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Opening extract from **Point Blanc**

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For WS and N



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GOING DOWN

Michael J. Roscoe was a careful man.

The car that drove him to work at seven fifteen each morning was a custom-made Mercedes with reinforced-steel doors and bullet-proof windows. His driver, a retired FBI agent, carried a Beretta sub-compact semi-automatic pistol and knew how to use it. There were just five steps from the point where the car stopped to the entrance of Roscoe Tower on New York's Fifth Avenue, but CCTV cameras followed him every inch of the way. Once the automatic doors had slid shut behind him, a uniformed receptionist – also armed – watched as he crossed the foyer and entered his own private lift.

The lift had white marble walls, a blue carpet, a silver handrail and no buttons. Roscoe pressed

his hand against a small glass panel. A sensor read his fingerprints, verified them and activated the lift. The doors slid shut and the lift rose to the sixtieth floor without stopping. Nobody else ever used it. Nor did it ever stop at any of the other floors in the building. While it was traveling up, the receptionist was on the telephone, letting Mr Roscoe's staff know that he was on his way.

Everyone who worked in Roscoe's private office had been hand-picked and thoroughly vetted. It was impossible to see him without an appointment. Getting an appointment could take three months.

When you're rich, you have to be careful. There are cranks, kidnappers, terrorists ... the desperate and the dispossessed. Michael J. Roscoe was the chairman of Roscoe Electronics and the ninth or tenth richest man in the world – and he was very careful indeed. Ever since his face had appeared on the front cover of *Time* magazine ("The Electronics King") he had realized that he had become a visible target. So when in public he walked quickly, with his head bent. The glasses that he wore had been chosen to hide as much as possible of his round, handsome face. His suits were expensive but anonymous. If he went to

the theatre or to dinner, he always arrived at the last minute, preferring not to hang around. There were dozens of different security systems in his life and although they had once annoyed him, he had allowed them to become routine.

But ask any spy or security agent. Routine is the one thing that can get you killed. It tells the enemy where you're going and when you're going to be there. Routine was going to kill Michael J. Roscoe and this was the day death had chosen to come calling.

Of course, Roscoe had no idea of this as he stepped out of the lift directly into his private office – a huge room occupying the corner of the building, with floor-to-ceiling windows giving views in two directions; Fifth Avenue to the north, Central Park to the west. The two remaining walls contained a door, a low bookshelf and, next to the lift, a single oil painting: a vase of flowers by Vincent Van Gogh.

The black glass surface of his desk was equally uncluttered. A computer, a leather notebook, a telephone and a framed photograph of a fourteen-year-old boy. As he took off his jacket and sat down, Roscoe found himself looking at the picture of the boy. Blond hair, blue eyes and freckles. Paul Roscoe looked remarkably

like his father forty years ago. Roscoe was now fifty-four, beginning to show his age despite his year-round tan. His son was almost as tall as him. The picture had been taken the summer before, on Long Island. They had spent the day sailing. Then they'd had a barbecue on the beach. It had been one of the few happy days they'd ever had together.

The door opened and his secretary came in. Helen Bosworth was English. She had left her home and her husband to come and work in New York and loved every minute of it. She had been working in this office for eleven years, and in all that time she had never forgotten a detail or made a mistake.

"Good morning, Mr Roscoe," she said.

"Good morning, Helen."

She set down a folder on his desk. "The latest figures from Singapore. Costings on the R-15 Organizer. You have lunch with Senator Andrews at twelve-thirty. I've booked the Ivy—"

"Did you remember to call London?" Roscoe asked.

Helen Bosworth blinked. She never forgot anything, so why had he asked? "I spoke to Alan Blunt's office yesterday afternoon," she said. Afternoon in New York would have been evening

in London. "Mr Blunt was not available but I've arranged a person-to-person call for you this afternoon. We can have it patched through to your car."

"Thank you, Helen."

"Shall I have your coffee sent through to you?"

"No thank you, Helen. I won't have coffee today."

Helen Bosworth left the room, seriously alarmed. No coffee? Whatever next? Mr Roscoe had begun his day with a double espresso for as long as she had known him. Could it be that he was ill? He certainly hadn't been himself recently ... not since Paul had got back from that school in the South of France. And this phone call to Alan Blunt in London! Nobody had ever told her who he was but she had seen his name in a file once. He was something to do with British military intelligence. MI6. What was Mr Roscoe doing talking to a spy?

Helen Bosworth returned to her office and soothed her nerves, not with a coffee – she couldn't stand the stuff – but with a refreshing cup of English breakfast tea. Something very strange was going on and she didn't like it. She didn't like it at all.

* * *

Meanwhile, sixty floors below, a man had walked into reception wearing grey overalls with an ID badge attached to his chest. The badge identified him as Sam Green, maintenance engineer with X-Press Elevators Inc. He was carrying a briefcase in one hand and a large silver toolbox in the other. He set them both down in front of the reception desk.

Sam Green was not his real name. His hair – black and a little greasy – was fake, as were his glasses, moustache and uneven teeth. He looked fifty years old but was actually nearer thirty. Nobody knew his real name but in the business he was in, a name was the last thing he could afford. He was known as the Gentleman and he was one of the highest paid and most successful contract killers in the world. He had been given his nickname because he always sent flowers to the families of his victims.

The receptionist glanced at him.

"I'm here for the elevator," he said. He spoke with a Bronx accent even though he had never spent more than a week there in his life.

"What about it?" the receptionist asked. "You people were here last week."

"Yeah. Sure. We found a defective cable on elevator twelve. It had to be replaced but we

didn't have the parts. So they sent me back." The Gentleman fished in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled sheet of paper. "You want to call Head Office? I've got my orders here."

If the receptionist had called X-Press Elevators Inc., he would have discovered that they did indeed employ a Sam Green – although he hadn't shown up for work for two days. This was because the real Sam Green was at the bottom of the Hudson River with a knife in his back and a twenty-pound block of concrete attached to his feet. But the receptionist didn't make the call. The Gentleman had guessed he wouldn't bother. After all, the lifts were always breaking down. There were engineers in and out the whole time. What difference would one more make?

The receptionist jerked a thumb. "Go ahead!" he said.

The Gentleman put away the letter, picked up his case and his toolbox, and went over to the lifts. There were a dozen public lifts servicing the skyscraper, plus a thirteenth for Michael J. Roscoe. Lift number twelve was at the end. As he went in, a delivery boy with a parcel tried to follow. "Sorry," the Gentleman said. "Closed for maintenance." The doors slid shut. He was on his own. He pressed the button for the sixty-first floor.

He had been given this job only a week before. He'd had to work fast – killing the real maintenance engineer, taking his identity, learning the layout of Roscoe Tower and getting his hands on the sophisticated piece of equipment he had known he would need. His employers wanted the multi-millionaire eliminated as quickly as possible. More importantly, it had to look like an accident. For this, the Gentleman had demanded – and been paid – two hundred thousand American dollars. The money was to be paid into a bank account in Switzerland; half now, half on completion.

The lift door opened. The sixty-first floor was used mainly for maintenance. This was where the water tanks were housed, also the computers that controlled the heat, air-conditioning, security cameras and lifts throughout the building. The Gentleman turned off the lift, using the manual override key that had once belonged to Sam Green, then went over to the computers. He knew exactly where they were. In fact, he could have found them wearing a blindfold. He opened his briefcase. There were two sections to the case. The lower part was a laptop computer. The lid was fitted out with a number of drills and other tools, each of them strapped into place.

It took him fifteen minutes to cut his way into

the Roscoe Tower mainframe and connect his laptop to the circuitry inside. Hacking his way past the Roscoe security systems took a little longer, but at last it was done. He tapped a command into his keyboard. On the floor below, Michael J. Roscoe's private lift did something it had never done before. It rose up one extra floor – to level sixty-one. The door, however, remained closed. The Gentleman did not need to get in.

Instead, he picked up the briefcase and the silver toolbox and carried them back into the same lift he had taken from reception. He turned the override key and pressed the button for the fifty-ninth floor. Once again, he deactivated the lift. Then he reached up and pushed. In the top of the lift was a trapdoor that opened outwards. He pushed the briefcase and the silver box ahead of him, then pulled himself up and climbed onto the roof of the lift. He was now standing inside the main lift-shaft of Roscoe Tower. He was surrounded on four sides by girders and pipes blackened with oil and dirt. Thick steel cables hung down, some of them humming as they carried their loads up and down. Looking down, he could see a seemingly endless square tunnel, illuminated only by the chinks of light from the doors that slid open and shut again as the other lifts arrived at various

floors. Somehow the breeze had made its way in from the street, spinning dust that stung his eyes. Next to him was a set of lift doors which, had he opened them, would have led him straight into Roscoe's office. Above these, over his head and a few metres to the right, was the underbelly of Roscoe's private lift.

The toolbox was next to him, on the lift roof. Carefully, he opened it. The sides of the case were lined with thick sponge. Inside, in the specially moulded space, was what looked like a complicated film projector, silver and concave with a thick glass lens. He took it out, then glanced at his watch. Eight thirty-five. It would take him an hour to connect the device to the bottom of Roscoe's lift, and a little more to ensure it was working. He had plenty of time.

Smiling to himself, the Gentleman took out a power screwdriver and began to work.

At twelve o'clock, Helen Bosworth called through on the telephone. "Your car is here, Mr Roscoe."

"Thank you, Helen."

Roscoe hadn't done much that morning. He had been aware that only half his mind was on his work. Once again, he glanced at the photograph on his desk. Paul. How could things have gone

so wrong between a father and a son? And what could have happened in the last few months to make them so much worse?

He stood up, put his jacket on and walked across his office – on his way to lunch with Senator Andrews. He often had lunch with politicians. They either wanted his money, his ideas ... or him. Anyone as rich as Roscoe was a powerful friend and politicians need all the friends they can get.

He pressed the lift call button and the doors slid open. He took one step forward.

The last thing Michael J. Roscoe saw in his life was a lift with white marble walls, a blue carpet and a silver handrail. His right foot, wearing one of the black leather shoes that were hand-made for him by a small shop in Rome, travelled down to the carpet and kept going ... right through it. The rest of his body followed, tilting into the lift and then through it. And then he was falling sixty floors to his death. He was so surprised by what had happened, so totally unable to understand what had happened, that he didn't even cry out. He simply fell into the blackness of the lift-shaft, bounced twice off the walls, then crashed into the solid concrete of the basement, two hundred metres below.

The lift remained where it was. It looked solid but in fact it wasn't there at all. What Roscoe had stepped into was a hologram being projected into the empty space of the lift-shaft where the real lift should have been. The Gentleman had programmed the door to open when Roscoe pressed the call button, and had quietly watched him step into oblivion. If the billionaire had just looked up for a moment, he would have seen the silver hologram projector beaming the image, a few metres above him. But a man getting into a lift on his way to lunch does not look up. The Gentleman had known this. And he was never wrong.

At twelve thirty-five, the chauffeur called up to say that Mr Roscoe hadn't arrived at the car. Ten minutes later, Helen Bosworth alerted security, who began to search the foyer of the building. At one o'clock, they called the restaurant. The senator was there, waiting for his lunch guest. But Roscoe hadn't shown up.

In fact, his body wasn't discovered until the next day, by which time the billionaire's disappearance had become the lead story on American TV news. A bizarre accident – that's what it looked like. Nobody could work out what had happened. Because of course, by that time,

the Gentleman had reprogramed the mainframe, removed the projector and left everything as it should have been before quietly leaving the building.

Two days later, a man who looked nothing like a maintenance engineer walked into JFK International Airport. He was about to board a flight for Switzerland. But first of all he visited a flower shop and ordered a dozen black tulips to be sent to a certain address. The man paid with cash. He didn't leave a name.