

"A much-needed breath of fresh air...
A great storyteller."
—Michael Connelly

Author of **FUN & GAMES** and **HELL & GONE**

**DUANE
SWIERCZYNSKI**

POINT & SHOOT

Time to pull the trigger.

POINT AND SHOOT

A Charlie Hardie Novel

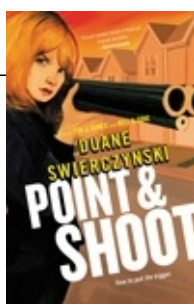
DUANE SWIERCZYNSKI



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*For David J. Schow,
straight shooter*

*Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
—lo pane altrui, e come è duro calle
lo scendere e 'l salir per l'altrui scale*

—Paradisi
Canto XVII, lines 58–60
Dan

*And if you still can't see the light
God's gonna buy you a satellite*

—The Hooters

Get up.

Grab your gun.

Where is—

Oh God, where's your gun?

This isn't going to have a happy ending.

—Morgan Freeman, *Se7en*

Near Brokenland Parkway, Columbia, Maryland—Seven Months Ago

A TWENTY-THREE-YEAR-OLD HUNGOVER intern with a broken heart saved the day.

The intern's name was Warren Arbona, and he was in a stuffy warehouse along with five other interns scanning endless pieces of paper and turning them into PDFs that nobody would ever, ever fucking read. The whole operation was strictly cover-your-ass. The interns' bosses wanted to be able to tell their government liaisons that, yes, every page of the flood of declassified documents they released had been carefully read and scanned by an experienced member of their legal team.

“Experienced” = interns who'd been on the job for at least two months.

The new president had made a big deal about declassifying everything, the shining light of freedom blasting through the deceptions of the previous administration. A democracy requires accountability, he said, and accountability requires transparency. Which sounded awesome.

But before the PDFs could be uploaded, the president's intelligence advisers insisted that no sensitive secrets harmful to the security of the United States would be leaked to the general public. This still was the real world.

So a white-shoe law firm specializing in government intelligence was retained to painstakingly review every line on every scrap of paper.

Nobody in the firm wanted to deal with that bullshit, so they put the interns on it.

And Warren Arbona, the intern in question, wouldn't have noticed a thing if it hadn't been for his cunt ex-girlfriend. He couldn't help it. The name just jumped out at him.

He stopped the scan and looked at the paper again. Were his eyes playing tricks on him?

Nope. There it was.

Charlie Hardie.

No, it wasn't Christy's dad. Her dad was named Bruce or some such shit. Balding. Big asshole. Deviated septum and beady eyes. But this Charlie guy was an uncle, maybe? Some other relative? Warren had no idea.

And really, who the fuck cared. Christy didn't matter anymore; he'd do best to put her out of his head and finish up with this scanning so he could go home and get good and drunk again.

They were all working inside the abandoned warehouse set of a canceled television show, *Baltimore Homicide*. The rent was absurdly cheap, and the set already had the delightful bonus of real desks and working electrical outlets, thanks to a subplot featuring a fake daily newspaper office.

So all the law firm had to do was arrange for the reams of paper—nearly three trucks' worth—to be backed into the building, plug in a bunch of laptops and scanners, and then set the interns loose. See you in September, motherfuckers.

The working conditions were less than ideal. While an industrial AC unit blasted 60,000 BTUs of arctic air into the fake office via ringed funnels, the warehouse itself had diddly-squat in the way of climate management. So every time you left to drag in another set of files, you baked and sweated the stifling summer heat. And then when you returned, your sweat was flash-frozen on your body. No wonder everybody was sick.

Warren had been fighting a cold since May, when he first started scanning the documents. He believed that if he polluted his body with enough tequila, the cold virus would give up and abandon ship. So far, it hadn't worked.

But the tequila also helped him forget about Christy Hardie.

Almost.

Now the name popped up, and Warren couldn't help but be curious. He started to read the document, which was a deposition.

Seems Charlie Hardie was an ex-police consultant turned drunk house sitter who was later accused of snuffing a junkie actress named Lane Madden.

Warren kind of wished someone had snuffed Christy after she confessed that she'd been blowing his best friend for, oh, *the entire first year of law school*.

Anyway, Warren remembered the Lane Madden story from a bunch of years ago. Apparently she'd been raped and killed by this house sitter guy who used to be a cop and kind of lost his mind. But the rest of the deposition was kind of boring, so Warren stopped reading and fed the pages into the scanner. Yes, they were all supposed to eyeball each page—even the partners weren't foolish enough to tell the interns to actually read them. But Warren and his colleagues dispensed with the *eyeballing* crap somewhere in late May. If fingers touched a page, it was considered read. Osmosis, they decided.

Warren looked at the clock. Just two more hours until his brain went south of the border.

But at fifteen minutes until closing, something strange happened.

Warren saw the name again, in another deposition, from another year.

Charlie Hardie.

The same fucking dude!

But a totally different file!

To have the same name pop up...with the same surname as his skanky cunt ex-girlfriend...well, that was too big a goocher to ignore.

There wasn't time to read it all, so Warren broke a series of federal laws by stuffing the relevant pages into his North Face backpack and slipped out of the building a few minutes early. He made his Jose Cuervo run, put his feet up on a wobbly Ikea coffee table that was improperly assembled, and settled in for an evening of reading.

Now when Warren had started the scanning project, the partners had told him to look out for anything "unusual." Like what, Warren had asked.

You know, they'd said. Unusual.

This seemed to qualify.

Charlie Hardie, it seemed, had also been involved in a top-secret military project *years before* he'd been accused of killing that actress. And not just your usual creepy top-secret military project. The one messed around with you at a genetic level and resulted in...well, that was the frightening part. Few survived, and the project was shut down. Dumb fucking luck? Not likely. Warren didn't believe in synchronicity. Exhibit A seemed pretty clearly linked to Exhibit B.

This made Warren's night, because all summer he'd been dreading the idea of not reporting a single thing to the partners. This would prove he hadn't been dicking around all summer (even though he

had). This was a genuine *catch*. This was justification for his summer. For his entire life.

The next morning he pushed the scanner aside and wrote a short memo, including his thoughts on the Charlie Hardie depositions, then copied it and Fed Exed it to the partners.

The partners, also happy to be able to report something to their friends in intelligence, passed along.

This document would later be known as the Arbona Memorandum. Its shock waves would be felt around the globe.

But at first, it started with a brutal mass slaughter in Philadelphia.

One Mile Outside Philadelphia—Now

Of all the shocks Kendra Hardie had endured over the past few hours—the dropped call from her son, the chilling messages on the alarm keypad, the thudding footfalls on the roof, the wrenching sounds in the very guts of her house, the missing gun, and the awful realization of how quickly her situation had become hopeless—none of that compared to the shock of hearing that voice on the other end of the phone line:

“It’s me.”

Kendra’s mind froze. There was a moment of temporal dislocation, distant memory colliding with the present.

Me.

Could that really be...you?

It *sounds* like you, but...

No.

Can’t be you.

But then how do I know, deep in my soul, that it *is* you?

“Are you there? Listen to me, Kendra, I know this is going to sound crazy, but you have to listen to me. You and the boy are in serious danger. You need to get out of the house now and just start driving. Drive *anywhere*. Don’t tell me where, because they’re definitely listening, but just go, go as fast as you can. I’ll find you guys when it’s safe.”

Kendra swallowed hard, looked at the face of the satellite TV receiver. Three thirteen a.m. A little more than four hours since she’d stepped into her own home and into a living nightmare. Eighteen hours since she’d last seen her son. And almost eight years since she’d last heard her ex-husband’s voice. Yet there it was on the line, at the very nexus of the nightmare.

“Kendra? Are you there? Can you hear me?”

“I’m here, Charlie. But I can’t leave.”

“You have to leave, Kendra, please just trust me on this...”

“I can’t leave because they’ve already called, and told me I *can’t* leave.”

Earlier in the evening Kendra had been out with a friend downtown, at a Cuban restaurant on Second Street in Old City, but found that she wasn’t really into the food, didn’t want to finish her mojito, and was tired of hearing about her friend’s first-world problems, such as arguments with interior decorators and the headache of maintaining three vacation homes on the Delaware shore. Kendra excused herself and just...*left*. Paid for half of the tab and split, handed the valet her stub, and drove

back to the northern suburbs, leaving poor Derek to complain to somebody else about having too much money. Maybe one of the Cuban exile waiters would give a shit.

It had been that kind of listless, annoyance-filled week, and Kendra now felt foolish for thinking that a night of moderate drinking and inane conversation could turn that around.

During the drive home her son, CJ, called. He told her he was just calling to check in—which was just about as unusual as the president of the United States dropping you an email to see how everything was going. CJ didn't check in, *ever*. As CJ grew to manhood, he became increasingly like his father, complete with the delightful ability to cut off all emotional circuitry with the flick of an invisible switch. All the abuse her son had been dishing out over the years hardened her into exactly the kind of mother she'd vowed never to become. The kind of mother who said things like:

"Cut the shit, CJ. What happened?"

"Nothing, Mom. I just..."

Mom. Oooh, that was another red flag. CJ hadn't called her Mom in...months? CJ barely spoke to her, and when he did, it was little more than a grunt.

Now a tiny ball of worry began to form in Kendra's stomach. Was he hurt? Was he calling from a hospital or police station? Her body tensed, and she prepared to change direction and gun the accelerator.

"Where are you?"

"I'm at home, everything's fine. Look, Mom, I know this is going to sound weird, but...what do you do with Dad's old stuff?"

"What? Why are you asking me about that?"

First Mom, now...*Dad!*? For the past seven years, CJ hadn't referred to his father as anything but "asshole" or "cocksucker" or "psycho." Before Kendra had a chance to hear CJ's answer, the phone beeped and went dead. NO SERVICE.

Kendra continued in the same direction but gunned the accelerator just the same, all the way up the Schuylkill Expressway, then the endless traffic lights up Broad Street and finally the hills and curves of Old York Road out to the fringes of Abington Township. Home. She didn't bother pulling the car into the garage, leaving it parked out on the street. Something in CJ's voice...no, *everything* about CJ's voice was completely wrong. Dad's old stuff? What was that about? Why did he suddenly want to see the few possessions his father had left behind? The thought that CJ might be drinking crossed Kendra's mind, but his voice wasn't slurred. If anything, it was completely clear and focused, in stark contrast to the moody grunts she usually received.

And whenever CJ did go on a binge, his heart filled with raw hate for this father, not fuzzy nostalgia.

"CJ?"

The alarm unit on the wall to the left of the door beeped insistently until Kendra keyed in the code. She closed the door behind her, locked it, then reengaged the system. It beeped again. All set.

"CJ, answer me!"

And then began the nightmare.

No CJ, not anywhere. No trace of him in his room, no tell-tale glasses or dishes in the sink. The house was *exactly* as Kendra had left it when she left for Old City earlier in the evening. Had CJ even called from home? The call had come from his cell, so he could be anywhere right now.

Not knowing what else to do, Kendra tried him again on her phone, but still—NO SERVICE. What was that about? She could understand a dropped call when speeding down the Schuylkill, as if a guardian angel had interfered with the signal to prevent you from sparking a twelve-car pile-up on the

most dangerous road in Philadelphia. But in her own home?

~~Maybe she could get a better signal outside. Kendra went back to the front door and keyed in the~~ code. Two digits in, however, her finger stopped, and hung in midair before the 6 key.

The digital readout, which usually delivered straightforward messages such as SYSTEM ENGAGED or PLEASE ENTER ACCESS CODE, now told her something else:

STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE

“The fuck?” Kendra muttered, then lowered her finger for a second before blinking hard at stabbing the 6 button anyway, followed by the 2. Which should have disengaged the system. The time, however, there was no reassuring beep. There was nothing at all, except:

KENDRA, THAT WON'T HELP.

Then:

DON'T MAKE A SOUND.

DON'T MOVE.

NOT UNTIL WE CALL YOU.

And Kendra, much to her own disgust, did exactly as she was told, staying perfectly still and silent...

...for about two seconds, before realizing *fuck this* and grabbing the handle of her front door. She twisted the knob, pulled. The door didn't move, as if it had been cemented in place. What? She hadn't put the deadbolts on when she'd come in just a minute ago...

The phone in her hand buzzed to life. There was SERVICE, suddenly. The name on the display: INCOMING CALL / CJ.

Oh thank God. She thumbed the Accept button, expecting to hear her son's voice, maybe even hoping he'd call her *Mom* again.

But instead, it was someone else.

Now, four agonizing hours later, during which Kendra heard the sounds of her own house being turned against her...she was listening to the voice of her ex-husband—an accused murderer long thought to be dead. And he had the audacity to be grilling her!

“They called me and said if I left the house I was dead.”

“Who told you that? Who told you you were dead?”

“A woman. She didn't give her name.”

“Did you call the police? Anyone at all?”

“They told me not to call anyone, or do anything else except wait.”

“Wait for what?”

There was a burst of static on the line, and then another voice came on the line. The one who had called four hours earlier, from CJ's phone.

The evil icy-voiced bitch queen who had her son and who claimed to have the house surrounded.

“Hey, Charlie! It's your old pal Mann here. So good to hear your voice after all this time. Well, the

magical day has finally arrived. In about thirty seconds we're going to kill the phones, and the power, and everything else in your wife's house. We've got her surrounded; I know every square inch of every house in a five-block radius. You, of all people, know how thorough we are."

Charlie ignored the other voice.

"Kendra, where's the boy? Where's Seej?"

Seej: Charlie's old nickname for CJ—See. Jay. Over time, shortened to Seej.

"Shhhh, now, Charlie, it's rude to interrupt. You're wasting precious seconds. Now I know what you're going to say. You're going to tell me that if I touch one hair on your family's head, you'll rip me apart one limb at a time...or maybe some other colorful metaphor? Well, you know, that's just not gonna happen. Because you lost this one, Chuck. There's not going to be any cavalry rushing in, no last-minute saves, no magic escapes. And you know what's going to happen next?"

What *should* have been going through Kendra's mind at this moment was something along the lines of:

Charlie, where the hell have you been, and why have you surfaced now? The last time we spoke was stupid and petty conversation about a late credit card bill and I think the last word I spoke to you before disconnecting was *whatever*.

Or maybe:

Charlie, why didn't you call me before tonight? Do you know how many late nights I stared at the ceiling, trying to physically will you to call me? Not to change anything or explain anything, but just to tell me what happened? Do you know how hard the *not knowing* was? How much it consumed me over the years, digging in deep, way past the regret and guilt and into the very core of me?

But instead Kendra thought:

Goddamn you, Charlie.

Goddamn you for doing this to us.

"What's going to happen next is," the ice bitch queen continued, "your family's going to die. And there's not a fucking thing you can do to stop me."

If Kendra had any doubts that the voice on the other end of the line belonged to her husband, they vanished when he spoke again. Because his words were infused with a rock-hard defiance that had once been familiar to her, over a decade ago.

Charlie Hardie told the ice bitch queen, "I can stop you."

2

Space is big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is.

—Douglas Adams

Low Earth Orbit—Three Days Ago

THE TRANSMISSION WAS supposed to start at 12:30 p.m. universal time, but by 12:55 it became clear that wasn't going to happen.

Hardie told himself it was just a little trouble with the signal. Someone down there was diligently working on the problem, and pretty soon he'd be seeing his family on the monitor. Just a few more minutes. They wouldn't leave him hanging much longer, right? This was the only thing that kept him going, and they knew it. They wouldn't mess with him like this. That would just be cruel.

After four hours of being frozen stiff, Hardie unstrapped his legs to stretch them. Starting at 1:00 p.m. UT he had a checklist of duties to perform. They had better start the transmission soon. Otherwise...

And then the transmission began.

One hundred and sixty-six miles below, life went on.

Below, on the surface of the earth, at almost 10:00 a.m. eastern standard time, which was three hours behind universal time, Kendra was making chicken soup. Both she and Seej were fighting colds. Kendra had already taken apart the chicken and was now chopping thick carrot slices. Her furious motions made Hardie nervous—her fingers moved so quickly, chop chop chop chop chop chop chop even though her fingers were curled under, just like you were supposed to do. Still, fingers could slip. And if something should happen...

Seej was in the living room, holding up an imaginary gun-sword thing and blasting and slashing away digital opponents on a flat screen. Hardie had no idea what the boy was playing. The last video game he could remember the kid playing, more than a decade ago, was something involving Italian plumbers and giant magic mushrooms. What the hell kind of game involved a gun and a sword? If a gun didn't do the job, did you really need the sword to finish off the bad guy? And why slash at him with a sword if you've got a gun at your disposal?

Still the boy was enraptured. Nothing real, except the sick delight on his face. You could tell when he got off a particularly gory shot, because his eyes lit up in a certain way. Partly appalled, partly amused. Much as Hardie didn't want to admit it, he looked like the kind of kid who might shoot up school someday.

This was Charlie Hardie's family. Right there in front of him. Flesh and blood, living their lives struggling with their problems.

Utterly unreachable.

For the past nine months, Charlie Hardie's life boiled down to mind-numbing routine. Open eyes. Crawl out of the harness that held him in place while he tried—and failed—to sleep. Evacuate bladder in a separate harness setup—which up here entailed a seventeen-step process. Climb over to the control panels. Check the levels, comparing the numbers against the ones in the manual, even though he knew them by heart. Stand to eat a bland meal, because sitting made his stomach hurt too much. Wash self with moistened towelettes. Do sit-ups and pedal an ergometer to get strength back. Push the same sequence of buttons again. And again. And again. A monkey could do this. But they didn't want any old monkey.

They wanted a monkey named Charlie Hardie.

It had been a year since Charlie Hardie *almost* shot that nice woman in the face.

And every day in this cramped-ass satellite, Hardie thought about what life would have been like if he *had* shot that woman in the face. Probably would have been short. As in “a few seconds long” short—because if he'd killed that woman, her armed minions would have blasted the meat from Hardie's bones with a dazzling array of heavy artillery. A few seconds may even be generous.

Instead Hardie had agreed to not shoot the woman in the face, and to surrender to the Cabal and pretty much do their bidding.

The Cabal...oh, they had so many names. When Hardie first encountered them, he knew them as the Accident People who worked for the Industry. Back then they'd nearly killed him...but he'd hurt them bad, too, scuttling a deal worth billions and *really* pissing them off. So much so that the incident (a) stole five years of Hardie's life, and (b) stuck him in a secret prison and forced him to be the warden. Needless to say, this really pissed *Hardie* off. So when Hardie finally busted out he set out to destroy the three known members of Secret America—which is what the inmates in that prison called the Industry.

But when Hardie asked the nice lady he almost shot in the face what they called themselves, she chuckled and said, “Call us the Cabal.”

Hardie wanted to crack a joke like, “Kebob? As in chunks of meat on a stick?”

But it was hard to make a joke with so many guns in your face, ready to end your life in a fusillade of lead.

Oh, Hardie had tried. Just before finding himself in an unwinnable standoff, he had embarked on a mission of blood-splattered revenge. It was, to be honest, kind of a mixed bag. The first leader of the Cabal? Killed without a hitch. You might even go so far as to call that a smashing success. The second leader? Hardie thought he'd killed that son of a bitch, but it turned out that he had survived after all. Maybe. It was all kind of unclear. And the third leader?

Well, that was the nice lady he *almost* shot in the face but didn't.

Which brought them to their current arrangement. In exchange for a year of indentured servitude the Cabal promised Hardie that the slate would be wiped clean. The Cabal would not actively seek to kill Hardie, and they would not seek to send the Accident People after his estranged wife and son. That's all Hardie wanted, of course. To have the threat of death finally removed from the heads of Kendra and Charlie Jr. So Hardie had lowered the gun and agreed to work for the Cabal.

We just want you to guard something, they said. That's what you do, right? You guard stuff?

Yeah, Hardie said, I guard stuff.

Only they didn't tell Hardie he'd be guarding something in *freakin' outer space*.

Okay: “low earth orbit.”

Same damned thing, Hardie thought.

~~The very idea of it sounded insane. But the Cabal insisted that it was not only possible but practical too.~~ Certain things were way too valuable to keep on the surface of the earth, where they could be hacked or dug up and breached in countless ways. For as long as people had scuttled across the planet, they had been devising countless ways to steal the possessions of others. For total security, you had to remove the planet from the equation.

That required some expensive technology—but in the long run, it was not as expensive as maintaining an ultra-secure facility planetside. Once you shot the thing up into low earth orbit, you could be assured that only organizations with the resources of the Cabal could get up there, too. And no one had the resources of the Cabal.

But you also needed a human presence, because machines, no matter how well built, could malfunction. Hence the need for a guard.

Hence the need for Charlie Hardie.

Hardie shifted his body in the cramped space near the monitor, trying to stretch his sore body, get the blood flowing. He forgot his pains, though, when he saw his family.

On screen, Kendra cracked eggs into a glass bowl to prepare the batter for French toast. Hardie was instantly hurled back in time, a decade ago, watching her do the same thing on a Sunday morning back when she *was* his wife. Same glass bowl. Same stainless steel whisk. Same plug-in electric fryer on the countertop, passed down from her mother. The sight of the familiar kitchen gear made it feel like they were still married, still together.

He knew they weren't legally married anymore. Too much time had passed. If she were smart—and Kendra was the smartest woman he knew—she would have declared him legally dead and collected a life insurance payout.

Even if Hardie were somehow able to magically teleport himself down to the surface of the earth inside that kitchen, what would she say? Their last days together, those years before all that madness in L.A., had been awkward and painful and tense. Back then, Hardie swore that if you could somehow liquefy and bottle Kendra's angry glares, you'd have the most potent weed killer on the market. He would ask what was wrong. Kendra's mouth would say, *Nothing, I'm fine*. But her eyes would say, *I hate you with every fiber of my being*.

Kendra left the kitchen. The camera should have cut away to the dining room, but it didn't. Which was strange.

Whoever was in charge of giving Hardie his daily dose of family time was usually pretty good about making sure those few minutes were worth it. Hardie couldn't help but wonder how often the same person—male or female—watched over Kendra and the boy the rest of the day. Was it constant surveillance, or just the occasional check-in to make sure they were still alive and thus useful to the Cabal? Was this person a perv? Did he or she watch Hardie's family in his/her spare time?

Usually Hardie couldn't think thoughts like these—not with him trapped in low earth orbit and unable to do a thing about it.

But sometimes he spoke aloud to this mysterious Watcher, on the off-chance he or she could hear.

Which he knew was ridiculous, because this was a one-way transmission—they had stressed that during his training. We'll be able to monitor you through various sensors, but don't bother talking to us. And fuck you very much!

Still Hardie couldn't resist.

“Come on.”

He spoke out loud just to reassure himself that he had a voice. He almost wished he could time travel back about a year and visit himself in that lousy secret prison and tell himself, *Look, buddy, least you've got people to talk to. Even if they are crazy. So enjoy it while supplies last.*

Hardie would say all kinds of things to himself.

You know how screwed you are, Chuck?

Chuck. Always Chuck. Nobody in real life called him anything but Hardie, and that would have included Kendra most times. But after he was almost shot to death nearly nine years ago, the medics decided that he was Unkillable Chuck. And he was up in this tin can, still alive. So he must be Chuck.

Right, Chuck?

How we doing there, Chuck?

Morning, Chuck, you big asshole.

How'd ya end up in a satellite anyway, Chuck?

There was only one way up to the satellite. You basically had to own a rocket, possess the technology to dock with the satellite, then force your way into the orbiting craft—which was not much bigger than a Honda Odyssey. But *if...* and this was a HUGE *if...* you could manage to clear all of these hurdles, then there was one last fail-safe:

Charlie Hardie would be waiting for you, ready to point and shoot.

The only entranceway—a long tube that didn't feel much wider than a hula hoop—was lined with machine guns. If you stepped inside and Hardie pulled the dual triggers, you would be cut to ribbons, then jettisoned back the way you came, along with your intruding craft. In lots and lots of chunky frozen pieces.

Hardie almost *wished* someone would try to break in, just so he'd have something interesting to do. Instead he languished inside a satellite parked 166 miles above the surface of the earth—passing over the United States, according to one monitor.

What was so important about this satellite? Hardie has no idea. But his life had boiled down to three duties: (a) press a few buttons to perform simple maintenance, (b) keep himself alive, and (c) shoot anyone who showed up.

Hardie still didn't fully understand why he'd been chosen for this particular mission.

I'm no astronaut, he told them.

That's fine, they told him. We don't want an astronaut. We want *you*.

Why?

You're a survivor. We realized this when you survived what happened in L.A. five years ago. This was confirmed when you managed to work your way out of an escape-proof prison facility. It's you we want. But first, we have to make a few modifications.

Yeah. *Modifications.*

You see, astronauts typically remain in orbit up to six months. Any longer than that exposes the astronaut to weakened bones due to loss of gravity and exposure to solar and cosmic radiation. (Not to mention the psychological stress of being so far from any other human being for so long.) But they claimed to have procedures that would limit the risks. Hardie wanted to know what they were going to do to him; they more or less flatly refused to tell him any detail. *Proprietary secrets,* they said. *Fuck you, it's my body,* you said. *Is it really?* they said. And they had a point.

All he knew is that after surgery, his head had ached for a really long time. And more or less hadn't

stopped hurting since then, as if they'd sawed open the top of his skull, moved some stuff around, and then put his head back together a millimeter or two off.

Anyway, that had been nine months ago; there were three to go on his contract. Besides the hellish confined spaces and the constant low-grade headache, it wasn't complete misery. There were perks. In addition to Hardie's family being permitted to live, he was allowed to watch them for a few minutes every day, via secret cameras inside Kendra's rented home just outside Philadelphia.

Each transmission from Earth was torture and relief at the same time. Hardie supposed that's what ghosts must feel like. Watching your loved ones live out their lives while you were completely powerless to affect them. Hardie began to suspect that watching these little snippets of his family every day had driven him insane. But what was he supposed to do? Stop watching?

After his contract was up, he would (supposedly) be allowed to return to them.

Hardie didn't believe this for a minute. The lizard cop voice inside his head told him that this would never happen. *They will kill you after this job is over. They will kill your family, too...* So Hardie knew he had only three months left to figure out a plan to escape, rejoin his family, then disappear with them. That, of course, was presuming his wife and son would want anything to do with him.

Still the faithful husband, his nemesis had once told him. *Which is really impressive, considering how long since you've seen them.*

For now Charlie Hardie's life was simply mind-numbing routine in a super-confined space. And the occasional pleasure of watching his ex-wife make breakfast.

But now Hardie was staring at the surveillance image of an empty kitchen. He tried to project his thoughts across the atmosphere and straight down into his ex-wife's head in Philadelphia. Come on, Kendra. Just walk back into the kitchen for something. You forgot something, didn't you? Maybe you didn't turn off the fryer? Give me something. Anything.

But there was nothing.

Seej, where are you? Don't you want to raid the fridge for a post-breakfast snack? The boy, who was pretty much now a man (as much as Hardie didn't want to admit it), was lean and strong and a little like a trucker. Whereas Kendra seemed to consume small, birdlike portions, Seej could put away the provisions for the working staff of an entire farm. And then be hungry again for lunch by midmorning. He looked nothing like his father, but he ate like him.

So, c'mon. You must be hungry again, Seej. Let me see you. Or have you gone out somewhere? Maybe to meet a friend? Or a girlfriend?

But there was nothing.

After another few minutes of nothing, the transmission came to an end. Hardie was beginning the process of unstrapping himself when—

Whoah.

He felt the satellite jolt.

The last man on earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door.

—Fredric Brown

HARDIE TICKED DOWN the extremely small list of things that could possibly jolt a \$3.7-billion-dollar satellite.

The best-case scenario: an off-schedule food delivery drone. But that couldn't be. The last had arrived two weeks ago, and there wasn't another scheduled for at least six more weeks. There's no way his employers would send extra, because (a) they were super budget-conscious, and (b) everything up here was planned down to the ounce. Which left...asteroid? A collision with a piece of space junk?

Sure *sounded* like the food delivery drone docking, though. The noise and clatter was like someone slamming an SUV into the side of your house, followed by magnetic deadbolts, locking it in place.

CLUNK-CLUNK-CLUNK-CLUNK

Hardie pulled himself over to the gateway hatch, using the hand-holds to make his way. He checked the sensors that usually told him when a delivery drone was ready to deliver a payload. He waited. Nothing appeared on the screen. This wasn't a delivery drone. This was something else. The very thing they assured him could never, *ever* happen...because they'd taken every possible precaution so that it would not happen...well, it seemed to be happening.

Fuck.

Hardie decided he wanted a beer. Like, yeah, right now. It was the morning in Philadelphia, but it was afternoon here in space. He should have insisted that they install a cooler in this damned thing, maybe arrange for monthly shipments of quarter-kegs or even a couple of six-packs. Beer is packed with nutrients, right? If you're going to stick a guy in a tin can, at least give him a couple of cans to open every now and again.

But no. The satellite was too small for such an extravagance as a beer.

His entire world was in the shape of a bullet, and it flung itself around the earth many, many times a day.

There were two main sections: the bulbous part where Hardie lived and performed his pointless daily tasks, and then the skinny-ass metal gateway tube that led to a small rear hatch, where the delivery drone would bring fresh supplies of food and water and also accept waste. And, boy, was the whole process fun.

Then again, ordinary life up here in space was a Black & Decker funhouse of pain. Hardie was forever banging random body parts (elbows, knees, toes, skull) into the metal gizmos on the interior of his living quarters. As a result, he moved throughout the craft perpetually stooped, limbs tucked close to himself at all times. Sometimes all Hardie wanted in the world was the opportunity to stretch

A *real* stretch, where you reach your hands to heaven and you can feel the vertebrae pop. Such a stretch was impossible inside this claustrophobic tin can. And taking a leak? Back on Earth, guys were blessed with the ability to find a semi-hidden spot, unzip, and let it fly. Up here Hardie had to contort as if he were doing yoga in a closet. If the vacuum seal wasn't tight, then he'd enjoy the sensation of his own gravity-free piss droplets smacking into this face.

Most days Hardie thought he'd have been better off languishing in that secret fucking prison.

The living area was about the size of a minivan. The interior, however, was so jammed with subsystems (thermal control, environmental control, avionics, communications, guidance computer, and a bunch of other crap he couldn't remember) that to Hardie it felt like a minivan jammed with crap for a cross-country family vacation. To do pretty much anything—sleep, eat, shit, shave—he had to strap himself in to one kind of harness or another.

Strapping myself in here, boss.

Go on, Charlie, strap yourself in.

For fun, Hardie could open the hatch and crawl into the gateway tube. But seeing as how that was lined with machine guns and didn't offer much in the way of entertainment value, such excursions were brief and unsatisfying. Sometimes he could look through one of the four tiny windows and check out the groovy solar arrays sticking off the sides of the satellite like robotic dragonfly wings. But that got old fast, too.

There was nothing else to do.

No place to go.

His only diversions were the heavily pixilated transmissions from Earth, showing his wife and son live their lives without him.

And if Hardie wanted his family to go on living, he knew that he had to take care of whatever might show up in that gateway tube.

The docking mechanism made a last, loud clunking sound. Hardie knew this was basically his front door being unlocked. Usually, he was the one doing the unlocking. To hear it being done with unseen hands was genuinely disturbing. This was no asteroid. This was some sentient being on the other side of the hatch, *unlocking it on purpose*.

Hardie's hands were wrapped around the dual triggers; here we go. All he had to do was point.

And shoot.

But a dizzying wave of thoughts raced through his head. He wondered how loud the gunfire would be. And would his employers bring him back down immediately, or would they force him to remain in orbit with the dead chunks of whomever still clinging to the sides of the gateway? Hardie heard himself sigh. Was he really going to do this?

The speakers crackled and popped.

"Charlie Hardie," a voice said.

Oh boy.

Not only was there a sentient being on the other side of the hatch. But this sentient being knew his goddamned name.

"Hardie, can you hear me?"

Yeah.

I can hear you loud and clear, partner.

~~The craziest thing—and this was pretty much the maraschino cherry on a sundae full of crazy—the~~ voice sounded *familiar*. As in, it sounded like Hardie's own voice. Which was insane, right? Maybe after nine months of talking to himself, his ears were tuned only to his own voice. And now even his voice sounded like his own.

The only other explanation was that Hardie had finally lost his damn fool mind, that the voices in his head had escaped and had somehow taken possession of this spacecraft.

“Hardie, if you can hear me, use the audio communicator and let me know, okay, buddy? It's the third button down to the left of the monitor.”

Sure. Yeah. The audio communicator. So I can talk to the voices inside my own head. A hand, an external manifestation of interior *cuh-RAAY-zee*.

“Hardie, talk to me,” his own voice insisted. “I'm here to save you, man. Eve Bell sent me!”

Eve Bell?

That was a name Hardie thought about almost every day.

Hardie and Eve had been bound together in the strangest way possible: They were old prison buddies. In her previous life, Eve Bell was a private investigator, a professional “people finder” who had been hired to find Hardie. And find Hardie she did. But they'd ended up in the clutches of the common enemy, and both had to claw their way through hell (and its Prisonmaster) to escape... at which point Eve announced that she was quitting the people-finding business. No, instead she would be in the “destroying the Secret America” business, and wouldn't rest until it was dismantled and destroyed, in flaming embers, etc. She recruited other like-minded loners who'd been screwed by the people she called Secret America and waged bloody war.

Eve had said: “We can fight back. All of us. We can take these bastards down.”

But the Prisonmaster shook his head and smiled. “You have family, Mr. Hardie. A wife and a son. Isn't that right? They will be dead the moment you leave this facility. They'll see to it.”

“Not if I get to *them* first. Who are they? Who are your bosses? I want names.”

“That won't do you any good. You can't comprehend the complexity of the Industry...”

Eve said, “I hate to say this: Hardie, he might be right. Once they know we've escaped, they'll be relentless. They won't hesitate to take out your family. I know how they work.”

Which made the decision clear: Only Hardie could slip out of the prison for now. Leaving Eve behind to deal with the other prisoners. Hardie promised he'd send help.

“Don't,” Eve had said. “Take care of your family first.”

“I can help.”

“Go,” Eve insisted. “Leave this to me. This is no hardship. I've been at war with Secret America for two decades now. Thanks to this place, I now have an army. And we're going to kick their asses.”

That was what Eve had promised, anyway. Hardie had no idea how that whole war thing was going because he was stuck in outer space.

Hardie often wondered if Eve had been winning any battles down there. Or if she'd already been caught, silenced, and/or killed. If it was the latter, Hardie wondered if they had made it look like an accident.

Now this mystery man here (who sounded just like Hardie) was invoking the name Eve Bell. Which

would be a pretty clever move on the part of the Industry, or Secret America, or whatever you wanted to call them. ~~Maybe this was simply a test to see if he had the guts to pull the triggers after all.~~

But what if this guy truly had been sent by Eve Bell? What if she was winning the war, and she sent someone to rescue Hardie? In that case, it would be a major bummer if Hardie were to pulp his own rescuer into machine gun-style chopped ham and flush him out into the void of space. Either way, he had to be sure.

“Eve who?” Hardie asked, trying to sound oblivious.

“Eve Bell. I know you know who she is, Hardie.”

“No, it really doesn’t ring a—” Hardie stopped himself. Christ, he *had* lost his mind.

“Hardie,” the strange yet familiar voice said, “time is critical here. You either have to trust me and open this hatch, or you don’t. In which case we’re *both* dead men.”

“Well, I don’t trust you,” Hardie said. “I don’t know you, or this Eve Bell, so why don’t you just leave.” The moment he spoke the words Hardie realized how absurd that sounded. This wasn’t like telling someone to *get off my porch*. There was no gray area here. This was low-orbit *space*. He had to either let this guy in or kill him.

“At least let me show you my face,” the voice said.

“Why?”

“Trust me. It’s a face you’ll recognize.”

“If I know you, why won’t you just tell me your name, then?”

“It’s a bit more complicated than that. Please, Hardie, just let me open the hatch and show you who I am.”

This boggled Hardie’s mind. Which wasn’t good, because Hardie was already convinced he’d gone crazy inside this tin can all of these months. Secret America or the Industry or who-the-fuck-ever wouldn’t run some kind of freaky psychological experiment on him all this time, would they? No. They wouldn’t do that to poor old Hardie. Not after all that they’d been through together.

“I’m opening the hatch.”

“You can’t,” Hardie said quietly.

“Overriding the system now,” the voice said. “Hang on.”

“Don’t, I’m warning you,” Hardie said, but he had to admit—his curiosity was overwhelming.

Who could it possibly be? Why would Hardie know his face? Maybe it was his former pal Del Clark, who somehow had convinced his FBI bosses to rent a rocket ship for the weekend. Or, for that matter, the president of the United States of America. Even better: Sylvester Stallone and Jason Statham and Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis, teaming up to rescue him. Oh, the adventures they would share!

Hardie knew it didn’t matter, though. He’d been given simple instructions: If anyone enters the tube, you shoot him.

Otherwise, your family dies.

Down below, the hatch unlocked and opened a few inches, as if a cat had playfully nudged it open. Hardie was ready. The target onscreen, fingers on the dual triggers. Again, he hesitated. Was he really going to do this? Pump buckets of bullets into a total stranger?

Hell, yeah, he was. If it means saving his family, he’d do anything. There was no choice.

Hardie was about to squeeze the triggers when the hatch popped open all the way and someone screamed, *Don’t shoot! I’m here to save you!* The figure clawed at the latch connecting his helmet to his suit, shouting, *Wait! Wait! Wait! Don’t shoot! Please!* Then the helmet came all the way off and reveal...

Hardie's own face.

4

Am I mad, in a coma, or back in time?

—John Simm, *Life on Mars*

THE SIGHT OF his mirror image left Hardie dazed, his vision fuzzy. As if his mind was struggling to apply some logic to the situation. *There's a guy down at the other end of that tube who looks just like you. Therefore, we don't exist. Therefore, I am shutting us down so as to avoid a time-space paradox.* Hardie dropped his hands from the triggers without even thinking about it. The tips of his fingers tingled.

“Relax,” the Other Him said. “I can explain everything.”

Hardie thought: no. Fuck no, I'm not going to relax. I need to pour hundreds of bullets into this guy *right this very second*, no matter who he looks like. But...

...but...

What if he *was* the salvation he'd been looking for?

All this time, spinning hundreds of miles above the surface of the earth, praying that God would grace him with even the tiniest glimmer of an escape plan. Was this it?

Hardie stopped himself.

What, *yourself*? You are your own salvation? For reals, yo? Are you hallucinating?

That was it. A hallucination.

Nothing more than a bit of undigested reconstituted beef or powdered NASA potato—*Scrooge Space*—style.

So a hallucination wouldn't mind getting blasted into little red messy chunks by twin machine guns? Would it?

“Who,” Hardie said, “the fuck are you?”

“I told you, I can explain.”

“Explain quick.”

Hardie stared down the long, silver metal tube at his double. And the longer he stared, the more his whole body seemed to rebel. Tingling and trembling and going numb in random places. The resemblance was more than uncanny. It was freakish. Hardie had always hated looking at himself in a mirror, but this was even worse than a mirror image. Mirrors flipped you around, showed you a skewed version of yourself. Now Hardie was faced with how he looked in real life, to other people. Never mind that this was a physical impossibility. He couldn't be in two places at once. The very thought of it was frying his circuits.

“I'm not going to hurt you,” the Other Him said, his voice trying to approximate a soothing tone. “I'm here to help you.”

“Don't—” Hardie floundered for the right sequence of words. He settled for: “Don't you move!”

“I work for the U.S. government. Intelligence. I'm here to save you from the Cabal.”

“The who?”

There, for a second, the spell was shattered. Hardie never used words like “cabal.” No, he’d use something like “creepy pricks who meddle in people’s lives and force them to have accidents and shove them down into secret prisons and shoot them into outer freakin’ space.” Never *cabal*. Sissie used words like *cabal*. Abrams, the bitch who’d sent him up into space, had used the word “cabal.”

Still, the Other Him pressed his case. “You know exactly who I mean. The people who sent you up here.”

“They seem to have many names.”

“Well, they’ve evolved.”

Hardie mulled this for a second. Then he said, “I thought I told you to explain quickly.”

The Other Charlie Hardie explained quickly.

Six years ago, the lawyers who ran the Accident People were a group of problem solvers, working in secret for the most exclusive and powerful clients in the world. (Usually, huge corporations.) Over the past few years, however, they’d evolved to *become* the powerful, with their claws sunk deep into the U.S. government at the highest levels.

“But you started to change all of that when you escaped from Site Number 7734,” the Other Charlie Hardie said. “All of those people popped out of that secret prison just jonesin’ for some payback, and they’ve been attacking their interests all over the world. Your buddy Eve Bell especially.”

“You say you know her, huh?”

“She sent me to find you.”

“You’re telling me she’s behind all of this?”

“She’s working with some others, but yes. We want what’s in this satellite so we can deliver the killing blow. Dismantle their operations permanently.”

“What’s in this satellite?”

“They never told you this...hell, why would they? But you’re up here guarding information hidden in this satellite. The most dangerous information in the world, as a matter of fact. It’s too dangerous to keep on earth, where it could potentially be stolen or hacked. But it’s also too important to destroy.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

The Other Him sighed. Swear to Christ—he *sighed*. Like he was troubled by all of this pesky explaining. Hardie decided right then and there: The Other Him was an asshole.

“Let me give you a quick example,” the Other Him said. “You ever hear of the Borgias?”

Hardie paused for a moment, then replied: “You talking about the casino?”

“No, the cutthroat Italian family. They...wait, you’re totally messing with me, aren’t you?”

“Go on.”

“The Borgias apparently came up with the most lethal poison on earth. A poison they only dared to use once, and vowed to never use again—the potential to wipe out the entire population of the earth was too great. Even back then, there was the fear that someone who possessed the poison would lose his or her mind long enough to try to kill thousands. The poison was *that* powerful.”

“Uh-huh. So you’re saying there’s a deadly poison on this satellite.”

“No,” the Other Him said. “I’m saying whatever you’ve got locked up in there has the potential to make the Borgia super-poison seem like salmonella. You’re guarding the one thing powerful enough to destroy them. Let’s find it...then destroy them.”

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