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Don’t Be Home for Christmas

Written by

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“Christmas Eve will find me

Where the love light gleams.

I’ll be home for Christmas

If only in my dreams.”

Kim Gannon and Walter Kent, 1943

“There are people who want to throw their arms round you simply because it is Christmas.

There are other people who want to strangle you simply because it is Christmas.”

Robert Wilson Lynd, 1915

PROLOGUE

November 25 – Early Ornaments

The first holiday hordes had finally scattered.

 Mounds of streamers and confetti drifted across Manhattan’s 6th Avenue like tumbleweeds. Workers with earbuds and fluorescent vests attempted to sweep the cups and trash left behind by the mobs. Some workers tackled rows of bleachers that needed to be disassembled. A long-awaited opportunity for holiday pay with overtime. No one rushed, and no one cared.

 One block west on 42nd, a white Ford cargo van turned towards the busy afternoon crowds of Times Square. It ambled around oblivious pedestrians and pulled onto a curb at the corner of 42nd and Broadway. A posted sign read, “Thanksgiving Day Parade Crews Only.”

 The driver paused to study his surroundings. He was parked near the rear of the building. The base was a three-story Walgreens. The remainder of the twenty-four-story tower was plain, covered in animated billboards. The crisp air was filled with steam from vendors’ carts that were so diverse the United Nations would’ve been proud.

 The tourist crowds were gradually filtering into restaurants and a handful of shows that were still open for Thanksgiving. The soundtrack was a cacophony of holiday melodies and honking horns.

 The driver exited the van. He was mid-fifties and wore blue coveralls. He appeared Hispanic, with a grim face. A younger man exited the passenger’s side. He was slim and darted his head as if new to the whole scene.

 The two men opened the rear of the van. They retrieved two boxes, each approximately six-feet tall and three feet wide. They placed the boxes onto handcarts and rolled them towards the building’s rear. Above a door was the address, “One Times Square.” The older worker rang a grating service bell.

 After another ring, a wary custodian cracked the door. He squinted like he’d been roused from a cave. “*Qué quieres*?” he asked in a hoarse voice. What do you want?

 The older worker replied in Spanish, “We have two boxes. To the 23rd floor. We are late.”

 “Late?” The custodian chuckled with yellow teeth, “The parade is over. No one is here today.”

 The older man sighed and pointed to an invoice. “Two patio heaters. Delivery for today.” He pointed up, “It is twenty degrees colder on your roof.”

 The custodian cocked his head. His eyes sparkled as if something clicked, “Are they perhaps for the show with…the Ryan *Seacrests*?”

 The workers shrugged and shook their heads. They didn’t know or care.

 The inside of One Times Square appeared abandoned. Minimal lighting kept the space gloomy even though it was late afternoon. The walls were bare cement and drywall with faded graffiti. Bing Crosby’s vintage “White Christmas” echoed through the walls from a nearby tenant. The hollow atmosphere was like a 1940s haunted tower.

 The custodian led the men and their boxes through the deserted area. He pressed the button to a scuffed elevator. The custodian puffed his cheeks and stared at his shoes at the odd pause. He looked up at the men, “You see the parade?”

 “No,” the older worker replied, stoic. The younger man grinned and bobbed his head.

 On the twenty-third floor, the elevator doors opened to blinding daylight. The men squinted to see they were outside on a roof. As they rolled their boxes, they realized they had another flight of stairs they had to climb to an even higher level.

 Before he could be asked to help, the custodian shouted from the elevator, “Be quick! I will wait for you downstairs.” The door closed.

 The two men helped each other wrangle the boxes up the steel-grate steps to an observation deck. Despite the wailing wind, they quickly unpacked and assembled the six-foot stainless steel patio heaters. Each one had a cylindrical stainless base that looked like a robot, with a pipe and a circular hood to house the furnace. They rolled each heater to two corners of the forty-by-twenty-foot deck. The men stepped back and nodded at their handiwork.

 They then turned to absorb a remarkable view of Times Square. Flashing lights and animated billboards that shimmered. Visitors on the streets looked like busy insects. The towering Marriott Marquis and every name-brand shop imaginable. At the far end, red grandstands were already waiting for the New Year’s festivities over a month away.

 “Incredible!” the junior man exclaimed in Spanish with wide eyes. “Imagine seeing the Christmas lights from up here!”

 His partner scoffed. “They barely clean the garbage from one holiday before planning the next.”

 Junior lifted his cellphone to take his own photo with the iconic background behind him. “But look at us now. Not a bad job we have.” He beamed and clicked.

 “Oh yeah?” The older man pulled a folded newspaper from his back pocket. “You may need to look for a new job.” He slapped the paper into the kid’s hand.

 Puzzled, Junior unfolded the business section to read a headline. His smile faded to read, “FTC Clears Merger of Harding-Foxtel and the Bayonet Group.” Joy drained from his face.

 “The big fish never care which holiday it is,” Senior grumbled as he lit a cigarette.

 Junior gazed over his partner’s shoulder –and then up at something he had not noticed. “*Dios mio!*” he exhaled. His eyes doubled in size and his mouth hung open. He eagerly lifted his cellphone to photograph what he was beholding.

 “No one will believe what I am doing up here…” Junior exclaimed aloud.

 His partner exhaled smoke, “They will never know…”

PART I

(THERE’S NO PLACE LIKE)

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Chapter One

December 24th

As with most cities and homes, time seemed to blur between Thanksgiving and Christmas in New York City.

 Sparkling lights outlined the corridors of buildings. The season’s first real snow. Awestruck masses crushed in for the unveiling of the Rockefeller tree. Radio City Music Hall flashed signs for their Rockettes. Lines formed for the skating rink, hot cocoas and carts selling snacks claiming to be chestnuts. A surge of tourists as people attempted to be five-percent kinder.

 Business was booming for most companies, and they endeavored to reward their people with equal joy. Holiday parties, bonuses, sweets –and of course sending their employees home early on Christmas Eve.

 Except for the esteemed Harding-Foxtel Corporation.

 Two blocks from Rockefeller Center, the landmark Harding-Foxtel Tower still had illuminated windows. Not as clever decorations, but because people were still working at 5:20 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

 On the 42nd floor, Harding-Foxtel’s executive boardroom was all-business with a dozen dour executives seated around its long mahogany table. The men and women wore tailored business suits, and maintained pensive frowns as they listened to each other drone on.

 Except for Kyle Colbert. Kyle had selected his red and green Santa tie weeks in advance. After all, “You can only wear it once a year,” he’d said to his wife Maria like a child, despite his forty-two years. Maria had smiled and nodded to allow him his fun.

 With the rare benefit of Christmas Eve falling on a Friday, Kyle had made a conscious decision to not wear a business suit or blazer to work. Just some nice khakis, a hunter-green dress shirt, his Santa tie, and a red and green scarf with his wool overcoat.

 He had briefly paused when he entered the boardroom to see his peers in their three-piece executive finest. *Really..?* Kyle had almost exclaimed. Christmas Eve at work used to be a day of fun. Sitting around, eating donuts and a catered turkey and ham lunch with gift exchanges. Not anymore –not at Harding-Foxtel. Kyle even gazed around the office at their lack of merriment. Since the H.R. department wanted to curtail any religious-based grievances, the extent of any holiday decorations included a few poinsettia plants, which had dried up since no one knew they needed water. Instead of corporate holiday cards, each employee receive an automated email wishing them “a satisfactory non-denominational day of planning.”

 Kyle only half listened as Senior Vice President Chester Hawkins rambled on about a projected decline with year-end sales. Kyle absolutely cared about his firm’s success, but couldn’t old-man Hawkins give it a rest until Monday or after New Year’s? What could possibly increase sales the week between Christmas and January 1st?

 Kyle gazed around the table, nodding as if following along. Everyone appeared ten years older than their actual ages, and their faces had permanent frown lines. Conversely, his coworkers all said he looked like a young Tom Hanks, or like “your friendly next-door neighbor,” whatever that meant. Kyle truly believed everyone at the table would put the company before their families at Christmas, and they had evidently selected “miserable” as a life choice.

 Kyle expelled a powerful sneeze. Instead of anyone saying bless you, a few of Hawkins’ V.P. minions scowled at the disruption. Kyle scoffed to himself and reached for another flu lozenge. He loudly opened its cellophane wrapper and popped it into his mouth. With two colors of pens, Kyle pretended to take notes on a thick legal pad. He doodled a halfway decent Christmas tree, a sleigh that had an engine, and a fireplace complete with stockings and flames.

 “–*Kyle!”* A voice loudly whispered from the seat beside him, “Mr. Hawkins just asked you a question.”

 Kyle looked up with wide eyes. It was his boss Connor Chase. He motioned to Hawkins at the end of the table. Kyle turned to Hawkins, “Can you repeat that sir?”

 Hawkins looked like a seventy-year-old angry eagle. He was bald, with an eternal scowl. He blinked with impatience, “*Mr. Colbert*… I asked you –after the symposium we so generously sent you to– do you still believe we have the lead over Phantex?”

 Kyle didn’t blink for an eternal second. He then cleared his throat, “Both our firms agree the targets’ use of social media is unprecedented with how aggressively it engages people here in the west.” He confidently shrugged, “We, of course, have the proprietary program I’ve been developing…” His voice trailed, unsure it was what they wanted to hear.

 Hawkins and his V. P. cronies remained still with severe faces. They then carried on with more indecipherable graphs that sloped downward.

 “I can never tell if they loathe me, or if I’m some… faceless number,” Kyle said to Connor Banks as they briskly exited the boardroom.

 “Are you kidding?” Connor replied as if Kyle were some football star. “They think you’re some sort of… analytical genius.” Though Connor and Kyle were roughly the same age, Connor was technically Kyle’s superior. Connor was slightly more bookish, with the standard uptight corporate face and horn-rimmed glasses.

 “Yeah, right,” Kyle almost blushed.

 “Think about it,” Connor replied as they marched down the hall. “They sent you 11,000 miles to Dubai. That shows you their level of confidence.” He turned to Kyle, sincere. “Your work here could single-handedly locate all target accounts and stop this entire thing in a year.”

 Kyle paused, truly humbled by his boss.

 Connor leaned forward, “You’re our rival’s worst nightmare.”

 Kyle chuckled. “I’m the only one here who knows it’s Christmas Eve and you describe me as a nightmare.” He lifted a finger to pause as he released another violent sneeze.

 Connor recoiled and stepped back. “Are you getting the flu? You probably caught it sitting twelve hours on a plane.”

 Kyle blew his nose, “Maria’s got a 151-proof rum eggnog that’ll knock it right out –if I can ever get home.”

 In Kyle’s spacious corner office that overlooked 5th Avenue, he hectically shuffled through undistributed gift bags. Maria had neatly written nametags on each bag to help make his task easier. Kyle still had four gifts to deliver to his staff. A reliable mix of Yankee candles or alcohol, depending on the person.

 “Chase Zahir called,” Rena Stacy announced, struggling to follow in his trail. “He said something’s going on–”

 Kyle interrupted “–He probably has news he doesn’t want to put in an email.” He squinted to read a tag.

 “You and Zahir are friends? Isn’t he, like, your leading competitor?” Rena was mid-twenties and considered alluring by the mailroom guys who would bring her Starbucks for no reason. She was an intellectual brunette with olive skin and wide dark eyes. An L.A. casting agent would say she could portray any ethnicity.

 “I think of Chase Zahir as a colleague, not a competitor,” Kyle replied. “He’s one of the few analysts I actually trust. I’ll call him after Christmas. Speaking of, this is for you, my most inquisitive intern.” He handed Rena an elaborate gold gift bag Maria had wrapped especially for her.

 Rena cautiously took the bag as if she were some species who’d never received a gift. “Uh, thank you..?” She sat the bag down and looked at Kyle, “Did the board today establish a window for the Bayonet merger?”

 “Rena,” Kyle smiled. “Do you want some inside advice?”

 “Absolutely.” She quickly readied her e-tablet to take notes.

 He stepped to an antique coatrack to grab his coat and a weathered leather satchel. “Here’s my suggestion:” He looked at her, “Just relax... It’s after five o’clock on Christmas Eve. It’s like everyone’s forgotten. If you want to glean every kernel of wisdom from me –*non-work-related*– would you care to walk with me? We’ll give out these last few bags like Mr. and Mrs. Claus, and then head towards Grand Central. You have to head the same direction anyway to go home –and that part’s an order.”

 Rena cocked her head and blinked as if needing to calculate such a concept. “All right..?”

 The crowds were lined-up for cabs on Madison Avenue. Final diligent workers racing to get to their families. The street’s glow illuminated snow flurries –not enough to create traffic havoc, but enough to encourage everyone to click photos of the holiday magic. Twenty-degree gusts couldn’t keep people from smiling. Twinkling decorations arched over the intersections. Holiday classics crooned from unseen speakers.

 Kyle was bundled and smiling as he and Rena walked briskly. “So how exactly did you land a placement at Harding? I know we’re a tough gig.”

 “Factually speaking, I was the top of my class,” Rena spoke quick and scholarly. “I simply applied at the top IT firm.” She rolled her hand as if obvious, “I then volunteered for you. You’re universally considered more clever than the others. You have the intellect, but you march to your own–” Rena paused as if switching gears. “Before I swell your ego, I recall your rule about ‘no shop talk.’”

 “Touché.” Kyle couldn’t contain a grin. “–And thank you. You’re sharp as well, and you seem to trust your instincts.” They paused a moment as they walked to step around Santa bagging his Salvation donations.

 Kyle smiled at Rena. “So, what are you doing for Christmas –I apologize; do you celebrate Christmas?”

 For the first time, Rena half grinned. “I’m not Jewish. But my father was Muslim. My stepmother does enjoy decorating a tree and we do exchange gifts.” She turned to Kyle. “Considering your… colorful tie, I presume you enjoy the holiday.”

 “Oh yeah.” Kyle grinned. “And this year’s special. With the kids and all… Doing the Santa thing. I promised to make this year as memorable as possible.”

 Rena smiled at the notion. Her eyes then focused through the flurries to see the renowned facade of Grand Central Station. “And you make this commute every day?”

 “Absolutely.” He looked up as they approached the terminal. Three towering arched windows on its 42nd Street façade, topped with sculptures of Roman gods surrounding an ornate clock at its center, all dusted with fresh snow.

 “It’s amazing how a ninety-minute train can erase the stress, horn-honking and furious pace of our beloved metropolis.” Kyle paused at his own words. “It’s like having a… time machine.”

 Rena cocked her head to absorb his perspective.

 Kyle resumed their stroll. “When I board that train every day, I can’t wait to unplug. No more bad news of the world. When we pull up to the station at Twin Creeks, it’s looked the same for eighty years. People actually smile and say hello –imagine that!

 “The station’s guard, Francois –the nicest guy in the world– always waves with a big smile, ‘*Good evening Mr. Colbert...’* Then I walk out through the snow. Only four blocks to my house. I walk by a park that’s been there since 1890. It still has a town square that has a gazebo and skating pond when it gets cold enough. They’ve put up little white lights. It’s like magic.”

 Rena remained quiet as Kyle painted images with his words.

 “My street was built in the early 1900s. I live on a cul-de-sac, nice little colonials. My neighbors have a holiday light contest. Organized by my buddy Jimmy next door. He’s a bear-of-a-man who cries like a baby if he doesn’t win. The block looks like a mini-Vegas when they’re done.”

 Kyle smiled at Rena, “Sometimes, when I come up the street, the kids stand at the window. I see ‘em as I walk up.” He beamed like a proud dad. “Even though Maria works too, I get home so late, she likes me to smell food when I walk in. If she’s got nothing, she does a little trick of just frying garlic.”

 Rena chuckled.

 “Sappy, I know. A ninety-minute ride, straight into a Norman Rockwell painting.”

 Rena asked, “*Norma* Rockwell is a painter?”

 Kyle shook his head. “Do you have any great plans or…traditions for this evening?”

 “We do. My stepmother and I meet at P.F. Chang’s in Hackensack.”

 Kyle smiled and blinked, waiting for more. “That…sounds lovely.”

 They stopped walking and he looked up at a brass sign that announced, “Grand Central Terminal.”

 “This is where I take off.” He turned to Rena, “And Merry Christmas to you –and no emails or texts about work until Monday.”

 “See you then. Enjoy your holiday.” She smiled, turned and was gone.

 Kyle pulled his phone from his jacket. The screen listed four missed calls labeled “OFFICE.” He narrowed his eyes and shook his head, *not tonight you don’t*... He clicked the phone to silent.

 Kyle then accessed the text screen and typed a message to Maria, “LEAVING CITY NOW, EXCITED ABOUT THE BIG EVENT. LOVE YOU.”

 Beside Grand Central’s entrance, Yuri, a roasted chestnut vendor, was calling it a night. The holiday was essentially over. The Monday after Christmas, he’d be back to selling pretzels. Yuri sighed before folding up shop.

 As he scrolled through news on his phone, a face in a story caught his eye. He turned to the man who just entered the terminal. The man with the red and green scarf. Could it be..? Should he call the authorities –or get out of the area immediately?

Chapter Two

The MTA, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, had a north railroad known as the Harlem Line because it ran from Harlem, through Grand Central, north to eastern Dutchess County, about 80 miles from Manhattan. A safe and reliable choice for commuters to work in the city, yet reside in entirely opposite environments.

 For Kyle Colbert it meant no more scrappy locals shouting or cars honking once he popped in his earbuds and the train departed the terminal.

 The train was less busy than usual due to the time on Christmas Eve. Kyle sat alone by a window; he still wanted to watch the lights. Due to the frigid window, he decided to leave on his scarf and he wore a wool fedora Maria had given him. He slid on his reading glasses so he could peruse the latest trade magazine he’d saved for the ride.

 From either the magazine’s content, or the lulling rumble of the train, or the flu medicine combined with waking up at 4:30 each morning, Kyle dozed off within minutes. As usual.

 “*Next stop Bedford Hills. Please stand clear of the doors –and Merry Christmas folks*,” the conductor’s voice proclaimed through the garbled P.A. system.

 The announcement triggered Kyle’s internal clock. Bedford Hills, another beautiful hamlet, was an hour north of Manhattan, which meant only thirty minutes for the final leg of his journey.

 Kyle sat upright. He adjusted his hat and glasses and opened his satchel to retrieve two handwritten notes. He scanned the first. On top was the name “Jack” scrawled in pencil. Under it listed, “X-Box; BB gun; Star Wars ship (classic only please.)” He paused for a mental inventory, and then made three check marks with a pen.

 He unwrapped another flu lozenge and unfolded the second letter. This one had been authored by “Cassie.” She neatly itemized, “Barbie doll; necklace; stethoscope...” He added more checks and made a few notes.

 Kyle knew this year had to go perfect. Could he measure up? Would be accepted into the family as one of their own? As a perfectionist and a strategic over-planner by trade, he tried to think of every contingency. And there are only a few hours left, he frowned at his watch.

 Over the P.A., a crackled version of “I’ll be Home for Christmas” began to play. The instant nostalgia of Bing Crosby’s classic made him pause.

 “–Such a sad song, don’t you think?” an elderly female voice interrupted.

 Kyle turned to see a shrunken woman of about ninety seated beside him. “Pardon me, Ma’am?” She wore a kitschy Christmas sweater, ornament earrings and crooked red lipstick.

 “The song,” she replied in a Brooklyn accent. “‘I’ll be Home for Christmas.’ So sad...”

 Kyle winced, mystified. “I think it’s beautiful. It’s so vivid. Seeing snow... The mistletoe, presents on the tree..?”

 The woman shook her head as if correcting him. “The song’s written from a soldier’s perspective. During the war. It’s a letter of the things he wishes for.” She gave a melancholy smile. “But he knows he’s not coming home... That’s why he writes, I’ll be home ‘If only in my dreams.’ Very sad. My first husband was in the war.”

 Kyle withdrew at her interpretation. *What a buzz kill.* He installed a smile. “You have a very cheerful holiday, Ma’am.”

 The conductor’s voice spared Kyle any further chatter as the P.A. declared, “*Next stop Twin Creeks. Please stand clear of the doors*…”

 Kyle stood to gather his belongings. As he glanced down the aisle –through a few shuffling passengers– he caught the glance of a young urban boy, about twelve years old. He was wearing earbuds and holding a phone. For the brief moment their eyes locked, the boy’s eyes widened as if Kyle had done something wrong. Kyle quickly looked behind him to see what the kid was reacting to, and nothing was there. When he turned back, the boy’s parents had pulled him into the next train car.

 Kyle shrugged it off. He secured his scarf and hat and stepped towards the exit. As he waited for the train to halt, he peeked at his phone. He was surprised to see, “MARIA: 3 MISSED CALLS."

 *She’s not a habitual caller,* he mused. Maria wasn’t an alarmist, and never called unless there was a reason. Was something wrong? Were the kids okay? Maybe she just needed him to pick-up something on the way. After he stepped off the train, he dialed her number.

 After four rings, her friendly but assertive voice announced, “*Hi there. You’ve reached Maria Colbert. Please leave a message and I’ll…*” He hung up. Within seconds, Kyle’s brain tried to think it through logically. Maria hadn’t left a message. If it was an emergency, like someone was injured, she would’ve left a message. Kyle knew his walk home was only fifteen minutes, so he decided not to worry. She was probably just excited to get the festivities going.

 He was the only passenger exiting through the station’s breezeway. He passed a plaque stating the station was built in 1914, replacing an older structure from 1869. Over the Chicago brick main entrance was a large clock flanked by eagle sculptures. Inside was a small café and a barber shop, one of the few barber shops in a train station today. The station was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.

 Despite the holiday, and just like clockwork, Kyle saw the security guard Francois by the exit foyer. Francois was a Creole gentleman of about fifty, in a pressed uniform he wore with dignity. He was in the shadows about twenty yards away. As Kyle initiated his nightly greeting, he saw Francois was turned away, huddled on his cellphone as if it were important. Kyle briefly paused to see if he’d turn, but François’s tense body language suggested the call was critical. *Hope everything’s okay,* Kyle thought as he continued out the building and into the snow.

 Kyle began his quarter-mile trek home. Unlike the city, when he inhaled in Twin Creeks, he was amazed there was almost no scent. Just icy air with a gust of spruce from trees fifty feet to his right at Metzger’s park. Flurries were still falling and the ground held a ten-inch carpet of snow. When he walked, his shoes made the *chirp, chirp* sound through the fresh powder until he could get to the plowed street. Kyle thought the hamlet of Twin Creeks indeed looked like a Hallmark card.

 In fact, his view was like a portrait because no one was outside. This seemed odd. Kyle turned 180-degrees to observe no one else outside. No dog-walkers, no kids, no carolers. This was his fortieth Christmas in Twin Creeks, and this appeared strange. *Then again,* Kyle chuckled, *it is Christmas Eve*. Everything was closed and people would be inside with their families.

 Kyle walked briskly, but still enjoyed the scenery. Metzger’s park had the white lights on the gazebo. A small pond would be used for ice skating in another few weeks if the temperatures continued. Now it was a thin, frozen slush, but reflected the lights beautifully. To Kyle’s left, facing the park, were two-story colonials built in the early 1900s, glowing with warm lights. The streets were laced with large-bulbed holiday lights and retro-decorations as if the town was stuck in some vintage past. Well worth the commute, Kyle reminded himself every day.

 Kyle noticed a large Victorian he admired daily. It had a wide bay window in front of a living room. With its drapes open, Kyle could see the entire family inside by a fireplace. Old and young, all dressed up. They were laughing and clapping at something. Kyle smiled, but this made him want to get home faster. He accelerated his stride.

 Kyle turned right on Mayfield Lane, a narrow road that ended with a cul-de-sac; his house waiting at the end. The homes were almost cookie-cutter colonials, but generations had given each home a uniqueness with distinctive landscaping and mature evergreens. And the lighting contest was in full swing. The homes flashed and twinkled with an array of white, red, green –and every other color. Automated Santas, reindeers, snowmen and pop culture characters Kyle wasn’t even aware of. It looked like Magic Kingdom with snow.

 About a hundred yards ahead he finally beheld his modest two-story home. It made his stomach flutter. He squinted to see any sign of activity –he flinched and gasped.

 A wolf-like Siberian husky ran up beside him. Kyle took a deep breath with a cough, “Hey Bella… You scared me!” He stroked the dog’s large head. “Are you cold? Where’s everyone? Enjoying Christmas I suppose.”

 Kyle resumed his pace, moving faster towards his home. The husky trotted beside him. “I’m late, huh girl? It’s weird out. Like everyone’s hiding.”

 Kyle looked again at his house. Just over a hundred feet away, he could see the illuminated front window. He beamed a wide smile to see the silhouettes of two children, one taller than the other. He pointed and said to the dog, “They’re waitin’ for me! See ‘em girl?” Oblivious, the husky began to sprint, running off behind a house, into the shadows.

 When Kyle approached his driveway, he gave an overstated wave. The kids were still in the window. He shouted, “Daddy’s home! Better watch out, better not cry!”

 With blinking lights and lit candy canes bordering the sidewalk, Kyle could see perfectly to dash towards the door. This was the big night. What he’d been daydreaming of for weeks.

 He jogged up the sidewalk, clomped up the brick steps and grasped the doorknob. When he opened the door his smile disappeared. He was horrified.

 “Tha…That’s not funny Jack,” Kyle stammered, white as sleet. “What’s going on?”

 Nine-year-old Jack aimed a .30 caliber Winchester rifle directly at Kyle. Tiny blonde Cassie, seven years old, stood behind him in pajamas. Both were crying, their cheeks wet with tears.

 Kyle raised his palms. He attempted to speak with authority, “Put it down Jack –where’s your mom?”

 The stocky boy maintained his aim directly at Kyle’s chest. His sister cowered behind him with a high, whimpering cry. The boy replied with startling resilience, “You took her! And I have to kill you –now! They said!”

 “*They* who? What are you talking about?” Kyle instinctively stepped back.

 Little Jack began to hyperventilate, his finger trembling on the trigger. The gun suddenly fired and bucked. The jolt made Kyle drop down a step, the bullet buzzing over his shoulder.

 Shockingly, the boy aimed again and stood strong. Kyle spun, dropped his bag, and bolted to his right. His last vision of the kids was little Cassie lifting a butcher knife. The shimmer of her blade.

 Jack fired again.

Chapter Three

Kyle had no time to evaluate what was happening. A primitive fight-or-flight instinct seized his body. He ran as fast as he could.

 The snow made him stagger as he sprinted to his next-door-neighbor’s house. He heard another shot behind him. It boosted his pace and he stumbled over thorny hedges. His right foot slipped on the edge of a frozen sidewalk, and he almost collided with a plastic snowman.

 Kyle regained his balance and ran to the home’s rear. Despite the dark, he made it to a back kitchen door he knew from memory. Panicked, he began beating on the door with both hands.

 “Jimmy! Ana! Let me in!” He looked to the left, towards his house. “*Jimmy!*” Kyle tested the handle –it was unlocked. He opened the door and barged inside.

 He’d been in their kitchen a hundred times. The same smell of home cooking that brought almost instant comfort. He panted, catching his breath. He looked up to see a frail mid-forties blonde standing in a robe.

 “Ana… Thank God…” He stepped closer. “Something’s going on! With the kids –they tried to kill me!” As he focused, he noticed Ana appeared shaken with wide eyes. She wore no make-up and her hair was up. He’d interrupted their private time, but this was an emergency. Kyle paused to see Ana slowly lift her hands as if surrendering. She was usually the life of the party.

 “M…May I go upstairs? For Jimmy?” Ana stammered.

 Kyle frowned at her odd reaction. “Yes –get him! He’s friends with Sheriff–” He stopped when he saw her turn and dash into the living room. He heard her footsteps thumping up the stairs.

 Kyle leaned on the kitchen counter to collect his thoughts. He rubbed his eyes as his sinuses throbbed. Kyle struggled to decipher his predicament. What had gotten into Jack and Cassie? Jack was too young for drugs, *right?* Should he call the police, or walk over with Jimmy first? He decided to go into the living room to shout for Jimmy.

 He walked from the kitchen into the dim living room. The décor was English country-style and homey. To his left was a staircase to the second floor. He noticed their menorah and Hanukah decorations. They’d been enjoying a quiet night at home. “I’m sorry Jimmy,” Kyle shouted. “I need help! It’s an emergency!”

 He scanned the room, his heartbeat still racing He looked up to see a mounted deer head. On the mantle were photos of him and Jimmy from a hunting trip two months earlier in Vermont. In the photo, bearded Jimmy was in flannel and a foot taller than Kyle, with an extra fifty pounds. He was holding his prized Remington Sendero rifle with stainless steel barrel –*click–*

 Kyle turned –Jimmy was aiming his rifle directly at him. He was standing on the staircase’s landing, aiming his prized Remington. The click had been the bolt locking a cartridge into the chamber. He was ready to shoot.

 “Wh…What’s happing Jimbo?” Kyle stammered, lifting his hands. “What the–”

 “–Stay up there Ana. I got him!” Jimmy bellowed over his shoulder, crying. The large man was in a t-shirt and boxers, heavily breathing with red, wet eyes. He frowned at Kyle angrily, “You think I *want* to do this?”

 “Do what?” Kyle replied, almost shouting.

 “Kill you now.” Jimmy’s hands quaked. He wiped a tear from his cheek. “All this time..? How *could* you..?”

 “Could I *what*?” Kyle exclaimed, frustrated. “What’s happening?”

 With a finger to his lips, Jimmy oddly *shooshed* him. “Shh… Stop. Stop... I can’t upset you. Or anger. Or even approach…” He began to cry and shook his head. “I have to shoot now.” Jimmy fired.

 Kyle dove back towards the kitchen, a blind spot from the stairs. He heard the shot ricochet off an antique fixture. Jimmy’s unsteady hands had saved him. Kyle’s momentum propelled him forward, through the kitchen and out the rear door, back into the night.

 Kyle panted as he ran, his lungs gurgling. He went left through the backyard. His pace slowed as he slogged through a snowdrift. He turned between two houses, back towards the road. As he checked behind him, he ran directly into a web of Christmas lights like a net.

 “*I think he went there…”* a boy’s voice echoed from a distance. It was Jack.

 Kyle crouched and looked towards his house. He saw crisscrossing flashlight beams in the distant haze. A man’s voice echoed from the darkness, “*We can’t corner him!”*

 Panicked, Kyle squirmed to untangle himself from the string of lights. He dreaded being seen; he looked like an electric Halloween costume. He dropped lower and tugged the lights’ cord until something unplugged. The lights turned off. He turned to see more hazy spotlights in the distance.

 “*I had him!”* bellowed Jimmy’s voice, “*He went north! Get a gun!”* Several men were silhouetted by a distant streetlamp.

 Kyle wriggled and kicked off the remaining lights. He huddled behind a mound of snow between a plastic snowman and a thin evergreen. He tried to remain calm when he saw the flashlights moving in his direction. He laid as flat as a salamander and closed his eyes as if it’d make the nightmare go away. *Please don’t see me… Just keep walking…*

 On his neck he felt the warm panting of a beast –inches from his ear.

 He cracked an eye. It was the snout and steaming breath of… *a wolf?* It was a Siberian husky. The dog Bella had found him. Sniffing him, six inches away. Kyle struggled to not move.

 Kyle whispered, “Good Bella… *Stay… Quiet*–”

 Bella barked. Then again. A sudden blast and Frosty the Snowman’s head exploded two feet away. The noise made the dog yelp and flee into the woods.

 Adrenalin launched Kyle into a full sprint, away from the scene. He heard faint voices in his trail.

 “*There!”* shouted one man. “*Get him!*” screamed another. A third voice exclaimed, “*We can’t upset him!*”

 Main Street in Twin Creeks looked exactly like it sounded. Built in the late 1800s with a cobblestone thoroughfare. The storefronts appeared to be untouched by time. Feed stores and mercantiles had gradually transitioned into trendy cafés and craft breweries. A few shops still served as pharmacies, a barber shop, and other mom-n-pop retailers. In the 90s, Twin Creeks’ Main Street won a “Most Like ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’” contest in *Travel Magazine.*

 And this Christmas Eve was no different. A light snow fell onto Main Street. The merchants’ holiday lights glimmered, but with everything closed, you could hear the flurries land. Despite the peaceful beauty, the absence of any life gave it a surreal quality.

 Piercing the silence, Kyle Colbert rounded the corner, running as fast as he could. He jogged onto Main Street, almost meandering, with no evident goal.

 Main Street was four blocks north of Kyle’s street. He’d zigzagged, cutting through yards until he heard no more voices following. He fretfully glanced over his shoulders as he ran down the boulevard’s sidewalk.

 Exhausted, he finally slowed in front of a row of shops. He erratically looked around to make sure no one was nearby. He bent, hands-on-knees, to catch his breath. He sounded like a saw as he hacked and coughed. “Jesus…what’s happening…Jesus…” Kyle panted.

 He patted his jacket pockets, remembering his phone. He lifted it to see the screen proclaim, “27 MISSED CALLS.” They were from Maria and other numbers he didn’t recognize. He hit redial for Maria’s number. He whispered, “Come on…come on…” A voice answered.

 “*Hi there. You’ve reached Maria Colbert. Please leave a message and I’ll call you back*.” A cold robotic male voice then interjected, “*Mailbox full. Please try again*–”

 “–Shit!” Kyle shouted. He sighed, depleted. A blue shimmer from the shop he was standing in front of caught his eye. He looked up and realized he was standing in front of Brett’s Television and Audio, owned by Brett Kelley, a pleasant Kiwanis member. The shimmer came from a wall of televisions that were on as a window display.

 When Kyle turned towards the televisions, his jaw dropped and he inhaled. A dozen screens were glowing with a close-up image of his face.

 He cupped his hands on the glass for a clearer view. On a large-screen TV, the image of his face appeared to be from his driver’s license. A caption read “Kyle Donald Colbert,” so it was no mistake. His blank expression made it look like a mug shot.

 Under his face a banner flashed: “DO NOT APPROACH.” Words added, “REWARD -$1,000,000 DEAD OR WHERABOUTS.”

Chapter Four

Kyle’s eyes darted with disbelief as if he’d entered some sort of *Twilight Zone.*

 He stepped back from the shop. A surge of nausea churned through his body. *What’s happening?* Kyle tried to comprehend, but his mind was reeling. It had to be a bad dream or delirium. Maybe brought on by fever? *Or the flu medicine* –*an allergic reaction?*

 Standing numb, he recoiled at the sudden squeal of tires coming from his right. He instantly dropped behind a bus bench to hide. From almost ground level he saw a car speeding around the corner. It skidded to a stop in the middle of the intersection. Kyle focused to see it was a battered, red 1970s Chevy, maybe an Impala.

 Laughter bellowed from the car’s open windows. Kyle peeked to see four figures in the car. He could hear their laughing. They sounded young like juveniles. The driver and rear passenger leaned out of their windows. They were wearing cheap, rubber Santa masks –and the passenger held a gun.

 “There he is!” One passenger shouted, “Get him!” The Chevy’s V8 roared.

 Kyle huddled lower behind the bench. He closed his eyes and gnashed his teeth.

 “There! He’s there..!” One of them fired a gun with more laughter. The car launched forward with chirping tires.

 When Kyle realized the car wasn’t moving closer, he cracked an eye. The Chevy and the Santa thugs drove straight towards a man on the sidewalk across the street. Kyle noticed the man was wearing a coat similar to his. The thugs aimed a spotlight at the petrified man. The middle-aged man froze with hands up. Evidently seeing he was the wrong man, the Chevy raced away, screeching around the corner. The laughter faded into the night.

 Though the threat was gone, Kyle’s breathing became labored. His heart felt like it was pumping out of his chest. He felt unable to move.

 The small brick Check Cashing Shoppe boasted in neon yellow that it was open 24-Hours –*Even Holidays!* There were only two older vehicles in its parking lot. One surely belonged to the poor soul who had to work there, and the other for its only customer.

 Santa Claus entered the shop –or rather, Timothy Baker, the year’s resident Santa from the Twin Creeks Mall. His rendition was not good. Santa appeared haggard, with the fake beard pulled below his chin. He had thick black eyebrows and stubble that didn’t fit the classic *Coca Cola* image.

 Santa sighed when he entered the warm shop. He unzipped his stained red coat to reveal a tank top and a gold chain. He waddled up to the service window and repeatedly tapped its bell.

 “Alright, alright…” replied a gravelly female voice. The clerk appeared from a back room, still chewing something. The older woman had thinning hair and appeared to be ninety pounds. With circles around her eyes, she coughed, “Ho, ho Santa. Last paycheck of the year, I suppose?”

 Santa slid her his creased mall paycheck without responding.

 She glanced at it, accessed her computer screen and pounded a rubber stamp. “I’ll see you next season, right?”
 Santa scoffed and slurred, “That shitty mall won’t be open next year.” He chuckled, “I need to win the lottery.”

 “You and me both. “ The clerk proceeded to count out a small stack of bills. “Now you be careful outside with this much cash,” she added maternally.

 Santa patted the side of his coat and grinned, “Oh… I got my conceal permit.” He winked, “Ho, ho Patrice.”

 Santa counted his cash and turned to exit. A television mounted in the corner caught his attention. On its screen was the face of a male with the name “Kyle Colbert.” Santa put away his cash and continued towards the door.

 He then heard the newscaster state, “$1,000,000 reward…”

 A thick eyebrow went up. Santa paused to watch the broadcast.

 A diesel saw ripped into a thick maple branch. The icy limb had fallen onto a 120-volt insulated utility line. No one had reported any power outages, but Creek County Electric wanted to be proactive.

 The worker holding an eight-foot pole saw stood in the bucket of a cherry picker. He was a large man with a black safety helmet and face mask. After freeing the line, he lowered the lift to the ground. His partner stood below with another eight-foot pole saw and a cigarette.

 The two workers were the latest result of the state passing “ban the box” legislation to prohibit employers from requiring applicants to check a box asking if they had a criminal record. In the past, checking the box usually led to automatic exclusion from consideration without the opportunity to explain the nature of their crime.

 Andre and Max had lengthy violent criminal records –and they were the only ones at C.C. Electric to volunteer for the Christmas Eve night shift.

 Andre revved his diesel chainsaw and swung the pole towards Max’s face as if trying to hit his cigarette.

 “Fuck you,” grumbled Max. He countered with his saw, pretending to fight back. The large men, swinging saws in helmets and masks, looked some fight out of *Star Wars.*

Andre finally stopped. He lifted his mask and lit his own cigarette. “God bless holiday O.T.,” he chuckled in a rough voice “That just paid for my old lady’s braces.”

 Max laughed and nodded as he lifted his phone to check for updates. In the quiet of smoking, Andre did the same, scrolling through social media.

 Max squinted at his phone’s small screen. “Andre, you see this guy?” He turned his phone around to show the face of Kyle Colbert in a news post. “Says a million reward?”

 “What?” Andre leaned forward, riveted. “Read me what it says.”

Chapter Five

As edgy as a cat, Kyle turned right into an alley off Main Street. So far, no other people were outside. No more cars –yet. He progressed deeper into the alley. Though it was dark and narrow, he was familiar with the lane that lead to a rear delivery road.

 Confident he was out of anyone’s view, he lifted his phone. He’d already left two messages on Maria’s phone and she hadn’t called back –*is she okay?* Despite his bizarre reality, he knew the right thing to do was to call authorities. Kyle needed to be preemptive to protect himself from the deadly locals. The police would sort out whatever insane mistake was going on.

 He dialed 911. After four long rings, an automated female voice answered, “*You’ve reached 911 for Creek County. Due to a high volume of calls, please hold*–”

 “–Are fucking kidding?” Kyle inadvertently shouted. Suddenly the live voice of a female operator came on the line.

 “911, state your emergency,”she uttered quickly.

 “Yes! Operator –don’t hang up!” Kyle exclaimed. He held the phone close with two hands. “I’m *Kyle Colbert*,” he emphasized the name. “There’s been some huge mistake. I–”

 The phone then clicked through a series of tones as if being transferred.

 “Hello..? You still there?” Kyle plead.

 A man’s deep voice spoke, “Do you purport to be Mr. Kyle Donald Colbert?”

 “Yes!” Kyle stood upright. “What’s going on –who are you?”

 The man replied, stern and robotic, “Other callers have been untruthful about being Kyle Colbert. Can we verify by asking a personal question?”

 “Of course!” Kyle exclaimed. “I am Kyle. Ask anything!”

 A pause. “What is your spouse’s blood type?”

 Silence. *Shit!* Kyle stood with his mouth ajar. He had no clue of Maria’s blood type. He must’ve heard it one time. He proceeded towards the alley’s exit to stay on the move. “I don’t remember –ask anything else.”

 “What is your current location?”

 “Tell me what’s going on first–” Kyle stepped out of the alley and froze at what he saw.

 To his left in the dim light were two tall figures. They wore helmets and held long pole saws like spears. They throttled their chainsaws.

 “It’s him!” growled one man. “Get him!” They lunged towards Kyle with their saws.

 “His hands!” a masked man shouted, “Cut off his hands!”

 Ignoring his phone, Kyle instinctively ran to the right. The deafening chainsaws made his action automatic, like an animal running the opposite direction of a threat.

 The two masked men leaped with their saws to follow in his trail. The taller man shouted, “Maybe just his arms!”

 Kyle pivoted left on a service road that sloped down a hill. When Kyle looked over his shoulder, his leather shoes slipped and he toppled onto the street.

 Oddly, the two men paused. The taller man lifted his hand, “They said don’t upset him!”

 “What if it’s too late?” shouted the other man.

 Kyle attempted to stand on the icy road. He then staggered and fell onto his stomach. He began sliding down the frozen asphalt –away from the saws.

 Kyle struggled to regain balance on his knees and hands, but the slick ice and gravity pulled him downhill. The road grated his hands and his belt buckle scraped the asphalt. When Kyle gazed up the hill, he saw the silhouettes of the two men holding their saws like scythes. They didn’t follow.

 Kyle came to rest in a gutter. His shirt had untucked and his stomach was scraped. His scuffed forearms were stinging with blood.

 He found himself on an industrial access road that was nearly pitch dark. He was at least thirty yards away from the saws, and in the gloom, he hoped he’d be invisible to the men. Kyle stood, and with a slight limp, quickly moved towards the rear of a darkened warehouse.

 Under a single lamppost over a row of putrid dumpsters, he checked his abrasions. He hissed as he touched grazes on his arm and tucked in his shirt. He looked around in the icy darkness to gain his bearings. He realized he was in the shadow of a factory-like structure.

 “The sewage department,” Kyle groaned. “Merry *Fuckin’* Christmas…”

 He continued left, following along the building, towards an intersection of two narrow streets. Maybe he could flag down a police car or a fire truck, or even an old lady returning from church. Anyone trustworthy.

 In the brief calm, Kyle inhaled with emotion, comprehending his predicament. He held a quaking hand to his eyes, becoming almost manic. He impulsively shouted, “What else you got for me!?” He stopped at a sound.

 The jingle of music warmed his ears. Before the corner of the building, he heard the faint melody of the Ronette’s version of “Frosty the Snowman.”

 His face was deadpan, thrown by the unexpected sound. Curious, he turned the corner. There, he came face-to-face with Santa Claus.

 The haggard mall Santa stood twenty feet away. Motown playing from his open 1979 El Camino. Santa was throwing beer cans into a dumpster when he locked eyes with Kyle. Santa and Kyle gazed wide-eyed at each other. Unflinching.

 Kyle finally asked, “So where’s your rein–”

 Santa aimed a .38 revolver from his coat.

 “–deer? *Fuck!*” With his reflexes already primed, Kyle dove behind metal garbage cans. Curled on the ground, he lifted two lids like shields.

 Santa fired. A bullet ricocheted off a dumpster two feet away. He shot again, the bullet hitting the gravel inches from Kyle’s feet.

 Kyle began tossing garbage cans at Santa as he maneuvered behind a dumpster. Santa fired again, bullets sparking on metal cans.

 “Stand still!” Santa shouted with a slur. “You’re my lottery ticket!” He fired again with diminishing accuracy.

 Kyle absorbed his ludicrous reality: Santa holding a gun with Christmas Motown playing. He crouched low, squirming behind the dumpster, inching towards the building’s corner.

 “Show yourself!” Santa shouted, looking like he was about to topple over.

 Kyle made it to the edge of the wall. He could turn the corner and run back the way he came. Maybe police would respond to the shots, and perhaps arrive at the intersection beside him.

 He rounded the corner –and cringed at abrupt diesel chainsaws. The pole-saw men were back, twenty feet away. When they saw him, they rushed forward, their lethal saws before them like lances.

 Kyle was cornered. The only open direction was into the narrow intersection. With hands up, he retreated backwards into the street.

 The helmeted men revved their saws, advancing within ten feet. A shot of dirt kicked up off the ground in front of them. They halted at the gunshot to see Santa approaching from their right, aiming his pistol.

 “He’s mine, assholes!” Santa shouted, walking towards the crossing, his gun ready.

 Seeing the three men now targeting each other, Kyle continued backward into the intersection.

 “Bullshit Santa!” yelled one man, continuing towards Kyle.

 Santa also moved forward, “I ain’t splittin’ no reward!”

 Kyle was out of options. Roaring saws in front of him getting closer. An armed Santa to his left. The three men were converging into the intersection. Kyle couldn’t run any longer.

 Santa grinned and aimed–

 A thunderous roar. Like a blur, Kyle saw the red Chevy return, racing into the intersection. In a flash, the car struck the men, their skulls striking the hood with thumps. A tire crushed Santa, tossing all three bodies like ragdolls.

 Kyle hurled himself to the side onto a snowbank. He watched the Chevy slide in the grit to a grating stop. In the shadows, his only plan was to play dead.

 Four young men wearing surreal rubber Santa masks stepped out of the Chevy. They were dressed like gangbangers, muscular with thick rope chains and tight leather jackets. They laughed at the carnage before them.

 “*Yo,* shit, that was like bowlin,’” chuckled the driver under his mask. He gripped a semiautomatic pistol.

 The other thugs stepped over the men. In death, their arms had landed in unnatural positions. One man looked at Santa’s bloody corpse lying three feet to Kyle’s left. “Is it bad luck to ice *Sanny* Clause?”

 The driver laughed –and then studied Kyle on the ground. “Yo, look who’s still here…”

 Kyle involuntarily shrunk. His eyes darted, anxious –that’s when he saw Santa’s bloody .38 pistol lying in the snow one foot away.

 The four thugs congregated to observe Kyle. A masked man cocked his head, “*That’s* what a million bucks looks like?” He chuckled, “Cryin’ like a bitch?”

 As the men laughed, the masked driver turned and instantly shot his three partners, pointblank. Two in the chest, one in the back as the man tried to run. The three thugs collapsed where they stood.

 Kyle gasped, curling towards Santa’s corpse, hands over his ears. He felt Santa’s gun under him. He seized it.

 “A million divided by four’s too much math.” The driver looked down ominously at Kyle. “Ain’t that right?”

 With no profound speech, Kyle fired up at the driver. Directly into his chest. One blast. Then two shots. Then three and four into the same bloody hole. *Click, click…*

 Christmas Motown played on.

 “Can someone please explain what the fuck is going on!” shouted the woman in the small room.

PART II

WE THREE KINGS

Chapter Six

 Maria Colbert sat alone at a metal table in the dark, claustrophobic room.

 She appeared professional but exhausted. Her long dark hair fell on her shoulders and she wore a tailored navy suit as if she’d just left work. The frigid room was only ten-by-ten with a single mirror along one wall.

 “I know you’re back there,” she shouted at the mirror in her Brooklyn accent. “It’s a cliché right out of Interrogation 101.” She then yelled, “Someone explain the charges!”

 The young male agent flinched at Maria’s outburst.

 In an office on the other side of the mirror, boyish FBI Agent Davis sat next to young female Agent Harmon. Davis and Harmon each had notepads, observing Maria Colbert like a zoo specimen.

 “She’s a live one,” Agent Harmon bit into a candy cane someone had given her.

 “Did she resist or try to run when you picked her up?” Davis asked.

 “No,” Harmon shrugged. “But she was *pissed*. Like trying to wash a cat.”

 Davis looked at his watch and sighed, “Del Rey’s taking forever.”

 “Bradley, it’s nearly 10:00 on Christmas Eve. What’d you expect?”

 He leaned forward, “But she doesn’t have–”

 They turned and sat upright to see Agent Del Rey enter the office. With her long blonde hair and slender form, Agent Anthea Del Rey could be considered striking. But her steely demeanor and forever-stern appearance kept her colleagues from attempting any small talk.

 “So that’s the spouse?” Agent Del Rey asked without any pleasantries. She crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes at their detainee on the other side of the mirror.

 “Yes, agent,” Harmon replied. “We apprehended her exiting her place of employment at approximately 4:40 p.m. She acted shocked and angry at our intrusion.”

 Del Rey scoffed, “Let me guess: she’s playing the pitiful innocent spouse. Sobbing how she knows nothing.”

 Harmon and Davis exchanged a glance.

 “No…” Harmon smirked as she read from notes, “She’s threatening to sue the Bureau –and you– for false imprisonment, abuse of process and intentional infliction of emotional distress.”

 “Mrs. Colbert is an attorney with the city,” Davis added.

 “Great.” Del Rey rubbed her brow. “Where are the children?”

 “We weren’t able to secure them,” Davis replied. “They were visiting a friend’s house. We received a call from Twin Creeks P.D. that they’re home now. Our cars are on the way.”

 “This should be enlightening,” Del Rey remarked with sarcasm. She turned to the door. “Imagine how sick you’d have to be to plan something like this on Christmas.”

 Maria Colbert looked up to see a woman enter the room. She was tall and slim with straight blonde hair on her couture black suit. The woman sat at the table across from Maria. She didn’t even attempt a fake smile.

 “Who are you?” Maria exclaimed. “And if you don’t have the authority to explain what’s going on, find me the person who does.”

 The woman gave a tight smile at her outburst.

 “I am Special Agent Anthea Del Rey,” the woman replied with authority. “With the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Domestic Counterterrorism.”

 “Wow…” Maria’s eyes widened, but she didn’t seem intimidated. “I did not see that coming. Is my husband in some sort of danger?”

 Del Rey raised a manicured brow. “Interesting, you immediately reference your husband.”

 “Why wouldn’t I?” Maria scowled. “He’s my spouse. He works in counterintelligence.” She motioned around the room, indignant, “All this… melodrama seems very grim to *destroy* our Christmas Eve.”

 Del Rey shifted her jaw as if planning her words. “I prefer being direct, Mrs. Colbert–”

 “–Then tell me why I’m here!” Maria shouted.

 Del Rey cleared her throat. “Your husband has gone dark. We have evidence he is a sleeper cell, in possession of a dirty bomb which he has now hidden in the New York area.”

 Maria blinked, dumbstruck.

 “We believe he’s had the trigger implanted somewhere on his actual body,” Del Rey continued. “If he’s cornered or provoked in any way, he will detonate the explosive.”

 Maria gasped. Her mouth moved like a guppy, with no words.

 “So…” Del Rey gave a subtle sneer. “Has your husband ever dropped words around the kitchen such…‘slaughtering millions of innocents’?”

Chapter Seven

The battered, candy-apple red 1969 Chevy Impala thundered down rural route 52, away from downtown Twin Creeks.

 Kyle’s hands gripped the wheel like wrenches. His eyes were wide and unblinking with adrenalin pulsing through his veins.

 He glanced in the rearview mirror and wiped a spot of blood from his cheek. He had no idea which man’s blood it was. *Does it matter?* Kyle wondered. He chanted under his breath, *I just killed people…* In some survival mode, the real shock hadn’t set in yet. He knew it’d been self-defense, but were there cameras or witnesses that could prove it? He looked again in the mirror and only saw a confused killer who had big problems.

 He looked away. Glancing at the interior of the thugs’ car, he wrinkled his nose. The car smelled like pot. On the floor was fast-food bags, lady’s underwear, candy and Red Bull cans.

 Kyle checked his surroundings. RR 52 was in the sticks. No other cars or lights, police or otherwise, in either direction. No street lamps or structures. Just frozen black woods rushing by, and snow flurries exposed by the headlamps.

 He turned on the radio to hear a choir caroling “Silent Night.” The melody made his blood pressure decrease by a few points. He took a breath, but was then reminded of the holiday and his entire dilemma. He lifted his phone and redialed Maria’s number, again.

 “*Hi there. You’ve reached Maria Colbert. Please leave*…”

 Kyle tossed the phone aside, too numb to cuss.

 A knocking cough sputtered from the Chevy’s engine. Kyle scanned the dashboard to see the gas gauge under empty.

 “*Please no…”* Kyle cried, exhausted. The idiot kids had been driving on ‘E.’ He pressed the accelerator down. Nothing. He shifted the car to neutral and idled to the shoulder. When the car came to a stop, he slowly pounded his head on the steering wheel, groaning, “Please…Baby…Jesus…Not on…Christmas–”

 Something caught his eye. He ducked in his seat and turned off the car’s lights.

 To his left, 200 feet diagonally across the street was a small church. Though he’d never been there, Kyle knew it. Twin Creek’s First Methodist Church, one of the oldest in the county. Being a small church, and having no midnight mass like the Catholic faith, the chapel was dark at 10:30 p.m. on Christmas Eve.

 But that’s not what caught Kyle’s eye. A man, presumably the church’s caretaker, was walking across the lawn. He was an older man, bundled in a plaid coat. Kyle watched him continue to the church’s nativity scene displayed in a small shed facing the road. The man turned off the display’s lights and closed accordion shutters on the front of the shack. The man then progressed to a pickup truck, the only vehicle in the parking lot, and drove away.

 Hunched in his coat, scarf and hat, Kyle scurried across the street like a raccoon. He rechecked the church and property. No lights, cars, or any sign of life.

 He walked to the nativity shed, positioned thirty feet from the road. It was about ten-by-fifteen feet, made out of timber like a small barn built by parishioners. The front shutters were predictably locked. He tried the only other entrance, the side door –it was also locked.

 *Shit,* Kyle exhaled and rested against the door. His head touched the door’s small square window. It felt like Plexiglas. He turned and tested the window. Miraculously, it slid open. He reached in, unlocked the door and quickly entered the shed.

Inside, he sighed deeply, the first full real breath since the train. He could feel tension fleeing his body as he exhaled. He fumbled around the wall until he felt a light switch. When he flicked it, he was stunned –and awed.

 Gazing at him were three wise men, Joseph, Mary, a baby in a manger and a couple donkeys. Plastic, life-size figures illuminated from inside, surrounded by bales of hay. They had ill-timed, serene smiles on their angelic faces.

 Kyle was somewhat daunted. He looked up to see a Star of Bethlehem shining down at him like a spotlight. Frozen in place, he realized the irony of the scene. He’d been longing for a *real Christmas.*

 He reclined on a bundle of hay. Kyle checked his phone –no return calls. He accessed the internet. Maybe the local news could help enlighten things. Scrolling through updates, he gasped to see his face, the same photo from the television news. He clicked the link and pulled the phone inches from his eyes.

 A bold headline read, “HOLIDAY HUMAN FUSE?” He tapped a video from the local news.

 A stern brunette newscaster was mid-sentence, “…the FBI has *not* commented, but it appears the video was anonymously posted, and already has nearly 2,000,000 hits in the last four hours.”

 The scene changed to a grainy video of a dark figure veiled in black. The shadow spoke in a deep voice that sounded altered. “*Our brother, Kyle Donald Colbert, has courageously uncloaked, to cleanse America’s financial cradle. To spread its light with fire*…”

 Kyle’s jaw dropped. It was his name –could anyone else have that exact name? Again it was like a feverish dream.

 The veiled figure continued, “*The trigger has been surgically implanted. If our servant is hunted, threatened or even approached, he will detonate the device without further delay*…”

 Kyle’s hands began to tremble. He gripped the phone tighter to see the news cut back to the reporter. Seated across from her was a silver-haired man in a suit and a grim face.

 “…We’re fortunate to have with us a specialist, retired FBI Agent Edwin Chance.” The reporter grimaced at the man. “Thank you for coming on short notice, Mr. Chance. Tell us: what would be the authority’s first step to locate this… hazardous suspect?”

 The man nodded and cleared his throat. “First of all, thank you for having me –and Happy Holidays.” His face reverted to stern. “The first thing I would do to find the suspect is track him through his cellphone usage. With modern towers, it’s easy to triangulate–”

 Like a hot potato, Kyle almost dropped his phone to turn it off. He blinked to think; he’d been using his phone all night, trying to call his wife. He stood and studied the small shed. In a back corner he saw lawn tools. A hedge trimmer, a shovel, a gas-powered weed eater –and a plastic gas can. He lifted it and it swayed with mass. It was at least half full, a couple gallons.

 Stooping beside the stalled Chevy, Kyle untidily poured gas into its tank. He entered the car and turned the key. It purred like a kitten with a cough.

 He needed to get rid of his phone and make another stop. But how safe would it be to return to his neighborhood?

Chapter Eight – The Christmas Crew

Maria was growing increasingly distraught. She wanted to slap the callous agent across from her.

 “You asked me the exact details of my morning,” Maria rubbed her eyes with an imminent migraine. “The exact details *are* me making canned *fucking* cinnamon buns and going to JoAnn Fabrics before–”

 Rookie Agent Harmon opened the door. Her eyes seemed eager. “Sorry to intrude Agent Del Rey, but we just confirmed.”

 Del Rey rolled her hand. “Well..?”

 “Verified through Customs, Kyle Colbert did travel to the Middle East, until three days ago. He was there a week, returned December 20th.”

 Del Rey turned back to Maria with an icy glare. “Tell me how that little nugget was never mentioned.”

 Maria’s face locked as if evaluating the impact of any response.

 A small team had assembled in a conference room. A half-dozen agents and several analysts were seated at long tables. The wall held a large flat-panel monitor. They were all prepared to help, but no one had wanted to be called away from their families.

 New York’s Jacob K. Javits Federal Building housed many agencies, including the FBI’s New York City Field Office.

 The office prided itself on pioneering the interagency task force approach to investigations. The city’s own NYPD’s counterterrorism investigators teamed with the FBI to form the nation’s first Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF.) The need for such collaboration increased sharply after the attacks of 9/11. The city remained an enormous target.

 Their current Joint Terrorism Task Force had investigated multiple threats, including the 2007 JFK Airport bomb, the 2009 New York subway bomb, and the attempted 2010 Times Square bombing. The office had successfully arrested major terror leaders, cyber criminals, and even corrupt CEOs.

 The office normally held over 2,000 agents and support staff. However, the workforce at 11:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve was ominously less. Nothing was considered more callous than a sophisticated attack on one of the holiest days of the year.

 Bookish FBI Analyst Dmitri Jenkins and older Dr. Irving Weisman sat together at a table facing the others. Each man was dressed casual since they’d been roused from their homes. Jenkins was in a Nike sweat suit, and the sixtyish Weisman wore a flannel shirt and jeans.

 The leader of the effort, Supervisory Special Agent (SSA) Vince Goldman, paced in front of them like a caged tiger. Goldman appeared flushed and he twitched like a man who’d just quit smoking.

 “Jenkins,” Goldman barked. “I know you’re in the middle of your move from Florida, but do you have any research how an ‘internal trigger’ is even… *conceivable*?”

 “Yes sir. We’ve seen similar concepts.” Jenkins spoke cool and rationally despite the crisis. “A surgically-implanted explosive device, or SIED, can be hidden inside the body to commit an attack.”

 Goldman paused and frowned. The agents in the room looked up, curious.

 Jenkins continued. “An SIED was used to assassinate *Prince Naya bin Mohammed*. The assassin offered to surrender if he could meet the prince in person. The Saudis agreed to fly in the fanatic and they even searched him. He had no weapons that anyone could detect. When he met the prince, the man detonated himself, killing the prince and his best security team.”

 The agents glanced at each other with a glower of *oh* *great…*

 “I need this to be bullshit!” Goldman shouted. His combed-back hair was in disarray, is if he’d been pulling it out for the past three hours. “I’m supposed to be assembling a goddamn Barbie Dream House right now!”

 The agents perked up at his outburst.

 Goldman took a breath and looked at the doctor. “Dr. Weisman, any theories how an *implanted trigger* could even be powered?”

 The older doctor oddly smiled and blinked as he speculated. “There are some exciting advances with *piezoelectric-able* material called lead zirconate titanate.” He grinned as if excited by the notion. “Microscopic material called *nanoribbons* are placed directly near an organ. The human heartbeat then creates all the power needed. No more batteries.” He raised his hands, incredulous, “Imagine, using it for pacemakers and such.”

 Goldman creased his face, frustrated. “I’m not imagining any excitement! I’m talking about this threat –*now*. Where could a trigger even be implanted?”

 Weisman shrugged, pragmatic. “Something as simple as his thumb or palm. Or his wrist… Anywhere on his body. And it would be powered as long as he has a heartbeat.”

 “Which has spawned these unsanctioned…vigilante groups,” Jenkins interjected. He aimed a remote towards the screen on the wall. “This was posted on social media earlier this evening.”

 All eyes turned to the screen to see a shaky YouTube video. It was dark and appeared to be the inside of a vehicle. A face then looked into the camera –a man wearing a flimsy Santa mask. The sound of several young men’s laughter could be heard. When the camera turned, it confirmed three other men in the car.

 “*We’ll find this trigger bitch!”* shouted a man in the video. He had a slight accent and sounded like a punk. Cocky laughter from within the car.

 The agents watched at full attention, taking a few notes.

 Onscreen, a second kid slid on a similar Santa mask. He chuckled, “I ain’t showin’ my face to no *terror-ist.* In case we miss him!” Laughter all around.

 Jenkins typed and the screen changed to a second video. It depicted a bachelor-style living room with whiskey posters and laundry. Four large men were standing wearing full snow-camouflage hunting gear. All the men were holding beer cans and large rifles.

 “*See this here 6mm sniper rifle with scope?”* one man shouted, slurring and rowdy. *“I’ll bag this dipshit myself. It’s my Christmas gift to America!”*

His drunk buddies all hollered and lifted their rifles and toasted their Budweisers.

 The screen faded and Jenkins continued to address the group. “As you all know, a viral post claims a $1,000,000 reward. Its origin is still unknown.”

 Seated at his side, Agent Harmon added, “Because of the trigger claim, the public has inferred the only way to stop Colbert is to remove his hands or stop his heart.” She paused, “Meaning…to kill him.”

 Goldman threw his hands up, “We can’t endorse a public ‘*kill order’*!”

 “It doesn’t matter,” Jenkins shrugged. “The message is a runaway train. A million residents only hear about a threat, a million dollar reward –with a name and face attached.”

 “We haven’t been able to track the message’s source,” Harmon shook her head. “The Bureau’s best cyber analysts are all on vacation. Cox is in Vegas. Lojy’s on a cruise. Coyne’s in Iceland—”

 “–I get it!” Goldman roared. “The bad guys targeted our biggest holiday, with smallest skeleton crews.” He rubbed his temples. “So we’re it,” he motioned around the room. “Welcome to our Christmas crew.”

 Several agents turned to see Agent Del Rey enter the room. She sustained her stern expression and carried a notepad.

 Goldman looked at her with hopeful eyes, “Did you get the wife to roll on his location?”

 “No –and she’s a real pistol.” Del Rey replied, realizing all eyes were on her. “But Kyle Colbert is *textbook*. He traveled to the Mid-East –Dubai– last week for Harding-Foxtel, where he’s employed to crack terrorist communications. And he’s been unhappy about a merger between his firm and the Bayonet Group–”

 “–Bayonet’s a defense contractor,” Jenkins interjected with interest. “They supply assault arms and aviation support.”

 Goldman scowled and turned as he interpreted the pieces. “So…an upset terror expert –who has access to military data and equipment– may be in possession of a *radiological bomb*?” He paused, “And he can ignite it if we approach or even *upset* him?”

 “There’s something else,” Del Rey glanced at her pad. “According to his wife, he’s caught the flu. Colbert had a low-grade fever this morning—”

 “–Are you suggesting an infectious or deadly pathogen?” Dr. Weisman interrupted with alarm.

 “We’re sending the CDC to his office in Manhattan to collect tissues from his garbage,” Del Rey replied.

 “*Jesus… Mary and Joseph*…” Goldman grumbled under his breath. He looked at the agent, “Del Rey: I’m sorry to make you the lead on this. But I know you’re alone with no kids or anything…” He shrugged.

 Del Rey frowned at his words.

 “I got news from Twin Creeks,” Harmon shouted from her screen. “The vigilante kids we just saw with the Santa masks,” she paused, “…were found dead. Gunshot wounds, point-blank. Along with three additional victims, all deceased.”

 Jenkins spoke up as his system chimed, “I got four pings from Colbert’s cellphone. All from Twin Creeks.”

 Goldman rocked his jaw and turned ominously to Del Rey. “Well, that confirms Colbert. And his location.”

Chapter Nine – Title

On a snowy, dark WOODED ROAD, Kyle PULLS OVER and PARKS.

Kyle EXITS the car. He slogs down an incline towards a FOREST. In the brush, he opens his CELLPHONE, removes the battery and SIM card, and THROWS it all deeper into the woods.

The GROWL OF A TRUCK. Kyle looks -a HUGE 4-wheel-drive FORD PICK-UP approaches. Camouflage with HUNTING LIGHTS. TWO MEN in the bed stand wearing SNOW-CAMO. Like ghost hunters.

The TRUCK STOPS at the Chevy. Kyle DROPS, flat in the snow. VOICES and LAUGHTER. He peeks up; the truck shines SPOTLIGHTS at the Chevy. Two hunters HOP onto the car. They HOLLER as they make it bounce up and down. Kyle squeezes his eyes closed.

After a laugh, they get back in the truck and SPEED AWAY.

ext. The colbert home – night

The house is surrounded by police tape and several POLICE CARS. STROBES illuminate the houses. NEIGHBORS stand around, curious.

ON THE SIDELINES, young Jack and Cassie stand with FEMALE OFFICERS with “FBI” on their coats. The kids are exhausted.

female officer

…Can you tell me anything else about his demeanor –I mean… his behavior?

Jack rubs his tired eyes with a shrug.

jack

I mean, he was like, all mad. He screamed at us –on Christmas too.

Little Cassie just nods, clutching her doll.

TWENTY FEET from the house, an OFFICER wearing an FBI BOMB SQUAD “EXPLOSIVE ORDNANCE DISPOSAL PROTECTIVE SUIT” looks like an astronaut. He carefully approaches Kyle’s dropped SATCHEL.

 bomb squad officer (filtered)

Doing cursory inspection. Then off to the lab. Got it…

He lifts the plain leather bag. He gently turns it upside down. Contents FALL OUT: A notebook, flu medicine, a Frank Sinatra Christmas CD, toothbrush, and oatmeal packs.

 bomb squad officer (filtered)

Sure this is the right bag?

ON THE PERIMETER are two county SHERIFFS CARS. TWO DEPUTIES stand with staunch SHERIFF LEON. Young DEPUTY NICK’s too eager.

deputy nick

Seven bodies! Where’s our manhunt? Jerry’s got dogs!

sheriff LEON

FBI handles terrorism. I only got twelve deputies. Ten off for Christmas.

 (blunt to his men)

We’ll handle calls. But the feds asked us to stand-down in case the “trigger threat’s” true. Understood?

Deputy jerry

--What about the reward?

Leon scowls.

sheriff LEON

That doesn’t apply to cops!

deputy nick

But most of us are auxiliary volunteers…

deputy jerry

So if we quit, we can get the reward?

The sheriff reacts, disturbed by their mindset.

int. interrogation room – night

Del Rey returns to Maria, who’s drained of her vigor.

maria

I don’t know what time it is and you haven’t arrested me. I know the process. I need to be home.

Del Rey cocks her head at her words.

del rey

Why do you need to be home?

Maria scowls at her as if she’s an idiot.

maria.

Do you have children?

(beat)

I have two. Expecting Santa for the only Christmas this year. They saw their new father splashed on the news as a monster.

Del Rey scoffs.

del rey

Some new father…

maria

Right! Married just seven months. This was a big year for Kyle. An instant family. Why do you think the kids were so suggestible? They’ve known him less than a year.

del rey

You’re smart enough to know I can’t let you just Uber out of here.

maria (heated)

I know we’re in New York, but there’s never an excuse to be a bitch--

They shout, fiery.

del rey

--You’re talking to a federal agent!

 maria

--You’re talking to an officer of the court! And a mother. And a human. Being civil’s always a better bet. It’ll make me want to help you.

del rey (interrupts)

--Ms. Colbert--

maria (interrupts)

--I’m not finished. I’m talking right now without an attorney, so I’d listen. I can tell you’re young, making a name for yourself. And I’m thoroughly knowledgeable of the process. You haven’t arrested me and I can’t get an attorney or judge until Monday. You really gonna’ place my kids in foster care for three days?

(softens)

I need to hug my children. Lay out a few gifts. Jack’s got one good Santa year in him. Cassie, who knows? But they’ve been horrified. And their mom is gone. What would you do for your kids?

Del Rey inhales for a retort. Maria goes for the kill.

maria (cont’d)

I can tell by your perfect nails and lack of empathy on Christmas Eve that you don’t have any.

Del Rey’s stunned by the comment. Maria plows ahead.

maria (cont’d)

I resolved your “red flags” for you: Kyle was sent to Dubai for work. He has a commendable job history. This is defamatory fraud. Release me to my residence -you can even park an agent outside. But I’m going to be in one bed with my children before morning.

Del Rey fumes, wordless.

ext. twin creeks roads – night

Kyle pulls over at a dark intersection. Snow falling, peaceful. The radio plays Nat King Cole’s “OH HOLY NIGHT.”

He spies wistfully down the road towards a GLOWING SUBDIVISION. He wipes his brow, feels his own forehead with his palm.

kyle (sotto)

Fever…

He coughs, and then REACTS at a WAIL of SIRENS and FLASHING LIGHTS down the road. A practical motorcade towards his street.

ext. wooded hill – moments later

In a cluster of TREES overlooking his cul-de-sac, Kyle crouches in the snow. He squints to observe his house. Several FLASHING CARS outside. A FEW PEOPLE in uniform milling around.

Kyle’s POV: An SUV enters his driveway. A DRIVER ushers a WOMAN to his house -he sees it’s Maria. She’s home. FIGURES reunite his KIDS and WIFE; they embrace. Kyle inhales with emotion.

int. kyle’s chevy – night

Kyle listlessly ENTERS the car. He sighs, now what..?

A TOWER of LIGHTS shine from behind. Like he’s onstage. He ROLLS to the floor. LIGHTS probe his car like an alien scan.

ext. road with kyle’s chevy – continuous

The enormous FORD PICK-UP with ridiculous 49-INCH TIRES is stopped behind Kyle. Its towering SPOTLIGHTS inspect the Chevy.

snow hunter’s voice (o.s.)

It is the same car…

TWO HUNTERS get out in SNOW-CAMO and menacing FACE MASKS. Each carrying RIFLES. One man walks to each side of the Chevy.

int. back to kyle – continuous

He scours through junk on the floor: Red Bull cans, a bong, beef jerky… Nothing –then ONE .38 BULLET. He studies it close.

snow hunter’s voice (o.s.)

…Anything inside there?

He hears STEPS through gravel. Kyle hectically searches his pockets to locate Santa’s .38 PISTOL. He nervously loads it.

HANDS scrape FROST from the window above him. Then a VOICE:

snow hunter 1

What you doin’ down there?

Kyle SPRINGS upright like a Jack-in-the-Box. He CRANKS the key and the engine GROANS. He turns it again, pumping. He stammers.

kyle

Fell asleep… Gotta’ go home--

snow hunter 2 (shouts)

--ITS HIM!

ext. road with stopped vehicles – continuous

The snow hunters struggle to AIM THEIR RIFLES in close proximity. A THIRD HUNTER CLIMBS DOWN out of the truck.

snow hunter 1

Don’t piss him off!

snow hunter 2

I’m gonna’ fuckin’ slay him!

Kyle’s CHEVY STARTS and TAKES OFF. The men on either side SHOOT towards each other; one HITTING the other’s shoulder. The man SCREAMS. The remaining men aim and SHOOT towards Kyle –but must stop as their driver TAKES OFF to follow. They shout:

snow hunter 1 (to driver)

You leavin’ us!?

snow hunter 2

Let the terrorist explode Travis.

int. kyle speeding in chevy – continuous

Kyle gasps as he races, intent. ON GAS GAUGE: almost “E” again.

ON REAR VIEW: The pick-up is approaching, fast in his trail. He grips the .38. Perspiring, he wipes his head.

ext. roadway – continuous

The pick-up FISHTAILS on the ICY ROAD. It CATCHES UP, racing to the LEFT of Kyle’s Chevy, FASTER. It pulls up BESIDE IT.

int. kyle in chevy – continuous

Kyle looks over. The hunter’s trying to AIM a RIFLE while driving. Kyle BRAKES and SPEEDS, enraging the driver, side by side.

Ironically, Kyle ROLLS DOWN his window. He BRAKES so the truck’s 49-INCH TIRE SPINS inches from his window. He maneuvers so the tire’s droning beside him like a buzz saw.

Kyle effortlessly SHOOTS the massive tire and ACCELERATES.

ext. roadway – continuous

The tire EXPLODES. The truck FISHTAILS then a VIOLENT TUMBLE. Kyle’s Chevy vanishes forward into the snowy night.

int. kyle in chevy – seconds later

Kyle, with RINGING in his ears, smirks in his rear-view mirror. A muffled ALVIN AND THE CHIPMUNK’S “CHRISTMAS SONG” plays on.

int. fbi task force conference room – night

With sleeves rolled and messed hair, Goldman finishes a call.

ssa goldman (on phone)

…When you assemble those things, there’s always spare pieces –I don’t know why! It’ll all in Chinese! Gotta-go-love-you-bye.

He quickly hangs up to see a casual AGENT SNYDER enter.

ssa goldman

Agent Snyder! Sorry to rouse you from anything better. Welcome to our esteemed Christmas Crew.

 (motions to the team)

Team, this is Brad Snyder with Homeland’s Nuclear Detection Office. Bottom line: what’s the credibility of this clown having a dirty bomb?

The team’s intent. The young Snyder plops in a seat, exhales.

snyder

Greetings. I’d rather be at my monster-in-law’s with her wooden brisket, but this threat… could be valid.

Solemn glances around the room.

snyder (cont’d)

“Dirty bomb” refers to a radiological dispersal device –RDD- that combines predictable explosives with radioactive material. They’ve been theorized since 9-11.

SSA Goldman

That’s not an M-80 you buy at Walmart. So how could they obtain radioactive material? Then into the U.S.?

Snyder uneasily sips a coffee.

snyder

A week ago, a laptop-size case of iridium-192 was stolen from an oilfield in Texas. Oil firms use it to image the inside of pipes. That’s enough radioactive material to kill thousands within hours to days.

(beat)

Ten days ago, thieves in Atlanta stole cobalt-60, a lethal radioactive isotope used in medical therapy from a truck hauling cancer treatment devices.

Goldman shakes his head in disbelief.

ssa goldman

So keeping track of radioactive material is like herding cats?

snyder

I was asked if the suspect’s threat is credible. It is.

Goldman looks straight up, cracks his neck.

ssa goldman

I can’t use choppers. Or do a full manhunt for fear of “distressing” the suspect or triggering a device.

 (to the team)

How do we locate the WMD?

davis

Harmon is at Colbert’s office now. They’ll do a radiation sweep. There was nothing at his home.

snyder

We have radiation portal monitors for tunnels, federal buildings… But an RDD bomb could be between the size of a fire hydrant or a soda machine.

Goldman is animated, SHOUTING sarcastically.

ssa goldman

No sweat: 304 square miles to check every hydrant and pop machine before someone pisses off trigger boy!

Jenkins interjects, pragmatic.

jenkins

Or let the public… neutralize him.

All eyes turn to him, silent.

int. nativity shed - night

DARKNESS. Then light as the GLOWING FIGURES illuminate. Kyle collapses, reclined against bales of hay. He feels his clammy head. Looks like crap. He gazes up at the smiling WISE MEN.

kyle (weary)

So were you guys “wise men?” Like “wise guys..?” I shoulda’ paid more attention to that… Were you kings?

The glowing wise men gaze; one dark, one light, one heavy.

kyle (cont’d)

If you’re kings… I’ll call you…

 (to the light one in white)

Elvis…

 (to the dark one)

…Martin Luther…

 (to the thicker one)

Um… B.B…

Kyle coughs, snuggles down with a coat on top of him.

kyle (cOnt’d)

Is that sacrilegious?

 (turns to baby Jesus)

Are we good?

He closes his eyes. Levity gone. A pained expression.

kyle (sotto)

Think! Deductive reasoning…

What’s the data -what do we know?

 (to the kings)

Fact: this is all happening.

Fact: I was identified by name.

Also fact: I am not guilty; I have no bomb or… trigger.

The kings remain still, pious.

kyle (cont’d)

The only conclusion… Another party perpetrated it. To frame me.

 (eyes fading)

Why? I’m just an email hacker… With a family… Trying to go hom…

He passes out. Devout glowing figures surround him.

int. kyle’s office - harding-foxtel building – night

In Kyle’s Manhattan office, two CDC WORKERS in BIOHAZARD SUITS swab the room. One collects WADDED TISSUES from his trash can.

Agent Harmon winces, watching from outside the door. She turns back to her witness, Kyle’s boss, Connor Banks.

connor (o.s.)

This is all preposterous.

agent harmon

Mr. Banks, you’re Kyle Colbert’s immediate supervisor?

Connor’s seated, casual from home. Obliging but confused.

connor

I think of us as a team, but technically yes. Kyle’s the genius. He’s our lead cryptanalyst.

agent harmon

What does that involve?

connor

He analyzes and decrypts hidden information, encrypted emails. In layman’s terms, we’re hired to I.D. terrorist communication accounts.

Harmon reacts, jotting information.

connor (cont’d)

In fact, I praised him earlier. A program he’s created could single-handedly locate all terrorist accounts within a year.

agent harmon (curt)

You’re confirming his job involves communications with terror groups?

Connor goes deadpan at the implication.

connor

No… Not directly. I mean… Kyle’s an honest, family man -right?

int. colbert’s home – night

In their adorned MASTER BEDROOM, Maria tucks-in her children. Together in one bed. They’re out cold. She smiles pensively.

Maria enters the LIVING ROOM that’s still awaiting Christmas. A TREE, stockings, gifts… All beautiful, but she sighs…

She peeks out her FRONT WINDOW. A cold FBI “MOBILE COMMAND CENTER” TRAILER is parked out front. The mood is spoiled.

ext. fbi’s mobile command trailer – moments later

In a coat, Maria KNOCKS on the trailer’s metal door. She shivers. The DOOR OPENS. A frowning Agent Del Rey peeks out.

del rey

We asked you to remain inside.

maria

I said park an agent outside, I didn’t mean you. Or this…monstrosity.

del rey

What do you need?

maria

You plan to stay inside…that all night? On Christmas?

The trailer is boxy metal. Behind Del Rey is a CLINICAL OFFICE.

del rey (wary)

I’m working. It has coffee and a couch.

maria

I also have coffee and a couch. And my house doesn’t look like the inside of a… proctologist’s office.

del rey

I can’t just leave--

maria (interrupts)

--You’re not screwing an ISIS suspect. I’m inviting you in –like you’re a vampire. I’m allowing you in.

int. colbert’s home – moments later

Agent Del Rey guardedly follows Maria into her LIVING ROOM. She darts her eyes as if identifying traps.

maria

Your fibbie’s already swabbed the place, took our hard drives and anything useful. Little Grinches. Please have a seat.

Del Rey warily sits on a couch before their Christmas tree.

maria (o.s.)

I made coffee –no Irish Cream in yours.

Del Rey absorbs the décor with eyes of an enthralled child.

del rey

I should only be a minute.

Maria returns with two steaming mugs. Hands Del Rey hers.

maria

Got your cell? They can find ya.’

Maria sits across from her. Her façade briefly falls.

maria (cont’d)

Listen: the only thing keeping me from crumpling is my kids upstairs. This is a bad dream. I don’t know if someone has slaughtered my husband... But I do know he’s innocent.

Uncomfortable, Del Rey is unsure how to respond.

del rey

I can’t comment about an ongoing investigation.

Maria scoffs, shakes her head. Del Rey inspects her coffee.

maria

It’s not my plot to poison one agent at a time who’s investigating my husband. That’d take all night.

(beat)

You will discover this is an enormous fraud. Created by one of his many targets. Your focus needs to be finding him, before some idiot does.

del rey

Our job is to explore all avenues.

Del Rey sips her coffee, it’s good… She absorbs the tree.

del rey (cont’d)

Your holiday tree is well… balanced.

maria

It’s what you call a Christmas tree. And thank you. Do you not celebrate?

del rey

Of course I do. I’m Ukrainian Orthodox.

maria

Ah. Don’t you use a different calendar or something?

del rey

Yes.

Painful small talk. Maria takes a sip.

maria

Anthea Del Rey. Doesn’t sound Ukrainian.

del rey

I had a first husband.

Maria nods, as if expecting more.

maria

I see. Sorry. Anyone else to enjoy this holiday with?

del rey

I must not have children –as you previously concluded.

 (stands)

I don’t think it’s appropriate for us to discuss my personal matters. Thank you for the coffee.

Maria’s eyes widen. She shrugs with no attempt to halt her.

maria

Suit yourself. Merry Christmas.

Del Rey EXITS. From her window, Maria can see through flurries that a pastel DAWN is approaching.

int. fbi task force conference room – night

Goldman’s turned away from the team, WHISPERING on his cell.

ssa goldman (into phone)

Nibble the edges of the cookies like he ate ‘em. Then drink the milk. I know you’re lactose intolerant -just dump it! –Got-to-go-love-you-bye.

He sees Jenkins approach with a grim expression.

ssa goldman

What is it? Colbert’s hard drive?

jenkins

No. Cox is helping remotely from vacation in Vegas. He’s reached out to his contacts at CIA…

ssa goldman (animated)

What?! What?

jenkins

They just deciphered a month-old post from a cyphernet IRC--

Goldman heatedly interrupts with a raised hand.

ssa goldman

--Talk to me like I’ve been pissed and awake for twenty-six hours!

jenkins

Sorry. An IRC is a chat room. On the dark web. There was a post confirming delivery of a dirty bomb. In Manhattan, thirty-two days ago. No location.

Silence as Goldman rotates. The room at full attention.

ssa goldman

The bomb’s real.

(beat)

If Colbert’s behind this, he knows where it’s located.

He grows more incited as he shouts obstacles.

ss goldman

If he’s still alive! Every armed civilian’s hunting him like a rabid Nazi! He’s useless dead! Davis: where was the last sighting?

davis

Ten unverified reports over three states. The cell hits were in Twin Creeks –where the bodies were.

ssA goldman

Idiots shooting each other like it’s the wild west. On baby Jesus’s birthday…

 (palms his eyes)

I want agents covering Twin Creeks like fire ants –plain clothes, not looking like Men in Black. I need Colbert somehow alive…

A young female AGENT LIANA meekly raises a hand.

agent liana

Supervisory Special Agent Goldman?

Goldman squints and nods.

ss goldman

Agent…Liana. You’re new, from NYPD. Watcha’ got?

agent liana

Why have cops never used tranquilizer guns?

 (beat)

A tiger escaped the Central Park Zoo last May. Zoos have Emergency Response Teams. Their guy brought a .50 caliber tranquilizer gun.

(shrugs)

It worked. It could keep Colbert from getting agitated or pulling any trigger. And keep him alive.

Goldman’s intrigued. He shrugs at Dr. Weisman.

dr. weisman

Sadly, there are reasons you’ve never seen police equipped with tranquilizer guns. First: they’re not that instant. The suspect could still shoot –or in this case, pull some trigger.

The room’s optimism sinks.

dr. weisman (cont’d)

More significantly: there’s too high a risk of killing them. That’s why anesthesiologists are paid so much. It’s a precise science. Based on size, body weight, diet, allergies. Otherwise you could overdose your subject or cause brain damage.

The agents turn back to their screens. Goldman winks at Liana.

ssa goldman

Nice input, Liana. We’ll table it as “Plan-D.”

int. A fevered dream – night

BLACK. ECHOS of the day’s events. SWIRLING images from Kyle’s psyche. We see Connor Banks’ face from after the meeting…

connor

Your work could single-handedly locate all target accounts and stop this entire thing in a year…

His toothy smile and amplified words:

connor (cont’d)

You’re our rival’s worst nightmare.

As “NIGHTMARE” ECHOES, the SCENE CHANGES to Kyle’s intern Rena, just as she’d been in his office.

rena

Chase Zahir called. He said something’s going on…

kyle (chuckles)

…probably has news he doesn’t want to write in an email.

A DARK ROOM lights to see a BOARDROOM TABLE. The menacing HAWKINS and a DOZEN EXECUTIVES. As they turn to Kyle –the executives all have the surreal SANTA MASKS.

connor (o.s.)

Wake up Kyle! Mr. Hawkins is speaking to you.

Connor nudges him angrily, unlike before. Kyle looks at Hawkins.

hawkins

No one wants a conflict…

connor (to kyle)

Are you going to I.D. all enemy accounts within a year?

Perspiring, Kyle pauses, confused. The Santa executives all lift glistening BLADES and BOLT out of their seats to CHASE HIM. He RUNS, tossing chairs in his wake.

He turns to see a MAZE of work CUBICLES. He attempts to navigate them. The FOUR GANGBANGERS, the TWO POLE SAWS and SANTA’s bloody corpse run at him from the corners of the maze.

From above, the nightmarish villains look like rats racing towards the center. POWER SAWS and LAUGHTER. Kyle runs, frantic.

Rena steps into his path. She’s seems more appealing, breathy.

rena

You’re smarter than the rest…

Frustrated, Kyle SHOUTS.

kyle

Then what the fuck’s going on?

The SAWS, GANGBANGERS and KNIFE-WIELDING executives CONVERGE.

smash cut to: nativity shed – day

Kyle’s SHOUT JOLTS himself awake. He rolls to see a BEAST’S SNOUT. He recoils to see it’s a PLASTIC DONKEY inches away.

kyle (sotto)

Jesu… Wha.. What time is it..?

He pats his coat, then recalls.

kyle (cont’d)

No phone.

It takes a second to realize he’s wearing a WATCH.

kyle (cont’d)

Almost three –three o’clock!?

He bolts up, rubs his eyes. Looks worse than before. Emotional.

kyle

Christmas day… almost gone..?

He coughs, wheezing. Turns to the kings and feels his forehead.

kyle (weary)

Martin Luther: you’re a doctor. What am I? 102 degrees?

Elvis: up all night. Sleep all day. Like you. I can’t go outside…

He sits on a bale of hay, depleted.

kyle (cont’d)

I can’t contact Maria. Or anyone…

He paces to address the figures as if presenting.

kyle

Sometimes it helps to present and analyze problems to brainstorm solutions. Since you’re all plastic, it’s called “thinking out loud.”

He unbundles a coat from the Chevy. In it: Red Bulls, beef jerky, a candy bar, an old NEWSPAPER. He opens a Red Bull and jerky.

kyle

Liquid stimulant. Protein. News. Exact same as coffee, bacon and the Sunday Times at home…

 (cough, frown)

Tuesday’s paper. No new data.

Kyle coughs. He iterates his goals.

kyle (cont’d)

Establish suspects. I can then approach authorities with credibility –without getting shot.

He gazes at the figure of JOSEPH.

kyle (cont’d)

Joseph, you were a… builder. I built a program, GhostSeeker. It IDs terrorist social media accounts. To stop the ways they communicate. Some believe it could be a final blow to terrorism as we know it.

Joseph maintains a soft smile. Kyle shrugs.

kyle (cont’d)

If there’s anywhere I can toot my horn, it’s here.

 (chuckle, cough)

The obvious result: my work creates many enemies. Suspects for my predicament will be… Countless.

He deflates at the outlook. Something suddenly dawns.

kyle (cont’d)

But who knows about GhostSeeker? The bad guys just know they’re getting caught. They don’t know me… Or my program. Only my company knows… And the firm that just acquired us.

He looks up at his audience. In his fevered state, they’re all FACING HIM with expressions of curiosity.

kyle (cont’d)

I haven’t explained: I work at Harding-Foxtel. We’re being acquired by Bayonet Group. They’re also government contractors. They do weapons, gear. Combat stuff.

 (to the group)

I know. It doesn’t sound peaceful. Especially…today.

Kyle sighs down at his paper. A WEIGHT LOSS AD for “DIET SOLUTIONS.” His CANDY BAR is lying beside it. He frowns.

A feverish FLASHBACK from his dream. Mr. HAWKINS’ face.

hawkins

No one wants a conflict…

connor’s voice (o.s.)

Are you going to I.D. all enemy accounts within a year?

Kyle looks up at his spectators. A perspiring EPIPHANY.

kyle

B.B., Elvis, you… You were business men… It’s a conflict of interest…

He lifts the paper and candy bar.

kyle (cont’d)

It’s like a chocolate company… buying a diet business. If they believe I can stop all terrorist activity… That doesn’t help a combat firm.

A thousand-yard stare as he deduces.

kyle (cont’d)

If my program and I are… gone, everyone profits…

Something catches his eye in the paper: a PHOTO of a MAN, “DR. MELVIN KENNEDY, discussing his new book…”

kyle

Melvin Kennedy? I’ve known Mel since 8th grade. He’s a professor. BioMedical Science or something… He knows me.

He looks up at his riveted audience.

kyle (cont’d)

Melvin and I used to ride bikes to school. He married Elaine Sims, lives in the nicest house on Holly lane… He’ll believe me. I need to tell someone. I need a phone, some help…

The kings, Joseph, Mary, all smile.

int. country club – day

An old-world club. Wood panel, leather chairs. SIX MEN with cigars and cognac. A SINISTER MAN in black with a uni-brow stands guard. At the center is stern Mr. Hawkins.

A formal SERVER approaches Hawkins.

hawkins (to server)

Tell the women to have the children clean and ready. We will dine punctual.

The server nods and exits. Hawkins raises a glass to the men.

hawkins

To our two great institutions, merged together for the new year.

The men are a mix of ethnicities. A MIDDLE-EASTERN MAN speaks.

mid-eastern man

His project, GhostSeeker, has never been shared outside the firm?

hawkins (curt)

This isn’t the time nor the place. But no. It will be abandoned as soon as…

He shrugs to finish his sentence. An ELDER MAN seems uncertain.

Elder man

Our entire success is contingent on the public… resolving this situation?

Hawkins gives a lethal smile at being questioned.

hawkins

There are 44,510 registered firearms in New York state. Half those owners have IQs less than 100. All it takes is one patriot and this problem will be laid to rest. Literally.

A BIG MAN in a cowboy hat interjects with a drawl.

cowboy hat

Pardon, but how confident are we that authorities can’t trace the uploads and… online posts?

Hawkins motions to the sinister man, standing with arms crossed.

hawkins

Meet my security chief, Mr. KRUG. He was Spetsnaz, Soviet intelligence. He can give you a lesson on utilizing TORs and bulletproof hosting if you say pretty please.

Krug scowls at the men, unflinching. No one speaks up.

As the men disband, the Mid-Eastern man walks aside the cowboy. They speak low, cautiously.

mid-eastern man

The… event is still in play?

The big man smirks.

cowboy hat

A necessary calamity. Live. Around the world. The collateral fallout will ultimately save millions.

The other man is curious.

mid-eastern man

How can you promise “live” and “around the world”?

ext. “First church” side property – day

Kyle winces at the sun as if exiting solitary. He looks around, jittery as a squirrel. No one around.

Behind the SHED he approaches a DONATION BIN. He rummages to find a coat hanger. He unbends it to fish in the bin. After tries, he pulls out a mismatched COAT, SCARF and CAP.

int. chevy – moments later

Huddled in his new disguise, he slowly DRIVES from behind trees. ON GAS GAUGE: it’s hovering on “E”

kyle (sotto)

Please… a few more miles…

int. colbert home – day

A KNOCK at Maria’s door. Still in a robe, she OPENS the door to see Agent Del Rey with an odd face of humility.

maria

You have news? Or apologizing?

del rey

No -it seems… our trailer’s toilet has backed-up--

maria

--second door down the hall.

int. colbert’s living room – moments later

Maria looks small in a large chair. With a glass of wine, she looks like she hasn’t slept. Del Rey returns with a faint smile.

del rey

Thank you Mrs. Colbert--

maria

--Maria. Anything new?

del rey

You know I can’t…

She stops herself. Takes a seat.

del rey (cont’d)

We have no information that Mr. Colbert has been located.

Maria blinks to consider this.

maria

Could be good news…

del rey

How are your children?

Maria’s shocked by Del Rey’s concern.

maria

Thank you for asking. They slept til noon. Still very confused. I saved their gifts. In case we can still…

She shrugs, switching gears.

maria (cont’d)

You said you’re Ukrainian Orthodox?

del rey (guarded)

That’s correct.

maria

Don’t they use a different calendar, so Christmas hasn’t even happened yet?

del rey

Christmas is celebrated January 7th. Something about the Julian calendar instead of your Gregorian calendar.

Maria shakes her head with a sip of wine. Growing weary.

maria

I was thinking… about the ridiculousness of this… Tell me one incident when a terrorist implanted something inside their own body.

She scoffs, takes another sip. Del Rey replies instantly.

del rey

January, Heathrow Airport. A Nigerian female attempted to board a plane with explosives surgically inserted as breast implants. She got through modern scanners.

Maria and Del Rey stare at each other.

maria

I can tell you as an absolute fact Kyle does not have fake boobs.

A beat. Del Rey uncharacteristically LAUGHS. Maria cracks up with her. Their moment is disturbed by a KNOCK on the door.

Maria opens the door. The grim faces of SSA Goldman and agents Davis and Harmon, with a SCARRED MAN in khaki fatigues. Maria is stunned at the daunting wall of officials.

ssa goldman

Mrs. Colbert, we need you in our mobile office. Now.

ext. rural road – day

Kyle drives strangely alone on the icy road. He sees FLASHING LIGHTS from POLICE CARS on an OVERPASS up ahead. Waiting. Shit! He holds his breath and drives under the crossing.

Passing a FIELD, he sees a HORDE OF RESIDENTS walking as if it were a search party –except they’re all CARRYING RIFLES.

He stares straight ahead and taps the gas.

ext. holly lane - affluent neighborhood – day

Kyle’s Chevy creeps along a street of LARGE HOMES with a backdrop of woods and lakes. Sparse decorations and icy snow.

ext. estate’s door – day

Standing at a DOOR, Kyle pauses to gather his wits. He knocks. After a beat, the door cracks open. The TALL, disheveled MELVIN KENNEDY(40) in a robe does not look like his pic. His eyes bug.

Melvin

Colbert..? Aren’t you--

Kyle grasps the door, exclaiming.

kyle

--Mel, you know me. I’m innocent. I can explain. And I’m sick. I need a phone –then I’ll be gone.

int. kennedy’s estate – moments later

Melvin (o.s.)

Obviously you’re innocent.

Kyle sits in his cluttered KITCHEN, a blanket draped around him and a thermometer in his mouth. Melvin SITS across from him.

Melvin (cont’d)

How many years? Our ten-year reunion? Even without hearing back from you, I never thought you were capable of… what they said. I watched the news all night. Running mental exercises how any of it could be resolved.

Melvin’s bizarre –not just professor odd. He’s large; his eyes dart as he rambles, twitchy. Kyle glances around the messy room.

Melvin (cont’D)

You noticed no decorations. No tree. With Elaine gone –and no kids- what’s the point? Buy more crap to add to the debt she left me? Consumerism murdered Christmas.

Kyle listens with fixed eyes. Melvin smiles at Kyle.

Melvin (cont’d)

I’ve had time to reason about your… dilemma. ”Internal trigger” seemed absurd. But a power source sustained from a heartbeat? That’s intriguing. Elaine had been working on Cryonic--

Kyle removes the thermometer to interject.

kyle

--Melvin, we were so sorry to hear about Elaine. We truly enjoyed her--

Melvin snatches the thermometer out of his hand.

Melvin

--Yes. We missed you at the funeral.

 (RE: thermometer)

103.1… We need to get you stable. I do have some over-the-counter meds.

Melvin gets up to exit –quickly turns, towering over Kyle.

Melvin (cont’d)

I’m curious: did you believe you could trust me because I’m a man of science who despises guns? Or because we’re friends.

An awkward pause.

kyle

Because we’re friends, Melvin.

Melvin smiles. Cocks his head.

Melvin

There’s a phone in the den. You can make a thirty-second call. If it’s traced, I’ll be forced to tell them you broke in when I wasn’t home.

Kyle exhales, relieved.

kyle

I owe you so much Mel.

int. den - kennedy home – moments later

In the hoarder-like DEN, Kyle finds an old rotary PHONE on a cluttered desk. He clumsily dials a number.

kyle (sotto)

Please… Be home… Pick up…

rena’s voice (v.o.)

Hello..?

intercut with: rena’s small apartment – day

Alone in a sparse Ikea apartment, Rena answers, dubious.

kyle’s voice (v.o.)

Rena, it’s Kyle -don’t hang up! If anyone traces this, you’re not in trouble. I’m the one calling you.

Rena gasps, anxious.

rena

But… The FBI was here. I don’t--

kyle’s voice (v.o.)

--I only have seconds. I’m being framed. It’s Christmas, so there’s no way anyone could get a court order to have your phone tapped. Are you willing to listen to me?

Rena stands to think.

rena

Yes…?

kyle’s voice (v.o.)

I’m taking a gamble you trust me. If you do, I need you to make one call and relay a message.

ON KYLE: On the phone, uttering quickly.

kyle (cont’d)

If you don’t, or you report me, at the very least tell Maria I love her and the kids –and I know who’s behind this and I’ll have proof.

ON RENA: Clutching the phone with both hands, eyes darting.

rena

What do you need me to do?

kyle’s voice (v.o.)

Thank you, thank you. Do you still have the number for Chase Zahir?

rena

Yeah. Yes.

ON KYLE: Speaking faster, passionate.

kyle

I know he’s our rival, but he’ll be on my side. He’s the only one with the same skills. Tell Zahir to search the dark web. Specifically for…

ON RENA: Intently listening. Her EYES WIDEN at his words.

rena

How do I let you know what he finds?

ON KYLE: A hushed tone as he hears Melvin returning.

kyle

Don’t call this phone. I’ll call you. Good bye Rena.

He abruptly HANGS UP and looks up.

int. fbi’s mobile command office – day

Within the trailer, Maria’s seated in a small steel OFFICE. Across the table are Goldman and his three agents. Standing is a stern MR. RENLY, with a facial scar, in khaki fatigues.

ssa goldman

Mrs. Colbert, this is Mr. Renly, a specialist who has very specific questions. Zero room for error.

Maria’s eyes widen at his words. Renly menacingly leans forward, with an Australian accent.

renly

Mr. Colbert’s New York driver’s license states he’s five-eleven. Is that accurate? Or an embellishment?

Maria recoils, thrown by the question.

maria

Yes –I guess. Why? What’s happened--

renly

--Does Mr. Colbert have any known allergies?

maria

No… Not at all. Maybe hay fever..?

The agents gaze, silent. Renly plows ahead with queries.

renly

What is Mr. Colbert’s approximate body weight?

int. kennedy estate – day

In the kitchen, Melvin hands Kyle a handful of random PILLS.

melvin

Take these. The red are for daytime –non-drowsy. Blue for nights.

Kyle frowns at anonymous pills.

melvin (cont’d)

Really? Read the tiny letters. It says “daytime.” I’ll show you the pack.

Kyle swallows several pills. Melvin oddly watches.

kyle

I gotta’ run Mel. I’ve been here--

Melvin touches his shoulder.

melvin

--No, no… Like I said, I’ve been studying your situation. I believe I have a short-term solution.

 (intense)

Elaine worked in Cryonics –have you heard of induced hypothermia?

Kyle winces, confused.

kyle

No. I’m not the scientist--

Melvin looms over him, insistent.

melvin

--Please. Kyle. I’ll show you. In the boathouse. I believe I have an interim solution. You trusted me before. Trust me now.

ext. forest – day

Heavily wooded and snowing. The two sheriff’s deputies, NICK and JERRY, creep. Full hunt CAMO, carrying RIFLES with SCOPES.

deputy nick (whispers)

Over there! The third house.

Nick points across an icy LAKE. Jerry lifts BINOCULARS.

BINOCULAR POV: Distant image of Kyle and the tall Melvin exiting the rear of a large home. In a low voice:

deputy jerry

It’s him. Positive. The shorter man.

He speaks into his 2-WAY RADIO.

deputy jerry

Dispatch: this is Jerry on Holly Lane.

dispatch (v.o.)

Dispatch, go ahead.

deputy jerry

Tell the sheriff the neighbor’s call was negative. False alarm. Over.

dispatch (v.o.)

Copy. Not surprised. Over.

They both get in crouching firing stances with their rifles.

ext. dock behind kennedy estate – day

Behind Melvin’s home, a narrow 30-foot DOCK leads to a shed-like BOATHOUSE. A slushy FROZEN LAKE surrounded by FOREST.

Walking close, Melvin leads. Kyle cagily looks all directions.

kyle

If you’re suggesting the boathouse as a hideout, I have one.

melvin

 Not at all--

kyle (curt)

--Please make this quick.

melvin

It will be. Have you ever heard of Dominique Jean Larrey? He was Napolean’s surgeon general.

Kyle’s frustration swells.

kyle

I’m not a historian either.

melvin

He observed the farther wounded soldiers lay from the campfire, the less likely they were to die.

They approach the end of the narrow pier. Mel turns to Kyle.

melvin (cont’d)

So removing energy –e.g. body heat- decreases the rate at which chemical reactions –metabolism- take place.

Kyle scowls at Melvin. Irate and confused.

kyle

You got two minutes to get to your point.

Melvin leans against an upright OAR. Spreads his hands.

melvin

Induced hypothermia. Remember the Hodges boy? Two, three years ago? Chased his beagle onto that frozen pond. Fell through the ice. He’d been in it thirty minutes before the sheriff punched him outta’ the ice.

(grin)

He lived. Slowed his heart to a crawl.

Kyle’s eyes widen as he suddenly gets it. He’s about to REACT but Melvin SWINGS the large OAR. Kyle’s knocked into the LAKE. He CRASHES through the ICE. Melvin yells over Kyle’s shout.

Melvin

I don’t want you dead! We’re friends.

As Kyle flails, Melvin steps down to ROCKS. He uses the oar to PUSH KYLE DOWN. Kyle has a wounded head. He’s pushed into the water, under a large SHEET OF ICE.

melvin (cont’d)

Slows your heart… Just enough… You won’t die. I need that reward…

intercut between the deputies and kyle:

JERRY AND NICK IN THE FOREST:

deputy nick (o.s.)

What the fuck just happened?

SCOPE POV: Kyle thrashing. The tall man thrusting him with an oar.

deputy jerry

Shoot ‘em both then!

KYLE IN THE LAKE:

KYLE’s POV: From UNDER the ICE, a blurred silhouette of Melvin standing over him as he’s forced UNDER. He SCREAMS bubbles. He kicks and pounds his fists, but against thick ice.

Above, Melvin struggles to hold him down. He begins to weep.

melvin

Idiot! My way keeps you alive..! Anyone else would kill you…

He watches Kyle’s horrified face under a two-inch pane of ice.

int. forest – continuous

A long PAX-22 RIFLE with an enormous SCOPE AIMS –but it’s held by a crouching Mr. Renly. He squints an eye.

renly

We got a situation. Please advise.

Agents Davis and Harmon are squatting behind him in camo jumpsuits. Harmon lifts her RADIO.

harmon

Goldman: Colbert’s in an altercation with a civilian. A male. Over.

int. fbi mobile command trailer – continuous

Goldman sits with Maria, riveted as they follow along.

ssa goldman (into radio)

Shit! I can’t have a yokel killing him!

Maria reacts, horrified.

ssa goldman (cont’d)

Can Renly hit the other guy first?

harmon’s voice (v.o.)

He says it’ll take too long to reload. Over.

Agent Del Rey barges into the room. Maria and Goldman turn.

del rey

Colbert’s intern left me a phone message. She spoke to him.

Maria gasps. Goldman throws his hands out.

ssa goldman

What’d she say!?

del rey (to maria)

He knows who’s behind this –and he’ll have proof. Nothing else.

Goldman instantly lifts his radio.

ssa goldman

Harmon: We need Colbert alive! I don’t care who else you eliminate!

intercut: all three parties

nick and jerry in the forest:

The two deputies struggle to AIM, frustrated.

deputy nick

I only see the big one. There’s no reward for murdering an innocent.

deputy jerry

I’ll shoot the big guy. When Colbert runs, you tag him!

kyle at the lake:

UNDERWATER. Hands pounding on TRANSLUCENT ICE. Muffled SHOUTS. The ice cracks, Melvin’s oar hits him again –Kyle’s able to GRAB the oar, PULLING Melvin off balance, falling INTO the ice.

As Melvin splashes in the slush, Kyle struggles to stand. He GRASPS a football-size CHUNK of ICE. He lifts it over his head, and smashes it over Melvin’s skull. Like glass and blood.

fbi and renly in the forest:

Renly readies his shot. In the crosshairs.

renly

Got ‘em. Just gimme’ the order.

nick and jerry:

They both aim in a ready stance.

deputy jerry

I’ll take the big guy –NOW.

He FIRES.

kyle at the lake:

Kyle lifts his chunk of ice again -But Melvin’s head BURSTS with RED as a BULLET strikes him. Kyle flinches –he’s then HIT in the NECK. He clutches it with his hand. There’s blood.

fbi and renly in the forest:

Agent Harmon SHOUTS, AIMING to the brush beside them.

harmon

The other shot came from over there! Fifty yards!

davis (shouting)

Freeze! FBI!

The agents RUN through the brush towards the other shooter, guns ready. Renly stands gratified, lighting a cigarette.

nick and jerry:

They RUN, panicked, winding through trees.

deputy jerry

Those were feds you fucktard!

ext. kennedy rear property – continuous

Kyle slogs in almost SLOW MOTION, stumbling over lawn chairs. He collapses to the ground, unconscious. On his neck, the RED PLUME of a DART protruding.

Several FBI AGENTS arrive from the side lawn with guns drawn.

FADE OUT.

fade in:

int. Hospital room – day

Darkness. A familiar, anxious voice.

ssa goldman (o.s.)

Can’t you just wake him up? We need to talk to him.

Kyle’s face is pale. Eyes closed, motionless in a hospital bed. Goldman stands with FBI Dr. Weisman and DR. LEE in a lab coat.

Dr. lee

It was your idea to hit him with 5 milligrams of Xylazine, typically used for horses. Clydesdales not Shetlands.

Lee lectures Goldman and Weisman.

dr. lee (cont’d)

Your dosage made no allowance for a cold medicine stimulant in his system, nor his raging fever. I’m amazed he didn’t go into cardiac arrest.

Goldman and Weisman glance at each other like scolded children.

ssa goldman

The… distributor was the top security expert from the Bronx Zoo.

dr. lee

I’m guessing the only expert who’d pick up a phone on Christmas?

The doctor notices Kyle’s eyes fluttering in a REM sleep.

dr. lee (cont’d)

Even if he wakes today, questioning him will be useless. Inadmissible. In his condition, he may suffer delirium or even hallucinations.

(beat)

Against my better judgment, I will allow the MRI you’ve requested.

Dr. Weisman looks to Goldman with concern.

dr. weisman

If any part of you still believes there could be a planted trigger, the magnets from the MRI could be a risk.

Goldman gives a pensive sigh. He looks at Lee.

ssa goldman

Go ahead with the MRI.

int. mri room – day

A TECHNICIAN rolls an unconscious Kyle into an MRI machine. The LIGHTS and sudden DRONE of the machine make him flinch.

CLOSE ON: Kyle. Claustrophobic, his eyes fluttering faster.

int. nativity scene – night

Kyle’s fevered delusion. His hospital bed is in a DARK place. Surrounded by GLOWING MEMBERS of the nativity scene. He smiles at the KINGS. Comforted, picking up where he’d left off.

kyle

Your majesties… Where were we? Lives are at stake. Many people.

The figures appear solemn. Mary with her hand over her heart.

kyle (cont’d)

I must determine where the danger might be…

 (to the group)

Just as you were all witnesses, Christmas brings many… observers. To have hidden a… bomb, they would’ve done so early. Without people around…

The kings grin knowingly. He’s on to something.

kyle (cont’d)

…On a day or time with minimal spectators, or workers… A Sunday? Or a holiday? But this city never sleeps…

He throws his hands up, perplexed.

kyle (cont’d)

What about location? Extremists want the largest impact. So how many landmarks do we have here? A hundred?

He scoffs; it’s futile. A LIGHT shines from above. The STAR OF BETHLEHEM with its painted beams. Kyle squints at a calligraphed SCROLL over the star. He reads:

kyle (sotto)

Follow the Star, for the masses shall arrive to rejoice…

A FLASH MEMORY from the cloaked figure online.

veiled figure

…To spread its light with fire…

The ECHOES of a FARAWAY TELEVISION plays. Kyle repeats:

kyle

The masses shall arrive… For a star… to spread its light. -Where will masses arrive to watch a light..?

His eyes widen.

smash cut: THE television – concurrent

The “STAR” BALL over TIMES SQUARE. Multitudes gathered below.

tv announcer (o.s.)

Soon the masses will be arriving! To claim the best view as New Year’s approaches. Tune in to see it live!

The TV plays on in Kyle’s room as a NURSE checks his vitals.

back to: kyle’s nativity dream – concurrent

The nativity figures morph to be BUILDINGS. At their feet, a CROWD of thousands, like ants in the streets. The “star” is on top of a building. The New Year’s ball radiates. Kyle panics.

kyle

How do I tell them!?

BACK TO: KYLE’S HOSPITAL ROOM – CONCURRENT

With AUDIBLE DINGS, Kyle’s pulse spikes. The nurse turns to observe, and EXITS.

ext. one times square – night

Krug knocks on an alley steel door. The CUSTODIAN cracks open the door cautiously. Krug BLASTS a TASER into the MAN’S FACE.

ext. roof observation deck – night

The same deck from Thanksgiving. Krug locates the two PATIO HEATERS. At the base of a 77-foot FLAGPOLE, he inspects the 12-foot diameter NEW YEAR’S BALL covered in CRYSTAL TRIANGLES.

He OPENS the patio heaters to remove CANISTERS the size of scuba tanks. With a POWER TOOL, he removes 1-foot glass triangles on two sides of the ball. He slides the canisters into the holes and reinstalls the glass.

int. hospital waiting area - day

An emotional Maria sits with Agent Del Rey at her side.

maria

Why can’t I visit him? I just want to see him. Talk to him…

del rey

Despite his condition, he’s still a person of interest.

As if again catching herself, she blinks.

del rey (cont’d)

If what his intern said is true, we need to talk to him –he can help us.

Maria looks at her, unsure.

del rey (cont’d)

We have evidence of a weapon somewhere in New York. You and I want the same thing: Kyle awake and alert.

int. hospital conference room – day

ssa goldman (o.s.)

There you have it!

Goldman slaps down folders. Del Rey, Jenkins and Weisman jolt.

ssa goldman

The MRI’s 100% negative. No “implanted trigger” or any other foreign object. And he’s got old-fashioned influenza. No bio-terror bullshit. His briefcase tested cleaner than the Pope’s browsing history. So why don’t I feel any better?

Del Rey and Weisman lean to gaze at the folder, wordless.

jenkins

Because the NSA and CIA know someone transported a radiological weapon a month ago? And one man who might have a clue hasn’t woken up.

del rey

Have we considered allowing his wife –even his children- to visit and talk to him?

The men look at her like she has three eyes.

del rey (cont’d)

You’ve heard those stories. The benefits of loved ones talking to unconscious patients… What’s the harm?

int. hospital waiting area – day

Maria sits alone. Her kids play with a vending machine. AGENTS stand at the doors. Maria seethes at a mounted TELEVISION. A NEWSCAST shows KYLE’S FACE.

newscaster’s voice (v.o.)

Authorities won’t verify they’ve captured the human trigger, Kyle Colbert. Nor confirmation about any threat of an explosive device.

The scene changes to FOOTAGE of a typical busy TIMES SQUARE.

 newscaster’s voice (cont’d)

New Yorkers plan to go about their business as the city predicts record numbers for New Year’s…

Maria turns, surprised to see Connor Banks approach.

maria

Connor, hi… Thanks for coming.

He kisses her cheek and gives a dramatic smile of compassion.

connor

Of course. How is he?

He sits beside her. She fumbles with a tissue as she speaks.

maria

The doctor placed him in an induced coma. To stabilize brain swelling..? Unsure how long he might be out.

connor

Did he… speak to anyone..?

maria

A little, for a few minutes. Those idiots aren’t letting me see him.

She scowls at an agent at the door. Then perks with a smile.

maria

They did say Kyle wanted me to know he loved me. They think he knows who’s behind this –they’re circling like hawks for him to wake up.

Connor goes briefly deadpan. A deceitful smile resumes.

connor

That’s magnificent. How soon might that be? I wonder.

They turn as Del Rey ENTERS with the closest thing to a smile.

del rey

Mrs. Colbert, would you like to see Kyle? He’s opened his eyes.

Conflicting faces: Maria ecstatic; Connor vexed.

As Maria and the kids are ushered towards a door, Connor exits. He lifts a PHONE, grim.

connor (into cell)

I need an encrypted memo. To the top.

int. hospital room – day

Maria and the kids cautiously enter. They see Kyle, seemingly lifeless. A pleasant NURSE turns with a smile.

nurse Jocie

Hello, I’m JOCIE. I’m the RN taking care of Mr. Colbert.

Maria emotionally absorbs Kyle’s state. She TEARS UP.

maria

They said he was awake… Is he okay?

nurse jocie

He’s very lucky. With the negative MRI, Dr. Lee elected to revive him from his sedative-induced coma.

The kids sheepishly remain behind their mother.

maria

What’s that mean?

nurse jocie

We’ve administered Anantadine, a drug used to expedite recovery. He’ll open his eyes again.

Maria steps closer, touches Kyle’s hand.

nurse jocie (cont’d)

He won’t remember much. And he may say things that are… peculiar. He’ll recover completely with time.

 (direct to Maria)

I will not let the FBI or anyone else talk to, or harass, your husband until he’s ready. It’ll only be Dr. Lee or myself in here.

Off her reaction, Maria turns to see Kyle OPEN his eyes. He struggles to speak, hoarse. She bends closer to hear.

kyle

What…day is it?

She smiles through tears. Puzzled by his first words.

maria

Thursday. December 30th. You’ve been out for five days.

He gasps. Panic. His eyes a range of emotions.

maria (cont’d)

I’m so sorry we missed Christmas… But we still have New Year’s!

int. fbi task force conference room – day

The crew’s expanded. AGENTS include Goldman, Del Rey, Harmon, Davis and Dr. Weisman. Plus Homeland’s Brad Snyder and a bear-sized COMMISSIONER VASSAR. Heated and fast-paced debate.

ssa goldman

--Of course I want to know who’s behind this. My priority is finding the WMD!

del rey

Colbert’s the only one who may know something –and I can’t talk to him.

dr. weisman

HIPAA laws are tricky. If he’s not under arrest, Dr. Lee can prohibit us from questioning him--

ssa goldman (interrupts)

--Then arrest him! I don’t care what for! We got seven fatalities so far, somehow tied back to him.

The large Commissioner Vassar interjects.

vasSAR

You have no answers. My duty is to Emergency Management. We got a million tourists for the holidays. You’ve had knowledge of a credible threat and you want business as usual? I have to talk to the Mayor.

Goldman recoils.

ssa goldman

What? You’re now Sheriff Brody on the Fourth of July? You gonna close New York, Times Square? The Rockettes?

 (looks at Snyder)

Snyder: show him what we’ve done.

Brad Snyder sits casually beside Jenkins at the controls.

snyder (to vassar)

Mr. Commissioner, we’ve deployed radiation detectors. Creating a grid of the city.

WE SEE what he’s describing: ANONYMOUS MEN in jumpsuits carrying yellow TOOLBOX-SIZED DEVICES with small domes.

snyder (v.o.)

DARPA has developed two types of detectors: large ones that can be installed on emergency vehicles, and phone-sized mobile devices that can be used by your officers.

ON ROOM: The commissioner and agents listen, intent.

WE SEE: The devices being installed on AMBULANCES and EMT VEHICLES across the city.

snyder (cont’d)

Detectors have been mounted on Fire and EMT vehicles throughout the city. SoHo, to Tribeca, to Midtown.

WE SEE: Vehicles crisscross through top areas of Manhattan.

snyder (cont’d)

As they go about their duties, they’re already creating a real-time map of the city. Looking for unusual spikes that could indicate a threat.

On the room’s SCREEN, an aerial GRAPHIC of Manhattan shows a digital WEB-LIKE PATTERN developing. Jenkins speaks.

jenkins

Because emergencies occur every hour in every corner, the vehicles are creating a unprecedented scan of the city. From tiny radioactive traces in construction granite, to levels found after medical treatments.

Vassar nods, intrigued with the concept.

vassar

I’m guessing nothing’s “spiked” yet?

 jenkins and snyder

No sir.

Goldman interjects to appease the bureaucrat.

ssa goldman

Your NYPD can carry the mobile detectors. At key locations: Empire State, the statue, World Trade Center –God forbid…

He knocks on the table. Vassar frowns and finally stands.

vassar

I’ll talk to the Mayor. We won’t issue any alerts.

 (points to Goldman)

But if you confirm evidence of a target, you will call me.

As the room gets up to collectively breathe, rookie Agent Liana approaches Agent Del Rey.

liana

Agent Del Rey: do you sense a flaw in their grid system?

Del Rey frowns, perplexed.

del rey

Such as..?

liana

Their scan’s on the ground. Only eye level. How high does it see?

Del Rey blinks to calculate.

del rey

I think we should trust our experts.

int. large estate’s kitchen – day

Within a lavish copper and stonework KITCHEN, the stern Mr. Hawkins wears an apron with a cute GRANDDAUGHTER (6).

hawkins

There you have it. You now know how to create crème brûlées. Have you made mental notes?

The little girl shakes her head with a shrug. Hawkins is curt.

hawkins

RENATTA! Focus on your grandfather’s baking lessons! How else might you dazzle a gentleman one day?

The girl blinks. He turns back to the stove.

hawkins (cont’d)

-Granted this is a bit advanced, considering we must now torch the tops…

Another GIRL (8) walks into the room with an E-TABLET.

girl

Grand-Papa, the pad you gave me looks funny. Says to get you.

Hawkins’ eyes widen. He grasps the pink CHILD’S TABLET.

ON TABLET: An ALL-BLACK screen contains plain white text: “BRING THIS TO MR. CHESTER HAWKINS - ENTER ENCRYPT KEY.”

hawkins

Well done, LUNDEN. As instructed.

He steps aside to type something. ONSCREEN the words “DECRYPTION COMPLETE.” His eyes narrow as he turns to read.

hawkins

Lunden, bring Grand-Papa your new mobile phone, S'il vous plaît.

int. hospital room – day

Kyle is sitting up, pale but functional. Maria holds a cup and straw to his lips. She’s an excited chatterbox.

maria

…We saved the gifts until you’re safe at home. The feds unwrapped all the gifts during their search. I said, “fuck you, you’re rewrapping those Goddamn things!”--

Jack and Cassie interrupt to WHISPER. She turns back to Kyle.

maria

This has really been tough on them. They have something they want to say. Go ahead Jackie, Cass.

Cassie hands him a crayon picture of a Christmas tree. Jack steps closer to Kyle, but avoids eye contact. In a monotone.

jack

I’m really sorry I tried to kill you.

Kyle releases an unexpected chuckle, but it turns emotional.

kyle

I love you and your mom more than anything I’ve ever had before. You know that, right?

 (smiles)

I did promise to make Christmas memorable.

His smile fades, back to business. He turns to Maria.

kyle

I know I had a theory about what might happen, but...

He covers his eyes, frustrated. She comforts him.

maria

You’re safe in here. The doctor said the meds take a while to wear off.

kyle

Did you bring your laptop?

maria

In my bag, in the car..?

kyle

Please get it and tell no one. And I need something from the corner bodega.

Nurse Jocie steps into the room.

nurse jocie

Mr. Colbert, I told her you can’t have visitors, but a Rena Stacy insists--

Kyle exclaims.

kyle

--Rena? Let her in, please.

 (looks at Maria)

Take the kids to run the errand. Talk to no one. I’ll be okay.

int. fbi task force conference room – day

A flurry of activity as agents work their monitors. On a large SCREEN’S ILLUMINATED GRID of the city, a point FLASHES.

harmon (eager)

Agent Goldman: we located a van with radioactive residue. Left in long-term parking at LaGuardia.

She projects ONSCREEN an IMAGE of a nondescript WHITE VAN. Goldman studies the image to assess.

ssa goldman

Standard serial killer rent-a-van… No markings… Coulda’ been there for weeks. How can we know more?

snyder

I’ll get the DNDO on it. See if the isotope is medical –or a threat.

davis

I’ll run the tag for rental agencies. Check LaGuardia’s video.

ssa goldman

Outstanding! Get coffees and bounce!

int. small bodega, New York City – day

Maria and the kids enter a busy CONVENIENCE STORE. She looks around then finds pay-as-you-go CELL PHONES on a rack.

She approaches the counter with THREE PHONES and an eggnog.

clerk

You wish to activate phones now? I can do for you.

maria

Nope. I got it. Thanks.

Int. hospital room – day

Rena sits at Kyle’s side. Hoodie, wide-eyed and terrified.

rena

This is surreal –there’s FBI at the elevators. Are they protecting you? Or arresting you--

Kyle shh’s her, touches her arm.

kyle

I’m okay. They can’t do anything now. We can talk in here, safe.

She locks eyes and nods.

kyle (cont’d)

What’d Zahir find on the dark web?

She whispers as if fearing being heard.

rena

He said don’t trust the company. He’ll text you proof, but needs a safe phone--

kyle

--I’m working on it. What’d he find?

She leans forward. Voice fearful.

rena

U.S. authorities deciphered a message. A dirty bomb was planted in New York. Thirty-eight days ago--

This resonates, he exclaims.

kyle

--What was thirty-eight days ago?

Confused, she scrolls on her phone.

rena

November 25th--

kyle

--Thanksgiving.

Kyle blinks as he assembles fragments.

kyle (cont’d)

They hid the bomb on Thanksgiving… Late in the day… businesses closed.

He scowls, the verge of recalling. They turn as Maria ENTERS.

maria

That asshole agent asked what I was carrying. I showed him it was fucking eggnog--

She’s embarrassed to see Rena. They smile with a brief hug.

maria (cont’d)

--Hi Rena. Thank you so much for your help… Kyle wanted a laptop. Can’t stay away from work…

She hands him her laptop and the three phones.

kyle (to maria)

Can your sister Linda come and get Jack and Cassie?

maria

She’s in Philly! Two hours away--

She halts seeing his face. Unflinching. Something’s up.

maria (cont’d)

--Okay… I’ll call her now.

He hands Rena one of the BURNER PHONES.

kyle

Use only this phone now. Your stepmom in Newark, she has a different last name?

Rena nods, startled.

kyle (cont’d)

Stay with her for a few days. Until I can finally confirm--

They’re interrupted as Dr. Lee ENTERS. He’s no-nonsense.

Dr. Lee

Ah, many guests. A lot of stimuli. You need some rest.

kyle

I don’t want rest--

dr. lee

--You’re still recuperating from an extremely severe trauma.

Before Kyle can argue, Lee injects meds into his CATHETER.

dr. lee (to Maria)

You may notice he’s confused or agitated. This’ll help him rest.

(smiles)

We have all the time in the world…

int. train dining car - dusk

Hawkins sits at an ornate TABLE in a modified DINING CAR. Vintage 40s. Same SIX MEN from the club: Connor, Mid-Eastern man, Cowboy Hat, older and younger. The menacing Krug stands.

hawkins

There’s no turning back. The apparatus has been armed.

The large cowboy hat man interrupts with his drawl.

cowboy hat

Hawkins, your planned… display will be more of a spectacle, correct?

A rock of his jaw at being questioned.

hawkins

I’m unsure how you conduct your trading post on the Ponderosa. I would never hurt or eliminate children or innocents. I have two granddaughters myself!

 (odd smile)

Radiation in that dosage is little more than a riot-maker. But sufficient to ensure the nation’s immediate demand for all our trades.

connor

The President will probably deploy 10,000 troops immediately –requiring every one of your industries.

Nods of support from around the table.

mid-eastern man

If authorities get close to the… device, can we accelerate the timeline?

Hawkins slaps the table.

hawkins

No! The entire impact comes from its live global coverage.

He does an exaggerated shrug.

hawkins (cont’d)

Our alibi is the fact we will be there, at the site. Invited as guests.

Murmurs of alarm from around the table.

multiple reactions

- The fallout alone!

- There will be chaos!

- That is foolish!--

Hawkins narrows his eyes.

hawkins

--There are plans to protect your precious selves. We will convene at this train car. After all, look where we are located.

The men glance at their surroundings.

hawkins (cont’d)

It takes precisely nineteen minutes to get here from the grandstands. Don’t be so egocentric to believe anyone will miss your attendance before the countdown.

(beat)

I now need input for our efforts to eliminate Colbert and his research.

A young black man, TOBY, raises his hand. In a British accent:

toby

Mrs. Colbert’s mobile has repeat calls to a number in Philadelphia. I ran the address. It’s her sister.

connor

His wife Maria or their children may be staying there.

Hawkins turns to Krug standing at the door.

hawkins

Check it out. Seizing the children might offer brilliant leverage.

ext. abandoned subway car – moments later

As the men EXIT the car, we see it’s a derelict SUBWAY CAR. Krug leads with FLASHLIGHTS in the DARK, ancient SUBWAY TUNNEL.

They emerge at a forgotten SUBWAY STATION. 1940s masonry with WWII posters. The Mid-Easterner approaches the Cowboy, quietly.

mid-eastern man

We need something more assured than just a spectacle.

cowboy hat

My oilfields use iridium-192. It’ll be much more than a riot-maker.

The men proceed to lavish brass ELEVATOR DOORS. They ENTER.

int. vacant retail space – moments later

The men EXIT a SERVICE ELEVATOR. Proceed up dark, dripping STEPS. Then OUT into a dark DESERTED STORE. They EXIT to the CITY through DOORS with a faded label, “FAO SCHWARTZ TOYS.”

ext. hospital parking lot – night

Nurse Jocie approaches her car. A FEMALE RUSSIAN ACCENT calls out.

woman’s voice (o.s.)

Jocie Masterson from Cherry Hill?

Jocie turns to see a BRUNETTE NURSE smoking a VAPE PEN.

nurse jocie

Hello… Do we know each other?

The brunette steps close with a smile. She pulls the VAPE PEN out of her mouth, STABS the pointed end into Jocie’s JUGULAR. Presses the other end like a PLUNGER. BLOOD SPEWS and Jocie drops to the ground. She rips Jocie’s ID BADGE from her neck.

ext. hospital waiting area – night

Del Rey watches Maria with her children from across the room. Maria emotionally HUGS each child. Maria’s sister, LINDA (25), smiles and takes Jack and Cassie by the hand to EXIT.

Del Rey humbly approaches. Maria sees her and dabs a tear.

maria

Never gets easier letting them go. My sister Linda’s taking them.

Del Rey nods. They each sit.

maria (cont’d)

I don’t expect you to understand. You want to shield them 24-7. Jack’s broken two bones in nine months. Wrist and collar bone. He’s wild.

del rey

Was your son ever prescribed inhaled steroids?

Maria frowns at the question.

maria

Yeah..? A nebulizer almost every day.

del rey

Corticosteroids can cause brittle bones. Osteoporosis in children.

Maria winces, confused.

maria

How do you know? You a doctor now?

del rey

My son Richie has asthma. He broke his arm on a hover board last year.

Maria is dumbfounded. She struggles for words.

maria

I am so sorry –I just assumed you didn’t have kids. I...just thought--

Del Rey makes a rare smile.

del rey

--Technically my ex-husband has my son. Full custody because of my job.

(beat)

I’ve exchanged fire with suspects. I receive threats. My ex argued he could provide a safer environment.

Maria looks deep into Del Rey’s eyes.

maria

I am so sorry, Agent--

del rey

--Anthea. And thanks. One agreement is I get Richie for Christmas.

Maria gasps, upset.

maria

It’s our fault you missed it…

del rey

No. My Christmas. January 7th. I just pray this will be over by then.

 (back to serious)

Which is why we really need to speak with Kyle. We need his insight.

Maria shakes her head, staunch.

maria

He’s still not straight. Get this: he said he was analyzing the situation with the baby Jesus’s wise men!

int. kyle’s hospital room – night

Kyle’s alone, reclined in bed, asleep. The imposter BRUNETTE NURSE enters. She CLOSES the door, then inspects his IV. She produces a SYRINGE. She steps closer but TURNS as Maria ENTERS.

maria

Where’s Nurse Jocie..?

The nurse remains stoic, with a slight Russian accent.

brunette nurse

Her shift is over. I am for evenings.

Maria pauses, uncertain. The nurse taps her syringe.

maria

I’m Maria. What’s your name?

Maria steps closer. The nurse looks at her, firm.

brunette nurse

I am Vivienne. I’m here to administer--

maria (interrupts)

--Yeah, show me what you’re administering.

Maria takes another step, lays her hand on Kyle’s FOOD TRAY. The nurse narrows her eyes, going toe-to-toe.

brunette nurse

250 milligrams of cephalexin to avoid infection. To help him sleep.

maria

Looks like he’s sleeping pretty damn good. –Did you account for his severe penicillin allergy?

The nurse pauses, recalibrates.

brunette nurse

Of course. I--

Maria SWINGS the food tray, STRIKING the nurse’s VOICE BOX. The nurse hacks, hands to her neck, drops the syringe. Maria strikes her AGAIN and again with the tray.

Kyle wakes, bolts upright, confused.

The nurse grabs the IV POLE and SWINGS it at Maria. Doing so RIPS the CATHETER from Kyle’s arm; he SHOUTS. Maria’s knocked to the floor. The nurse dives for the syringe, Maria KICKS it.

Kyle tosses her his metal BED PAN. Maria catches it and BANGS the nurse’s head with a CLANG. A sudden shout from the door.

del rey’s voice (o.s.)

Freeze! FBI!

Kyle freezes. Del Rey aims her GLOCK. Seeing Del Rey, Maria slides towards the door. The nurse is left in the corner, open.

del rey

Do NOT move! Hands up!

The nurse scowls –then lunges for the syringe. Before Del Rey can react, she PLUNGES it into her OWN NECK.

CUT TO: Dr. Lee and NURSES striving to resuscitate the nurse. Her eyes turn BLOOD RED. A wicked smile on BLACK LIPS. Dead.

ON KYLE and MARIA: Taken aback. Kyle turns to Del Rey.

kyle

I’m ready to talk.

exy. times square, N.Y. – night

PRE-DAWN as PEOPLE begin to line up in designated “PEN” areas for the best views for the ball and STAGES.

broadcaster’s voice (v.o.)

Pre-dawn here on this beautiful New Year’s Eve morning. Folks are already beginning to line up…

POLICE assist with the crowds. Some are carrying hand-held RADIATION DETECTORS.

broadcaster (cont’d)

…Over a million people expected this year. That’s a new record, Laney!

int. hawkins’ estate – day

The TV FEED of Time Square continues on a large FLAT PANEL.

Broadcaster (o.s. cont’d)

…Some visitors wait hours for the best views…

hawkins’ voice (o.s.)

Get a good view little lambs.

In a richly-appointed DEN, Hawkins sits in a chair in his robe. Hearing someone enter, he changes the TV channel. CNN BUSINESS:

broadcaster (o.s.)

…As the Dow closed. On the eve of the historic merger between Harding-Foxtel and the Bayonet Group…

His company’s LOGO onscreen. He leans in.

 broadcaster (cont’d)

…Shares for both firms have plummeted. Blamed on our nation’s record stretch of peace in the past year…

Hawkins gazes at his watch.

hawkins

Give it another seventeen hours.

Krug approaches, more grim than usual. A gruff Russian accent:

krug

Xenia has not text from hospital.

hawkins

Do you find this behavior… unusual from your… minx from Minsk?

krug

Da. She knows procedure.

Hawkins sighs. Rubs his eyes.

hawkins

Give her an hour. Then we’ll have a go at plan-B. After all, the holidays are about the children.

int. fbi task force conference room – day

The team’s busy. Dr. Weisman approaches Goldman.

dr. weisman

Dr. Lee says it was Tetrodotoxin. It was absolutely an assassination attempt against Mr. Colbert.

Goldman gnashes his teeth. He turns to a large MAIN SCREEN.

ssa goldman

Okay, I see you -can you hear me? Is this thing on mute!?

ONSCREEN: is Kyle. Maria on one side, Del Rey on the other.

del rey (onscreen)

We see you Agent. Hit the little microphone thingy. Can you hear us?

INTERCUT WITH:

int. kyle’s (new) hospital room – continuous

Kyle’s been moved to a NEW ROOM. He’s seated in a recliner; his wife and Del Rey on either side. A LAPTOP CAM videoing them.

del rey

With Witness Immunity under Title 18 –drafted by Mrs. Colbert and the DOJ- Mr. Colbert is offering insight.

 (TURNS TO MARIA)

Maria Colbert is present for her knowledge of the city.

ON GOLDMAN: squinting up at the screen.

ssa goldman

Knowledge of the city? Aren’t you a big shot lawyer who threatens to sue every fifteen minutes--

maria (onscreen)

--I am a city attorney who’s worked with the historical society. I have multiple grounds to sue, but we’d rather help you save a million lives in the next fourteen hours.

ON GOLDMAN: levity drained from his face. The room pauses.

kyle (onscreen)

I know the bomb was hidden on Thanksgiving day--

ssa goldman (interrupts)

--How could you have that information?

kyle (onscreen)

You do know I’m in counterintelligence, right? Did you even know that part?

ON HOSPITAL ROOM: Del Rey looks at Kyle, losing patience.

del rey

Tell him what you told me.

Kyle looks into the camera.

kyle

I have reason to believe a radiological bomb is at Time Square. Maybe on the New Year’s ball.

ON FBI TASK FORCE: Scoffs of disbelief, heated debate.

commissioner vassar

Our cops swept the entire area with detectors. Nothing--

liana

--That was on the ground, not on top of a building--

ssa goldman

--How could anyone get anything to the top of a building? Too many people--

ON HOSPITAL ROOM: Kyle interrupts the bickering.

kyle (shouting)

--That’s why Maria’s here!

 (beat)

Do any of you know why the address One Times Square is so unique?

He turns to Maria.

maria

I’m uploading images.

ON FBI TASK FORCE: Full attention. Onscreen a TALL BUILDING.

maria’s voice (v.o.)

One Times Square is the building that holds the New Year’s Ball. That’s not what makes it the most interesting building in New York.

She projects HISTORIC SCHEMATICS of the building.

maria (cont’d)

It’s a twenty-four-story tower on the world’s most famous intersection –but it’s hollow. A ghost building.

Agents gaze at each other, curious.

maria (cont’d)

Since 1995, the tower’s been empty. Generating income solely from advertising. Covered in electronic billboards, earning millions in revenue.

We see the ICONIC BUILDING covered in countless ANIMATED SIGNS.

maria (cont’d)

Only a drug store on the first floor. Then twenty-three floors of vacant halls. The most exclusive real estate in America -with no occupants. On top, a dormant ball that has a job one night a year.

kyle (v.o.)

Not exactly Fort Knox. And ignored even more on a Thanksgiving.

Goldman and the others blink. Engrossed but uncertain.

ssa goldman

That’s not enough to cancel God damn New Years -is it?

vassar

Can you imagine the chaos with a million pissed New Yorkers?

snyder

No one’s even tested the ball.

 (all eyes on Snyder)

Without causing alarm, let’s send undercovers with detectors. We’ll have an answer in an hour.

smash cut to: ext. “one times square” – day

Commissioner Vassar knocks on a door. He’s with TWO MEN in generic “NYC” JUMPSUITS. A security RENT-A-COP opens the door.

vassar

Commissioner Vassar, NYC. Code enforcement inspection.

int. one times square – continuous

The guard leads the men inside. It’s indeed vacant, dark and eerie. Like a haunted hotel. Vintage Andy Williams’ “IT’S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR” echoes from outside.

ext. roof observation deck – day

At the base of a 77-ft FLAGPOLE is the 12-foot CRYSTAL AND METAL BALL. The jumpsuit men approach the ball with mobile DETECTORS. An AUDIBLE reading goes berserk on a man’s device.

The man turns to Vassar with terror in his eyes.

ext. residential home, philadelphia – day

A Philadelphia SUBURB. KRUG exits a black SUV to approach a SMALL HOME. He’s wearing FBI GEAR: CAP and WINDBREAKER. He knocks on the door. Maria’s sister Linda cracks it open.

krug (enunciates)

I am Agent Wil-kins. F.B.I. Are you Linda Marie Ortiz?

He lifts a BADGE. Frowning, Linda opens the door another foot.

linda

Ya… What’s this about?

krug

We are pro-tect-ing Mr. and Mrs. Colbert. They wish to have their little children with them.

She studies him; his uniform, his stern expression.

linda

Thank God. I’d feel much better if they were properly protected.

int. krug’s suv – moments later

Cassie and Jack are in Krug’s BACK SEAT. They look back to see Aunt Linda waving warily from a driveway. Krug DRIVES OFF.

jack

Where are we going?

krug

Would you like to see New Year’s ball? Best seat for you.

INTERCUT: TASK FORCE AND KYLE’S HOSPITAL ROOM

int. fbi task force room – day

Goldman dead-serious. Everyone crushed in close, anxious.

ssa goldman

This is real. A confirmed national security threat. Our Director’s on the way. The White House will be informed.

harmon

With less than twelve hours, do we alert the A.G.? Possible civil disorder, maybe use of armed forces?

Vassar stands, animated.

vassar

Armed soldiers in Times Square? The stampede alone will kill thousands.

kyle’s voice (o.s.)

Someone is still watching…

They all look up at Kyle ONSCREEN.

ON KYLE: Speaking into the cam.

kyle

They didn’t plant the bomb and run. They’re watching. If you send in troops or “call off” New Year’s, they’ll pull the trigger now.

ON FBI TASK FORCE: In unison they turn to Goldman.

ssa goldman

Are you suggesting we just let the clock tick ‘til Ryan Seacrest says so?

kyle (onscreen)

Sort of. It’s too risky to disarm. Not enough time. The bad guys can still activate it.

maria (onscreen)

We have to remove the risk. Move the ball. Away from the people.

Goldman shakes his head, utterly confused.

ssa goldman

Are you talkin’ like Batman? We can’t tie the ball to a chopper and fly it out over the bay!

ON HOSPITAL ROOM: Agent Del Rey emits a rare chuckle.

maria

That’d be cool, but no. At midnight everyone expects the ball to go down. Just not how far down.

ON GOLDMAN: Both fists on a desk. Seething with confusion.

ssa goldman

What. The. Fuc--

maria (interrupts)

--Uploading images now.

ONSCREEN: IMAGES of the BALL on top of One Times Square.

Maria (cont’d)

The ball remains on top of the building year-round. At 6:00 pm on December 31st, it’s raised up the 77-foot flagpole. After 11:59, the ball comes down with the countdown.

Everyone nods along. IMAGES change to historic SUBWAY DIAGRAMS.

maria (cont’d)

From my work with the society, we’ve researched an abandoned subway line under Broadway. Directly beside One Times Square.

ONSCREEN: A MAP shows BROADWAY between 42nd and 43rd Street.

maria (cont’d)

The line hasn’t been used since the 40s. Historians want to save it. Our engineers confirm it’s a hazard.

(beat)

That’s 100 feet deep, under reinforced cement…

She looks into the camera.

maria

Commissioner Vassar: How good is your city’s demolition contractor?

ON FBI TASK FORCE: Vassar squints, piecing it together.

vassar

We use a firm, RDX. They imploded the Nakatomi tower –had neighbors ten feet on each side. It came down without a scratch on anything.

Maria (onscreen)

Mr. Snyder: Does your department have folding sheet-lead panels?

Snyder steps beside Vassar, as if he gets it.

snyder

Yes we do.

kyle (onscreen)

Is your city willing to pay overtime to your experts for a rush job?

In the GLOW of the screens, Snyder, Vassar and Goldman stand together like the THREE KINGS, in awe at what they’re seeing.

ext. times square – dusk

LIGHTS begin to glow as dusk sets in. Over a million PEOPLE clamor for places to stand. Happy families and friends.

tv announcer (o.s.)

We’re almost six hours away! It’s twenty degrees, but these happy faces don’t have a care in the world!

43rd and BROADWAY (base of One Times Square) is three blocks from the GRANDSTANDS. FEDS appear, to start moving café tables.

FOUR 18-WHEELERS are guided-in by feds in plain BLACK UNIFORMS. The trucks have vendor LOGOS: Coke, Budweiser, etc. The four trucks maneuver beside the building to form a GIANT 40 ft SQUARE.

The feds usher people to go elsewhere. A TOURIST sees a logo.

tourist

Yo, is this where I can get a beer?

FED

No.

ext. roof observation deck – dusk

FOUR MEN in generic NYC jumpsuits arrive. We hear an EARPIECE.

goldman’s voice (v.o.)

Stay low. We may have eyes.

FAST MONTAGE: They remove GEAR from backpacks. They attach C-4 PUTTY and REMOTE DEVICES to the ball’s 77-FT FLAGPOLE. One man takes a coil of STEEL CABLE and THROWS over the side.

ext. base of “one times square” – continuous

A WORKER in a hard hat retrieves the end of the uncoiled CABLE. He stands in the 40’ X 40’ SQUARE SPACE created within the four parked semi-trucks. He RADIOS a confirmation.

int. underground NYC – continuous

In a sewer-like SUBTERRANEAN SPACE, FOUR “BLASTERS” wear LIT HARD HATS with gear stating “RDX DEMOLITION.” They use huge DRILLS to make 2-inch wide HOLES. They fill them with DYNAMITE.

blaster (into radio)

Boreholes complete. Proceeding to secondary level. Over.

They arrive at another level –an abandoned SUBWAY STATION- in awe at what they see. Cavernous and unsettling.

blaster

Target the support columns.

They drill holes in the decaying stonework COLUMNS.

int. fbi task force conference room – night

Everyone on their feet, gazing at monitors, riveted.

radio voice (v.o.)

The blasters have exited. On schedule.

vassar

Nine o’clock. Look at what we’ve accomplished in three hours…

ssa goldman

It takes you ten months to fix a pothole.

Agent Davis shouts from his station.

davis

I got an ID on the renter of the van.

INTERCUT WITH KYLE’S HOSPITAL ROOM – CONTINUOUS

Kyle perks up. On the laptop screen is a LICENSE PHOTO of a YOUNG MAN –it’s the younger patio heater delivery guy.

harmon’s voice (v.o.)

Albert NEGRIN, 28. He’s a contractor with Harding-Foxtel--

Kyle’s eyes widen.

kyle

--Check his social media.

ON FBI TASK FORCE: Analyst Jenkins frowns.

jenkins

He has security settings--

kyle (onscreen)

--Gimme’ a break; even I can do it. Check November 25th, Thanksgiving.

Jenkins types. Something pops up. SOCIAL MEDIA IMAGES of Negrin. Him sitting at a DINNER TABLE, with FAMILY, etc.

jenkins

I got it. Scrolling.

ONSCREEN: Suddenly the SELFIE Negrin had taken from ATOP the building after the heater delivery. Times Square behind him.

Agents watch in awe. The next photo is a SELFIE of Negrin and the older DELIVERY MAN with the NEW YEAR’S BALL behind them.

ssa goldman (sotto)

Harding-Foxtel delivered the weapon…

kyle’s voice (v.o.)

I know those faces! Search obituaries.

Agents wince, confused. Eyes on Jenkins as he types. He gasps –and then looks soberly at the group.

jenkins

Negrin and his coworker died in an electrical accident three weeks ago.

ext. nye grandstands – night

BANDS PLAY in the background. Beside the performance area, a SIGN by BLEACHERS states “CORPORATE SPONSOR VIP SEATING.”

Seated among elegant VIPs, Hawkins is with Connor, Cowboy Hat, Mid-Eastern man and TWO OTHERS. Hawkins pulls Connor close.

hawkins

Have you placed a call to Sloane?

connor (scoffs)

My wife? She’s in Fiji, sleeping off their New Year’s with God-knows-who.

Hawkins closes his eyes with impatience.

hawkins

The point is… to create a footprint of being here. Have the others call their brides, vowing to be home soon.

He gazes out at the sea of people. A smug grin.

hawkins (cont’d)

Things here are as unfailing as a German train schedule.

int. fbi task force room – night

Goldman pulls Commissioner Vassar aside. Speaks directly.

ssa goldman

I don’t care if you say it’s the city or for some cause-of-the-month. But tell ‘em at ten o’clock there will be an unscheduled fireworks display. Sell it however you want.

int. backstage dressing trailer – night

RYAN SEACREST has a cigarette in a makeup chair. With the CREW busy, an EXECUTIVE approaches Mr. Seacrest.

tV executive

Mr. Seacrest, may I approach?

Ryan lifts his frozen EYE MASK and pulls out his cigarette. He has a tough BROOKLYN ACCENT.

mr. seacrest

SLUTNER, don’t you even talk to me unless the rumor’s horseshit!

tV executive (nervous)

It…It is true –but it’s the city not the network. There will be a ten o’clock fireworks display. Supposedly for children who can’t stay up late.

Seacrest stands, rips his makeup bib off.

mr. seacrest

Can’t stay up? It’s two more fuckin’ hours! They gonna’ cut my song debut? Do you know how many months I been with a vocal coach? Cut fuckin’ Fergie!

tv executive

The fireworks are happening. Move your song to after the ball. There’s never any excitement after the drop.

ext. semi-trucks, base of “one times square” – night

Feds move barricades FARTHER from the trucks. On each truck, STEEL PANELS fold down to block any view under the trailers.

fed (into radio)

Portal plan ready. Over.

ext. ryan Seacrest onstage – night

Polished and perfect, Seacrest beams into the camera.

mr. seacrest

As an extra-special treat for our young families, we’re thrilled to showcase a “pre-event” fireworks display –right after these messages…

int. fbi task force room – night

Goldman stands with an RDX SUPERVISOR wearing “RDX Demolition.”

 rdx supervisor (into radio)

Team: coordinate the fire button with the pyrotechnics. Lead line ready?

rdx voice (filtered)

Lead line ready. Over.

ext. times square crowd – night

The MASS OF PEOPLE must turn from the stages towards One Times Square. A COUNTDOWN is in progress.

crowd

-Seven… Six… Five…

ext. vip grandstands – continuous

Hawkins frowns as he observes whatever’s going on.

hawkins

This wasn’t on the shedule…

back to: times square crowd – continuous

crowd

Three… Two… One..!

ext. area between trucks – concurrent

As FIREWORKS spray UP from the trucks, A BOOM under the street creates a TWENTY-FOOT CIRCULAR implosion. A CHASM drops straight down. Then a second muffled BLAST underground.

back to: view from the crowd – concurrent

A plume of SMOKE -but a SHOW of FIREWORKS paint the sky. All eyes are up and smiling. Nothing amiss. Applause.

ext. area between the trucks – continuous

An RDX REP observes a perfect CIRCULAR HOLE, twenty-feet wide.

RDX REP (into radio)

Gravity brought it all down. Over.

vassar’s voice (v.o.)

Copy. Quickest excavation permit I never got.

back to: hawkins in the grandstands – continuous

With pursed lips, Hawkins loses interest. He lifts his phone.

hawkins

Where is your delivery?

He frowns at the response.

hawkins (cont’d)

You and the children are useless stuck in the Lincoln Tunnel. Hustle!

int. kyle’s hospital room – night

Del Rey and Kyle remain near the laptop.

del rey

The portal blasted perfectly. All eyes were on the sky.

Maria’s CELL RINGS from her purse. Kyle turns, alarmed.

kyle

It’s yours -see who it is first!

She looks at the cell’s screen, then quickly answers.

maria

Linda, what is it? Are they okay?

Her face twists into anxiety. She turns to Kyle.

maria (cont’d)

She’s asking if we got the kids yet. The FBI picked them up.

del rey

No we didn’t.

ext. times square – night

The hulking Krug treads through a sea of PEOPLE. He pulls small Jack and Cassie by their hands. The kids struggle to keep up, overwhelmed by the crowd and lights.

jack

Where’s our mommy and dad?

Krug ignores them as he leads them through the masses.

ext. vip grandstands - night

Hawkins’ CELL rings. He answers.

hawkins (into phone)

Update.

krug’s voice (v.o.)

The lures are in place.

back to: krug in the crowd – continuous

Krug stands with Jack and Cassie at a prime front BARRICADE with a view of the COUNTDOWN CLOCK. Krug on his PHONE.

hawkins’ voice (v.o.)

We will deliver images to their mobiles. Stay where you are.

The children dart their heads at the chaos. Krug takes their PHOTOS with his phone.

int. kyle’s hospital room – night

Kyle stands, anxious with Maria. Del Rey tries to calm them.

maria

Linda’s a twenty-five year-old idiot!

del rey

Do your kids have phones? Something with GPS we can track?

In the room, a CELLPHONE DINGS. Kyle and Maria lock eyes.

kyle

That’s your old phone -I told the kids not to use it.

Maria rummages for her phone. She sees the screen and SHOUTS.

maria

It’s the kids!

They rush to look.

ONSCREEN: A static IMAGE of JACK AND CASSIE. Standing in the Times Square CROWD. Safe, but with distressed eyes.

del rey

Send me the pic. The metadata will give us location--

kyle (interrupts)

--It’s Time Square. I’m going now--

del rey

--It’s a million people! They’re four feet tall! Leave it to us--

Maria, scrolls to read a TEXT. She shouts.

maria

--There’s a text! It says: “Report every location of your GhostSeeker code. Every folder, even the cloud.”

del rey

This is all about a program?

Maria becomes defensive.

maria

Just like he told you! And it’s about him!

Kyle struggles to locate his clothes, weary.

kyle

I’m gonna find my kids.

Maria’s moved by his words. Del Rey tries to stop them.

del rey

They want you out there! That’s their plan. You’re safe in here.

Kyle puts on his coat at the door. Intense to Del Rey:

kyle

Our kids have been abducted. Standing at ground-zero for radiological fallout in less than an hour. I give our lofty plan about a 20% success rate.

Maria stands with Kyle. She frowns at Del Rey.

maria

What would you do for Richie? So either shoot us -or drive us!

int. hospital hallway – moments later

Fast paced. Del Rey ushers them to the elevator. KYLE’S VISION suddenly distorts, TUNNEL VISION. He grasps Maria.

maria

Are you okay?

He pounds the elevator button. Dr. Lee jogs up.

dr. lee

He hasn’t been discharged! He’s not stable--

Del Rey speaks fast to a young FBI GUARD at the doors.

del rey

--Please wait ten minutes before you call Goldman. They’re in my custody.

ext. vip grandstands - night

Hawkins covers his ears from the BANDS as he’s on the phone.

hawkins

The valet confirmed Colbert departed the hospital. On shedule.

intercut with: krug in the crowd – continuous

Krug looms over the children. He frowns on his phone.

krug

If he comes, do not disable him?

ON HAWKINS:

hawkins

Let the ball defeat him naturally. Don’t risk an altercation.

ON KRUG: His eyes dart.

krug

What about… Am I to go to the train?

An awkward pause.

hawkins voice (v.o.)

With your training, I am confident you will persevere.

int. del rey’s cruiser – night

Insufferable TRAFFIC. Kyle’s in the BACK SEAT. Maria and Del Rey in the front. She HONKS. Each glued to their phones.

del rey

NYPD issued an Amber Alert. But there’s a half-million kids there--

Maria (exclaims)

--We got another photo! The kids don’t look hurt. They haven’t moved.

del rey

Look for location clues!

Maria squints at the photo.

maria

I see a… Starbucks…

Kyle and Del Rey throw out their hands. He dials a FLIP PHONE.

kyle (into phone)

Rena: If I send a photo for the metadata, how precise is the GPS?

rena’s voice (v.o.)

Discounting any urban-valley effect, usually within ten meters--

kyle (abrupt)

--I’m sending you pics of my kids.

rena’s voice (v.o.)

I’m on it. Zahir sent me all the proof you need from Foxtel.

kyle (direct)

Rena: you have a copy of GhostSeeker. Send it to Zahir. Tell him to share it with every one of our competitors. The genie’s out of the bottle.

Maria shouts from the front.

maria

--Twenty-one minutes ‘til the countdown!

del rey

I can’t get closer. We’re still five blocks!

BLURRY-EYED, Kyle sees a white LIMO pull beside them. He looks to see GLOWING KING “ELVIS” in the back, giving a THUMBS UP.

kyle

I’m getting out here.

int. train dining car – night

TOBY, the young black Brit, is the first to arrive at the rendezvous. With a headset and COMPUTER, he types.

toby (into headset)

The carriage is clear Mr. Hawkins.

His SCREENS are views of Times Square’s BILLBOARDS.

toby (cont’d)

I’m tapped into the city’s emergency management feed. They will shut me out. But…I can get a good ten minutes.

hawkins’s voice (v.o.)

Ample time. It’ll be over then anyway.

ext. new york streets – night

Dense with PEDESTRIANS. On foot, Maria pulls Kyle by the hand. They rush behind Del Rey, frantic.

maria

Seventeen minutes!

del rey

Back-up’s on the way!

kyle

Fifth avenue –two more blocks.

Within a pack of REVELERS, he sees glowing WISE MAN “KING B.B.” pointing in the right direction with a wink and a smile.

ext. vip grandstands – concurrent

Hawkins, Connor, Cowboy and the rest are exiting the area.

hawkins (on phone)

We are en route. Upload the feed… Now.

Time Square’s HUNDREDS OF BILLBOARDS simultaneously flicker with static. The crowd gazes 360-degrees, curious.

back to: kyle, maria and del rey - continuous

They approach the LIGHTS and CLAMOR of Times Square, the CORNER of Broadway and 7th.

maria (to kyle)

What if she’s right? Someone’s looking for you out here?

kyle

I’ll be hidden among millions. How would anyone know me?

They turn the corner. A HUNDRED BILLBOARDS of KYLE’S FACE. “WARNING: KILLER ON THE LOOSE.” Kyle’s face is repeated 300X, on every billboard in Times Square.

ext. STAGE LEFT with ryan seacrest – concurrent

A BAND PAUSES, confused. Mr. Seacrest and CELEBS are puzzled by the barrage of KYLE FACES around them.

 mr. seacrest (brooklyn accent)

Who’s fuckin’ show is this?

back to: kyle, maria and del rey - continuous

They’re frozen. Wide-eyed. They converge into a cluster. Kyle pulls out his phone, desperate.

kyle

Rena! Do you have any location?

Her voice is barely audible with the noise.

rena’s voive (v.o.)

GPS… Between 40th and 39th… Near a Red Lobster… (inaudible)

It’s futile. They keep moving.

IN THE CROWD, various scary THUGS study the Kyle billboards. “$1,000,000 REWARD.” We see some thugs are PACKING HEAT.

int. fbi task force – night

All eyes on the monitors.

ssa goldman (into headset)

Del Rey: Whatever’s happening, we can not delay our portal plan. The risk is too high.

ON SPEAKER: Her response is muffled within CHEERS of millions.

ssa goldman (cont’d)

Anthea: You got twelve minutes. You need to exit. In case it doesn’t…

Shakes his head. He turns with a personal CELL. Rare sincerity.

ssa goldman (into phone)

Donna. Listen… Don’t let the girls watch New Year’s on TV tonight…

 (poignant)

I know, I know… I can’t explain. Tell ‘em I love ‘em… Save me some champagne. Then put on Little Mermaid or something.

EXT. abandoned fao schwartz toy shop – night

With hordes behind them, Hawkins and his men enter the old doors.

intercut: between kyle, goldman and hawkins.

ON KYLE and MARIA: Hunched, snaking through the crowd with Del Rey.

maria (to kyle)

Take my scarf –put it around your face!

del rey (rushed)

Stay low. I’m armed so I’m heading out. You have phones. Update me!

Del Rey dives into the crowd. Kyle and Maria go the other way.

TO THE SIDE: A TALL THUG notices Kyle. Looks at the billboards. Pulls a SKI MASK over his face, reaches into his jacket.

ON FBI TASK FORCE: Goldman watches a countdown clock, tense.

ssa goldman

Team: Seven minutes. Come on Del Rey…

int. derelict subway tunnel – continuous

In the ghostly shaft, Connor leads the men with flashlights.

EXT. times square billboards – continuous

Hundreds of Kyle faces warn “DANGEROUS.” They flicker OFF. The boards return to normal. The crowd looks around, shrugging.

TO THE SIDE, a muscular SHORT THUG squints at Kyle. He pulls a SWITCHBLADE out of his pocket and follows him.

IN HIS TRAIL, a 300lb LARGE THUG cracks his knuckles and follows.

int. train dining car – continuous

Hawkins, Connor and the men take seats at the table. MONITORS are tuned into various channels for the countdown.

hawkins

DuBois once said, “The only way to properly face doom is to be on time.” Superb work. Four minutes to spare.

The men cautiously nod. Hawkins sneers at a channel displaying Ryan Seacrest.

hawkins (cont’d)

Poor Richard “Dick” Clark. We never miss water until the well’s dry.

ext. times square crowd – continuous

Maria and Kyle labor to look all directions.

maria

We’re between 40th and 39t -there’s a Red Lobster!

Kyle rubs his face, the crowd DISTORTING. He turns to see a glowing vision of the Wise KING MARTIN LUTHER. Pointing right.

kyle

Go right!

ext. krug with the kids – concurrent

Menacing over the kids, Krug looks up at the COUNTDOWN CLOCK: almost FOUR MINUTES. He scans the crowd, lifts his cell.

krug (into phone)

I need to depart--

He TENSES as Cassie suddenly SHRIEKS.

cassie

Mommy!

ON MARIA AND KYLE: A glance of Cassie’s face through the crowd.

maria (shouts)

Baby..? Cassie! Jack..?

The glimpse of their children shifts with the horde.

ON KRUG: He pulls a gun out of his coat. He SHOUTS to the kids.

krug

Do not move. Be good boy and girl!

He looks at the clock. Deliberates. He WALKS AWAY. Fast.

A COUNTDOWN ANNOUNCEMENT reverberates through the square.

 echoing announcement (v.o.)

Three minutes! Let’s hear some NOISE!

ON KYLE: People notice him. A commotion in his wake. He and Maria push forward. Like fish swimming upstream.

ON KIDS: With Jack leading, he grips Cassie’s hand. They cautiously step into the crowd, towards their parents.

ON KRUG: As he flees, the TALL THUG walks his direction and LIFTS A GUN towards Kyle. Krug misunderstands, lifts HIS GUN.

tall thug (to krug)

Who the fuck are you, uni-brow?

The crowd notices and SHOUTS. Krug AIMS at the thug. The masked thug does the same.

tall thug (cont’d)

I got no beef with you bru’!

The crowd BACKS AWAY. The muscular and heavy THUGS stride around them towards Kyle. One man lifts a BLADE.

 echoing announcement (v.o.)

Two minutes, ladies and gentlemen..!

FIREWORKS somewhere. Krug uses the disruption to FIRE, hits the thug in the chest. The man SHOUTS, FIRES UPWARD. Everyone RUNS.

ON KYLE: He and Maria instinctively DUCK. The scattering crowd clears a path like magic: a CLEAR VIEW of Jack and Cassie. Maria practically runs in slow motion to her children.

As Kyle does so, the brawny THUG with a knife and a 300 LB GUY step into his path. In Kyle’s condition, he is beaten.

ON KRUG: Noticing countless THUG-TYPES moving against the flow –all towards Kyle. A DOZEN ASSAILANTS, with SKI MASKS, etc.

 echoing announcement (v.o.)

One minute! Are we ready..?

Krug turns to flee –and faces the BARREL of Del Rey’s GLOCK.

del rey (shouting)

DO NOT move! FBI!

He aims and FIRES. With lightning reflexes she shifts. Returns FIRE, sending a 9mm DIRECT HIT to Krug’s FACE.

ON KYLE: Surrounded by hopeful ASSASSINS, wearing SKI MASKS, STATUTE OF LIBERTY MASKS, NEW YEAR’S MASKS. A nightmare.

EVERY SCREEN suddenly blares the COUNTDOWN.

echoing countdown (v.o.)

Nineteen… Eighteen… Seventeen…

ON DEL REY: She jogs to Maria, who’s embracing her kids.

del rey

Where’s Kyle?

maria (fretful)

He was behind me!

ON KYLE: He steps back. Thugs move-in, spurning each other.

echoing countdown (v.o.)

Fifteen… Fourteen… Thirteen…

int. dining train car – concurrent

All eyes on the screens. Toby manning the systems.

toby

Twelve seconds. All systems go.

int. fbi task force – concurrent

Tense. Jenkins manning their systems.

jenkins

At the ten count. RDX standby.

BACK TO KYLE: He closes his eyes as the killers converge.

multiple (shouting)

FBI! Drop your weapons!

TWO DOZEN PLAIN-CLOTHES AGENTS emerge from the crowd like an illusion. Presumed attendees are armed agents.

echoing countdown (v.o.)

Eleven… Here we go! Ten… Nine--

Several agents leap to shield Kyle to the ground.

ON DEL REY: She does the same with Maria and the kids.

ext. happy crowd – concurrent

Happy faces watch the BALL atop the flagpole –but their smiles suddenly fall. Something’s wrong.

ext. 24 floors above times square – continuous

Amidst FIREWORKS are two compact EXPLOSIONS at the base of the FLAGPOLE. The GLISTENING BALL at the top of the pole pauses. The metal pole groans as it COLLAPSES to the side.

ext. POv from the crowd – concurrent

The flagpole BENDS to the left. Everyone gasps and points. The pole jolts to an abrupt stop on the side of the roof. The BALL FALLS off the tip.

POV FROM THE SEMI-TRUCKS: The ball, threaded with STEEL CABLE to the blasted hole, FREEFALLS 170 feet per second –directly INTO the 20-ft wide hole, like a golf ball into a hole-in-one.

FOLDING LEAD PANELS are instantly DROPPED on top of the hole.

Silence. The CROWD cranes their necks to see what happened.

ext. onstage with ryan seacrest – concurrent

With a BEAUTY on his arm, everyone onstage is baffled.

mr. seacrest

Where’s my countdown? What am I? Upstaged by fuckin’ Penn and Teller?

int. dining train car – concurrent

Everyone leans forward. Hawkins scowls as Toby shrugs.

toby

Perhaps we have delayed reception..?

int. fbi task force – concurrent

Jenkins shakes his head.

jenkins

The impact created a deferred response..?

int. 100 feet underground – concurrent

The CRUSHED BALL rests in a glittery heap in the ABANDONED SUB STATION. It DETONATES in a SCORCHING EXPLOSION.

ext. times square crowd – concurrent

A faraway MUFFLED THUMP under the panels. Anticlimactic. Everyone looks at each other.

 ANNOUNCER AND CROWD (SIMULTANIOUS)

Happy New Year!!

int. abandoned subway line – concurrent

Radioactive FIRE EXPANDS, 3,000 feet per second, racing through the abandoned tunnels.

int. dining train car – concurrent

Enraged, Hawkins opens the door.

hawkins

Open doors will enhance receptio--

Their car is engulfed in an FIRESTORM. Everyone instantly IGNITED. SCREAMS merging with the scorch of flames.

ext. subway car – continuous

As the fire passes, the car is CHARRED and MELTED WRECKAGE.

FADEOUT.

fade in:

int. hospital – day

Kyle sits upright on a hospital bed. Surrounded by Maria and the kids. With a stethoscope, Dr. Lee is listening to Kyle.

kyle (to maria)

Did we ever tell Rena she could leave her stepmother’s--

Dr. Lee SHH’s him to be quiet, listening to his lungs.

dr. lee

Please, Mr. Colbert! I’m upgrading you to walking pneumonia. You can go home if you rest. No more nonsense. I warned you would suffer delusions.

kyle

All I’ve been trying to do is go home.

As Dr. Lee exits, he pulls Maria aside. In a hushed tone:

dr. lee (cont’d)

The bureau’s offering trauma counseling for the kiddies. I think you should consider it--

Maria’s attention is drawn to the television: a NEWS REPORT shows footage of the BALL FALLING.

newscaster (v.o.)

…the city blames 90 mile-per-hour gusts on top of the building with a fifty-year-old flagpole…

Maria and Kyle trade glances. The somber newscaster continues.

newscaster (v.o.)

Emergency Management says there’s no connection to the gas line that ruptured in an unused subway line. They’re unable to identify seven victims, presumed to be vagrants.

 (she smiles)

Other than that, we hope you have a magnificent New Year’s Day.

Agent Del Rey enters. Back to tailored black.

del rey

I’m pleased to see you are all well.

kyle (sincere)

Thank you for your help, with my entire family.

del rey

Goldman wants to thank you for GhostSeeker. It’s a silver bullet like our cyber division has never seen.

Maria become somewhat defensive.

maria

I hope it’s worth it. We missed our first Christmas and New Year’s together –with a coma in between.

Kyle looks down at the silent, timid children.

kyle

Believe it or not, everything will get back to normal. And Christmas will come again. Sooner than you think. I promise.

Del Rey seems genuinely moved. Her eyes spark with an idea.

del rey

I may be able to help with that…

Smash cut to:

ext. holy trinity ukrainian orthodox cathedral – day

It’s SNOWING outside the beautiful historic Manhattan cathedral. A SIGN in front announces in Ukrainian and English: “JANUARY 7, MERRY CHRISTMAS!”

int. sanctuary - holy trinity ukrainian church – day

The packed hall is filled with joy. Gold and VIBRANT COLORS adorn the arched columns. TALL CHRISTMAS TREES and poinsettias.

The CONGREGATION is merrily dressed in their finest, enjoying a Ukrainian CHOIR performing, “CAROL OF THE BELLS.”

Seated in a PEW, Del Rey holds the hand of RICHIE(8). She smiles at Maria beside her, tight at Kyle’s side. Jack and Cassie’s eyes absorb the room in awe. Cassie points to a BISHOP with a white beard who looks like Santa.

The choir’s song shifts into a Ukrainian rendition of “I’ll be Home for Christmas.”

Kyle grins at his wife and puts his arm around their kids.

FADE OUT.

the end

NOTE

As part of the FBI’s Operation Power Outage in 2011, the Miami FBI, the IRS, U.S. Customs, and Homeland Security announced indictments against thirteen people for extortion, credit card fraud, money laundering, smuggling and health care fraud. Over a hundred others were arrested in connecting with an Eastern European gang stretching from Miami to Los Angeles.

 The Miami arrests consisted of figures from the former Soviet Union. Their counts included threats of physical harm, credit card fraud, laundering and health care fraud stemming from the sham ownership of a Hallandale medical clinic and a Miami chiropractic office. These clinics allegedly paid individuals to refer “patients” from staged accidents.

 Ten girls were arrested in a “B-Girl” scheme, charged with conspiracy to defraud visitors, luring them to “private clubs.” Eighty-eight men admitted to being victims.

Acknowledgements

Despite true crimes and similar arrests, the characters and events in this story are a work of my overactive imagination. Having said that…

 The idea was hatched by a frequent story among Miami police that Eurasian mob has approached clinics, stating “You work for us now.” The doctors then have a choice: agree and make more money, or decline and face the consequences.

 From my personal life, my office was in Little Havana for five years. I was a non-bilingual gringo who felt very welcomed. I enjoyed Cuban coffee from walk-up windows and lunches at Versailles and La Carreta. The strip mall next door was almost identical to the one in my story. The locals could not have been friendlier –or the food any better.

 The storybook village of Hope Town is real, complete with its red-and-white striped lighthouse, narrow brick lanes and tiny bakery. It’s located on Elbow Cay in the Abacos, and most restaurants and bars are just as described and absolutely worth visiting.

 Warning guys: the B-Girls exist, in case you’re not a stud and exotic beauties start admiring your Rolex. A popular Philadelphia weatherman was targeted by two young ladies during a trip to Miami Beach. His credit card was charged over $43,700 after he was drugged and brought to a “private caviar bar.” Rather than being humiliated, he went public to help expose the scheme, which was proven to be tied to Russian organized crime.

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