

Intersection

Parallel Planes, #1

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Chapter 1

The Drill

A piercing shriek traveled across the water's glasslike surface. Before ripples could form, they gave way to swells, and waves began to churn and froth with intensifying force. Twelve feet beneath the whirling foam, eight human figures fought against the undercurrent.

Bion Hall had a swimmer's build, yet he struggled to keep his body upright. Resisting the urge to charge toward the surface, Hall concentrated, straining to bring the closest of the nearby faces into focus. He locked eyes with Melissa Peri, and the resolve in her expression persuaded him to hold steady. In fact, something in her gaze insisted that he do so.

Through the watery chaos, Hall could see that Peri's eyes remained fixed and almost serene as red strands of hair danced across her face. Her wiry frame calmly maintained position beneath the relentless surges. Hall then gazed up through the water at red characters on a large digital display. The numbers had decreased from "3:45" to "3:15" in long, drawn-out seconds.

Hall noticed subtle movement to his left as Alana Grier adjusted her footing. Thirteen inches shorter than Hall and two-thirds his weight, Grier fared much better at withstanding the violent currents. However, what struck Hall was Grier's countenance. To him, the odd expression on her face appeared to be a combination of forced composure and near laughter. The resemblance to laughter increased each time her eyes darted to her left, beyond the dark curls lashing her forehead, where their companion, Grayson Wyatt, floated as stiff as a statue. Except for an occasional blink, Wyatt somehow kept his stout body immobile and his face rigid as water whipped around his smooth scalp. Only an enigmatic glint in Wyatt's deep-set hazel eyes hinted at any evidence of life.

Something in Hall's peripheral vision caught his attention. To his right, he saw Akira Craig. Hall read the rising panic in Craig's expression. It was practically Craig's first day, and Hall guessed the new guy hadn't expected this. Very similar to Hall in build and athletic ability, Craig also struggled

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against the punishing undercurrent. Knowing that much worse was yet to come, Hall wished he could calm Craig's nerves the way Peri had calmed his, but Hall knew he didn't possess Peri's powers of persuasion—or, perhaps more accurately, her powers of intimidation.

Determined to conserve air and energy, Hall struggled to control his movement. Mounting fatigue and the surrounding turbulence made it difficult to make out what was happening with the other three swimmers. He could only assume that the blurry shapes several feet in front of him were Cassidy Pryce, Tristan Gordon, and Loren Clarke.

Difficult to read but still discernible through the turbulence, “2:55” glowed red through the current. Next to the countdown, another set of red digits steadily increased. Eighty-seven, eighty-eight, eighty-nine, and upward, the numbers sped before resting at ninety-three degrees Fahrenheit. The countdown clock read “2:20” and hung there for an eternal second.

The sensation in Hall's head oscillated between the sting of hot needles and a dull ache. The effects of oxygen deprivation were difficult to bear. Meanwhile, the countdown and harsh conditions continued.

The temperature reversed when jets of water slammed into the submerged swimmers. Seventy-five, seventy-four, seventy-three, and downward, the water cooled. The sudden drop took place in less than ninety seconds. By the time the temperature reached sixty-five degrees, convulsions plagued the swimmers.

Person by person, dizziness settled in as the countdown passed fifty seconds. Peri's eyes were closed at that point. While Wyatt and Grier both blinked incessantly, Craig's eyes were squeezed shut so tightly that deep lines were etched around the corners.

Usually pulled into a tight bun, Gordon's hair covered his face. Worsening the entire ordeal, the haphazard currents had woven the hair into an oppressive web around his head.

Next to Gordon, Clarke's hair was in a similar state, and beneath the tangled strands, her bloodshot eyes stared at the surface. Flushed from excruciating effort, Pryce's cheeks matched the pastel pink of her hair, and her entire body trembled as every muscle seized.

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The water continued to churn around the swimmers, and the bold red numbers on the clock appeared to slow as their lungs tightened, their ears rang, and all around them faded.

Everything before Hall's eyes grew bright, faded to darkness, and then glowed with an orange-tinted blackness. Battling his body's demand to escape the miserable conditions, Hall resisted. Had he relented, he would have been the only swimmer to surface before the countdown reached zero.

Underwater, a muffled hum vibrated through the torrent as the buzzer sounded. In a desperate dash for air, the eight figures surfaced just as a second shriek whistled across the water, signaling the end of the aquatic endurance drill.

Despite the agony and fatigue that tugged at their bodies and minds, the seven waterlogged agents swam over to a very weary Craig. They formed a circle around the rookie and took turns congratulating him.

"Welcome to the team!" Grier said, gasping for air between each word.

Gordon joined in with a pat on the back. "Consider yourself initiated."

"Nice job," Hall managed to say as he, too, patted Craig on the back and headed for the edge of the training tank.

"Well done," Peri said, panting as she swam behind Hall.

Wyatt slowly made his way toward the ladder. "Good job, Craig. Now somebody get me a frigging blanket." His Texas twang was strained as he coughed through the words.

Not quite capable of speech yet and despite her appendages feeling like rubber, Pryce swam up behind Craig, collapsed her tired arms around his shoulders, and gave him a shaky squeeze. With trembling fingers, Craig gave Pryce's forearm a gentle squeeze back.

By this time, everyone else had reached the tank's edge. Peri and Wyatt helped Grier up the ladder and onto the platform, where the training staff were busy taking vitals and distributing heated blankets and hydration.

Craig was the last to reach the platform. Clarke, who was snugly wrapped in a blanket, greeted him with a high five.

"Thanks, team. I wasn't sure I was going to make it," Craig said, smiling through bouts of shivers.

As she sat on the tank's edge, Grier surveyed the seven other members of the Field and Discovery Team (FDT) and let out a long breath. "Great job,

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everybody. I had zero doubts,” she said, with the sweetness of her southern drawl warming the room.

* * *

It had not been easy finding individuals with the characteristics required to meet the physical, intellectual, and psychological demands of the work in the Field and Discovery Division—and no one understood that better than the team’s veterans, Grier and Wyatt, and the division’s director, Hector Alvarez.

Alvarez was nearly forty and had been part of the organization his entire life. His mother had been a member of the second generation of scientists employed at the agency, and Alvarez had grown up surrounded by the organization’s magnificent goals and extraordinary achievements. Nothing excited him more than continuing the agency’s vital work by expanding the capabilities of his division and his team.

After the aquatic endurance drill, Alvarez remained in the observation booth, where he had been perched with a clear view of the team from the moment they were submerged until they left the platform. Now, he reviewed the notes he had taken on each team member’s behavior and performance. He cross-referenced those observations with vitals recorded throughout a series of drills. There was a lot to study—this had been the final activity of a thirty-six-hour training program.

By the time Alvarez stepped out of the booth and headed to debrief them, the team had made its way to the recovery ward, where they rested. With a confident stride, Alvarez entered the ward. The room was so quiet that his steps echoed. He positioned himself so he could see each FDT member’s face.

“I never tire of congratulating this group.”

“Thanks. Any notes for the team?” Wyatt asked.

Alvarez smiled. “Not one. I realize how fortunate I am to head such an exceptional group—from the field team to our support staff—and with each addition, we get even better. Nice work out there, Craig. Great work, everyone.”

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The team murmured their thank-yous. The director nodded and glanced at his watch.

“Once everyone is cleared for hypothermia and dehydration, make sure you complete your training debriefs. And please be sure to attend the new staff onboarding orientation later today. Try to stay for the entire session if you can. Professor Bradwell’s team will be presenting, so you’re in for a very thorough refresher on our organization’s history, mission, and objectives.”

“Will do,” Gordon said.

“Sounds good. Have a nice day, everyone.” Alvarez smiled and exited the ward.

Still exhausted, the group fell silent again—until Grier chuckled. A second later, Pryce followed suit. A soft duet of laughter now percolated through the silence.

Wyatt’s eyelids were heavy, and he struggled to keep them open. “You were about to laugh the whole time Alvarez was in here, weren’t you?” he asked Grier.

With traces of a smile beginning to form, Peri glanced over at her.

Grier’s laughter continued. “You know I always laugh at inappropriate times,” she said, standing to refill her thermos with warm water. A lingering effect of hypothermia, her muscle coordination hadn’t returned, and she soon slid down the side of her bed. Craig jumped to her rescue—and soon he, too, lay flat on the recovery ward floor. A roar of laughter rumbled through the room as the medical staff helped Grier and Craig back into bed.

The recovery ward door opened, and the laughter broke off.

Dr. Anya Bello, head of the agency’s medical team, thundered into the ward and stopped at the base of the semicircle of beds. She made eye contact with every member of the team and then admonished the group:

“Drowsiness, lightheadedness, dizziness, confusion, loss of coordination, tiredness, weakness, uncontrollable shivering, and lowered heart rate are all symptoms that some or all of you are still experiencing. What part of ‘remain in bed until cleared’ did you not understand? I’m sure you won’t need to be told again.”

Dr. Bello stood for a moment to let her words sink in. She gave the team a final severe glance—accompanied by a reluctant smile.

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This group was tougher than any other Dr. Bello had met, and she admired their tenacity. She refilled Grier's thermos, made sure all others were topped off as well, rechecked everyone's vitals, distributed more blankets, handed out nutrition bars, and left the ward.

As the doors shut behind her, Dr. Bello could hear a muffled chuckle followed by a cacophony of laughter.

"Gosh, I'm beat," Wyatt said, moaning as the laughter gradually trailed off. The peaceful hum of the electronic equipment was the only sound now. The team had settled into the recovery routine.

Although he had stopped shivering, Hall was still suffering from drowsiness, confusion, and slight lightheadedness. His left calf was cramping, his nose was running, his eyes were burning, and his mouth was dry. Even so, he didn't question his sanity—or the mental soundness of his teammates—for subjecting themselves to literal torture. He knew why they were there.

Hall's musings were momentarily interrupted by Grier.

"Does anyone know if Evercrest is back from leave?" she asked. "The chief director had asked if someone from our team could cover a section of the onboarding presentation, and when I saw the agenda, I felt that someone from the Analysis, Insights, and Reporting (AIR) Division would be better positioned to connect the analytics to real-world applications."

Hall stared into the light above him, took a slow and deliberate breath, and replied, "I believe she gets back this afternoon."

* * *

From the window of a small private jet, Ainsley Evercrest stared out at the vast grass river of the Everglades. Four weeks of leave hadn't been enough. Although she looked forward to returning to her post with the Analysis, Insights, and Reporting team, she ached for home. The time to reunite with her family was nearing—but there was still so much to do before her assignment with the agency concluded.

Evercrest's mobile device rang, pulling her back to the present. Her mood brightened when she heard Grier's voice.

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“How was your leave?” Grier asked, her tone filled with its usual infectious joy. “I hate to bother you before you’re officially back onsite, but I wanted to fill you in on the final agenda for the onboarding session.”

“It’s no bother. It’s good to hear your voice. I’m all set for the orientation. Since Professor Bradwell wanted to include AIR topics in the onboarding curriculum, we already had the content ready.”

“Wonderful,” Grier responded.

“We’ll be airborne momentarily, but I won’t get in until a couple of hours before the session. If you need to review the content beforehand, just ask Deacon.”

“Will do. Happy travels.”

“Thanks. See you soon.”

At 41,000 feet, Evercrest watched the landscape shift—from lush green to rich teal, then dark blue, pale yellow, vibrant orange, and finally a dusty tan—as the jet descended into an isolated corridor of the Nevada desert.

In no time, she had deplaned and settled in front of the large solar window in her office. As she adjusted to the stark change in scenery—from the marshes and wetlands of South Florida to the desert sands and mountains of the Southwest—Evercrest ran through a mental checklist. She had always possessed a keen analytical mind, but where she once applied her skills to finding opportunities, her current role focused on identifying problems.

Seated at her desk, Evercrest typed a series of commands into her computer and waited for confirmation that the routine maintenance script was running. All preliminary diagnostics were green, but the full scan would take several more hours to complete.

When she checked the Personnel Positioning System, she saw that her AIR colleagues, Isaac Deacon and Professor Bradwell, were already in the auditorium—presumably preparing for the new staff onboarding session. Evercrest locked her computer screen and headed out to meet them.

* * *

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The main auditorium was located in the northernmost wing of a 1.2-million-square-foot facility that, from above, resembled a snowflake. The tan hue of its thick exterior walls, paired with a beige metal roof and reflective solar windows, made the immense building nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding desert. Camouflage was one goal of its design. Functional partitioning was another.

The outer perimeter formed a large ring divided into six sectors: one for the main entrance and five for the administrative offices of each division. The only entry point was a concrete corridor connecting the main atrium to the facility's core. Long glass walkways linked the division offices to the center of the circular structure.

Three security checkpoints stood between the atrium and the central hub, which housed staff residences, conference rooms, a library, recreation room, gym, and cafeteria. Beneath the main level lay a second world—top-security laboratories, computer systems, and research archives.

Beyond the primary building, the 2,500-acre campus included a small airfield, a launch platform, a vehicle depot, an equipment and supply warehouse, and a series of advanced training courses. Enclosing it all, a high-surveillance electrified fence, flanked by a trench and anti-climb wall, created a veritable fortress tucked away in a remote corner of the Nevada wilderness.