

THE FIXER

SEASON 5:

COMPLETE

A JC BANNISTER NOVEL

REX CARPENTER

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This includes:

The Fixer, Season 1: Prologue - Indonesia (unavailable anywhere else)

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Duke: The Education of an Assassin

WARNING: The Fixer is for mature audiences. It contains strong language and violence. If it was a movie, it would be rated R. If it was on TV, it would be on cable. If it was an album it'd have a Parental... you get the picture.

CHAPTER 1

SCOT FREE

Logan Schmidt ran. It was all he could do and all he'd been doing for the past three months or so. Despite the rush hour traffic in downtown Birmingham, he bolted across the street, hoping it might delay the people chasing him. In his heart of hearts, he knew it wouldn't, but at this point, he was past grasping for straws. He was simply grasping to hold onto his life for a few minutes.

Shots rang out behind him, the bullets pounding into the concrete of the parking structure he was running past. He skidded to a stop, the bullets narrowly missing him. His tennis shoes slipped on the dusty concrete, loose gravel scratching the palms of his hands as he caught himself.

Logan took off like a sprinter, finding purchase after a couple of quick jerks brought his feet under himself and headed into the parking structure. He wasn't familiar with Birmingham. It was the very reason he'd chosen it — there was absolutely no connection between him and the city. But still they'd found him. He pounded down the stairs. The entire area was filled with high-rises. As he'd run past, he remembered skyways linking the parking structure to the surrounding structures of metal, concrete and steel. His plan was simple. Head downstairs, grab an elevator up, then escape through one of the skyways or, better yet, steal a passing car.

Ever since The General dressed him down in front of Secretary Grey and then the two men had ignored him, he'd been turned out in the cold. Nobody in Grey's loose organization returned his phone calls. The one or two acquaintances he'd made in The General's group of hired mercenaries, the Veracious Group, stopped talking to him. Actually pretended they'd never heard of him.

He thought he heard footsteps behind himself. He stopped. Listened intently. Heard nothing, then continued down.

Logan Schmidt had killed the most wanted woman in the world. Law enforcement officers and intelligence officials should be buying him drinks in every bar from DC to Marrakesh. Instead, he was an outcast. A pariah. The General didn't think Joan was dead, and after the past few months, Logan began to wonder as well.

But in the end, it didn't matter.

Dead or alive or kept in a coma somewhere in a vegetative state, Joan's life or death ultimately hadn't made enough of a difference. Logan's bigger mistake had been not killing JC Bannister as well.

He'd heard the man on the phone when he was in that final meeting with The General and Secretary of State Russell Grey. Heard his anger at the loss. Knew that if the man was going to be coming for Secretary Grey for sanctioning and bankrolling the hit on Joan then sooner or later he'd be coming for the triggerman as well. And likely sooner.

Logan hit the landing on the fourth basement level of the structure, smashed his foot against the panic bar that opened the fire door and tore into the parking structure. The elevators at the far end of the structure were what he was looking for. The buildings on that end of the structure were bigger, more potential to lose his pursuers.

They'd shut down his bank accounts, cut off his utility bills, managed to cancel his mortgage and his car loan. Logan, like most others in this game, had a stash here and there, but it wasn't enough and it wasn't very long before he was trying to hire himself out to various criminal organizations to make some extra dough. Each one had rejected him, even the biker gang his cousin was a member of. It was like there was a flashing neon sign above his head that read "Dead Man".

Logan reached the elevator and started pounding on the "up" button. The red digital readout began counting down from the first floor. It was too slow. He pulled his pistol from his waistband. Knew it wasn't enough, but it was better than standing there with his dick in his hand.

"How could they find me?" he asked himself yet again. It didn't matter. If he could make it out of here tonight and get back to his dirty weekly motel room, he was packing up and heading south of the border. Find work in Guatemala or Uruguay or pretty much any tiny country where people might pay him for his skills. Just get away from the madmen chasing him.

The elevator doors opened and two things happened almost simultaneously. The first was he saw the face of the woman he had shot in the head three months ago in Lisbon, Portugal, and she was pissed. The second was her fist rocketed out from between the opening elevator doors and connected hard with his jaw, snapping his head back in a powerful uppercut that felt like being hit by a sledgehammer.

"How could..." he thought as he blacked out for a split second, falling backwards, dropping his gun, all his plans for escape disappearing into the dusty parking garage.

He came to, Joan standing over him. He saw a two-finger brass knuckle on the index and middle finger of her right hand. It was black and looked to be made of carbon fiber. People were still filing out of the elevator. Logan knew who most of them were from the intel provided by Secretary Grey, watching them as his hands searched around him for his missing gun. The really tall guy was Duke, the short fat guy was Theo. There was short slim guy he didn't recognize who looked Hispanic. *Must be new*, Logan said to himself. And then the last one out of the elevator, the one man who made the blood run cold in his veins.

"Bannister," he said to the man, slowly scooting away from the team, the rough concrete tugging at his jeans as he did. Bannister had no weapons in his hands but the other three held various firearms: Duke a pair of Berettas, the Hispanic guy had an AR-15 variant with a long, fluted sniper barrel. The fat one, Theo, had a pair of wicked looking knives.

"You like these?" the man said, a fleshy grin splitting his face in half like a chubby, demented clown, rotating the knives with an uncomfortable ease.

The short slim man chuckled, shouldered his rifle and said something in Spanish, causing Theo and Duke to chuckle as well.

"It doesn't matter now," Bannister said.

Logan ignored what they may have been saying. Right now was the most important time in his entire life. He had a little bit of leverage and if he were able to play it right, he might actually walk out of here alive.

"Listen, JC," he said, raising one hand in front of himself.

Joan leaned forward at the waist and punched him in the mouth, the carbon fiber knuckle breaking three of his front teeth. Blood spilled down his lip and chin. He turned and spat out the blood and bits of teeth, the pain making his head swim. It didn't matter. What mattered was

convincing Bannister not to kill him.

And there was only one way to do that.

“You kill me now, you five are dead men walking.”

Duke shook his head as Theo laughed.

“Secretary Grey-” Logan tried to continue before JC cut him off.

“Is a dead man,” JC said. “We know all about him, all about his plans and his working with The General.” Paused. “Anything else?”

“You’re wrong,” Logan spat, blood flying from his mouth with his words. “They hate each other. They’re using each other but they’re like lions circling, waiting for an opening to attack.”

Theo snorted. “They’re turds,” he said, “circling the bowl on their way down the sewer.”

Logan started to shake his head in disappointment but stopped because of the pain from Joan’s two punches. “Arrogant, misinformed, homicidal. Exactly what they said you were.”

“You shot me in the head,” Joan growled down at him. “Did you think I’d let you walk away from that?”

“I figured you’d be dead,” Logan spat back.

“Did you think *I* would let that pass?” JC said quietly, scaring the piss out of Logan. “Or my team?”

“Don’t worry,” Joan said to Logan, her face still full of fury, “you get to hell, there’ll be plenty of misinformed souls you can commiserate with. Lots of people thought they could go up against us and found out they were wrong, too.”

“Buncha losers,” Duke said, his voice changing, whiney, “sittin’ around in hell. ‘Oh, yeah, I used to be a shooter. Tried taking out JC and Joan. It’s a tough racket.” Raised an imaginary drink. His face hardened. “You’ll find lots of company there.”

Logan laughed, hard. Not because Duke’s joke was funny but because they were so screwed. “The worst part? You wanna go after Grey and The General? You don’t even know where to begin.”

“Killing you’s a good start,” Theo said slowly, his grin spreading even more.

“They cut me off months ago,” Logan said, attempting to put some daylight between he and the men who sanctioned the hit on Joan. “Threw me out in the cold.”

“Some loyalty,” the Hispanic man said with a sniff.

“Don’t you see, it doesn’t matter,” Logan said, seeing a potential opening. “They’ve got dozens of guys clamoring to take my spot. Law of the jungle. Which is why you’ll never catch them.” Paused. “But I know how.”

“You’re going to trade your information for your life?” Bannister stepped forward, standing right behind Joan, looking over her shoulder down at Logan. “Lay us out a pathway while we keep you alive.” Paused. “You really think we’d trust a damn word you say?”

“You need to locate Rudd,” Logan said, “get him to talk.” He noticed the change in Bannister’s posture, the stiffening of his back. Knew he was right. “I know exactly where he is,” he continued, then started to laugh. He knew his bloody lips and broken teeth would make him look like a madman, but he didn’t care.

His time was up. And he had them all exactly where he wanted them.

Duke, Theo and Cespedes exchanged glances. Rudd’s location was exactly what they needed, but something was off about Logan. And it wasn’t the busted mouth and manic laughter.

“I think all this talking has made you complacent,” Logan said, reaching under his shirt. “You haven’t even bothered to search me for weapons.” He laughed as Joan backed up. “Or explosives.”

Joan, the closest to Logan, was running first, pushing Bannister out of the way as Theo and Cespedes backpedaled into the elevator. Duke dove away to the right just as Logan hit the plunger for the claymore mine he strapped to his chest every morning for the past three weeks. The shaped charge was directed outwards towards the team and when it exploded, 700 ball bearings exploded towards them.

The concussion and sound of the blast was all that hit them. Logan’s chest was pointed more up into the air than directly at them, so the majority of the shrapnel shredded the ceiling and walls above them. Theo and Cespedes were safe on either sides of the elevator’s interior, Joan and JC were ducked down around the corner of the elevator shaft’s exterior, hunched next to a Volkswagen SUV which lost its windows and a portion of its roof. Duke was equally safe on the other side, rolling prone beneath an old Chevy van.

Logan wasn’t as lucky. Whether he expected to die or not, the blowback from the claymore shredded most of his chest. His spine, the rear section of his ribcage and the musculature of his back was all that kept the two nearly separated pieces of his upper and lower body together. The wound was blackened and mostly cauterized, although his carcass was still leaking fluids.

JC stood, walking back over to the man, looking down at yet another person who almost killed him. These days it felt like every successive attempt was getting a little closer each time.

“Mierde,” Cespedes said from behind him. “That dude was crazy,” he followed up in English. The more he hung around Duke and Theo, the more his English mirrored theirs.

“Did you get everything, Theo?” JC asked without looking at the man.

“Yeah, boss. All except the grand finale.” Theo was wearing a hidden body cam to secretly record whatever intel Logan might have given to them.

“Edit it down,” JC said. “Make a quick highlight reel.”

“You got it boss,” Theo said. Although they had no need of it, somebody down the chain might.

JC turned away from Logan’s corpse. Looking at his team. Joan was still angry, but he could tell by the ease in her shoulders the weight she carried since Logan shot her in the head three months ago had lifted. Duke was bleeding from a cut on his shoulder. JC nodded to it, Duke shook his head in response and the matter was set aside. His time in the CIA had mellowed him somewhat. He was still the wise-cracking Duke, always would be. But there was a gravity in his movements and decisions that wasn’t there before.

“What’s next, boss?” Theo asked. JC turned to him. Theo’s smile was easy but there was a darkness behind it. JC kept tabs on the man, on the team or not, and he knew the reason for the heaviness. The man’s attempts to turn his father’s business away from crime and towards legitimacy had fallen flat. Agreements between Theo and various governmental agencies had gone sour and the man hadn’t taken it too well.

“Well, Theo,” JC said, glancing at Cespedes as the newest member of his team smiled and leaned on Theo’s shoulder as if the man was simply part of the landscape. “That’s going to depend on Duke.” JC turned to his old friend. *CIA agent moonlighting as a mercenary? Or a mercenary moonlighting as a CIA agent?* It was a question JC didn’t have a good answer for.

“Can you stay out past your curfew,” JC said with a smile.

Duke smiled and nodded. "Sure, but if you want me to sleep over, I might need to make a phone call or two."

Joan groaned as the men chuckled. She swept a lock of her short hair behind her ear, but it wasn't long enough yet to stay put so it fell back to where it was before. "You hear that?" she said, nodding at the four floors above them. "You guys might want to explain everything to whoever's behind those sirens, but I sure as hell don't." Started walking for the stairwell on the adjacent wall of the parking structure as the elevator was likely unsafe from the blast.

Theo, Cespedes and Duke followed her, JC bringing up the rear. Logan wasn't wrong, he said to himself as he glanced over his shoulder to make sure nothing was left behind other than the man's corpse. We gotta find Rudd. And we've got precious few leads. Looked back at his team in front of him. Talking to Logan would have been useful. We'll just need to find a different way.

His mind jumped forward to all the different avenues they might be able to pursue in order to track down Rudd. The former Army corporal murdered Stella Daniels, a US embassy staffer in London, and Ambassador Larry Patterson, on the orders of Secretary of State Russell Grey and General Marvin O. Robinson, retired. The two men ordered the killing to secure The General's team of soldiers-for-hire as the protectors of embassy staff worldwide.

The plan had worked, mostly, but the repercussions from that action were still being felt.

Chief among them was Stella Daniel's father bankrolling JC and his team in order to take down Secretary Grey and The General.

JC followed the team through the fire door and into the stairwell. It smelled vaguely of urine but that was a relief from the smell of C4 and burnt flesh that filled his nose. His mind churned through the plan he had in place to take down Secretary Grey without being hunted for murdering one of the highest profile US officials and the nation's chief diplomat.

As they jogged up the stairwell, JC knew his plan's success was going to be a close call no matter how it went down. But he had no options. Grey was the first step. Then The General. Then, perhaps, freedom.

He shoved the idea down. Entertaining it would bring nothing but misery and missteps until the time was right. And as he walked out of the ground floor emergency exit of the parking structure into the Birmingham heat and sunlight, the sounds of sirens just around the corner, and jumped into the waiting SUV, he knew now was not time to think of freedom.

Now it was time to execute his plan to assassinate the Secretary of State of the United States.

And get away scot free.

JC smiled as Duke pulled the black Expedition from the curb, stopped to allow the police cars and fire trucks to pass, then continue on towards the airport. Joan, sitting next to JC, took his hand without the slightest trace of self-consciousness.

CHAPTER 2

THAT'S TOO BAD

Senator Chris Holstrom drove from his office in the Federal Building in downtown Raleigh, North Carolina, to his home on the eastern edge of Durham, North Carolina. It was about a thirty minute drive, forty-five in rush hour traffic, but Holstrom was pushing his three-year old American-built sedan as far as he thought he could risk it without losing control of the vehicle. He didn't care about speeding tickets at this point. He'd take a ding for going a hundred and twenty in a sixty-five, but his mind was focused on getting home as fast as humanly possible, not what might happen to his driver's license. Or his career.

His wife called him just after two-thirty that afternoon, asking when he was going to be home and why didn't he tell her he had friends coming over. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on their very short ends and told him she was in danger.

"Who's there?" he asked her, trying to keep his voice as calm as possible while his stomach threatened to throw up the cheap burrito he wolfed down at his desk for lunch. As a former federal prosecutor for the Eastern District of North Carolina and one of the most visible and high-profile senators currently in office, he had more than a few enemies.

"Nobody told me their names," she said, quieter, as if she was speaking into the phone, trying to keep those around her from hearing. "But there's five men and two women. Some of them look a little familiar, but I don-" She stopped as a voice behind her said something. "Of course, dear," his wife said away from the receiver as Holstrom gripped the phone hard in his hand, already standing, grabbing his cellphone and car keys from the desk. "The big bowl is right there under the sink. So, honey," she continued, back to Holstrom, "when should we expect you?"

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Eighteen minutes later and his tires were squealing as he rounded the last curve to his house. He'd tried calling his assistant, Dustin Mitchell, to find out where the hell he was but his voice-dialed calls kept going to Dustin's overlong answering service. Holstrom slammed on the brakes, the auto-lock mechanism keeping his car from being thrown into a slide. On the sleepy street his house stood there were three black SUVs, one silver Dodge Challenger and the red sub-compact Mitchell drove.

His heart hammered even faster. His oldest daughter, a junior at Duke University but still living at home to save money, didn't seem to be here as he couldn't see her Mini Cooper. It was a relief, but he still had to face who was inside, lying in wait for him to return home.

Holstrom had an idea who it was. Still, as he headed for the front door of his house, he checked his right front pocket to make sure the snub-nosed pistol he kept hidden was still there. He knew it was, but the feel of the checkered wooden handles and the stainless steel backstrap comforted him slightly. He took the three stairs from the paving stone walkway to the front porch in one leap, the faint scent of barbecue wafting to his nostrils.

He ignored it, opened the screen door with a bang, heading through the house to the backyard, his hand still in his pocket. Although he was pretty sure who was visiting unannounced, he wasn't going to let up until he saw the faces of the men and woman he expected to see.

Wait, she said two women? he said to himself as he opened the door to his backyard.

He breathed an almighty sigh of relief.

“Chris!” JC Bannister said above the low sounds of the people gathered in his backyard. “Glad you could make it to your own party.” The man raised a Mason jar full of iced tea in Holstrom’s direction as the others assembled did the same, their salutations blending together.

Holstrom looked at each one in turn. His assistant Mitchell, Duke, Theo and Joan he recognized instantly, as well as Mr. Douglas, the CIA agent who recruited Duke and was currently third in command in the Agency, although only a handful of people actually knew that. He saw a shorter, slim Hispanic man he couldn’t place and then his eyes came to rest on Vedika Singh, Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. She smiled, walking over to Duke, taking his hand and leaning against his arm.

That rumor’s confirmed he said to himself as he took his hand from his pocket to encircle his wife in a hug as she walked up to him, planting a kiss on his cheek. He’d need to do some explaining to her later, but the chances of these people coming to hurt him were extraordinarily slim. Not zero, he reminded himself as he let his wife go and walked over to JC Bannister, but extraordinarily slim.

What was topmost in his mind right now was the reason that brought them all together, secretly, in his backyard on an overcast Thursday afternoon in Durham, North Carolina.

“Bannister,” he said as the man shook his hand and handed him a Mason jar filled with ice but no liquid.

“Senator,” Bannister said with a nod. “Ice tea’s over there along with the lemonade,” he said, pointing to a laden picnic table just past the patio. “And if you’re looking for something a little harder,” he whispered not very quietly, “Theo’s the man to speak to.”

Holstrom nodded and laughed, switching back into politician mode, his personal concerns tabled. The reasons for their appearance would come out in time, likely after the barbecue Mr. Douglas was currently preparing was cooked and consumed.

“One more thing,” Bannister said before he moved away. “Kindly put your cellphone in that black bag at the end of the picnic table.”

Holstrom glanced at Bannister. The man was still smiling but his eyes told a different story.

Holstrom slapped him on the shoulder, lit his own face up with a big ol’ country grin, said “You bet,” and walked over to the picnic table, his phone already in his hand. He had no illusions. If he didn’t do it, he would be relieved of the phone by force if necessary. Whatever was going to be said tonight needed to be off the record and a black bag that likely blocked all electronic frequencies would do the trick. Probably where Mitchell’s phone is, he said to himself as he dropped his phone in the bag and moved over to shake Vedika’s and Duke’s hands.

He was a politician and he’d work the room, or the backyard as the case may be. The people assembled here may be, for the most part, killers and spies, but they were still people. And every one of them had helped the United States more than once in the past few years. He imagined they’d have more than a few stories to tell, so why not get them to talking?

Six hours later and everyone in Senator Holstrom’s backyard was full of good barbecue, good beer and ready for the quiet the night brought with it.

Holstrom spent some time talking with Cespedes, the Hispanic man unknown to him at first, and found him to be pleasant but not particularly talkative. He noticed the man would

periodically disappear into the house for twenty minutes at a time. Holstrom thought it was just a loose bladder until he caught a glimpse of the man standing in the window of Holstrom's bedroom, surveilling the houses around them with a rifle, a high-powered scope mounted on top of it. Cespedes looked down at the senator as he dropped the rifle from his shoulder, nodded once, and disappeared for another ten minutes, likely scoping out the front of the house.

The senator spent most of the time trying to manage his wife and assistant from either asking too much or hearing too much from JC and his team.

And on the whole it worked. JC seemed to be quite respectful of the fact that they had invaded the senator's backyard and had come awfully close to the legal definition of holding him, his wife and his assistant Mitchell against their will. His daughter had called the house earlier and said she was staying late with a study group, which was a huge relief to Holstrom. His daughter was pre-law and likely would have asked too many questions anyway. She might be a politician one day, but for now she was fully in the lawyer end of her particular gene pool and prone to questioning more than listening.

"Honey, you mind if Mitchell helps you clean things up while I sit here with my friends?" Holstrom asked his wife.

She smiled, stood, took a swig from Holstrom's beer and said, "Come on, Duncan," she said, planting a quick kiss on her husband's cheek then tapping his aide on the shoulder as she walked past him towards the house. "You're on kitchen duty tonight."

Holstrom's aide followed his wife into the house with Duke quickly following behind. Holstrom wanted to ask him why but knew the man was as trustworthy as any in the backyard. It still put him slightly on edge.

Duke came back a few minutes later, a small duffle bag in his right hand. "For the mosquitos," he said, as he unzipped it and withdrew some sort of electronic contraption. He unfolded the legs of the tripod it was attached to, set it in the middle of the picnic table they were seated roughly around, and turned it on.

Holstrom guessed it had more to do with blocking potential listening devices instead of the actual insects that may be flying around, but he said nothing. Waited until Duke gave JC a thumbs up. Then he sat forward.

"Bannister," he said, voice calm and with a smile on his face, "I've been about as accommodating as I think can be expected in this situation. I hope to hell you've got a good goddamned explanation for coming here like this."

JC leaned forward on his knees, the Mason jar of ice tea he'd been working on all evening on its fourth refill.

"I do appreciate your hospitality, Chris," Bannister said, "believe me, I do. Once upon a time you told me that if we were to sit down over some barbecue we'd probably find some common ground."

Holstrom nodded, remembering. "If I recollect, the idea was a few drinks, not barbecue, but you got the gist right." Looked around as the other people in the backyard gathered the rough circle they were sitting in closer around Holstrom. "I do thank you for the lovely food and company. However, I think it's high time to get said what you came to say."

As he looked around the faces of those assembled, he saw each of them grow a little somber, each one turning to look at Bannister, even Mr. Douglas. As everyone else felt JC was the man calling the shots, Holstrom turned back to him as well.

“Secretary Grey,” Bannister said. “It’s time to bring him down.”

Holstrom leaned back, sipping the half-empty beer in his hand. “Best of luck,” he said. “The Secretary’s done an excellent job of making political hay with the mess you folks left behind in North Korea.”

The words came out harsher and more accusatory than he intended. He knew they lost a teammate and friend there. He also knew how much JC pushed to have Owen Porterfield’s star engraved on the CIA’s Memorial Wall, Mr. Douglas overseeing the actual ceremony himself. Holstrom saw JC’s jaw flex more than a little, telling him he’d already stepped in it, despite his politician’s instincts. Time to smooth it out.

“Listen, guys,” he said to the group as a whole. “I’m sorry, that was a little uncalled for. I know you lost people there.” Raised his beer. “One too many of these, I’m afraid.” Set it down on the ground, leaning forward on his knees. “What I meant to say was Grey’s done a damn fine job of bringing North Korea to the bargaining table. He’s taken them farther along the road to peace than anyone else has in decades.” He stood, going to get a glass of iced tea in order to give them a little time to get past his indelicate words and to maybe sober himself up a little with the tea’s caffeine, although coffee would be better.

“I understand,” JC said to him, waiting until Holstrom was sitting back in his chair before continuing, the night able to carry their voices far too easily. “However, if we wait any longer, he might end up being even more untouchable than he is now.”

“Nobody’s untouchable,” Cespedes said absently, forcing a chill along Holstrom’s spine as Joan nodded.

“Let me be clear,” Holstrom said, “to everyone here.” Paused to sip his tea and wet his suddenly dry mouth. “You cannot, in any way, think you’ll be able to assassinate the Secretary of State for these United States without being hunted to the ends of the earth.”

“That’s not what this is about, Chris,” Mr. Douglas said softly. “You know me better than that.”

“Then lay it out,” Holstrom said to Bannister, still knowing he was the one leading this band.

JC sat back. Sipped his iced tea. The crickets were loud, the sound of the logs crackling in the fire pit not far away doing little to keep them at bay. A few more months and the cicadas would be joining in, raising a din that would make a polite conversation like this impossible. But tonight, it was.

Bannister set his Mason jar in the grass at his feet, leaning sideways over the weathered Adirondack chair. Glanced at Joan who nodded once, then turned to Holstrom, scooting forward to the edge of the comfortable chair, leaning forward on his knees to match the senator’s posture.

“We’re here to discuss with you the steps we need to take in order to get Secretary Grey removed from office.” Paused, letting the treasonous implications sink in. “So that *then* we can execute him.”

CHAPTER 3

GET IT DONE, JOHNNY

Secretary of State Russell Grey was a man in a hurry. He had precisely seventeen minutes for the meeting he was currently waiting on to start. At 9:43 exactly he needed to be standing up and walking away from the luxurious leather chairs in the Turkish Ambassador's residence and heading for the door to be whisked up the street to meet with the President of Indonesia on an entirely unrelated but equally important matter.

But he didn't check his watch. Knew that Daryl Smith would be checking his own watch and alerting Grey at 9:39, giving him enough time to wrap things up and make his goodbyes with Deputy Ambassador and Ambassador. If one were to look at him, he looked like a man with all the time in the world.

It was a practiced nonchalance that he was more than a little proud of.

He looked at his fingernails. If I had only been an actor, he said to himself before looking back in the eyes of Ambassador Tchelebi. Ahh, but then you wouldn't have the entire world eating out of the palm of your hand like this bastard here.

Grey smiled. He just doesn't know that's what he's doing yet.

"Is there something about this that amuses you, Grey?" Deputy Ambassador Hazenidar said, his tone harsher than a more experienced statesman would dare use.

Grey kept his eyes on Ambassador Tchelebi for a full second, letting the faux surprise at being spoken to in such an impolite manner register in his eyes, just enough for Tchelebi to see it before smoothing it over. He turned to Hazenidar then back to Tchelebi.

Smiled the smoothest grin in all of Washington DC.

"I'm just thinking how pleased your president is going to be when you bring our proposal back to him," Grey said.

"I regret to say this," Tchelebi said, far more urbane than his Deputy Ambassador, "however I can tell you right now that our president will never accept your proposal. In fact, I'll likely be executed were I to bring it before him."

Grey shook his head. "Things are changing, my friend. The old world of compromises by the US is over for the time being. You need to get with the new program before the new program steamrolls you and your president into the ashbin of history."

Hazenidar moved forward, the lid coming off his anger. "How dare you, Secretary of State Grey. You drop bombs on Syria, you let that madman Kim off with a slap on his hands, you pull out of ironclad agreements with Iran and expect us to believe you'll honor anything you put before us?"

Tchelebi nearly lost his own temper at his underling's lack of judgement. But Grey only smiled. It was the smile of a wolf, looking at a young lamb bleating in fear before him. He could almost feel the young sheep's blood running down his throat after he sunk his fangs into its neck as he was about to do with Hazenidar. Metaphorically, of course, he said to himself.

"Allow me to be very clear," Grey said, sitting back in his green velvet chair as if it were the most luxurious throne in the world. "Syria was bombed because they did not heed my

president's warnings. Kim is given the royal treatment not because he has nuclear weapons but because in the face of total annihilation he has shown himself to be far more reasonable than previously expected." Paused. "And we pulled the rug out from under the Iranian mullah's feet not because they began violating the spirit and letter of the horribly one-sided agreements before the ink was even dry but because instead of blinking when they should have, they decided to bark at us instead, like a couple of street dogs foolishly standing against an entire pack of wolves."

Ambassador Tchelebi said something in Turkish to his Deputy Ambassador. The elder statesman was livid. He kept his diplomatic mask in place but the sudden redness on the back of his neck belied his true heart.

Grey didn't know what he said and it wasn't important. He turned to the older man, smiling as he did, not caring how much he looked like a wolf.

"Ambassador Tchelebi, you will inform President Erdogan that we look for his support in this matter. If he does not back our plays with NATO and on the UN Security Council, not to mention the EU, he will quickly find not only our military forces unleashed against the Iranian forces he's secretly hiding and training in your country, he'll also find Israel suddenly interested in who knew what in regards to the Iranian nuclear program." He smiled. "And we all know how vigorously Israel pursues those she feels has harmed her."

Ambassador Tchelebi nodded, trying to keep his composure but obviously shook beyond what he expected to be in this meeting.

"Kick out all Iranian forces from your country, Ambassador," Grey said, his smile gone. No more velvet glove. Now was time for the iron fist of American power. "By this time next week if we suspect any Iranian forces remain inside your country we'll fire missiles at every single base we believe to be housing them. Right or wrong, we'll kick your military back to the seventh century with a push of a few buttons. You'll be going into battle for the next decade on horseback with muzzleloaders."

"I can assure you, Secretary Grey, there are no--"

"Get it done, Johnny," Grey said, using the man's nickname from college when they first met, "or Erdogan's going to end up like Gaddafi or Ambassador Stevens or Ceausescu."

"By this time next week, Russ," Ambassador Tchelebi said, "you'll find no greater ally in the Middle East than the President of Turkey."

Grey smiled, rising to his feet. Glanced over Tchelebi shoulder as he also rose to see Smith standing by the door, holding up two fingers.

Two minutes, he said to himself as he clasped the sweaty hand of the Ambassador of Turkey. Mission accomplished.

Secretary of State Russell Grey, the top diplomat in the entire United States of America, eased back in the black leather seat of his Lincoln Continental. His driver, Eddie Sanchez, waited until Daryl Smith went around the other side, hopped in and slammed the door before taking off to their next destination.

"9:44," Daryl said, glancing at his watch. "Eddie, we're a minute behind."

"Not for long," the man said. He was former military, not one of The General's group but someone Daryl found on his own, and was precise with his driving. "We'll make up the time before we get there."

“Excellent,” Daryl said. Opened the cover for his iPad, powering up the secure device, letting it scan his fingerprint and then going to Secretary Grey’s schedule. “Ten o’clock and we’ll be pulling up outside Rizzo’s to meet Ambassadors Chen and Patrick inside for drinks.”

Grey nodded but was already tuning the young man out. Smith was rehashing details already discussed and filed in Grey’s memory. It was useless for Grey but important for his younger aide, so he allowed him to do it.

Johnny’s right, he said to himself, we are going light on Kim despite his mix of saber-rattling and peaceful moves. The man’s too much of a despot to actually sit at the table with other civilized nations. Looked out the window, the glow from Smith’s iPad reflecting in the heavily tinted glass. Still, North Korea pulled me back from the brink.

The turmoil JC Bannister and his team roiled up inside of North Korea and allowed to spill out into China and the world in general was tamped down with the expert abilities of Secretary Grey. His staff helped, but it was his initiatives and ideas that smoothed the way to more progress than had been accomplished since the ceasing of hostilities in 1950.

I might actually get a Nobel Peace Prize he said silently to his reflection in the window. It’ll look good on the mantel of my Swiss chalet. Smiled for real. After, of course, my presidency has run its course.

The American populace will generally go with the lesser of the two evils, even if that choice is drab, uninteresting and still evil. But occasionally the populace will back an underdog, a mover and shaker who will turn things around, at least in the concept of the great unwashed masses.

Secretary of State Russell Grey was angling to be that mover and shaker. His sexual dalliances were, by and large, no worse than any of the presidents going back to Kennedy and before. His financial dealings were also no greater or worse than any of the political dynasties or presidents that either occupied the White House or came close to it.

“There’s no greater sin than losing,” he said absently, momentarily surprised at the sound of his own voice. He wasn’t aware he was speaking out loud until one of his most dearly held maxims was leaving his lips.

“What’s that, sir?” Smith said, stopping what he was saying.

“Nothing,” he said. Smith knew many things, including where the bodies were buried and the numbers of most his secret bank accounts across the Caribbean and Europe. But he didn’t need to know everything.

The young man nodded, glanced at the iPad again as the driver said, “We’re here,” slowing and pulling up to the curb outside the residence of the Ambassador of Indonesia.

As the car stopped, Grey let Smith leave first, holding the door for the elder statesman as he exited, not bothering to thank the young black man for doing his job, then walked towards the wrought-iron gate guarding the house. Breathed in the night air, the freshness of it invigorating him, crystallizing in his mind the approach he needed to take with the Ambassador of Indonesia in telling him his country would either get on board and stamp out the Muslim extremists in their borders and government posts or find themselves on the outs with not only the United States, but also the trading bloc of Japan, South Korea, China and very possibly North Korea in the very near future.

I will be president he whispered under his breath as he waited for the armed security guard to unlock the gate and grant him entrance. And as he said it, the doubting voice in his mind was

silent because it, too, knew the chances of that actually happening were now quite good. Step one, the doubting voice said, is to be vice-president.

Step two, the ambitious voice said, is to make sure the sonofabitch in the top spot doesn't make it past the second year.

As the gate opened, Grey smiled.

CHAPTER 4

VEDIKA, IS IT?

The night was getting later and later. It was just past ten and the crickets had quieted down, but now the frogs were picking up the slack. The sounds from the neighborhood and nearby interstate had diminished and the air held a hint of rain, but the fire kept the darkness at bay. For now.

“Listen,” Holstrom said, “this is merely hypothetical. We’re only speaking in terms of what may or may not happen.” Paused. “Could be’s, not will’s.”

Bannister nodded. Holstrom had been dancing around the reality of the situation all night. Everyone had allowed him to do so. There was no danger in the conversation being overheard — Duke’s device disrupted all potential recording devices for two hundred yards. But as Bannister listened to Holstrom continue to couch his end of the discussion in ass-covering deniability, JC realized that sooner or later, the man would need to come to grips with exactly how deep the pool he was wading into actually was.

“Nobody’s here to nail you to the wall,” Duke said to Holstrom. JC sensed he was about fed up with the senator’s kid glove treatment of the topic. “We’re just talking, so you don’t need to worry about it.”

Holstrom nodded. “You need to understand, someone like Grey isn’t going to be easy to remove from office.”

“Really?” Theo said. “Did he suddenly stop being a lecherous pederast? Did he give away all his dirty money and ill-gotten gains?” Paused. “Then it should be no problem.”

Nobody laughed at the comment and JC wasn’t so sure it was meant to be humorous.

“Tell me again what happened in Cheyenne?” Holstrom said to Theo.

Theo smiled, not unkindly. “What do you mean?”

“Last I heard you were under the protection of Federal Marshals in Cheyenne, Wyoming.” Glanced over both shoulders. “I don’t see any here.”

“I was. We had a disagreement.”

“About?”

Theo shrugged, picking up the remains of a bowl of baked beans. “They wanted to order in some fried chicken. I wanted to go out for pizza.” Shrugged. “So I went out for pizza.”

“Listen,” JC said, stepping in before the conversation went too far off track. “The best move for us is to get Rudd to testify to his involvement with Stella Daniels, maybe Deputy Ambassador Larry Patterson’s murder, and how Secretary Grey ties in to all this.”

“And then what?”

“And then Grey goes down for what he’s done,” Joan said.

“It’s not what you can prove,” Holstrom said, “it’s what the defense can’t explain away.”

JC said nothing. His mind was trying to figure out what the difference actually was between what he just said and what Holstrom said.

“He’s right,” Mr. Douglas said. “You put Rudd on the stand, Grey will point the finger at

Khaled or The General or Rudd himself. Too many layers between himself and the Secretary. It'll never stick."

"By itself," Vedika said slowly through the grumbles of Bannister's team. "It'll never stick by itself. You need proof."

"Which we don't have," Theo said.

"Have you looked?" Vedika pressed.

"For what?" Bannister asked, not knowing where she was going with her questioning, but curious.

"Every financial decision and action leaves a clue," Vedika said. "That's what you've discovered the past few months," she said, pointing at JC, "and what your banker Phillips seemed to have forgotten a decade or so ago."

"Listen," Joan snapped. "Vedika, is it?"

Vedika raised her hands. "I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. Phillips is brilliant and if there is anyone who could guide you through what seems to be your current mess, it's him." Paused. "But if you're want to take down Grey, it sounds like you need to Elliot Ness him."

Nobody said anything, waiting for her to continue.

Theo leaned over to Joan and said under his breath, "Elliot Ness, took down Al Capo--"

"I swear to God, Petrosian," she growled, "I'll cut your nuts off and throw them in the fire."

Duke, JC, Cespedes and Mr. Douglas chuckled as Vedika looked between them. Theo smiled.

"Can I dip 'em in some barbecue sauce first?"

As Joan's hand snaked to the back of her right hip, Duke, JC, Cespedes and Mr. Douglas's smiles disappeared, hands raised, moving forwards with calls for their teammate to calm down. They were all too slow for Theo. He grabbed Joan in a bear hug, pinning her arms in place, his face inches from hers.

"God, I've missed you guys," he said, an easy grin on his wide face.

Joan started to laugh, a chuckle first, rising into full-fledged peals of glorious laughter as her old friend held her in a bear hug, joining her in the laughter.

"Alright, fat man," she said as her laughter subsided. "Seriously, let me go. You're getting sauce all over my jacket."

Theo let her go as the rest of their team sat down, glad for the dissipating tension. As Theo picked up a wet nap to clean his hands, Joan stood then leaned down to give the man a quick peck on his cheek, like a mother kissing a child.

"Glad you're back, Theo," she said before going to the picnic table for a glass of lemonade.

"So," JC said to Vedika, noting her look of disbelief and slight panic fade. "Can you actually do that? Track down Grey's financial dealings? Stitch them together to paint a bad enough picture of the Secretary?"

Vedika was nodding. "We can. If the financial misdealing's are there, we can find them."

"Say you do that," Mr. Douglas said. "What's the next step?"

Vedika shrugged. "You'll need a face."

"Meaning?"

"It's all a bunch of documents," Vedika said. "It's not sexy and it's not easy for juries to

understand. You'll need a face, a person who can convincingly lay out the story the documents support." Shrugged again. "Get that, get someone good enough, and the jury will be eating out of their hand."

Holstrom nodded. "You're not really taking this to a jury, but it will help to have someone who can thread everything together." Paused. "You're also going up against the clock."

Vedika nodded, joining back in. "Once we start digging into this, there's going to be a limited window of time until Grey shuts everything down."

"He doesn't have the authority," Duke said.

"Not in any official capacity, no," Vedika said. "But he can close out accounts, juggle things around, keep moving the ball as we're about ready to kick it."

The team grew quiet. The embers of the fire pit drew the eyes of everyone except Cespedes and JC. JC was watching Holstrom. He was the key to getting Grey out in the open and able to safely paint a target on his back. Cespedes was watching the night beyond, his head on a swivel.

"You need to get Rudd, too," Holstrom said.

JC knew they did. Not just to bring down Grey, but for the sake of justice.

"He may be an unreliable witness," Holstrom continued, "but he'll be an important voice in the selling of the story."

"If he lives to make it to the stand," Duke said, glancing at Joan.

JC was well aware of the likelihood of Joan killing Rudd on sight after what he did to Stella Daniels. He was also fully cognizant of Herb Daniels, Stella's father and the team's current financial backer, desire to see the man die.

Rudd will pay, he silently told them both, but not on the timeline you want.

"I'll make sure Rudd gets to tell his story," JC said.

He didn't need to look at Joan to know she was clenching her jaw in the glow from the embers. He'd go round and round with her later. But she would have to agree. He'd make her understand.

Holstrom leaned forward with a tree branch and poked the fire, sending a geyser of sparks up into the night sky.

"Get me Rudd and get me a paper trail," he said. "Then there's nothing that will be able to protect Grey. He'll be out of a job." Paused. "And vulnerable."

JC didn't say anything. Didn't grin. But the demons inside him soared into the night with the sparks from Holstrom's barbecue. A vulnerable Grey was his single short-term goal. Because that was the first step in taking down The General.

CHAPTER 5

DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD

The man in front of JC was about an inch or two taller than him but outweighed him by a good hundred and fifty pounds. He looked like he started out the flight he disembarked from put together and sober but somewhere along the line he started to drink heavily, fell asleep and sweat the alcohol through his skin into his cheap suit. His suit needed to be dry-cleaned with him still inside it. JC thought maybe that would improve the man's smell which was not unlike a distillery JC visited once in Scotland.

He glanced across the crowds lined up in the Belgrade Nikola Tesla airport. Despite being named after a famous man of science, the immigration area felt more like putty-colored herding pens than anything else. Joan was to his left, scanning the crowd just like he was, her blank eyes passing over him as she pretended to not recognize him. JC turned to his left, catching Cespedes eyes doing the same sort of scanning. The man looked right through him.

The sweaty distillery in front of JC shuffled forward, knocking over his carry-on rolling suitcase. As the man bent over to pick it up, JC put the chances of Mr. Big pitching forward and breaking his nose on the polished concrete at slightly better than even.

He was wrong. The man stood, unscathed, turned to JC and said something in German with far too much exhalation. JC raised his hand to his nose, coughed once and muttered, "I'm sorry, I don't speak German," in Korean. Mr. Big looked confused then tried saying something in English. JC cut him off with more Korean. "Even if I could understand you," he lied in the only language he spoke other than English, "I wouldn't speak to you, you drunken lush." Mr. Big, looking even more confused, stopped trying to talk to him and shuffled forward a little more.

JC glanced at his watch. At this rate it was going to take them close to an hour to make it through customs, pick up their baggage then meet separately at the Hotel Moskva, a decent but not top-end place about ten minutes from the confluence of the Sava and Danube rivers.

Duke, Theo and Vedika were likely already through customs in Geneva. Vedika convinced them the easiest way to get the pinchers on Grey's stockpiles of dirty cash was to actually be in front of the bankers as they made their requests. JC agreed. It was going to be a tricky balancing act. While Vedika was the Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, she was not acting in any official capacity and, if pushed, would not be able to put the full force of the Treasury Department behind her requests. And if she pushed too hard, she'd get called on the carpet by not only her boss, Director Thomas Andresakis, but potentially by one of the same sub-committees Holstrom chaired.

Mr. Douglas wisely stayed behind in Langley so he could both run interference for the two teams as well as provide logistics and support, should the need arise. Holstrom was doing his best to stay above the fray, but whenever he wasn't around, Duke would randomly say, "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in," using his best The Godfather Part III era Al Pacino impression.

Duke's not wrong, JC said to himself as he took another step, following behind Mr. Big. Holstrom's gonna have to do a fair bit of tap dancing to come out of this smelling sweet and clean with his political career intact. JC scanned the crowd in front of him, looking for the

person who was supposed to meet them but not seeing them. In many ways this op was no different than many of the others he'd done, both alone, with only Joan and with the full team. So many moving parts in play that it always seemed on the edge of falling apart.

Movement from the right of JC caught his eye. It wasn't the movement itself. The crowd was slowly moving forward in fits and starts. What caught his eye and what he quickly looked at was a group of four armed policemen parting the crowd, walking swiftly from their mirrored-windowed office towards Cespedes and, eventually, Joan and himself.

Cespedes turned to JC who gave him a slow nod. There was unlikely any other person in the crowd of business people and tourists who the policemen were moving towards. Stepping out of line and away from them would raise their suspicions even more. Which might lead to gunfire, something the team was woefully unable to do much about at this point in time.

The lead policeman, heavy browed and angry, held a walkie-talkie to his ear, adjusted his trajectory and made a beeline to Cespedes. He stopped, the three other policemen surrounding the shorter Bolivian man. One officer took Cespedes bags, one took him by the arm and walked him back towards the security office. The lead officer and his assistant, a rail-thin kid with a pock-marked face, began moving again, scanning the crowd for their next target.

"Are we going quietly or fighting?" Joan said from behind JC.

He controlled his first instinct, forcing himself to not jump in surprise. Instead he shouldered the leather duffle bag at his feet, turned to the person he trusted most in the world and smiled.

"Just because you can take them on," he said to her as Mr. Big looked at him with wide eyes, "doesn't mean you should."

"I thought-" Mr. Big started to say before Joan cut him off.

"Did you actually fall in the vat of Scotch?" she said, her nose wrinkled in real disgust. "Or did you just take a shower in the stuff?"

"Welcome wagon's here," JC muttered to her, bringing her attention to the problem at hand.

"Bannister?" the heavy-browed man said, looking at JC before turning to Joan. "Green?"

"Yes," JC said. Not shrinking, not dodging. He knew why they were here, even if they didn't.

"Come with us, please," Heavy Brow said as the tall kid behind him tried to look authoritative.

JC moved forward, knowing that disobeying or fighting now would create more trouble than it was worth. Besides, he said to himself as he walked through the crowd watching him as if he was some kind of gangster, I asked for this.

The kid passed JC and held the door open for he and Joan as Heavy Brow brought up the rear. As JC walked past them, he saw two men in the room: Cespedes and a six-foot two man, close-cropped red hair, looking down at Cespedes, his shoulders hunched up with his arms folded high on his chest.

"How long you been with JC?" the red-haired man said to Cespedes.

"Long enough to know that if he hasn't told you," Cespedes said, "then you don't need to know."

Max Henderson, head of Mobile Security Deployment in London, the SWAT division of the Diplomatic Security Service, looked over Cespedes as Joan walked in the room, then looked to JC. "I like this guy," he said with a smirk on his face. JC wasn't sure if he was being serious or sarcastic, but Max's feelings about the new team member weren't of his utmost concern.

Thirty seconds later and the handshakes, greetings and introductions were finished as Heavy Brow, actual name Markovic, and the kid, actual name Adilovic, were gone, leaving JC's team alone in the secure room.

"Who are we after?" Max said. "Mr. Douglas didn't tell me and Kate swore she didn't know." Kate was Kate Baker, head of all security at the US Embassy, London and a central figure in not only the London Incident but also the safe return of Ambassador Norman Ellsworth after his kidnapping.

JC paused a micro-second before saying, "Nathan Rudd."

Max's easy nature hardened in an instant. Rudd murdered Stella Daniels, an embassy staffer Max was tasked with protecting and he was also the chief suspect in the gunning down of Ambassador Larry Anderson, another charge who died under Max's watch. Although he was not directly responsible for their security, the man, like most in the DSS, felt responsible when one they were charged with protecting, died.

"He's here?" Max said. "In Belgrade?"

"That's what our best intel says," JC answered. He paused, letting Max's temperature rise in relation to his anger. "You ready to go crack some skulls and see if we can get this nutsack?"

Max's grim faced slowly split into a vicious grin as his head started to nod. JC knew in his heart Max wouldn't get the satisfaction that was consuming his every thought right now. But he needed the possibility of it to drive the man further and help him bring Rudd to justice.

"Where's Nigel?" Joan asked.

Max took five seconds to compartmentalize and clear his head before turning to her. "He's outside, waiting in the truck."

"Let's get moving," JC said, spurring Max to exit the room through the door in the back, the team following behind him.

Time was a problem for Duke, Theo and Vedika which meant it was a problem for JC and his team as well. The sooner they found Rudd, the sooner the paper trail Vedika was rustling up would be backstopped.

But first they had to find Rudd. And that was like trying to find a needle in a field of uncut hay.

CHAPTER 6

NEED TO HAVE A CONVERSATION

General Marvin O. Robinson, retired, stomped on the gas pedal, the Range Rover's V8 engine roaring as it accelerated hard down the straightway of the bridge. Water to the left and the right, the toll bridge he was passing over linked the Florida mainland to North Key Largo, one of the largest of the Florida Keys. It was several thousand feet of two-lane highway and The General was weaving in and out of traffic. Doing his level best to put distance between him and the SUV chasing him.

"Goddammit, I'm gonna kill Jenkins," he yelled, more to get the building rage at the situation out of his system so he could focus than any real anger at his second-in-command.

The General was headed to Washington D.C. from his corporate headquarters in London when a request came down the chain to meet with a group of gentlemen interested in high-level security in the Miami area. Security that The General's company, The Veracious Group, would be able to provide, complete with ex-military men, tactics and weapons. For an exorbitant price.

Last-minute flight changes were bribed through and approved, landing The General's charter plane at Miami International. Jenkins was unable to secure an armored rental vehicle on such short notice, having a two-year old top-of-the-line Range Rover Discovery waiting on the tarmac instead. The General grumbled, but said nothing, knowing that with the sudden change in plans there was little danger. Still, he took a range bag filled with modified grenades and a small duffle bag with a handful of high-powered weaponry.

The General spied the end of the bridge coming up quick. Pushed the luxury SUV past 120 mph. He glanced in his rearview mirror. Only thing he saw was the single Chevy Suburban that had been tailing him since he left the airport, accelerating hard to catch up with him. Nobody in the vehicle had fired a single bullet at The General, but they'd bumped him every time they got close, even tried to push him off the road once. Bullets or no, they were trying to kill him.

The General slammed on the brakes hard, the ABS system activating, keeping the wheels from locking up and spilling him into the Atlantic Ocean. The pursuit vehicles slammed on their brakes, their systems operating the same. As the Range Rover came to a halt, The General reached around, grabbing his range bag and his duffle bag from the back of the vehicle, hit the lever to lower the driver's side window and dug around in the range bag.

He glanced out the window, spying the SUV stopped just to the left of his vehicle, slightly turned to the left, presenting him with a wide target. He pulled one grenade free, pulled the pin and threw it at the Suburban, aiming for the right front quarter panel of the vehicle, accelerating away from the impending explosion as soon as the munition left his hand.

The modified grenade, based off of one of Duke's designs, housed a powerful electro-magnet, powering it after one second in flight. It was designed to attach itself to vehicles instead of bouncing off them, improving the chances of taking one out in a battle. Or a pursuit.

The blast shook the windows as he drove towards the mainland. The General whooped in victory, glancing back, expecting to see a smoking pile of twisted metal behind him.

The Suburban was accelerating hard, catching up to him.

“What the-”

He didn't need to finish the statement. He knew what caused it. Heavy armor, tank-like, was the only thing that could survive a blast like that. And if the vehicle chasing him was that heavily armed, there was little chance he had at taking it out.

The General swore. Long, loud and colorful.

“I ain't going out like that,” he said after taking a breath, zooming past the end of the bridge onto the mainland and towards the luxurious high-rises lining Miami's famed South Beach area. “I'll turn this damn place into Mogadishu if I have to.”

He weaved in and out of traffic, running red lights. It was only a matter of time before the police were involved, but that didn't really matter to The General. He just wanted to find a way to level the playing field a bit. Dread and fear began to seep into his heart as the realization that there was little he could actually do hit him like a splash of cold water in the face.

The boom occurred simultaneously with the loss of control of the Range Rover's steering. The General fought to keep the vehicle on the road and not crash into the other cars on the road or even the buildings lining it. The *whap whap whap* of a right front flat tire filled the cabin. The General glanced in the side mirror to see what appeared to be a rifle of some sort sticking out the window of the driver's side of the pursuit vehicle.

Another boom sounded as the right rear tire joined the front one in death. The General's sinewy arms fought to keep the vehicle on the road, but he knew it was done. The pursuit was over and he lost.

“No way,” he said to himself, letting the vehicle slow to a stop naturally, his right hand pulling a pair of H&K MP5s from the small duffle bag he brought from the plane. “I'm not riding on rims like some criminal on Fox News.”

As the Range Rover rolled to a stop on its own, The General looked in the rear view mirror again, watching the Suburban pull up on his left again, angling itself to put as much body and protection between him and the driver of the vehicle.

He opened his door, stepping out amidst the acrid smell of ruined rubber and overheated lubricants, the Suburban about five yards from him. He swung both German-made sub-machine guns toward it and unloaded, both weapons set to full-auto.

The bullets did no damage, the weapons empty in a matter of seconds. He dropped them, drawing his Colt Commander from its holster in the small of his back, holding the weapon in a two-fisted modified Weaver stance, waiting.

The driver's side door opened, the tinted windows hiding who was inside, or even how many people were in the vehicle. A hand moved forward past the pillar of the windshield, followed by another. A peaceful gesture of a man wanting to indicate he was unarmed.

The General pointed his pistol at the area just behind the windshield. He didn't fire. The man hadn't actually fired on him yet. And he still didn't know who it was. But his finger was on the trigger, his pistol was cocked and it would only require about two pounds of pressure before a bullet found its mark.

The man stepped out from the cover of the bullet-proof windshield. Walking around the front of the truck. His suit was impeccable, looking much like a businessman instead of a man driving an armored pursuit vehicle.

The General's jaw dropped, his body relaxed, the pistol dropping to his side, the muzzle pointing at the concrete near his feet.

“Holy mother of God,” he said slowly.

The man in the suit stopped, standing only three yards away, hands still slightly raised.

“You about done, Marvin?” the man said, lowering his hands.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” The General said, flat-out dumbfounded.

The man didn’t smile, didn’t change his expression, just took two steps forward.

“I think you and I need to have a conversation, General,” he said.

CHAPTER 7

WASN'T A COINCIDENCE

Three months is a long time, Nathan Rudd said to himself as he walked down the street, bulky, misshapen backpack flopping against him with each step. They're not gonna know it's you. Seriously.

He'd spent the past three months since faking his death in London on the run. Rudd knew Bannister would come after him sooner or later. The man had the reputation of a chivalrous Boy Scout. No matter the fallout from going head-to-head with Khaled the terrorist in London, Bannister would eventually circle back and take care of Rudd. And the man had spent every day since preparing for that eventuality.

Rudd glanced up, gained his bearings, then dropped his head back to staring at a spot two feet in front of him as he continued to walk. Homeless drifters and junkies don't walk with their back straight, shoulders back and their head on a swivel. They keep their eyes to the ground to avoid trouble, shuffle instead of stride and do their level best to disappear in a crowd of people.

The policemen fanning out through the cheaper tourist sections Old Belgrade were watching the people walking by. Looking at their cellphones or a piece of paper. They were looking for someone and Rudd had a pretty good guess who it was. Although he kept most of his belongings on his back, he needed to swing by the weekly apartment and pick up his stash of money. It wasn't much, but it was worth the risk.

The crowd was slowing down, looking around for the cause of trouble. They didn't know where it was, but they could sense it. Terrorism had entrenched itself in Europe and nobody wanted to be the next statistic when the trouble started. Rudd kept his head down and the brass knuckles firmly on both hands in his dirty fleece jacket.

They're not gonna recognize me, he said to himself. But he'd rather not take the risk of being wrong. Looked up as a young police officer was scanning the pedestrians. Test it, his devil side said and before he knew it his feet stopped in front of the fresh-faced patrolman.

"Excuse me," Rudd asked, keeping his eyes down and dodgy, glancing quickly at the police officer and then away. "Where's the Belgrade Fortress?"

The officer looked at him, then looked over Rudd's shoulder, searching for the man on the picture. "Cross the Sava River and ask the first person you find. Can't miss it."

Rudd mumbled his thanks and walked on. It worked. He'd lost nearly fifty pounds of extra fat and muscle mass, had his back molars pulled by a Chinese dentist in the back-alleys of Paris, permanently tattooed his eyebrows to thicken and lengthen them more towards a unibrow, used color-changing contact lenses and grew a beard when before he was always clean-shaven. He looked nothing like any picture they'd have of him.

But something niggled the back of his mind. "What if it's not you?" the voice of doubt whispered in his ear.

He glanced over his shoulder, trying to catch a good look at the printout the young officer held in his hand as he continued to scan the faces in the crowd. The patrolman turned at just the right angle at just the right time, giving Rudd a clear look at the image.

His head whipped around, he clenched the brass knuckles tighter, stood up straight and shrugged off the physical characteristics of the homeless junkie he'd adopted over the last several months. His spine was straight, shoulders back and his eyes roamed every face and person he saw, his head swiveling quickly to take it all in.

Get your shit and get the hell outta Dodge, his inner voice screamed inside his own head. He was in total agreement. It was time to engage his escape plan. But only this time with a little twist.

He shivered although the really cold days of Belgrade were a month plus away. The picture ran through his mind. It wasn't him. It was a photo of Larry Patterson, the ambassador of London that Rudd killed on the street outside his flat months ago.

More importantly, it wasn't a coincidence. If the Belgrade police were spreading out across the city on the lookout for a dead man, there was only one person behind it.

"JC Bannister," Rudd growled, flagging down a taxi in order to get where he needed to go faster than on foot.

CHAPTER 8

MAY WE?

Max stood and stretched, his long arms nearly brushing the ceiling of the office in the Central Belgrade Police Station. Kate Baker offered the resources of the US Embassy but JC turned them down. Too many questions, too many eyes and way too many security measures, both going in and out. After a few well-placed phone calls by Kate and Max the team was holed up with a skeleton crew of two women and two men running computers and coordinating overtime for any officer willing to go around the city in their off hours with a picture of a man murdered in London three months ago by the man they were really after.

“I still say we’re barking up the wrong tree,” one of the women said.

Milinka, twenty-seven, eight years on the force, JC said to himself as he pretended to ignore her.

“Why’s that?” Joan asked. Icy.

“We’ve got one of the best facial-recognition programs in the entire European Union,” Milinka said, her eyes glued to the computer, “and you’re paying overtime to not look for the man you’re really after.” Paused as her fingers continued to fly over the keyboard. “We should be going through old photos and border crossing videos.”

Cespedes, helping out on another computer station, said nothing but looked at Joan. Joan looked nodded once, almost imperceptibly, then looked at Max. Max nodded and shrugged. It’s a good idea, the shrug said. Everyone looked briefly at JC.

JC said nothing. Didn’t move, didn’t flinch. Didn’t say a word or indicate he heard.

She’s not wrong, he said to himself. It’s just her timing is off.

“No,” JC said. Clearly and slowly.

Milinka shook her head slightly and muttered something. One of the Belgrade PD men snickered, freezing when all eyes in the room swiveled to him.

“She said you’re an arrogant prick,” the man said defensively.

“She’s not wrong,” the second woman in the room said. “But if she can’t keep herself under control she can go back to parking detail.” Paused. “You, too Spiridon.”

JC looked at the woman. He couldn’t remember her given name, just her family name and her rank. Colonel Babic, a hard woman and the highest ranking person Kate Baker was able to get assigned to their project.

The plan was simple. Send out as many officers with a fake picture in order to flush Rudd out of whatever hidey-hole he’d burrowed into. With enough police presence flooding the areas he was most likely to be, they’d shake him loose. Get him on the road, on the run, uncomfortable and vulnerable.

Then they’d swoop in. It was plan designed to minimize casualties. If he was willing to murder a person and blow up the body in London to cover his tracks, who knows what he’d be willing to do in Belgrade when backed into a corner.

Unless he wasn’t actually in Belgrade. Or if he decided to dig in even deeper. Or... there were dozens of possibilities that ended up with egg all over JC’s face. They’d been in the

country exactly fourteen hours and he'd slept only three of those. Every tick of the second hand in his hand ratcheted up the tension in his shoulders. Duke, Theo and Vedika in Geneva were digging and in danger of triggering something big enough to shut down this entire operation. Or worse, get them all killed.

Nigel appeared next to JC. Silent. Stirring a cup of tea, looking at the same monitors JC was staring at. JC glanced at him. Nigel nodded his head at the monitors.

"Careful," he said. "You look away, you might miss something."

JC shook his head at the man's dry humor and looked back at the monitors. The smell of Nigel's tea made his mouth water. Nigel stopped stirring and handed the cup on the saucer to JC. JC glanced down, saw the milky liquid and took the proffered cup without a word. Nigel was the only person on the team with no military training but he was quickly proving invaluable if nothing more than for his tea brewing skills.

"I've got something," the man who snickered moments ago yelled, standing up straight, the communications headpiece still attached to his head. All other sounds sucked out of the room as the man bent over, picking up a pencil, scratching on yellow legal pad.

He ripped the paper off, ripping his headpiece off and walked over to Babic, handing her the paper.

"Patrolman in Block 14 reports a suspect running away when confronted," the young man said.

"We can't go chas--"

"The suspect dropped a bag full of guns as he ran, Colonel," the man said interrupting his superior officer.

Max took two steps forward, hand politely held out to Colonel Babic.

"Colonel?" he said, the urgency in his voice barely held in check. "May we?"

Babic looked at him, then looked at JC, the real power in the room. She nodded, handing the paper to Max.

Max headed for the door, followed by Cespedes, Nigel and Joan, each one picking up one of the heavy duffle bags that clanked when they moved and nobody said anything about. JC turned to Babic, extending his hand in friendship, the colonel shaking it.

"Start monitoring all border crossing stations with your facial recognition software," he said.

"Every border?" Milinka said behind him.

"Every one," JC said as he walked out the door. "Right now."

He didn't understand the words Milinka said next, but the tone of her voice was pure excitement and, JC imagined, vindication. JC didn't smile. Her idea hadn't convinced him to alter his path. It was simply time to kick in the second part of his plan.

CHAPTER 9

VERY IMPORTANT

The run-flat tires on the bullet-proof Chevy Suburban chattered and bounced on the sections of cobblestone as the vehicle tore through the mix of old and new in Belgrade. Golubovic, a captain in the Belgrade police force, barked directions from the last row of seats at Nigel as he piloted the vehicle. Diplomatic plates had been switched with the plates from an out-of-commission city dump truck in order to make the operation look at least a little bit like a Serbian operation, not the operation of US agents.

“We’re almost there,” Nigel said, the voice-activated GPS navigation from the dash telling him what Golubovic didn’t. The team said nothing, just pulled balaclavas over their faces or, in the case of Cespedes, a face mask with a faded skull on it. Joan looked at him, her eyes rolling from behind her cotton balaclava.

“Really?” she asked.

“It has always brought me luck,” Cespedes said, adjusting the Velcroed neoprene mask on his face, his voice muffled by it. “Besides,” he continued, his eyes narrowing as he smiled behind the mask, “it looks cool.”

“Golubovic, you’re lead,” JC said from the front seat, raising his voice to cut through the vehicle noise. “We get there, you stay outside. Joan, you’re first through the door, followed by Max, then me. Cespedes, you watch our backs, Nigel, stay with the vehicle. Don’t leave it.”

Everybody nodded. Golubovic may not have liked the situation but he kept his mouth shut. Babic made it explicitly clear who was in charge out in the field and it wasn’t him.

“Boss?” Max said. “Maybe I should be the first through the door.”

“You kick it open,” JC said without looking back, “but she goes in first.”

Max opened his mouth to say something more. Joan backhanded him in the shoulder.

“Really?” was all she said. Max smiled, shrugged and went back to securing his firearms.

“We’re here,” Nigel said, the three-ton beast of a vehicle stopping hard thanks to the ABS brakes. The actual address was about two-hundred yards away but the approach was through a city park, designed to encourage walking and community. Every door except Nigel’s burst open, the team getting out, moving forward slowly, waiting for Golubovic to jog to the lead, then double-timing it after him.

The night was in their favor. Block 14 was about what JC expected a place with that name to look. Dark, drab, utilitarian in a former-communist-state way. Hints of color appeared, the flashes of capitalism late to this working-class section of the city. But overall, it was a place where people kept their heads down and their noses out of other people’s business.

Still. Five heavily armed, masked people jogging through the streets in the late evening was bound to bring a bit of attention. People stopped, looked, and liked everywhere, took out their cellphones out to take pictures.

Golubovic barked at them in Serbian, but nobody reacted.

“Like a goddamn movie,” Max growled.

“*Shut up,*” Cespedes said in Spanish, quieting the team.

Golubovic turned right, dodging between trees, heading for a narrow alleyway that quickly turned into stairs. The team charged after him, following as he went into one of the doorless entryways. Charged up two flights of stairs, ran halfway down a windowless hall and stopped in front of a door that looked exactly like the dozen plus other doors.

Max stopped in front of it, checking with Golubovic before slamming his size thirteen boot against the wood just to the right of the doorknob.

The doorframe splintered, the ruined door flying inwards. Joan ran through, twin SIG P226s in her hands. Max was right behind her, JC right behind him.

The blood was pounding in JC's ears, the run from the Suburban winding him more than he had hoped. The apartment was small, dingy and dark, like the hallway they'd just come from. Joan was standing at the end of a broken-down sofa, the muzzle of her gun planted against the forehead of the man lying there. His hands were hovering in the air, not quite over his head, but definitely not coming close to touching the sofa or any place else that might conceal a weapon. Tears were sliding down his face as he jabbered in a mix of English, Serbian and French.

"That's why she's first," JC said to Max as he walked past. "She gets the job done quiet."

Joan was holstering her unused pistol, reaching behind her back for her push dagger when JC stepped forward, waving her off.

"Max," he said over his shoulder, "toss the place, but watch for booby-traps." He knew the chances of any being here were slim. This man wasn't Rudd. But if he was somehow connected to their target, it was a wise precaution.

JC squatted down next to the man, looking in his eyes, then over his face. Early twenties, white, but teeth rotten likely from meth. Long stringy *hair*. *How this guy had a bag full of guns beats the hell out of me*, JC said to himself. Pulled a printout of Rudd's latest picture from his pocket. Unfolded it slowly and showed it to the man who quickly started shaking his head before JC even asked a question.

"You know him?"

"No," the man repeated over and over again.

"Seen him?"

"No, no, no..."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," the man said, his head bobbing up and down.

"Joan?" JC said quietly.

Joan's push dagger was against the man's throat in a second, ceasing all movement except the panicked heaving of his chest.

"It is very important that I believe you," JC said softly, his voice not carrying beyond the two of them as Max tore the room apart, moving into the bedroom. "Do you know this man or have you seen him?"

"Maybe I've seen him around," the man said in clear English, slight posh British accent in his pronunciation. "I can't be sure. I'm so sorry."

"Why all the guns?" Joan asked.

"I found them," he said, crying out as Joan's blade pressed against his throat harder. "I swear to God," he said, the words coming out as he began openly sobbing. "I found them behind a dumpster when I was looking for food. I came to Belgrade to teach English and got hooked on

meth, then heroin.” His nose was running, the snot snaking through his thin moustache over his lip and into his mouth. “I was going to try and sell them to make some money, oh God, please don’t kill me.”

JC stood. The man had pissed himself and the smell was overpowering.

“Nothing here, boss,” Max said, standing in the doorway to the bedroom, his arms crossed high on his chest.

JC nodded at Joan, her knife disappearing from the young man’s neck. He looked around the room. Exactly what he was expecting to find. Nothing.

“Who are you?” the man on the sofa asked.

“Go to the Central Police Station,” JC said, not looking at the man and not answering him. “Ask for Colonel Babic. Jana Babic. She’ll get you in a treatment program, get you cleaned up.” He looked down at the man. “But if you breathe a word about tonight to anyone, I’ll find you and finish what she started,” nodding at Joan.

The man’s head was nodding over and over again. JC didn’t wait to listen to the jabbered words he was trying to put together, just turned and walked out the door, passing Cespedes as he stood, watching up and down the hallway, his Daniel Defense AR battle rifle at his shoulder.

Golubovic was at JC’s shoulder as he walked down the hallway to the stairs asking all kinds of questions.

“Speak to Babic,” he said, unwilling to explain himself to this man. His opinion or evaluation of tonight was unimportant. It achieved what JC wanted, nothing more.

As they walked back to Nigel waiting in the Suburban, he wondered briefly if the man in the apartment would take him up on the offer to clean up. It didn’t matter in the end. If he did, it was another person JC may have helped improve the life of. If not, it was yet another person who turned away from a better path laid in front of them to continue to wallow in their own misery.

More people were outside on the streets than when they ran in. JC decided to hurry things up, just in case, breaking into a loping jog as the team following him did the same. JC glanced over his shoulder. Golubovic was right behind him, followed by Joan and Max jogging side-by-side, Cespedes, bringing up the rear.

As they passed the growing crowds, JC smiled beneath his balaclava. The whole point tonight wasn’t to find Rudd. It was to get him moving. When backed into a corner in London, he set off an explosive in his apartment. The blast and the resultant fire injured dozens. JC wanted the man moving and off balance. If this raid achieved that, it was a success.

JC stopped ten feet from the Suburban, walking it in. Stopped at the front of the vehicle as the rest of the team piled in. There were dozens of people watching him, but something was different. He felt eyes on him. Not the eyes of a civilian. The eyes of a hunter, a rival.

He turned, pulling his balaclava from his head, breathing in the night air. Looked around, his eyes searching the cityscape in front of him. Seeing nothing out of place.

“He’s here,” JC muttered before walking around the front of the vehicle, getting in and continuing to scan the faces of people as Nigel guided the bullet-proof vehicle back to the police station.

Rudd walked away, his face now clean-shaven, his hair almost military short. The dirty clothes were traded in for a fresh burgundy velour jogging suit with big aviator sunglasses. He looked ridiculous walking around like this at night, but he most certainly didn’t look like the

man who interacted with the policeman two days ago.

His ruse worked. He left the bag of guns behind a dumpster and whispered in enough people's ears that somebody in the neighborhood picked them up and got caught in the dragnet that JC Bannister spread over the city. There was no danger. All the firing pins were removed from the guns. But it triggered a response. And that's all that Rudd was looking for — confirmation that JC was in the city.

He was watching from the shadows as JC stood there in front of the obviously American SUV. Half-wished he had a sniper rifle to take out the man. But that wasn't the plan. JC had other uses. And now it was time to make use of the path in front of him.

Rudd flagged down a taxi, giving the man the name of a popular club not too far from the Central Police Station. He had two stops to make and an insurance policy to put together. Pulled out his most recent burner phone, dialing a number from memory.

First one'll be fast, he said to himself as the taxi sped through the night, the red LED counting the dinars of the fare. The second will be longer. Much longer.

He looked out the window, knowing that despite the upscale neighborhood of the second stop tonight, that was going to be the far more dangerous leg of this journey.

CHAPTER 10

THAT'S WHAT I SAID

No man in Washington had experienced such a change in fortunes in the past twenty years than Secretary of State Russell Grey. Months ago he was ready for the ash heap. His chief diplomat, Ambassador Norman Ellsworth was accused of banging then murdering a young London staffer, Stella Daniels, and then kidnapped and certain to be killed by an international terrorist. His replacement, Larry Patterson, was then gunned down in the same streets of London.

Although Ellsworth was recovered, the embassy was attacked and dozens killed, dozens more injured. Then, soon after, video was leaked of him banging a staff over her own desk.

He was weeks away from being fired by the president.

And then, Grey said to himself, Bannister turned North Korea into a hornets nest for the world and a golden goose for me. Leaned back in the seven thousand dollar chair in his secondary office and looked out the window. I hate the man and want him dead, he continued, but if it wasn't for him, I'd be looking for work instead of looking down the barrel of a Nobel Peace Prize.

In the wake of his diplomatic prowess, he'd been granted all kinds of freedom from both the State Department and the President. Everybody loves a winner, and he was close to winning the most impossible prize in the world's stage — a peace treaty and denuclearization of North Korea.

One of the perks of this recent goodwill was the largesse afforded him by State Department. His office in Foggy Bottom was busy as could be and the drive to his home in Rockville, Maryland, was long. The bean counters, flush with the possibility of his success, agreed to set him up with a secret office in Georgetown, hidden in a row of multi-million single family homes that looked just like every other house owned by one of the establishment elite. The first floor was his office and the mess, the second floor his living quarters when he visited.

The President told him in no uncertain terms that if another scandal involving young women were to darken his door, especially at the Georgetown residence, he would be out on his ass in a heartbeat. From the house, the State Department and government service forever.

Grey stretched and stood, walking up the stairs. He had taken to padding around the house in pajamas and slippers until he needed to leave for a meeting or receive someone. The Ambassador of Turkey was coming over in a few hours with an SUV full of young women willing to do whatever Grey desired and he desired quite a bit. Time to start getting ready. Chuckled. He said the scandal had to darken his door. He didn't say to not have any fun.

He heard a commotion near his front door. Daryl had a small office set up near the front door to screen all visitors, and as he heard the front door open and close and voices rising, he walked back down the stairs.

"Sir, you cannot!" Daryl said loudly to the unknown intruder. "You can't go in there, sir!"

Grey hit the first floor, desperately wishing he was wearing more than his Brooks Brother's pajamas and Pendleton wool robe. Turned towards the front door, yelling out in his most commanding voice, "Who the hell is tha—"

His words stuck in his throat.

“Russ,” The General said loudly over the protestations of Grey’s assistant, “you and I need to have a conversation.”

“You can’t barge your way in here, Marvin,” Grey said, “barking at me like a goddamn drill sergeant.”

“I did and I will when it serves your purposes, Russ,” The General said, looking Grey up and down, a smirk on his face. “Where’s your ascot?”

“Where’s your brass knuckles?” Grey sneered.

“Don’t need ’em,” The General said, balling his hands up into fists.

Grey chuckled, easing the tension. “Daryl,” he said, looking over The General’s shoulder, “take a break.”

As Daryl moved towards the still open front door, The General barked at him not to move.

“You need to go downstairs to that soundproof wine-cellar-slash-sex-playroom and not come out until the secretary comes down to get you.” The General was speaking over his shoulder but staring directly at Grey.

Daryl didn’t move until Grey nodded at him to do as their visitor ordered. The doorway to the cellar was concealed beneath the staircase Grey had just come down. Grey half-wished the six-two Daryl Smith would shoulder-nudge the five-six former general just to see what the old warrior would do. But Daryl didn’t and Grey ignored the man as he walked past, focusing on why The General was here and more importantly, why now.

“You don’t call,” Grey said, “you don’t write? Why am I blessed with this visit now after months of radio silence?”

“Shut the hell up, Grey,” The General growled. “You know it’s too dangerous for us to be seen together these days.” Paused. “Besides. There’s someone I’d like you to meet. Officially unofficial.”

Grey didn’t move, didn’t twitch but his mind was working overtime as to who The General would be clandestinely bringing to his semi-secret private home office.

“I’m game,” Grey said.

The General turned on his heel and headed for the door, the bamboo flooring taking the brunt of the man’s heels pounding out each step as if on parade.

Grey took The General’s brief absence to move towards the kitchen, opened a drawer in the island and slid the Walther PPK hidden inside into the waistband of his pants. He didn’t trust The General one bit, nor whom he might be bringing into his house. His only regret was not installing surveillance audio and video to record whatever and whomever The General was marching through his front door. A person The General thought so important that he meet that it was worth bringing him here in order for them to have a face-to-face.

He heard the front door close when his head was in the refrigerator, retrieving chilled bottles of water for his guests. The General’s footsteps rang through the entryway, echoing into the living area. Behind that was the sound of one person walking. Male, leather-soled shoes, not boots, not pounding into the wood like the old soldier’s footsteps.

Grey sat the glass bottles on the countertop as The General passed the entrance to the kitchen, took three more steps, stopped and turned. Grey looked towards the entryway of the house, his view blocked by the wall to the kitchen. His hand strayed near the back of his pajama bottoms,

towards the gun stuffed into the waistband of his boxers. He knew that if this man were going to kill him, he'd be too slow to do anything about it, but he'd be damned if he would go to his death with empty hands.

The other visitor in his house stepped forward, turning to the kitchen, hands open and unarmed. Grey ignored the man's expensive shoes, ignored his expensive suit and the French cuffed shirt and the silk tie that cost more than most people's house payment.

He looked directly into the man's face and blinked once. Then twice.

"You've got to be shitting me," Grey said.

"That's what I said," The General chuckled.

The man stepped into the kitchen, his hand extended, an easy but cold smile on his face.

"Secretary of State Russell Grey," The General said, "allow me to introduce former Deputy Director of the CIA Ted Williams."

Grey took the man's hand and shook it warmly. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Deputy Director."

"And you," the man said, "and it's *former* Deputy Director," he continued, "so please, call me Ted."

The two men stopped their handshake, perfectly timed to show warmth and interest between the two strangers without being overlong or uncomfortable.

The three men stood there, waiting for each to make the next move. Grey knew he had a slight advantage being on home turf, but with these two men, one a former master spy and the other a former master soldier, any advantage would be short-lived.

"Last I heard Director Ingrassia told you to hide your head in the sand. Way it was told to me, if you poke your nose where it doesn't belong, he'd stick the knife in you himself." Paused. "Frankly, I thought you were already dead," Grey said bluntly, cutting to the chase of the matter as he handed Williams a bottle of water to soften the blow.

"You and a whole bunch of other people," Williams chuckled as he opened the water and took a sip, waiting as Grey handed a bottle to The General who set it down on the countertop it just came from. "Not dead. Just thrown out into the cold." Dodging the threats and memories of Director Ingrassia's ultimatum that banished him from intelligence work for life on pain of death.

"And now?" Grey asked, not looking at The General.

"I'm angling for warmer climes," Williams said. Paused. "I hear there's a little turbulence in your meteoric rise to the presidency." Sipped again from the water bottle.

"I think that's a little premature," Grey said with a diplomatic smile full of teeth but no feeling. Trying to figure out how Williams guessed his own secret desires when nobody else had.

"Come on, Grey," Williams said, walking from the kitchen to the living room. The ivory leather sofa creaked very little as he sunk into its overstuffed depths, Grey and The General following him into the room as if he was the host, not the guest. "Holstrom's got your tit in a wringer whether you know it yet or not. Bannister and his crew are running around the world building an airtight case that's gonna make your name one step below mud."

Grey said nothing. The man wasn't wrong. *But what does he want?*

Williams sipped his water, then tightened the metal cap down hard. Glanced at the two men

in front of him. "I think we can help each other."

CHAPTER 11

TAKE A LOOK AT THIS

“We’re wasting our time,” Joan said under her breath.

JC said nothing. He wasn’t sure she was wrong, but he didn’t want to get into it in front of the Belgrade police officers assigned to help them.

“Something might turn up,” Max said, standing next to Joan, although his voice lacked conviction.

The raid in Block 14 last night gave them no intelligence they could use. The facial recognition software employed had resulted in no actionable information. It was just past noon the next day and for over fourteen hours the computer servers had been chewing through terabytes of data and so far had produced exactly diddly squat.

“She’s right,” Cespedes said, then, switching to Spanish, he said, “I didn’t join your team to sit on my hands.”

JC still said nothing. The room that yesterday seemed small but cozy was now closer to stifling. And as much as he didn’t appreciate their grousing, the voice in the back of his head was telling him they really weren’t wrong.

He’d looked at the map and demographics of the city, choosing to flood the areas most likely for Rudd to hide in with police officers. Provided them with photos of a dead man, hoping that maybe Rudd would see one of the photos, get the message and exit the country quickly.

So far, he was coming up snake eyes all the way around. Rudd was one half of their push against Secretary Grey. Losing half of their leverage against the man was far from ideal, but if they had to move forward with just half, then that’s what they’d do.

Time to check on the other half.

“I have to make a call,” he said quietly, pulling his phone from his pocket, moving away from the three. Nigel was outside, waiting in the SUV for a quick departure.

JC walked to the far end of the room, although it wasn’t that far away, avoiding Babic’s eyes. The Belgrade police colonel said nothing last night after their unsuccessful raid but as the morning wore on, she’d become increasingly icy.

I gotta break this ice with some kind of win, he said as the number he dialed rang and rang. Keeping his face like a stone despite the gnawing fear in the pit of his stomach that this was a huge misstep.

“Hey, boss,” Duke said as he picked up the other end of the line.

“Hey, man,” JC said, trying to keep his voice low without making it obvious. “How’s it going over there?”

“About as good as can be expected,” Duke said.

“Which means?”

“Which means they aren’t.”

JC kept himself from sighing, knowing that all eyes and ears in the room were on him. Clenched his jaw tight, trying to not grind his teeth.

“We’re finding all kinds of leads, Mr. Douglas keeps feeding us bank accounts and numbers and names of shell companies, but everywhere we go, all we get is stonewalled.”

“Knock them down,” JC growled.

“We don’t have the legal power, boss,” Duke said. Exasperated, but JC knew it wasn’t at him. “No subpoenas, no writs, no political pull in the cantons here, no legal power, no force of the US bully pulpit behind us?” Paused. “We’re walking in on our hands and knees, man, begging for crumbs and people keep kicking us out.”

JC kept his eyes locked on the monitors, doing his level best to keep his turmoil internal.

“Can you hack in somehow?”

“I can’t, boss,” Duke said. “Tried. Department of Defense, Pentagon, MI6? No problem.” Paused. “But I think I know someone who can.”

JC nodded, looking at the floor. He knew who Duke was talking about, but he hadn’t heard his friend mention him in years.

“Call him if nothing shakes loose by tomorrow.” Paused, looking up at the Belgrade police officers who were working so hard but coming up with absolutely nothing. “I think we’re about out of time.”

“Hey, boss,” Max said, leaning over Milinka but looking over his shoulder at JC. “I think you gotta take a look at this.”

JC was moving before he clicked off the call.

CHAPTER 12

A RABBIT

Duke swiped the app away, the line dead. Sighed, not because his friend hung up on him but because he knew the man was right.

They were running out of time.

He walked back to the table, his mind churning through the possibilities and potential courses of action. Nothing was hitting on all cylinders. Every plan he came up with had a fatal flaw somewhere along the line.

Vedika and Theo looked up at him as he approached, faces expectant. He hated to let them down, but he needed to be honest.

“JC,” he said as he sat, “checking in. He’s having about as much luck as we are.”

“You make your own luck,” Theo said over a mouthful of pasta. “You know that.”

“Yeah,” Duke said absently.

Vedika reached over to squeeze his hand. She was too experienced and practical to offer improbable platitudes or promises that everything was going to work out. She was an adult and likely knew better. But she was there in the same boat with him. He smiled. *Good woman*. His smile broadened further. *Smart, impossibly beautiful, good woman*. He squeezed her hand back.

The flight from Washington DC to Geneva was full of promises and plans and boasts about breaching the bulwarks of the legendary privacy of Swiss banks. They knew they’d be in and out before JC even got a whiff of Rudd.

They were very wrong. Bank after bank, director after director told them “No” in increasingly creative ways. As Mr. Douglas continued to relay banks and accounts that were possibly connected to Secretary Grey and his ill-gotten gains via warlords, drug lords and corrupt dictators, the pressure kept ramping up. Every bank they went into, they waited and were eventually ushered into an office and sat in front of another person who, after five or ten minutes, politely informed them there was no way possible to reveal the information they were looking for, despite Vedika’s official position, without court orders or a signed request from either the US president or the US ambassador in Switzerland or, in some cases, both.

Which we can’t fake.

Or, barring that, some sort of leverage that will twist the arm of one of the directors — hired, in part, on their complete lack of personal problems that might be used as leverage over them.

Which we won’t get.

“We need an in,” Duke sighed, *Ocean’s Eleven* still running through his mind.

“Where?” Theo asked.

“Anywhere?” Vedika said. “I don’t know about you guys, but Swiss National General is the prime target.”

Duke and Theo nodded. The intel Mr. Douglas had been forwarding them indicated Grey held numerous accounts totaling over five million dollars in that one bank. Getting access to those accounts and subsequently preventing Grey from accessing those funds would be a major

coup. Once the account history was traced and backtracked with Grey's work history and his time spent in various international trouble areas over the years, a case could begin to be built.

"Don't you have any private school, masters of the universe connections?" Theo asked Vedika with a smile.

"Public school, you dick," Vedika said as they both laughed. "What about you, Duke? Any ambassadorial connections from your youth?"

Duke shook his head, deep in thought, trying to dredge something up that had been tickling at the edges of his brain for several hours. He could almost see it, but not quite, and as his brain worked on it, he was getting maddeningly closer.

"Brute force," Theo said with a shrug, dropping his fork, finished with his meal. "I can't think of anything else."

"We go down that path, I'm on the first plane out of here," Vedika said. "I work for the US government, not some tin-pot dictator in a Latin American banana republic."

Theo opened his mouth to retort to her jab, but Duke cut him off, his mind putting into place the final pieces of the puzzle that had eluded him until just now.

"Theo," he said, looking at the middle of the table, still testing the possibility of the nascent plan he just worked up. "Swiss National General. What was the name of the director of the Latin America division?"

Theo looked up, his mind accessing the info. "Camila something," he said. "I remembered because of the flower." Chuckled. "And she was hot. We only walked past her office, but man!" he said with a grin.

Duke looked up at his friend, the plan laid out before him. "What was her last name?" he asked. "Keep thinking." He already knew the answer.

Theo struggled a bit more before realization washed over his face like rapture. He smiled. "You think it'll work?"

Duke shrugged. "It's either that with her or duct tape and zip ties with someone else."

"What the hell are you two talking about?" Vedika said. Wary.

"Pulling a rabbit out of our asses," Duke said with a smile, sipping the glass of wine he'd left untouched until now.

Theo leaned back, hooked an elbow over the edge of the chair, a half-finished glass of Austrian beer in his free hand, looking at Vedika.

"I ever tell you about the time I was in a Honduran prison, Vedika?" he said, leaning back, savoring the drink.

CHAPTER 13

TELL ME YOU KNOW

Everyone in the room crowded around Milinka's computer station. Like every other station, she had three monitors but all eyes were focused on the center monitor.

"What do you have?" JC asked.

Milinka clicked the play icon on her video program. "This man right here," she said, as a man walked across the screen in what could have been the departures area of the Belgrade Nikolai Tesla airport. "He matches the description of Nathan Rudd that you gave us."

The camera covered a large area of space and although it was a good image, it wasn't close enough to definitively see if it was Rudd or not.

"Can we get a closer image of him?" JC asked.

As the man moved out of frame on the camera, Milinka deftly switched to another camera, this one much closer.

"That look like your man?"

"Yes," JC said.

Rudd looked up at the camera and smiled.

"He's not even avoiding the cameras," Max said.

"He wants us to see him," Cespedes said.

"How old is this footage?" Joan asked.

"Three hours ago," Milinka said. Joan swore. "There was simply too much data for our system to dig through in the time frame we had."

"Tell me you know where he's going," JC growled.

"Naxos," Milinka said, "small island in Greece."

"What are we waiting for," Joan said, moving for the door.

"You should know," Milinka said, "he wasn't traveling under the name of Nathan Rudd."

"That's not surprising," Colonel Babic said as the group moved away from Milinka's terminal.

JC took one step backwards as Milinka swiveled her chair around, looking at him. He knew what she was going to say before the words left her mouth.

"He travelled on a US passport," she said. "The name on the passport was JC Bannister."

CHAPTER 14

THE PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

“I fail to see how I can help you gentlemen,” Camila Saavedra, Chief of Operations, Latin Division of Swiss National General. “I do not work in that branch of the bank, and even if I did, we are bound by not only Swiss laws but our own bank charters. It’s impossible.”

Duke, Theo and Vedika spent the rest of the previous day putting their plan together. Although simple on the face, there were more than a few moving parts to put together to make it work, including scheduling with people halfway around the world. At nine fifteen they walked into the lobby of Swiss National General and at nine twenty-three they were sitting at the desk of a director in SNG, a woman who was going to help them break all kinds of laws in a few minutes.

“May I call you Camila?” Theo said. Very smooth. “From what I understand, it’s a simple matter. You log in, you search for the account numbers we provide you, print up the records, then log out.” He smiled. “Easy.”

“It’s easy to say it’s easy when it really is impossible,” Camila said. “I have worked all my life to get where I am and I am not about to throw it all away to help three people I don’t even know.”

“Camila,” Vedika said, “I am Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence and I can assure you, the United States government would look kindly on your assistance in this matter.”

“Then show me a court order, signed by your president, and we’ll proceed,” Camila said, keeping calm. “Until then, we have no business to attend to.”

Duke said nothing, just pulled out his phone while Theo continued to try and convince the woman to do something she was very set against. Dialed a number, putting the phone to his ear while he waited for it to ring.

“Who is he calling?” Camila asked Theo.

“*Hello?*” Duke said in Spanish as the man he was calling picked up before Theo had a chance to answer. “*This is Duke,*” he said. Smiled. “*I’m great.*” Paused. “*Yes, Theo is here with me.*” Looked at Theo. “*He’s doing fine as well.*”

“Tell me who that is,” Camila ordered Duke. “If you think you ca-”

“*Well,*” Duke said, ignoring Camila, “*we need a favor from someone and they’re refusing.*” Paused. “*I’m not sure you two have ever met, but you’re related.*”

“I’m calling security,” Camila said, picking up the receiver on her office phone.

Vedika stepped forward, hanging up the phone with her index finger. “You might want to take this call first,” she said as Camila glared at her.

“*Yeah, one second,*” Duke said. Leaned forward, handing his phone to Camila. “It’s your uncle,” he said, “Colonel Agosto Saavedra in the Bolivian Army.”

Camila’s eyes grew wide. “Tio Agosto?” she said, reaching for the phone. “How do you...?”

The conversation between Camila and the youngest brother of her father, the only uncle she had never met, took about two minutes. In that time, Camila’s eyes widened, narrowed, teared

up and cried, along with the facial movements to join in the range of emotions she felt. She hung up the phone, handing it back to Duke and turned to Theo.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” she said. “I had no idea you were *that* Theo Petrosian.”

“How many of us are there?” Theo smiled, still very smooth.

Camila laughed. “You have to understand, I’ve never met the Bolivian branch of my family. We moved to Argentina when I was born, then London when I was three.” Smiled, warming to Theo. “I’ve heard of you, of course. Every Saavedra has. I can’t believe I’m actually sitting here with you.” Pure smolder.

“Believe me,” Theo said, “the pleasure is all mine.” Absorbed the scrumptious nudge from Duke without a twitch. “However, I am hoping you could help us out with the matter of these accounts.”

Camila nodded. “I understand, really I do,” she said, then frowned. “If I could help you I would, but I would get fired, maybe even imprisoned, and then everything my parents went through to help me would be wasted.”

“We understand,” Duke said, reaching in the pocket of his suit jacket and retrieving a USB drive. “Plug this in,” he said, holding it up for her to see, “before you sign in, and after you sign out, all traces of your activity will be erased.” Placed it on her desk and slid it towards her.

Camila looked at it, then Duke, then Theo. Back to the USB drive, then back to Theo. She picked it up, examining it. Delaying her decision. “What happens after?” she asked Theo. “How would I get it back to you?”

“I can wait,” Theo said.

Duke kept his face serious, but inside he was laughing. *Baby, you are so money and you don’t even know it. Although you kinda do know it.*

Three minutes later and Camila was handing over a stack of printouts along with the USB stick the Duke gave her previously. He neglected to mention the device not only recorded the data she printed out, along with the keystrokes she used to type in her password, it also uploaded a Trojan horse program that allowed him backdoor access to the bank’s systems whenever he needed it.

“Thank you so much for your help,” Theo said. “It is the first chink in the armor of a very bad man.”

“I’m happy to help,” Camila said, the exact opposite from when they walked in her office fifteen minutes ago.

“I hate to ask you this,” Duke said, “considering all you’ve done for us already. But is there any way you would be able to help us with other banks?”

Camila frowned, thinking. “I wish I could, but I don’t have the access.”

“But maybe you have friends?” Vedika suggested.

Camila shook her head, her attitude changing, the walls coming back up.

Theo smiled and leaned forward. “I’d be very grateful, Camila, if you could think of anyone who might be willing to help us.” His smile disappeared. “The man we’re after has hurt a great many people. These records are the first step in bringing him to justice.” He didn’t mention what kind of justice the team had in mind.

Camila’s walls visibly melted.

Duke stepped in with the pre-planned last move. He handed her his business card. Off-white,

one side said “Duke” the other had a phone number.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“If you ever need any help. Of any kind. Call me at that number.”

Camila glanced at Theo, who nodded, then laughed. “So if I need somebody taken out? You’re the guy to call? Is that the kind of work you do?”

“Your uncle Agosto can give you some idea of what we do,” Theo said.

Camila looked at him, the opposing emotions of danger and excitement playing out on her face for all to see. Danger lost.

“I’ll talk to some of my friends,” Camila said. “See if they might be able to help you out with your mission.” As Theo, Duke and Vedika rose, Camila stood from behind her desk, walking her visitors the three feet to her office door. “Are you going to be in Geneva long?” she asked Theo.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” Theo said. Paused. “Unless, of course, some of your friends might be able to help us out.”

“Tell you what,” she said, handing Theo a business card. “Give me a call at that number just before six tonight. I’ll see what I can scare up before then. Then you can meet me for dinner.” When Theo didn’t immediately agree, she moved forward, stepping just inside his personal space, but not so close as to be untoward. “Or perhaps, next time you’re in town, give me a call. I’d love to hear the story of how the great Theo Petrosian defeated a corrupt Honduran prison warden with an army of luchadores-masked guerilla soldiers.”

Theo took the card, smiling. “Five fifty-seven tonight,” he said.

Six minutes later as they were walking in the chilly Geneva afternoon, Duke finally laughed out loud.

“You really did all that?” Vedika asked. “You single-handedly broke your cousin out of prison and ousted a corrupt Honduran prison warden?”

Theo smiled, pulling Camila’s card from his shirt pocket to look at it a second, then putting it back away.

“Something like that,” he said.

Duke laughed again. The story wasn’t even close to that, but he wasn’t going to rain on the man’s parade.

He pulled his cellphone from his pocket, eager to call JC and give him the news that they were no longer empty-handed.

CHAPTER 15

KEEP HIM ALIVE!

“That’s good news,” JC said. “You guys staying for awhile to see what plays out?”

“Yeah, a day or two,” Duke said. “Theo’s working this Saavedra girl for other informants.”

“Will Lily approve?” Theo’s girlfriend was a florist in Las Vegas. The team rescued her from kidnapers in Los Angeles but Theo was the one who won her heart.

“That’s what I asked him,” Duke said, laughing. “He said work is work.”

“Make sure he keeps it in line,” JC said, smiling at the thought of Theo pretending to be a player. “She’ll cut his nuts off if she gets a whiff of anything improper.”

“No worries,” Duke said. “What about your project?”

JC looked across the impossibly blue water to the bungalow that Rudd had checked into. Mounted on stilts pounded into the Bora Bora sand, the resort’s lodging hovered over the perfectly warmed water while the dining and bathing facilities were anchored on the island proper.

“It’s developing,” JC said as he spotted Joan, Cespedes, Max and Nigel fanned out across the walkways to the bungalows and the beach, pretending to be tourists.

He hung up the phone. It was almost sundown and the time for their operation to begin was fast approaching. Naxos, the island in Greece, was a false lead. Rudd had actually purchased two tickets, one to Naxos, one to Bora Bora, and bribed the gate personnel in Belgrade to report him as on the flight to Naxos but missing the flight to Bora Bora. They’d lost precious time chasing down the phantom, but were poised to scoop up their man in short order.

The plan wasn’t difficult. As the sun went down and dusk set in they would converge on his place and have a few words with the man, then hightail it off the island to a friendly country in Europe. Max suggested bringing him to London or the US but nobody else on the team, including Mr. Douglas back in Virginia, thought it would work to their advantage. Too many laws to follow and eyes to ensure said laws were followed.

On the way to Bora Bora JC had a long and difficult conversation with Herb Daniels, the father of the woman Rudd murdered and the one bankrolling this operation. In truth, there were enough government agencies involved at this point that JC could cut Daniels loose. But he’d promised the man justice for his daughter.

Unfortunately it wasn’t going to be as neat or as easy as Daniels envisioned. There were larger issues in play right now and while a bullet to Rudd’s head would satisfy Daniels, it would cut off too many other avenues for it to be a viable option right now. Later, maybe, but not right now.

“Everything’s in place, boss,” Nigel said over their earpieces. As he was the person least likely to be noticed by Rudd and the one with the least military bearing, the team had bribed the hotel staff into giving him the bungalow right next to Rudd’s. They had a small Zodiac boat tied up in front of Nigel’s place to exfil Rudd and the team to the beach where an older Land Cruiser was positioned to make the next leg of the journey to the small airport on the island where a private turboprop airplane waited for them.

“Is he in the room?” JC asked.

“Just saw him walk in,” Nigel reported.

“You in place Ces?” JC asked, using the nickname Max had given to the Bolivian sniper that quickly caught on with the rest of the team.

“Yup,” Cespedes said. While the team was busy bribing the front desk staff for Nigel’s room, Cespedes snuck out and set up a sniper perch on the top of the main building’s roof. His line of site and the Daniel Defense .223 counter sniper rifle he was using would cover much of the area that might be a problem, although not all of it. Plus another set of eyes in case Rudd had friends, or other pursuers was always useful.

“Let’s go, then,” JC said.

“On it, boss,” Max said, moving from the end of one of the walkways where he was taking pictures of the sunset towards Rudd’s bungalow, his camera bag full of weapons.

“About damn time,” Joan said as she moved from the beach where a big bellied European wearing a Speedo was hitting on her towards the walkway. JC was about thirty yards behind her and admired the view of her walking like a silent cat towards her prey.

“You gettin’ an eyeful?” Joan said over the comms as she was almost to Rudd’s bungalow, looking slyly over her shoulder at JC.

“Meh,” JC said, ignoring the jab and keeping his head on a swivel. They had only a narrow window to get this right and not turn it into an international incident. No local police or law enforcement were notified of their presence and Mr. Douglas made it very clear what would happen were anyone to get caught.

“He still inside, Nigel?” JC asked.

“Far as I can tell, yes,” Nigel replied.

They didn’t have time to set up cameras inside Rudd’s room or task drones or satellites to fly overhead and it was making JC nervous. Rudd could have given them all the slip again and they’d be left trying to chase him down wherever he went to next.

He’s not going to do that, JC said to himself, the back of his leather deck shoes sliding off his heel with each step, hitting the wooden walkway like flip-flops. He wanted you to see him in Belgrade. He knows you’re after him and he wants you to catch him.

Or lure you in and set a trap, the other side of his mind said, giving JC a nice visual image of the entire bungalow exploding in a fireball like in one of Duke’s action movies.

“I’ve got some movement,” Cespedes said in JC’s ear.

His stride slowed. Joan walked just past Rudd’s bungalow and stopped, leaning over the railing, looking into the sea beyond, her covering white shirt dropped to the ground, the black of her tank top underneath masking the black of the pistols in her waistband.

“Tell me, Ces,” JC said.

“Three teams of two, coming at you from every walkway except the one Max is on.”

“Tourists?”

“All men, all look military and all carrying what look like... yup, silenced MP5s.”

“Shit,” Max said.

“Nothing’s changed,” JC said, picking up the pace. “Nigel, get to the boat now, Ces and Max you take out anyone who starts firing at us.”

There was always the off chance that the six men converging on their location were there for

someone else. Or someone who happened to be on their side. Unlikely, but he didn't want to start a firefight with potential friendlies without reason.

"Take the door, Joan," JC said as he started to jog the final twenty yards to Rudd's door.

The plan was for JC to kick the door in while Joan went in first but the unwelcome guests approaching meant they needed to move faster. Which meant Joan needed to kick the door in while he ran in behind her.

"You got it," she growled as she walked in front of the door, readying to kick it in with an almighty boot to the flimsy doorknob.

Then everything turned to hell.

As Joan was cocked up and ready to kick, the door to the bungalow flew inwards and Rudd came rushing out, grabbing Joan's leg and pushing her off balance. Joan was off balance and unable to react quickly. Rudd managed to lift her up, carrying her to the opposite end of the walkway. She pounded his face with her right hand, her left grappling for his eyes, but she was too late.

JC broke into a run as soon as Rudd grabbed Joan but he knew there was no time to reach her. Rudd dumped her head over heels into the waters of the lagoon below. Her vicious curses filled the air before she hit the water.

"Nigel," JC said over the comm, "Joan's in the drink, pick her up and wait for my orders."

"Got it boss," Nigel said as he heard the engine of their Zodiac roar to life.

"They're coming your way hard, boss," Cespedes said over the comms as JC pounded to a stop in front of Rudd's bungalow. The man was looking over the railing at Joan. He looked back at JC with a big smile on his face.

"You see that, man?" he said to JC. Standing, looking over his shoulder.

"Best not to piss her off, Rudd," JC said. Knowing he was out of time, but wanting to see the man's reactions. "Or me."

"They with you?" Rudd said nodding at the men JC could hear running on the wooden walkway behind him.

"Red hair?" he asked, thinking of Max.

"Nope," Rudd said, still looking over JC's shoulder. JC kept staring at Rudd, walking slowly towards him as Rudd backed up, keeping the distance even. "Black and blonde, military grade buzz cuts."

"Must be with you," JC said.

Bullets pounded into the wall of the bungalow right next to JC, splinters flying everywhere. Both he and Rudd ducked down then ran towards the opposite end of the walkway.

"Not with me!" Rudd yelled over his shoulder. "Guessing not with you either, hunh?"

"Nigel, you got Joan?" JC yelled as he ran.

"Keep him alive!" Joan yelled over the comms, her voice clear from the lagoon below, answering JC's question before Nigel could.

"Meet us at the end of the pier," JC said to the two teammates in the boat below.

"Now, boss?" Cespedes said.

"You gotta ask?" Max answered for JC.

"Wing them if you can, Ces," JC said, still unsure if the men chasing and shooting at them

were there for them or for Rudd.

Or both.

JC skidded to a stop just past a bungalow, drawing one of his Glock 23s from the belt holster in his waistband. The sweat was pouring off of him, the air humid and still hot from the day's sun. He saw the three teams running towards him.

The legs of the two men in front buckled underneath them, one after the other, as the bullets from Cespedes's rifle found their marks, the sharp cracks from the weapon rolling over the lagoon. Max hit the two men bringing up the rear with short bursts of fire from his Micro Uzi, dropping both of them.

JC jumped back up and holstered his pistol, running after Rudd. Cespedes and Max could finish with the other two. Right now he was most concerned where Rudd was going. The walkway he was running down only lead to more bungalows and then open lagoon. There really was no escape for him.

Unless...

He caught sight of Rudd as he cleared the last bungalow. The man had nowhere else to go except the water. JC realized that's exactly where he was going a split second before Rudd hopped up on the railing of the walkway and executed a passable dive into the darkening water below.

"You got him, Nigel?" JC yelled, both from adrenaline and anger at his quarry getting away.

"He's got a jet ski or something down here, boss," Nigel's voice came back through the comms as the sounds of gunfire from the direction of Max and Cespedes continued to ricochet through the dark.

"Joan, don't shoot," JC yelled. "I repeat, do not shoot!"

"What the he-" Joan started to say over the comms.

JC hopped up on the handrail just short of where Rudd did. Saw the man below just getting on the jet ski. The water behind the personal watercraft was beginning to boil as Rudd powered the throttle.

JC dove head first in a tackle at Rudd, hoping he didn't crack his head on the fiberglass hull of the vehicle. Arms outstretched, he felt more like a flying squirrel leaping for another branch than anything else. Right about the time Rudd gave the jet ski all the power it had, he looked up to see JC flying through the night at him.

"Holy shi-" Rudd yelled, trying to duck away from JC.

He was too late. JC grabbed ahold of the man's right shoulder through Rudd's wet t-shirt, the force knocking Rudd back. JC swung his right hand towards the man, wrapping it around his head and neck and, twisting as he did, whipped him from the jet ski into the water.

JC pushed Rudd's head down in the water as the man scratched and clawed at JC to let him loose. JC kicked enough to keep his own head above water, looking around to get his bearing on where Nigel was coming from. He didn't want the boat rolling over him in the growing dark.

Rudd grabbed JC's left thumb and cranked on it, forcing JC to let go with that hand but still holding on with his right.

"Hey!" JC yelled as Rudd's head broke the surface. "Hey," he yelled again, slapping Rudd with his free hand. Rudd grabbed ahold of him, the two refusing to let each other go. "If those guys aren't with you," JC said, breathing hard and spitting water, "you're safer coming with us."

“The hell I am,” Rudd said.

“You wanted us here,” JC yelled. “That’s why the camera work in Belgrade and the passport in my name.” Paused, trying to catch his breath, hearing a boat fast approaching, hoping it was Nigel. “I’m gonna guess you’ve got something you’re selling. Odds are good we’re about the only buyers you’re gonna find.” Caught his breath, waiting for Rudd to deny what he said. “So stop fightin’ me and get in the goddamn boat!”

Nigel cut the engine and drifted close to the two men as Rudd nodded and said, “Okay.” Joan and Nigel both reached out to help JC get in the boat.

“Rudd first,” JC said, not willing to give the man who could sink Grey the chance to get away.

Joan and Nigel hauled Rudd in and unceremoniously dumped him on the rigid bottom of the boat. Joan held him at gunpoint as Nigel helped JC get in the boat.

“Max?” JC said, “you there?”

“One left, boss,” he said, the sounds of a firefight still drifting through the night.

Nigel gunned the throttle of the boat, the three passengers sitting down to avoid getting thrown overboard. The boat slapped against the light waves kicked up by the evening breeze but they were making good time.

“Finish him off and meet us at the truck,” JC said to Max. “You, too, Ces.”

“Do my best,” Max said.

One more almighty boom rang through the night.

“You’re clear, Max,” Cespedes said.

The boat shot underneath the walkway, headed for the beach and their waiting Land Cruiser. Max and Cespedes would be there soon. JC wondered, however, who else was waiting for them.

And who they were working for.

CHAPTER 16

THE DANGER WASN'T REAL

It was just after eight in Geneva, the sun was trying to cut through the cool of the early morning and Duke, Theo and Vedika were finishing up a working breakfast with Camila and a handful of her associates she felt might be willing to help out.

It was a delicate matter. Camila introduced the team as security consultants looking for new clients. It wasn't too far from the truth. Duke played the urbane intellectual, a role honed by growing up in embassies across the world as the son of an ambassador. Theo played the edgy guy who you didn't know how much of his outrageous stories were truth or lies. And Vedika, eager to keep her government job secret, played the role of the aloof financier.

Duke knew most of the seven assembled people wouldn't help them. The laws in Switzerland were very clear — breach the privacy of a financial institution or client and go to jail. But the team had no plan to ask these people directly. First they'd talk and schmooze in the morning. Then, when everyone went to work, Duke and Theo would get to work finding any bit of incriminating dirt on the assembled proto-masters of the universe. Break for lunch then swing by the most promising mark to see if they would, in turn, break.

Duke and Theo walked the group out, laughing, glad-handing, while Vedika paid the bill with one of the team's untraceable credit cards from Herbert Daniels, joining them moments later. As the group stood there, delaying the walk to their offices, Duke's phone rang.

"Excuse me," he said, looking at the screen. JC.

"So there I was," Theo said, nodding to Duke but continuing his story, "massaging this vicious killer of a drug lord, he's got two goons outside waiting to kill all comers and I'm supposed to, you know, take care of this guy..."

"Yeah, boss," he said, walking away from the group for a little privacy.

"Duke, we've got Rudd," JC said loudly, the sound of wind rushing past the phone making it difficult to hear.

"Awesome, man," Duke said, "where's th—"

"Hit squad ambushed us, Duke," JC yelled into the phone, cutting Duke off. "Six shooters, came out of nowhere."

Duke stood up straighter, looking everywhere around him, searching his surroundings for a hint of trouble. Saw none, but his hackles were up. *If they can track and hit JC...*

"Watch your six, Duke," JC said. "If they can find us, they can find you," JC said, mirroring Duke's thoughts. "You got any good news?"

"In process," Duke said, raising his voice so JC could hear him. "How much time do we have?"

"Not sure," JC said. "Couple of days, probably le—"

JC swore as gunfire crackled over the cellphone call.

"Gotta go," he said to Duke, yelling orders to others as he hung up the phone.

Duke looked briefly at the phone, putting it back in his pocket, composing himself and

turning around to the group of young financial geniuses. As he strode the few yards back to them, he realized although he was only a few years older than them, he'd seen so much more of the world, both good and bad.

He felt old.

"Camila," he said, "I want to thank you for introducing us, however, something's come up that we must attend to."

Theo's smile melted as Duke's urgency and tone said more to him than the words Duke was using. He looked around the heads and shoulders of the men and women he just had breakfast with, scanning the crowd and surroundings, looking for the danger that had spooked his partner.

"It was my pleasure," Camila said, confusion in her eyes at the change in Duke's attitude.

"Can we steal you for a minute or two?" Duke said to Camila.

The two groups said their goodbyes, Duke's urgency and Theo's sudden seriousness unnerving the bankers. As soon as the team was walking up the street and were fifty feet away from the other group, Duke stopped.

"Duke?" Vedika said.

"JC was attacked," he said, mostly to Theo. "I don't know where they were, but he said six shooters came out of nowhere."

"How's the team?" Theo said.

"Didn't mention it, so I'm guessing they're okay."

"Do they have Rudd?" Vedika asked.

"Yes," Duke said, allowing a brief smile as Vedika pumped her fist in the air. "But as the phone call ended, there was more gunfire."

"What's going on?" Camila asked, confused.

"The man we're after must have sent people to attack our friends," Theo said to her, trying to comfort her. "Everything will be fine," he continued, "but I think you should lay low for a few days."

"Lay low?" Camila asked, not comforted at all. "What does that mean? Do I go to work? The gym? Mass? What?"

Vedika took her arm. "It means you only do the bare minimum until we tell you to do differently," she said, harsh. "Stay inside, don't meet new people, put his phone number on speed dial along with the police," she said, nodding at Theo.

Camila was nodding. The danger wasn't real to her yet.

Duke heard the engine of a vehicle on the street revving hard behind him, out of place in the morning traffic crawl. No cause for it. Except...

Theo's pistol was already in his right hand, pushing Camila down and towards safety, stepping in front of her as Duke was turning, drawing his own Beretta 92FS, looking for danger, moving to protect Vedika.

He saw the man leaning out of the silver Skoda sedan just before the man pulled the trigger on the AK-47 he was holding in his hands. Duke pushed Vedika to the ground as he dove forward as well. Some of the bullets whizzed past them, the whole thing feeling slow motion, while others hit the pedestrians that were between Duke and the shooter.

He hit the ground, rolling forward, coming up in a crouch, left hand holding onto Vedika to keep her safe, right hand pushing his pistol towards the shooters, firing round after carefully-

placed round.

The first hit the Skoda's body panel above the front right wheel, the second the side mirror and the third found the target, slamming into the chest of the shooter, forcing him to drop the pistol-grip rifle, his body falling, hanging half out of the sedan.

Screams began to cut through the air as Duke continued to fire, aiming for the driver. Vedika half-stood next to him, grabbing at him, pulling him down. As he dropped down to tell her to let him be, bullets whizzed past where he was just standing. Shooters were converging on them from across the street.

"Stay here," he said to Vedika as he moved to flank the shooters.

She grabbed ahold of his shirt and slammed him against the blue Peugeot they were hiding behind.

"I am a fully trained Treasury agent, son," she growled at him. "Now give me one of your pistols if you want to actually make it out of here alive."

Duke stared at her for a split second. He'd underestimated her and embarrassed her. He had another split second to make it right.

He quickly drew the second Beretta from his waistband, handing it to her butt-first. "I'll draw their fire when I run," he said. "You plug anybody firing you and not covering their own ass."

"Go," she said, checking the weapon briefly. "And don't get all shot up."

Duke smiled as he ran, ducking down and popping up between the cars he ran past, pausing to fire at the shooters. The Skoda had stopped, the driver and two passengers in the back getting out. He counted seven total attackers.

Theo fired from behind his position down the street, catching one shooter in the chest, another in the head. Five to go.

Duke pulled up short, hiding behind a car as the shooters filled the opposite side full of holes, shattering the glass and making it rain around him. As much as he wanted to make it out of here alive, he also wanted to know who the hell sent these sonsabitches.

"Theo!" he yelled up the street, turning to look at his teammates as Vedika stood and shot the driver in the head, the man falling on top of a table at the outdoor café he was standing in front of.

"Yeah?" Theo yelled back at him.

"Keep one of them alive!" he yelled.

"You're all gonna die," one of the shooters yelled at him over the gunfire.

American, Duke said to himself. Smiling.

"That one," Duke yelled at Theo. "That's the guy I want to talk to."

"You ain't gonna talk to any-" the man yelled back, his trash-talk cut short with a grunt and a howl as Vedika's bullet found its mark in his shoulder.

"Kill 'em all!" Duke yelled to the two shooters on his team, pulling his backup Kahr PM9 from its ankle holster, standing and firing at the men arrayed against them.

It was over in less than a minute. Vedika and Theo each took out a shooter while Duke managed to take down the remaining two. The one man left alive, the trash talker from before, tried to pick up a gun and shoot at them as they cleaned up the scene but Duke saw him first. A bullet to the leg and all the willingness to fight left the man.

"Check on Camila," Duke said to Vedika.

“Because I’m a girl?” Vedika said, her jaw jutting forward.

“Yeah,” Duke said, handing her a spare magazine. “Because you’re a girl and she might react better to you than Theo or me.”

Vedika looked him up and down, a smile growing on her face. “You didn’t listen to me,” she said, nodding at his waist.

Duke looked down. “Dammit.” A bullet had creased his side, the blood oozing out from his shirt and creating a growing stain on his punctured suit jacket. He pressed his hand against it. It didn’t hurt much, but was messy.

“I’ll take care of Camila,” Vedika said, reloading the pistol then putting her reassuring hand on Duke’s shoulder. “You see what you can get out of them,” she said, nodding to the dead bodies across the street.

Duke and Theo quickly searched the bodies, finding little. No ID, no train tickets or hotel receipts. A fast-food restaurant receipt and burner cell phones was all they found.

The sirens that were in the distance were getting closer. Despite Geneva being one of the world’s foremost financial centers, it was still a sleepy town, especially this early in the morning. Still, nobody had any desire to be on the bad end of the Swiss anti-terrorism forces. They needed to get out of there. But first.

Duke looked up as he heard moans and protestations of pain. Saw Theo roughly searching the last survivor of the shootout.

“I ain’t gonna tell you shit,” the man spat at Theo as he stood to look down on the one man who might be able to tell them who ordered the hit.

Theo bent down, grabbed the man by the ankle and started dragging him across the rough cobblestones towards the still-running silver Skoda. Smiling. “Yeah,” he said over his shoulder as the man tried to kick his way free, his smile fading, “you most definitely will.”

CHAPTER 17

NO CHOICE

The Range Rover Nigel rented upon arrival on the island was neither bulletproof nor exceptionally large. Although advertised as seating eight, it was more comfortable with six: two up front, two on the middle bench seat and two in the rear bench seat.

Adding Rudd into the mix, when Joan wanted nothing more than to either beat him to a pulp for dumping her in the water or simply kill him for what he did to Stella Daniels, made it more crowded and volatile than the luxury leather interior would suggest.

“Get off of me,” Max muttered, pushing Rudd away with his elbow as Nigel took a hard left turn, forcing those on the left, Cespedes in the middle and Rudd in the back, to slide and bump against those on the right, specifically Joan and Max, if they weren’t properly braced for the turn.

“Not my choice, man,” Rudd muttered back. Max said nothing, just kept looking out the window of his side of the vehicle, his H&K MP5 held at the ready.

Joan glared back at Rudd but said nothing. She’d shared plenty with JC on the flight from Belgrade to Bora Bora about what they should do with Rudd once they find him, her preferred course of action being to leave him bleeding out exactly where they found him. But JC was the boss and he said no.

“Turn up here,” JC said to Nigel, looking at the GPS map of the small island.

“Shit!” Cespedes swore. “I think that’s them.”

“Think or sure?” Max yelled, his head pivoting around, looking for their pursuers.

“How many other people driving around here, man?” Cespedes said, not looking back at Max. The trees sped by, illuminated by the headlights then gone.

JC ignored the bickering behind him. They were swiftly approaching the only chokepoint between them and the airport — a one-mile long stretch of road, barely two lanes wide, that was built mostly on top of a coral reef in the 1940’s. They would be sitting ducks. But there was only one choice if they wanted off the island sooner rather than later.

“There they are,” Max yelled, one of the pursuit vehicles bursting out of the trees and on an intercept course with them.

Joan, on the same side of the vehicle, said nothing, just thrust her Steyr AUG out the window and began firing at the other vehicle. Max did the same a beat later, their bullets finding their mark. The pursuit vehicle swerved then slammed headfirst into a palm tree.

“Whoa!” Max yelled. Nobody else in the vehicle shared his excitement. They weren’t out of trouble just yet.

“There it is,” JC said, pointing ahead to Nigel.

“Got it, boss,” he said.

The car quieted as Nigel piloted the speeding vehicle onto the narrow road, the water on either side deep enough for them to sink into the inky depths and never be seen again.

“Speed it up,” Joan growled as Nigel acquiesced, the V8 of the British SUV roaring in

response.

Two sets of lights appeared behind them and, along with the bullets, came the gunfire.

Everyone slid down as much as they could, Nigel swerving slightly from side to side sporadically, trying to avoid being shot.

JC looked up the road. It was too long. It wouldn't take much to line up a good shot and take one of them out. Just a little bit of luck on the side of the other guys and then the good guys would be a world of hurt. Or worse yet, drowning in the treacherous depths of the beautiful sea.

"Rudd," JC said, twisting around, "scoot your ass over and weld it against Max." Ignored the protests of both men and looked sideways at Joan, sitting right behind him. "Joan, give Ces your rifle."

"What the-" Joan started to say before JC cut her off.

"It's the longest range weapon we've got and he's our best shot."

"The hell he-"

"No choice, here, Joan."

Joan clamped her mouth shut and handed the Finnish-made battle rifle to a man she'd only met a few short months ago but, apparently, JC trusted more than her. At least that's what the dirty look she gave JC said.

"You ready, Ces?" JC asked.

Cespedes turned in his seat, sliding his ass as low as he could, getting as stable as possible in a moving vehicle. "Good," he said, eyes never leaving the simple scope Joan mounted on the Picatinny rail.

"Nigel," JC said, "get us straight as an arrow then hit the brakes, hard." Paused as Nigel looked at him horrified. "Yes, I want you to stop the damn truck."

Max and Rudd's voices rose from the back seat but Joan cut them off. "He's right," she said, getting on board with the plan. "It's the only way."

"Now, Nigel," JC commanded.

Nigel hit the brakes, hard enough to slow them quickly but not hard enough to turn it into a skid, making them pitch into the sea.

As the vehicle came to a stop and rested back on the rear suspension, everyone in the vehicle held their breath and began to slide down, unwilling to either remain a high target for their pursuers or upset the balance of the vehicle enough to throw Cespedes off his target.

The bullets began getting closer, knocking out any remaining glass in the vehicle, pounding into the rear lift gate. JC tore his eyes off the back of Cespedes's head to see the twin headlights of the two vehicles. Hoping the man's sniper and hunting skills were going to work in their favor now.

Cespedes let out one breath slowly, audibly, and the sound of the rifle blast actually inside the vehicle turned everyone's hearing into a high-pitched whine from the damage to their ears.

JC winced, like everyone else did, the muzzle flash of the rifle temporarily blinding them to go with the hopefully temporary hearing damage. He looked back up to see one set of headlights swerve, then head straight off the side of the road into the ocean, extinguishing as the saltwater shorted out the connection to the battery.

Cespedes's second shot caught him off guard, reinforcing the pain and ringing in his ears, the muzzle flash of the rifle blinding him again.

One more shot and JC didn't know how much more he could take but wasn't about to say anything.

"Okay," Cespedes said, turning and handing the rifle back to Joan. "We can go."

JC looked out the back of the vehicle. Their pursuit vehicle was still on the road, but its nose was pointed off at about two o'clock and wasn't moving. More to the point, no more bullets were being fired at them.

"Let's go," JC said to Nigel.

The vehicle didn't move. JC realized the man was about as temporarily deaf as he was. He reached over, clapped Nigel on the shoulder and, when the man looked at him, directed him to head up the road.

It was only five more minutes before the road widened out in front of them, the lights of the airport welcoming them in. JC directed Nigel around the main building which housed both departures, arrivals, immigrations and customs. The access road they were on seemed to run the length of the tarmac and runway, all the way into the sea. Just up ahead, however, there was an access gate. JC directed Nigel through it, the front end of the SUV busting through the simple chain and padlock that held it together. The flight crew they hired out of Tahiti was told to stay with the aircraft and to be ready to take off at a moment's notice. As soon as they got there, a short hop back to Tahiti and then another chartered jet would take them to Berlin, the team's staging area in Europe.

They were heading back towards the main building when JC's phone began to buzz. He heard the ringtone but it sounded like it was coming to him through an empty cardboard tube. He fished his phone out of his pocket, expecting to see Duke's number. It wasn't — unlisted.

"Yeah," he said after accepting the call.

The voice on the other end was too far away. JC turned the volume up, struggling to hear.

"I can barely hear you," he said into the phone, knowing on some level that he was probably yelling.

"Get out of there!" the voice on the other end yelled out.

"What?"

"JC! It's Douglas!" Paused. "Get the hell out of there!"

"Get out of where?" JC yelled into the phone, looking around for the danger he could feel swiftly approaching from somewhere. They were almost to their plane, maybe three hundred yards away. Almost home free.

The plane in front of them turned into one gigantic fireball as an unseen missile slammed into the fuselage, then two, then three as the fully-loaded tanks of jet fuel exploded into the night.

Nigel slammed on the brakes as the yells of anger and fear inside the Range Rover struggled with the sounds of the blast in front of them, keeping JC from hearing a damn thing Mr. Douglas was saying on the phone.

"What?" he yelled into the phone, blocking his left ear, trying to hear.

"The dock," Mr. Douglas yelled, "go to the dock. Turn left now and go to the dock."

"Turn left," JC yelled at Nigel, patting him on the shoulder and pointing him in the direction of the dock on the island, the port-of-call for the ferries that transported people between the islands of the area.

"There's a fence!" Nigel yelled at JC, heading for it, his foot pressing the gas pedal flat

against the floor.

“Crash through it!” JC yelled at him, putting the phone back against his ear. “What?”

“A drone,” Mr. Douglas yelled through the phone. “There’s a dro-”

The ground in front of them tore into fist-sized chunks, the 35mm cannons from the drone flying by them opening up and threatening to cut them apart.

“Goddammit, Neil, get that damn thing off of us!” JC yelled into the phone, pushing Neil to keep going.

“I’m trying, JC!” Mr. Douglas yelled back through the phone.

Fifteen seconds later and one more close call from the drone targeting them and another explosion filled the night. This one was about two hundred feet in the air above the main building. The remains of a drone fell flaming to the earth, some of the pieces hitting the airport terminal.

“Go,” JC commanded Nigel, crashing through the chain link fence in front of them and turning right, the access road in front of them taking them swiftly to the docks.

As the Range Rover slid to a stop in front of the wooden docks in front of them, one man emerged from the shadows, walking for them, hands held up by his shoulders. He was wearing boardshorts, flip-flops and a long-sleeved t-shirt in the cooling night.

Joan jumped from the ruined Range Rover followed by Cespedes and JC. Max stayed inside, his eyes glued to Rudd to keep the man from escaping.

“Who are you?” Joan half-yelled, her ears still not recovered from Cespedes gunshots from inside the vehicle.

The mystery man held a set of keys in his hand, extending the keys towards the team. “There’s a cigarette boat behind me,” he said, “courtesy our friend in D.C.” he said. “It’s gassed up and ready to go, coordinates to Tahiti programmed into the satnav.”

“What’s our friend’s name?” JC said, stepping past Joan to take the keys from the man.

“He said you know him as Mr. Douglas.”

“And you?”

“He first introduced himself as Mr. Snow,” the man said.

JC nodded. It was the name Mr. Douglas used when Duke first knew him as well, a number of years ago.

“Thank you,” JC said, waving the team forward. He didn’t trust this man, but neither did he distrust him either. If Neil sent him, there had to be a good reason for it. “What about you?” JC asked, looking closer at the man. He was dark-skinned, possibly from the islands, possibly Tahitian. JC couldn’t really tell.

The man shrugged. “I go home,” he said with a smile, not volunteering where that might actually be.

JC nodded. He looked over the man’s shoulder to see the go-fast boat. It likely had a top speed of over one hundred and fifty miles an hour and could make the trip between Bora Bora and Tahiti about as fast as an airplane, assuming the seas were relatively calm.

“There’s a vehicle waiting at the coordinates on the satnav,” the man continued as JC’s team walked swiftly past them to the boat. “There’s a plane waiting for you in Mr. Douglas’s name at the Fa’a’a International, gate 14C.”

“Fueled up and ready to go?” JC asked with a smile.

“Changes of clothes and plenty of good food on board,” he said with a smile. Glanced over his shoulder, then back to JC, before continuing. “There’s also a small holding cell in case your guest gets a little... unruly.”

JC nodded. “Thank you,” he said again, moving towards the boat. The man had more information than JC was comfortable with, but if Mr. Douglas trusted him, that was worth something.

“Sure thing, buddy,” the man said with a smile, “anything for a friend.” JC knew the mystery man wasn’t talking about him. He watched the man walking up the access road, away from the flaming wreckage and dead bodies inside the chartered plane, the burning roof of the terminal and the shot-up and smashed-up Range Rover.

JC sighed and walked up the dock to the waiting boat. It looked like a smuggler’s dream, hull painted non-reflective grey. Joan was standing there, looking at the boat as Max, Rudd, Nigel and Cespedes were already seated, waiting.

“We drew straws,” Max said to JC, slightly more normal tone of voice, their hearing apparently returning. “I won, so I get to drive.”

JC looked at the men. No way would he let Rudd drive and he’d never seen Cespedes behind the wheel of any vehicle, so Max must have been talking about Nigel.

JC smiled, looking between Max and Nigel as he held the keys out to Joan as she held out her hand. He dropped them into her waiting hand as Max frowned and Nigel nodded his head.

Joan was born and raised by the sea and knew more about piloting boats than most people he’d run across. Besides, he said to himself as he followed her onto the boat, I need to figure out who the hell followed us here and tried to kill us.

He sat back as Joan started the boat, shoving the throttle forward, making the engines roar, yet another sound that ruined the quiet of this night. Mentally going through the list of people he knew were currently a danger to them. People who had the will and the means to actively target them.

It wasn’t a long list.

Secretary of State Russell Grey.

The General.

As the glow of the satnav illuminated Joan’s face below, the boat pushing past one hundred and fifty miles an hour in the dark of the night, another thought came to JC.

What if it was Mr. Douglas? Maybe he set up everything in order to get Rudd under his thumb.

He stretched and groaned, letting the wind blow his worries and problems all away. At least for the next forty-five minutes.

CHAPTER 18

UNLIKELY TO SURVIVE

“Dammit!” Williams swore, throwing his bottle of water against the far wall.

The General said nothing, smirking, and continued searching the various frequencies in the off chance that the drone he was operating wasn’t just blown out of the sky.

The plan to take out JC and his team in Bora Bora evolved quickly but naturally. Although The General was the one who brought Williams and Grey together, he was watching both of them like a hawk. His hopes, in truth, were that the two would manage to bring each other down, with a judicious bit of pushing from The General himself, and leave him holding a bigger piece of the pie than before.

He had Jenkins, his right hand man, quietly do some digging and reaching out to find out how deep in the shit Williams was. Jenkins reported back twelve hours later, far earlier than The General expected.

Williams was neck deep and sinking fast.

Ingrassia’s threat to end Williams if he was in the intelligence gathering or disseminating fields was not empty. The man was tailed, both physically and electronically, for six months after getting fired from the CIA. Every move, every purchase, every email and phone call was tracked and reported to Ingrassia daily. Then weekly. Then monthly.

Williams kept his nose clean. Began to reach out to CEOs in various Fortune 500 companies with the possibility of doing consulting work in the security sphere. Every one walked away after a call from Ingrassia. His pension was enough to survive on so he and his wife sold their house and downgraded, working to extend what they had for a number of years, perhaps even indefinitely.

“Well?” Williams said.

“Still looking,” The General said, eyes glued to the screens in front of him.

“Waste of time,” Williams said. “It’s gone and so is our best chance at covering our tracks.”

The General said nothing. He knew what Ingrassia apparently didn’t — nobody rises as high as Williams did, just a half-step away from the brass ring, to just go quietly into the good night when the rug was ripped out from under him.

He may be gunning for JC, now, The General said to himself as he double-checked his work just to irritate Williams a little more. Sooner or later he’s going after Ingrassia. And that’s when you sell him out.

“All right,” he finally said, turning in his chair to face Williams. “It’s gone. Somebody else was watching and shot our bird down.” Paused. “Anything about it traceable?”

Williams shook his head absently, staring off into the distance. The General wondered what he was seeing.

“So, what’s next?”

Williams snapped back to the present, turning to The General. “Get Rudd. He testifies about Grey’s involvement, we’re sunk.”

The General nodded his head, realizing that Williams looked at Grey as his golden ticket back into legitimacy. If they formed a partnership, and Grey made the right moves, getting elected vice-president, then president, he would be able to forgive Williams and bring him in from the cold.

Naww, he said to himself. There's more than that. Man like Williams? He's got plans upon plans. Multiple irons in the fire.

Watch yourself, Marv.

The General smiled. Voices from the past. He heard them more and more these days. Sometimes it was his father. His mother. His drill sergeant. Friends long gone.

Or, like today, it was Thomas. JC Bannister's father. His best friend from the time they crossed paths in basic training to the man's death forty years later.

You're a soldier, not a planner.

The hell I ain't.

You're smart, but this guy has layers on his layers. You're not careful, you're going to end up the one nailed to the wall.

"So," Williams said. "You know JC. How do we get him?"

"Depends," The General dodged. "What's your end game?"

Williams looked at him and shrugged. "Kill JC. Kill Rudd. Get the Secretary out from under that threat."

The General shook his head. "You go after JC, you have to take out Duke, Theo, the guys who run his bike shop, the little bike team he sponsors." Smiled and wagged a finger at the man. "Don't forget Joan."

Williams rolled his eyes and chuckled. "Is she really the badass everybody says?"

"I dunno," The General lied, "but Grey's man put a bullet in her head and three months later she put that shooter in his grave."

Williams chuckled, standing and stretching. The mobile operations center they were working out of was parked outside a local TV station, looking much like any of the other TV vans in the area. It was a little cramped but still a high-end rig, complete with functioning air-conditioning, a working bathroom and a stocked mini-fridge.

The General watched him move and stretch. He looked much like any other office worker. But Jenkins told him a little of the dirt he found. The man had more than a dozen unofficial assassinations under his belt. And not just calling the shots but his finger on the trigger or his hand on the blade.

He waited. He'd thrown the question out there, looking for Williams's end game, and the man dodged it. So he waited. And watched.

He didn't need to wait long.

"Listen, general," Williams said, sitting back down and scooting his chair close. "You and I know Grey is unlikely to survive this."

"We do?"

"Let's say we're lucky and take out Bannister and his entourage. You really think Grey is enough of a statesman to survive the fallout from his financial misdealings and his inability to keep his dick in his pants?" Paused. "It's a different world."

You don't know the half of it, The General said to himself. Grey had a soft spot for sex with

underage girls and admitted it on camera in The General's London office. But he held his tongue.

"And?" he said.

"And I think we need to get out of here," Williams said, obviously dodging the question, moving for the driver's seat.

Ten minutes later and they were driving the surveillance van down the streets of Alexandria, heading back to the secure CIA facility Williams "borrowed" it from.

"You backed the wrong horse," Williams finally said. "In Bolivia."

"Who?" The General scoffed. "Machado? Don't think so. Dead or not, he funneled millions to me. Gave me the seed and experience to start my company. Speaking of wrong horses, you really think sending that psycho Del Stevens down there was your finest hour?" Chuckling.

"Del Stevens wasn't the right man for the job, that's true," Williams said, chuckling with The General, but stopping as he grew more serious. "But the plan was solid." Paused. "Ingrassia's still running that, you know? Alberto, second-in-command for Don Joaquin Velasco Reyes, Machado's chief rival, is running it for him." Shook his head. "Can't imagine the level of actionable intel they're getting."

"Don't forget the money," The General said, leaning over, then leaning back and joining in with Williams's laughter.

The traffic slowed and then came to a stop, a red light ahead keeping them from moving forward. The General briefly wondered if the surveillance van was bulletproof or not. It's not an ambush, man, he told himself, just a red light.

"Tell me something," Williams said, turning towards him, "I get your business model. Smart. But why Grey?"

The General looked at Williams then back out the window. His mind processing options and courses of action faster than any supercomputer. A second later and his path was chosen. Bit of info but cover your bases.

"He had access and was about as high up in the decision-making process as could be." Shrugged. "Embassies need protection. Benghazi showed us that. Beirut showed us that. Kenya, Dar es Salaam, Karachi, Yemen, Jeddah, Managua. Figure we could do it better, cheaper and with less hand-wringing than the Diplomatic Security Service."

Traffic started moving, taking some of Williams's attention. "Deniability?"

"Sure," The General said, getting behind the patriotic reasons for his business choices. Downplaying the selfish ones. "Our focus is security, not what the next news cycle is going to say or what the electorate is going to think."

"Plus it makes you a lot of money," Williams said, leaning over slightly, just as The General had done.

"There is that," he laughed in return. Waiting before he said anything more. Williams turned the big vehicle slowly at the next street, taking the left turn cautiously due to the height and weight of the van.

"Then tell me why you were providing security for North Korean installations?" Williams said. "You think that would pass Congress's muster?"

"Only if they know about it," The General said to more laughter. Not answering the question. Looking out the window again, balancing how deep he was going to step in it with Williams.

Knee-deep, Marv. Thomas Bannister again. Hip-deep if you have to.

“Tell me something, Ted,” The General said, turning to Williams. “Why now? You’ve got the sword of Damocles hanging over your head with Ingrassia at the ready to chop your head off. Why come out like this, coming to me, knowing I’d bring you into Grey’s field of influence?”

Williams nodded, avoiding looking at The General. The road ahead was clear and he watched the road. Careful. Good.

“You tell me,” Williams said. “Does a thoroughbred, born and trained for the races, enjoy being sent out to pasture? Or does he still feel the adrenaline of the race flowing through his blood?” Paused. “I know you know the answer, because you weren’t about to sit around a pool, thinking of the glory days when they sent you out to pasture.”

The General said nothing. The man wasn’t wrong. Being forcibly retired from the Army for helping a friend in their time of need wasn’t about to keep him quiet the rest of his life.

“You sent Bannister down to Bolivia to resolve things with Machado,” Williams said. “Instead, he ruins my life, kills your cash cow and gets me sent to a metaphorical Siberia.” Paused. “Ain’t no way I’m spending the rest of my life playing golf with my neighbors in the morning, tennis in the afternoon with my wife and drinks with the lushes at the club after dinner.”

The General chuckled. “The government trains us to perfection and then expects us to turn off the decades of training at the flick of a switch.”

“Doesn’t happen.”

The General nodded. But Williams still hadn’t answered his question. So he waited.

Two minutes later, Williams slowed down, the wide-open stretch between neighborhoods coming to an end, traffic piling up again at another red light.

“JC Bannister ruined my life. Ruined yours. Ruined Grey’s,” he said, looking at the cars in front of them. Turned to The General. “The three of us together? Taking him down?” Looked back at the road as the cars began to move. “How can we go wrong?”

The General nodded. Williams was saying the right things, but he was a trained liar. A man who, according to Jenkins, was personally responsible for over a dozen assassinations. Not calling the shots but with his finger on the actual trigger or his hand on the hilt of the blade. Don’t trust him, Marvin.

I never will.

“And what happens when Grey’s gone?” The General asked as the van picked up speed.

Williams smiled. “Assuming Bannister is dead?”

“Dead or alive.”

Williams nodded. “Dead or alive, I see no reason why this arrangement cannot continue.”

There it is.

The General said nothing, mulling over the offer Williams just made. It wasn’t ideal. But it could be beneficial. As long as the plan The General was hatching to ensure Williams’s death worked out. Because as interesting as it might be to have the former Deputy Director of the CIA working with him, The General held no illusions. Sooner or later Williams would either force him out or have him killed.

Better him than me, The General said to himself. And sooner rather than later.

“Neither do I,” The General lied to Williams, his most convincing grin accompanying the words. Paused, his grin disappearing. “But what are we going to do about Rudd and JC?” Williams smiled. “It’s already in motion.”

CHAPTER 19

MY HEAD HURTS

“You can’t let him live.”

JC sighed. “Would you at least try to keep your voice down?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Joan replied. “He’s dead no matter what.”

The flight from Tahiti to their base in Berlin was long — longer than JC imagined and felt. Just under twenty-three hours in total, but they were still four hours out from Berlin and Joan was starting in again. JC didn’t want to think about it in those terms, but that’s what it felt like.

He saw her point. The things Rudd had done, the stabbings, the shootings, the murders — it wasn’t like JC and his team to let someone like that off the hook, although in his darkest hours, he realized the line between his team and the bad guys was more blurred than he cared to think about.

He also knew their financial backer, Herb Daniels, the father of one of the murder victims and the catalyst for so much of what they were currently involved with, wasn’t about to let the man off the hook either. And if JC let him off the hook?

Money all gone.

JC had money, truth be told. So did the rest of the team. But right now, with JC’s banker under investigation for financial irregularities as a result of working with JC, things were tight. Not don’t-have-money tight, but can’t-access-what-I’ve-got tight.

And with JC’s lawyer, Jacob Meier, cutting ties with him as a result of over-zealous and possibly corrupt prosecutors pushing him to make the choice between JC and his international practice, he had little in the way of leverage.

His only hope for him, and his team, was to get Grey knocked out of the State Department’s top spot, take him out and then see if that gave him a bit of leeway. Most of the pressure coming against him was from Grey and The General. Those two men had turned his life into a mess the past few months.

He sighed again. “Moving past Rudd,” he said to Joan, turning towards her, the leather of the private chartered jet creaking as he did, “who was behind the Bora Bora attack?”

Joan said nothing, just staring at him. He knew she didn’t want to put the matter aside until he agreed with her. But he wasn’t about to let her kill the man they’d spent so much time tracking down without getting some answers from him.

She broke eye contact, looking up the aisle then back to JC. Shrugged. “Grey? The General? Who knows?”

JC shook his head and looked away. Her focus was usually a benefit, but right now he needed her to look past the problem that was burning a hole in her heart and examine who might be acting against them. Try and figure out who might be trying to put a hole in their heads.

Rudd, handcuffed to the support structure of the sofa in the front of the plane, rolled over. JC guessed he wasn’t sleeping. I sure as hell wouldn’t be right now if I was him. But he had no way of knowing, so he turned back to the immediate problem at hand.

“Do you think Rudd could have been responsible?”

“He almost got killed more than once back there,” Joan said, her first reaction disbelief. Looked up the plane to Rudd, then back to JC. “Could be, though. Only way is to question the dead. Or examine the drone. But we can’t do either of those.”

JC nodded. “Let’s hope Mr. Douglas has some better answers for us.” The CIA agent was meeting them at the safe house they’d arranged in Berlin.

“Maybe it was him,” Joan said, leaning back in her chair, closing her eyes. “My head hurts.”

JC chuckled softly, the reaction he thought she expected. He’d banished that thought early on. Mr. Douglas gained little by getting his hands on Rudd and risked too much by initiating an action that put Rudd’s life in danger.

The only person who benefitted was Grey and, by extension, The General.

“We’ll see soon enough,” he said softly, partially to Joan, partially to himself and the situation at large.

Leaned back like Joan, closing his eyes as well.

She’s right, he thought. My head hurts, too.

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know,” Rudd said.

“Everything?” JC pressed. “No lies, no subterfuge?”

“Bring in a lawyer and a video camera,” he said, looking up at the two of them, his hands zip-tied to the metal chair, the only furniture in the basement of the house they rented in Berlin.

“Bring in a stack of bibles. Lie detector, sodium pentothal, whatever you need to make yourself feel better.”

“Why the change of heart?” Joan asked.

“Because he’s a boy scout,” Rudd said to her, nodding his head to JC. “All the actors in this particular iteration of the game, he’s the one least likely to put a bullet in my head. And if it takes me confessing all the horrible shit I’ve done to make him happy, then I’ll do it.”

JC walked away from the man, not wanting him to see his reaction. He wasn’t wrong. Although the man would eventually die, JC would give him as much time as he could in order to get answers for both the survivors of the people he murdered as well as the depth and level of Grey and The General’s exposure on the London Incident. Bannister believed them to be behind the entire incident — ordering Rudd to murder Stella Daniels and contracting with the terrorist Khaled to kidnap Ambassador Ellsworth, as well as every other thing that stemmed from those two major decisions, including the damage to the Tower Bridge.

But he needed proof. Both for himself, Herb Daniels, Stella’s father, and for the US government in the form of Senator Holstrom. He couldn’t get Grey pushed out of his Secretary position with just JC’s suspicions. They needed to get him as much rock-solid proof as he possibly could.

“Alright,” JC said, turning back to the man, the single incandescent bulb hanging above him making the rest of the room dark, forcing Rudd to squint to see someone just beyond the range of the bulb. “We’ll get a lawyer in here, put you on a lie detector, jack you full of sodium pentothal and see what we can get out of you.”

“Great,” Rudd said. “I recommend Ricci, Takamoto, Meier and Nilsson.”

JC froze. That was Jacob Meier’s Firm.

“Why that one?”

“Because they’re my lawyers,” Rudd said with a smile. “Before I went to Bora Bora I flew up to Paris, to their Paris office, and gave a wide-ranging deposition.” His smile getting bigger as JC stepped into the light, his surprise clear on his face. “Call them up, get whoever you want from the firm in here. They can corroborate the information I give you with what I recorded in the deposition.” Shrugged. “Backs up what I say.”

“Why?” JC asked. Leaving out the specifics, letting Rudd answer what he felt best.

“Because I want to live as long as possible,” he said with another shrug. “I figure the best way to do that is help you get what you want.”

“And you know what that is?” Joan growled.

Rudd looked at her, his face hardening. “You want to kill me where I sit,” he said to her. “But he’s after a bigger range of justice than just for Stella Daniels. So yeah, I think I know what he wants.” Turned back to JC. “You want Grey. You want The General. You want them roasting on a spit. Ruined forever.”

JC waited. Wanting the man to say the words. He didn’t. Not yet.

“You can provide that?”

Rudd smiled.

“You’re damn right I can.”

JC stared at him, looking for any hint or sign that the man wasn’t telling the truth.

He saw none.

I need Jacob, he said to himself. That man’s a natural born bullshit detector. Smiled.

“Alright, Rudd,” he said. “I’ll call your firm for you. See who they send.”

Rudd shook his head. “I ain’t doing it here.”

“What?” Joan said, stepping forward, all stored violence, action a millisecond away.

Rudd turned to her. “I’m not giving you any more information here.” Turned back to JC. “We’ll do this at my firm’s offices. I hear they’re all fairly secure, thanks to you.”

JC’s decision was made in less than a second. “Okay,” he said. Stepped forward, shoulder to shoulder with Joan, boxing Rudd in. “But you screw with me on this and I let her go to work. Lawyer or no lawyer, video camera or no video camera. Clear?”

Rudd looked up at Joan. The confidence on his face lessened a shade or two when he saw the eagerness for his blood on her face. He looked back to JC and nodded.

“Say it,” Joan growled.

“This is on the up and up,” Rudd said to JC. “I swear to you.”

JC searched his prisoner’s face for several seconds before nodding once and turning for the door. The soles of his shoes scraped against the rough concrete of the basement. He heard the unmistakable but unexpected slapping sound of a fist connecting with flesh. He turned to see Joan still standing over Rudd, the man leaning forward to spit blood on the ground between his feet.

“Understand one thing, Rudd,” she said as the man felt his teeth with his tongue, searching for breakage. “You think JC holds my leash, restrains me.” She gripped Rudd’s chin, jerking his face up towards her. “I allow him to.”

She shoved her hand forward, wrenching Rudd’s chin and face forward then walked to the door, passing JC. She glanced at him as she passed, winking once, her face still a mask of anger.

God, I love her, he said to himself as he followed her out the door.

CHAPTER 20

PROBLEMS

The General's skeleton office in the outskirts of Baltimore, close enough to DC to be influential but far enough away to benefit from lower rent prices, was quickly becoming a hive of activity for the growing triad between he, Grey and Williams.

Despite The General's desire to keep Williams at arm's length as much as possible, the man was more and more a fixture at the offices and in meetings. It made sense on one level. The man had access and contacts far beyond The General's own, despite the man being out of the game for more than six months. But at the same time, The General knew it was dangerous.

Ingrassia would find out sooner or later, especially if he was actively monitoring and watching Williams. Which meant they needed to get done what needed to be done sooner rather than later and cover their tracks as best as they could.

Jenkins had sourced cellphones that not only masked their locations but also digitally altered the voices of the people using them, making it harder for the NSA to track their phone calls. Since voices couldn't be recognized, a series of daily passcodes were worked up for the three lions, as they began calling themselves, in order to know who they were actually talking to.

But that didn't mean The General was happy with everything.

"Tell me again what's happening with the target?" he asked Williams yet again. Or at least he thought it was Williams. He'd called him on his encrypted phone and the voice on the other end had given the correct passcode. It put The General more on edge than comforted him.

"It's being taken care of," Williams said. "Three teams of four, all certified out to fifteen hundred meters."

"Alright," The General said, hanging up.

"Any problems, sir?" Jenkins said, walking in to the office after a brief knock and seeing his face.

The General shook his head briefly and said nothing. Jenkins deposited the files he brought in and left without a word.

There's all kinds of problems, he said to himself. But not the kinds of problems that can be solved with a sniper rifle. Shook his head. "Like others haven't tried that," he said to the empty room.

He picked up his phone. He was a man of action, not used to hiding and waiting. There were other ways to deal with the problems he was facing.

He. Not Grey. Not Williams. Me and me alone, he said to himself as the phone rang and rang.

CHAPTER 21

WHEN DOES HE DIE?

JC stood in the expansive kitchen of the Berlin safe house. The former occupants had, apparently, been foodies on some level. The place was decked out with restaurant-quality equipment of every kind imaginable. Just off the kitchen was a large dining area with a long rustic table with bench seats. The benches had been moved against the wall, the team bringing chairs from other rooms to make it more comfortable.

Still, it provided seating for more than a dozen. The planning for their next steps was still being put together and the kitchen, as much as anywhere else in the house, was a good place to take care of it.

“You’re sure he doesn’t know about your connection to Jacob?” Mr. Douglas asked JC again.

“He has to,” Duke answered for JC. “Somewhere it’s public record, so it’s just a matter of opposition research. He’s found out and is using it to his advantage.” Shrugged. “No harm in it, as far as I can see.”

“Might even help us,” Max said. Although his part of the job was over, he stuck around to help out, claiming he was taking a few vacation days to finish up with Rudd. Nobody objected because they could always use an extra set of eyes and trigger fingers.

“If he’s already got a recorded deposition to double-check against?” Theo said. “If the answers he gives us are supported by his previous deposition, that’s all the better for us.”

JC nodded. He saw the wisdom in it but something about it bothered him. Couldn’t put his finger on it, but it did. But right now, he had other things to discuss.

“Vedika,” he said, turning to the Treasury agent. Duke, Vedika and Theo had shown up when JC and Joan were down in the basement with Rudd. “Do you have enough to bring Grey down?”

She nodded, more positive than their meeting in Holstrom’s backyard. “I took a look as we were coming over here,” she said, tapping the file of papers in front of her. “This details tens of millions of dollars between numbered accounts across the world. Nothing identifying, but if we can pin the accounts we accessed to Grey, then he’ll have to explain the sources of the money.”

“Can’t he just say it was State Department money?” Joan asked.

“No way,” Vedika said. “There are clear rules in place for all governmental agencies in the handling of money. While some of our friends,” she continued, nodding at Mr. Douglas, “may flout these, State Department is very clear. Everything requires transparency.” She tented her right hand on the file. “This isn’t.”

“Can we pin it on him?” Max asked. “Definitively?”

Vedika glanced at Theo. “Yes,” he said. “Every account requires a signature card and a handprint. We’ve got copies of those.” He stopped speaking and looked at Mr. Douglas.

“And they match Grey’s,” Mr. Douglas said. “We don’t know where the money came from, but the fact that it was either residing in or transitioning through his account is going to be more than difficult to explain.”

“We still need a face for this,” Vedika said, jumping back in to the conversation.

JC nodded. The wisdom of having a lawyer to present the information and guide the listeners

through it was solid. He had an idea of who to use but he didn't want to bring it up just yet.

"We'll get it taken care of." Paused. "Next," turning to Duke, "tell me about your troubles in Geneva."

They had given JC a quick rundown on what happened, but not everyone had heard it. He wanted it at least touched on in front of everyone there. Especially Mr. Douglas.

Duke nodded. Serious. "Two two-man teams on the street, one team of four in a car. Car rolled up blasting, street teams flanked us."

"Could you ID them?" Joan asked.

Duke shook his head. "No passports or anything. Didn't have time to take pictures of the dead. The one survivor didn't give us anything."

"You took a hostage?" Mr. Douglas said with a smile.

"Damn skippy," Theo said. "Someone starts playin' OK Corral I want to know who the hell's starting shit."

His serious face made everyone chuckle, including Joan.

JC stood, going to the refrigerator for a bottle of water. Leaned against it after taking a sip.

"You run his face or prints?"

Duke shook his head. "We did, but nothing definitive came back. Former Army, fell off the grid about four years back."

"Discharged?"

"Naww," Duke said. "His term was up, so he didn't re-enlist."

JC looked at his friend. There was something he wasn't saying. Unlike him. JC decided to move on, choosing to ask Duke later instead of provoke a confrontation in front of everyone.

"Alright, on to the elephant in the room," he said, coming back and sitting on one of the benches against the outside wall, the curtains behind him drawn tight. "Bora Bora," he said to Mr. Douglas. "What the hell?"

Everyone chuckled. "Damn near shit myself over that," Nigel said. "Again."

JC was glad for the break in tension. Allowed him to watch Mr. Douglas more carefully. Nothing so far hinted to him that the man was anything but on the up and up. But there was always a first time.

"Sorry 'bout that," Mr. Douglas said to Nigel. "I'll make it up to you."

"Unlimited account with Brooks Brothers?"

"Something like that," he said, turning to JC. "Got word of a Panamanian-flagged freighter transporting aircraft parts," he continued, making air quotes around the last two words. "Only problem is the ports of call have no aircraft industries to speak of. In other words, something was up. By the time we had *our* drone checking it out, *their* drone was already in flight, heading towards Tahiti."

"And you didn't call us right away?" Joan asked.

"Sorry, honey," Mr. Douglas said, "but your little vacation in Bora Bora was neither officially sanctioned nor the only one in the area, so no, I didn't know it was after you guys until it was almost too late."

"Call me honey again," Joan said. "Do it. Call me honey one more time."

JC could tell she was joking, but most of the others couldn't. *I wish others got her jokes*

sometimes, he said to himself. *But then again, if they did, she wouldn't be Joan, baby.*

"You figure out who was on the stick?" JC asked, diffusing the mistaken tension in the room.

Mr. Douglas shook his head. "We're investigating, but Tahitian authorities aren't too forthcoming with information. Until we get our hands on the wreckage?" He raised his shoulder with his hands.

Dammit, JC said. He didn't believe Mr. Douglas was being untruthful, but he wanted to know who was after them. It didn't feel like Grey or The General, although he couldn't put his finger on it.

"Rudd," Joan said. "When does he die?"

Back on that track, JC muttered in his head. Calling me on the carpet in front of others? Not cool.

"When I say," JC said, "and not before." Harsher than he wanted, but it needed to be done. Paused, letting the sting dissipate. "We need to call his lawyer and arrange a meeting there."

"Not here?" Max said.

"He won't talk unless we're in his lawyer's offices."

"We could make him." Theo said with a smile and a wink at Joan. Joan rolled her eyes.

"No," JC said. "I want him comfortable and talking, not pulling teeth to get the info."

"Literally?" Vedika asked.

The rest of the team chuckled but nobody told her that her fears were wrong.

JC pulled his phone from his pocket. Searching for the number for Ricci, Takamoto, Meier and Nilsson's main office number in Berlin.

His phone vibrated in his hand, the ringtone a synth pop-song from the eighties.

Everyone stared at him as he looked up at Duke.

"My bad," Theo said. "I thought the ringtone would be funny."

"Who's calling?" Joan asked.

JC glanced down as the pop-song loop continued. He didn't answer Joan, just slid the icon to the left, raising the phone to his ear.

"Hey, man," he said. "Kinda surprised to hear from you."

"Yeah, well," Jacob Meier said. "I hope you can forgive me. Kinda left you in the lurch."

"Yeah," JC said. "Lots of unfinished business."

"Can't finish business if I'm in a jail cell or disbarred," Jacob said. "I hope you understand."

JC did. He figured the man was under an unholy amount of pressure to revoke their working partnership. He held no ill will towards the man. Instead, he had the idea in the back of his head that, should the current troubles and leverage being used against him were to go away, they might re-start their working relationship. And friendship.

"I do," JC said, being honest instead of dancing around the issue as was his first inclination. He paused, waiting for the reason for the call. Something told him it wasn't just coincidence.

"Listen, I'd like to hire you for a job," Jacob said after a beat.

"Alright," JC said, looking up at Joan. "What kind of job is it?"

"Protection and transportation detail," Jacob said. "High-risk principal, good chance of someone taking action against him."

"Who is it and what's their current location?" JC asked.

Jacob paused. "Funny thing about that," he said slowly.

"Let me guess," JC said, shaking his head as his eyes passed over the confused faces of the people in front of him.

"Yeah?" Jacob said.

"Nathan Rudd," JC said. Not a question.

"Yeah," Jacob said.

CHAPTER 22

MAYBE THE CHAIR

JC chose to bring Nathan Rudd to the law offices of Ricci, Takamoto, Meier and Nilsson in the most efficient way possible: hard and fast. Two armored SUVs, both sourced from the CIA's motor pool courtesy of Mr. Douglas, were used, Nigel driving one, Theo driving the other. Theo's was in front and his team consisted of Duke, Vedika, Max and Mr. Douglas. Nigel's SUV held JC, Joan Cespedes and Nathan Rudd. While Theo drove in front, Nigel took up the rear. It wasn't ideal. JC would have preferred more vehicles, more people and heavier artillery. But they were going to a lawyer's office, not heading into battle.

The streets of Berlin, while crowded during the spring, summer and early fall, were mostly grey and deserted in the late afternoon this close to winter. Cars, of course, were plentiful, but people wandering around outside were kept to a minimum, a result of the cold and the rain.

This was good for Bannister. The assaults in both Bora Bora and Geneva, while incorporating a mobile aspect, were primarily based around foot soldiers. While this was no guarantee any impending attack in Berlin would follow the same pattern, it was something to hold onto when you had no idea how many attackers, or where they were from or how they would be coming.

Or, more importantly, who was sending them.

JC kept going around and around in his mind, trying to figure out not only who was behind them, but why?

If it was Grey alone, he'd likely follow similar patterns as in London or China. If it was The General, his tactics would be easily identifiable as well. But these attacks felt different and he couldn't put his finger on the reason why.

The other side of the coin — how did their pursuers find them? Only a handful of people knew where they were going and most of them were in these two vehicles. Perhaps they were tracking Rudd, waiting for JC and his crew to show up, but that wouldn't explain the attack on Duke, Theo and Vedika in Geneva. If they were watching his accounts and attacking whomever might have access to them somehow, that might explain it as well. But wouldn't they need to be watching all of Grey's accounts in all banks? Which would indicate Grey had knowledge, but he most likely didn't have the manpower.

The General?

JC compartmentalized the problem as Nigel said, "We're here" over his shoulder, pulling up to a stop behind Theo's SUV outside a non-descript office building in the heart of Berlin's financial district. The building, built in the immediate aftermath of the destruction from World War II, had no underground parking. Entrance and exit would be by the front doors only as the back doors were even more restrictive. Rudd, along with everyone else, had been given a ballistic vest with ceramic chest and back plates, but it wouldn't do much good against a half-decent sniper and a simple hunting rifle.

JC glanced around as he got out, looking up at the windows in the buildings surrounding them on all sides. There were no people on the street immediately around them, but every window was a potential death sentence. Cespedes and Joan did the same thing, both looking at JC and shaking their head grimly.

“Like fish in a barrel,” Cespedes said as he walked by, his CIA-supplied sniper rifle with a folding stock in a long bag he carried over his shoulder.

JC said nothing because the man wasn’t wrong. They just hustled Rudd and the entire team into the building, save Nigel. He was tasked with watching the vehicles and ensuring they were safe and running when the team came out.

As they walked through the glass and steel doors to the building and were ushered to the elevators by someone claiming to be sent from Jacob Meier directly, JC breathed a sigh of relief. Paranoia was a real danger in this business. But you had to control the fear, not let it control you. As soon as you did, it was time to retire.

And he wasn’t quite ready to retire just yet.

The elevator opened up and JC saw the face of an old friend inside.

“Jacob,” he said as he ushered Rudd and the rest of the team inside. “I am surprised to see you here.”

“I was in London on business,” Jacob said as they rode up to the ninth floor. “Thought it prudent to visit.” Paused as the rest of the team were silent in the crowded elevator. “Besides, we have more than a few things to discuss.”

Jacob was right. They had many things to discuss.

Seven hours and lots of coffee later and Nathan Rudd’s deposition was finally finished.

Although it wasn’t exactly a deposition as there was no opposing council, JC and his team played that role. They grilled Rudd about everything they could think of. The murder of Stella Daniels. The murder of Larry Patterson. Who ordered them, who carried them out, who knew and when. What was the involvement of both The General and Secretary of State Grey?

When they were done, his own lawyer began asking further questions JC and his team hadn’t thought of. After they were done, everyone took a break for another group of lawyers to comb over. As Joan, Duke and Theo took lead securing Rudd and watching the people coming in and out of the secured office, JC and Jacob stepped into a different secure office.

After the teams of lawyers double-checked Rudd’s initial statements in Paris to his statements in Berlin, triple-checking any inconsistencies and following up with more questions, they presented the information to Jacob. After fifteen minutes of looking over their final report, Jacob stood, beckoning JC to follow.

As they walked down the stone-tiled floor, past empty offices with frosted glass walls, the rest of the team filed in behind them. Jacob pushed the door to the conference room Rudd was in. He didn’t bother sitting down, just walked to the head of the table and slapped the file down.

“All this is true?” Jacob asked.

“Every word,” Rudd said.

“Can you corroborate these claims?” Jacob asked.

“I detailed the ones I could during the deposition,” Rudd said. “Some of them I cannot and I made clear to note that when I discussed them.”

Jacob took a deep breath. JC involuntarily did the same as well as half the team arrayed around them. JC needed to hear one more thing. Well, two actually, and he hoped Jacob was getting ready to ask the first and then tell him the second.

“Would you be willing to testify to these statements in a court of law?” Jacob said, slowly

and clearly.

“You’re damn right I will,” Rudd said without missing a beat. “I want the record clear. I am guilty of many things, but those sonsabitches put it all together. I want them to fry.”

Jacob exhaled, as did JC and the half of the team holding their breaths. The elder lawyer stood and turned to JC.

“Will it work?” JC asked. “Is Grey going down?”

“He president will be telling him he’s fired before Rudd’s two hours in,” Jacob said. “He’ll be lucky if he isn’t arrested by the end of the day.”

“And The General?” Joan asked.

Jacob turned to her and nodded. “He’ll get life in prison,” he said, “and if *we’re* lucky, maybe the chair.”

JC smiled. Finally a feeling of relief washed over him, a feeling he’d been waiting for since he couldn’t remember when. That was the second thing he needed to hear and Jacob hit it out of the park. It looked like things might be going his way.

As the team around him smiled and did their best to keep their congratulations low-key. No mention was made of what would happen to Rudd, but nobody expected him to be a free man ever again. And there was still the matter of

CHAPTER 23

FROM START TO FINISH

His phone buzzed next to him. He clicked the button on the wire of the ear piece, connecting the call.

“I’m ready,” he said to the wordless question.

“Good,” the man said. “We should have confirmation shortly.”

He hung up. The man would call back when there was a positive ID. Although, truth be told, he had no doubt. The man had never been wrong before.

He looked through the scope of his rifle again. It was like shooting fish in a barrel.

Rudd walked in the middle of JC’s team. While everyone else was armed, they were erring on the side of prudence and keeping their weapons concealed. Despite the presence of high-ranking CIA and Department of Treasury agents, their operation was so far off the books they would likely be rendered to an unfriendly nation for unfriendly questioning should they be caught.

JC hung back, slow-walking with Jacob to the vehicles. As they passed through the doors, JC scanned the area, saw no threat and stopped. He leaned in to his friend and former lawyer’s ear.

“How’s the investigation into The Mexican’s situation progressing?” JC asked. After killing the Bolivian drug lord known as The Mexican, JC found stacks of legal papers in a secret safe representing ownership in dozens, even hundreds of legitimate businesses. He’d passed the papers on to Jacob to quietly investigate the nearly unbelievable windfall.

“I was wondering when you’d ask,” Jacob said, turning his body to his friend. “We’re about halfway through. It looks like you’ll be in possession of about a billion in annual revenue if things continue as they have so far.”

JC closed his eyes and sighed. He wasn’t happy about it. He knew owning that put a gigantic target on his back from not only bad guys of all types but also governments. Most importantly it put him right in the crosshairs of The General who felt half or more belonged to him. He’d kill JC not only to get it but also for tricking him into believing it didn’t exist.

“As soon as you get it sorted, I want it divested,” JC whispered to Jacob. “Donate the money anonymously to somewhere that will do some good.”

“You don’t want any of it?”

“Not a penny,” he said. The matter resolved in his mind, he took out his phone as he began to walk forward again. He needed to update Herb Daniels on their progress. JC tried to keep him updated as much as he could. Didn’t want to leave the man in the dark but didn’t want to feed any unrealistic hopes of finding the men responsible for his daughter’s murder. As the phone call connected, JC finally felt like he had some real, verifiable, legitimate good news to tell the man.

“Take him.”

“Yes, sir.”

The bullet, specially chosen to do as much damage and create as large of an exit cavity as possible, flew from the barrel of the rifle at speeds in excess of two thousand feet per second. It impacted Nathan Rudd right in the middle of his forehead, at an extreme downward angle, expanding, turning into a flower-shaped rotating mass of lead and copper. As the jacket peeled back with the lead of the core, it tore through Rudd’s midbrain, his medulla and eventually, in the course of a millisecond, nearly severed the man’s brain stem in half before it exited his body, continuing its path and lodging in the concrete below and behind him.

Rudd stopped, rigid, his body freezing from the shock. JC, walking in the back with Jacob, saw the lower half of the man’s head explode backwards. As he drew his pistol from its holster on his waist, he saw Cespedes already had his rifle free and pointed at a window high in the building opposite them.

“NO!” JC yelled, knowing that even if Cespedes hit the person he believed responsible for the shooting, his bullet might well pass through the target, through the ceiling and into the floor above, injuring or killing an innocent citizen and greatly compromising their position.

As Rudd fell to the sidewalk the sound of the shot rebounded off the buildings of glass and steel, not unlike an artificial canyon, making the origin of the sound nearly impossible to discern. The rest of the team drew their weapons, looking for the source of the attack. JC stepped in front of Jacob in the off chance that the shooter would risk more than one shot, but he knew it unlikely even as he put his body in the line of fire. There was only one target and he was already lying on the ground, bleeding and twitching, but dead.

Cespedes ran towards the entrance of the building directly across the street. Cars honked and screeched to a stop, the short Bolivian sliding over the hood of a BMW as it slammed on its brakes, narrowly missing him. Duke, Theo and Max ran after him, barking orders, dividing up the area they needed to search.

It was noble but within three minutes they were walking back, pissed at the escape of their quarry. JC would have been very surprised if they caught the person. This was a professional hit from start to finish.

As the boys came back to the waiting SUV and the sirens approached in the distance, one of Jacob’s assistants exited the front door of their building. Joan stepped forward, protecting both JC and Jacob, but a kind word of thanks from Jacob had her standing down.

The assistant handed JC a briefcase.

“That has copies of both recorded depositions,” Jacob said, “in addition to the report my staff prepared. Transcripts of Rudd’s testimony are being prepared and will be in your email’s inbox by the time you land in the US.”

JC nodded. “I’ll take it all to Holstrom,” he said, not knowing anyone else who might be able to use it.

“Without a living witness it won’t stand up much in a court of law, but it’s legitimate enough to get Grey wobbly.” Paused. “Vedika’s reports should be enough to push him over the edge. Avery will be on the next flight out from London, temporarily reassigned to our New York office until this matter is resolved. She’ll be ready to go where and when you need her to help out.”

JC thanked his friend, but he was still stunned. The victory that was so close at hand seemed

to be flowing out of his grasp.

Jacob put his hand on JC's shoulder. "You want Grey?" he asked.

"Yes," JC said, coming back to himself.

"This will get him for you," Jacob said. "It's no slam dunk and it won't be as fast as you want, but in the right hands, Grey will be out of a job." Paused. "Trust me, James."

JC and the team were in their vehicle and driving back to the safe house two minutes later.

"Helluva thing," Nigel said. "How could they know we were there?"

"That's a damn good question," Joan said.

JC thought he had an answer to the how. But the who was still eluding him.

The call came in two hours later.

"I'm clear," the voice said. "Target eliminated."

"Good," the Ted Williams said. "Never call me again."

The shooter, a man named Fraenkel, hung up the phone. "That man is a consummate professional," Williams said absently.

"What was that honey?" his wife said, passing through the living room on the way to the laundry room.

"Oh, nothing," Williams said, taking the back off his phone, removing the SIM card and the battery and stuffing all the pieces in his pocket. "I'm heading to the club," he said loudly to his wife. "Forgot my nine iron and I need it in the morning."

"Drive safe," his wife's voice drifted to him through their split-level ranch-style home. "See you soon."

As he pulled his three-year old Honda Pilot from the garage, he was plotting out the stops he would make along the way. Three in total. One to dispose of the SIM card, another for the battery and the third for the phone's body. The last one was off the beaten path, down near the Potomac River. The hammer on the seat next to him would come in handy when he was breaking the phone into pieces, the remains to be chucked into the depths of the river, never to be found.

"Phase one complete," he muttered to himself as he merged from an onramp into the late evening traffic of Alexandria, Virginia. "Time to initiate phase two." He smiled. "Then phase three."

CHAPTER 24

TELL ME THE PATH

JC was getting antsy.

It had been a week since an unknown sniper blew a hole in Nathan Rudd's head, cutting off any chance of the man ever being able to testify to his involvement in the London Incident and, more importantly, the depth of General Marvin O. Robinson, retired, and Secretary of State Russell Grey's knowledge of and subsequent involvement in the same incident.

The trip home had been subdued. Nigel elected to return to Austria and the employ of Baroness Bianca Strasser and her man friend, former Ambassador Norman Ellsworth. He invited Duke to come visit his father, but David Ellison Ellsworth, AKA Duke, declined. There was too much to do and he was sure his bosses at the CIA wouldn't take kindly to a vacation when he hadn't even been working there for a year.

Herb Daniels, the money man and financial backer for their operation, was grateful for JC's report and said he'd send more money when he could. JC knew that flow would dry up sooner rather than later. The man may have wanted the big men in the operation, but JC still was keeping that info close to the chest. He didn't want Daniels going off half-cocked and ruining what was already done.

Besides, the best JC could figure, every time over the past week or so it felt like their enemy was one step ahead of them coincided with phone calls he made to Daniels, giving him updates on their progress. He didn't think the man was secretly colluding with Grey and The General. He just felt there was a leak around him - likely an electronic listening device planted by someone who suspected him of coordinating the revenge for his daughter's murder.

Mr. Douglas and Duke went back to their offices in the most secretive US agency in the country. While Duke was previously assigned to a non-descript office building in Arlington, Virginia, his experience in North Korea and the good word of Mr. Douglas had brought him into the Langley building proper. He was rising fast, but what few friends he was making were quickly alienated by his meteoric rise as well as the fact that he was always gone.

Vedika returned to her position in the Treasury Department, her boss retroactively signing off on her vacation request after a brief conversation with Frank Ingrassia, Director of the CIA. Every other day she would travel to New York to brief Avery Ekeburgh on the details of the financial records they'd recovered, building a case in the off chance that it would need to be presented to someone sooner or later.

Max travelled separately back to his work in the DSS in London. While he enjoyed riding with JC and his crew, and gave them an open invitation to ask for help, an offer that was reciprocated, his end was done. The man responsible for the murder of Stella Daniels and Ambassador Larry Patterson, both occurring on his watch, was dead, unclaimed in a refrigeration unit in a Berlin morgue. His work was over.

Theo decided he would stay in Boston, JC's base of operations, for a little while. He had no desire to return to Los Angeles or Las Vegas and try to pull together the pieces of his family's dying business. The various federal agencies that had promised him the world then pulled the rug out from under him were still looking for their imagined pound of flesh. While Theo may

have had extra, he wasn't about to give the lying, backstabbing sonsabitches a single, greasy ounce. His words.

Joan returned to her art gallery and the fight against the Art Crimes division inside the FBI that claimed many of her original pieces were forgeries. It was a circular argument. She said the forgeries were genuine with authenticated papers of provenance. The agents investigating her claimed that even those papers were false. Joan wouldn't let them examine the papers out of her eyesight because she didn't trust them and the agents refused to perform their investigations under the watchful eye of a subject of investigation.

JC had little to do. His main business, Strong Arm Cyclery, was closed up due to an IRS investigation run amok. His employees and friends, Thomas Coletti, Vincent Mercier and Sean Killian had been out of work so long they'd been forced to start working elsewhere. His banker, Arthur Phillips, was under investigation by enough government agencies there was no way he could get within a half mile of the man without being tailed. His second business, Gorman's Machine Shop, was still operating but he stayed away. The man running it for him, a former Army machinist by the name of Mickey Sparks, was a good guy but not someone he trusted with his freedom. Besides, the machine shop was fully insulated from JC Bannister — there was absolutely no paper trail between he and it. Worst case it would be his financial line of last resort.

But after the first week went by and then the next, he grew even more antsy. The information given to him by Jacob Meier made it into the hands of Senator Chris Holstrom with the understanding that he would use it to force Grey out of office.

Every night JC and Theo watched the evening news in silence. And every night, the only mention of Secretary Grey was either a brief mention regarding the ongoing discussions with North Korea or the occasional puff piece that inevitably mentioned his "legendary libido." That always initiated a swearing streak by Theo which, while humorous, was getting them nowhere.

After the second week, JC was half out of his mind. He needed to do something, anything constructive. Decided to go for a bike ride. Took the train from near his house in Sudbury and went down to the studio loft he kept about ten minutes away from the bike shop in Newton Highlands, a suburb of Boston. Checked everything inside, including the small cache of weapons hidden in the floorboards, then took his favorite bicycle, a 1971 British Racing Green Raleigh Superbe in perfect condition, down from the wall and headed over to Coletti's house.

By car it took ten minutes from JC's loft to the bike shop and another five minutes to get to Coletti and Mercier's houses. The two literally lived right next to each other. He didn't call ahead, didn't want to disturb them or create a sense of obligation if they weren't around. The weather was cool but sunny and his tweed suit, custom made in England from a textile mill in operation for more than one hundred and eighty years, kept the coolness at bay.

As JC rolled down the street, he saw Coletti up ahead, unloading his truck from a trip to some mega superstore or another. It was just after two on a Tuesday. Not the best of signs. He stopped, parked his bike to keep his friend from hearing the distinctive sound of the Raleigh three-speed hub, locked the locking front fork, pulled the frame pump from its mounting bracket and walked softly up the street.

Stopped and hid behind a tree as Coletti came back out, his back to JC as he struggled to get something from inside the truck bed. He stood, adjusted his pants and leaned back over to try again. JC jogged quickly behind him and shoved the frame pump into his ribs.

"Move and I smoke you," he growled.

Coletti froze, half leaning over the truck bed.

“It’s all good, buddy,” he said clearly, no fear in his voice.

JC laughed, stepping back. “How you doing, Tommy?”

Coletti looked over his shoulder, saw JC and stood, a smile spreading across his face.

“You gotta be careful, man,” he said, showing JC the snub-nosed revolver he palmed in his hand. “I see some dude sneaking up on me, I just might shoot first,” he continued, putting the gun back in the belly band holster hidden under his shirt.

JC smiled, not telling his friend there was no way he would be fast enough. Coletti was strong and was a trained soldier, but he’d been out of the game too long. It wouldn’t be a fair fight.

“Wheel your bike around back, man,” Coletti said. “I’ll meet you there in a second.”

JC walked back to get his bike. Coletti hadn’t invited him into the house but to the detached garage that doubled as his workspace and man cave. Maybe Linda and the girls weren’t home. Maybe they were. But something was up. As he wheeled his bike around the side of the house, he caught the movement of a curtain. Faint, but visible.

He sighed.

“Our wives? They’re pissed, man,” Coletti said. As JC looked around the backyard, noting the changes since he last visited, Coletti prepared two cups of tea, bringing them out and opening up the garage so the two men could talk in peace and relative solitude. “I mean, why wouldn’t they be? IRS comes in and closes up our shop like that.” Shook his head. “Not what we fought for.”

JC passed ownership of the bike shop over to Coletti and Mercier legally years ago, although they still deferred to JC on bigger issues. The upstairs office was still his whenever he was there. Although they might be the owners, JC started the shop and brought them in when their lives were spiraling out of control. They claimed to owe him a debt they could never repay. JC felt the same for the two big men who saved his life by pulling him out of a burning ammo depot in Kandahar years ago.

JC nodded. Avoiding asking what he needed to ask but knowing it had to be said.

“And you guys?”

Coletti looked at him for a second, not understanding. The realization of what JC was actually asking finally filtering through, turning his face into a frown of derision. “Oh, come on, man,” he said, chuckling at the absurdity of it. “You don’t even gotta ask, brother.”

JC nodded. Coletti called exactly four men in the world his brother. Mercier, JC and his two actual blood brothers, even though he rarely spoke to his blood that often.

“I have to say, I am sorry about the mess I brought to your door, Tommy,” JC said, sipping the tea. Enjoying the time with his old friend. “IRS only came knocking because of me.”

Tommy smiled and chuckled again. “Screw ’em.”

JC joined in his laughter, but he knew the truth. Knew the reason why he was having tea in the backyard instead of the house. Coletti and Mercier would give up everything they could for him. Their loyalty would never diminish, but the extent they would be willing to go to show that loyalty was shrinking.

He understood. Wives, kids, mortgages, car loans, braces. Real world stuff. It made their

days as warriors seem so far removed from their own lives.

No, that wasn't right. Simply that the things they were defending was changing. No longer needing to protect their squadmates and brothers in arms, they were turning to their own wolf pack.

He smiled and stood, looking around the garage, examining the man's meticulous workbench. Glad to see his friend doing so well. When he first hired him, the man's PTSD was nearly consuming his life. Now he was an expert bike mechanic.

"You working?"

"Here and there," he said. "Sparks is busy these days. Mercier and I are tag-teaming it at the machine shop." Smiled. "Vargas is full-time there, you know? Started community college this fall."

"Why didn't he tell me?" JC asked, surprised. Vargas was the captain of the bike shop's terrible bike team. JC promised the man a full ride wherever he wanted to go.

Coletti sipped his tea then shrugged. "Wanted to get some electives under his belt first, show you a track record before he came to you with his hand out."

JC nodded, looking for a delicate way to ask the next question. Just jump in, son.

"Did you clean out Gorman's?" JC asked. Coletti, Mercier, Gorman and JC built a custom hiding spot for a cache of weapons and money in the back area of the machine shop years ago. It didn't hold much but what it did hold would get them twenty plus years of federal prison time.

Coletti nodded. "Soon as the IRS goons were busy cleaning us out, Mercier and I moved everything to Bobby's old airfield. It's buried behind the pump house."

JC nodded, standing at the open garage door, looking out past the house to the street beyond. Relishing the feeling that nobody was currently gunning for him. No hit squad likely to run up at this very moment, in this suburban enclave outside of Boston, and do their dirty work. He sighed. Gorman. Bobby. How many other people gone? Shook his head.

This isn't your life, man, he said to himself. Maybe someday, but not yet.

Coletti stood and stretched. "You want me to see if Mercier's home? Have a right proper reunion," the man said, aping the bad British accent the two men often did.

JC smiled. "Naww, another time." Set down the tea, walking over to Coletti. Clapped the man on the shoulder. "You tell me the path and I'll walk it with you, brother." Paused. "Or let you walk it with others."

Coletti opened his mouth to say something when the back door of the house flew open, Coletti's wife Linda running down the stairs to the patchy lawn and halfway to the garage before she stopped.

Coletti was moving towards her, JC's Glock 23 already in his hand, scanning for danger.

"PD just called," Linda said, her Bostonian accent strong. "It's the bike shop. It's on fire."

CHAPTER 25

LET ME DEAL WITH THAT

The chief on the scene told JC the four-alarm fire started somewhere in the back of the shop. It spread quickly, accelerating through the dryness of the old wood, the chemicals used to clean and degrease bicycle parts making it spread faster and hotter than it normally would.

Inexplicably, the chief said, a secondary fire started at the front of the store at nearly the same time. While there were no witnesses and the video cameras in the area were either looking elsewhere or somehow disabled, there was the sound of breaking glass and a loud whooshing sound reported by nearby stores.

“Honestly,” the man said to JC and Coletti, “it looks deliberate.” Shook his head. “Damn lucky nobody was inside.”

“We’ve been shut down for a few months,” Coletti said.

“Well, then I imagine the investigators are gonna want to have more than a few words with you.” He shrugged as the two men shot him dirty looks. “Wouldn’t be the first time an ailing business has an accident,” he said, using air quotes around the word accident.

Coletti and JC said nothing as the man walked away, just stared at the smoking ruins across the street from them. Fire trucks filled the street although the firemen were putting hoses and equipment back on the trucks now that the fire was contained. News trucks were held back on either end of the block but they wouldn’t be detained for long. Sooner or later they would come and film the destruction for the evening news shows that were on in a just over an hour.

“Who was it?” Coletti said. Voice even but the anger clear. “The General?”

JC shook his head. “Not sure,” he said truthfully. “Not really his style.”

“Grey?”

“He ain’t got the nutsack for this,” JC said. “Not on US soil.”

Coletti said nothing for a beat, his anger growing with the heaves of his chest.

“We need to find out who, boss,” he finally growled. “And make sure they don’t walk away from this.”

JC put his arm around the man in the deepening dusk, knowing Coletti’s tears were from frustration and anger. “I will,” JC said to him, holding his own anger inside, tamping it down to avoid his friend feeding on it. “You take extra care of your family. Jacob’s firm still your lawyers?”

Coletti nodded.

“Then they’ll cover you with this investigation. Guide you through the insurance claims.”

Commotion near the fire chief’s response vehicle drew their attention. Most the firemen gathered around it then sprinted away, doubling their pace on loading the trucks and getting out of the area.

“What the...?” Coletti said.

A knot appeared in the pit of JC’s stomach. *There are no coincidences.*

“Stay here,” he said to Coletti as he jogged over to the chief’s truck, the ground still slippery

from the water and fire-retardant foam.

“What’s going on, Chief?” JC asked the man.

The guy gave JC a quick once over before saying, “Busy night. Machine shop about ten minutes away just caught fire. Witnesses put people inside the structure.”

He hopped in his truck and sped away as JC ran back to Coletti, the voice in his head saying “no no no no” again and again.

The young man walked back up the street in the dark of the night. JC and Coletti watched him as he came, the question topmost in their minds answered by the man’s face, his posture and his stomping footsteps.

“He’s gone, man,” Bruno Vargas said as he came to a stop in front of JC. “Mickey. Cops found his body, bullet hole in his head.”

Coletti swore quietly but vigorously. JC said nothing. He could tell Vargas wasn’t done.

“What else?”

The tears rolled down Bruno’s cheeks before the words came out. “Louis, too, boss,” he said, his mouth turning into a frown, the sobs for his friend and co-captain not far behind. “Shot in the head, too. Cops are saying it was a fight gone wrong, but Louis didn’t even carry a gun, man, he always went with a knife,” the words tumbling out, the loss of his two friends swamping him. His chest heaving, like Coletti’s did less than an hour ago. “He loved Mickey, boss, respected him. Wanted to be a machinist, too.” Paused as his voice broke. “His girl’s pregnant, man. They were gonna have a baby.”

He broke down into sobs as JC wrapped his arms around the young man. Absorbing his pain and, just as important, his anger. JC knew the anger is what would get Bruno in trouble more than anything else. He’d seen it before. Not in Vargas, but himself.

Let me deal with that, son, he said quietly to himself.

After hearing of the fire at a nearby machine shop, JC and Coletti jumped in Coletti’s truck and followed the firetrucks, parking a few blocks away from Gorman’s shop. The chief on site had indicated they were arson suspects. Showing up at another fire wouldn’t make them look any better and more than likely a whole lot worse.

Vargas called soon after they walked over and saw the blaze fully engulfing the shop. Surprised to hear they were close by, Vargas followed JC’s directions to their location, talking with them as the firemen did their work. The three men avoided speaking their fears. Mickey Sparks, the man who JC put in charge of the shop after his friend and teammate Gorman was murdered in Indonesia, was known to stay late and work on side projects for local people and small businesses who needed the work done but couldn’t afford full shop rates. Mickey would volunteer his time, only charging them for materials and equipment usage.

As he held Vargas, letting the young man get as much of his anger out as he could, JC’s mind kept coming back to one idea again and again.

This was no coincidence.

He didn’t need to hear a word from the fire chief. The fire was deliberate. The place had a state-of-the-art fire retardant system installed and inspected monthly. There was no way it could have burned down unless that system was tampered with.

Or if it was firebombed.

Vargas stood back, wiping his eyes and nose on the sleeve of his jacket.

Time to be the boss.

“Coletti,” he said, turning to his old friend, “take my bike back to your house, would you?” Paused, looking back at Vargas. “I’m gonna take Bruno out to Sudbury.”

“You got it, boss,” Coletti said.

“Naww,” Vargas started but JC cut him off.

“You got class tomorrow?”

“Yeah, but at two in the afternoon,” Vargas said. “I can skip it.”

“No,” JC and Coletti said in unison. “I want you to come out with me,” JC continued. “A friend of mine is staying with me I’d like you to meet.”

Coletti looked at him. “Theo,” JC said, causing Coletti to break into a smile and a laugh.

“Make sure to ask him about Honduras,” Coletti said to Vargas, JC joining him in laughter.

Ten minutes later and after JC called Vargas’s brother to let him know the young man would be safely staying out in Sudbury and the three men parted ways. Coletti took JC’s bike with him, heading back to his house to deal with the aftermath of the bike shop fire the following morning. JC and Vargas headed slowly back to Sudbury, stopping for a slice at a local pizza joint then catching the last train out to Sudbury.

Vargas wasn’t a soldier, although the Puerto Rican-born kid had a rough childhood growing up in Boston. He wasn’t used to the sudden loss that came with warfare and the life JC led. He needed to talk, to get as much off his chest as he could before he could function. And function is exactly what he needed to do. With Louis dead and the bike shop gone for good, the other young men on the team would be looking to Vargas for leadership. JC needed him prepped and ready as much as he could be overnight to lead these men. Make sure they didn’t break away and get lost like they were the day they tried robbing JC in the same machine shop that was now an arson and double-murder scene.

Four hours later and Vargas was snoring loudly on JC’s leather-covered sofa in the middle of his living room. The house had four bedrooms with bunk beds downstairs in the den and in the barn with room for over a dozen, but Theo and JC decided to let Vargas crash right where he was.

“It’s not Grey,” JC said, “and not The General,” JC said in response to Theo’s question. The two were sitting in Adirondack chairs on the front porch, JC’s cup of tea and Theo’s cup of hot chocolate keeping them warm as the temperature hovered right above freezing.

“Not his style,” Theo said. “*Our* style, but then we don’t have a private army at our beck and call.”

JC said nothing for a second, Theo’s comment churning through his brain.

“You’re right,” he said. “It is our style. And we’re pretty much always outnumbered.”

“Or looking to hit fast and achieve maximum damage before cutting out of there,” Theo said, warming to what his boss was going after.

“Almost like guerilla tactics, yeah?”

“But who would use guerilla tactics against you?”

JC stopped talking, nodding, the next step of the puzzle eluding him.

How.

How could anyone realize the bike shop and Gorman's machine shop were both connected to him? It would take surveillance on a massive scale, assigning people to watch the players involved for months and months on end, crunching massive amounts of data just to possibly find the slightest wisp of a connection.

Who had the resources for that? Or the patience.

"You know who it is?" Theo asked slowly, watching JC's wheels turn in his head.

"Not yet," JC said, leaning his head back.

Theo sipped his hot chocolate. Looking into the dark of the night beyond.

"You find out, I'll help you bring them 'round to the right side of the equation," Theo said.

JC nodded. He knew Theo was always there for him. Just like Duke and Joan. But he needed to know who was targeting them.

"I'm flying to DC in the morning," JC said. "Take the Jeep and make sure Vargas gets to class tomorrow."

Theo said nothing, just nodding in acknowledgement.

Ten minutes later and JC was heading upstairs to his room for a few hours of sleep before heading out before the sun rose for the train ride down to DC. Theo set up for the night in one of the leather club chairs in the living room to keep an eye on Vargas.

When Theo was sure JC was in for the night, he pulled out his cellphone and sent a quick text message. Hoping the person he sent it to would see it and do what needed to be done.

CHAPTER 26

MY BEST GUY

“What have you done?” Grey said.

“What do you mean?” The General asked. The picture of innocence.

Grey threw the newspaper on the coffee table in front of them. The front page detailed the fires and murders in Boston. It was making headlines across the US. The Return of the Mob was the current headline Grey was tapping on.

“This,” Grey said. “You think I don’t know Bannister runs a bike shop in Boston?” Stood and headed into the kitchen of his house in Georgetown.

The General watched him go, shaking his head slightly. Grey was losing it. He’d called The General on a regular landline this morning, screeching about the news and how The General needed to get over there right now. It had been days since he’d seen the man and the change in him shocked Marvin O. Robinson.

Grey was padding around the house in slippers and boxers, a thin grey robe wrapped around him but mostly falling open when he moved. He smelled like he hadn’t showered since The General last saw him.

It’s not a good sign, The General said to himself. The man barely made it into his office anymore. He was the Secretary of State and all he did was hang around this once-luxurious pad and diddle any girl who looked fourteen, legal or not. The place stunk and needed to be aired out.

“Where’s Daryl?” The General asked as Grey prepared a single cup of coffee for himself.

“At the office,” Grey said absently. “He’s watching things there while I run the operation from here.”

The General didn’t bother to ask what operation he was referring to and, in fact, he really didn’t care. He’d sworn off working with Grey numerous times over the past several months and every time he got suckered back in for some reason or another. And every time he regretted it.

Not anymore, he said to himself as Grey padded back to the living room, the mug of coffee spilling over its rim onto the polished hardwood floors as the man moved to fast. Grey ignored the mess.

“You want to kill Bannister?” Grey said, sitting on the edge of the sofa. “Then be smart, Marvin. Go at him with couple dozen men, split up in threes. Pen him in and shoot anything that moves inside that pen.” Paused. “Don’t start throwing firebombs through plate glass windows, man!”

The General cocked his head to the right an inch. “Are you giving me tactical advice, Russ?” he said. “Really? Did you forget how many years I was a soldier?”

Grey waved off The General’s words, the threat behind them lost on him. “We’ve got to work together, Marvin,” he said, eager and wide-eyed, his hands shaking a little. “You took out Rudd. Good job on that, by the way. Just make sure JC’s gone and then we’ll get everything we want.” Paused, sipping the too-hot coffee, grimacing from the pain. “North Korea’s about ready to sign a peace treaty and then our course is set before us.”

The General watched the man. It's something different, he said to himself. Closed his eyes as he realized what Russ's problem was. Drugs. Cocaine, meth, prescription pills, he didn't know. Never was around the stuff enough to know all the various signs. But he'd been close enough to it often enough to see when someone was under the influence.

"Listen, Russ," The General said, standing. "I think it's best we not communicate until that treaty is signed."

"Yeah, yeah," Grey said. "Operational security and all that." Standing as well, walking The General to the door. "Just be smarter, general. Don't let that spook Williams influence you too much." Leaned in for a whisper, the stench of his unbrushed teeth nearly overwhelming. "If we're not careful he'll snatch away everything we've worked so hard for."

The General nodded, giving the man various platitudes until he was out of the house. Headed for his personal vehicle, a Mercedes SL65 AMG Roadster. Headed back towards his office in Baltimore, pulling on leather driving gloves as he did. Stopped at a convenience store, picking up a stick of beef jerky and two burner phones. Opened the packages with his gloves still on, powering them up and getting them set up from the parking lot of the store.

He had two calls to make. Both short but not wanting anyone to trace them back to him just in case.

Dialed the first number on one of the phones. Waiting while it rang, careful to keep it slightly away from his face.

"Hello?"

"JC," The General said. "You got a minute?"

"Less."

"It wasn't me," The General said. "I saw the news and wanted you to know it wasn't me."

"Grey?"

The General paused for effect before he said, "I can't be sure."

"Meaning?"

"He's brought in a silent partner and I think this guy's calling the shots now."

"Who?"

"He'll kill me."

"You think I won't?"

The General said nothing, waiting as vehicles drove past on the street. The call was longer than he would like, but it was unlikely to be ever traced.

"Who's calling the shots?" JC asked. "Grey?"

"This new guy."

"You've met him?"

"No," The General lied, smiling. Paused, trying to make JC think he was agonizing over telling him what he was about to say. "Grey told me he was high up in the CIA a few years ago. That's all I know. He's taking over operations." Paused again. "I think he's angling to take over my company, too."

"It doesn't matter," JC said. "You're not gonna be around long enough to enjoy it."

The call disconnected. The General smiled. He knew JC was going to take a run at him once Grey was dead and in the ground. But giving him this other mystery man? Might delay the

inevitable for just a little longer. Give 'ol Marvin time to make a backup plan, he said to himself.

He opened the first phone, pulling the SIM card free, breaking it into two pieces, dropping one in the garbage, the other going in his pocket to be disposed of later. Broke the phone into pieces, dropping them in the trash as well. Picked up the second phone for his second call. It was a longer number and a longer and stranger ring.

He waited.

The other end picked up.

“*Da?*”

“Let me speak to Leonid,” The General said

The man on the phone responded in a stream of Russian.

“I know you speak English,” The General said over him, “so put Leonid on.”

“Hold on,” the man said in heavily accented English.

The General waited. He didn't bother to check the time. Leonid rarely slept and even when he did he wanted his men to wake him up. Especially for phone calls from his “friend.”

“Hello?” a voice said on the Russian end of the line. Soft, a little higher than the average man's voice.

“Leonid,” The General said. “Good morning.”

Leonid laughed, the greeting being an old joke between the two. “How is my friend this fine evening?” he said.

“Good.”

“But I'm guessing that's not why you called?”

“Just checking in, my friend,” The General said. “It's been awhile since we spoke.”

“As long as everything goes well, there really is no need, yes?” Leonid said. An edge creeping into his voice.

“You watch the news, yes?” The General said, falling into the Russian and general European use of the word.

“Of course,” Leonid said. “Those who do not are behind the curve.”

“Which is exactly why I'm calling.”

“I don't understand,” Leonid said flatly.

“There will be news coming out in the next few days or weeks,” The General said. “Do not worry whatever you hear. The contracts will continue.”

Leonid said nothing for several seconds. When he spoke, his voice was lower.

“I hear there are tensions between you two.”

The General gritted his teeth. Wondering who the Russian Army general turned mobster had been talking to.

“Some,” The General said, “like between all business partners from time to time.”

“And if Grey cancels the contracts?”

“Don't worry, my friend,” The General said.

“Well I am very worried!” Leonid Gazinsky bellowed, the sound coming through the phone very clearly. He said nothing for a second, speaking in a more normal tone of voice from then on. “Or to be precise, I'm concerned we backed the wrong horse.”

The General gulped, hoping the sound didn't make it over the line. He'd heard the man utter those words before and it never worked out well for the people he was referring to. Right now he hoped Leonid was talking about Grey. Let's make sure.

"We've been partners for a long time, Leonid," The General said. "From Indonesia and before. Trust me, the State Department security contracts are good business, for State and for us," The General said. "It doesn't matter who is in the top spot, they'll continue, which means you'll continue getting your twenty-five percent every month."

The General met his counterpart in the Russian army nearly two decades ago, striking up a friendship and based on discontent and greed, funneling business to each other with the corresponding kickbacks. When The General was forcibly retired from the US Army, he reached out to Leonid, offering him a silent investor partnership in The Veracious Group, The General's nascent security contracting company. It worked and was profitable for both. Unfortunately for The General, Leonid was far greedier than he could have imagined. Although he never asked for more than their agreed upon twenty-five percent, he expected the amount he received to double every year.

Leonid said nothing. Waiting for more, The General said to himself. Like always.

"The contracts will continue," he said again, "and The Secretary will be dead within weeks."

"How can you be sure?" Leonid asked.

The General smiled, looking at the traffic zooming past, thinking of the hints he dropped in his last phone call.

"Because I've got my best guy on the case."

CHAPTER 27

GO ALONG TO GET ALONG

The flight from Boston to Washington DC took just under an hour and a half. After waiting in an unnaturally long line at the car rental agency, JC was driving through the country's capital city at just after ten in the morning.

The call from The General came when he was waiting in line. He didn't believe the old warrior. Grey and The General were working together and he didn't believe the Secretary got one over on his former CO for a second.

But he couldn't figure out the truth from this end. He knew who might be able to, though, making a mental note for a second meeting right after the first meeting he was heading to was concluded.

The flight was crowded but quiet, most of the people focusing on the contents of their briefcases or their cellphones, allowing JC to close his eyes and try to figure out the approach he should take in the meeting he was currently driving to. Nothing was right. It was going to be ugly no matter how he approached it. Made a second mental note, this one to try his level best to not make matters worse than they already were.

Sighed as the traffic in front of him slowed to a crawl. The one thing that kept bothering him was the fire at Gorman's shop. Although tragic, the deaths of Mickey and Louis weren't the most alarming development. The fire and attack themselves were.

He had no doubt in his mind the two fires were deliberate. Which meant both were set to send him a message. The issue he couldn't wrap his mind around was how in the world someone outside his circle of friends was able to put the two together. The machine shop was opened by Gorman and his name was on all the paperwork, although JC was the financial backer of it. When Gorman died, JC didn't change anything on the paperwork. Gorman died in Indonesia, so for the purposes of the local government it looked like he was still the owner.

He'd been thinking about it since the fire and he'd gotten nowhere. But The General's phone call had added another piece to the puzzle. As the traffic ahead cleared he hoped his second meeting today would let him see the bigger picture.

JC opened the door and walked through, ignoring the receptionist, the heels of his shoes leaving indentations on the carpet behind him as he half-stomped through the office towards the inner office which was his real destination.

"You can't go in there, sir!" the woman said loudly to him as he passed.

"Watch me," he said, gripping the brass doorknob, turning it and throwing the door open.

Senator Chris Holstrom was sitting behind his desk in the Hart Building, silver-framed eyeglasses resting on his eyebrow ridge as he read a stack of papers. He looked up to see JC standing in front of him, fists on his hips, impeccably tailored suit looking just like he stepped out of the pages of a men's fashion magazine.

"I'm so sorry, sir, he ju-"

"It's alright, Brenda," he said to his secretary, putting the papers down on top of the stacks of

other papers on his desk. "Please close the door and don't disturb us."

"Can I offer you a drink?" Holstrom asked once the door was closed.

"You can tell me what the hell's going on, Chris," JC said. "And explain to me why Grey's still in office."

Holstrom sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"Haven't you been watching the news?"

"Every damn night," JC said. "Nothing about Grey being bounced out on his ass."

"Not that news," Holstrom said.

"I'm guessing you and I watch different channels," JC fumed, "because that's all I'm looking for these days."

"I'm being primaried," Holstrom said. "Do you know what that means?"

"Yeah, you condescending prick," JC said. "You've got a challenger. So what? Beat him back?"

Holstrom shook his head. "It's not that simple," he said. "For twenty years I've been working for the good people of South Carolina," he said. "Now some young gun's coming in, born-again conservative, getting backed by some of the richest men in the world." Shook his head. "Big money PACs financed and run by European billionaires. Trying to remake this country in their own failed image."

"Meanwhile I'm being targeted by Grey and you're sitting on your hands," JC said. "Save the stump speech for your donors or constituents, Chris." Turned, pacing the room slowly, like a lion. "Two of my people are dead. Never coming back. One left behind a wife and an unborn child."

JC stopped talking. He was on the edge of saying things that couldn't be taken back or smoothed over.

Holstrom stood, looking out the window at the late morning grey weather. "That thing in Boston?" Paused. "Sorry to hear about that."

"Yeah," JC said, trying to calm himself, remind himself that Holstrom was one of the good guys. "That."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Holstrom said. Sincere. "But I'm fighting for my political life, here, JC. They're digging into every nook and cranny of every conversation and every relationship I've ever had. Looking for dirt. Looking to judge past actions by present norms." Turned back, not sitting. "They've hired the dirtiest opposition research firm and I can't see a way where I make it out of this unscathed."

JC felt for the man. He really did. If he was out of a job or sidelined by false claims and innuendos, then the team's situation would be even more precarious.

But still.

"I can't wait around anymore," he said, "hoping your situation improves to the point where you can start in on this."

Holstrom crossed his arms, shaking his head. "If you're asking-

"I'm not asking, Chris," JC said, cutting the senator off, "I'm telling. They firebombed my bike shop. They firebombed my machine shop and killed two of my friends."

"I read the newspaper," Holstrom said. "There's no way to know-"

"Those locations have no identifiable connection to me," JC said, cutting him off again.

“Nobody should be able to find that fact out and attack both in the same night, hours apart.”

“Then how did they?”

JC began pacing again, thinking through the problem out loud. “It’s either The General or Grey.”

“They’re not working together?”

“I think their working relationship is tenuous at best,” JC said, not willing to divulge The General’s phone call earlier.

“So go after The General first,” Holstrom said with a shrug, “knock him out, then Grey.”

“Grey first,” JC said. “He’s the loose cannon.”

“And the general’s not?” Holstrom said, sitting at his desk.

“Grey’s desperate,” JC said. “He’s in the national spotlight and the dirt we’ve dug up can cripple his career. Right now The General’s a sleeping dog.”

Holstrom shook his head. “You’re wanting me to give you permission to go after the Secretary of State, JC. There is no way in hell I’m going to do that.”

“I told you before, I’m not asking.”

“You take these steps? The blowback will be monumental.”

“Then you work your political magic and get me a meeting with someone who can get me the go ahead.”

Holstrom leaned back in his chair, momentarily stunned at what JC was asking. “You really think that’s going to go like you think it will?”

JC stopped his pacing, walked over, leaning over the senator’s desk, supporting himself with his left hand. “The Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence has uncovered proof of massive financial malfeasance by the sitting Secretary of State. I’ve got a sworn deposition explicitly spelling out the man’s involvement in and ordering of the murder of two American citizens in London, people who were under his watch and command.” Each point punctuated by his right index finger pounding on Holstrom’s desk.

“That’s not-”

“Come on, Chris!” JC said, his voice rising in volume and tone. “If you can’t make political hay with that?” Shaking his head, his anger cooling into a slow burn. “Then what the hell kind of politician are you? The go along to get along kind?” JC sat in one of the chairs, letting the sting of that insult sink in. “Or are you the bulldog prosecutor from South Carolina that carried a snub-nose .44 in the courtroom? Because even though the drug dealers and gangsters put a half million dollar price on your head, you still showed up to work and put them in jail.”

Holstrom sat back, surprised. “Who told you?”

“I did my research,” JC said. Not wanting to tell him it was his wife a few short days ago at the barbecue at their house.

He smiled. “Not good enough, apparently. It was actually two million alive, half million dead.”

JC said nothing. His point was made, the hard sell out there in the open. It was time to sit it out and wait.

Holstrom nodded, leaning forward, finding a pencil and a piece of scratch paper in the mountain on his desk. “I ran into Vedika,” he said. “Told me Avery’s in New York. Give me her number and send me everything you’ve got, even the stuff you don’t want me to know about.”

Grey will be out within a month.”

“Not good enough,” JC said, folding his arms across his chest.

“This takes time,” Holstrom said, exasperated.

“You’re not looking for a conviction here, Chris,” JC said. “You’re looking to smear him with enough dirt to force him to resign or force the President to fire him.”

“Why,” Holstrom said, “so you can kill him?”

“Do you think he’ll receive justice inside the system?”

Holstrom didn’t answer.

JC knew Holstrom was on the edge of doing the right thing, the thing that JC needed him to do. All the man had to do was start raising a stink in one of the many powerful sub-committees he was a member of. But JC was tired of holding his hand and leading him to the path he should instinctively be walking.

“You do things your way, senator, and I’ll do things my way,” JC said, standing. “We’ll meet in the middle and Grey will get what’s coming to him.” Paused, walking to the door. “But make it fast because everyone on my side is in danger. Any harm comes to them because you were dragging their feet?”

JC left the threat unspoken, hanging as he opened the door and walked through it. It wasn’t a real threat. But he hoped Holstrom understood the edge behind it.

JC walked out of Holstrom’s office, Brenda the receptionist shooting daggers at his back as he walked into the marble-floored hallway, people streaming by to all kinds of meetings and government business.

He heard a low whistle, two-tone, high then falling low. Eyes scanning the crowd, a smile involuntarily coming to his face. He knew who it was before he saw her.

“Joan,” he said, finding her leaning against the wall ten yards away. She peeled herself from the wall, falling into step with him as he continued to walk. “Who told you?” Snapped his fingers. “Theo, right?”

“He was concerned,” Joan said. Her hand taking JC’s as they walked. “I’m sorry to hear about your friends.”

JC nodded, saying nothing for several steps, more grateful for her presence than he was willing to admit.

“Did you drive?” he finally asked her.

“Of course,” she said. “How the hell else was I gonna bring the arsenal?”

JC glanced at her. She wasn’t joking. He leaned over, kissing her as they walked, breaking contact before they ran into others walking around them.

“I love you,” he said. “Come on,” he continued, picking up the pace. “There’s someone else I want to talk to.”

Five minutes after JC left his office, Holstrom was dialing a number on his phone. Waited as it rang.

“Hey, you got time?” Paused. “What’s the deadline for your evening show?” “No, I don’t want it breaking news, I want it something more substantial.” Waited as the reporter in DC most sympathetic to his views checked the schedule. “Five? Great. Be at the Intelligence sub-

committee at 3.” Paused. “Yeah, but keep it under your hat, seriously.”

Hung up the phone, knowing the man had notoriously loose lips. Rumors would be all over the city in an hour and the normally uneventful meeting would be packed by three.

Picked up his phone again, dialing Brenda. “Hey, track down Vedika Singh in Treasury and get her on the phone as quick as you can.”

CHAPTER 28

WHERE OTHERS FAILED

Every operation has phases. Planning it as one continual course of action risks derailing the entire plan when something doesn't go as it should. Separating it out into distinct phases lets you compartmentalize the damage should something not go according to plan.

But everything is going exactly as it should, Ted Williams chortled silently as he teed off on the sixteenth hole. The ball sailed smoothly through the air, bouncing once, then twice, then numerous times before it rolled to a stop in the approximate location Williams was aiming for.

The other men in his group congratulated him. Middle-managers from Fortune 500 companies, making do in branch offices, claiming they enjoyed not having to fight the New York commute or the high real estate prices. They were all liars, and not very good ones, and Williams ignored them, not even acknowledging the fact they had spoken.

You don't get to the second position in the CIA without making a fair amount of enemies and a few friends along the way, Williams told himself. And no matter how loyal you are to the Agency, it's the friendships that are going to save your ass when it's in a sling. Smiled.

The entire plan was always to get Ingrassia back for firing him. The two went back too many years to justify tossing Williams out in the cold over an operation gone wrong. That's not how things are done, especially between friends. And when it's done like that, it's a fast way to make enemies. If getting back meant killing him, which it probably would in the end, then Williams was fine with that.

And what are enemies to do besides plot their rival's downfall, Williams said to himself as he strolled along the perfectly manicured grass, the sun coming out finally after too many days of grey. It wasn't warm, but it was a welcome sight. Weaker minds would take it as a sign Williams's plan was going well. He took it for what it was — an unconnected event, but one to be appreciated.

Bannister was the start. He was the one who took down Del Stevens. Sure, Williams had given the go ahead when forced. He'd even put out the green light on Stevens before Bannister ever showed up. It was all part of the job and the plan to get their own in-house drug cartel in South America. He and Ingrassia discussed it years before

But when Bannister succeeded where others failed, it created all kinds of problems for Williams. Uncomfortable questions being asked that he was forced to answer. Investigations opening that shone light on places better left in the dark.

While Williams was pushed out and left to wither on the vine, Bannister kept going. Kept making more enemies for himself. And although Williams was no longer in the day-to-day mix, he still kept his finger on the pulse of the world. Watching, waiting for his opportunity.

And then Secretary Grey and The General stepped knee-deep into a river of shit, he said to himself, chuckling softly so as not to concern the men walking behind him.

The London Incident, from start to finish, was brilliant but executed poorly. Williams followed every aspect of it, tracing news reports back, getting to know the players from afar, watching the aftermath as it played out. It was a cluster bomb of international proportions. And

when Grey got lucky and hung onto his career by the skin of his teeth with the North Korean situation, Williams knew it was his time to step in.

“You want to make things a little more interesting?” one of the men called to him. “Lay some money on this hole?”

“I never gamble,” Williams said over his shoulder, the lie coming easily to him. He always gambled. Every part of his job, from the first time he pulled the trigger to the unsanctioned operation he was in the middle of right now was a gamble.

He’d managed to get The General and Grey to bring him on board with little resistance, granting him access to the team currently in opposition to Bannister. It masked his movements and likely confused his current target. Rudd was dead which meant Bannister had little chance of legal action against Grey. Holstrom, Bannister’s only political ally, was fighting for his political career and would be out of a job come next election, if not before. Any stink he tried to raise now would be severely muted.

Best of all, the fire-bombing was going to piss Bannister off. Make him take action before it was wise. Which would open him up to reprisals and, if things went well, arrest and prosecution for those self-same actions.

Williams smiled. He found his ball, approached it, lined up the shot and hit it again, the ball landing in the exact spot he was aiming at, bounced and rolled to within four feet of the cup. A perfect shot. Walked forward, ignoring his golf companions behind him, his mind focused on the next phase of his operation. The one where he gets his hands a little dirty.

CHAPTER 29

THE SECOND ONE

The 10 Ring Firing Range, located just outside the city limits of Langley, Virginia, wasn't popular because it provided the best facilities, had the kindest staff or the cheapest prices. The place was falling apart, had numerous EPA complaints lodged against it, and the owner was a cantankerous old bastard.

But it was cheap, didn't require membership or even identification, let the users bring in their own ammunition and was open from five in the morning to eleven at night. Mike Roberts, the owner, slept in a travel trailer parked out back and ate breakfast, lunch and dinner in the range. Some people said he was old CIA, maybe even OSS, but nobody could prove it. The name was just too generic and his Social Security number was connected to nothing shady whatsoever.

Mr. Douglas liked coming to the range to practice for all the aforementioned reasons. Plus, he knew the truth about the man. Mike Roberts was never CIA but his son was. Killed in the embassy bombing in Beirut, he opened the firing range as a way to make sure any agent who wanted extra practice could easily get it. It wouldn't have stopped that particular bombing, but it allowed him to, in his own way, help out.

"Visitors," Mike's voice came over the scratchy intercom system. Mr. Douglas wasn't expecting anyone, so he kept firing. His previous backup weapon was being held for ballistic testing so he wanted to make sure his private purchase backup, a Kahr CW380, was up to snuff. The target was fourteen feet away and Mr. Douglas was practicing headshots with it.

"Aww, look at that cute little gun," a woman's voice said behind him and to his left. He turned, laying the gun on the bench in front of him with his left hand, his right hand gripping the Glock 19 on his hip.

"Joan?" he said, relaxing but surprised. Looked over her shoulder to see JC behind her. "What's up?" he said, the serious look on JC's face telling him Joan's joke was for others to hear. He looked up and down the range. The only other person in the place was by the door, a good thirty feet away. Not surprising, it was just after lunch on a Tuesday.

"What happened in Boston?" Mr. Douglas said, unloading the Kahr and putting it in his range bag. Whatever the reason for the visit he knew his time at the range was done for the day.

"Tell me you know who's behind it," JC said, keeping his voice low, "because I'm pretty damn sure it's not Grey."

"Why not him?"

JC looked over his shoulder, then stepped closer. "Every action Grey has planned or performed on his own until now has been ham-handed and ineffective." Paused, trying to get his emotions in check. "He doesn't suddenly get smart and efficient on his own without any help."

"And it's not The General because...?"

"Because he'd send a squad of killers, not firebomb two businesses. That's sneaky, guerilla shit. Right up your alley."

Mr. Douglas nodded, knowing JC was speaking about the Agency, not him personally. "Come with me," he said, sliding past them and heading for the exit.

“I see your point,” he said as they walked out of the fluorescent-lit shooting range into the early-afternoon sun. He said nothing else as he walked to his Dodge Challenger, putting his range bag in the trunk, closing it, turning and leaning against the car. Folded his arms on his chest.

“So tell me this,” he said finally. “If there is another player in the mix, how does that effect your plans?”

“What do you mean?” JC said, taking a step back and crossing his own arms on his chest. Not exactly confrontational but not totally friendly either.

“Exactly what I said,” Mr. Douglas said. “If there’s another player, are you going to sit back and wait, see what happens? Drag your feet even more on Grey?” Paused, looking at JC, ignoring Joan. “Or are you going to finish your business with that sonofabitch and then take care of whoever’s still standing?”

“The second one,” Joan said.

JC said nothing. Watching Mr. Douglas. He doesn’t know who it is, he said to himself, realizing why the man was dodging. But he’s worried.

“You willing to birddog this one for us?” JC asked the man, taking a different tack. Friendly, not confrontational or demanding. “Do some digging, find out who Grey’s added to his team?”

Mr. Douglas smiled, standing, digging in his pocket for his car keys. “What the hell you think we’re talking about, man?” Walked around to the driver’s side of the vehicle. “I’ll start looking into it, see what I can find. You update me with any intel you can scare up.”

JC smiled and walked away towards their SUV, Joan following.

“You’re not gonna like what we find,” he said to Mr. Douglas over his shoulder as he went, a plan already forming in his mind.

CHAPTER 30

SMART CHOICES

“You sure this is such a good idea?” Duke said. Not for the first time.

“If you don’t like the plan, stay home and stop second guessing those of us who are fully committed,” Joan said, her voice slightly muffled by the balaclava, just like they were all wearing.

Duke held his tongue, unwilling to unpack the various levels of insults inside her one sentence.

“Stay on target,” JC said as the elevator slowed. “No headshots, no fireballs.”

“I love this thing,” Cespedes said, his gloved hands gripping the barrel and handgrip of the weapon Theo had given him.

“You’re gonna have a blast, dude,” Theo said.

“I hope not,” Cespedes said as the elevator dinged at their targeted floor. Theo and Cespedes chuckled.

As the elevator door opened, all five of the teammates walked out. The polished concrete of the entryway gave way quickly to lush beige carpeting as the offices of Secretary of State Russell Grey’s secondary office spread out before them. His office was at the far end of the building on the northwest corner. Massive room according to the architectural plans, it had a separate office connected to it serving as the man’s in-house bedroom.

Luckily for him, he wasn’t in the office today. It didn’t matter. Grey wasn’t their target.

As the elevator doors closed behind them, two things happened at once. The receptionist looked up from her desk at the new visitors at the exact same time the two armed security guards walked around the corner.

As the receptionist sat there, wide-eyed and with her jaw hanging open, both security guards were moving to draw their weapons from the holsters on their right hips.

They were too slow.

Joan stepped forward, snugged the folding stock of her Mossberg 500 against her shoulder and fired one round at each man. The rubber bullets caught them low in the stomach, the bulletproof vests they wore stopping most of the pain and potential damage but not the shock of being shot from twenty feet with a shotgun. Both men staggered backwards, their hands moving to their torsos, checking for holes, and not their guns.

As they stumbled, Theo and Duke ran forward, grabbing the pistols from their holsters before the men realized they were going to be alright. Zip-tie handcuffs and duct tape on their mouths finished the job.

“Don’t move until she says so,” Theo said to the security guards as he and Duke walked backwards to the elevators.

At the sound of two blasts from a shotgun, a number of people began to file out of the offices, not believing that violence could be coming to their particular office at this particular moment in time. They were wrong.

“Stand up,” Joan said to the receptionist. The woman stood up like a shot, rigid and quivering in fear, the short cord of the headset pulling it from her ear. “When you run, scream,” Joan continued. “Got it?” The woman nodded her head vigorously. “Now run.”

The woman didn’t move.

“Run!” Joan barked.

That did it. The woman turned, filling her lungs with air, letting out a blood-curdling scream as her feet pounded into the luxurious beige carpeting, running for her life from the five armed, masked invaders. Although it was almost five, the office was still full of people and the receptionist’s movement and screams propelled the other people in the office to run as well. Some were silent, some yelled in fear, some yelled in warning to others. It didn’t matter. JC and his team were after one person and one person only. And he was in the northwest corner office.

Joan followed the screaming woman with JC right behind her. JC held no weapon in his hands, electing to keep his Glock 23 pistols in their holsters until they were faced with a real threat. He didn’t expect one, to be honest, but you never knew, hence the bullet-proof vests everyone wore. Cespedes followed with his unique weaponry strapped to his back.

Theo walked down the other aisle of the building, towards the security guards.

“Go on, git!” Theo yelled, turning them around and kicking one in the ass. The two men ran awkwardly towards the fire exit at the northeast corner of the building.

Duke stood at the elevators for a second, his attention focused on his laptop. He hacked into the building’s security system in the parking garage. Now it was time to finish the job. He sent all the elevators to the first floor and then disabled the fire suppression system on this floor only. They didn’t want the sprinklers turning on before their work was finished.

Work done, he stowed the laptop in the messenger bag, swung his own shotgun loaded with beanbag rounds into his hands and jogged after Theo.

He caught up with him in a few seconds, his friend standing near the fire escape stairwell in the northeast corner, guiding people through the door and towards safety.

“I’ve got this,” Duke said as he tapped Theo on the shoulder. “You go help them out,” Theo nodded and headed against the human stream of people running in panic for the exit, looking for JC, Joan and Cespedes.

JC saw the office they were looking for at the end of the hallway. There was a desk positioned in front of the office, a personal receptionist. The person who held that job was currently crouched down behind the desk, peeking over the edge of it, a walkie-talkie in one hand, a pistol in the other.

When he saw Joan he ducked down fully behind the desk, held the pistol over the edge of the desk and started firing blindly.

Joan, JC and Cespedes all dropped to the ground. One of JC’s recurring nightmares was being killed by a stray bullet or random shooter instead of by someone who actually knew what they were doing. Joan and Theo had told him the same thing.

The gun empty, the three stood and kept walking forward.

“Bad idea,” JC yelled at the man. Stopped, turned to Cespedes and said, “Light ’im up.”

JC couldn’t see the grin on Cespedes’s face because of the balaclava but he figured it was there. The man stepped forward, raised the barrel of the flamethrower and pulled the trigger.

The jet of flammable liquid shot twenty feet down the hallway, splattering against the desk

and igniting it within seconds. The man hiding behind it half stood, fell over and scooted away from the pillar of fire that was once his workspace. He scrambled back, saw Theo coming at him from the only other escape route and headed into the large office behind him, locking the door as he did.

Cespedes stopped firing the flamethrower, his laughter audible once the howling hiss of the weapon subsided.

“Woo-hoo!” he yelled.

“Simmer down, cowboy,” Joan said as she walked past, “you’ll get your chance again.”

JC walked up to the glass walls of the office. The man was hiding behind the desk in the office, still on the walkie-talkie, still trying to call backup. JC watched him for a second, then grew tired. This needed to be over now.

He stepped back, drew his pistol and fired three rounds through the window, breaking it. Momentarily glad it wasn’t bullet-proof. As the glass cascaded to the ground and the team stepped through the opening, the man behind the desk stood up, putting both his pistol and walkie-talkie on the desk, raising his hands in the air.

“Secretary Grey isn’t here,” he said.

“Oh, we know, Daryl,” JC said, taking his balaclava off. Smiling. “We’re here for you.”

Daryl Smith’s face fell, his mouth hanging open.

“Me?” he said after recovering. “What the hel-”

“Shhhh,” Theo said, his balaclava gone as well, stepping forward, a hypodermic in his right hand. “This will make you sleep for an hour or so.”

“Ain’t no way you-”

Joan racked the shotgun in her hands and pointed it at Daryl’s head. “Either way you’re going to sleep,” she said. “The question is whether you remember third grade when you wake up. Or not.”

Daryl Smith gritted his teeth, his jaw flexing under his skin, said nothing and nodded to Theo. Theo stepped forward, plunging the short needle into the man’s neck. The medicine inside was fast acting and within twenty seconds the man was collapsed on the floor. Theo lied. Daryl would be sleeping for close to ten hours. The team had something else to do before they started asking their captive any questions.

The team said nothing, just started stripping their black coveralls off, tossing them on the pyre of Daryl’s desk. Underneath were button-down dress shirts and slacks and, in Joan’s case, a pantsuit. They kept their gloves on but put their weapons into a backpack. JC donned the backpack, reached down and, with Theo’s help picked up Daryl Smith and headed with the rest of the crew out of the office and towards the stairwell.

“Torch it,” JC said to Cespedes over his shoulder.

The Bolivian walked over to the separate bedroom in Grey’s office, kicked the door open and pulled the trigger on the flamethrower, swinging the muzzle from side to side and up and down. Let go of the trigger, stopping the flow of fire and walked through the glass wall JC shot out minutes before. Turned and pulled the trigger on the flamethrower again, raining liquid fire on Secretary Grey’s office. The desk, the sofa, even the flame-retardant carpet began to burn, the windows turning black.

Cespedes walked past the decreasing fire of Daryl’s desk towards the stairwell where the rest of the team waited. As Cespedes dropped the flamethrower far from the danger burning office

furniture and made his way to the team, Duke pulled his laptop out again, setting a thirty second countdown timer on the fire-control system.

Thirty seconds later when the sprinklers turned on the team was moving down the stairwell with the rest of the people in the building, their clothing blending in with everyone else. JC and Theo supported Daryl's knocked out form as they went down the stairs, Cespedes and Duke helping Joan who was pretending to be overcome with smoke inhalation.

Two minutes later they were ushered out the front doors to the triage area, the firetrucks and ambulances just rolling up. Joan shrugged off the help of Duke and Cespedes, the team moving to obscure the view of an unconscious Daryl from any person looking at them too hard.

Another minute later and their target was loaded into the back of a white Chevy Tahoe, the team driving down through the parking lot and out on the street, pulling over periodically to let emergency vehicles scream past.

The vehicle was quiet. Although Cespedes was the only non-citizen in the vehicle, even he understood the line they had just crossed. Daryl Smith may not have been as high-ranking as the Secretary of State but he most definitely was on the payroll of the State Department.

And they'd just kidnapped him.

We're gonna torture him, too, if we have to, JC said to himself as the heavy vehicle cruised through the streets of a blissfully unaware populace, heading towards the house Duke had rented earlier in the day. *Let's hope he continues to make the smart choices.*

CHAPTER 31

BOTH SIDES WERE RIGHT

The text message from Daryl arrived just as Grey was leaving the State Department office and heading towards his house in Georgetown. He'd left right at four, silencing all calls except those from Daryl. There were dozens of other calls and texts, but Daryl's said "come to your main house — problem" so he ignored the rest. Told his driver the change of plans, dropped his phone on the seat next to him and leaned back, closing his eyes, trying to rest.

The General had seen it. His physician started prescribing pills when Grey needed to work hard, pushing through to keep the North Korean peace plan on track. There were so many players involved it hurt his head as soon as he woke up in the morning and made him not even want to get out of bed. But he had to. It was his last chance at greatness and he'd take it, consequences be damned.

But the pills to keep him up left his nerves too jangly to go to sleep at night. So more pills from his physician. He knew the path he was going down was risky. But achieve this and he'd scale back. Sometimes, though, he'd take one too many of the pills. Or double up when he knew he needed to stay up late or could sleep extra long. It was turning into an ugly cycle. One he knew he'd get off of once the agreement between the US and North Korea was signed.

Exhaustion overtook him. His phone buzzed next to him, phone calls and messages from numerous people piling up. Everyone calling about the assault on his office and Daryl's kidnapping. Grey was oblivious to it all.

His driver gently turned on some music, the vibrating of his own phone silenced by the road noise and the energetic sounds of some late sixties surf rock.

JC knew the op would be better served by a helicopter. Duke even pushed for it. But since none of them could pilot one and it had been years since any of them had rappelled out of a bird, that part of the plan was sidelined early on.

Grey was a hard nut to crack. He had no identifiable businesses other than his collaboration with The General. No family to speak of. No wife, no regular girlfriend, no friends, no people who were close to him. There simply wasn't many ways to leverage the man.

Until JC's realized the one thing Grey tried so very hard to protect above all else.

His reputation.

Duke and Theo jogged down the towpath next to the canal that would grant them access to the back of Grey's house. Georgetown was an area of extreme mixes — college kids, diplomats, wealth beyond imagining and Bohemian coffee shops. But gunmen cutting through lawns wasn't one of those things. And it wouldn't take long before someone would call the police.

The black SUV came to a screeching halt out front of the house, the lights inside all turned off. It was a sleep street and by seven most everybody was home, providing all kinds of witnesses. JC and Joan exited the vehicle, decked out in black tactical clothes from head to toe, bulletproof vests and balaclavas, H&K silenced H&K MP5s in hand along with a portable battering ram.

Cespedes jumped out, sniper rifle slung on his back, running and climbing like a ninja up the side of the home, heading up to the roof to scan across the river for any potential problems.

JC and Joan walked swiftly to the front door, smashed one of the panes of glass and tossed in a flashbang grenade, covering their ears as the metal canister went *tink-tink-tink* on the stone entryway. The blast illuminated the interior of the house for a split second, breaking some of the interior windows.

Joan stepped back, hefted the battering ram, swung it back high in the air and brought it down and forward in an arc, crashing the entry tool against the wooden door's lock mechanism. The door flew backwards, the wood splintering. JC was through the door as Joan dropped the battering ram with an almighty clang, following right behind him.

As soon as the flashbang exploded, Duke and Theo took hammers to the plate glass windows on the deck, smashing everything they could see. Dropping the hammers, they walked through the empty metal frames, meeting up with JC and Joan in the living room.

"Ready?" JC asked, getting three nods from his team. "Do it," he said, "and watch your backgrounds."

They turned, their H&K sub-machine guns in their hands, and pulled the triggers. Dozens of frangible bullets, chosen for their low danger of penetrating through exterior walls, flew from the barrels of the weapons. As they moved, they reloaded, firing again and again, putting bullet holes in everything they saw — sofas, cabinets, doors, everything. Theo stayed on the ground floor while Duke, JC and Joan moved upstairs.

The plan was simple. Make it look like a hit squad came to the man's house, busted through and found nothing inside. In frustration, they shot the hell out of the house.

Which is exactly what they were in the process of doing.

As Theo strafed the staircase, one of the panels swung slightly inward. He stepped forward, his hand pushing the panel in even more. Looked into the empty space and saw stairs descending into what appeared to be a basement.

"Uhhh, boss?" he said over their comm devices.

"What's up?"

"You might want to see this."

"On my way."

Of all the things the Agency taught me, Williams said to himself, was that planning and manipulation of human nature could be so much more effective than a bullet from a gun. Smiled, actually enjoying creeping through somebody's side yard. And then, sometimes, you just gotta kill people.

He slowly crept forward, the sniper rifle cradled in his hands designed to kill quickly and quietly from up to a mile away. He wouldn't need that range. He was only shooting across a river. And truth be told, he no longer was that good of a shot. But for the range he was attempting, the rifle would perform as well as he needed it to.

Grey was unstable. The General had told Williams about the sex room in the basement of his Georgetown house. It dovetailed with some of the rumors he'd heard. The man had a legendary libido. DC was a filthy town, but even it had limits.

He was in position. The house he just crawled past was chosen for two reasons — the owner

was currently in Italy on business and it provided one of the clearest views of Grey's house from across the Potomac.

Burning down Bannister's bike shop and machine shop was a strategic decision — piss the man off so much he'd move early and at least take a shot at Grey. And if he didn't actually take the shot, the Williams would have to make it look like he did.

One of the advantages of all the friendships he made on his way up the CIA ladder was information, the other connections. Those are what enabled him to continue his work secretly, under the nose of Ingrassia and with the utilization of CIA equipment, like the van and drone he and The General used to chase Bannister out of Bora Bora as well as the snipe rifle he was currently watching Grey's house with.

He set up position, waiting. Sniper school in the Army taught him patience. Actual sniper duty for the Agency taught him the reward that comes from that patience. He'd wait until four in the morning to take a shot at Grey if that's what was required.

Williams didn't need to wait that long. He saw the two gunmen jogging up the towpath. There could be only one place they were headed. Thought he recognized Duke and Theo based on their relative sizes. The flashbang inside took him by surprise as did the gunfire that followed.

Not bad, JC, Williams said to himself. Started moving the barrel of his rifle around the perimeter of the house, looking for other members of JC's team, looking for the next trick up JC's sleeve.

Froze. He wasn't sure but it looked like what could be a scope and barrel pointing at him from on top of Grey's garage. Williams wanted to increase the magnification of his scope to see if that's really what he was seeing but knew that moving right now was the wrong move. If it was a sniper, more movement would draw his eye if he hadn't seen him already. If he had seen him but was waiting to take the shot, movement would confirm that he was a target.

So he waited. Couldn't see what was going on inside the house because that required movement, something he couldn't take a chance at right now.

It was nothing new, the waiting. But the fear, that was new.

Two minutes later and the wine cellar section of the cellar was shot all to hell, the wine covering the floor. The sex-party section, however, was left untouched. Everybody was creeped out by it and wanted nothing to do with it.

"Boss?" Cespedes's voice came over the comms.

"Yeah, Ces?"

"I think it's time to leave."

"What do you see?"

"I think it's a sniper, but I can't be sure."

Duke, Theo and Joan had heard Cespedes's conversation with JC. All the good feeling that came from laughing at the sex playroom disappeared. Back to business.

"His movement stopped?" JC asked.

"Yes," came the reply.

"Hold on," JC said. "Watch him."

JC moved up the stairs slowly. Peeking out from the hidden doorway, seeing nothing, even

though he didn't expect to. Waved the team up the stairs.

"Set it, Duke," he said. "Ces, watch the target."

"Yep," Cespedes said.

Duke pulled the incendiary device from his backpack. The rest of the team moved to the door, waiting. Duke lit it, then followed them out the front door.

The plastic one-liter bottle full of gasoline exploded, filling the room with burning gas. It splattered everywhere, igniting whatever combustible surface it touched.

The team gathered around the vehicle as the fire started to burn through the house. The open windows would prevent the smoke from triggering either the smoke alarms or the sprinklers until the blaze was consuming much of the house.

"Did he move?" JC asked Cespedes over the comms.

"Not a millimeter."

"Leave your rifle and get down here."

"What?"

"You heard me," JC said, indicating the rest of the team should get in the SUV.

A minute later Cespedes was inside the truck and they were driving away from the fire, the sound of fire trucks responding in the distance.

"What did you see?" JC asked Cespedes, both of them sitting in the middle seats, Theo driving with Duke in the front passenger seat, Joan in the back.

"It looked like a man with a rifle laying in the grass," Cespedes said. "He was moving his rifle around slowly, watching the house, but froze when his rifle pointed at me."

"You should've taken the shot," Joan snorted from the back.

"And killed a civilian sighting in his deer hunting rifle?" JC said.

"Who goes deer hunting in Georgetown?" Theo said from the front.

"You did right, Ces," JC said. "He likely froze when he saw you. Leaving your rifle there hopefully means he'll stay there longer, afraid to move. If we're lucky, he'll be picked up and the arrest will be on the news."

JC knew it was unlikely. What was more likely is it was someone hired to kill Grey but got spooked when he saw the team doing their job on the house.

Maybe it's a good thing, he thought, stretching as the team grew quiet for the ride back to the hotel they were staying in. If somebody else is gunning for Grey and they're successful, that means our work is done and we're off the hook.

It means a job unfinished and a man martyred, the other side of his brain said. The job is to expose and humiliate him, then kill him. Don't forget it.

JC smiled, knowing both sides were right.

But hoping the angrier side got what it wanted more than the calmer side.

He wanted to sleep, but knew the night ahead was busy. After stopping at the hotel they would have maybe an hour to grab a bite to eat, freshen up and head out again. Daryl was locked up in a basement in east Baltimore. They had a few questions to ask him before the night was over.

CHAPTER 32

ALL BETS WERE OFF

The smell is what he noticed first. Before the cold, before the feeling of his hands zip-tied to a solid object, it was the smell that hit him. Dirty and damp. Those were all he could identify and they weren't even actual objects. But the nose is what it is and all Daryl could smell was dirty and damp.

He opened his eyes slowly. Saw nothing. It was dark beyond belief. He didn't know if he was in a box or a warehouse. There was nothing holding his eyes shut and nothing on his head, so he knew he had a little room to move. But it was so dark he literally could not see anything.

Sound above him. Which meant, combined with the smell, he was likely in a basement. The chubby guy said an hour, but he felt like he'd been out for much more than an hour. Tried to move his head to look up at the sound of what probably were footsteps but the movement made his head swim.

A bolt of light cut through the darkness, illuminating the staircase leading into the basement, shadows falling on it as people walked down it into the room. One of them carried a duffle bag. Daryl had no idea what was in that bag but he was very sure he didn't want to find out.

A light came on above him. Single light, dramatic, and just like the movies. It worked. Daryl was quickly approaching panic.

"My name is Theo," one person said, stepping forward into the light. The chubby guy who injected him. "I'm sorry for injecting you with the rugs, but it was necessary."

"What do you want?" Daryl said.

"We'll get to that," another said, a woman. Sounded just like the person who pointed the shotgun at his head.

"We're going to ask you some questions," Theo said. "How you answer affects the course of this evening."

"You're going to torture me?"

"Not if you answer quickly and truthfully," another voice said, stepping forward into the light.

Nobody wore masks and it concerned Daryl. It was unlikely that they would let him see his face and live. But live is exactly what he planned to do and right now that meant answering their questions. He knew it would be about Grey. No other reason for people to go to the trouble of kidnapping him unless it was about the Secretary. Truth be told, he was fine with that. The man was increasingly off the rails. The drugs were not affecting his work life but most definitely his personal life. And to be honest, Daryl was tired of covering up the man's sex life. It was creepy and weird. And if these people wanted to know everything about Grey, he'd tell them everything.

"I'll do my best," he said, looking at the chubby man.

JC watched Daryl connect with Theo. Interesting. Decided to let Theo run most of the questioning.

He indicated the team to huddle up, telling them in broad strokes what the plan was. JC set his phone down on a table just outside Daryl's view, setting it to record the conversation.

Theo turned around and started in on the questions.

It was going to be a long, hopefully peaceful, night. If Daryl didn't answer truthfully, well, then all bets were off.

CHAPTER 33

PRODUCTIVE

Mr. Douglas stretched and yawned. It had been a long day and an even longer night. He headed in to his private office after parting ways with JC and Joan at the firing range the day before. Spent the next ten hours in private, phone off, TV off, walking to the corner store for burritos and beers, digging through computers and recordings and reports and bank records, trying to figure out who might be working with Grey and The General.

Kept coming up with nothing.

The official reports on the fires and murders in Boston weren't due for several weeks, but a few friendly phone calls and he got the rundown from the fire chief on the scene and the detectives investigating the murders. It was professional but obvious. Bullets were likely from a .38 revolver. No casings to be found. Entry pattern indicated it was point-blank. The fire suppression system in the machine shop had been shut down, which meant the person knew about it and researched how to do it.

That was the professional part.

However the person or persons doing it made no effort to cover their traces. The fire origins were obvious and easily found. Almost like they wanted to be found.

It had the hallmarks of a setup, but Mr. Douglas kept coming back to why. Why set up JC? The bike shop wasn't in his name and neither was the machine shop. Although they were both started by him, finding that out would require a massive amount of digging. The General might know about it, but from all reports the man's relationship with Grey was rocky at best. Sharing that nugget of information wouldn't just come up in conversation.

Which meant someone else found out and set the fires.

Again back to the why.

And the who.

Who would take that action? Not the general idea of it, but that action specifically. Murder and arson. Attacking the businesses connected to one person. In the hopes of...what? Ruining him? JC was already pretty much ruined. Every bank account anyone could find was already frozen. Herb Daniels was bankrolling him and Mr. Douglas only knew that because JC told him so in confidence.

Patterns. He told Duke years ago that he looked for patterns. The more he looked at the current problem, he was reminded of two things. Terrorism and the CIA.

If he took the two actions against JC and expanded them in scale, imagined that JC was a nation, not an individual and the two fires were equally as large, it would be tantamount to terrorism against said nation. Or even a declaration of war by an enemy nation or force.

The CIA angle wasn't really related, but the fires reminded him of what groups would do if they lacked the numbers or financial ability to go after a group full-on. It also reminded him of what JC and the team did down in Bolivia when they were going against Del Stevens and The Mexican.

He called it quits at two in the morning. Laid down on the cot in the reception area. It was a

front business. Travel agency that was never open. He probably should have chosen something different, but it was the first front business he ever opened and it was a little nostalgic.

As he started up the coffee, he turned on his phone and the TV.

The news was all bad. The fire at Grey's second office, the kidnapping of his assistant, the assault and subsequent fire at Grey's second house. He was dialing JC before his phone finished buzzing through the messages he'd missed.

"Hello," JC said.

"Have you lost your goddamned mind?" Mr. Douglas nearly yelled into the phone. "Last night--"

"Was very productive," JC said.

"We're having a meeting," Mr. Douglas said. "Right Now. Get your ass over to Langley," moving to grab his coat from the back of the chair he tossed it on last night.

"Will Ingrassia be there?"

Mr. Douglas stopped JC's tone odd.

"Why?"

"Make sure he's there, Neil," JC said. Confident, more than usual. "We'll be there in twenty minutes."

"You're coming here?" Mr. Douglas said. "Right now?"

"You're damn right," JC said.

Mr. Douglas walked to his door, opened it, closed it and locked it behind him. "Let me guess," he said, walking down the hallway to the service elevator that would take him to his car, "it's gonna be you, Joan, Theo and that Bolivian sniper whose name I can never remember."

"Cespedes, yes," JC said, "and Duke will be coming with us, too, don't forget him. We'll be there in an hour." The line went dead.

"Yeah," Mr. Douglas said as he punched the button for the elevator, "I won't forget Duke." Dialing another number.

The elevator doors closed as the call was connected. "Get Frank on the phone, it's Neil."

Paused. "I wouldn't be calling if it wasn't important, now get him on the phone," he said the elevator going slowly down the seven floors to the basement.

CHAPTER 34

CALL HIM. RIGHT NOW.

Langley, Virginia, is, honestly, not even a town. It's a sleepy little burg, an unincorporated area that, thanks to the offices of the Central Intelligence Agency, is known throughout the world. But driving through theit, one would be easily mistaken thinking you were driving through one of dozens, perhaps hundreds of similar small towns all across the country.

As Theo drove the SUV into the parking lot, JC was actually pleased with how things were going. He'd been scanning the news on his phone and things were unfolding better than he expected. Duke was nervous and he had reason to be. He was a CIA employee and he engaged in operations on US soil, a direct violation of the CIA's charter. He might be the one with his ass in the highest sling, but JC wasn't worried. The kid always had a job with JC, no matter what.

The drive was pleasant, if a little fast. JC actually liked that part of Virginia. Reminded him of growing up in North Carolina — small towns, white picket fences, kids selling lemonade, local high school football. He could never live in a small town like that again in his life, but he enjoyed the idea of it.

The security guards running mirrors under the Chevy Tahoe, looking for explosive devices or hidden operatives, made him realize they were in an entirely different world than when he was young.

They parked the SUV and wound their way through the parking lot, the early morning sun not yet warming up the November day. JC had lied. Cespedes wasn't with them. He was guarding Daryl at the Baltimore facility. The night had gone well. They hadn't needed to torture him at all. He was ready to be rid of Grey and answered their questions easily, even volunteering info before they asked him about it. By the time the night was over, they were upstairs in the kitchen, drinking coffee, laughing and having a real conversation, but still recording everything.

Duke approached the front desk, running interference for them. Even with his security clearance, they wouldn't allow the team inside the building without an escort. The kind but firm young woman at the desk with a gun on her hip informed them to wait. So they did.

JC walked over to the CIA Memorial Wall. Looked at the stars, the realization that each one of them represented a man or woman who died for their country sinking in. He looked at the bottom. The last star was still relatively fresh, the black of the paint not yet turned to grey. He touched it.

"I'm sorry, little brother," he said softly in Korean to the man the star represented.

The despair and loss of his young friend dying in his arms flooded over him again. *Grey and The General were responsible for that kid's death.*

"They're gonna pay," Joan said from his left shoulder. Took his hand.

JC said nothing, using his right hand to wipe the hint of tears from his eyes.

"JC?" he heard from behind, recognizing Mr. Douglas's voice before he even turned around.

"Is he ready?" JC said, giving the rumpled Mr. Douglas the once over.

"Yeah," he said, catching Theo and Duke's attention, waving them over. "Cespedes?" he said, looking for the one person who was missing.

“So you do remember his name,” Joan said flatly.

“He won’t be joining us,” JC said, not explaining why.

“Okay,” Mr. Douglas said as Duke and Theo joined them. “Let’s go.”

“Lead the way,” JC said, his smile thin.

They could have been walking into the lion’s den. He knew that. The crimes they performed in the past twenty-four hours should get them jail time. Likely federal jail time, truth be told. But the phone recording in his pocket was the thing that would get them off scot free and, if things went according to plan, with a grateful handshake from the President of The United States.

“I don’t see what I can do for you,” Director of the CIA, Frank Ingrassia, said, leaning back in his chair.

“What?” Joan said sharply.

Ingrassia shrugged. “I don’t see what I can do for you,” Ingrassia repeated.

Duke scooted forward in his seat, pointing at the phone, the papers they brought with them and the Director’s desk. “You’ve got the Secretary of State cooperating with the Veracious Group, a private military organization, an organization that was actually operating inside North Korea, in support of the regime. They conspired to and did commit murder of both a US citizen and the US Ambassador of London. They kidnapped a different US ambassador. Grey’s got dozens of accounts with millions of dollars in them. He gave State Department security contracts worth billions to Veracious Group, and now he’s negotiating with North Korea, a country materially benefitted from those contracts. And now he’s linked to the murder of two more US citizens and two cases of arson.”

Ingrassia nodded. “That’s a fairly good summation,” he said. “But my position hasn’t changed.”

“He’s dirty and you know it, Frank,” Mr. Douglas said.

“Victory covers up all manner of indiscretions, Neil,” Ingrassia said. “You know that.”

“And what if this is just the man’s first step?” JC said.

“Towards?”

“You tell me?” JC said, pushing back. “He’s got millions and millions stashed around the world in private banks.” Pointed at the papers on the desk. “Those are three of his accounts. Mr. Douglas has dozens of others linked to him that we don’t have access to.”

Ingrassia picked up the papers, leafing through them. Put them back down on the desk.

“And?”

Joan ground her teeth.

“And he’s signed a high nine-figure contract with a military contractor. He’s building a military quick-reaction force, paid for by the State Department and US government but dedicated to himself.”

“And?”

“And what?” Joan growled.

Ingrassia sat up, elbows on his desk. “And what do you want me to do with this?” he said very clearly. “I cannot sanction operations inside the United States. The CIA is strictly forbidden from operating inside the borders of this great nation, something that some people in this room seem to have forgotten,” his eyes flicking between Duke and Mr. Douglas. “Is Grey a bastard?”

You bet. Is he a threat to this nation? Yeah, it kinda looks like it.” Places his hands on top of the papers and files and phone recordings on his desk. “You’ve given me all this info when you know I can’t make a move to do anything with it?” Spread his hands over them as if presenting a magic trick. What do you want me to do with it?”

JC looked at Ingrassia, wanting to jump down his throat. Wanting to yell at him, toss the challenge back at him. Then he paused. The anger in his belly turning to butterflies, then resolve. Ingrassia wasn’t challenging them. He was actually asking.

“I want a meeting with your boss,” JC said.

All sound was sucked from the room for three seconds.

“You want me to take this to the President of the United States of America?”

“I’m gonna guess you’ve got his personal number on speed dial,” JC said. “Call him. Right now.”

CHAPTER 35

GET OUT IN FRONT OF IT

JC knew he wasn't going to be waltzed in through the front doors of the Oval Office, a smiling President waiting for him, offering him a cup of his favorite tea. A small part of him hoped that was what would happen. A very small part. But the rest of him knew it would be radically different. And it was. In fact, it was roughly about what he expected. At least until they started talking.

He was right about one thing. Ingrassia did have the President on speed dial. As he stepped out of his office to make the phone call, everyone in the room looked at JC. Some in surprise, some in admiration, some in shock. But nobody said anything. Of all places in the world that everything was likely recorded and videotaped, the office of the Director of the CIA was a safe bet for it.

Ingrassia came back in quickly. "Let's go," he said.

The team stood quickly, following him down hallways and passageways, through multiple security checkpoints and down elevators, down stairs and more security checkpoints. When they emerged into an eerily empty and small parking garage, a single black van was waiting for them, doors open. Ingrassia ushered them in, closing the doors behind them and getting in the front passenger seat.

Nothing was said for the twenty minute drive from Langley to downtown DC. Once, when they were about five minutes out from the White House, Duke pointed at brownstone building and said, "I think I used to live there," but nobody responded or asked him follow-up questions.

When they arrived at the White House, the procedures were eerily similar to the ones leaving the CIA offices: private parking garage, multiple security checkpoints and private elevators. There was more of everything, including armed guards and metal detectors. There was also the advanced pat downs where Secret Service agents ran their hands over every single clothed part of the team's bodies, including Duke and Mr. Douglas's. The team left their weapons in their own vehicle back at Langley, however, the female agent searching Joan found her carbon fiber two-finger brass knuckles and push dagger.

"Seriously?" Mr. Douglas said.

"You never know," Joan said with a shrug.

They were ushered into a conference room, the door shutting and electronically locking behind them. Ingrassia sat down comfortably in one of the chairs on the side, Mr. Douglas and Duke joining him. The Director put his briefcase on the oak table, opening it and withdrawing all the evidence JC and the team had given him earlier.

JC sat across from them, Theo and Joan sitting past him away from the door.

And they waited.

And waited.

Twenty minutes later and the electric locks disengaged, two Secret Service agents coming into the room, examining everything with their professional gaze and then retreated.

And then President Vernon Callahan walked into the room.

JC rose to his feet, half-feeling the need to salute the man. Instead, he waited. Watching. The man was large, standing six-two, almost as tall as Duke and a little taller than JC. He moved with an energy that belied his big belly hidden behind the excellently tailored suit. President Callahan shook Ingrassia's hand then moved to JC's side of the table, reaching out to shake the man's hand.

JC did so, trying to keep the red white and blue pumping through his veins to a minimum. He was here to negotiate with the leader of the free world. He would need to keep his wits about him.

After introductions were made, the President sat. JC did as well, smiling. Not because he was happy or giddy. But because he knew the position he was in was actually quite good.

Offer them value, he remembered a friend from the Army saying, and they can't help but buy what you're selling. Last JC heard the man took early release and was a millionaire many times over.

"What have we got, Frank?" President Callahan said, hands folded in front of him on the table.

"Russell Grey," Ingrassia said. "He's coming apart at the seams."

Callahan turned to JC. "And you want to kill him?"

JC was momentarily taken aback. "Yes," he said bluntly.

"You can't," Callahan said, equally as blunt. "No way am I going to sanction the murder of one of my highest-ranking governmental officials." Turned back to Ingrassia. "Why the hell are we even discussing this?"

"We're not," JC said before Ingrassia had a chance to answer. He had exactly one shot at this. He needed to make sure it counted. "We're discussing your need to fire the man."

"Really?" Callahan said, really focusing on JC for the first time. "And why would I do that?"

"Because he's a gigantic pain in your ass and his activities are going to drag your administration down into the mud."

"That pain in my ass is currently making more progress with North Korea than anyone has in half a century," Callahan said, "so I recommend you tread carefully."

"Have you watched the news this morning, Mr. President," Joan said behind JC, her voice kind and pleasant.

"I always do," he said. "Why?"

"The kidnapping and fire?" she said. "You're aware that was Secretary Grey's office?"

"I am," he said.

"And have you heard what they're finding there?" When Callahan shook his head, Duke joined in.

"Millions and millions of dollars, sir," he said "Fake passports, euros, even weapons. All stashed in secret panels built into the walls."

Callahan said nothing, just looked at Ingrassia who nodded.

"In Grey's second house in Georgetown," Duke continued, "the investigators have discovered a sex playroom, millions more stashed in upstairs bedrooms, even videos of him having sex with women who appear to be underage."

Callahan leaned back in his chair. "Here's my question," he said slowly, his eyes coming to rest on JC. "How the hell do you know that? It hasn't been on any news reports because my

people are purposely quashing those reports.”

JC smiled. “Because we got it from an impeccable source.”

“Grey told you himself?” President Callahan said. “I kinda doubt that.”

“He didn’t,” JC said. “Daryl Smith told us after we kidnapped and interrogated him.”

Callahan leaned back on the table. “That was you?” Turned to Ingrassia. “Why aren’t they under arrest?” Voice rising.

“I think you should hear them out,” Ingrassia said.

Callahan looked back to JC, his eyes colder. “Proceed.”

“Mr. President,” JC said, “you and I both know the country would be best served by information like this staying private. But we also know it isn’t possible, not in this day and age. It will be dragged out in the open, dissected and, even though you are not personally involved, it will tarnish your administration.”

“I was born and raised in New York,” Callahan said. “I can handle a little tarnish.”

It was said as a joke, but also a warning.

“The press’ll crucify you, sir,” Theo said. “And once it starts, it’ll never stop. Unless you get out in front of it.”

Callahan looked at everyone in the room in turn, resting on JC.

“Alright,” he said. “Say I fire him. How will that be to your advantage?”

“It’s not, really, sir,” JC said, time for the hard sell. “It’s to your advantage.” Callahan’s didn’t say anything, but his facial expression showed his complete disbelief in what JC was saying.

“Secretary Grey is in partnership with General Marvin O. Robinson of the Veracious Group, sir,” Duke said on cue. “They colluded to create the mess in London earlier this year in order to initiate the security contracts. We don’t know how big of a kickback Grey received for this, but believe it was substantial.”

Callahan was shaking his head. “That all started with the murder of that staffer,” he said to Duke, “and then the kidnapping of your father.”

JC was surprised he knew who Duke’s father was. To Duke’s credit, the man took it in stride, never showing an emotion about that revelation.

“You’re correct, sir,” Duke continued. “Grey and The General were behind it, all of it.”

“Can’t be,” Callahan said. “It’s too much, even for me to believe.”

JC said nothing, waiting. As Callahan went back around the table, he came to rest on Ingrassia.

“Is there proof, Frank?” the President said.

“I wouldn’t bring this to you without it, Mr. President,” he said, “and it’s pretty damning.” Stood and took the stacks of paper, laying them down in front of the President.

For the next thirty-five minutes, President Vernon Callahan thumbed through the presentation of Grey’s misdeeds. The financial records from three Swiss accounts detailing deposits and holdings of millions of dollars. The sworn testimony of Nathan Rudd. The recordings of Daryl Smith detailing not only the extensive perversions of Grey but also the massive amounts of money he squirreled away in the walls and furniture of his various residences and workspaces.

Callahan dropped the last piece of paper on the table, stood and stretched. Sighed, then

groaned, then sat back down, turning to JC.

“Two conditions,” he said. “First, North Korean negotiations aren’t thrown off track.”

“Not a problem,” JC said. “We’re neither concerned with nor involved with that.”

“Concerned with it or not,” Callahan said, “if those negotiations go off the rails because of your actions, either directly or indirectly, all bets between you and I are off. Are we clear?”

“Clear, sir,” JC said, knowing what he was planning would likely throw cold water on anything connected to Grey, including the North Korean negotiations. “But understand, he’s going down. If you drop the ball because your star player gets taken out of the game, that’s not on me.”

“We’ll see how it plays out,” the President said, dodging the realities of the situation.

Putting me in the crosshairs if he screws up, JC said to himself.

“What’s the second thing?” JC said, trying to out-alpha the leader of the world’s only remaining superpower.

“No innocents get harmed in your activities.”

JC said nothing. Waiting for him to clarify. The president waited him out as well.

“Please clarify,” JC said, halfway between a request and an order.

“How much collateral damage I accept in your actions is proportionally related to how much blowback your actions create for me.” Paused. Breathing hard through his nose. “I’m no angel and I know you can’t make an omelet without losing an egg or two. But if you pull shit like you did down in Bolivia? Start a damn civil war in the streets of this country?” The President shook his head. “Then Grey and The General will be the least of your concerns.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” JC said, standing and walking to the man, hand extended. The two shook on it, the rest of the team and Ingrassia rising as well. The two men shook hands again. Nobody took any pictures, although JC knew the meeting was being recorded and stored in a secret facility somewhere.

As they milled about, unsure of what to do, Ingrassia said, “Mr. Douglas, could you return them to Langley? I have more business in the White House today.”

As goodbyes were said, JC’s mind turned to the next step in his plan.

Killing the Secretary of State.

Ingrassia and President Callahan sat down again after the team left.

“Was that really Joan?” Callahan said.

“The one and only,” Ingrassia said.

“I thought she was taller,” Callahan said with a chuckle.

“Tall tales will do that to a person,” Ingrassia said. Paused. “Mr. President, I’m concerned.”

“A little late for that now, Frank,” Callahan said with another chuckle. “I just greenlit the Secretary of State of the United States. Shouldn’t you have spoken up a few minutes ago?”

Ingrassia shook his head, not joining in Callahan’s laughter. “The firebombs, sir, up in Boston. And the murders.” Paused. “It’s not Grey’s style.”

“The General?”

“He’s more... conventional. Too many years in the Army, commanding forces.” Paused. “Sneaky, but conventional.”

“Then who?” Callahan said.

“First blush? JC or his team,” Ingrassia said. “Evaluating the known players, it’s more their style.”

“Tell me it’s not them,” Callahan said.

Ingrassia shook his head. “Goes against everything we know about him. And his team. They protect. They execute. No, this is an attack on them.”

“From who?”

Ingrassia waited a long time before he said anything. “I’m looking into it.”

President Vernon Callahan could tell Ingrassia had an idea on who it was. But he knew the man well enough to know he wouldn’t say who his suspicions were leaning towards until they were no longer suspicions. He’d wait. Meanwhile, he hoped the go ahead he just gave to JC Bannister wouldn’t blow up in his face.

CHAPTER 36

PARTNER

“Can you believe it?” Theo said to Duke, punching the taller man in the arm. “We did it.”

“I still can’t believe it, man,” Duke said, “and I was there.”

“We’re not in the clear just yet, ladies,” Joan said. “Let’s focus.”

The Agency in the form of Mr. Douglas had rented a luxury suite in the Four Seasons hotel. Duke suggested the Watergate Hotel but everyone cursed him for the bad luck he might bring down on them for just mentioning the name. With two bedrooms, a kitchenette, a bathroom and a living room it was almost big enough for them to stay a night or two.

But they weren’t sleeping there. They just needed a place to plan and the living room with its sofa and easy chairs and the conference room with its white board and small table provided them what they needed to plan out the job without the fear of prying eyes or electronic listening devices.

The plan didn’t take too long. JC already had it in mind. It would take the entire team as backup, but only he and another person would be in the thick of it. His first choice was Cespedes but Joan quickly nixed that. It would be her and no one else.

A handful of phone calls and everything was arranged. Now all they had to do was wait for a few short hours.

And that was always the hardest part.

Grey’s life was ruined. It was in absolute complete shambles. He felt like one of the undead from those stupid zombie movies — they were already dead but they were too mindless to know it and just lay down.

The news had been nonstop about him. The fire in his office, Daryl’s kidnapping, the weirdly unsuccessful attempt on his life at the Georgetown house. The news had even gone international. Everyone was calling him from his Dom, his Deputy Secretary on down to the lowest beat reporter in Washington DC. Someone somewhere had given out his personal cellphone number so he tossed it in the garbage disposal and turned the switch on.

He tried calling The General on the cellphones Williams gave them but there was no answer. Same when he tried calling Williams.

They’ll come around, he said to himself, when they realize how helpful I can actually be.

He was lying to himself and he knew it. He almost took both bottles of pills his doctor had given him but decided not too at the last minute. Too cliché d. Better to harpoon everyone around him on the way down.

The knock on his door came just after three. A security detail from the State Department showed up when the news started to break and had kept the reporters and riff raff away. If someone was actually knocking it meant they had a real reason for being here.

“It’s the President, Secretary Grey,” the short Hispanic man said in accented English. “He wishes to see you.”

“Where’s Eddie?”

“Different service,” the man said. “Eddie’s State Department. I’m not.”

Grey got the implication. Even though he was the head of the State Department, he was out.

“I’m not ready,” Grey said imperiously.

“I was told to bring you as you are.” Paused. “One way or another.”

Grey looked at the man, maybe half a foot shorter than he was. The fight just drained out of him, his shoulders folding in on themselves.

“Alright,” he said, not bothering to close the door behind him as he followed the limo driver.

Williams walked up the street, away from Grey’s house after the limo took him away, dialing The General on one of their secure phones. The line picked up on the second ring.

“He’s gone,” Williams said. “I just saw him taken away.”

“He’s not coming back, is he?”

“Would you let that stand?”

“No,” The General said, “I don’t imagine I would.”

“So, what’s next?” Williams asked.

“I don’t know,” The General said. Paused. “Partner.”

Williams smiled, ear to ear, as he walked through the ritzy Maryland neighborhood towards his own vehicle, parked two blocks away.

CHAPTER 37

EITHER WAY

It wasn't the first time Russell Grey had been in the Oval Office. Far from it. But he was very sure it would be his last.

The limo had taken him to the secret parking lot, the one used for visitors the President didn't want anyone to see. Two Secret Service agents roughly frisked him as he exited the vehicle, something they'd never done before, and escorted him through the back door of the Oval Office.

The President was already there, sitting on the sofa in the middle of the room. Ingrassia was seated next to him, close but not too close.

Grey sat down hard on the sofa facing them. He didn't even try to look professional or respectful.

"So, this is it?"

"You brought it on yourself, Russ," President Callahan said.

"I've done so many good things for the country, Vernon."

"Okay," Callahan said. "Name them."

Grey stared at the President for a second, mind churning through what he could say.

"Go ahead, Russ," Callahan said. "List off all the good things you've done for the country."

The more Grey thought, trying to find his peak accomplishment, the more time ticked away and the more he realized he was digging his own political grave with each passing second.

"Your time's up, Grey," Ingrassia said.

"Why?" Grey said, belligerent. "Why now?"

"Underage girls, for starters," Ingrassia said.

"None of those girls were underage," Grey said with a wave of his hand, not asking which girls. "I got signed affidavits from all of them."

"Even the ones from other countries?"

"If their passport says they're eighteen, what else can I do?"

"So let's take a look at the optics of this, Grey," President Callahan said.

"I can-"

"Just humor me," Callahan said. "You've got a secret sex playroom-"

"Dungeon," Ingrassia said. "The press are going to call it a dungeon."

"Dungeon," the president said, the narrative changing right before Grey's eyes. "This secret sex dungeon installed under a house paid for by the State Department. You've got dozens-"

"Hundreds," Ingrassia said, interrupting again. "They're still counting."

"Alright," Callahan said, "hundreds of videos of you and your Hapsburg group of ultra-wealthy elite friends having sex with and abusing these girls who, although maybe they were all eighteen, were hired precisely because they look much younger than that."

"I don't thi-"

"I wasn't done," Callahan said, cutting Grey off. "And then you've got millions of dollars

stashed in your office. Your office that is not inside the State Department building but inside a separate facility. Can you account for all that money?"

"I-

"Was it your personal money? Or was it State Department money? And if it was State's money, why was it hidden inside the walls of your office, Russ?"

"I-

He was deflating. Everything coming down around him.

"It won't be long before the rumors about you hit the press," Callahan continued. "Then people will be asking me what I knew and when." Paused. "I'm not going to get smeared with the dirty end of your stick, Russ."

"You can't fire me," Grey blurted out. "North Korea-

"Will deal with me," the President said slowly. "I am the leader of this country, am I not?"

Grey said nothing. He was cooked. At least for now.

"Sign this," Ingrassia said, sliding a sheaf of papers across the glass-topped table between them.

"What is it?"

"Your resignation."

"You're sick, Russ," Callahan said. "You've got a sex addiction and you're hooked on pills. Take time to heal, let the country heal and move forward in the best way possible. It's all spelled out there, including press release statements written by you. Personally."

"I am not going to sign that."

The President shrugged. "Okay. Then sign this," he said, handing another, smaller batch of papers to Grey.

"This is?" Grey asked, scanning it.

"Your termination," Callahan said. "You've stolen, embezzled and defrauded the state department and the US government for tens of millions of dollars. Conspired with foreign governments against the US." Paused. "Treason, Russ. IRS agents will be on their way an hour after you walk out that door to comb through every nook and cranny of your shit. The leaks from their investigation will continue until your name is remembered only as a late night comedian punchline joke." Paused. "And then we'll begin the treason proceedings." The President shrugged. "Either way, you're signing one of those documents before you leave this office."

Russell Grey, Secretary of State for the United States of America, looked at both men, at the documents in his hand and the ones on the table, then back to the two men.

"Alright," he said, leaning forward to the coffee table. "Which one of you sonsabitches is gonna give me a goddamn pen."

CHAPTER 38

THAT'S TOO BAD

When the Secret Service agents guided him to the private parking garage beneath the White House, the limo was there waiting. Grey stood there for a second until he realized nobody was going to open his door for him. Maybe not ever again. He smiled, shook his head, opened the limo door and climbed in. The privacy screen was up, which he was glad for. At least that little prick has some sense. He keyed the intercom and said, "Home," as the vehicle took off.

Grey leaned back in the limo, relaxing. As strange as it was, he felt free for the first time in a very long time. No more juggling, no more worrying about if someone found out. All his secrets were laid bare and the world was still turning.

Callahan was an arrogant prick but at least the IRS isn't picking through my life, he said to himself. That's a relief. Sure, I lost millions, but there's millions more that they don't know about.

Smiled.

"I think I can make it out of this," he said softly, not sure if the driver was listening or not. Put some time behind him, go to a cushy rehab center, come out leaner, more focused, smelling like roses. Position myself in opposition to whoever is in power at the moment, present myself as an expert and before you know it, I'll be on news channels, talk shows, speaking tours. Book deal, more than likely.

He closed his eyes, the road to his house familiar and uninteresting in the grey of the November mid-morning. He'd be there soon enough. A deep relaxation washed over him, feeling simultaneously light and heavy at the same time, like he was floating in a sensory deprivation tank.

He was snoring within a minute.

Grey felt the cool rush of air on his cheek and in his dream, he imagined he was falling from a great height. The sound of a whump made him think he hit the ground in his dream, his subconscious matching the sound to the closing of a car door, the disparity between the two pulling him from his slumber just as the limo accelerated hard, pushing him back in the seat, forcing his eyes open.

He panicked, trying to scramble over the back of the limo's bench seat, but there was nowhere to go.

"Hi, Russ," JC Bannister said, sitting directly across from him.

"How did yo-" Grey said, stopping and leaping for the door handle. It moved but didn't open. Tried the other side. Bannister didn't move, just watched him.

Grey sat back, panic subsiding, looking for the angle, the way out.

"Who sent you?" he asked, buying time.

"Don't even bother," Bannister said, reaching inside his tailored suit jacket, withdrawing a revolver. Grey stiffened. Bannister rested the gun on his right knee, pointed in the general direction of Grey.

“Hold on,” Grey said. “I know you hate The General more than you hate me. I can help you get him. Then all bets are off, I’ll take my lumps.”

Bannister slowly shook his head. “I don’t think The General’s going to be returning any of your calls,” he said. “And you’re gonna take your lumps right now.”

Grey opened his mouth to say something when Bannister handed him the gun. Grey looked at it, then back to Bannister.

“What are you doing?”

“Giving you the chance for honor.”

“That’s not honor,” Grey sneered, “that’s cowardice.” The bile from pure panic rising in the back of his throat. He swallowed it down with a gulp.

“Last chance,” Bannister said. “Take it or this turns into something else.”

Grey slowly reached for the gun. Took it, looking at it.

“This is mine,” he said. “From my bedroom.”

Bannister nodded. “Daryl gave us the keys to your house,” he said. “He was very relieved to know he wasn’t going to be charged with any crimes if he helped us out.”

Grey bounced from anger to fear to resignation in the space of thirty seconds. His shoulders slumped and he seemed to sink even more into the leather of the limousine.

“I can’t,” he said, tossing the gun back to Bannister.

JC caught it, smiling. “I kinda hoped you wouldn’t,” he said, setting the gun on the seat next to himself.

“Was it even loaded?”

“Sure it was,” Bannister said, “but at this distance I’d slap it out of your hands and make you eat it before you realized what was happening.”

Grey looked out the window. They were somewhere up the Potomac, far from his house. All he saw was country. No houses, no civilization.

“Where are we going?”

“We’ll be there soon,” Bannister said.

Grey looked at him, steeling himself. “Why are you doing this?”

“Stella Daniels,” JC said. “Larry Patterson. Mickey Sparks. Louis Henderson. Everyone who was killed when Khaled attacked the embassy in London. Owen Porterfield. Should I go on?”

Grey was shaking his head. “All that was The General and his new minion, Williams.”

“Who?” JC said, surprised.

Grey smiled. “You didn’t know about Williams?”

“Who is Williams?” JC said, frantically searching his brain for the connection and the memory that was just out of reach.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Grey said. “You’ll find out soon enough.”

Bannister stared at the man a brief second more then set it aside for later. “So you’re blameless in all this?”

“No,” Grey said, “but those mass murderers are more to blame than I am?”

The privacy window rolled down fully.

“What about me?” Joan said from the driver’s seat.

Grey's eyes widened, then he relaxed. Tapped his head. "At least you'll have something to remember me by." Smiled, greasy and lecherous.

Bannister sat there, staring at him. Chest heaving in anger, then subsiding.

"I promised you not too long ago that you would die slowly," he said. "Do you remember that?"

Grey looked him up and down, arrogance returning. "You don't have the patience for that," he said. "You're an animal, a brute, just like The General."

Bannister buckled his seat belt. "I could beat you to death with my own two hands," he said. "It wouldn't be the first time for me," he said. "But sooner or later, someone in that situation, the resign themselves to die and then, well, what's the fun in that?"

Grey shook his head, the panic returning.

"You ready, Joan?" JC said over his shoulder.

"You bet," she said.

Both windows on the driver's side of the vehicle went down, the cold air of the November morning rushing in at seventy-five miles per hour.

"What are you doing?" Grey said over the wind noise, the panic rooting itself deep in his mind, not letting go. "What is this?"

"Ever hear of Chappaquiddick?"

"The hell-"

"It's like that," JC said. "Only without the alcohol. Or the dead girl. Or the career saved from the scandal. Just your body, bloated, floating down the Potomac until your expensive Italian wool suit snags on a branch hanging over the muddy waters and you get lodged there, fish chewing at your soft dead flesh, waiting for an early morning jogger or some drift boat fisherman to see you and call the cops."

Grey was searching for an escape as JC spoke, trying the doors again, trying to climb out the open windows. JC pushed him back in the seat with his foot.

"You might want to buckle up," JC said, taking a small canister from his suit jacket.

Grey grabbed for his seat belt, pulling on it, but in his panic he pulled too hard, triggering the collision locking mechanism.

Bannister smiled as Grey went into full panic.

"That's too bad," he said with a smile.

Grey looked through the privacy window. Saw Joan fit a molded clear plastic face mask over her head with one hand, then put both hands on the steering wheel.

"Here we go," she said, guiding the speeding limo across the double yellow line, lining it up towards the river.

She took her foot off the gas, letting it decelerate as it continued on its path. It crossed the road, passed through a graveled scenic turnout for pictures of the famous river, crashed through the underbrush and pitched over the bank into the river beyond.

The front of the vehicle, far heavier because of the weight of the engine, dived towards the water first as it went over the embankment and into the water a short ten feet below. When it hit the water, it was still traveling at close to forty miles an hour. Joan let go of the steering wheel a second before it hit, placing her arms by her side to avoid broken wrists as a result of the airbags deploying.

As the vehicle slammed into the water, Grey flew forward, his body crashing into JC and the front of the compartment. The airbags deployed, sounding like a shot from a gun but protecting Joan and JC from the bulk of the potential damage of the accident, but not Grey.

The water beneath them was dozens of feet deep and the nose of the limo began to sink, the water rushing through the floorboards and then the open windows. JC and Joan undid their seatbelts. Joan peeled off her mask, took an oxygen canister from inside her driver's jacket, inserted it in her mouth and began to breathe. She moved towards the open window, the frame and body crumpled from the crash but still allowing her enough room to escape. She kicked towards the surface only feet above her.

JC did the same with the oxygen canister in his hand. Grey grappled for it, screaming and yelling, his shoulder dislocated but still moving. As the vehicle continued to sink the water rushing in, JC floated towards the window, pulling himself out.

But he waited. Gripping the window frame, his legs still inside the vehicle. Watching.

Grey was moving towards the open window. There was a small chance he might escape and survive. JC pushed him back in with his booted feet, keeping him in the car.

The nose of the vehicle hit the bottom of the riverbed, the rear beginning to sink as the air trapped inside the trunk escaped. JC still held on. The canister held at least fifteen minutes of oxygen. Compared to Grey, he had all the time in the world and he was going to make sure the job was done.

Grey started to trash in place, floating, trying to breathe. He sucked in double lungfuls of water, all oxygen gone from his system. His eyes grew wide, then empty as the lack of oxygen in his system shut it down.

JC moved to the front of the vehicle, opened the driver's side door and then Grey's door. It was relatively easy, although the damage sustained in the crash made the driver's door stick a little. He reached in and pulled Grey out, letting him float in the water, letting the current take him downriver slowly.

He kicked for the surface, looking for Joan. He saw her above, holding onto the rigid inflatable piloted by Theo. As he broke the surface, and Theo helped first Joan then him into the boat, he looked over his shoulder towards the scenic turnout where they just crashed into the river.

An old white Chevy van was there, pulling away, Duke at the wheel. Cespedes waved at him from the passenger seat, cellphone to his ear, calling in the accident.

JC and Joan lay on the bottom of the boat as Theo powered the engine, heading for a deserted state park not too far away with a small dock for fishermen.

Ten minutes later and the rigid inflatable boat was deflated and stowed in the van, JC and Joan were drying out and the team was heading back into DC.

"One down," Joan said.

"One to go," JC said, thinking of The General.

He said nothing about Williams. As they drove, he realized who Grey must have been talking about. He'd need to have a conversation with Mr. Douglas soon. Very soon.

But for now, he'd let his team enjoy this win.

Soon enough they'd be going into battle again.

EPILOGUE
THE PLAN

TBA

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is for my wife and daughter. I love you both. Never give up.

Thanks to the following: Craig for being Craig. B Penny for settin' me straight, as always. The mighty Doug, for persevering, TW for havin' my back and Sue, because she's got awesome stories. Thanks to The Bear for the ear. Also much thanks to Otto for taking the time and being cool with things.

Thanks super much to The Advance Team. I was up against the wall on the timeline and you guys always come through. Appreciate it.

Thanks to The Team for getting on board and your support, spoken and unspoken. The times when I didn't want to write, when I thought I'd rather veg and watch TV, I put fingers to the keyboard because I knew you fine folks were waiting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rex Carpenter was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. When not writing heart-pounding action thrillers, he loves snowboarding, hiking, mountain biking, reading, watching good television as well as both good and bad movies and spending time with his wife and daughter. After fifteen years in Asia, they currently live in the sunny climes of Cascadia.