

Chapter One

Failure

**American-International Systems Solutions, Inc. (AISSI)
North Metro Atlanta, Georgia
Wednesday morning, December 28**

JONATHAN CARLTON Riggins, J.C. to his friends and family, stepped out of the elevator on the tenth floor of corporate headquarters. He checked his watch. Eight a.m. Right on time. He stopped at the desk of the CEO's assistant, Mary Hawthorne.

"Good morning, Mary. Hope you had a pleasant Christmas."

She nodded but didn't return the greeting. In fact, she appeared strangely dour.

"FedEx should be here around ten o'clock to pick up the proposal," J.C. said, deciding not to probe into Mary's personal feelings. "Eight copies. Mr. Billingsly will sign them out—"

"He'd like to see you." Something flashed in her eyes. A warning. A prophetic bearing a dire message.

Her tacit alert seemed so palpable J.C. actually glanced behind him, wondering if someone dressed as the Grim Reaper might be creeping up unseen.

"I just need to stop by corporate communications first—"

"Now," she said, her voice low. "He wants to see you now."

J.C.'s gut churned. The holiday bonhomie and sense of vocational optimism he'd harbored just seconds before fled like helium from a pricked balloon. Adding to his sudden angst, the smell of blackened toast and scorched eggs drifted in from the executive dining room three doors down. The term "burnt offerings" crossed his mind.

He tried to imagine what could have gone wrong, for surely something must have. He wasn't misreading the foreboding implicit in Mary's demeanor. At yesterday's final review, the wrap-up prior to the most important proposal in the company's history being shipped out, everything had seemed in order. The meeting had been brief and smooth. No gremlins lurking in a forest, no trolls hiding beneath a bridge.

All that remained was to print and bind the proposal documents and put them in the hands of FedEx who would deliver them to Rampart Aerospace & Defense Corporation in Durham, North Carolina, by the end of the day, a step ahead of an impending winter storm that had everyone on edge. It seemed as though the Southeast, in the over-the-top words of a major TV network, faced a once-in-a-millennium monster. A shutdown blizzard expected to cripple the region for a week, maybe two.

What had he missed?

He rapped on the door of Cyrus Billingsly, the CEO.

"Enter." A curt command from a retired Air Force major general.

J.C. stepped into Billingsly's lair. The man still appeared every bit a flag officer with his close-cropped gray hair, chiseled features, and laser-like gaze. While J.C. didn't mark him as a hard ass, he knew him to be demanding and blunt.

Billingsly didn't look up from a document he appeared to be studying. After a minute or so, he

did. His gaze, something that could have withered a granite monolith, fell on J.C. with almost tangible intensity.

“Do you know how fucking pissed I am?” Billingsly said. His voice rumbled with volcanic undertones. His face, twisted into a mask of barely contained rage, gleamed lava-flow red.

J.C. had never heard the CEO use profanity before, so “fucking” became an immediate marker of the depth of the man’s fury. J.C. chose not to respond to the question, understanding it didn’t demand an answer. A wave of nausea swept over him. The strength in his legs failed, the muscles and tendons holding him upright deteriorating to a rubbery state. He grabbed the desk for support. Something cataclysmic had happened. On his watch. Under his leadership. His responsibility.

“Yesterday I was briefed everything was fine,” Billingsly said. “Last night, I decided to make one final sweep through the proposal.” He slid a stack of papers toward J.C. and raised his voice. “You just cost this company a billion-dollar project. A billion fucking dollars! Damn it to hell, J.C.! Damn it to hell!”

J.C. reached toward the papers, trying to camouflage the tremor in his hand.

“It’s the test data,” Billingsly snapped. “Here we are, the only company in the bidding with a working HDIRLLTAS”—he pronounced it hy-derl-tis—“a virtual shoo-in to win the job, and instead of entering working-model test results into the proposal, we entered the prototype evaluations. Two-year-old data. I know the differences are subtle, but when it comes to highlighting the effectiveness of the system, they’re deal-breakers. Shit.” He pounded his fist onto his mahogany desk with such force J.C. thought the CEO might have shattered the bones in his hand.

J.C. read the title on the top sheet in the stack of papers: TEST RESULTS: HIGH-DEFINITION, LOW-LIGHT TARGET ACQUISITION SYSTEM (HDIRLLTAS). The system, a high-tech blend of night vision technology and infrared detection capabilities, had undergone extensive modifications over the past two years. From a barely functional prototype, it had been crafted into a state-of-the-art, reliable, ruggedized military system. No other corporation, at least as far as AISSI’s corporate intelligence could discern, had one. It was to have been the company’s golden egg, the key to Fort Knox, their own Saudi oilfield. But now?

His hand visibly shaking, J.C. leafed through the papers.

“Don’t bother,” Billingsly said, his voice coated with rage. “I double checked, triple checked. It’s not obvious, at least not until you drill down into the data, but it doesn’t support our efficacy claims.”

“We can fix it,” J.C. said, his voice wavering and feeble.

“Sure we can,” Billingsly said, his words derisive. “In case it escaped your notice, that data ripples through virtually every damn section of the document. Tech specs. Functional design. Applications. Maintenance. By the time we repair the damage, it’ll be midnight.”

“FedEx can still—”

“I already checked. They don’t expect to be operating tomorrow. If the weather guessers are right, much of the Southeast may be non-op tomorrow. And Friday.”

“Maybe they’re wrong.”

“Maybe pigs will fly, too,” Billingsly snapped.

“Look, I’ll talk to Rampart,” J.C. said, his words hesitant, irresolute, “and see if they’ll make an exception and let us email the document.”

“Not a chance. You know how acutely sensitive the data is.” Billingsly shook his head. “I don’t believe it. I just don’t fucking believe it. I trusted you. A billion-dollar opportunity. You assured me things were under control. No potholes in the road, you said. Jesus.” He buried his head in his hands.

“Sir, let’s at least try—”

“Shut up. Just shut up and get out. Pack your stuff. I want you out of this building in an hour.

HR has your termination papers.”

Another ripple of nausea coursed through J.C. A stream of bile erupted into his esophagus. He turned, made a desperate grab for a waste can, and vomited.

Dispassionate, Billingsly watched. “Same way I feel,” he said. He nodded at the waste can J.C. held. “Take it with you when you leave.”

Back in his own office, J.C. leaned over the foul-smelling waste can and loosed another volley of his barely digested breakfast. He wiped his mouth with a paper towel and shoved the can into a corner with his foot. He sat in his chair, stared blankly at a wall adorned with family photos and framed awards, and waited for his stomach and breathing to regain a state of relative normality. It took several minutes.

He attempted to analyze what had gone wrong, how his career had come to such a sudden and mortifying end. Somehow, as proposal manager, he’d lost control of the effort and allowed the corporate ship to founder on the rocks. A week ago, everything had seemed on course, smooth sailing ahead.

A Week Earlier

American-International Systems Solutions, Inc.

Thursday morning, December 22

J.C. SAT AT AN aircraft carrier-sized conference table in the executive meeting room of AISSI, a half-dozen key members of his proposal team flanking him on both sides. As team chief and Vice President of Systems Development, he carried the burden of heading the effort to put together the proposal to Rampart Aerospace & Defense.

If AISSI won the job—and there was every indication they had the inside track against a score of other companies—it would mean a billion-dollar project. A billion dollars. The company would move from being a minnow in the systems development world to being a whale.

The team members engaged in idle chatter, much of it centered on rumors of a major winter storm targeting Atlanta, sipped coffee, and nibbled on stale bagels and frosted doughnuts while they awaited the arrival of Cyrus Billingsly. J.C. knew Billingsly had called the meeting to make certain everything remained on track as the proposal’s delivery date, December 30th, neared. With only eight days remaining, and Christmas in the mix, they had definitely entered the “no screw ups zone.”

Jan Darleena, tasked with overseeing the Operational Applications section of the document, leaned close to J.C. “Do you think The General will be in a jolly mood?”

J.C. dabbed at his mouth with a stained paper napkin. “Is he ever?”

“It’s three days until Christmas.”

“My question stands.”

Chastened by the reminder their boss wasn’t exactly a hail-fellow-well-met or “one of them,” Jan wrinkled her nose and slumped back in her chair. She folded her arms across her stomach, resting them on the front of a woolly black and white sweater adorned with leaping reindeer, and stared straight ahead.

J.C. patted her shoulder. “Don’t worry. Everything’s on schedule. I’ve reviewed all the sections. We’re in excellent shape. No lumps of coal in our Christmas stockings.”

The door to the conference room popped open. Cyrus Billingsly strode in followed by a rush of chilly air from an adjacent corridor. “Seats,” he announced, though no one was standing.

J.C. understood old habits were difficult to break. Billingsly hadn’t quite been able to take the stars off his collar, hadn’t fully made the transition from military commander to civilian boss even after two years. When an Air Force two-star entered a briefing room, everyone stood until ordered

to sit. Not here, not at AISSI, where employees worked in blue jeans and tee-shirts, at least during the warmer months, and called managers by their first names.

Billingsly lowered himself into a chair opposite of J.C. and his staff, flipped open the cover of an iPad, and tapped the screen. He looked up and spoke. “Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I suppose I don’t need to reiterate this, but the future of this company is riding on the work you’re doing.”

J.C. resisted an urge to roll his eyes. No, Billingsly didn’t need to reiterate that, but just did. Everyone in AISSI, as professionals, knew very well what the proposal meant. It was the sort of opportunity on which careers and major corporations were built. It was, to be trite, an opening that comes along once in a lifetime.

The meeting went smoothly and quickly. Each member of the proposal team tendered a status report. Nothing seemed amiss.

At the close of the meeting, Billingsly snapped his iPad cover shut. “It sounds as if we’re in excellent shape. But I want to make absolutely, dead-center certain this document goes out the door on December 28th. That gives us two-day’s grace before it needs to be in Durham.” He stood. “I don’t want to get sandbagged by this so-called superstorm the media is screwing itself into the ceiling over. I understand it’s probably the usual uber-hype, and that we’ll end up with just a few raggedy-ass snow flurries, but I don’t want to take any chances. This document is far too important for us to risk getting Little-Big-Horned by the weather.”

He started to move toward the exit, but stopped.

“One more thing,” he said, “just so we’re clear. I know it sounds as if we’re golden on this, so it’s probably an unneeded warning, but I’m a guy who has zero tolerance for screw ups. If someone fumbles the ball, steps on his poncho, gets her tit caught in the ringer, don’t expect absolution from me. What you *can* expect is that your next job will be stocking shelves in Walmart . . . if you’re lucky. But like I say, it’s probably an unneeded warning. Merry Christmas.”

“Tit caught in ringer?” Jan mouthed to J.C., a smirk creeping across her face.

Billingsly executed a sharp pivot and strode from the room.