



A JACK NOBLE THRILLER

NOBLE JUDGMENT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

L.T. RYAN

NOBLE JUDGMENT

JACK NOBLE BOOK NINE

L.T. RYAN

LIQUID MIND MEDIA

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ASPEN, COLORADO.

THOSE WHO WERE close with the man sitting at the head of the table called him Butch. He let his subordinates call him by his last name, Monaco. Even at age sixty-three he was tall and straight and lean and lanky. A smooth scar a centimeter in width ran the length of his cheek from the corner of his mouth to the spot where his earlobe met his head. The reminder stood out most when his skin was tanned, like now. When asked, he always told different versions of over a dozen stories. A single version of one of those stories contained the truth. Only Butch knew which. Despite the danger that plagued his life for so long, he had aged well. Aside from a few wrinkles around his eyes and his mouth, he looked much the same as the last time he conducted a secret meeting in Aspen, Colorado.

He couldn't say the same for the five men he knew in the room. They'd gone bald or had bellies that hung over their belts or sprouted double chins or had faces that looked like scuffed leather. Taken as a whole, the description described one of the men to a tee. The rest were some variation. He let three of those men call him Butch. Two addressed him as Monaco.

The other five men at the table were unknown. And chances were that the last time he held a meeting around that same table in that same room, those five guys were in high school or college. Perhaps they'd had some experience since then. Maybe not. At least not the kind Butch accepted. It

didn't matter, because he needed ten men in the room for the meeting and the other five original members of the group were dead. Some from natural causes. The others, not so much.

Butch Monaco looked at every man in turn. The blank stares returned to him said more than words ever could. None of them wanted to be there that day. Hell, even Butch had a knot in his stomach. Up to this point, the purpose of the meeting had been left unstated. Too many words led to too many trails, which led to people in Butch's position being sentenced to life in prison or death by firing squad, if you lived in the right state. The rest got the chair or lethal injection. They'd go to sleep, never to wake. And if he were honest with himself, he'd admit that every man in the room deserved it.

So the meeting had been arranged in a private manner. The only guy Butch trusted, Waldron, went man to man, speaking in a code that only twelve people knew. He found all of them, minus one, Goetz, who had disappeared four years ago and hadn't been heard from since.

Like the previous meeting in Aspen, there would be no documentation. Nothing would be recorded. And every man in the room would deny ever having been in Colorado that day. What need was there? They all knew that it had to be done, and they were the only ones who could sanction it.

And what was the purpose of the meeting Butch Monaco held that day? The organization they had formed over twenty years ago had to be shut down.

And to do so, secrets had to be eliminated. The men who held those secrets, at least the ones outside of the room, had to die.

Butch drummed the fingers of his right hand on the table, tips to pads to knuckle, growing in intensity. Chatter died down like the tail end of rolling thunder. When all eyes were on him, Butch took a sip from his glass of water, then set it down near the edge of the table. Condensation ringed the bottom. Enough vibration, and it might carry the glass over the side.

Rising, Butch addressed the group. “In 1991, eleven of us met in this same exact room. That meeting, like today’s, was unprecedented, unsanctioned, unrecorded, and never happened.”

The five men who had been there twenty-two years ago smiled.

The others glanced around the room. Two shrugged. One lifted an eyebrow. The other two remained stoic. They all knew the outcome. None of them knew the story of how it started.

Butch continued. “We all know what we did that day. We might describe it in different ways, depending on who we’re speaking with. I’m sure there are those who consider us prognosticators, ahead of the rest of Washington and every intelligence agency in so many ways. I know I consider us the original Homeland Security. A decade ahead of our time.”

A man named Davinski chuckled. Butch cut right through him with a cross look. Davinski brought a fist up and coughed into it. His cheeks puffed out and his face turned red.

“What we created, our own police force that could operate anywhere, anytime, and without scrutiny, was a beautiful thing twenty some years ago. Hell, most people, even the high ranking, never even heard of our baby. We dodged some bullets, of course, but for the most part, over two long decades, it operated flawlessly. Then, a few months ago some intelligence fell into the wrong hands. Possibly through the aide of someone in this organization. We know of at least one agent who was working for the other side. She’s dead now. But there could be more. On its own, this is not the issue, for we’ve dealt with such things in the past. This group has been great at policing itself, and we’ve used them for it. But this time, it goes too high. It’s above all of you. Above me. Someone, and I can’t name who, has ordered this thing shut down, or it’s us who’ll pay the price.”

The man seated at the opposite end of the table lifted his hand in the air. Butch stared him down for a few seconds. Said, “Name?”

The guy rose. "Ballard, sir. Joe Ballard."

"You've got a comment or a question?"

Ballard ran his right hand through his short black hair. Flecks of silver caught the sunlight coming in through the panoramic window behind him. "What if one of us were to object to what you're proposing?"

"Then you won't leave Aspen alive."

The guy straightened, held his left hand out in front, fingers splayed. "So you're saying that-"

"Shut up, Ballard, and listen to me. There is no choice here. We are not taking a vote. And what's more, you don't have a say in this thing. The SIS is being shut down, and all members, current and former are to be eliminated. That clear?"

Ballard said, "Crystal, sir."

Butch waited for the guy to sit back down. Then he picked up a folder on the table to his right. Inside were a dozen copies of the same information. He handed five to his right, six to his left. The men each kept one and passed the rest down.

"First, these are to be handed back to me in a minute."

"What's the point then?" Davinski said.

"The point is that I want you all to look over this list and tell me if you object to any of the names on it."

"There's gotta be fifty names here."

Butch hiked his shoulders an inch, and said, "And?"

Davinski had no response. His gaze, like the gazes of all the men in the room, shifted to the paper. Their eyes moved right to left repeatedly as they read the names to themselves. Butch felt his stomach tighten even more. He knew the five men who had been in the original meeting would not speak up. This was part of the weeding out process. Any man who objected could be a man who might leak what they planned to do. And a guy who would do that needed to be dealt with immediately.

At the other end of the table, one man lifted his hand.

“Yeah, Ballard?” Butch said.

“I know a name on here.”

“Who?”

“Jack Noble.”

“And do you object to Mr. Noble being on that list?”

Ballard looked down at the paper, fidgeting and tapping his thumb against the table. He shifted his eyes. Glanced up at Butch.

“Well?” Butch said.

“No, I knew him from his time in the Marines is all. I have no objection to him being on this list.”

NEW YORK CITY.

THREE MEN MADE the trek from Queens to Brooklyn to lower Manhattan in a black BMW 750i on a humid and cloudy Tuesday morning. They crossed the river by way of the Williamsburg Bridge. While suspended over water, one made a remark that he saw at least a dozen heads bobbing below, racing in the currents and heading toward sea. They were former friends of his. Guys that had remained loyal to the Old Man after his passing. And more importantly, guys who'd refused to accept Charles DeCosta as the new leader of their organization. Charles gave them time to come around, the ones he deemed worth keeping around, at least. But time, finite in this world of crime, had run out.

So the three men in the luxury vehicle had acted the part of good soldiers and captains and performed their jobs and arranged the executions, because there was no other way to refer to it when friends kill friends, though the three men tried, and had the bodies disposed of in a rather conspicuous manner.

Twenty-four hands. Same number of feet. A dozen heads. And the leftover bodies. All cast into the river in various locations with no attempt at concealing the task. Charles didn't care if the remains washed ashore, got tangled up in fishing nets and crab pots, or if they found their way to the Atlantic. He gave little regard to the idea that a group of kids might hook into a decapitated head, reeling it in and coming face-to-face with a ghost. Or that a group of old women on their

morning walk might stumble over the ass-up headless body of a criminal.

So long as the act achieved the intended effect.

Fear begets more fear, which in turn creates allegiance.

Charles's thinking, at least.

The deepening of the new boss's maniacal nature had coincided with his rise to power. From a street hustler to a private mechanic for Feng, the Old Man and notorious gangster that led the organization. From driving Feng around town to becoming the Old Man's most trusted adviser. And when the Old Man was assassinated in broad daylight outside a Queens restaurant, Charles returned to New York from Europe, where he had headed up overseas operations, and stepped into position to claim control over the organization.

He met with resistance. More than two dozen, a third of them captains, disagreed. The most vocal were dealt with immediately. The rest fell into line, for a while, at least. Murmurs of dissent made their way through the compound, through Queens, bypassing Brooklyn, and finding their way to Lower Manhattan where they were whispered into Charles's ear.

So he formed the plan that required a mass assassination. Kill to keep the peace, he said.

None of the men in the BMW wanted to think about the screams and pleas of dying. Men they had laughed with and hustled with and killed with. For simply killing wasn't enough for Charles. The bastards had to suffer. If things had gone the other way, they would have done the same to Charles before casting him into the Atlantic after fitting him with concrete pants and shoes.

The transition from the bridge to Delancey Street erased the thoughts from their collective memory. For a while, anyway.

"Who's calling the overgrown bastard?" the driver said. He forced a laugh to cover up the remark, but none of the men in the car bought it.

“I’ll do it,” the guy in the backseat said, pulling his cell from his pocket.

CHARLES STOOD WITH his back to the reinforced steel door that separated his office from the rest of the complex. Designed to stop a .50 caliber round, the door provided him with a sense of security. A false one considering his only other way out was down, but he found solace behind the door. If someone reached it, Charles knew his chances of getting out alive were closer to zero. But at least he’d have the opportunity to take a few of the assailants out with him.

He glanced back at the three silent men seated on the opposite side of his dominating mahogany desk.

Two bodyguards remained outside the office any time Charles was present. Near them sat two assistants who handled Charles’s day-to-day schedule. One for legit activities. The other for all things related to the organization. A wall separated the bodyguards and assistants from the receptionist who sat behind a counter, with a headset on, underneath an oval sign labeled *CDC Industries, INC.*

The place had to look legitimate for a crime boss to work out of it. Not that it fooled anyone. Charles took notice of the stares in the lobby. He felt the judgmental thoughts in the elevator. Women would stop short and allow the doors to close before stepping on if he was the only one inside it.

The top floor looked down on West 3rd Street, and offered an unblocked view of the fountain in the center of Washington Square Park. Charles had grown accustomed to staring down at the park while mulling over important, and not so important, decisions. Even on a humid mid-July morning, the place teemed with activity. The high-powered binoculars perched on the ledge allowed him to watch the women as they jogged or roller-skated along the walkways. Stress relief. Nothing more. So far.

Looking to the northeast, Broadway stretched to 14th Street. With a brief smile, Charles recalled how he longed to perform there when he was a kid. His mother had taken him to see *Fiddler on the Roof* when he was eight or nine. He even

took two weeks of dance lessons, but quit when his friends found out and turned on him. The secret wish didn't die, though. But when he filled out and his size offered easier and more immediate ways to make a buck, Charles gave up on his dreams of fame under the lights and embraced the criminal life. A couple bucks here and there grew into a hundred a pop. Before long, he had more money than he knew what to do with. His favorite theater was a benefactor of that wealth. Anonymously, of course.

Stretching his arms overhead and directing his gaze to a spot just over the city horizon, Charles contemplated why the Old Man never moved to a proper office. Even when Charles had urged Feng to do it, the old bastard stubbornly refused. The compound served a purpose. No denying that. It made a great base of operation, and housed several of the underlings at any given time. But as a place to bring in guests and conduct business?

Not anymore. Not a chance.

Another mistake Charles refused to duplicate was Feng's inability to delegate. The Old Man's refusal to do so until the end led to a near-Civil War within the organization. It also resulted in the Old Man's assassination. The geezer could've retired four or five years back, enjoyed time with this granddaughter. Instead, the little girl witnessed Feng's brains exiting his cranium at high velocity.

To appease those in the organization on the fence about Charles's overseeing the operation, he promised to avenge the Old Man's death. He didn't care if he ever did. Killing off two-dozen dissenters would be enough to get everyone in line. The timing had to be right. And finally, it was.

So now he had the office, where he spent most of his time, and the compound, where he only made brief appearances. There were people Charles trusted, and those were the ones who remained in charge in Queens. He also had snitches on call should his captains turn on him. Loyalty, as far as he was concerned, did not exist. Charles and the Old Man had turned on each other. And over what? Something to do with a woman and Jack Noble?

No, even the concept of loyalty only got one so far. If a concept could be packaged into something similar, then his group would be considered as loyal as they came. Which meant a quarter to a third were scamming and skimming off the top. To be expected, though. Charles did it when he was coming up. He presumed Feng did as well. Didn't mean he had to accept it. He'd already decided that would be the next order of business.

From the compound, Charles's captains oversaw day-to-day activities. From the high-rise, Charles worked on broadening and expanding his empire. Opportunities existed that Feng never bothered to investigate. The money the Old Man had, which now belonged to Charles, meant a chance to move into businesses other than drugs and racketeering and selling secrets. And now that things had been handled and he expected operations to run smoothly here on out, that was precisely what he planned to do.

Charles reached for the binoculars. He followed two women, one brunette, the other blond, as they jogged through the park, honing in until their brightly colored running shorts disappeared behind the thick leafy cover. His gaze lifted over the tops of the trees, down the shimmering, hazy corridor of 5th Avenue. His eyes switched focus from the cityscape to the reflection of the three men seated behind him.

"Which of you thought this would be a good idea?" Charles turned, folded his forearms across the top of his expensive high-backed leather chair. It swiveled to the left until his weight settled.

The first guy that spoke drew Charles's wrath.

"Shut up," he said before the guy managed a second syllable. "All three of you are lucky I brought you down here and didn't have you dismembered and dissolved in the compound basement."

The looks on the faces of the men were as varied as they were. Each had come up in Feng's organization in a different manner. None of that mattered, though. They remained loyal

to Charles when others hadn't. They carried out his wishes exactly as requested. Until the final slaughter.

"Didn't I say," Charles said, "that Mikey C. was off-limits? He was the only one from the old regime, from back when I was a damn grease monkey working in the garage, who remained neutral in the face of change. He had ties with groups outside our organization that wouldn't talk to me. Now we lost him, we lost them, and we lost a lot of damn money."

None of the three men spoke.

"I said don't touch him!" Charles kicked his chair, sending it to the left. It toppled over on its side. Caster wheels spun without resistance. "But now his body is torn into pieces and floating in the damn river."

Sunlight shone against the sweaty foreheads of the men across from him. One snuck a peek toward the office door, presumably in a failed attempt to locate Charles's bodyguards.

"We didn't know he was gonna be there," the guy named Paolo Almeida said. "I mean, once we started, he came out from a back room where I guess he was banging some whore. Charles, man, he saw what we was doing. He reached for his piece. I had no choice." The guy closed his eyes and flinched, having given up the critical information Charles searched for.

Charles leaned back against the window, massive arms crossed. "You two, out."

Paolo remained seated while the other two captains rose and exited the office.

"What are you thinking right now?" Charles said.

"I'm wishing I'd kissed my wife before I left today."

"You're single."

Paolo shrugged. "Figure of speech."

Charles smirked. "Well in that case, if you had one, probably woulda been a good idea."

"Look, I'm telling the truth. It was me or him. I had no choice."

“Yes, you did.” Charles pushed off the window and planted his thick knuckles on the desk and leaned over it. “You could have known who the hell was in the damn house before going in, guns blazing.”

Paolo said nothing. Better that way. Every word he uttered dug another six inches in his eventual grave.

“So what should I do with you?” He didn’t wait for the man to answer. “Death is too simple an answer. It lacks the punch I’m looking for. Maybe a demotion. You know, knock you down a peg or six. You’re young enough to hustle on the street. Of course, you won’t have any protection if you get picked up.”

“And I’ll rat your ass out first chance I get.”

“Oh, hotheaded Paolo. The moment you arrived from Brazil or Argentina or wherever the fuck you’re from, I knew you’d be a problem.”

Charles smiled at the guy while an internal switch flipped. Rage rose up within him like angry bile. Still smiling, he reached out, grabbed the back of Paolo’s head and slammed it against the edge of the desk. Cartilage met solid mahogany. The desk won. Paolo choked on the blood that flooded his mouth and throat. Another round of head-meets-desk split Paolo’s forehead and sent him to the floor.

With his heart racing and his breath rapid and uneven, Charles rounded his desk. A pool of blood seeped into the twenty thousand dollar rug. He slammed his foot into Paolo’s midsection, cursing at the spreading tide of crimson, then he proceeded toward the door.

“You two,” he said, aiming a finger in the direction of the men who had accompanied Paolo. “Get him off my floor. Clean him up, take him upstate, and get rid of him. Use the express elevator straight to the garage. Anyone asks, he slipped in the bathroom and hit the urinal.”

NEW YORK CITY.

TWO WOMEN. ONE blonde, the other brunette. Skimpy outfits. Did they run for exercise? Or for attention? The blonde glanced over, then back, smiling as she passed. The diamonds on her wedding ring glinted in the sunlight.

Jack Noble returned a complimentary nod as he stayed far to the right of the Washington Square fountain. In part to stay out of view should someone be watching from above. Also to seek shelter from the heat. But not even the cover of the trees could provide respite from the mid-July humidity. Even at nine in the morning. Didn't bother the kids at the playground, although few things did. They raced past, sidestepping adults without taking their eyes off one another.

The sight brought images of Mia to the forefront of Jack's mind. He hadn't seen his daughter since he left London to deal with a matter in his hometown of Crystal River, Florida. Things there hadn't gone as planned. Once again, his past had resurfaced, as it always did. And as much as he wanted to be near his daughter, her safety was paramount.

So Jack came back to the closest thing he had to a home.

But there wasn't much left for him in New York. The properties he co-owned with his former partner Riley "Bear" Logan were all up for sale or sold. It had been Jack's idea. Bear followed through with it. The properties were a waste at this point anyway. They sat unused, and would remain that way if the duo hung onto them. Better Bear have the money to

set aside for his and Mandy's futures, than the condos and apartments go to waste.

Bear had kept another promise Jack forced upon the big man. He and Mandy had disappeared. Calls to his main forwarding number were met with a fast busy signal. The line was gone. All other numbers Jack tried received a message indicating the same.

Better this way. At least, Jack convinced himself of it. Anyone connected with him met an untimely and painful ending. Somehow, Bear had managed to survive for close to twenty years as Jack's partner, first in the military, then in business. The odds weren't in the big man's favor if he remained in that capacity.

At the northeast corner of the park, Jack crossed Washington Square North and continued along the busy sidewalks of University Place until he reached 11th. He'd made the same walk four other times in the past month. Each time, his knocks went unanswered. Had they gone unheard? All he wanted was proof that Clarissa was OK. The last time he'd seen her, she'd saved his life by stopping a rogue SIS agent from filling him with bullets.

Since then, she'd been a ghost.

Perhaps that meant it was time to accept his duty to her was done. He'd protected her long enough. She obviously could make her own way now.

From 11th, Jack made his way to the Upper East Side. An eccentric millionaire had reached out to him through a private channel and showed interest in securing Jack's services as head of security for the duration of the man's stay in New York. The call came as little surprise. He'd fielded several over the past month after gaining a reputation in some circles. The reason? He'd prevented the assassination of a rising political star in London. In retrospect, it would have been best for all involved had she died. Eventually, she did. Regardless, Jack's status in the wake of the event offered new prospects. This one, being close to home, intrigued him.

He didn't need the money. Even after turning ninety percent of his assets over to Bear, his bank accounts provided enough to live on for years to come. But Jack wasn't ready for retirement. Yet. And rather than eat up his accounts, he figured a better plan would be to add to them while he still had the ability. Short-term security gigs would provide an opportunity to do just that. Plus, they had the added benefit of giving him something to do every day. He expected his senses to dull over time due to age. Little could be done to prevent that. Maybe slow the decline down. But there was no need to accelerate the process by sitting around on a barstool all day.

Upon entering the millionaire's condo building, the phone in Jack's pocket buzzed. He'd acted on a whim and purchased a smart phone. It had gigs of memory, and multiple gigahertz of processing, and cloud capabilities. At first none of that meant anything to him. The phone had nearly ended up in the trashcan on more than one occasion. But he took the time to figure it out. The devices, he figured, were here to stay. No point fighting them.

A man the color of coal and the size of a box-truck entered the lobby. He had a dark t-shirt on that said, "Yeah, I'm That Guy." Jack figured he got asked the question a lot. The man gestured with his head for Jack to follow, so he did. They took the hallway to the left and entered a small windowless room.

"I'm sure you know how this works," the guy said.

"I'll save you the trouble." Jack reached behind and retrieved his Beretta. He released the magazine and set it and the pistol on the table, grip facing the other man.

"Appreciate that, but it ain't gonna keep my hands off of you."

Jack didn't resist the man's attempt. Wasn't like he was going to find anything. Hands ran roughshod up and down Jack's torso, legs, ankles. Finally, the guy stepped back and opened the door.

"Let's go."

They took the elevator to the top floor and walked the length of the building where they came to a stop in front of the last door. The man made Jack wait in the hallway. Murmurs escaped through the gap between the door and the floor. They were too low to decipher. After a few minutes, the guy returned and waved Jack inside the condo. The drawn curtains, perhaps purple in color and made from velvet, blocked out all the light. One dim bulb illuminated the room. A flash of orange shone from the corner. Jack didn't recognize the face behind the cigarette.

The guy took a step forward. Curly silver hair with traces of black adorned a chiseled face.

“Ah, Mr.-”

Jack held out his hand and said, “No names.”

The guy nodded. “No problem.”

“Can we get some light in here?”

“I'd prefer not.” He paused a moment. “Took a bullet to the head twenty-five years ago, eyes haven't been the same since. I've got special glasses to help when outside, but I don't like wearing them inside the house.”

Jack's eyes adjusted. He made out the scar on the man's right cheek, between ear and eye. Maybe a remnant from the bullet that affected his tolerance for light.

“So what happened? Mugged? That why I'm here?”

Laughing, the man stepped forward again. His frame was slender, but muscular. “Twenty five years ago I was a SEAL. Do the math.”

“Panama.”

Nodding, he said, “At least I wasn't one of the unfortunate twenty-three souls who perished there. Anyway, what about you?”

“Panama? I was in eighth grade. I was ready to go, but they wouldn't take me.”

The guy's smile widened. “No, not Panama. Military?”

“You invited me here, figured you knew that already.” Jack paused to allow the man to rebut. He didn’t. Jack continued. “Eschewed college to join the Marines. Selected for a special assignment early on for some new program they were testing.”

“With the CIA.”

Jack shrugged and continued. “Did that for a couple years before the whole thing fell apart. They threw a lot of money at me to get me to retire early. I took it. Considered making it a permanent situation. Problem was, being a drunk in the Keys didn’t pay all that well, so I hopped on board the government wagon again and worked for another agency. Couple years there, then went into business for myself. Picked up the security gig for that politician by accident after working with British Intelligence a few months back.”

“And I heard you did an excellent job.”

“I suppose.” Jack glanced around in an attempt to locate the large man who’d escorted him through the building. “Then again, she’s dead.”

“Not your fault, from what I hear.”

“Don’t believe everything you’re told.”

The man fidgeted with an envelope and said nothing.

“What’s this all about?” Jack said. “You obviously have the skills and contacts to take care of yourself. You’re not some eccentric that’s being stalked or extorted or living in fear of his own shadow. So why me? Why here? Why now?”

The envelope disappeared behind the man’s body. “Perhaps you are right. Maybe I don’t need your services right now.”

For a moment, Jack’s gut tensed, and he had the feeling that mortars were incoming. “Was it something I said?”

The guy said nothing.

“What’s in the envelope?”

“Down payment, that’s all.” He brought his hands around, empty. “Seems we won’t be needing it.”

“The hell is this all about?”

The guy lifted his hand and snapped. “Martellus, please escort our guest out.”

The big black man crossed the room. Each step reverberated through the floorboards. Sensing he had a few seconds left in the condo, Jack spoke up.

“Never got your name.”

“You don’t need it,” the older man said.

“Why’d you bring me here?”

The big man’s hands wrapped around Jack’s shoulders. He didn’t budge.

“Easy way or hard way, man. Either way, I get paid the same,” the man said.

“Why?” Jack said.

The older man turned away and went into the next room without saying a word. The door shut behind him, sending a slight gust toward the windows and ruffling the dark drapes.

“Last chance of easy way,” the guy said.

Jack broke free of the man’s grasp and started toward the door. “I can find my own way out.”

“You want your piece?”

Jack stopped, turned, held out his hands.

“Elevator,” the guy said.

A minute later, the bronze-plated doors opened up to an empty lobby. The big man didn’t get out. He handed Jack his Beretta, then tossed the magazine halfway across the room. By the time Jack reached it, the elevator had started its ascent to the upper floor.

Not quite sure what to make of the meeting, Jack exited the building and walked north one block. Heat reflected off the concrete surrounding him. The temperature had risen ten degrees since he stepped foot inside the building. The humidity was close to maxed out. Despite that, the sidewalk

was packed, and the park across the street too. The meeting played over again in his mind. What had the man wanted with him? Maybe he'd built a team of some sort, security or mercenary. Not much difference these days. The guy had some interest in Jack, but apparently not enough to extend an offer. What had he said to discourage the guy?

As soon as a break in traffic presented itself, Jack jogged across 5th Avenue. A curb marked the crossover from asphalt to concrete. He imagined a sniper rifle protruding from a window in the condo, aimed at his back and tracking every move. The cover of the trees on the opposite sidewalk failed to provide the security he needed. So he hopped the solid fence and cut across Central Park, always moving forward, resisting the urge to look behind.

PARIS, FRANCE.

A COOL MIST enveloped Bear as he emerged from the sweltering metro station. Glancing up, he couldn't tell where the mist ended and the clouds began. The breeze chilled the droplets of water that clung to his cheeks and bare arms. They did little to counter the stifling humidity, though. Was the weather typical for Paris in the middle of July?

Bear shielded his eyes from the pervasive mist and scanned the street and sidewalk. The haze made it difficult to spot any landmarks he might recall from his last visit to the City of Lights. As he began to gather his bearings, he felt a tug on his shirt. Glancing back, Mandy stared up at him. She cupped both hands over and around the sides of her eyes.

"I need an umbrella," she said. "Or a jacket with a hood."

He spotted a drug store a block away. Gesturing with his chin, he said, "Come on, kid."

She stepped to his side and the two of them made their way down the crowded sidewalk. Outside the store entrance, he handed her twenty euros and remained there while she went inside. The drizzle and mist didn't bother him. He'd endured far worse during his years in the Marines. Hell, he'd purposefully sat through worse just to bag a ten-point buck.

Crowds passed in waves, most emerging from the metro, intertwining with those already in place. They all had the same reaction to the weather upon emerging from the covered stairs. They scrunched their faces and winced at the hovering mist as

though they entered a field of pissed off honeybees. Bear recognized none of the people that passed. And none of them recognized him.

And that was how Bear liked it.

Mandy exited the store with a multi-colored umbrella large enough for the two of them. Quite a feat, Bear thought. While she was still a petite thing, Bear was massive. She extended the umbrella and handed it to him.

Bear declined. “Change?”

She deposited a couple coins into the palm of his hand.

“That it?” he asked.

“I got us each a soda, too.” She pulled a bottle from her bag and gave it to Bear. “Will you tell me where we’re going now?”

Bear started forward on a path that led away from one metro station, and invariably toward another, which they ignored.

“Bear,” she said, fumbling with the umbrella before sliding it open. “Wait up.”

He slowed his pace until the sound of her labored breathing caught up to him. He’d grown concerned over her wheezing, which had worsened in recent months. The entire time Mandy had been at his side, he hadn’t brought her to a doctor for a check-up. Not something that occurred to him. And now that it had, he had no idea where to take her. She had spent time at Number 10, the British Prime Minister’s residence. Had they checked her? If so, they hadn’t addressed any concerns with Bear. After a few moments, her breathing returned to normal, and his concern faded, yielding to another set of thoughts.

It wasn’t that Bear didn’t want to tell Mandy why they were in Paris. He didn’t know how. Months ago, a woman had caught his attention, even though they had only spent moments together. Sometimes it took no more than that. To make matters worse, she was with Pierre, a man that, while they had their ups and downs, was as close to Jack and Bear as anyone.

Of course, the Frenchman had been laid up in intensive care, the victim of gunshot wounds, the last time Bear had seen him. The doctors had given Pierre a fifty-percent chance to live. Could've died, for all Bear knew.

So he hesitated again when Mandy asked why they were in Paris. The girl hadn't had the easiest year of her life. Abandoned. Abducted. Orphaned. That was only the beginning. She might have been better off had Jack left her alone on the sidewalk back in New York City. They all might've been. Some agency or organization would have picked the girl up and found a foster home for her. He shuddered at the thought. He knew the life of insanity they shared was better than anything an orphanage or foster family could ever provide for her.

Stability.

Bear's only goal. He was the constant in her life. A shaky one, but a constant nonetheless. And here he was, ready to shake things up for her again. He ran a hand through his hair, squeezing the water out as he went.

"Are we doing something illegal?" she asked.

"Maybe," he said, shrugging.

"Bear!"

"Mandy."

She sighed and pushed ahead of him. "Whatever."

"I'll tell you more soon. Now get back here so you don't get lost."

She glanced back with narrowed eyes. She'd grown a lot in the last year or so, and soon he wouldn't be able to tell her what to do the way he just had.

"Soon, Mandy. I promise."

And he would tell her more. Once he figured out how to broach the subject. It wasn't as if he'd called Kat to announce their visit. It had been weeks since he'd last seen her. There had been no contact between the two of them since then. She could have moved out, or moved on. She might not even

remember or recognize him. Possibly didn't want to because of what happened shortly afterward. Perhaps their shared sin, as benign as it had been, caused Pierre's injuries. Hell, what if the version of events he remembered failed to match reality?

The shops and restaurants they passed took on a familiar look. Bear's head moved as though on a swivel now. Every person he saw could be Kat. None were. His tunnel vision was so narrow that they could have been tailed and he wouldn't have known. The thought sent ice down his spine. At once, he pulled Mandy inside cafe and they waited inside for five minutes while he studied the passing foot traffic.

"Let's get something to eat." He fished another twenty euros from his pocket and handed it to Mandy, adding, "Some kind of sandwich. And a coffee."

While the girl went to the counter and ordered in broken French, Bear continued to watch for anyone lingering near the cafe. Would the urge to look over his shoulder ever fade? Bear had been promised that his records were expunged across friendly countries, at least anything criminal. Crossing borders should no longer raise red flags. But that promise was only as good as the mouth that delivered it. Almost no one Bear knew could be trusted, and therefore, neither could the supposed command.

Mandy crossed the room with the trained eyes of a Spec Ops soldier. Even at barely twelve years of age, Bear had managed to teach the girl to identify the greatest threat in the room, as well as the weakest target. He watched on as she spotted both, as well as points of ingress and egress, and potential weapons. She placed the food and drinks on the table and sat down. Bear nodded.

Mandy said, "The man with the gray hair, wearing a white pullover is the biggest threat in the room."

"Why him and not the younger guy with the beard?"

"Because he has a cane under the table."

"So is he the weakest?"

She shook her head and quickly shot a look at a woman with twin babies. “She is.”

“Why?”

“She’ll defend her babies before herself.”

“That makes her weakest?”

“She has to fight for three, spreading her too thin.”

“Weapons?”

She reached for a salt shaker and dumped some on an empty spot on her plate. “These are heavy, made from glass, and pointed corners on the bottom. Can cradle them in my palm, top near my thumbs, and do a...” She glanced up, thinking, calculating. “...windmill punch?”

“What about the silverware? Forks and knives and junk?”

“That’s what they’d expect. With those glass shakers, all they see is a twelve year old girl flailing her arms.”

Bear smiled and nodded and reached out for the salt. “Good job, kid. Now pass that over here.”

They finished eating in less than ten minutes. Bear spent most of that time drinking his coffee, his sandwich only lasting sixty seconds. He scanned the street. Every time he glanced at Mandy, she was doing the same. He’d given her pointers on what to look for, patterns she should notice, and what a team acting in cohesion might attempt to do while stalking. This information was relearned regularly. In time, she would commit it to memory and it would become second nature.

They left the cafe and joined the crowds on the misty sidewalk. It seemed thicker, denser than just fifteen minutes earlier. Pressing forward, Bear began to feel as though they were close to their destination. He resisted the urge to rush, knowing they might be in a holding pattern soon. If they were being tailed, even for the purposes of gathering information, he didn’t want to linger too long and blow the location. That would hamper their ability to return, nullifying his chances of seeing Kat again.

When they came to the old stone wall, he knew at once they had found the right place.

“This is it.”

“What is it?”

“An apartment complex.”

“Who do you know in here?”

“A friend.”

“We went from England to Rome to Barcelona and then Paris just so you could see a friend?”

Bear said nothing as they passed the locked iron gate.

“And why are we walking past? Didn’t you call first?”

“Pipe down, Mandy.”

“Whatever.”

He reached out in front of her and they both stopped. She leaned back against the wall. He faced her. Her eyes darted left and right and back again, studying the faces that passed. It was like Bear had eyes in the back of his head now.

“Listen,” he said. “That door needs a key on both sides. Got it? You can’t let it fall shut once you get through.”

“How am I going to get through?”

“We’ve gotta wait. As soon as someone enters or exits, you catch the gate at the last moment and go through. But make sure it rests against the frame. OK?”

“OK.”

“All right, go.”

Bear watched the girl trot thirty feet away and stop near the gate. They didn’t have to wait more than fifteen minutes for it to open. An older woman glanced down and smiled at Mandy as she exited onto the sidewalk. Even held the gate for the girl. Bear overheard Mandy thank the woman in French. Iron hinges grated as the gate swung shut, but instead of a rattling as the lock engaged, metal softly clanked against metal.

Bear waited a minute, then walked toward the gate. Mandy stood on the other side.

“Papa,” she said in her French accent, and she swung the gate open.

Bear grabbed hold and stepped through, carefully resetting the gate against the lock, but not engaging it.

He followed the stone sidewalk through the complex until they reached Kat’s building. The mist had driven everyone, even the cats, inside. Not even the bravest of children were out today. The playground equipment stood barren. Wind blew the swings back and forth. Bear stopped in front of the weathered door. Paint littered the stoop like lead snow. With a push, it opened silently on well-oiled hinges. The mustiness of the foyer caused Mandy to sneeze. The sound echoed up and down the stairwell.

They climbed the stairs. Bear three at a time. Mandy running to keep up. Her wheezing returned. Bear slowed down, but it didn’t help. Each of the floors had different tiling. On Kat’s level, it was a blue and pink paisley design. Of all things, that was what Bear had committed to memory. They reached the floor, and Bear led the way down the narrow hallway. He stopped at the corner before Kat’s apartment.

“Why are we waiting here?” Mandy asked.

“Just a minute, all right?” He didn’t want to tell her he had to gather up the nerve to knock on the door and face Kat. It wasn’t only feelings he had for her. It was the guilt of Pierre taking the bullets that had been meant for him.

She shrugged. “Whatever. Just curious.”

Bear took a deep breath, looked down at Mandy and stepped into the hallway.

“Shit.”

Mandy maneuvered around him. “What?”

The door sat ajar a half-inch. Dull light knifed through the crack and created a long, narrow finger along the hallway floor. He approached. Stopped. Listened. Heard nothing. Bear

glanced over his shoulder and spotted a fire extinguisher that looked like it had been in the place since the seventies. The instruction tag had turned a lifeless yellow color. He grabbed the extinguisher from the wall and returned to the door.

“Go wait down the hall, Mandy.”

She shook her head, clutched both hands in front of her chest and inched closer.

“Go.”

She didn't back down.

“Dammit, kid. All right, stay behind me. Not kidding, right behind me.” He used his foot to nudge the door open further.

And the apartment was empty.

NEW YORK CITY.

THE BLISTERING HEAT and ninety-five percent humidity drove all but the diehards inside by the time mid-day hit. Jack was no exception. He returned to his apartment and holed up for the rest of the afternoon. Sleep over the past four weeks had been broken due to recurring images of two women who had been a part of his life and were now gone forever. After the first two weeks, he regularly had to make up for the lack of rest during the day. That was the case again as he slept through the hottest part of the afternoon and woke around six in the evening. A glance at his phone told him the temperature still hovered in the low nineties. At least his east-facing unit provided some shelter from the afternoon rays. All he needed was a solid breeze to keep the stifling air moving.

He glanced out the bedroom window. Long shadows blocked out the crowded city streets below. It'd be three hours before the sunlight gave way to artificial illumination. Then the streets would come to life once again.

Moving to the kitchen, he put on a pot of coffee. Not even the heat could stop him from consuming the drink. The process was tedious but necessary. He'd considered purchasing one of those new single-serve machines, but it went against his general philosophy of sticking with what works.

While waiting for the coffee to brew, he checked his phone for missed calls.

There was one. He returned it.

Erin answered on the third double-toned ring and mumbled something into the phone.

“Sorry to call so late,” he said. “I can try again when it’s morning in London.”

“I’m still up. Was just about to go to bed, but I can spare a few more minutes.”

“Is Mia OK?”

“She’s fine. Misses you, though. Been asking about you every day.”

“Tell her I miss her.”

“Do you? I mean, do you really? I don’t want to build you up to her, only for her to have to tear down this image when you drop off the face of the earth.”

Jack took a deep breath in order to reply civilly. Years ago, before he knew Erin was pregnant, Jack broke off their relationship and disappeared. He’d feared for her safety, like he did for everyone close to him. It wasn’t until recently that he saw her and discovered he had a child.

“Erin, what happened seven years ago is in the past. I’ve changed. My priorities have changed. I’m only over here because I want to make sure that everything is behind me. So far, no one has come seeking me out. I care about her. And you. I want to make things right. Even if you and I can’t be together, the three of us can be a family in some fashion.”

The coffeemaker roared like an approaching squall as the final stream of brew was expelled. Jack poured a cup, the aroma filling his nose, his mouth watering. He recalled an early date with Erin, shortly after Dottie had introduced them, at a cafe in Paris.

“Anyway,” he said. “Did you call to fuss me out, or was there something else?”

“We’re leaving on holiday to Tenerife tomorrow.”

“How long will you be out of touch?”

“Well, a couple weeks I suppose, but I don’t want us to be out of touch. I’d like for you to come join us. For a little while, anyway. There’ll be none of the madness that is London. Now, I know that you might not be inclined to fly on your own passport after what happened in Florida.”

“I’ve got others. Clean ones that no one knows about. Plus, I can get Sasha to check for me and see if my profile is flagged.”

Erin started to speak and stopped mid-word. She had something to say about Sasha. She always did. Though there was nothing romantic between Jack and Sasha, Erin had vocalized her concerns on more than one occasion, despite Jack’s claims of it only being a working relationship.

“Right,” she said. “Well, do you think you’ll make the trip?”

Jack took a sip from his mug, set it on the counter, then turned and walked to the other side of the room. He opened a door and stepped out onto the six-foot-wide balcony. Wind pushed the humid air around. It didn’t make the difference he’d hoped for. Sweat formed on his brow the instant he set foot outside. If he was going to endure this kind of weather, might as well do it on a beach somewhere secluded from stalking shadows.

“Yeah,” he said, “I think I will. I need to tie up a few things here first, so maybe I can catch a flight on Sunday or Monday. How long do you plan to be there?”

“We own the condo, so as long as we want, I suppose.”

“Who else knows?”

“Outside of Mia and me? Only Hannah, and she’s coming along.”

Jack had met Hannah earlier by coincidence after landing at Heathrow. Turned out she was the nanny of the daughter he hadn’t yet learned of.

“OK,” Jack said. “You know how to reach me if anything changes.”

After ending the call, Jack stepped back inside the chilled apartment and finished his coffee. The itch to head outside was strong, but he remained, opting to make his own dinner. As the ribeye sizzled in the frying pan amid a swirling sea of butter and olive oil, he thought back to the meeting that took place earlier that day. The setting had caught him off-guard. How much had he missed in the darkened room? There could have been someone in the other corner, waiting for a signal or code word, which if triggered, might've spelled the end for Jack. The meeting might have been a setup for some other purpose. Or maybe it was legit. Either way, something he did or said compelled the older man to call it off.

And there was someone who might know.

Jack cooked the steak up to medium-rare, added a layer of salt and pepper, then sat down to eat. When the meal was finished and his beer half-emptied, he pulled out his phone and navigated through four screens until he reached his contact list. With a tap on the screen, the phone dialed a number that Jack had manually entered hundreds of times in the past decade. Technology made it easier, but the process still took the same amount of time. He considered himself a reluctant convert at this point.

“That really you, Jack?”

“Brandon, my man, how've you been?”

“All right, I guess. Holed up for a bit, but for the most part I'm hanging in there. Doing more crypto stuff lately. Even got myself a legit business going on the *interwebs*. Oh, and I started this new therapy that is supposed to stop the progression of this damn condition. Found a forum with others who've done it and some noted that it reversed it a bit. Might be able to use my legs again one day, man.”

“That sounds great.”

“Sure it does.” Brandon paused, then added, “So what brought you out of the oil fields?”

“You don't know?”

“Know what?”

“Someone reached out to me about security. Supposed to be a flamboyant millionaire, but nothing screamed flamboyant about the guy. Turned out to be a merc. Former SEAL. Figured the contact might have come through you somehow. Seeing as how the guy has a Spec Ops background, figured he might’ve spent some time in the intelligence community.”

“Nah, man, it’s been a while since someone asked me about you. And even if someone had, I’d have given them my standard answer of I don’t know nothing about no Jack Noble. Anyway, you got an address, or did you meet at a restaurant or library or something?”

“Library?”

“Why not?”

“Never occurred to me to set up a meeting in the library. Kids, I guess. We met in his condo.” Jack found the address and read it to Brandon. “See what you can find.”

“Hold on just a moment, my good sir.”

While Brandon searched a myriad of databases, Jack considered who else might have been involved with providing the guy he met with his contact information. There were plenty of people he’d worked with over the years. Few knew his whereabouts at the moment.

“This guy say that was his place?”

“It was inferred.”

“He lied.”

“What?”

“Some guy in South Carolina owns that unit, man. Rents it out through some kind of stay-at-my-place-for-the-night website. People who don’t like hotels can rent someone else’s apartment for a day or two, or even longer, I guess. That place is booked for a solid six months.”

“So this was either the guy from South Carolina, or someone who rented the room. You’re saying that it’s booked solid, and probably has been up ‘til now. In which case, they would have had to have known they were coming for some

time. Impossible, given my status over the past six months.” He paused to consider the possibilities. “Can you send me the owner’s details? I might have to follow up with him to find out who he rented to.”

“Sure can. I’ll even do a search to see if the name flags in any databases.” Brandon tapped on his keyboard. “He’s got a service record, but according to this, he’s been out for a long ass time.”

Jack gave Brandon an email address to send the information. Like a call to his phone number, the email routed through multiple addresses and servers before reaching the final destination. After they ended the call, he pulled up the message and read the contents. The condo belonged to a John C. Merrick. Little River, South Carolina. No address. No phone number. Maybe Brandon was still working on that part.

He consulted a map and determined that Little River was about ten miles north of Myrtle Beach, located on the North Carolina border. Worst case, he could fly into Charleston, get a car, and be in town in forty-five minutes. From there, a little investigation would turn up the man’s address.

He tried the contact number he’d been given when the original meeting between him and who he thought was a millionaire had been arranged. The line rang once, then disconnected to dead air. Second attempt yielded the same results.

Someone was already covering tracks.

A trip to South Carolina would be in order. He decided to get through Friday first, then fly out Saturday morning.

UPSTATE NEW YORK.

THE LAST TRACES of sunlight passed through pinpricks between the multitudes of leaves, providing little light by the time they reached the BMW. The bag on Paolo's head prevented him from seeing the sunset. But he knew it was there. He'd counted the seconds since they laid him down in the backseat with the threat of "sit up and we'll shoot you in the car and leave you in a ditch."

Perhaps the other two captains, Endrizzi and Milano, had plans to let him go. Why else keep him alive so long? Their soft chatter filtered from the front seat. They said nothing important since leaving Charles's office eight hours ago. They hadn't been driving the entire time. First, the men took him to Milano's house. They tied Paolo up with cord and duct tape and left him in the sweltering garage. Temperatures that had to reach the mid one-twenties left him drenched in sweat. The pain from his broken nose and split forehead had caused him to black out and lose track of time. He'd only managed to catch a glimpse at Endrizzi's Omega moments before they placed the hood over his head, then brought him inside the house. The air conditioning coated his soaked body. But it didn't last long. A minute later, one of them dragged him back into the garage. Only this time, he walked through a thick cloud of exhaust toward the purring engine of the BMW.

The threat of execution was made, and Paolo went into the backseat where he fought through pain and dizziness and nausea in an effort to keep track of every second that passed.

For only time remained. How much, though, was the question.

“This looks good,” Milano said. Or perhaps it had been Endrizzi. Everything sounded as though Paolo had gone underwater and the fluid never drained from his ears after he surfaced.

The vehicle decelerated and pulled to the right. The motion brought a swirl of bile up Paolo’s throat. Unwilling to have his bloody vomit splash against the hood and pelt him in the face, he swallowed hard against the rising tide.

Windows rolled down and wind rush overtook the silence. The warm, humid air full of the songs of crickets and cicadas felt warm against Paolo’s frigid skin. For a moment, at least. The sensation faded against the welling fear that they were close to the drop off spot. At least, he hoped it would be a drop off spot, and not a place of execution.

Solid asphalt gave way to a bumpy, gravelly ride, further confirming Paolo’s fears. Crushed rock parted underneath the weight of the vehicle and sounded like waves breaking. The BMW slowed to an eventual stop. The men in the front seats remained in place. A Zippo wheel turned. Smoke from a freshly lit cigarette filtered through Paolo’s hood.

“You can sit up now,” Milano said.

Paolo, with his hands tied behind his back, used his shoulder and legs to move into an upright position. As one of the men ripped the hood away, his head spun.

“Steady there, Paolo,” Endrizzi said. He extended the cigarette. “Smoke?”

Paolo nodded. Endrizzi flipped the cigarette around so the butt faced Paolo. The palm of the man’s hand glowed orange. He then stuck the butt between Paolo’s parched lips. Paolo inhaled like he was sucking down his last breath. The cherry burned bright, illuminating Endrizzi’s face. The man looked away as Paolo made eye contact.

“How ‘bout a drink?” Paolo asked.

Milano reached for the center console and retrieved a silver-coated flask. It looked like one side had a coat of arms and the other something written in Italian.

“My grandfather had these made,” Milano said. “In his later years, he did a lot of research on the family. This specific coat of arms belonged to some Italian king I’m a direct descendant of. You believe that shit? I’m like royalty or something.”

Paolo said, “Just give me a damn drink.”

Milano handed the flask to Endrizzi, who pressed it to Paolo’s mouth and turned it upward. After Paolo had taken a pull, Milano pulled the flask back and shook it up and down and back and forth, emptying the contents on Paolo’s open wounds.

Paolo yelled and kicked from the backseat. The two men in the front exited to avoid an errant boot connecting with the side of their head. One of them, likely Milano since he’d been in the driver’s seat, kicked the rear driver’s side door. Take a hundred thousand dollar BMW and treat it like shit. That’s the way these guys treated their vehicles. They didn’t care. The organization paid for the captain’s cars.

The door whipped open and a hand fell upon Paolo’s head. Milano, he presumed, dragged him off the leather seat by his hair. With his arms tied and unable to slow the momentum down, he tried to wedge a foot between the front seats. Didn’t happen. Temporarily suspended in mid-air, his hips slipped off the seat. He crashed to the ground. The impact sent a jolt of pain that traveled up his spine and down through his pelvis and legs.

“Get up, you bitch,” Milano shouted.

Paolo rolled to his side and planted his forehead into the gravel. Jagged rocks stabbed the exposed flesh of the wounds on his forehead and the bridge of his nose. He gritted his teeth against the pain and drew his knees forward. Before he could lift his head off the ground, a leather-clad foot collided with his midsection. The air rushed out of his lungs. The impact sent him rolling to the side. A moment passed. His oxygen-

starved lungs screamed. Four hands wrapped around his arms, grabbed his shirt, pulled him to his feet. Still winded, he stumbled backward into the BMW's rear fender.

“Don't get your fucking blood all over my ride.” Milano grabbed the back of Paolo's shirt and yanked downward.

Paolo stumbled, then steadied his footing. Endrizzi launched another attack. Paolo arched back, avoiding the man's right fist. Endrizzi, the least fit of all of them, stumbled forward, lost his balance, and fell to the ground.

Milano pulled his pistol and stepped back toward the spot where Endrizzi scrambled to get to his feet. He gestured with the firearm toward a narrowing path that led east. There was enough light left to follow the path to a point where it curved to the north. Beyond that, it was anybody's guess. They might have a barn back there. Or shovels waiting. Maybe a hole had been dug in advance for this kind of situation.

“Start moving.”

Paolo refused to budge.

Both men approached, stopping a few feet short. Endrizzi had pulled his .22. Lethal, if he got close enough. After missing with the punch, he wouldn't even try.

“Let's go,” Milano said again.

“Do it here,” Paolo said.

Milano glanced around. “That the way you want it?”

Paolo said nothing.

“Then kneel.”

Paolo didn't. He knew that they were too close to the road for either man to consider firing off a round. If he kneeled, it would put him in a position of weakness. They'd bludgeon him. And without his hands, he couldn't do anything to stop them from doing so. Standing, he could dodge, strike with a kick, and perhaps use one of the guys' momentum against them.

“Kiss my ass.” Paolo launched a spray of bloody saliva toward the men.

A crack of thunder and flash of lightning and searing pain hit all at once. His ears rang with a chorus of angels all hitting a high C. A warm, fresh stream ran down his left arm. He grimaced and looked away from the searing wound in his shoulder.

“What the hell are you doing?” Milano shouted at Endrizzi. “God dammit.” Panicked, he raised his firearm and aimed it at Paolo.

Paolo refused to go down like this, hands bound, in the woods. No way would he allow them to drag him deeper into the woods and bury him in a grave shallow enough for the scavengers to feast on his remains. That wouldn’t happen. Not today. Not without a fight.

He shuffled his feet, dropped down a few inches into a running stance, prepared to bolt forward and drive his shoulder or head into any part of Milano. Didn’t matter where. As long as he at least knocked the man off balance. Any damage he managed was a bonus. Maybe Milano would get a shot off. Perhaps Endrizzi would squeeze off another .22 round. Best case, both men would go down, affording Paolo a running start.

The evening went still. The crickets stopped singing. The cicadas shrill calls faded. Or maybe the ringing in Paolo’s ear was so great he no longer heard them.

No, the distant sound of tires rubbing asphalt proved he could still hear.

Paolo lunged forward, cutting left, then right, like a running back dancing between three hundred pound linemen. Milano’s eyes widened as he hurried to line up his shot. Endrizzi stutter-stepped backward and raised his arm.

A single shot was fired.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

“WELL LOOK WHO’S back and ready to work.”

Clarissa locked her computer screen and spun to the right in her chair. The building was never empty, but she was surprised to see Beck standing in her doorway. He smiled and offered a single nod.

“Most people,” Beck said, “would’ve gone home after their last day of training.”

“You should know by now that I’m not most people.”

“How’d you find it?”

“Different than the last one I went through.”

“Well, different agencies and agendas and such.”

“What are you doing here so late?” she asked.

Beck extended his arm toward an empty chair opposite Clarissa. “May I?”

She nodded.

He sat down, took a moment to get comfortable, then said, “Was hoping you’d show up.”

“Want to take me out for a celebratory dinner?”

As much as Clarissa denied it, she had thought of Beck frequently while away. Though the offer he’d extended to her had been professional in nature, there was additional motive

behind it. Beck hadn't admitted it. Probably wouldn't unless she went first. Something she wasn't opposed to doing.

"Afraid we can't do that tonight. We've got to start working on our first case together."

"Already?" She knew that they'd have an assignment soon, but had figured upon returning she would help Beck close out his caseload before they started something new.

He nodded and set a USB drive on her desk. "The information you need is on that drive."

She reached for the device. His gaze never left hers. She shuffled the USB drive from her right hand to her left. Aligned it with a slot on her laptop.

"Stop."

She pulled her hand back and glanced up at Beck. "What?" she said, making no attempt to hide her annoyance.

"Don't they teach you anything in that training?"

"Like...?"

"Like the fact that these little drives are one of the top ways we track people these days. Fools carry them everywhere, transmitting their location, the information they put on them, even recording audio in some cases."

She stared blankly at him. "So, you're telling me that you bugged the thumb drive you just gave me?"

Beck folded his arms and sighed. "Open your middle drawer."

Clarissa did.

"In there is a device. Unassuming in looks, it will be your electronic forensics lifesaver. Flip it on and hold it over the drive. Look for red or green."

She needed no further instruction. The device flashed red then green before turning green permanently.

"Easy, right?"

She nodded as she inserted the drive into her laptop.

“Keep that one in your desk. Use it every day in here.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out another. Set it on her desk. “Keep this one on you. Check your car, your apartment, the booth you sit down at when you go out to eat. Everything. Everywhere.”

“OK. I got it.” She rolled her eyes at him, then glanced to her screen as she navigated with her mouse to the new drive on her computer. “What’s this case about, anyway?”

“Known crime boss that the locals and FBI can’t make a single charge stick to. He’s actually new as a leader. Had been a number two for a few solid years. His boss wound up on the wrong end of a sniper’s bullet last year. He’s since taken over and managed to survive a number of attempts from within his own organization.”

“So what are we going to bring him up on? Tax evasion?”

“Surprisingly, he’s strong there. But there is a counterfeiting operation that we can tie him to. The hope is we can bring him down on that, then let the FBI and police go after his underlings on some murder charges and get them to flip.”

“Does this count as special assignment?” she asked. “Wasn’t that the reason you stayed on? This new position?”

Beck frowned as he glanced up at the ceiling. “This does not qualify. They want me to get you up to speed first. That’ll involve us taking on a few of these cases first. Then we’ll get into the real ops.”

“Which will be what? Taking down a shady business owner?” She smiled.

He shook his head. “Joke now. You’ll be wishing that was the case when we’re on assignment.”

“We’ll see, Beck. We’ll see.”

He leaned forward, rose and stepped back to the door. “Anyway, I’m heading home. Take a look through that file and take note of any questions you have. We’ll get to work in the morning.”

Clarissa waited for a few minutes, then exited her office. She closed and locked the door before heading to the break room for a cup of coffee. The machine brewed one cup at a time, so it was always fresh. She added cream and then returned to her office.

Seated at her desk, she pulled up the drive and scanned the first few folders. There wasn't much of note there. A lot of names, businesses, and locations and the connections between them. She noted some restaurants she recalled from Manhattan. Her earlier joke now seemed half premonition. When she reached a folder with pictures in it, Clarissa was surprised at how many of the men she recognized from her stints at various bars and clubs in the city.

She closed the folder and opened another. The first face she saw sent a shiver through her. She froze for a moment, staring at the scar, the dark soulless eyes. The menacing grin.

Charles DeCosta.

The man who had tried to kill her a year before. Had it not been for Sinclair, Charles would have snapped her neck or split her skull in half. At first, he hated her mostly because of her connection with Jack. But in time, she won him over on her own. She was sure Charles would kill her on her own merit now.

What to tell Beck? Clarissa was concerned she had too much emotional baggage invested to handle this case properly.

Maybe Beck knew that. Perhaps his bosses knew too. Hell, that's the reason he made her wait. The reason he left before she opened the folder. She wasn't done with training. Taking down Charles would be the final test.

And she couldn't fail.

She enlarged the picture of Charles until his ugly face filled her monitor.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered as anger filled her veins. He'd beaten her. He'd shot her. But he'd failed to end her life.

And for that, he'd pay.

UPSTATE, NEW YORK.

ONE OF THE BMW's windows shattered. A thousand pieces of glass smashed against one another, like a waterfall of ice chips.

Paolo left his feet. His bloodied head met Milano's, and both tumbled to the ground.

Endrizzi fired wildly, missing Paolo and hitting Milano at least once. The bullet slammed into the guy's flesh like a meat tenderizer pounding a sirloin.

Paolo whipped his head back and drove it forward, multiple times, each strike smashing Milano's forehead, nose, mouth, eyes. After the sixth head butt, the man stopped responding.

Endrizzi's pistol emitted a clicking sound when he tried to fire it. He threw it at Paolo. "I'm gonna rip your nuts off."

Paolo rolled to his right several times. He felt Milano's pistol under his midsection at one point. As he hopped from his knees to his feet, Endrizzi charged. Paolo held his position until the last possible second, then sidestepped left while bringing his right knee up. It connected with Endrizzi's soft mid-section and the guy stumbled to the ground, doubled over on his knees. Paolo glanced around, then ran up to Endrizzi and used the only weapon available to him. His feet. He kicked and stomped on Endrizzi's head, neck and chest.

Milano rolled over and got to his hands and knees. His right hand swept the ground, presumably in an attempt to locate his missing firearm. Perhaps giving up, he reached into his pants pocket. A moment later, a knife blade glinted in what little light penetrated the thick cover. Before Paolo could cover the distance, Milano was on his feet. Unsteady, but upright nonetheless.

The pistol remained on the ground between them.

Milano moved toward it, slowly, cautiously, each step deliberate, knife extended.

Behind Paolo, Endrizzi choked on his own blood. Maybe a couple teeth.

If Milano got to the pistol, it was over. Paolo would rather deal with a stab wound up close, than a shot fired from ten feet away. He sprinted forward, and, like a striker kicking the winning goal, angled his body low and to the side and kicked with his right foot. He connected with the pistol and sent it skidding into high grass.

Milano dove forward, slicing right to left with the knife. The blade caught Paolo's left calf. He lurched to his right, out of reach from a second strike. The missed opportunity left Milano unbalanced and sent him to his torso, like a base runner sliding into home while trying to avoid a collision with the catcher. Paolo struck with a right foot to Milano's side. The pain of using his left leg to support him was too much, and the leg buckled. As he was going down, Paolo shifted his weight and dropped his knee into the middle of the other man's back. Milano grunted as the air left his lungs, and a rib or two cracked.

The dislodged knife fell and bounced inches past Milano's outstretched arm.

Paolo rose up and dropped his knee into Milano's back again. Then a third and fourth time. The man stopped reaching for the knife. Paolo rolled off Milano and fell to his side, the knife behind him. He scooted until it was within reach. His hands, numb from being bound for several hours, gripped the weapon and secured it. He then rolled into a sitting position.

He brought his hand down to his calf and felt the wound. It wasn't as bad as he thought. Superficial. No real damage.

Milano managed to put his hands under his shoulders and pushed off the ground.

Paolo drove the heel of his boot into the guy's face, further dislodging his broken nose. With Milano face down in the dirt and gravel again, Paolo focused on cutting the cord that bound him.

Idiots.

He'd have used thick rubber handcuffs to secure one of them. No way out of those. But rope. Simple. Using hands that felt nothing, the blade sawed through the cord like a spoon through a frozen stick of butter. It took a bit of work, but every movement meant progress. Finally, he sliced through and brought his hands around. He cut the remaining rope off, then massaged his aching wrists to restore blood flow to his fingers.

Endrizzi had managed to move a few feet, collapsed and rolled to his back again. The outer edges of the light cone created by the BMW's headlights enveloped his head. Blood flowed from the guy's mouth, down his chin and cheeks. He looked like a deranged killer clown.

Paolo stepped over Milano's still, lifeless body, driving the toe of his boot into the side of the guy's head for good measure as he did so. The guy didn't respond. Paolo continued toward Endrizzi. Stopped a couple feet away. The man was in bad shape. He'd probably die if Paolo left him there. No point in letting nature take its course, though. He bent over, grabbed a handful of Endrizzi's hair, and pulled backward, exposing the flesh of his neck.

Then he began stabbing. Five. Ten. Fifteen times. Finally, he plunged the blade into the side and yanked across, severing the carotid.

Paolo didn't stand around to watch the man bleed out.

Milano laid with his chin perched on the ground. He had witnessed the slaughter. When Paolo spotted him, the guy attempted to roll to the side and crawl away.

Paolo thought about locating the pistol lost in the grass, or perhaps finding Endrizzi's .22. He didn't want to get too close to Milano. The .22 was out of ammunition, though. And the pistol could take minutes to find.

As he cautiously moved forward, he stumbled on a large rock. It was about a foot wide and twice as long. He slipped the knife into his pocket and picked up the little boulder.

"Christ," Milano said, now on his back, looking up at Paolo, who held the rock over his head. "No, man, come on."

"Should have let me out and driven off," Paolo said. "Or killed me instead of dicking around."

"Come on, Paolo. I'm married to your sister, for Christ's sake."

"And you were willing to kill me."

"It was an order. What'd you want me to do?"

Paolo answered by slamming the rock into Milano's forehead. In case that wasn't enough, he hoisted it up in the air again and whipped it back down, nearly splitting Milano's head in two.

He left the rock and the men where they lay and walked over to the idling BMW. Light flooded the ground when he pulled the door open. He noticed his pants and boots were covered in blood.

"Shit," he muttered, reaching inside and pushing the trunk release. He went to the rear of the vehicle and studied the contents of the trunk. While there wasn't much, what he saw gave him an idea.

He fished through Endrizzi's pockets and came up with a wallet with three hundred in cash, and a pack of cigarettes and the lighter he'd used earlier. He pocketed the items, then dragged the man close to Milano. After dropping Endrizzi, he searched Milano's pockets. All he found was a billfold with six hundred dollars and an ID.

Paolo kept the cash, smokes and lighter. He tossed the first two into the car and kept the latter in hand. He went back to

the trunk and pulled out the full, red plastic gas can, which he then carried over to the bodies. After the contents were emptied onto them and the surrounding ground, he dropped the can, and then stripped down to his boxers, tossing the rest of his clothing on top of the dead captains.

He went to the trunk again. Pulled out a pair of gym shorts and a t-shirt and put them on.

Seated inside the BMW, bare feet touching the ground, he inhaled deeply from a lit cigarette. When the smoke had burned down about halfway, Paolo tossed the smoldering remains onto the pile of clothing and bodies. As he drove away, he watched the flames rising into the night sky in the rear-view, consuming his friends.

LONDON, ENGLAND.

SASHA KIRBY FLATTENED the lapel of her jacket as she entered the building affectionately known within the intelligence community as *Legoland*. Despite the playful moniker, the dealings that went on inside of Vauxhall Cross were anything but pleasant. The building acted as the headquarters of the British Special Intelligence Service, better known as MI6. The agency was responsible for keeping tabs on the world.

And a great deal of that responsibility fell upon Sasha's shoulders, whether directly or otherwise.

She passed through security with a nod and a smile, and continued on to the elevator bank. There were no buttons jutting out of a plate mounted to the wall. She swiped a card in front of the reader and waited for the doors to part. When they did, she entered the lift alone. She pressed the button for the fourth floor and waited while the lift dropped a few feet while the cable tightened, then propelled the car upward some forty feet.

The lift halted. The doors remained sealed. Sasha used the same card and swiped it through a reader positioned above the floor and call buttons. A red light turned green. The doors parted.

In the hallway, a security guard pushed off the wall and stood at attention with his hand precariously close to his sidearm. He gave a slight nod to Sasha as she passed, then

reached behind his back and pressed a button. The lock to the double doors clicked.

Sasha entered the gray floor.

Every inch, drab and devoid of color. The floors, cubicles, walls, office doors. Even the blinds that covered the windows were dull. She often thought that the look of the space contributed to ineffectiveness, although some above her pay grade cited bullshit studies that said otherwise. She could counter in one of a hundred ways, but when someone who reached a rank too high gets an idea, they hang on for dear life. They wouldn't change. It had been that way for years, and it'd stay that way.

As she approached her office, her assistant leaned forward in her chair and gestured for Sasha to stop.

“Mason Sutton phoned and said he'd be ten minutes late for your meeting. Is that all right, or should I reschedule with him?”

Sasha had forgotten about the meeting. It was the first of a planned series of weekly meetings between Mason and her. He occupied a similar role in MI5. After the terrorist bombings a few months ago, they realized their collective intelligence might have helped prevent the carnage.

“No, that will be OK,” she told her assistant. “Send him in when he arrives please.”

She continued to her office, the one place where she could personalize and colorize. The wide window behind her desk overlooked the Thames. Stormy conditions kept the scullers off the river. Pictures of nothing but color splattered on canvas hung on each wall. She'd filled the space with flowers and plants, real and fake. Her desk was bare except for a single vase with three roses. She replaced the flowers every week on Monday morning. A habit started two months prior.

The current batch made it the week without wilting or losing a petal. Unusual.

Sasha unlocked her computer, logged into the system and pulled up her email, quickly prioritizing the messages. She

knew that nothing important had come in overnight, having checked her phone both before leaving home and during her commute in the Tube. Likewise, nothing had arrived for her in the time it took to reach her office.

A quiet Friday. For once.

She immediately wished she hadn't allowed the thought to manifest.

Sasha performed a quick check of the major news sites, then MI6's internal bulletin board for any updated threat assessment information. Nothing new today. Moments later, there was a rap on her door.

"Come in," she said.

Mason Sutton opened the door, took a step, stopped a foot inside. His gaze traveled over her head, toward the sky or the water or whatever else might have caught his fancy across the river. His attire was casual for MI5 standards. MI6, for that matter. And though his short hair was presentable, he'd left his face unshaven.

"Day off?" she asked.

"Late start," he replied, tracing his thumb along his jaw line. "Keep an electric shaver at my desk for days like this."

"And your clothing?"

"Why do you care, Sasha?"

She swiveled side to side in her chair. "I don't, really. Just like getting a rise out of you lads."

He glanced away and shook his head, then stepped forward. She hadn't reached the point of trusting the man yet. Jack did, for whatever reason, even when the guy had threatened him hours after Noble had entered the UK. There was something Jack liked about Mason Sutton. Sasha couldn't quite put her finger on it, though. Maybe in time, after a few of these meetings, she'd feel the same way.

"Anyway," he said. "What are we going to start with? Foreign or domestic?"

She reached down for her bag and pulled out a Moleskin notebook. The damned things were expensive, but they seemed a good fit for her.

“Why don’t you start?” she said.

He pursed his lips together and exhaled through them. They vibrated and his cheeks puffed out. After, he said, “Samir Parsa. Let’s start with him.”

“Parsa,” she repeated. “He took over for Naseer Shehata, that millionaire, or was it billionaire, terrorist wannabee?”

Mason nodded and scratched something into his notebook. Upon closer inspection, it was a cartoon head. His shabby clothing and stubbled face had not betrayed him, after all. But as the image came together, she recognized the face from the papers, the news, and their files.

“So what is Samir up to these days?” She aimed her pen toward the drawing.

“Seems he’s been importing talent from all over the Middle East. Most are coming in on mangled passports, entering through France.”

“Are we thinking they are planning an attack? If I recall correctly, Naseer wasn’t much into that. He seemed to like to attend parties while dabbling in organized crime, and consorting with billionaires with loose morals, like that Thornton Walloway character that turned up dead a few months ago.”

They both remained silent, avoiding the other’s stare. Walloway had been assassinated. A hit planned by his ex-wife, and carried out by Naseer’s men. Maybe even Naseer himself. The only witness they knew never divulged the details.

“Right,” Mason said. “Ancient history now, though, isn’t it?”

She agreed.

Mason continued. “Samir has been rather quiet since Naseer died. If not for two of these *travelers* getting picked up

for petty crimes, we might not have found out he was importing a whole host of soldiers.”

“So are you going to move?”

“Over this?” He leaned back in his chair and wrapped his hands around the back of his head. “It’d be pointless. The only thing that would happen is Samir would start shifting money and assets around. He wouldn’t do any time. And no judge would allow us to keep him penned up for too long. Right now we are working on the two guys the police picked up. Hopefully we can convert one or both to work for us. Each believes the other has already flipped, and if he doesn’t join up, he’ll be hanged.”

“And if you can’t?”

“Convert them?”

“No hang them.” She paused, smiled. “Of course convert them.”

Mason had no reaction. “Just have to hope no one finds the police report and comes nosing around looking for them. If that happens, they’ll be shipped off to Iraq or Jordan or Syria or whatever God-forsaken place they come from.”

Sasha glanced toward her desk and frowned. She often found herself uncomfortable in such discussions. While most in her line of work associated countries with the terrorists they fought, she realized that not all inhabitants and citizens shared the views of the extremists. Hell, the UK and USA had homegrown extremists who would love nothing more than to overthrow their respective governments. Should all citizens of those nations be treated as suspects in turn?

The question made her feel nauseous every single time it crossed her mind. The sad truth of it was that they had to act first in this new world. If they were reacting, that meant people had died. Mason and the rest of MI5 had it worse, since national security was their primary effort. Sasha bent the rules to keep tabs on the rest of the world. Mason did it to his countrymen for their own protection.

“So, what do you have to share Sasha?” Mason asked.

She stared for a moment, then smiled. “Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Odd, isn’t it?”

His face darkened. “There’s no point in these meetings if you aren’t going to share information with me. Yes, I know as a whole our departments do. But this is for us, two people in very similar positions across the river from one another. And... Dammit, do you want another bombing on our soil? Huh? I’m talking a mile, maybe two, away from where we are seated? Might be able to watch it from this view you’ve got here. Don’t you get it that the things you are withholding from me could turn the noise I’m hearing into the plans of those meaning us harm?”

Sasha leaned back in her high-back leather chair and folded her hands in her lap while she studied the man across from her. It wasn’t an act, his rant. He appeared to truly be pissed off at her. She wondered how long it would take for his boss to call her boss and in turn for him to call her to ream her out for being obstinate despite his orders for her to cooperate.

“Mason, I can assure you, I am being open and honest with you. My group has flagged nothing this week which would bear any impact on the whole of England. Outside of that information, I am not required to share what we gather regarding other nations. Nor should I, as I don’t see quite how you would use the information.”

He remained motionless for several moments. The red faded from his cheeks and ears. Finally, Mason rose and exited the office. At the door, he looked back, said, “I expect you’ll call the moment you do turn something up, eh?”

“Sure.”

She remained seated until after the door slammed shut, then spun her chair around and stood. The rain fell heavier now. White-capped waves, driven by the fierce wind, skated across the river and crashed into the banks. Hopefully, the weather would let up by the time five o’clock arrived. A good portion of her commute was on foot, and there was no one

who lived close to her that she wanted to share a cab or catch a ride with.

As she scanned the blurred horizon, her computer emanated a soft beep so quiet that it almost went unheard. A second beep caught her attention. Sasha turned, nudged her chair out of the way and leaned over her keyboard. A few strokes later, her monitor's screensaver dissolved into tiny fading squares. She clicked on the mail icon on her desktop. Nothing in the inbox was flagged important. She checked all her main folders, the ones where mail diverted based on a set of rules, yet still found nothing.

The alert sounded a third time.

"What the bloody hell?" she muttered.

As she slid the mouse around, it slipped to the bottom of the screen and her hidden task bar surfaced. There, a light flashed in the system tray. She double clicked the tiny red icon.

"Shit."

She stared at an alert she had programmed into a proprietary software only available to select agents in MI6. The program violated every treaty they'd ever signed. It monitored worldwide and reported access or hits on a specific individual's files. Most agents used it not only to watch persons of interest, but also to keep tabs on themselves. If someone intended to slit their throat or slip them a radioactive cocktail, they wanted to know first.

But Sasha wasn't looking at a personal alert. More of a personal *interest*.

Someone had accessed Jack Noble's files.

Twice.

PARIS, FRANCE.

BEAR WATCHED MANDY sleep while the coffee brewed in the hotel's cheap coffeemaker. For what the place charged, damn near three hundred euros a night, they could afford to put a Keurig in each room and stock it with those little plastic cups of coffee grounds. No point in complaining. They wouldn't be there long enough for management to do something about it.

He thought back to the day before. Kat's empty apartment. Nothing left but the kitchen table and the woman's cat. The feline took to Mandy, so they brought her home. Now she cuddled with Mandy in bed, black-and-white head poking out from the covers, one ear back, the other at attention.

One of the neighbors had come out when Bear and Mandy were leaving. The woman couldn't provide much information. She and Kat had never been friendly. They managed a bit of small talk when the building put on a cookout, but nothing else.

The final drips fell into the pot, signaling the brew was ready. Bear rose, poured a mug, and took a seat at the table again.

Coming to Paris was a mistake.

He couldn't shake the thought. It played over and over since the moment he pushed the door open and saw the abandoned room. And what potential danger had he put Mandy in by taking this sabbatical? He should have used the

time to find her a good school in the countryside. One where she'd be safe and could make friends her own age. It didn't matter that she shot the idea down every time he brought it up. He knew what was best for her, and lately, he'd begun thinking it wasn't living with him.

And as soon as those ideas surfaced, counterarguments made themselves heard. The internal tug-of-war never idled. Sure, it took a day off here and there. Usually when it benefited him. Which made the argument for placing her in someone else's care and leaving a million dollars in an account for her future that much stronger.

He drained the last sip from his mug, set it next to the coffeemaker, then went to the bathroom and showered. After he'd washed, shaved his neck and cheeks, and dressed, he reentered the room and poured another cup of coffee. The cat met him by the brewer and wove around his legs in a figure-eight pattern.

"What time is it?" Mandy asked groggily.

Bear glanced back. The girl sat up and stretched her arms over her head while yawning.

"Almost nine-thirty."

She looked toward the window. The sunlight knifed across her face. She winced and shielded her eyes.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"You looked peaceful. And you know we never can tell how much sleep we're going to get the next night. Figured I'd let you catch up, or get ahead, whatever."

He'd taken to saying *whatever* now too. Although, rarely with the same meaning as Mandy.

"Hungry?" he asked.

She nodded, then stuck her feet over the edge of the bed. "Can I get a shower first?"

He jutted his chin toward the bathroom. "All yours, kid."

Twenty minutes later, Mandy had showered and dressed, and Bear had finished his second cup of coffee. They left the room empty-handed. The rain had let up, rendering an umbrella moot. And he kept all important documents on him, not left behind.

Bear placed the do-not-disturb sign on the knob, and a small piece of tape at the bottom of the door, connected to the frame. If someone entered while they were gone, the tape would break off from one side. Not foolproof, but good enough.

Both scavenged at the complimentary breakfast bar, grabbing croissants and pastries. Bear grabbed two to-go cups. One he filled with coffee, the other orange juice. Mandy exclaimed when he handed her the hot cup.

“Sorry, kid. Take this one.”

She scowled at him, but the look, like the pain, quickly faded.

Inattention would get them killed if he didn't get it together.

Outside, Mandy took a bite of croissant, then said, “Where're we going?”

Bear glanced down and shook his head. “Swallow your food first.”

She rolled her eyes, swallowed. “OK?”

“OK.”

“Where are we going?” she asked again.

“Hospital.”

“All right.” The words dragged out like she had a southern drawl, but without the accent.

“Going to visit a friend.”

“Pierre?” she asked.

Bear stared ahead, said nothing.

“Shoot,” Mandy said. “I'm sorry. No names. Ever.”

Sometimes training takes a while.

A cab approached. Bear stepped into the road, taking up a third of the narrow street and blocking the driver's path. He and Mandy slid into the backseat, and Bear gave the driver the name of the hospital.

No one spoke during the fifteen-minute trip. Better that way, of course. Mandy would too often let things slip she shouldn't reveal. He always tried not to chastise her in public for it. Bear supposed he was the same way at one time. Maybe. He hadn't been much of a talker at that age. Friends weren't easy to come by when you stood a head taller and scared the daylights out of the other kids, even if unintentionally. Wasn't until he dominated on the football field that he found a group to become part of.

Of course, that hadn't lasted long.

Then, down at Parris Island during Recruit Training, people liked him *because* they feared him. Even the drill instructor gave him less shit than the other maggots. The only one who didn't back down from him was Jack. And that became the basis of a lifelong friendship.

Even if they didn't speak these days.

The breakup was for Mandy's sake. At least, Bear told himself that. He knew that Jack feared he would be the cause of Bear's downfall one day. And frankly, Bear wouldn't argue the point.

The driver pulled up to the curb in front of the hospital's main entrance. Two men hung out by the double doors, smoking. An elderly woman walked past and took one hand off her walker to wave the smoke away from her face. Bear exited, followed by Mandy on the same side of the vehicle. Together, they walked around the woman and past the men and through the automatic doors and continued toward the information desk.

Bear walked up to the middle-aged woman manning the counter. A forced smile was plastered across her face. He spoke to her in French.

“Can you tell me which room Pierre Allard is in?”

She continued to smile. Her eyes, minimized by way of her thick glasses, shifted toward the computer screen. As she typed, her face drew tight. “Did you say Allard last name, Pierre first name?”

“Yeah. His room?”

“I’m sorry. It appears he checked out two weeks ago.”

“Give me his address.”

She leaned back as though he had tried to take a swing at her. When Bear placed an arm on the counter and started to lean over it, the woman, who couldn’t have weighed more than a buck-ten, moved forward to block the screen.

“Sir, we cannot divulge such information.”

Without taking his focus off the woman, Bear said, “Mandy, go wait outside.”

“What? No way.”

“Do it, Mandy.”

Her footsteps faded as she backed away, turned and headed toward the main entrance. She might have cursed under her breath. Bear made a mental note that he had to watch his own language around her. Not that she hadn’t heard any of it before. And she’d hear plenty of it later.

“Sir, I’m going to be forced to call security.”

Bear pushed away from the counter. “Reasonable minds can come to reasonable resolutions.”

“Excuse me?”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a hundred euros in bills, then placed the wad of cash on the counter. “Just give me an address. Pierre Allard’s address. Take the money, get yourself a nice outfit, maybe a facial, or some glasses from this century. I don’t care what you do with it, frankly, I just want his address. I know you can see why he was admitted. I was there. I had to leave the country, but now I’m back, and I want to make sure he’s all right and help him out if I can.”

“Sir...” She looked around. Her cheeks had grown red. Sweat coated her forehead. A few people seated in blue chairs glanced over. “I...”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out another stack of bills. One by one he laid them on the counter. Ten. Twenty. Fifty more euros. The woman’s eyes continued to dart around, presumably on the lookout for security, or her supervisor, or just taking in all the attention they had drawn.

“Sir, this is embarrassing. Please stop.”

“The address, please, then I’m gone.”

She reached for a notebook and pulled a black pen out of an empty coffee mug that read “#1 Grandma.”

“I could get fired for this,” she said, tearing the paper out of the notebook.

“You let me know if you do. I’ll make sure you get your job back.”

Bear backed away and glanced toward the entrance. The doors stood open due to Mandy hovering directly in the path of the sensor. He glanced at the address on the paper, then tucked it in his pocket.

NEW YORK CITY.

CHARLES STOOD IN front of the Washington Square fountain with his right arm crossed over his chest, left hand covering his mouth. The wind blew an enveloping mist toward him. Most days he'd have thrown a fit over getting wet. But today he had on chinos and a golf shirt. Overdressed, as far as the heat was concerned. Under his clothing, sweat raced down the middle of his back, and coated his inner thighs.

“This fucking weather,” he said to the man next to him. “Anyway, you’re sure it’s my guy?”

The guy nodded, gestured with his head toward the field to the north. Both men started that way.

The duo made an odd couple. Harris was a twenty-plus-year veteran of the NYPD. For more than half that time he'd managed to remain uncorrupted. He'd known Charles when the guy wasn't even considered a thug. Met the Old Man through him. Eventually, the Old Man had made a persuasive enough argument. The kind that went beyond money, and involved Harris's wife and kids. Even his dog at the time. The detective could've fought back. Might've won. It would have been a hollow victory, for he would have lost something, or someone, in the process. Harris had been smart enough to know that. And now with Feng out of the picture, he fell right in line and did whatever Charles needed. The organization paid him handsomely. So much so, that when Harris got word of two men found partially burned and beaten and stabbed and

bludgeoned to death in upstate New York, he called Charles rather than revealing that he knew the identity of one of the men.

A short walk later, the men found an unoccupied corner of the park. Charles sat down on a well-worn bench. Harris joined him, then pulled out his smartphone and tapped on the screen.

“They just emailed these to me.” He handed the device to Charles.

“Christ.” He scrolled through the images of two men beaten so badly he couldn’t recognize them. At first, at least. The charred, flabby belly obviously belonged to Endrizzi. But the other body, he couldn’t tell. “Can you zoom these or something?”

Harris reached for the phone. The detective pinched and spread his fingers on the screen. “There you go.”

Charles stared at the picture. No doubt in his mind that the identity of the other man was Milano. Same as Endrizzi, the guy’s stomach was charred, and his legs looked worse than fried chicken. His face only had soot and ash on it, but damn if the guy’s mug wasn’t smashed beyond recognition. What gave him away was the cloak-and-dagger tattoo on Milano’s forearm.

“Some hunters driving around on trails nearby spotted the smoke. Led them to the blaze a few minutes after it got started. They had a couple coolers full of ice and water. Used that and some blankets to get the fire under control. The fire department was only three miles down the road. They took the rest. Didn’t matter to your guys, though. They were already dead. Pretty good job on the one. Waiting to hear what the fat guy died from.”

“Endrizzi.”

“Yeah, Endrizzi. I met him once. Who’s the other guy?”

“Milano.”

“You fucking kidding me?”

“No, why?”

“Our kids play soccer together. His wife and mine even get together for bridge or some shit every once in a while.”

Charles looked up from the picture.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Harris said. “Milano and I had no other dealings outside of what you authorized.”

Charles said nothing. He stared off, past a group of kids walking past them thirty yards off. All of them wore red shirts with a black logo of some kind over the right side of the chest.

“What is it?” Harris said. “This ain’t the first time you’ve lost some good soldiers. Something you’re not telling me?”

Charles squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Just a lot to take in, Harris. No matter how many times it happens, you don’t get used to it.” He paused, then added, “These hunters, they say anything else? Like they saw someone fleeing the scene, or anything that would’ve indicated a car or truck had been there? Footprints?”

“It was dark. And I doubt they were concerned about such things at the time.”

For a few minutes they sat in silence. The warm breeze blew the sweat around on Charles’s forehead, never cooling it. A wave of diesel fumes reminded him he was still in the heart of the center of the universe.

“What was they doing up there, anyway?” Harris asked.

“Going up to the reservation to play blackjack or some shit.”

“Huh.”

“Huh, what?”

“Well, why not AC?”

“Endrizzi’s got, or had, a girl down there he’s been trying to avoid. Knocked her up and wouldn’t admit to it. She ain’t got the balls to come up here and have him served with a paternity suit. He feared she was gonna track him down if he

showed up in Atlantic City and kill him or something. I dunno.”

“So, you think it’s worth looking into this woman?”

Charles reached back and grabbed the base of his neck. “As a suspect? Why would she follow them five hours upstate? How would she even know?”

Harris shrugged. “Just searching, man. You wouldn’t be holding anything back from me now, would you?”

“This questioning?” Charles extended his arm like he was about to deliver a backhanded blow to the detective. “I just lost two guys and you-”

“Keep it down.” Harris pressed down against the air between them with both hands. “Already bad enough I’m meeting you out here in broad daylight.”

Charles rotated his wrist back and forth a couple times, then glanced down at his watch. He had nothing planned, but the detective’s questioning left him itching to go. “I got someplace to be in an hour, Harris. Need to wash up and stuff first. This meeting is over.”

“I can walk with you.”

Charles looked around. “Nah. Don’t think that’s a good idea. We’ve been seen together long enough now. Any more and people are gonna think we’ve got something going on.”

Harris remained seated after Charles rose and started toward the fountain. “Don’t turn your phone off, got it? I might need to reach you for a little more information.”

Charles stopped, turned, said, “Why don’t you leave the investigation, if there’s gonna be one, up to me? You five-oh types get all worked up about a couple of dead gangsters when you should be celebrating two more of my kind are off the street. Just forget about it, all right?”

Harris rebutted, but Charles didn’t hear the man’s words. He’d noticed for the first time the Fed hanging around just past the first couple trees. The detective’s words trailed off as Charles trudged on in search of a crowd to get lost in.

NEW YORK CITY.

JACK LEFT HIS apartment around two in the afternoon without a clear set of plans for how he'd spend the rest of the day. Of the people he knew remaining in the city, there was little desire to visit any of them. With that crowd came problems. Problems with the law. Problems with people opposed to the law. Unforeseen problems. Laying low would work out better than inviting unwanted attention into his life.

But even low had its limits. And Jack had reached it.

Today saw no respite from the heat. Same for the humidity. If anything, it felt worse. Within a block, he regretted wearing pants. But he didn't turn back. A little distance would be a good thing and there was only one way to get it.

He stopped into a local deli to cool off, then negated the effect by having a grilled sub followed by two cups of black coffee. The brew had been on the burner too long and left a bitter aftertaste. The waitress left it off the bill even though Jack hadn't complained.

After eating, he cut through Central Park, westbound, and visited the American Museum of Natural History. In his teenage years, he'd narrowed down his college selections based on their archeology programs. Florida State had the program he wanted. And they were willing to offer him a full football scholarship. The Marines won. Even though post-secondary education wasn't in the cards, Jack's interest in pre-history never faded.

And he much preferred it to current technology, despite his recent somewhat successful attempts to learn more.

Exiting the museum, he spotted a man positioned across the street. The guy looked out of place, like he'd forced himself to dress like a tourist, but was uncomfortable without fatigues and shoulder and thigh holsters. The guy glanced in Jack's direction. Wasn't much, but it lasted a hair too long. Jack merged into the steady stream of pedestrian traffic, headed west on 77th, away from the guy, then north on Columbus. Twice he glanced back at the man. The first time, the guy remained perched on the stairs leading into a clothing shop. Jack tried to convince himself that the man was waiting outside while his wife shopped. A bead of sweat streamed down Jack's cheek.

Who waits outside on a day like this?

His second glance revealed that the man had started moving west as well. And it also yielded a flash of recognition. He'd seen him in the Park. Thought nothing of it at the time. He saw lots of people in the park. Why hadn't the guy stood out then? He recalled the countless faces he'd passed since then. Impossible to store them all in accessible memory. For all Jack knew, the guy'd been tailing him since he left the apartment. Maybe even before that. Maybe since the odd meeting yesterday morning.

Columbus was one-way and ran south. A cab would take him right past the guy. On the one hand, he'd get a better look. On the other, it'd do the same for the man tailing him.

If he still followed along.

Jack ignored the incessant itch to look back.

At 81st, he turned right, headed east, quickening his pace. Traffic stood still in the middle of the street. Jack cut across mid-block, weaving past front and rear bumpers. Once on the other side, he darted under the dark blue awning of The Excelsior Hotel. The circular rotating front door offered no resistance. As the pane of glass behind him cut him off from the outside world, he glanced back, searching through the

maze of vehicles and pedestrians, looking for the guy who'd watched him.

Had Jack lost him? Or had he given up after being made?

In the mirror, the reflection of two employees dressed in khaki slacks and white shirts hovered around ten or so feet behind Jack. Both covered their mouths with their outer hands as they spoke. Their words were indecipherable, but the mirror images of the men were clear enough that he saw their eyes focused on him.

One of them stepped forward.

"Help you, sir?" Shy. Timid. His voice cracked. Had he even hit puberty yet?

Jack looked back and made eye contact with the young Hispanic guy and said nothing. Didn't need to. These two were bellhops. Maybe the concierge had sent them over to check Jack out. Perhaps they did it on their own volition. Whatever the reason, they weren't in a position to do anything, and they posed no threat.

So he turned back toward the street and performed a quick scan of the sidewalk, road, opposite sidewalk and the Teddy Roosevelt Park. Nothing. He turned his attention to the multitude of vehicles in front of him. Quickly, one-by-one, he looked past the clear and tinted windows. Half-way through, someone broke his concentration.

"Sir, do you need some assistance?" Deep. Smokey. Spoken with authority. Like he had a set and could tip a table with them.

Jack turned and faced a third man. Six-three and three hundred pounds, at least. How had he not spotted him on the approach?

Tunnel vision.

The big guy took a few steps forward. Jack held steady. Grease stained the guy's denim coveralls. His face and hands, too. He added to the mess when he wiped his cheek while asking Jack once again if he needed assistance.

“Maybe you should turn around and go wash up,” Jack said. “This place has a reputation to uphold.”

The two men in khakis looked at each other. Shock on their faces. No one spoke to Grease Stain like that. His presence alone was supposed to whip Jack into answering them. The tower of a man approached. Jack still held steady. He choked a bit as a wave of body odor washed past. The big man reached out and placed his hand on Jack’s shoulder.

“Get your dirty paw off me,” Jack said.

The guy squeezed, said nothing.

“You see my right hand?”

The guy glanced down, glanced up, said nothing.

“That’s right, you don’t. Know why? Because it’s wrapped around the grip of my Beretta.”

The guy eased up, but didn’t let go. His eyes wavered, like he was unsure what to do now. He’d always been the muscle, but not the brain. On the street, he’d smash Jack in the face, the gut, the groin. But in the hotel lobby? What was he supposed to do?

Jack said, “You don’t know me, where I’ve been, what I’ve done, or where I live. But I know where you work. Won’t take much effort to get the rest. Now get your hand off me before I show back up here when your shift ends and jam my pistol up your ass.”

The guy’s eyes widened, pupils dilated. Presumably, he wasn’t used to being talked to like that. He was the enforcer for Christ’s sake. Grease Stain released Jack’s shoulder from his grip and took a step back. For a moment, it seemed he contemplated lashing out after having been embarrassed by a guy close in height, but nowhere near as large overall. In the end, the big guy turned and gestured toward the other two. They looked at each other, then walked away.

Jack shifted back to the window, splitting his focus between the street beyond, and the image of the big man waiting behind. A city bus blocked the view of the opposite sidewalk and the park. A minute later, the bus inched forward,

gaining speed along with the rest of the vehicles as they made their forty-foot shuffle.

And the man who'd been following Jack stood across the street.

Jack took a couple steps back, then called out, "Hey, Grease Stain."

The big man stopped near the elevators and looked back.

Jack jogged toward him. The few people seated in the lobby looked away as he approached. They'd been watching. Might've even overheard what Jack said to the big guy. Whatever had happened, they apparently didn't want Jack to know they'd been eavesdropping.

The smell of stale coffee hung thick in the air, leaving a bitter taste in the back of his mouth. Someone needed to change out the pot before a guest poured a cup and complained to management. An upscale place like this might fire someone over such an offense.

Grease Stain continued to wait for Jack by the elevators. No sign that the guy planned to bolt. He'd turned into a broken-in bronco. When Jack arrived, the guy said, "Follow me."

He led Jack to the right, down the hallway, then pulled out a set of keys that jingled and clanked and bounced off one another. He fumbled through them. Opened the door to a maintenance room. Smelled like anti-freeze and oil. Fluorescents dangled from the ceiling and lit the room the majority of the room. The corners remained encased in shadow. A cluttered old wooden desk occupied a space along the wall mid-way between the front and back. Racks of servers hummed to the left. Past them, four telephone panels were mounted on the wall. Copper-wire spaghetti twisted and looped upward into a conduit. Tools hung from a pegboard. A hammer and a mallet, both with grease-covered handles, were positioned next to each other. Easy access, should Jack need them.

Grease Stain pointed at the door at the far end. “Go through there. You’re gonna be in an alley behind the hotel. Go left, you get to Columbus. Go right, all the way to the dead end, then left and you’ll come out on 82nd. If that ain’t good enough, cross the street and you’ll hit an alley. That leads to a big opening between the buildings. There’s another alley across the way takes you to 83rd. From there, the park is less than a hundred feet to your right. Put you right next to Summit Rock.”

Jack nodded, crossed the room. Looking back at the guy, he said, “No hard feelings?”

The guy sniffed and looked up from his desk. “Just hope you never encounter me outside this building. I’ll end you if I see you again. All right?”

Tough talk from a guy who’d been verbally defeated already. He’d all of a sudden regained his manhood with Jack well out of reach.

Jack turned his back on the guy and headed toward the door. Fans inside the server equipment buzzed like a hive of excited bees. When he reached the back of the room, he half-expected the door to be locked, and when he turned, he would see Grease Stain coming at him with a grease-stained hammer in hand.

But it didn’t come to that.

The latch gave, and the door opened. Light temporarily blinded him. Warm air rushed into the chilled room. After his eyes adjusted, Jack stuck his head out and scanned the alley. Didn’t see the man who’d been following him. Only the backs of buildings, overflowing dumpsters, wind-blown trash strewn across the asphalt. Perhaps the guy had spotted Jack through the window, and now stood in the hotel lobby, minutes from tracking Jack to the maintenance room. Of course, the guy could have continued on 81st, either taking the 79th Street transverse to the Upper East Side, or heading north or south on Central Park. Didn’t matter. Forward was the only option for Jack regardless of the actions of the other man.

He stepped into the man-made valley. The surrounding buildings trapped the heat, not allowing the breeze to penetrate the urban canyon. The only change in the air came when a door opened and the stifling air rushed through the gap, allowing a new wave to take its place from above.

Jack looked left, headed right. When he reached the end of the alley, he turned left. Moments later, he cut across 82nd and found the narrow passage the mechanic had mentioned. On the other side of it, he spotted the next alley, across the opening and to the right. He checked behind. No one followed. The guy had to be close. But in this city, he thought, that meant nothing.

On 83rd, he contemplated whether to head to the Park or Columbus. An approaching taxi gave him a third option.

And he took it.

NEW YORK CITY.

CLARISSA AND BECK left before dawn. They hit Philly before traffic. Trenton afterward. Didn't matter once they entered Manhattan, though. The last leg of the journey took twenty minutes longer than it should have. She doubted it mattered to the guy they were going to meet.

Because he didn't know they were coming.

Detective Harris was a name she dug up late the previous night. The guy had a long history with Charles. What information the men shared had remained unknown, though.

Harris had a clean record. On paper, he appeared to be a good cop. Model citizen, too. Wife, two kids, two dogs. A lot to live for.

They encountered no trouble at the precinct's front desk. Secret Service credentials had that effect, Clarissa had learned. The young female cop pointed them in the direction of Harris's office.

After that, they were on their own. Cops had a way of sniffing other cops. The looks they gave the duo indicated they could tell Clarissa and Beck were in some form of law enforcement, but not one of their own. She supposed they figured Beck and her for FBI.

Turning toward her, Beck said, "It's always like this. They'll cooperate, though there will be plenty of resistance at first."

Clarissa nodded in response. Then she aimed a finger into the glass walled room in front of them.

“That’s him,” she said.

“You sure?”

“His photo was recent.”

Beck reached out for the door, opened it, and waited for her to go through.

“Detective Harris?”

The guy turned toward them. His eyes narrowed and she could almost see him concocting a story that would pass as cover for almost any question.

“Who the hell are you guys?” Harris said.

“I’m Agent Beck. This is Agent Abbot. We’d like to have a word with you. Have someplace private we can talk for about fifteen minutes?”

“Agents? For who?” He glanced at each in turn, holding their attention like a blackjack dealer waiting for a call of hit or stand.

“We’ll explain that in a moment,” Beck said.

“Hell you will,” Harris said. “Let me see some creds. Now. Or you can take a hike.”

Smiling, Clarissa said, “We just need a few minutes to ask you about someone.”

“Then you can tell me who you are.”

Beck showed the man his ID.

Harris’s eyebrows went up. “Secret Service? What’s this have to do with me?”

“We’ll explain all, Detective,” Beck said. “In private.”

Harris hiked his thumb over his shoulder. “Let’s go to interrogation.”

Clarissa and Beck followed the guy out of the room and down the hall. They entered a room labeled six, which

contained a table and four chairs. Nothing else. Harris seated himself with his back to the tinted glass. His normal seat, Clarissa presumed.

Beck grabbed the empty chair next to Harris. It scratched and created a high-pitched whine as he dragged it around the table and placed it next to the seat Clarissa was lowering herself into.

Harris fidgeted with his cuffs while Clarissa stared at him. Beck had told her they'd start off this way. Let the guy sweat a bit. Get into his mind and let him ponder what they were there for. If he'd done something wrong, it would play on his psyche. If he hadn't, he'd try to figure out what could be misconstrued.

He who talks first, loses.

"Never realized how cold it is in here," Harris said. "Detainees, they always mention it. Rub their arms and whine about the temperature. I mean, yeah, it's a bit chilly, but nothing to bitch about."

"You enjoy interrogations?" Beck said.

Harris shrugged and glanced down at the table. "Never really thought about it. Part of the job, I guess. Pretty good at getting confessions. But it sucks when half of them don't hold up because of some slime-ball lawyer finding a technical glitch."

Beck nodded. Clarissa didn't. She'd been on the receiving end of questioning in the past. The techniques used were meant to wear a person down until they were willing to confess to escape the pressure being applied to them. She'd been too strong willed for that to happen. But not all were.

"Anyway, you didn't come up here to ask me about my interrogation techniques." He paused as though he expected an answer. "So what gives? What do you want to know?"

"Charles DeCosta." Clarissa had learned to control the tensing that occurred every time she said the name. It occurred, but was not visible. "You have met with him regularly in the past. Even now, when he's assumed a high-

level position in a known criminal organization, you still have meetings with him. What's it all about?"

She watched for Harris's position to change. For the man to give something away. But the guy remained in the exact same position. His forearms on the table, right hand over left. Shoulders firm and back an inch. Head level. Eyes locked on hers.

Harris took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. "I guess we'd have to go back a dozen or so years. Before then, DeCosta was a mechanic for a crime boss who went by the moniker of the Old Man. Name was Feng, but few knew that. From working in the garage, DeCosta went to being Feng's chauffeur. Interesting jump, right? Anyway, back then I was working robbery and we pinched DeCosta for something stupid. I think he stole a case of purses and hawked them out of a trunk. Something like that."

"Did he do jail time?" Beck asked.

Harris said, "No, no he didn't. He passed on a little information to me, something he had gathered about a rival organization, and for that, I let him walk. No one on his side of the tracks knew. But I had him with that. You gotta remember, this is not the DeCosta we know today. I doubt it would go down the same way."

"So go back to then," Beck said.

"OK. I put a regular tail on him. Caught him doing some other stuff. Kept a list of it. Then I'd find him on the street, or at home alone, and tell him what I had on him. In turn, he'd give me more information. Went on like that for more than a few years."

"Then what happened?"

"He started rising through the ranks. Became the equivalent of a mafia capo. It was harder to pin things on him, and the shit I had from the past, DeCosta didn't sweat that anymore. He had the full backing of Feng. Which also meant if I tried to strong arm him by saying I'd out his relationship with me, we'd both be fitted for concrete boots."

“So why do you still meet? We’ve got a source that puts you two together recently.”

Harris leaned back. First time he’d moved other than to speak. “He stills gives me information. But it’s more of a one for one thing these days.”

“So you warn him of impending action?”

Harris held up his hand and shook his head. “No, nothing like that.”

“Then what is it like?” Beck said.

Harris leaned forward, one arm on the edge of the table, chest resting against it. “The people I report to know about my relationship with DeCosta. Everything we talk about is in those files. You want to read up on it, be my guest. But I doubt they’ll humor you as much as I have.”

“We’ll do that, Detective,” Beck said, rising.

Clarissa joined him. They met at the door. Harris remained seated and didn’t look back.

“One more thing,” Beck said.

Harris said nothing.

“What do you know about a counterfeit ring being run by DeCosta?”

Harris’s chair scratched the floor as he scooted back. He took his time standing, and then turning. He looked at Beck. Laughed.

“That guy pockets probably ten thousand a day. At least. He’s already printing his own money through all his enterprises. Why the hell would he need to do so illegally?”

“Thank you, Detective,” Beck said. “We’ll see ourselves out.”

Five minutes later, they stood outside in the summer heat. Clarissa waited until they were out of earshot of a group of cops talking and drinking coffee.

“Do you think mentioning the counterfeit operation was a good idea? What if he goes right to Charles with it?”

“We’ve got a dozen eyes on that operation,” Beck said. “And now we’re going to have someone watching Harris. If something changes, then we’ll know he went to DeCosta and warned him. And you know what that means?” He didn’t allow her time to respond. “We’ll know that DeCosta is behind it.”

NEAR LANGLEY, VIRGINIA.

THE GUY LEANING against the blue Malibu lifted his chin as Brett Taylor pulled into the diner's parking lot. Over the past three months, Brett had been given three contacts. Each had information about specific Black Ops groups. One of the contacts had Brett take out an entire team, a mission that would require months of planning for some. Brett completed the job in four weeks. The next contact only had three names for Brett, along with a request that each death had to look like an accident. The agency these men were involved with wasn't as clandestine as some of the others. There were people, the kind who were too high up the political food chain to know about the operation, who would notice if the three men were all slaughtered. Accidental deaths, while occurring close to one another, could be written off as coincidental. So long as no evidence was left behind.

And Brett Taylor never left evidence behind.

He parked his Escalade four spots down from the Malibu, then waited for the guy to make his next move. Nothing had been predetermined. Maybe they'd meet here. Perhaps the guy planned on getting back in his car and driving off. Brett would follow if he did.

Turned out, the man made it easy on Brett. He walked over to the passenger door, and got in.

"Drive off," the guy said. "Go right."

Brett put the Escalade in reverse, and exited the lot to the right.

A mile down the road, the guy said, “Ballard. Joe Ballard. I don’t know your name, not your full name at least. And I don’t want to. I also don’t care to know anything about you. What you did before this. Where you grew up. Your wife and kid’s names. None of that. Got it?”

Brett glanced over and nodded. “Whatever floats your boat, Ballard.”

They drove on another ten minutes, west, away from Langley. Any further and they’d be in the country. Brett studied the rear-view for a tail. Of course, on a road like this they needn’t be close. Ballard could’ve picked a spot and arranged for a team to either be there, or to show up there at a predetermined time.

Ballard pointed at the approaching intersection. “Make a left.”

Brett glanced at the GPS in the dash. The road went on for a couple miles and dead-ended. There were no tributaries branching off. At least according to government satellite. Around these parts, there might be arteries purposefully left hidden to keep passersby from exploring.

He made the turn and continued to the end of the road. Two sections of split rail fencing stopped ten feet short of touching. A thick metal chain strung between them had a *no trespassing under penalty of the law* sign dangling in the middle.

“Let’s get out,” Ballard said, opening his door.

Brett cut the engine and went to join Ballard at the front of the car, but the man already had one leg over the chain.

“You know you’re breaking the law, right?” Brett called out.

Ballard glanced back, eyebrows scrunched and mouth slightly open. Oblivious to the joke.

Brett hopped the chain and caught up to Ballard, who trekked down a rutted dirt path. Warm air pushed past them. He inhaled the earthy air, held it for a moment and exhaled through his mouth. Calm and steady. Remain that way or die.

After walking a quarter-mile or so, Ballard stopped. “I think this is far enough.”

Brett glanced around. “Unless the trees are bugged.”

“Don’t put it past the Agency to do so.”

“Is that who you’re with?”

Ballard looked away. “Who I work for is none of your concern. The only thing you need to worry about is what’s in here.” He held up a USB drive.

“What’s in there?”

“One of the biggest fucking mistakes we ever made.”

“I’m intrigued.”

“Yeah, I bet you are.”

“What’s with the attitude?”

Ballard spat to the side. “Sorry. Meeting with people like you puts me on edge. And, frankly, sometimes I’m not excited about running the biggest black op ever in order to rid all previous black ops. Makes me wonder what’s in store for us after this is over.”

Brett shrugged. “Hadn’t thought about it. Just doing my job, I suppose. Always figured things’d work themselves out one day. It’s the life we signed up for.”

“You signed up for it. Not me. All I ever wanted was to be an analyst and put the puzzle together. I can’t even stand being outside the office. And as to that day, well that day may come sooner than you ever anticipated.”

“I have plans in place for when it arrives.”

“I’m sure you do. Problem is, just like these schmucks we’re terminating, you won’t know it ahead of time.”

Brett attempted to prevent the man's paranoia from seeping in to his psyche. An on-edge assassin wasn't a bad thing. It kept him or her alert. But one that was on the lookout for the spook sent to kill them? Well, that was another story.

"Anyway," Brett said. "What's in the file?"

"Back in late 2001, after the attacks, an agency was formed. The Secret Intelligence Service."

"SIS, sure, I've heard of them. In fact, they tried to recruit me when I was between jobs. Didn't like the guy I interviewed with. Seemed like an asshole. Plus, from how I understood it, the luster of the group had worn off and they were clinging to a razor thin wire in those days."

"Consider yourself an insider, then. Most people in our community think Canada or the UK when they hear the acronym. That's why they selected that moniker. See, this group pissed off a lot of powerful people. Like the CIA, they could operate overseas. Like the FBI, they had jurisdiction in the States. The NSA had to comply with *their* requests. You can imagine how those assholes took that. And SIS could step all over Homeland if they wanted to. Local law enforcement? Please. They stood no chance."

For a second, Brett wished he had reconsidered the offer instead of declining.

Ballard continued. "If there's a group we're concerned about, it's this one. That's why it's being segregated between your kind. We've got a list of active members, which isn't all that many these days due to budget cuts. And a list of inactive. Seems several former agents retired involuntarily, mostly due to death. Others were fitted for their toe tags within a year after retirement. It's kind of strange, but there are only a few living former members."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Some believe the guy running the show is so paranoid about the truth behind their operations coming to light that he's green lighted the killings. He travels outside his

organization to arrange the hits though. Speculation, of course, but the kind that usually ends up true.”

“Intriguing.”

“It is. And that’s why we’re hitting all living retired agents and their associates. All at once. Then we’re going after current agents, and finally the head.”

“Surely, some of the former operators have to be in public positions now, right? I mean, we can’t go in, hit them all, and not expect it to get back to SIS, or without concerning some of the higher ups.”

“I can see why you think that, and I really can’t go into detail beyond what you’re being contracted for. What I can tell you is that this is going to be fast and hard. SIS won’t have a chance to breathe before we’re all over them, too.”

“What kind of time frame am I looking at here?” Brett asked.

“Two weeks.”

“For how many former agents?”

“One.”

“One?”

Ballard nodded.

Brett leaned forward, hiked an eyebrow. “I don’t need two weeks for that.”

“It’s him plus a handful of his associates who have knowledge of his past operations. I think that once you look through these files, you’ll be telling me that two weeks isn’t enough. And when you do, my response will be that I don’t care. Do whatever you have to do to make this happen. You are green lighted for any tactic, and we’ve got your back. First and foremost, your concern is the former agent. But to get to him, you might have to go through his closest associates first.”

“So, does my target have a name, or should I pick out a children’s book and use something from that?”

“He’s got a name, wise ass. It’s on this drive. You can check it out after we’ve parted ways.”

The men stood near the edge of the woods for a few more minutes. Neither spoke. The hot, stale air continued to blow. Brett had adjusted, but it still did little to cool him off.

“All right, let’s go,” Ballard said, still clinging to the USB drive.

They trekked the quarter mile back to Brett’s Escalade, which had baked in the sun long enough that he knew the interior temperature would be over a hundred degrees. A push on the remote start button fired up the engine and AC while they were still a couple hundred feet away.

Once inside, Brett said, “Where to now?”

“Back to my car.”

Brett navigated down the narrow road and then aimed the vehicle in the direction of the diner. He spent more time watching his rear-view than he did the empty stretch of wavering asphalt in front of him. He recalled their conversation. One thing bothered him. The silent two minutes prior to returning to the SUV. It was as though Ballard had told someone they’d be in the spot for fifteen minutes, but they’d finished in thirteen. If they left too soon, it’d disrupt the timing of a preplanned event.

What, though?

Brett considered the options, but none were worth dwelling on. His senses were heightened. They had never failed him before. Wouldn’t now. Any situation could be dealt with so long as he remained aware of the danger presented to him.

He pulled into the diner parking lot. Ballard opened his door before Brett put the Escalade in park. The man dropped to the ground, turned, and tossed the USB drive onto the seat.

“At least wait until I’m gone to look at it.”

No problem, Brett thought. He didn’t plan on opening it until later that night, from the safety of his condo.

UPSTATE NEW YORK.

ADRENALINE FUELED PAOLO throughout the night. Back roads carried him a hundred miles west. In his haste, he hadn't kept an eye on fuel. Running on fumes, he pulled off the road and ditched the BMW in the woods. Someone would find it. But not for some time. And Paolo didn't need much. The rest of the night would suffice.

Before exiting the vehicle, he had zoomed out on the GPS and determined he was about twenty miles south of Syracuse, and twenty-five miles east of Ithaca, his destination.

The roads bore no resemblance to how he remembered them, at least not in the dark. Paolo had considered sleeping in the car, then resuming his journey to Ithaca the following morning. In daylight, he could find his way.

A glance at his face in the rear-view had been enough to convince Paolo to keep moving through the dark. The morning would allow too many eyes to fall upon him. If he had left at that moment, the three or four hour walk would put him at his sister's house around sunrise. He had closed his eyes and leaned back. The pain from his wounds had been enough for him to remain in the luxury vehicle and sleep. But he had to move.

And so Paolo did, with nothing more than a map on his cell phone to guide him. Paranoid, he had turned the GPS off and estimated his position throughout the trip. He could've called his sister and asked her to pick him up, but there was

too much risk involved. There was a chance Charles already knew Paolo was on the run. What if he traced Paolo's other sister to Ithaca and had already called her? Or worse, dispatched a team? The concerns helped propel Paolo forward. Step by step, retreating to the safety of the thick woods every time the rumble of a car cut through the crisp night air.

He felt the weak, early morning beams of the sun on the back of his neck around six in the morning. His cell phone had died an hour earlier. Fortunately, the roads were familiar, and the remaining journey was under four miles. He could make that leg of the trip by memory whether light or dark.

The row of small-brick ranch style homes stretched out in front of him. Paolo wanted to collapse on the asphalt. He had to make it to the end of the street. The majority of the windows were darkened, but not all. He kept his head down and his hands in his pocket as he briskly walked down the right side of the road.

At the end of the street, he slipped in through the unlocked front door. Coffee and bacon and toast led him to the kitchen where his youngest sister, Esmeralda, stood in front of an open refrigerator. Her screams turned to tears when she realized it was her brother, not a deranged and bloodied killer, standing in her kitchen. A nurse by trade, she bandaged him up, and strongly encouraged him to come to the hospital for stitches. Paolo had declined, saying he needed rest first.

So he had eaten bacon and toast and passed on the coffee. Esmeralda left for work and told him she'd be back after six that evening. He objected to her leaving, but there was no convincing her otherwise. He hadn't the strength. Paolo found the guest bedroom and collapsed onto the plush mattress. It was well worth the money he'd given her to buy it. The whole house, as a matter of fact. It had all been his graduation present to his sister.

Sunlight crept through the slits in the blinds. Fingers of light inched across the room, moving with the sun, slicing across Paolo's face. He opened his eyes and winced at the brightness. The intense pain when he attempted to roll over roused him from bed. What time was it? He picked up his

phone, fully charged now, but still off. With his finger on the power button, he reconsidered powering the device on. He could be tracked through the cell towers. Less of a concern the night before. But a lot could happen during the morning hours. Better to leave it alone, for now.

But, he wondered, did the provider have the capability to track his movements prior to the phone losing power?

He made a note to Google the question after waking fully.

Paolo found the kitchen and poured cold coffee into an over-sized mug, so large it almost didn't fit into the microwave. While the coffee reheated, he searched the contents of the refrigerator for something simple to eat. Two of his teeth were loose. How? He couldn't recall. Maybe when he'd head butted Milano repeatedly. The resulting pain made the thought of having to chew unbearable. In the end, he took two bananas and a handful of blueberries and dropped them into a blender. The sound of the machine intensified the knifing pain in his skull.

With coffee and smoothie in hand, Paolo made his way through the living room and out to the back deck. It wasn't as humid in Ithaca. Still hot, though. Esmeralda's backyard sloped down to a small fence. Behind it, a pond. The breeze blew across the pond, carrying the odor of mud and stale water. A mother duck and her fluffy chicks floated by. The trees and bushes hummed with insects.

For many, tranquility. For Paolo, boredom.

In between sips, he held the chilled glass containing the smoothie to his cheeks, nose, forehead. The relief didn't last long.

Watching the ducks swim away, he recalled the chain of events that led to him hiding out at his sister's place. Had the bodies been found? Had the fire scorched the bodies sufficiently to delay identifying Milano and Endrizzi? Again, he wanted to reach for his phone, cut it on, and start making calls. Impossible. He couldn't trust anyone now. No amount of fraternity could outweigh the command and money of Charles. Any contact he had outside the organization also knew

Charles, which meant they were useless to Paolo. If word got back that Paolo was alive, there was no telling what lengths Charles would go to in an attempt to lure him out of hiding.

Be invisible. For now.

He spent another hour in the sun. Unmoving. His wounds soaking up the heat.

The ducks circled around the pond twice. Of the few neighbors that had visibility into Esmeralda's backyard, only one had come outside. The old woman walked down to the water and tossed several chunks of bread toward the passing ducks. Momma and chicks circled around the floating loaf and devoured it while the old lady trudged back up her sloping yard and disappeared into her house.

A short while later, Paolo rose and went inside, too. The heat hadn't gotten to him as much as the obsession over the thought that the bodies had been found. It wouldn't take long for Charles to create a list of the places Paolo might go. He was fortunate that the bite of love had never infected him with strong enough venom to marry. He had no kids, as far as he knew. Aside from his two sisters, the rest of his siblings and his parents were in Brazil. And that was beyond Charles's immense reach.

Ithaca, however, wasn't. And Charles had a team in Buffalo. A small group, for sure. But that didn't matter. They could be at Esmeralda's in half an hour. And they were all killers.

He grabbed the portable off the wall and called the hospital.

"How're you feeling?" Esmeralda asked him.

"I've been better."

"Are you going to walk up here, or would you like me to come get you?"

"Surely you've seen this done enough times you can put a few stitches in me."

“I can, but you’re going to look like a medical experiment gone wrong with the scarring it’ll leave behind.”

He glanced at his reflection in the microwave’s mirrored surface. Scarring was inevitable. “I don’t care about that.” And he didn’t. The desire to run, disappear drove his thoughts and actions now. The sooner he could go, the better.

“OK, fine,” she said. “I’ll do it. But I don’t want any shit from you later down the road. Got it?”

“Yeah.” He paused a beat. “Can you come home early, Essie?”

“I’m supposed to be here until six.”

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important.”

Paolo had told his sister details about his life. She didn’t know everything, such as how high up in the organization he was or the crimes perpetrated by him or his underlings, but she had enough knowledge that the meaning behind his words should be evident to her.

“The mid-shift is at lunch right now,” she said. “I’ll leave as soon as they are back.”

After Paolo hung up, he walked to the front of the house and split the blinds vertically with his thumb and forefinger. A sleepy street, oppressed by the heat, stretched out before him. He repeated the process at the windows located on the side and back. Afterward, he walked through his sister’s room and into her closet. The small space overflowed with dresses, blouses, skirts, pants and scrubs. He pulled the clothes off the railing, revealing a blank section of the back wall. Tapping, he located the upper seam of the cutout he’d had installed while she was on vacation a year earlier. He pushed on the cover, rocking it back and forth, until the top seam split. With two fingers wedged into the slim opening, he tugged on the drywall cutout. It tore away from the wall. Paolo reached into the dark space and located the LED light mounted to the top.

The cutout was two feet wide, and a foot high and deep. Inside were four passports, two 9mm pistols, a tactical knife

with an ankle sheath, twenty-thousand in cash, and the bankbooks to three domestic and two foreign banks.

The wise man is over-prepared, Paolo.

His father had said that weekly since Paolo was five or six years old. Didn't matter if they were hunting or fishing or woodworking or packing for vacation. The words were ingrained. A mantra of sorts.

He pulled out the knife and a pistol, five thousand in cash, three passports, one of which had Esmeralda's photo in it, and one domestic and two foreign bankbooks, including one for the Bank of Montreal.

On the closet floor was a duffel bag that contained a couple changes of Paolo's clothes. The kind of casual wear that would allow him to blend in anywhere. He placed the items from the safe inside and carried the bag to the guest room.

Esmeralda arrived home a few minutes later. As she stitched his nose and forehead and attended to a cut on his upper arm, he filled her in on what had happened, neglecting to mention that one of the men he'd slain in self-defense had been their brother-in-law. She'd find out in time. As she listened to the retelling, her eyes glassed over. Mouth hung in a perpetual state of openness. Her breathing became erratic as the panic took hold.

But she performed the procedure as though on autopilot.

After she finished, Paolo poured her a drink and told her to stay away from the door while he showered and changed.

"Pack a bag," he said on his way toward the bathroom. "We might be leaving this evening."

PARIS, FRANCE.

“GO WAIT IN that restaurant.”

Bear pointed toward the little Italian place tucked in between a drug store and an apartment building. The door opened. The smell of pasta and pizza flooded the sidewalk.

Mandy glared up at him, defiant. “I don’t wanna. I’m staying with you.”

Bear glanced across the street at the four-story building. The address he’d been given at the hospital led them here. Pierre’s apartment was 3C. For all Bear knew, Pierre owned the whole thing, and half of it was used for DSGE purposes.

“Look,” he said. “I don’t know what I’m gonna find when I walk into that building. I can’t risk putting you into a dangerous situation. It’s best you wait inside. Have a drink. A slice of pizza. If I’m not back in fifteen minutes, you call for help.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I have to make sure this man is OK.”

“Why, Bear? This isn’t like you.”

“Why are you questioning me, kid? Dammit. I ought to ship you off to one of those Swiss schools now and get you out of my hair.” Pain knifed through his chest and abdomen as he spit the words out.

Mandy’s eyes misted over, she backed away.

“Mandy.” He reached out. “I’m sorry.”

“Whatever.” She turned her back on him and entered the restaurant and took a seat at the counter. Bear stood three feet in front of the door, waiting, but she never looked back.

After a minute, he turned and cut across the street. A call box hung near the freshly painted door. It looked as though his palm would come away red if he pressed it against the door. The name next to 3C’s button had faded to the point of being illegible. Bear reached for the front door, found it unlocked. He took the stairs, three at a time, and stopped on the third floor landing. Did he smell the restaurant? Or was someone cooking Italian tonight? The stairwell led to a short hallway with four doors, two on each side, labeled A, B, C, and D. He positioned himself in front of C and knocked three times.

A woman spoke from inside. The door muted her voice enough that he couldn’t understand what she said. Nor could he tell if the voice he heard belonged to Kat.

Bear knocked again, gently. Less intimidating. The C in the middle shimmied side-to-side with each rap against the solid-core door. Most of the brass coating had worn off the placard.

A few moments later, the door pulled away, and dark wide eyes peered up at him. The kid stood about the height of the knob.

In French, Bear said, “I’m sorry to bother you at this hour. Is Pierre in?”

The kid said, “Pierre? There is no Pierre here.”

His mother, presumably sensing something was not quite right, appeared. She looked to be early 40s, dark hair and features, heavysset. “Can I help you?”

Bear leaned back and verified this was the correct apartment. “I’m looking for an old friend of mine. Man named Pierre Allard. I was told he lived here.”

“Perhaps he did,” she said. “I only moved in a week ago.” He spotted opened and unopened boxes lining the hallway behind her. She lifted her hand and wagged a finger in front of

her face. “But, perhaps I have something that will help. Please, come inside.”

Too trusting, he thought, to invite a man his size inside. He followed the woman down the dim, narrow corridor, avoiding the containers in the way. Pasta and tomato sauce saturated the air. One of his favorite dishes since he was a kid and his mother made the meal from scratch every Sunday using tomatoes they grew in the side lot.

The woman led him to the kitchen. A tall silver pot boiled over and hissed when the water took on the burner’s flames. Red tomato sauce bubbled, the pockets of air bursting and flinging tiny drops of gravy.

She must’ve caught him staring at the food. “I can fix you a plate. It’s almost ready.”

Bear smiled and patted his stomach. “Appreciate the offer, but I really can’t stay. I have someone waiting for me.”

She shrugged, turned, and reached up for a book perched atop her baker’s rack.

“They left this behind,” she said, arm outstretched toward Bear.

“They?”

“I assume they were married or a couple.” She pointed at the book. “Open. See.”

Bear peeled back the front cover and leafed through dozens of pictures of Pierre and Kat. Some went back in time. Others were recent. Pierre in a hospital bed, Kat at his side. His physical therapy. Kat at his side. Sitting at the dining table that Bear stood in front of. Again, Kat at Pierre’s side. Perhaps Kat had put the book together for Pierre for his homecoming, but they left it in the apartment after he’d decided to let the place go.

“And no idea where they went to?” he asked.

She shrugged, turned her palms upward. “Sorry. A broker found this place for me. Perhaps he knows?”

Bear reached the last page of the small album. A paper slipped out, previously held in place by the last page and the back cover. Bear reached down for it.

“I think I have all I need,” he said, turning toward the front of the apartment.

She hurried after him. “Please, take this photo book. If you find them, I’m sure they’ll want it back.”

Bear accepted the book from her, then made his way down the stairwell, leaving behind the smell of Italy. He considered trashing the photos. For some reason he didn’t. As he pushed past the building’s front door, his stomach tightened, refusing to relax until he spotted Mandy across the street.

Hurrying, he dodged traffic and entered the restaurant. Italy re-found, but only momentarily.

“Come on, we gotta go,” he said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

“What?”

“Not until you say you’re sorry.”

“Kid, I don’t have time for this. We need to get to the train station.”

Mandy spun back toward the counter, lowered her head and scooped another spoonful of vanilla ice cream into her mouth.

Bear took a deep breath, stepped forward, placed his large hand on her shoulder. “I’m sorry, Mandy. Sometimes I get worked up when the situation is intense. I’m working on it.”

She turned her head to the left, angled upward at him. “Are you really going to ship me off to a boarding school?”

“Is that what you want?”

She shook her head.

“Then I won’t.”

She scooped one last bite of her ice cream, then hopped off the stool. “Where’re we going?”

“Nice.”

“What’s there?”

“Pierre.”

And Kat.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

BRETT LEFT THE USB drive on the kitchen table next to his laptop. He had walked in to his apartment, set it down, then rinsed off. For four hours the drive and the computer remained on the table as though he had forgotten about them. Of course, he hadn't. And the files couldn't remain unopened for long. Depending on the logistics of the job, two weeks might be plenty of time. Or it might not be enough.

Without looking at the target's information, he had already begun forming a plan. Ballard had mentioned it'd be wise to go after one of the target's associates in an effort to draw the man out. A female, presumably, would be the best choice. Most men could not rebut their irrational side when a woman he cared for was placed in a dangerous situation, whether real or perceived.

He turned to the evening news as a means of procrastination. They had nothing of note. Their versions of some events were off a hair. Most wouldn't know. Nor would they accept the truth if it were presented to them.

Brett fixed a dinner of chicken and green beans, ate, then after clearing his plate, settled at the table again with a beer in hand. It was the first he'd had in two weeks. The carbonation burned as the alcohol slid down his throat. He exhaled, took another pull.

Then he set the bottle down and powered on his computer. He checked the USB drive, first scanning it with a device

aimed at detecting a bug or tracking device. The drive was clean. He inserted it into the computer and began browsing the files, starting with the pictures.

It took a moment for his reaction.

“Son of a bitch.”

The face staring back at him was one he knew. Not well, but the men had bled together, at one time, under the oddest of circumstances.

In 2007, Brett had been targeted for execution. The order had originated with a young Syrian terrorist cell leader living in France. Four years prior, the man had been a college student studying in the U.S. He was also part of a sleeper cell at that time. Willing to give his life to kill innocent Americans in a coordinated attack that never went down. Mostly thanks to the SIS. And as fate would have it, the guy responsible for expelling the terrorist would later receive the order to terminate Brett.

But life, as it often does, had different plans for all three men.

The terrorist, Bashir al-Sharaa, rose to prominence in France in a short time. In twelve months he accomplished more than some do in five years. Not only did he have a strong cell in place in Paris, but he had satellites and sleepers spread throughout Europe, and American expansion was well underway.

Brett at that time devoted ninety percent of his resources to tracking al-Sharaa down. The drive to bring him to justice consumed his life. He had infiltrated al-Sharaa’s group in Paris with an asset. Not only did she provide information about the Paris cell, she had mapped out a framework of the operation, and had started to nail down the identity of the people al-Sharaa reported to. Nothing could be done until Brett had the information that led him to the next level. Unfortunately the woman was murdered in broad daylight when she was on the verge of making the connection. Her sins had been discovered. And Brett’s involvement was known.

Al-Sharaa arranged with not one, but two separate contacts who had the reach and capability of assassinating a man like Brett. Both were almost successful. One was an FBI agent who, oddly enough, had close ties with al-Sharaa and Brett. Joe Dunne had been married to Brett's foster sister, Reese McSweeney. Dunne had also used al-Sharaa as an asset when the man was in the States as a student. The other to issue a hit was a politician who contracted the SIS, and ultimately a man named Jack Noble, to handle the job.

As it turned out, Noble discovered the sham behind the operation, and saved Brett's life.

Word was that Noble also removed the politician from office, though the rest of the world thought the guy had a coronary.

And now, as fate would have it, Brett Taylor stared at the face of the man who had risked everything to save Brett back in 2007.

That was why he hesitated. Brett hadn't known it at the time, but he was not forceful in acquiring the USB drive from Ballard, nor did he open it immediately, because somehow, someway, he knew Noble was the target.

A professional killer undergoing a crisis of morality leads the assassin on a path that results in no death other than his own.

The words had been spoken by Brett's mentor a hundred times. If faced with a situation where he felt he couldn't complete the job, for whatever reason, he had to back down. Once the thought was in place, there was no avoiding the negative consequences associated with it. If he continued, Brett would be looking over his shoulder and questioning whether being involved was the right thing to do.

Not a good scenario in light of the executions the shadowy side of the government had been ordering.

Brett knew if he turned down the job after seeing the details, he could count on some like him paying a visit.

Either way, he was fucked.

“Get it together,” he muttered.

He set Jack’s photo off to the side and leafed through the documents. They listed Noble’s last known location.

New York.

Where he’d been previously.

London.

Who he’d worked with while there.

Both MI5 and MI6.

There was mention of the British Prime Minister. It detailed the previous five years, a life of working for the highest bidder, answering to the dollar, not any sense of higher purpose. Not until the past year, when Jack reacquainted himself working with, not for, the SIS. Classified documents detailed how Noble helped orchestrate the take-down of a Russian government-backed terrorist cell, and a corrupt General named Ivanov, who was involved in operations top to bottom.

A long pull drained the beer bottle. Brett got up, trashed it, opened another, then carried it outside. The terrace faced west, overlooking an expanse of concrete and asphalt. The modern day jungle. The sun hung low in the sky. Red, orange and purple spread across the horizon and painted the buildings. A steady exhaust- and smog-laden breeze blew toward him. The bottle seemed to sweat in his hand. He placed it in a cup holder fixed to one of the chairs.

Leaning over the railing, he contemplated his next move. Jack Noble had spared his life. And why? Simply because Brett and his foster sister, Reese, had given Noble their word. For that reason alone, the job could not be completed. But Brett couldn’t turn it down for reasons he’d already considered.

He thought through the supporting documentation on the drive. The Jack Noble he knew and the one portrayed within the digital walls were not the same man. Neither of them were choir boys, and Brett was aware of that. However, there was a line that was not to be crossed.

Noble had stepped over that line and left any semblance of moral code behind.

For that, his death could occur and it would not weigh on Brett one bit.

Bullshit.

Nothing Noble had done in the previous six or seven years could outweigh the debt Brett owed to the man. Further, there was evidence that the guy had in some ways redeemed himself. When it came to it, he did right by his country.

The second bottle went down quicker than the first. Three or four more and he might feel the effects of the alcohol coursing through his system. Despite that possibility, Brett re-entered the apartment and opened a third beer. Somewhere toward the bottom of it, he went back to the kitchen table and scrolled through additional documents on the drive. The second half contained information on Noble's associates. The ones that had or might have inside knowledge of the things that he had done with the SIS.

The first name was one Brett recalled. Riley Logan, the way Brett remembered him, was a mountain of a man, aptly nicknamed Bear. He'd been with Brett when Joe Dunne's guys kidnapped him. At the time he thought they had killed Bear. They probably should have. The big man's current location was unknown. That was the first problem. The second was that if Brett planned on drawing Noble out, using a six-six former spec ops soldier was a bad idea. Bear could, and would, take care of himself. And he'd have no qualms removing Brett from the picture if presented with danger.

Moving on, he came across a few pages dedicated to Clarissa Abbot. Noble had served under her father while in the Marines as part of a special assignment working alongside CIA operatives. After Clarissa's father's death, Jack looked out for her. The timeline turned murky about a year ago. Clarissa had made a transition in her life, but it wasn't obvious as to what. Something had been in print, but later redacted from the file. Brett made a note to follow up and find out what she was involved in. If it was tending bar, there'd be no reason

to hide her current location. It wasn't like Bear's file, where they didn't know. Someone knew, but wouldn't reveal the information. As far as Brett was concerned, Noble already had an affinity for looking out for the woman. All Brett had to do was place her in harm's way, and Jack would come calling.

Next, he read through the file of a woman named Sasha Kirby, a top agent within MI6 on the fast-track to a director's position. Jack worked closely with her for a few months while in London. She'd attempted to remain in contact with him after he returned to New York. Phone records indicated that the requests were not reciprocated. Sasha made for a bad potential target at this stage. While being on the list made her susceptible to termination, using her to draw Noble out would likely land Brett in a UK prison. Not ideal.

When he moved to the next target, a lump rose in Brett's throat and his gut tightened. He'd thought Clarissa was the obvious answer. She wasn't. But could Brett really engage this target? Could he hold them for the time it would take to involve Noble?

He set the file down, finished the beer and grabbed another. It wasn't until the bottle was empty that he made his decision.

It had to be done.

Brett's life was more valuable than Jack's, and anyone else in the file.

The job was on.

And Jack Noble's child and her mother were the way to draw Jack Noble out.

And off his game.

NEW YORK CITY.

THE ORANGE GLOW rose up from the concrete horizon and expanded to the east and west, passing through the expansive windows, illuminating and tinting Charles's office.

Between working his contacts in the FBI and New York State Police - and wasting minutes staring out the window looking for Feds watching him - Charles had accomplished little during the daylight hours. And that was why, at nine-thirty in the evening on a Friday night, he sat behind the overbearing mahogany desk, in his office, across the street from Washington Square Park.

He hadn't managed to swing by the Queens compound that afternoon. The task had become an afternoon ritual. Check up on the locals. He supposed no one there missed his overbearing presence. When he called Trevino for an update, all he received were questions from the captain about the three missing men: Endrizzi, Milano, and Paolo. Charles played coy, telling Trevino that they must've taken a trip to one of the reservation casinos. Best to stick to one story, and this one placed the trio upstate. Trevino had no further response. Perhaps he knew something, and held back. It'd come out in time if he had.

Similar calls took place through the late afternoon and early evening. Charles cemented the casino story with everyone he spoke to, leaving enough doubt to keep them from

prying into what had really happened that night. Hell, he remained unclear about that.

Rising from his chair after placing a sixth unanswered call to Detective Harris, Charles turned toward the panoramic window looking out over the park and toward high-rise buildings of Upper Manhattan. Lovers lingered on benches. Shadows darted past the fountain and disappeared under the dark green canopy. Cars drifted past on the road. Didn't matter what time of day or night, traffic was always present. At least the sounds of horns and engines couldn't filter in through the windows. Foot traffic flowed along the sidewalks.

He focused on anyone who remained stationary. Of the half-dozen he saw, none stared back at him, or toward the building's entrance. At least, not anyone visible. Perhaps the need had gone. They'd spotted him leaving the building and later returning to it. There wasn't much else to piece together. Didn't matter what agency the guy watching him talk to Harris worked for.

For all Charles knew, they could be standing outside his door at that moment. He'd sent his assistants home early, and the hired guns didn't hang around much longer. Their contract stated nine to five, and they abided by it. When Charles raised a concern, they said something about unions and walked out. After that, he had considered bringing in someone from the organization, maybe rotating a couple trusted guys. Problem was he couldn't trust anyone enough at this stage to have them protect him while he sat behind closed doors. There was still dissent remaining since Feng's assassination, though they'd purged the vocal minority already. But that didn't mean all who were opposed were gone. Bring the wrong guy into the office, and it could be a bullet or iron bars in Charles's future.

Standing in front of the mirror, he dialed the detective again. The previous calls had been made from the office line. Perhaps Harris had ignored them because he hadn't recognized the number. Ten rings later, that theory was disproved.

"Where are you, Harris?" Charles walked past his desk, toward the washroom. Halfway there, he noticed a shift in the light under the office door. Movement. Charles stopped,

turned. Shadows now blocked half the light passing underneath. He took a step back, toward his desk, where he knelt down for a clearer view.

Six shoes. Three men. Outside his office.

One rapped on the door.

Charles rose, took another step back, said nothing. He reached down with his right hand and slid open the upper desk drawer. It housed his Glock 21. .45 caliber. One shot. One man. Stopped dead. Repeat two more times before they got to him and call it a day. He gripped the pistol tight, brought it up and aimed it at the door.

Another knock, three hard raps, this time followed by a guy calling out, “We know you’re in there, DeCosta. Open up. We just want to talk.”

Spoken like a true Fed.

One of them had to be the Fed Charles saw outside at the park. Maybe the others had been there, too. Christ, what if there had been four? Had they followed Harris after the meeting? The detective would roll over on Charles faster than a cheap hooker. Shit, he thought, what if one of them standing there now *was* Harris?

Charles’s office had no other way out. Only option was through the door now blocked by the three men. Past that point, there was a second means of egress. When he leased the place, he figured that the worst-case scenario he’d face would be someone out in the main hallway. The security measures he had put in place should’ve prevented the men from reaching his office door. Someone had screwed up and left the main entrance unlocked.

Or the guys had a warrant and building management had let them in.

“Come on, DeCosta,” the guy said. “Don’t make this any harder than it has to be.”

Charles slid the monitor on his desk to the far right, leaving him with a clear view of the door, then he sat down. Reaching underneath the desk, he pushed wires out of the way

and then pressed a button. The door unlocked. The three men could enter, but on Charles's terms. And at a distance.

"It's open."

The door cracked an inch. A thickening bar of light flooded across the floor, washed over his desk. One man moved forward and stepped into the office. The other two men hung behind. At first glance, Charles recognized none of them as the guy he had spotted in the park.

"Who the fuck're you?" Charles kept the pistol underneath the desktop, aimed at the lead man. A single shot would all but amputate the guy's leg at the knee.

The man stepped forward until the remaining natural light washed over him. Close cropped gray hair framed a slender, chiseled face. He had the frame to match. The pockets of his dark cargo pants looked empty. He held nothing in his hands. Nothing bulged from his shirt. Either his pistol was tucked behind his back, or he trusted the other two men with his life.

Charles shifted his focus from the older man to the two guys flanking him. Carbon copies, only younger. The men didn't look like Feds. No, they were mercenaries.

Charles repeated his question.

"May I sit down?" the man said.

"Only after you tell me who you are."

"Name's Merrick."

"Means nothing to me."

"That's a good thing, Mr. DeCosta. Believe me, it is." The man exuded confidence in a quiet way. Reminded Charles of the older guys who were staples in Feng's organization during Charles's early years.

"It's Mister now, is it?" Charles lifted his left hand abruptly, testing the three guys. The men didn't flinch. Charles continued. "And who are you with, Mr. Merrick?"

"Me? I'm not with who I used to be anymore. I'm sort of a nobody to most. A somebody to many others. Some think I'm

retired. Others assume I work for the highest bidder. It is true that I retired for a while, but sitting around didn't suit me. So, I'm dabbling again."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Charles shifted in his seat.

"Is it all right if I sit down now?"

"Send them outta the office."

Merrick turned, spoke softly to the two younger men. They nodded and then disappeared. A few moments later, the outer door opened and fell shut.

"Happy?" Merrick asked.

Charles nodded and gestured toward an empty chair opposite him. Nothing above or below the desk obstructed the path from his pistol to the seat Merrick sat down in.

"Sorry about the theatrics," Merrick said. "Earlier during the day in the park, and now. We had to make sure it was you we were dealing with. Can't make mistakes in matters like these."

Matters like these, indeed.

Charles batted the possibilities around. What would a man like Merrick come to see him for? Were the Feds preparing to move on him? Was this a shake-down? How long would the two of them have to dance around the subject to get to the heart of it?

"It's no problem," Charles said. "Spotted your guy down in the park while meeting with an associate of mine."

"You associate with corrupt detectives often?"

"That guy's corrupt? Perhaps I should reach out to the Chief and let him know." Charles reached for his desk phone. "I got his number on my speed dial."

Merrick smiled as he placed his forearm on the desk and leaned forward. "We both know that's not necessary."

"Look, this is fun and all, but I'm late for a meeting. So why don't you get to the point?"

“Fair enough, Mr. DeCosta. Let’s talk about a couple bodies that someone tried to make a barbecue out of upstate.”

Charles shook his head. “Man, it seems every week we hear something like this, doesn’t it? Friggin’ shame what the world’s coming to.”

“Don’t fuck with me.”

“Don’t you fuck with me.”

“On your orders, those men traveled with a third guy. The way I see it, you are the one ultimately responsible for their deaths. The state police are managing not to screw things up too bad. Once it is determined that the guys are career criminals, that path is going to lead right to you. Probably get turned over to the Feds. Right now, you’ve got a corrupt policeman willing to cover you on this. I can make him irrelevant. In fact, I can make the situation go away completely.”

Charles leaned back, allowing the Glock to surface for the first time. Merrick didn’t react to its presence. Charles didn’t bother to question why.

“What’s your angle, Merrick?”

“I need your help, Mr. DeCosta.”

“With?”

“Jack Noble.”

Charles traced the scar on his cheek. “What about him?”

“Without going into too much detail, I need him dead. My research indicates you wouldn’t mind it if he died. Problem is, his death can’t appear to be an assassination by me or my team. Nor can I allow you to simply have him killed. If it came back that I allowed that, I’d never see light of day again. It has to look like he was involved with something he shouldn’t have been.”

Charles said nothing.

“The third man, he killed the other two and got away, right?”

Charles leaned back and wrapped his free hand around the base of his skull, scratching at the short hair there. “Son of a bitch. All of them.”

“This guy could cause problems for you, couldn’t he?”

Charles dipped his head, said nothing.

“What’s his name and cell phone number, if you have it?”

What was this guy’s angle? He’d talked a good game so far, but did he really have anything on Charles? Outside of knowing his name, the situation up north, and Detective Harris’s corrupt nature, Charles knew nothing about the man. He studied him for a moment, then said, “Why?”

“I’m trying to help you. You only prevent me from doing so by asking questions.”

“You gotta understand,” Charles said, “I don’t know you from Adam. For all I know, you could be bullshitting me right here. Trying to set me up.”

“I don’t need to set you up, DeCosta. You’ve already screwed yourself. If you don’t want to help me, so be it. But believe me, I’ll be placing a call to another department that has a unit stationed not four blocks from here. You’ll be detained before you know it, and these people don’t know the meaning of bail.”

“Trumped up charges. Won’t keep me for long.”

Merrick smiled as he leaned closer. “You really want to take that chance?”

Charles didn’t. He said, “Paolo Almeida,” then pulled out his cell phone and read off Paolo’s number.

Merrick nodded and placed a call. He repeated Paolo’s name and number, followed by a few minutes and several yes and no responses. Finally, he lowered the phone and smiled at Charles.

“Last known position one mile outside Ithaca, New York, this morning around five a.m. Signal goes dead there, but research uncovered that he co-owns a house inside Ithaca city

limits with a woman named Esmeralda. Also an Almeida. I'd say odds are that's where your guy is right now."

Charles considered kicking Merrick out of his office and calling his Buffalo team. According to the map in his head, he could dispatch them to handle Paolo and anyone around the guy within an hour. But Merrick had proved himself useful so far, and Charles couldn't help but wonder what other information the guy might have.

"I know what you're thinking," Merrick said. "But in the time it takes you to get to your car, we can have someone halfway there. And if you try to screw me, we'll take your guy in and get him to testify against you."

Charles rose, arm extended, pistol aimed at Merrick's head. Rage had gotten the better of him.

"Who the hell do you think you are bursting into my place of business like this and threatening me? Huh?"

Merrick smiled, said nothing. The guy seemed unfazed by the prospect of being shot in the head.

Charles glanced down at the man's lap where an illuminated cell phone screen counted the seconds the call had been connected.

"Shit."

"That's right," Merrick said. "You shoot me, you're done. So, why don't you sit down and hear me out? I have a proposal that'll benefit both of us."

Charles took a deep breath. He looked back, out the window, at the darkened treetops, covering the park below.

"OK."

After Charles had seated, Merrick continued. "We know where Noble is."

"Back in the city?"

"Yes."

Charles shook his head, said nothing.

“And we’ve got someone monitoring his building right now. You are going to present him with an offer to handle this Paolo situation for you. Tell him you’ll pay a quarter million, whatever, it doesn’t matter. Use a number you think’ll motivate him.”

“Money won’t do anything for the guy. I can tell you that.”

“I can work on that, then. We’ll come up with something for blackmail as a last resort.”

“OK, so then what?”

“We’ll handle it from there.”

“Meaning?”

“Your problem and my problem will both be resolved.”

“I don’t get it,” Charles said. “Why not just do him here if you know where he is?”

Merrick nodded. “I know it makes no sense. Thing is, I need him positively identified, and to be caught in an illegal or dangerous act. I’ve handled the ID. But as of now, all he’s doing is going to museums and eating out. One might think he’s a boy scout, or something.”

“You’re a spook,” Charles said.

Merrick said nothing.

“You kill for the government.”

Merrick still said nothing.

Charles thought it over for a few seconds. “You know, he’s got a lot of connections. The kind of people who might know you’re planning something. What’re you gonna do when he finds out?”

“When? You mean if. No one is reaching out to him right now. The moment we had the positive ID on Noble, we blocked most traffic into his cell phone. I’m sure someone’s found out. But they’ll never reach him. And no one cares enough to seek him out past a phone call.”

Charles rubbed the short stubble on his chin and jawline. The operation sounded plausible. And even though Noble wasn't much of a problem these days, having him out of the way entirely wouldn't be a bad thing. The Old Man made a mistake by keeping Jack around long past the guy's expiration date. Charles didn't want to suffer the same fate as Feng.

Merrick lifted the cell phone to his ear again. A few seconds passed, then, he said, "Really? That sounds incredibly fortunate for us. Get a guy en route to London now. I want someone on that plane."

"What is it?" Charles asked in response to Merrick's grin.

"Did you know there's a young Noble running around?"

Charles searched his memory. Found nothing. Shrugged in response.

"Seems that she and her mother are embarking on a journey from London to Tenerife tomorrow, and it just so happens I'll have someone following them." He placed both hands behind his head and leaned back in the chair. "There's your bait, Mr. DeCosta."

Before he left, Merrick provided three ways for Charles to reach him. Cell phone, secure messaging through a terminal program, and a secure email address. Charles doubted any of them would be viable forty-eight hours from now.

"So help me," Charles said as his office door fell shut. "This guy screws me, he's dead. He's got no idea who he's messing with." He spun in his chair and stared down at the park. A minute later, Merrick and the two younger men cut across the street, past the fountain, and disappeared under the protection of the dark leafy canopy.

Charles turned away and went to the washroom. Ice-cold water ran over his cupped hands. He splashed some on his face, momentarily easing the tension. As the water dripped off his chin and jaw, he grabbed a towel and dried his face off, dabbing at his eyes so as not to dislodge a contact lens. He stared at the scar that ran the length of his cheek. He thought about the man who'd given it to him.

Jack Noble.

Charles didn't need some Fed to threaten him into taking the job. Hell, he'd handle it himself if it meant Noble's death.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

CLARISSA AND BECK returned to D.C. late in the afternoon after chasing down a few false leads. On the way back, Beck received a call from FBI Special Agent Howell, a man he'd worked with on eight previous cases. Howell and his partner Shelton had been investigating the organization long before Charles DeCosta headed it up. They were committed to taking it down, and therefore, willing to offer any and all resources at their disposal to Beck.

They agreed to meet that evening at Beck's office in D.C.

Before they arrived, Beck warned her about not getting too close, or giving up too much information. "No matter how closely we work with another agency or entity, they always have their own agenda to fill. Remember that. They'll be your friend, until they no longer have to be."

The FBI agents were twenty minutes late. Clarissa had nearly dozed off when security knocked on Beck's open office door.

The first man to enter introduced himself as Howell. He was physically imposing. A tall, broad, black man. She rose to introduce herself and found him almost a head taller than her five-nine frame.

Shelton had been made in the image Clarissa had of FBI agents. Slightly taller than average, brown hair, cut short and parted straight on the side. The all-American boy turned hero.

She immediately distrusted him. Had seen too many guys like him come through the places she had worked. Beneath their perfect exterior lay an asshole in wait.

Beck introduced everyone and they were all seated.

Howell didn't waste time with small talk. "Got a guy we think you might want to check up on. Name of Scott Hood. He's been in Anderson for a couple years now. Charles DeCosta turned on him in order to save his own ass."

"Anderson?" Beck said as he drummed his pencil on the edge of the desk. "That's white collar Fed, right?"

Shelton said, "Yeah. If what we have is correct, he was involved in some laundering, tax schemes, and one of the guys running the counterfeit operation."

"Maybe you'll get something out of him," Howell said.

"Why are you telling us?" Clarissa said. "Why not question him yourself?"

Howell glanced at Beck, who lifted an eyebrow and nodded. Then he shifted in his chair and turned toward Clarissa. "He wouldn't speak to us. Maybe because he hates the FBI. But the most likely reason was that we couldn't offer him anything."

"And we can?" she glanced at Beck.

He nodded.

Howell said, "Hood's in extended summer camp for a long time, Agent Abbot. I'm talking almost two more decades."

"If he has the right kind of information," Beck said, "we might be able to reduce some of that time."

Howell held up his hands, and, laughing, said, "Hey, I didn't hear that."

Beck's smile looked as though it was a courtesy to the other man.

"Well, I guess we should get going." Howell wrapped his hands around the chair's arms and pushed himself up. "I'll

email over everything we have on the guy, so you two can prepare.”

“Send it over tonight,” Beck said.

Howell and Shelton saw themselves out. Clarissa remained behind. She waited until she heard the elevator announcing it had reached the floor.

“When should we go?”

“I’ll have to get it authorized, and I want to review the information. So, I’m thinking Sunday.”

“Sounds good. Forward whatever they send you to me. OK?”

He nodded as she rose. She stepped into the hallway.

“Oh, Clarissa,” he called out. “I almost forgot. I’m going to pick you up at seven tomorrow night.”

“Seven? For what?”

“The past twenty four or so hours have been so hectic with you reviewing the DeCosta files, and us going to New York, and this meeting we just had. I wanted to take you out to celebrate your making it through training.”

She said nothing.

“I hope that’s OK?”

She smiled, slightly. “Sure, it’s fine. I’ll see you at seven tomorrow.”

LONDON, ENGLAND.

SASHA WOKE WITH her face on her laptop's palm rest. Her right fist wrapped around her cell phone. It took all of five seconds for the fog of sleep to clear. She sat up, then tapped the menu button on her Samsung. But the screen didn't come to life.

"Damn," she muttered, searching for the charger cord. She located it. The phone still wouldn't power on. It'd take a few minutes. She diverted her attention to the computer. Fortunately, it had gone to sleep along with her and still had a half-charge on the battery.

She'd spent most of the night following up on leads. Most led to dead ends. Jack Noble had been a ghost for most of the past month. That didn't stop someone from checking on him, though. Did he know? Was it because he was getting back in the game? Or was someone after him?

She opened up the same alert program she had used in her office the day before. Overnight, while she had slept, there'd been another hit on Jack's file. This was no coincidence. Something was about to happen, and he was going to find himself in the middle of it.

A red LED burned millimeters above the Samsung's large screen. She grabbed the phone off the nightstand. As she tried to power it on, it slipped from her hands, slapping the hardwood floor. Sasha cursed again, holding her breath as she reached for the phone. Wouldn't be the first time she ruined a

phone dropping it. Most cases were too bulky for her since she preferred to keep her cell in her pocket and not in a purse. In fact, rarely did she carry a bag other than the one for her laptop. Fortunately, the screen was intact, and the phone powered on. She tapped the appropriate icon, and the cell dialed the last number she had called.

“Come on, Jack,” she said three times while the phone purred in her ear.

No answer.

No voicemail.

Constant ringing.

She hung up, then entered another name into the program. Riley Logan. Unfortunately, the software had limitations, and a history search would not always return a positive match if the name had not been previously monitored. The search yielded no results.

Perhaps she had his contact information in her address book. She searched through her digital memory, but found nothing. She could’ve sworn it had been in there. With four hundred contacts listed, it was more likely her brain was playing tricks. They’d only worked together briefly, and only because he’d turned up in London the day she met Jack the first time, at the bombing site. In order to get Bear’s information, she’d have to travel to the office. A couple large gray clouds trudged across a blue sky beyond her bedroom window. Better than the day before. And with it being Saturday, a jaunt to Legoland wouldn’t eat up too much time.

She tried Jack’s number again.

No answer.

No voicemail.

Constant ringing.

“Christ, Jack, where are you?” She rose and tossed the phone onto her bed, then paced the length of her room, from the window to the door and back again. The process always jogged her memory.

And it didn't fail today.

Erin Carlisle.

Jack's ex and the mother of his daughter, Mia. Perhaps she had spoken to him recently, or could reach out on Sasha's behalf.

Sasha rushed to her laptop. She launched a new instance of the program, tapping on the shift key while urging the software to load quicker. Once the cursor appeared in the dialog box, she entered Erin's name. At Jack's request, she had kept tabs on Erin and Mia for him while he was away from London. If someone had accessed her information, anywhere, Sasha would know. She continued to tap on the shift key while the program cycled. A multicolored wheel spun on her screen, center of the window.

Then it stopped and returned a hit.

Someone had accessed Erin's file within the past twenty four hours.

Sasha searched through her folders until she found and opened another program. This one top secret as well, and used mostly by MI5. It searched multiple government databases and returned contact information. In addition, it allowed them to access any recent financial transactions on credit, as well as travel arrangements for a specific individual. She plugged in Erin's name and waited while the program connected to and cycled through multiple databases.

Two hits came back within thirty seconds of each other.

Sasha waited another thirty seconds for the program to finish its search and terminate operations. After, she clicked on the first item. A financial transaction. Over two thousand pounds paid to Air Europa. There was no doubt what the next item on the list was. She opened it up and found travel arrangements for Erin, her daughter Mia, and Hannah, the nanny from the States. They were departing Heathrow in ninety minutes on a trip to Tenerife.

The next program she needed wasn't installed on her computer. No one she knew at MI6 had access to it. But she

knew a man that did.

Mason Sutton answered on the third ring.

“I need your help, Mason,” Sasha said.

“My help,” Mason said. “You know, I’m afraid this relationship has become quite one-sided and I don’t see it benefiting me these days.”

“I don’t have time for this. I need your help.” She paused, then added. “And Jack needs your help, too.”

Mason’s tone changed. “What’s going on?”

“I’ve kept tabs on him since he left. Deemed it necessary, especially in light of what happened in Florida.”

“Yeah, sure.” Mason was aware of what had occurred when Jack got mixed up in a murder investigation that turned out to have major implications in the espionage world.

“Well, someone recently accessed Jack’s files. Twice now. I’ve been unable to reach him. That number he gave us, you remember it?”

“Yeah.”

“It just rings and rings. In fact, I’d like you to try it. Are you around another phone?”

“Yeah, hang on a sec.” His cell banged against something heavy like a counter or dining table. Thirty seconds passed before Mason returned. “Same thing, Sash. No answer, only ringing.”

“Christ.”

“So who’s accessed his information?”

“I can’t tell that. But no one should be looking at him. It was quite the coordinated effort to expunge much of what could do him harm. It’s very concerning that anyone would be looking into him.”

“Right, well, what can I do to help?”

“Short of hop across the pond and check in on him, I need you to investigate the passenger list of an Air Europa flight to

Tenerife, departing this morning.”

“Tenerife? Why?”

“You remember Erin and Mia, right?”

“Of course.”

“I got a hit on Erin. Then I dug into that program you MI5 chaps use, and, well, it told me they are departing from Heathrow in about ninety minutes from now.”

“What’s the flight information?”

Sasha read it off to him.

“OK,” he said. “So, I suspect you think someone undesirable will be on that flight, yeah? Well, what I’ll do is run this through ATIPs, get the passenger list. Then I’ll cross-reference those names and see who, if anyone, stands out.”

“Can you do that while mobile?”

“Absolutely. Why?”

“Meet me at Heathrow,” she said. “Get there as soon as you can. If your program returns anything while en route, call me.”

Sasha terminated the call, then phoned a taxi service. Ten minutes, max, they told her. That’d put her at the airport in under forty.

She took a shower, cold, as there wasn’t time to wait for the water to warm up. Nor did she have time to put on makeup after. She threw on a pair of worn jeans and a faded blue t-shirt. With her laptop bag and cell phone in hand, she hurried down the stairs, tossed a cold mug of coffee in the microwave and grabbed an apple and banana out of the fridge.

The taxi driver honked to let her know he was there five seconds before the microwave signaled that the coffee was ready. She emptied the contents of the scorching ceramic mug into a travel container, then exited her house.

She avoided eye contact as she slid into the rear seat, and pulled out her laptop to signal that she needn’t be disturbed.

The cabbie already knew her destination.

Along the way, she phoned Mason. Her end of the conversation was spoken in generalities.

“Nothing yet,” he said. “I’m about ten minutes out.”

As was she.

The cabbie drove on.

When they reached the airport, she paid him and exited the taxi, laptop bag and phone in hand. Inside, she made her way toward the Air Europa check-in counter. Mason waited for her there, a few feet away from the roped off maze they put travelers through prior to obtaining their boarding passes.

“Anything new?” he asked her.

“No,” she said, scanning the passengers in line.

“Yeah, well, I’ve got something.” He also searched the faces, studying each one a second before moving to the next, as though looking for someone in particular. “I had one of the guys manning a terminal at the office dig in since my mobile signal is shit today.”

“And?” Sasha’s heart pounded against her chest like a sledgehammer trying to take down a cinder block wall.

“No terrorists. Nobody wanted in England, or anywhere else, at least places we can check.”

“Am I just being paranoid, then?”

He grabbed her wrist and led her to an empty spot in the phone bank.

“One name came back, Sasha. Former US Special Forces. Now a mercenary. Name’s Jared Akers.”

She searched her internal database but came up with no match. “What else?”

“He purchased his ticket in the past twelve hours.”

“Oh, God. Do we have a visual reference?”

Shaking his head, Mason grabbed the back of his head and glanced down. “Working on it. So far, it’s been scrubbed from

any file we have access to, and given how things are looking, I didn't feel it appropriate to peer into other networks and tip them off."

"What would we be tipping them off to?"

"I'm not sure. But something doesn't feel right. Surely you understand that?"

Sasha pulled her phone out and opened a travel application.

"Who are you messaging?"

She extended the phone so he could see. "Not messaging. Getting us two tickets to Tenerife."

"What?" He leaned back and peered over the short walls of the space they occupied. "Sasha, I can't leave now."

"Just for the weekend. I've got an awful feeling about this, Mason. And I told Jack that I'd watch over his daughter while he's away. How can I face him again if something happened to her and I didn't do everything in my power to save her?"

Mason stared at her, lips drawn, slight shake of his head. Had she been so transparent that her feelings for Jack bled through in her words?

"Listen," he said. "We can call the authorities there. They can escort her."

"No, listen to me. I don't trust anyone but us to be involved in this." She finalized the transaction. "Besides, the tickets are paid for. You have to go with me now."

He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "I'm armed."

"You're MI5. They'll be honored to have you on board."

"I've got no luggage."

"You've got two hours. Their flight was full. We're on a different one."

"You don't give up, do you?"

"Never."

Mason smiled, briefly. “Why didn’t Jack stay, then?”

“Who said I’ve given up on the idea that he’d be back?”

The two agents separated for an hour, then met again near security. An hour after that, they were seated on their flight, bound for Tenerife.

NEW YORK CITY.

JACK HAD SPENT the remainder of Friday looking over his shoulder and hopping from cab to cab before finally returning to his apartment building and entering from the rear alley. He waited inside the door for twenty minutes, where he observed the path he had taken. Then he moved to the front of the building and watched for anyone lingering amid the foot traffic. Confident that he had not been followed, Jack headed upstairs and holed up with his Beretta in his lap. He had placed a couple calls to Brandon, first to tell him about the tail near Central Park, and later to find out if Brandon had uncovered anything. Eventually, worry faded, and he'd fallen asleep on the couch.

Now, five hours later, he woke in a cold sweat, unable to shake the image of Mia and Erin plummeting thirty thousand feet into the Atlantic.

Only a dream.

He repeated the thought over and over until it turned into a mantra, and the remnants of the chilling nightmare broke apart and faded into the recesses of his mind. For thirty minutes he tried, and failed, to fall back to sleep. It wasn't so much the images that lingered, as the fact that he had to get moving in order to reach South Carolina with daylight to spare. Attempting to locate Merrick, the owner of the condo where he'd had the strange meeting, in the dark in unfamiliar territory could prove to be a problem. Best to avoid it.

Finally, Jack rose and started a pot of coffee and threw a pound of bacon into a large skillet.

As the fresh brew dripped, and pig fat sizzled, Jack placed a call to Brandon.

The man answered, sounding as though he hadn't woken yet. "I know you're a bad ass super spy and all, Jack, but some of us need to sleep. Is this important, or can I call you back in three hours?"

"Three hours? It's six now."

"Your point?"

"It's important."

"You know what I have to go through to get up, right?"

Jack pictured the guy reaching for a metal triangle suspended from his ceiling, and using it to hoist himself out of bed, his frail, lifeless legs trailing behind, weighing him down.

"Did you find anything last night?" Jack asked.

"No." Brandon hesitated, then said, "But I've got a laptop up here. Let me remote into the other system and check for you. I'll call back in fifteen, all right?"

"I can hang on."

"No, you can't, 'cause I don't want to hear your Neanderthal breathing in my ear while I'm trying to help you."

Jack laughed, then told Brandon he'd call back if he didn't hear from him by six-thirty.

He stepped back into the kitchen and pulled the pot off the warmer despite the fact the coffee still brewed. Then he flipped the bacon over and waited for the second side to cook up. Once it had, he scooped it onto a large plate, and carried it and the steaming mug outside.

Stepping onto the balcony was like passing through a soaked towel. The air temperature felt fine, cool even. But the humidity hovered in the mid-nineties already. He hadn't eaten two slices of bacon before sweat formed at his temples and hairline.

He used the vantage point and sleepy Saturday morning sidewalk to scan the area for any possible watchers. Of course, anyone out there would likely be looking up and have spotted him as he exited his apartment onto the terrace. Jack's chances of spotting them would be slim. But if he did, it'd be a race to see if he could get to them first, or if they managed to get away.

But he saw nothing. The cityscape remained silent.

Jack headed back in around six-twenty, pulling out his phone as he crossed the humidity threshold. No missed calls. Ten minutes to go until the deadline he imposed. Screw it. He called Brandon anyway.

"I still got a few minutes. And I did try calling, but you didn't answer."

"Never heard it ring. Whatever. What've you got?"

"OK, so I did a bunch of checking for you, Jack. So far, I've got nothing on you. But, your ex over there in England, someone did a huge database search on her a few hours ago."

His heart rose in his chest. Felt like it might crack a rib or two. "From where?"

"UK, best I can tell."

"Can you narrow that down?"

"Maybe. Uh, London, that's for sure. Still working through the maze of IP addresses to pinpoint the address. Anyway, they checked on Erin's recent financial transactions and flight plans."

Jack paced the room. "Sasha has access to do that, and I asked her to keep track of Erin and Mia for me, watch over them while I'm away."

"Think it's her?"

"I don't know who else in London would be checking on them."

And he didn't know what reason Sasha would have to do so on a Saturday morning.

“So, that’s it?” he asked while his mind navigated through possible scenarios. Could the mystery meeting, a man in South Carolina, Feds tailing him, and someone spying on Erin have something in common?

Other than him.

Brandon said, “Looks that way, my man.”

“Do me a favor and keep digging for me. You’ve got access to me twenty-four-seven.”

He set the phone on the counter and poured another mug of coffee. Wouldn’t be as strong as the first, but that didn’t matter. At this point, coffee provided comfort and settled his racing mind. He carried it back to his room and started the shower. He had to get moving within the next hour if he wanted to reach Little River, South Carolina before dark. He was already behind an hour of his original plan. He’d thought that he might stop off in D.C., but that looked less likely now. Not if he planned on boarding a flight to Tenerife on Sunday. If things went smoothly in Little River, perhaps he could arrange a long enough layover in D.C. to get out and meet a few contacts in person. Possibly Frank Skinner. He couldn’t call the guy, but if anyone would be clued into why a Fed had been tailing Jack, it’d be Frank.

Jack cut the shower, toweled off, skipped the shave, and changed into a pair of cargo shorts and a lightweight button-up shirt. Casual and easy for the long drive ahead.

In the kitchen, he set his Beretta next to his cell phone, then filled a travel mug to the brim and grabbed a handful of lunch meat from the fridge, which he bagged and tossed into a small cooler. He lined all the items up on the kitchen counter and went to the front door. Before walking out with his hands full, he had to scout the hallway and make sure no one waited for him.

A pinprick of light passed through the peephole. A good sign. Meant no one stood outside the door. Now he had to investigate the rest. Jack disengaged the locks. Pulled the door open. His expectation of an empty hallway was not met. He

leaned away from the large knuckles inches in front of his face.

They hovered for a moment. A grin spread across the face of the man standing in the corridor.

“Jack, how are ya?”

“The hell you doing outside my apartment, Chuck?”

Charles’s smile faded. He shook his head. The corners of his thick jaws bunched with muscles.

“I know,” Jack said. “Don’t call you Chuck.”

“May I come in?”

Ten steps to the Beretta. Jack could get there before Charles could shut the door. Even with a suppressed pistol, the guy wouldn’t take a shot with the door open.

So Jack turned his back and hurried to the kitchen counter and allowed Charles to enter.

“What’s the hurry?” Charles said. “Left your piece over there? Go ahead, take your time and get it.”

Jack looked back. Charles lowered himself onto the sofa, hands on his knees, groaning like an old man.

“All that money and yet you live like this.” Charles gestured around, shook his head some more.

Jack tucked his Beretta in his rear waistband. “I don’t have as much as you might think. Bad investment decisions.”

“Drugs always pay off in the end.” Charles leaned back, looked up, shrugged. “Then again, not always. Anyway, I’m the wrong guy to ask for money advice. Seems you fit the mold, too. But at least I live well.”

Jack took a seat opposite Charles. “Sorry to hear about the Old Man.”

Charles smiled as he wrapped his big hands around the back of his head. “No you’re not. And neither was I. You and I both know that Feng should have retired a couple years back. He got crazy in the end, and that got him dead.”

After a silent pause, Jack said, “What do you want?”

“Want?”

“What the hell you are you doing here, Charles? Last time I saw you, we were trying to kill each other. I haven’t forgotten that you put a damn hole in Clarissa. I’m sitting here, and I’m questioning why I haven’t shot you yet.”

“Bygones, Jack. Let them be. I have.”

“So cut the shit, then, Chuck. Or get out of my apartment.”

“Where you headed dressed like that?”

Jack said nothing.

“Vacation? Looks like you’re going on a vacation. Dressed like a bum, and all.”

Jack said nothing.

“OK, I’ll get to it.” Charles leaned forward. Hands on knees again. “I have a proposition for you.”

Jack shook his head. “I’m out of the game now.”

“Well, this might be one of those, I help you, you help me situations.”

“There’s nothing you can help me with.”

“I beg to differ.” The smile plastered on his face was genuine, but he wasn’t smiling with or for Jack. Charles had something planned here.

“What’d you do?”

“Imagine a plane, Jack, flying over the Atlantic. Hugging the coast of France. Slipping off to a place called Tenerife.”

Brandon had said someone had accessed Erin’s travel information. How had Charles gained access like that? In a fluid motion, Jack lunged forward while reaching behind his back and retrieving his pistol. He stopped a few feet short of Charles, arms extended, Beretta in hand, aimed at Charles’s head.

The guy didn’t budge. “I die, so do they.”

Jack held firm, index finger lightly tapping the trigger.

“You hear me?” Charles said. “I die, and they do too. Right now, there’s a man seated in coach, about twenty rows back. He’s got their names. He knows where they’re going after they land. He’s gonna hang back, for now. But one call is all it takes. More to the point, one missed call at a predetermined time is all it will take to spring that man into action. And he’s a bad dude, Jack. Badder than you. Former Army Special Operations. Time with the CIA. Highly trained and skilled. Ice-cold killer. Would slit his mother’s throat and watch her die if you paid him enough. And let me tell you, he’s getting paid well to babysit right now. You wanna keep it that way? Then you do what I say.”

NICE, FRANCE.

BEAR AND MANDY had left Paris early Saturday morning on the first train with seats available. They'd relocated to a hotel closer to the station. Cheaper in many regards. Bear slept better that night than any other in Paris after making one too many house calls that led him to another location. If Pierre and Kat weren't in Nice, he'd have to abandon the search. Otherwise, the risk of alerting someone to his presence increased.

The train rocked along the track with a distinct rhythm. The scenery blazed past. Beautiful French countryside. The kind of place he and Mandy could disappear into. They entered the final leg of the six-hour train ride. The lush landscape gave way to the Mediterranean climate, and finally, the cityscape.

Bear used his phone to bring up a map of the area, then charted the route to the address he found in the photo album. Only a mile, give or take, from the train station. They could walk. That'd give him a chance to recon the area and plot their escape route. If it came to that.

Since it often did.

As they stepped off the train, Mandy stared up at the myriad of glass panes that allowed natural light to flood the platform area. Bear placed his hand on her back to keep the girl moving. From the station, they headed toward the coast. The streets and sidewalks were packed thick with tourists and

locals. Families meandering. Women in bikinis. Men in suits. Although why they wore suits on a hot Saturday afternoon was lost on Bear.

The coast drew near. Foot and auto traffic thickened. The blue waters of the Med were visible at the other end of the narrow asphalt corridor.

He spotted the ornate white building on the corners of *Rue du Congres* and *Rue de France* from a block away. The address matched the paper that had fallen from the photo album, and the address Bear had entered into his phone. Bear took note of each store, sign, and face they passed on that final stretch.

He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

“What is it?” Mandy asked.

He jutted his chin toward the building. “That’s the place.”

“Want me to wait across the street again?”

He glanced down at her. “Nah, you can come up with me. Things are different here.”

They were. More luxurious in some ways. Seedier in a lot of others. Fewer shadows were present in the town. The criminal element was greater. And more organized.

Together, Bear and Mandy crossed *Rue de France* and entered the apartment building at the corner. An expansive lobby opened up to them. The door was unmanned, as was the front desk. On break, maybe. A place like this should have someone available, Bear thought. Easier this way.

He ushered Mandy past the elevators and into the stairwell.

“What floor?” she asked.

“Fourth.”

“I don’t want to climb all those stairs, Bear. Can’t we take the elevator?”

“We risk being spotted if we do.” He looked down at her and shook his head. “You’re young. Suck it up.”

She did, somehow managing to keep up with Bear as he bounded up the stairs three at a time at a sprinter's pace.

On the fourth floor landing, he turned to her, said, "You need a rest?"

She shook her head and said nothing. Her cheeks were red and she breathed quicker than normal.

"Let me do the talking up here. Got it?"

She nodded.

"There's a chance he'll react negatively to my presence. He won't do nothing, though. I know his secrets, and that should be enough to settle him down." He peered down the hallway, mentally calculating the apartment numbers until he determined Pierre's. "OK. You ready?"

"Let's do this."

He smiled. "As they used to say, you got moxie kid."

The left side of her face scrunched together. "What the hell is moxie, Bear?"

"I really need to watch my mouth around you. Come on."

She rolled her eyes. He turned away. Together, they exited the stairwell and headed down the bright corridor.

Bear stopped short of the apartment. The hum of a vacuum cleaner slipped past a door. Pierre's? He took a few steps closer and the sound faded.

They'd reached the point of no return. One more step, and there was no turning back. His heart said, take the next step. His mind said, leave things be. For two months, he'd tried to accept that advice. At war with himself and over a woman. No matter how he tried to accept what the rational side said to do, every move they made brought him closer to this moment. If he didn't find out now, he might go on the rest of his life wondering what if.

"This is stupid," he muttered under his breath.

"What's stupid?" Mandy asked.

“At least we don’t need your ears checked.”

“What?” She shook her head. “Are we gonna knock, or what?”

He considered or what. Instead, he rapped on the door and waited while the floorboards beneath him vibrated as someone approached.

The door swung open.

Kat’s face froze somewhere between a smile and asking what the hell he was doing there.

Bear’s words were trapped in his throat.

Mandy nudged him.

“Kat,” he said.

“Riley,” she said. “It’s been a few months...”

He nodded. “Since before Pierre...”

“I remember.” She glanced back, stepped forward, pulled the door tight behind her leaving it open a few inches. Bright light wrapped around the loose strands of her dark hair. “What are you doing here?”

“We came to see Pierre,” Mandy said.

Kat leaned forward, smiling. “And who might you be?”

Mandy looked up at Bear. He nodded. She said, “Mandy Logan.”

Kat’s gaze swept upward toward Bear. Her dark eyes leveled him.

“She’s your daughter?”

“Long story,” Bear said. “I’m her guardian.”

“So is it true that you are here to see Pierre?” She drew the right side of her bottom lip into her mouth and bit down.

Bear nodded. He had a hundred things to say to her, but not a single word would emerge at that point.

“He’s inside.” She stepped back and pinned the door against the wall. “Please, come in.”

Bear ushered Mandy through, then turned sideways and took a step in. He stopped in front of the Frenchwoman. Inches separated their bodies. Her chest heaved toward his. She looked up at him. He, down at her.

“Please,” she whispered, “speak with me alone before you leave.”

All he could do was nod.

Kat slipped past him and headed in the direction Mandy had gone. Bear followed. The hallway opened up to a large, open living space. Floor to ceiling windows lined the squared back wall. They provided an encompassing view of the city.

Pierre sat at a circular table. Spoon in one hand. Newspaper in the other. White cords dangled from his ears and disappeared beneath the surface of the table.

“I thought you were dead,” Bear said loud enough for his voice to echo through the room.

Pierre looked up, dropped both items in his hands. His eyes narrowed at first, then a warm smile spread across this face. He pulled the earbuds free, rose and walked toward Bear.

“It takes a lot more than an assault rifle to get rid of me, my friend.” He extended both arms and embraced Bear. Kissed his cheek. “And this little one. Mandy, how are you, my dear?”

She glanced away at first, then smiled and held his gaze. “Fine.”

Still a girl in a few ways. Fading fast, though.

“What brings you to Nice?” Pierre asked.

“We were up in Paris, looking for you. Hospital gave up your address. New tenant in your old apartment had a photo album that contained this address.”

Bear tensed. He hadn’t told Mandy to keep the first leg of their journey, the visit to Kat’s, a secret. Perhaps the girl understood because she didn’t add that detail to the conversation.

Pierre glanced down at the girl, smiled, said, “Why don’t you go with *Mademoiselle* Kat. She’ll show you to your room.”

“That’s not necessary,” Bear said. “We’re not staying the night.”

“I insist.” The smile left Pierre’s face. Urgency shone through in his stare. “Let her go get settled.”

The men waited until Kat and Mandy disappeared from sight.

Pierre glanced around the room. “Perhaps we should take this conversation out to the terrace.”

The balcony wrapped around two sides of the building, providing a view of *Rue du Congres* and *Rue de France*. Bear looked south, down the street, and saw white sands and the blue sea. Pierre stood at the corner. He stared up and down one street, then the other.

“Did you notice anyone following you?” he asked.

“No,” Bear said. “I checked out everyone I could on the train, then on the street.”

“Are you sure?”

“I told you no, didn’t I? You know me, man. If I’m being followed, I know it.”

Pierre nodded tensely. “They were watching me, Riley. From the moment I left the hospital, I saw them outside my apartment building, at the restaurant Kat worked at, everywhere, it seemed. I think I’ve spotted one down here, too.”

Bear’s gaze followed Pierre’s to the street below. “Who?”

“I don’t know. No one I recognized. I don’t think they are French, either. Every time I spot one, the face changes. I’ve checked with DSGE, but no one is aware of anything.” Pierre pulled a pack of cigarettes out and turned as though lighting one. When he spun back around, he held a pistol at his waist, shielded from view of the street and aimed at Bear. “So, you

can understand how highly suspect I am that you've showed up at my home unannounced."

Bear reached for a pistol that wasn't holstered. The problem with traveling legit, it seemed.

"You and I both know you're not going to discharge that weapon out here," Bear said.

Pierre shrugged. "That's why we're going inside."

"I'm not moving."

"Then I will, and I'll get the girl." The Frenchman grabbed the knob.

"Put that shit away."

"Give me a reason. Why should I trust you?"

"You betrayed me and Jack. Twice, at least. Why would I come here now, of all times, to do something? Think about it, you French prick. I could have left you to die in that hallway in Paris."

Pierre lowered the muzzle an inch.

"I'm not... I'm not here with anyone who's been watching you," Bear said. "I can make a few calls and see if anyone knows the who and why of it all."

Pierre nodded as his gaze drifted to the left, past Bear.

"What is it?"

"They're here. That, or someone followed you, and they aren't alone. We need to get inside."

Bear looked back and scanned the crowd. Tourists, locals, they blended together into a mass swarm heading to and leaving the beach, stopping in and exiting restaurants and shops. But two men stood out. They dressed casually, but their actions were not the same as the others wandering around in paradise. The men avoided looking up. They did their best not to react when spotted. And as Bear moved toward the apartment door and threw one look back, the men were gone.

"Kat," Pierre called out.

The woman ran from the hallway, hand on her chest. “Jesus, Pierre. You scared me. What is it?”

“Take the girl and use the emergency stairwell to the parking garage. Stay out of the elevator. Don’t think about going to the main lobby.” He reached into his pocket, pulled out a set of keys and tossed them to her. “I want you to take the Audi. There are a couple scarves in the glove box. Wrap your heads for the first few miles. Go to your mother’s place. OK?”

“What’s going on?”

“No time for questions, Kat,” Pierre said, handing her a pistol. “Go, now.”

Mandy emerged from the hallway. She ran up to Bear. “What’s happening?”

Bear glanced at Pierre, then Kat. She tried to smile and offer comfort, but her fear was evident.

“Listen, Mandy. You’re gonna go with Kat for a while, OK? Seems someone followed us.” He placed his hands on her shoulders. “Now, if something happens to you along the way, what do you do?”

She brushed away a tear. “Get to cover, whether a building or the woods. Get off the street and out of sight. If I see a delivery truck, hop in the back. If I see a bike sitting there, take it and use it to get away faster. Don’t accept help from anyone not approved by you. Once safe, call you on your secure line. If I can’t reach you, call Jack. If I can’t reach him, call the police.”

“They have to go, Riley,” Pierre said.

Bear leaned over and hugged Mandy. He wanted to do the same to Kat, but settled for a nod and a shared stare.

“I’ll call when we’re in the car,” Kat said.

“We should keep an open line,” Bear said.

“No,” Pierre said. “They could be monitoring. Just let them go. The emergency stairwell can’t be accessed from the main floor. They’ll go down as the men come up. And even if

those guys wait outside, they'll be by the entrance. Not the garage exit, which looks like part of another building.”

Bear watched Mandy and Kat leave the apartment.

“Trust me, my large friend,” Pierre said. “This is for the best.”

Five tense minutes passed. Bear moved from window to window, staring down at the street. He didn't see the men. They could be next to the building. They might've left. He had no way of knowing. Had they followed him, or were they already in place? There's no way he wouldn't have spotted a tail from Paris to Nice. Not one as obvious as the men he saw on the street.

Or had he been so distracted by the thought of Kat that he hadn't noticed?

Shit.

What if he'd brought trouble upon the woman who now lived in Pierre's old apartment? He had to fight the urge to grab his phone and check the news.

Come on. Come on. Come on.

Why hadn't they called yet? How long did it take to get to the garage and leave?

As he began to raise the question with Pierre, the phone rang.

The Frenchman answered and placed it on speaker.

“We're out. Getting on the motorway now. No one is following us.”

“Leave the scarves on for a little longer. Call me if anything changes. And whatever you do, don't stop for anyone.”

“Now what?” Bear said.

Pierre walked to his desk, slid open several drawers and began pulling out a cache of arms. “Now we wait for these assholes to make their move.”

OVER THE ATLANTIC.

THE SUDDEN CHANGE in altitude jarred Brett Taylor from his slumber. After stretching his arms overhead, he adjusted his seat forward and lifted the window cover. Blue ocean swirled below. Nothing else from wing to horizon. The plane continued to drift downward. Perhaps he'd missed an announcement while sleeping. He stopped a passing flight attendant. She confirmed they were on approach, but the pilot had not yet been cleared. They'd land within twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes didn't bother him. The fact he'd been able to get a seat on the flight, first class nonetheless, had been an act of God. No other way to explain it. At least to those who didn't know what he did and who he worked for on occasion. Anything could be arranged.

The downside to air travel was that he had to give up his pistol. For most places he flew into, landing unarmed wasn't an issue. He'd have something in his hand within an hour. But Brett had no contacts in Tenerife. As of yet, he was unsure whether his contacts had contacts on the island, which left him in a precarious position. A Smith & Wesson tactical pen was his only defense. And that was useless against a skilled opponent.

There was no point in worrying until he made those first couple calls and had a better grasp on his situation. So he turned toward the window and gazed down at the expansive Atlantic.

A couple minutes later, the pilot made an announcement in Spanish, then French, then English. Brett understood all three. They were making their final approach and should be on the ground within ten minutes.

The plane banked left. The island appeared. It grew larger with every passing second. They continued descending. Ground rushed up. The tarmac came into view. The plane banked again. Brett leaned back in his seat and waited for the screeching of the wheels touching down on the runway. Roaring ensued as the flaps and the brakes did their job and slowed the plane to a halt.

With the air travel behind him, Brett turned his attention to the woman and child he came to find. He powered his cell phone on while the plane taxied to the gate. There was a message waiting in his inbox, sent from Joe Ballard. The man had made reservations for Brett at a small hotel. He wouldn't stay there. He preferred to remain off Ballard's grid. Everyone else's, too. The message also contained more information on Erin's travel arrangements. He knew the hotel, but the room assignment was missing. That could be found easily enough.

By the time he exited the aircraft, Brett had found a hotel with a vacancy and reserved a room using a false identity for which he carried an ID and credit card.

He exited the terminal and found the car rental counter. With no lead time, the only vehicle he managed to secure was a silver Fiat 500. Minutes later, he stood in front of the small vehicle, puzzled as to how he'd fit inside. Surprisingly, it fit his six-two frame well, and had legroom to spare.

A short drive put him on the TF-1, westbound. Small cars and scooters crowded the highway. Traffic flowed at a rate of about fifteen miles an hour. It took a total of seventy-five minutes from the airport to the exit for *Playa del Duque*, a short distance north of the overcrowded party city of *Playa de las Americas*. A place where the bars were more packed than the beaches.

Checking in to the hotel posed no problems. The woman behind the counter accepted his credit card, then handed it

back along with a plastic key card. Brett found his room, showered, changed, then grabbed a bite to eat at the overpriced hotel restaurant.

The hotel was situated a block from Erin and Mia's. Not ideal, but he should have their room assignment soon enough. With that in hand, all he had to do was watch and wait for the right moment to act. For now, he decided to head out, scout the surrounding area and then camp out in the lobby of Erin's hotel.

Dressed in a pair of board shorts and t-shirt, he fit in with the surroundings. At the same time, he looked out of place. The attire didn't suit him physically or mentally. But no one paid attention. Not in their nature, he supposed. Not even the staff at Erin's hotel when Brett entered and took a seat in the lobby.

He spent the next half hour staring at his cell phone and mindlessly tapping his thumbs against the case. To anyone nearby, it looked like he engrossed himself into a virtual game world. Instead, he studied the photos he had of Erin and her daughter. When he closed his eyes, their faces were etched to the back of his eyelids. The move paid off when the two females entered, accompanied by a third woman who looked to be in her early twenties.

They passed Brett without tossing a glance in Brett's direction. He rose. Followed them to the elevator lobby. The mirrored doors were sliding closed. He lifted his hand and jogged forward. The younger woman stuck her arm through the narrowing opening. The doors parted. Brett smiled, thanked her, and boarded the elevator.

"Floor?" he asked.

"Five," the younger woman said.

He pressed the button and said, "Same as me."

During their ascent, he studied the face of the younger woman in the mirrored door, searching for a memory or some recollection of who she might be. She had not been present in any of the pictures he had on file. Who was she, and what was

her purpose here? She was too small to be a bodyguard. Didn't have the appearance of a British Intelligence agent. Too innocent and naive looking. Perhaps an assistant to Erin. Maybe the nanny. That made sense.

The woman caught his gaze and smiled. He replied in kind, tersely, then glanced away.

The elevator slowed to a stop. The doors parted. He stepped to the side, arm in front of the door, and waited for the women to exit. Brett followed them down the hallway. The younger woman glanced back once, but Erin seemed to pay little attention to Brett. She and Mia stopped in front of room 511. The other woman in front of 513. She cracked her door, paused, and watched Brett as he passed. He nodded, and continued to the end of the corridor, turning left, taking the stairwell down to the lobby.

He had their room number. Now he needed a weapon.

And a way to get Erin and Mia off the island.

HANNAH WAITED TWO minutes before opening her door and poking her head into the hallway. Her hopes that the man had lingered were dashed. Perhaps he waited by his room or around the corner or somewhere central like the elevators. She felt for her room card in her pocket and stepped into the hall, allowing the door to fall shut with a heavy clunk. Like a child prowling after bedtime, she walked slowly and softly toward the middle of the floor. The whole time praying that Erin wouldn't come out. She walked the perimeter, but didn't see the man. As she approached the corner where the hall intersected, voices rose. English accents. The guy hadn't said much, but he'd had a neutral American accent. She considered turning back, but in the end, she figured what the hell. There were worse things she could do than meet a stranger on vacation.

Just wouldn't happen today.

The two older men smiled and offered to hold the elevator for her.

Hannah shook her head and turned toward her room.

BRETT SCANNED THE pacified faces spread throughout the hotel lobby. Bored employees. Sunburned tourists, worn out from a day at the beach, followed by shopping. Drunks stumbling from the bar to their rooms.

What one might expect at a resort.

All except for one man. He stood out among the others. Mid-thirties. Short hair. Narrowed eyes sunken into a slender face. Dressed like he tried too hard to fit in. Seated in the same chair Brett had occupied. The one that provided a complete view of the lobby and hallway.

Brett lowered his head and brought his phone to the side of his face as he slipped past the man. A safe distance from the hotel, he called Ballard.

“You find them yet?” Ballard asked.

“Never mind that,” Brett said. He had no intentions of filling Ballard in on the status of his operations while they were in progress. Only a fool would. “Who the hell else is on this island?”

“What?”

“I just passed a very out-of-place spook in the lobby of a hotel. Tell me you didn’t double book this job, Ballard.”

The man stammered. “I didn’t. I swear.” He paused, then added, “I’ll look into it.”

“If you’ve screwed me...” Brett turned in a complete circle, his gaze lingering a little longer than usual on every face.

“I haven’t. Look, I found a contact to supply you. I’ve also got a boat for you. It’s docked there at the marina.”

“It’s suitable to cross to Africa?”

“More than suitable.”

Ballard relayed the contact’s name and number, as well as the reservation information for the boat. The contact was to provide identification that matched the name on the boat’s reservation.

Brett called the guy after hanging up with Ballard. He was hesitant to allow the hotel to slip from view, but he had little choice. The other man wouldn't make a move in broad daylight. Bret met his contact twenty minutes later. Ten minutes after that, he left the man's house, armed with a Glock, carrying a duffel bag with two MP7s and the false papers he needed to complete his boat reservation. The contact had offered to drive him to the marina. The place was less than a half-mile away. No point in risking being seen with the man.

The only question the old man at the marina asked Brett was what he'd be doing with the vessel. A one-word answer sufficed. Fishing. Presumably, they heard it a lot.

He followed directions to the slip. The thirty-nine foot Carver waited at the end of the dock. Brett boarded and investigated below deck. Plenty of space to store a woman and a girl.

Now to get them there.

LISBON PORTELA AIRPORT, PORTUGAL.

“EXCUSE ME,” SASHA said to the passing flight attendant. “How much longer will we be stranded?”

The woman stopped, blew a puff of air that lifted the right side of her bangs, and said, “I am sure we will be departing shortly.”

“That’s what you said an hour ago.”

The flight attendant didn’t hear her, though. She’d already turned toward the cabin.

“Want me to make a call?” Mason said.

“For what?” Sasha said.

“We’re not that far from Tenerife now. Maybe seven hundred miles or so away. Maybe we can arrange private transport.”

She glanced out the window at the flurry of activity on the ground. “That could take a few hours. We might be up in the air in thirty minutes. Plus, what are the chances of getting a fast enough craft to get us there in ninety minutes?”

“Just a thought.”

“Keep it in your back pocket for a bit. If we’re still here in an hour, see what you can do.”

ITHACA, NEW YORK.

“THAT’S THE PLACE,” Charles said, aiming a thick finger toward the small house. He slowed the vehicle to a crawl as they passed the residence. Drawn curtains and closed blinds blocked any view of the inside. “I’m gonna let you out on the side street. I trust you can figure it out from there?”

Jack scanned the unkempt yard. Grass sprouted between cracks in the sidewalk and driveway. Weeds littered the barren flowerbed. The hedges hadn’t been trimmed since last summer, at least. He didn’t know much, only his target’s name, and that the target’s sister resided at the house. Charles hadn’t even spotted Jack a photo.

Sport assassination, Jack thought. Nation’s next past time.

If people only knew.

“Place looks deserted,” Jack said.

Charles shrugged as he tapped the gas pedal, sending the vehicle lurching forward. “Sister’s young. Works a lot, I guess. Don’t have time or the know-how to keep the place up.”

“So, you’re saying you don’t pay your guys enough that they can hire a lawn service? And you wonder why you’ve got a mini-revolt going on at the Queens compound?”

Charles sucked in air then expelled it along with a fake laugh. “Same smartass Jack. Ain’t the last two years taught you nothing?”

Jack had a reply, but it'd only prove Charles right. So he said nothing. Rolled down his window as they took the next right. Warm air rushed in. It smelled of fresh-cut grass. An old push mower sat by the curb of the second house they passed.

Charles continued past two more houses, then slowed to a stop. The engine idled low. The luxury vehicle looked out of place in the blue-collar neighborhood. The two guys in it, too. Anyone that passed would probably remember the BMW when the police came around to question residents after discovering the crime scene. They would surely recall Jack getting out and breaking into a house in broad daylight. Perhaps that's what Charles wanted. For years, he'd had a hard-on to take Jack down. He'd even come close to making it happen a time or two.

Would Charles risk being implicated though? What if his reach didn't extend this far into New York? He had a lot to lose. A charge against Jack carried the possibility of resulting in the conviction of Charles. The Old Man had maintained contacts everywhere. Built up over years. How many of them had remained loyal to the organization now that Charles ran it?

Charles opened his mouth to speak. He slammed his eyes shut. His nose and cheeks scrunched upward, while his lips snarled back. He sneezed four times, like a roaring lion, into his open hand.

"Allergic to the damn cut grass," he said. "Part of the reason I always hated being out in Queens. Anyway, you should get a move on."

Jack remained seated.

Charles reached for the console. Grabbed his phone and placed a call. As the phone connected through the vehicle's Bluetooth system, the radio cut off. Ringing blared through the BMW's speakers.

"Yeah?" the man on the other end answered.

"You seen them yet?" Charles asked.

"In their hotel lobby now. They went up a little while ago."

"And you've got their room assignments?"

“Ten-four.”

“OK.” Charles lifted his gaze from the phone’s screen. With his head tilted forward, eyes peering over the top of his gold-rimmed sunglasses, he looked like a deranged bull about to charge. “If they leave, you tail them. Otherwise, stay put and wait for my next call for the go or no-go. Got it?”

Jack’s chest, abdomen, upper arms all locked as the muscles tightened. The edges of his vision darkened as dizziness took hold. He forced air in, held it, forced it back out.

Charles ended the call, looked at Jack. Shrugged. “What?”

“I already said I’d do this,” Jack said, teeth and jaw clenched. “If anything happens to them, you’re the first one I’ll go after, Chuck.”

Using his extended middle finger, Charles slid his glasses up and over the bridge of his nose. “It’s time for you to go.”

Jack opened his door, placed a foot on the ground.

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Take this.” Charles handed Jack a cell phone. “I’ll be checking in with you in an hour. Should give you plenty of time to do the job and clean up. In the trunk is a case. In the case is a Glock 17 and a Trident suppressor. You got three shots in the magazine. Make ‘em count.”

Jack stepped out to the sound of the trunk lock disengaging and the lid popping open. He stepped behind the car, hoisted the trunk lid, and grabbed the case. The weight felt right. He unsnapped the locks and opened it an inch. A bar of sunlight passed over the pistol, suppressor and magazine. After having been forced to leave his Beretta behind at his apartment, this was the first time in five hours he felt safe. He slammed the trunk shut. The BMW pulled away from the curb, then turned right at the next street, and disappeared from sight.

He wondered how he looked to anyone staring out their windows at that moment. This man who moments ago had

exited a hundred thousand dollar BMW now stood in the middle of the road with a black case dangling from his hand.

The heat rising off the blacktop felt like it might melt the soles of his boots, trapping him in place. It served as a strong reminder to get out of view. He cast a quick glance around. Spotted no one outside. Odd for a Saturday afternoon.

Heat wave or not.

Jack stepped over the curb, onto the sidewalk and walked back the way they had come. He wanted to find a route that would lead him to the target's backyard. A couple houses later, he sidestepped the ticking push mower parked on the curb and spotted a strip of grass between two six-foot privacy fences. The green path led to a brown pond. A shift of his eyes was all it took to survey his surroundings. Certain that no one was watching, Jack turned left, cut across the lawn, squeezed between the wooden fences, and made his way to the water's edge.

Fenced yards provided cover from houses behind him. But not from those across the water. Using thick bushes for cover, he once again surveyed his surroundings. And as it was on the street, no one was outside. He turned his attention to the houses. Sunlight reflected off the windows in bright bursts, making it impossible to tell if anyone stood behind the panes of glass staring back at him. Even so, perhaps it was normal for the residents to spot a guy in tan carpenter's pants, a faded t-shirt, worn hiking boots, carrying a black case. Electrician, maybe. Possibly an environmental geek out to test the pond, making sure the water was fine for the ducks who were wading past.

Not a bad idea.

He stopped, turned, knelt down, placed the case in front of him. A good opportunity to prep the weapon and build a bit of cover from prying eyes. Assuming there were any. He assembled the weapon and threaded the suppressor onto the barrel. After tucking the pistol behind his back, he grabbed an empty magazine out of the case and stuck it in the water. Held it there for a few moments, then placed it back in the case.

A hot breeze blew past, rustling leaves on trees and sending a torrent of tiny waves across the top of the pond in Jack's direction. The accompanying smell reeked of death. A fish, perhaps, on the opposite bank.

Jack continued along the edge - one foot on grass, the other packed dirt - gaze focusing on the back of the target's house in search of signs of life from within. A hundred feet to go. A wide open expanse of overgrown green lawn and brown dead spots. Waiting at the end, a deck with rotted supports and rusted brackets. Jack trudged up the lawn, careful of anything hidden in the high grass that could trip him. He cast a glance back. Momma duck and her ducklings rounded the top of the pond. Leaves and branches swayed and dipped and bounced in the continuous breeze. He no longer smelled the dead fish. And still no one was outside.

The deck sagged then rebounded with every step he took. Old wood. Weathered. Splintered. Maybe stained when constructed, but never again. Years of expanding and contracting and hot and cold and snow and rain. The back door didn't look any better. Long cracks ran up the surface. A small, two-paned window sat in the middle, about six feet off the ground. Jack leaned close, peered through the split in the sheer curtains. A still room was laid out in front of him.

He reached for the knob.

A door opened from somewhere behind.

He glanced over his shoulder. An older woman stepped out of her house. She took a few steps. Something dangled from her hands. A bag. She peeled it open and reached inside. Her hand emerged, wrapped around bread or scraps of some sort. She looked and walked toward the lake, her face scrunched up. The fish, he figured. She'd caught a whiff of the decomposing body. As she started her trek toward the water's edge, her free hand waved away the smell like it was a cloud of vapor.

Then she stopped, turned, looked at Jack. The old woman froze for a moment, head cocked to the left, eyes narrowed to slits. He waved at her, then smiled. Her posture relaxed. She smiled, waved back.

Jack took a deep breath as he turned the knob and leaned into the door with his shoulder. The door gave about a foot. It stopped when it hit something solid. Jack glanced down at the floor. Sunlight flooded through the opening, stretching out in a long, narrowing bar. Near the threshold, it reflected off a coagulated crimson pool.

“Shit,” Jack muttered.

ITHACA, NEW YORK.

CHARLES CIRCLED THE block a few times. He stopped near the neighborhood's exit. He pulled up to the curb and waited five minutes with his window down. Silence beyond the BMW's purring engine. Not a car passed on the four-lane road that ran past. No sirens filled the air. If all had gone according to plan, the man waiting inside the house would have Jack restrained by now.

Or dead.

A car approached from the north. It slowed, turned, stopped in the middle of the road. The driver's window rolled down and cigarette smoke emptied through the growing divide. The older guy leaned forward from his position in the passenger seat so he could be seen.

Charles nodded.

"We'll take it from here," the older guy said. "Thanks for your help. The money will be wired. If you ever find yourself in need of a get out of jail card, give me a holler."

"Can't I at least see the look on that smug piece of shit's face as he realizes he's at the end of his line?"

The tinted window rose. The car pulled away.

"Bastards," Charles muttered. As he watched them continue down the street, he considered following them back to the house and forcing his way in. If anyone deserved to take a shot at Noble, it was Charles. But his gut instinct told him

not to push his luck with these men. The decision wasn't based on fear. These men cared about nothing, least of all Charles. Why force a losing proposition?

He eased the nose of the car forward to the stop sign. Pulled out to the right, then changed his mind and reversed course to the north. He hadn't been to Niagara Falls in years and figured this was a good a day as any. A few minutes later, as he pulled to a stop in front of a throng of people, he discovered why the streets had been deserted. The city was holding some kind of parade downtown.

"Hell with that," he muttered, adjusting his GPS so it rerouted him.

ITHACA, NEW YORK.

JACK PUSHED THE door into the body and kept driving it forward until the gap grew large enough for him to slip through. With the suppressed Glock drawn, he stuck his arm then head through. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the darkness past the sliver of sunlight extending across the floor and the dust motes dancing in it. He saw a worn leather couch against one wall. A chair to the side of it. Opposite them, a TV. A square ottoman must've doubled as a table. The TV Guide sat opened to a page in the middle.

Nothing else. No one waiting for him.

Other than the dead guy face-down on the floor.

Jack continued inside, careful to not disrupt the corpse or step into the pool of semi-solid blood. He shut the door. Knelt next to the body. Cause of death appeared to be a gunshot wound. 9mm most likely. The bullet hadn't blown the guy's entire face clear off. Blood and bone and brain plastered to the wall indicated he was probably trying to escape when his assailant fired the fatal shot. Poor bastard had almost made it. Out of the house, at least. Judging by the terrain, he never would have made it past the pond.

Before tending to the body any further, Jack performed a cursory check of the house. There weren't but five rooms in total, and they were all empty. He checked each twice, reversing course on the second pass.

On his way back to the body, Jack flipped on the light, then pulled his cell phone out to take pictures of the corpse. In the event Charles refused to come inside, he could use the photos to identify the body. Would the picture be enough? Sure, Charles might be able to ID the guy based on a partial profile. But a head shot would make things easier. So he had to move the guy. Jack glanced down at his bare hands. He rose, turned toward the kitchen. He went to the sink and grabbed a dishtowel and opened the cabinet doors. Plastic bottles full of cleaning supplies cluttered the space. He kicked them out of the way. A few thumped hollowly on the linoleum then rolled toward the opposite end of the room. Old house, slanted. He bent over again. In the back, tucked under a box of sponges and spider webs, was a pair of yellow rubber gloves. The thick kind you might use when handling bleach or ammonia or some other kind of poisonous cleaning chemical. Residue for whatever had been used last lingered on the gloves. The strong odor left behind might be enough to prep someone for surgery.

Jack returned to the body. Tucked the pistol in his waistband. Donned the gloves. He grabbed a handful of dark hair and peeled the face away from the pool of blood. He studied the man for a minute. Beyond the dried blood, the skin was pale. Sparse stubble poked out. Close-set blue eyes were half-rolled back, framing the man's narrow, broken nose. Jack slipped one glove off and snapped a few additional photos with his smart phone. Then he eased the man's head back to the floor and rose.

Pictures lined the wall on the way to the kitchen. Dark haired people with dark features. Good looking, all of them. Even the woman in her fifties. Latino or South American. Family photographs. Jack focused on one picture in particular. A man, maybe Jack's age, with a younger woman on one side and a slightly older woman on the other side. The younger woman appeared in a few other photographs hung nearby. One photo looked like graduation day, only she wore scrubs instead of a cap and gown. She looked twenty or twenty-one that day. Too young to be a doctor. So a nurse, or some other skilled position. Her diploma hung a foot below. Esmeralda Almeida. Paolo's sister. He glanced at the other picture, guy and two

gals, and studied it for a moment. It was her with her siblings.
No doubt about it.

The man in the picture was Paolo.

And that didn't clear up the identity of the guy laying the
pool of blood.

HORSEHEADS, NEW YORK.

PAOLO PACED THE narrow carpeted alley that separated the two queen beds from the dresser that took up half the opposite wall. He hadn't set down his pistol since entering the room. The passports, bank documents, and cash were laid out on the bed nearest the window. A finger of light passed over them. Specks of dust twirled through the light on their way to the ground. Every time Paolo passed, they were kicked up in the air again.

Esmeralda lay on the other bed, stretched out on her side. Her wet hair spread over her pillow like tendrils. The pillowcase soaked up the water, leaving shadow-like impressions. The remnants of a grilled sub wrapped in tin foil nestled close to her waist. The smell of toasted bread and oil and vinegar and salami and cheese filled the room. Paolo had only ordered for her. Now he fought off pangs of hunger.

Focus, Paolo.

“How long will we be here?” she asked.

Paolo stopped at the sound of her monotone voice and glanced down at her. She stared at him, but also past him. Death wasn't new to her, not working in the emergency room. But the kind of death she had witnessed in her house had affected her in the way it did for most who bore witness to a violent act. It had left her in a state of shock. Numb, perhaps. She'd taken four showers in the hours since they had been in

the motel room. An effort to scrub away the memory of the man's head exploding in front of her.

"We're only here until I collect my thoughts," Paolo said. "Once I figure out where we're going, we'll move."

Her lips parted as if she were going to say something else. Instead, she sighed and let her gaze drift away from him.

He wanted to tell her it'd be all right. That in time, she'd find a way to neutralize the images that seemed so real in her head. The blood and skull and brain that splattered on her back door would be forgotten, and soon she'd realize that if it hadn't have been him, it would have been her.

And Paolo.

It seemed every time he passed her, he chastised himself for not following his gut instinct and leaving Friday night. They could have made it across the border at Niagara Falls. Her, the local girl. Him, the out-of-town boyfriend. At least according to their passports. They'd have gotten through without a problem. There would have been no concerns over whether a neighbor had reported hearing something. Or had smelled something. No worries over whether the cops had Paolo's picture on their dash.

And Paolo wouldn't have the stress that every move he made from here on out would ultimately determine whether he and his sister lived. Her safety was of greater concern than his own. He had to get her to safety before they were found. His stomach knotted at the thought. If it were him alone, he'd take more risks. He had to anyway. Paolo knew his overcautious approach set them up for failure.

He figured that by waiting until Saturday morning, he could check in with a few trusted associates and get a bead on the situation in the city. Maybe someone could help. That thought didn't last long. Friends were only loyal until their lives were threatened. Charles knew who Paolo was close to, and the man would go after them.

As Paolo chastised himself once again for staying an extra night, his thoughts drifted to what had happened at Essie's

house that morning. How could he have known some guy would sneak in before sunrise as he and his sister prepared to leave? The man had caught Essie coming out of her room, towel wrapped around her wet body, as she headed to the back door. She'd fumbled with the lock, dropping the key that hung next to the door. The man had paused and watched as she bent over to pick it up. Her wet hair flipped forward and grazed the ground. She must've seen him then. Though she couldn't say now. But she had frozen at that moment, one hand on the key, the other on the doorknob.

The guy had said something. From his position in the kitchen, Paolo had been unable to make out his words. Whatever he'd said, it had sent Essie into action. She swept upward and drove the key into the lock. The guy rushed forward, grabbed her with both hands. One wrapped around her waist. The other over her mouth to stop her from screaming. He'd made a critical mistake, though, by shoving his pistol into his waistband.

Paolo rounded the partition separating the kitchen and living room while Essie struggled against the man's grip as her towel fell. The guy spoke in a grating voice. Paolo tuned out the words. Essie spotted him and calmed. Went limp. She dropped her body enough for Paolo to take his shot. It wasn't dead center, which he would have preferred. Too much chance of the bullet passing through and hitting his sister. But at ten feet he didn't need the larger target of the man's back or chest. He took a second and steadied his aim. The other guy must've wised to the reason Essie relaxed, because he started to turn his head. Too late. Paolo fired. The bullet slammed into the back of the guy's head. Essie was free of his grasp, but covered in his blood and the remains of his brain. The guy dropped to the floor and fell forward, blood pooling around his head.

After pulling Essie away, Paolo had studied the man. He hadn't seen him before. Ever. Charles had gone outside the organization for the hit.

Fearing there were others close by, Paolo had wasted no time getting his sister out of the house. He brought her a robe

and a wet towel to clean the blood from her body. He left her with the items and carried the bags to the car. When he returned, she had remained frozen in the living room. Paolo had to wipe her down, then dress her in the robe before escorting her to the car, which idled in the small garage.

Hours later, as they waited in the motel room, she remained in that same state of shock. At least she had eaten. Always a good sign. Still, she hadn't made enough progress for Paolo to feel comfortable taking her outside. They were a half-hour from Ithaca, in a cheap hotel in Horseheads. Thirty minutes from Essie's. Ten miles south, they'd be in Pennsylvania. A hundred miles north, Canada. Every option was available. Where would Charles expect Paolo to go?

He put his money on Canada.

"How long will we be here?" Essie asked again, this time adjusting her gaze until it crossed his.

Paolo sidestepped down the narrow lane between the two beds and took a seat opposite her. He reached out, took her hands in his.

"Not long, Essie. Not long."

He couldn't wait much longer to move her. Crossing into Canada, at least through Buffalo, was out. Backtracking east to another crossing was out also. Word would get back to Charles soon enough that the hit has soured. The man would use every ounce of pull he had to prevent Paolo from making it across the border.

The city was out, too. He didn't know if he could trust anyone there. Every move he made might lead to a trap. Of course, the city also provided the quickest way to end things. Whether with his life, or Charles's.

So west to find a crossing into Canada, or east to New York.

Either meant he had to find somewhere to stash Essie.

ITHACA, NEW YORK.

THE DEAD MAN had no identification. No cell phone, either. Had he come without the items? Or had whoever killed him removed them? Jack had another question: Was this man there to kill him?

With no answer immediately available, he switched gears. For the first time all day, he had the opportunity to contact Erin and warn her. Glancing down at the dead man, he considered how much time he had before someone else arrived. Charles had told him an hour, but Jack discounted almost everything the overgrown moron had said.

One quick call.

He retrieved his personal cell phone. Hesitated before dialing. Jack reached into his other pocket and retrieved the mobile Charles had given him. Studying it, he wondered whether it had been bugged. Wouldn't even take an external device to do so. There were top secret applications that could be downloaded and installed that turned a regular cell phone into a listening device.

And Jack had no way to determine if the phone was configured in such a way.

He went back to the kitchen, opened the freezer, tossed the phone inside. Aside from the probability of it being used to listen to everything that happened around him, it could also be used to track him. He let the freezer door fall shut with no plans to open it again.

As he started to dial Erin's number, a vehicle pulled up to the front of the house and idled. The sound reverberated off the driveway, through the garage, bouncing off the floor, ceiling and walls, through the door separating the kitchen and garage. The vibrations filled the air surrounding Jack.

Back already, Charles?

But he realized it wasn't him.

The engine didn't match. The whine was wrong. The rumble too deep. This car was American made. Possibly government issued.

A set of car doors opened and then slammed shut. Where would the men head? Front door? Around the sides to the back? Were they aware? It went back to not finding identification and a phone on the guy. Had he come that way, his team confident in the man's ability to complete the job with no problems?

The corpse positioned in front of the back door served as a stark reminder to Jack to avoid making the same mistake.

He parted the curtains covering the door's window an inch and scanned the backyard. Empty. He cracked the door an inch. Light flooded through on either side. Something glinted on the floor, near the bottom hinge. Jack glanced down and spotted a pistol. He reached down. Inspected the weapon. It was fully loaded. He'd gone from three shots to eighteen.

The idling engine was dwarfed by the sound of banging. The loud noise silenced. The engine roared, echoed, then went dead.

Had they really thought Jack would be taken so easily? With a loaded weapon?

He glanced at the pistol Charles had given him and at once realized his stupidity. Never trust any weapon other than your own. He tucked the silenced pistol into his waistband and pulled the door further open.

The slice of lawn he saw remained empty. Overgrown grass swayed in the steady breeze. A wind gust pushed

through. The pond surface rippled. The air carried the odor of a cookout, but not the sounds.

Jack slipped out the door, cut across the back lawn on a line for the narrow patch of grass he had used to enter from the side street.

He didn't make it that far.

Someone yelled from inside the house, loud enough that the sound reached Jack as a muffled scream. A burst of static arose from the direction he headed. A voice like a robot barked orders through the mechanical hiss.

Jack drew the silenced pistol with his left hand. In his right, he held the dead man's firearm. He held both out in front of him. Wherever his gaze traveled, so did the dead man's gun. The other remained at a forty-five-degree angle, ready to go should he have to turn around.

A figure appeared from the grass alley, shielded by thick bushes. A voice spoke from the same general area. The man stepped out from behind the cover, drew his pistol and fired. Jack flattened against a fence the moment the guy had appeared. The shots slammed into the house he had been in moments ago. The guy took another step into the open. Jack leveled both weapons in his direction and pulled both triggers. The silenced pistol did nothing. The other unleashed a bullet that hit the man in the abdomen.

In a split-second, Jack made the decision to keep the worthless sidearm until he had the chance to remove the suppressor. First, he had to deal with the bent over man, stumbling around on the bank.

From behind, the back door crashed open. Jack glanced over his shoulder; spotted a guy standing there, shielding himself against the sun. Jack figured he had a couple seconds before the sun blindness diminished and the man spotted him.

He wanted to question the first guy, but there was no time. From ten feet away, Jack aimed and fired a round into the side of the guy's head. The man fell over sideways, splashing into the lake.

Instead of checking behind again, Jack continued forward, past the bushes, and ducked into the grass alley. He rose, using branches and leaves for cover, and saw two men standing on the back deck. One pointed at the body. The other scanned left-to-right then back again. Just to Jack's right, the old woman had emerged from her house, clutching a giant portable phone in her hand. She looked paler than before. Her other hand pounded against her chest. She tried to speak, but hyperventilated. The men on the deck saw her too. Jack risked exposing himself by shifting to a position where he had a clear shot should one of the men decide to eliminate the innocent onlooker.

One of the men shifted on his feet. Started to lift his pistol.

Don't do it, you bastard.

Before the man could line up shot, his partner swatted the guy's arm down and jugged his chin toward the door.

The wind carried the man's words. "The cops'll be here soon. We gotta go."

With his cell phone, Jack snapped a picture of the men moments before they turned to leave, then buried himself deeper into the bush. The men would most likely take the quickest route out of the neighborhood. But there was the chance that they'd drive down the side street. And if so, the alley would provide them with a clear view.

While waiting, Jack placed a call to Erin. He had to make her aware of the dangers so she could remain vigilant until he managed to get across the Atlantic. Doing so on his own name seemed unlikely at this point. Perhaps even as he currently appeared. It had been a long time since he last had to alter his appearance in order to board a plane.

The line held for several seconds then proceeded to ring a half-dozen times in a double-toned cadence. The call went to Erin's voicemail. Rather than risk being overheard by leaving a message, Jack hung up with plans to call her back shortly. He'd have taken the chance to speak to her in person given the possible gravity of the situation in Tenerife.

After a minute had passed, his thoughts turned to who he knew in the surrounding area. He returned a blank. Perhaps a friend could help. Brandon had contacts everywhere, and on both sides of the law. Surely the guy had someone within fifty miles who could assist Jack.

First, he had to get away from the house, and the neighborhood.

FRANK SKINNER REACHED for his vibrating cell phone. "Yeah?"

"We got his location," the man on the other end said.

"Where?"

"I'm loading it to your GPS now."

Frank stared at the LED display on his dash. The map zoomed out, panned right, then focused in on a spot. He made a mental note of the street names. The display zoomed back out and a bright red line was drawn from his location to the destination.

"That's less than a mile away." Frank glanced at the man behind the wheel. "Turner, go."

JACK KEPT HIS shoulder pressed against the siding as he crept down the grass alley. The faint sound of approaching sirens grew by the second. They'd enter the same way he and Charles had. Where would they go? To the house? Around the block? He stopped. Turned. Looked across the pond.

Idiot.

If he continued, he would place himself out in the open in the middle of the neighborhood. The opposite direction offered him a path to the main road. There he'd look less like a suspect and more like a passerby.

Jack sprinted toward the pond, then turned left, away from the house with the dead body, and rounded the lake. He spotted an old man peeking out through his sliding glass back door. It didn't matter. By the time the cops got to the guy for a statement and then hauled him in for a composite, Jack would be deep in hiding.

After he reached the other side of the pond, Jack hopped the first fence he came to. A German Shepherd emerged from a large wooden dog house positioned on the other end of the yard. The dog released a fierce bark, lowered its hindquarters, and lunged forward.

The dog had fifty feet to cover.

Jack had ten.

The dog was faster, and it wasn't a contest. If Jack had any more distance to cover, he wouldn't have made it. He crossed the last five in a leap, landing with his right foot midway up the fence, and both hands grasping at the top. In a single motion, he vaulted over, landed square, then resumed his sprint. From behind, the dog let out a torrent of violent attacks on the fence.

The sirens were closer, perhaps a couple blocks away from the neighborhood now. Jack didn't bother to look right or left down the street. He sprinted across, heading toward an open back yard that used high hedges to separate the home from the main road.

"WHAT IS IT?" Hannah broke her gaze from the black sands and turquoise water and watched as Erin bit her lip while staring at her phone.

Erin didn't respond.

"Erin?" Hannah said. "What's wrong?"

"Jack called a few minutes ago, but didn't leave a message."

"He said he was coming today, right?"

"He suggested it."

Hannah shrugged. "Then there you go. Probably just letting you know he was boarding or getting ready to take off and didn't have time to leave a message."

"You're right. You're right." Smiling, Erin set the phone on the table. "Want to get some dinner?"

Hannah nodded, rose and walked to the door. A moment later she was met by Mia and Erin, who had left her cell where she had set it down.

JACK STEPPED IN between the hedges. The jagged waxed-over leaves sliced into his skin. He kept one hand in front of his face to part the foliage. Then he stopped, just shy of exiting. The sirens were loud now, deafening almost. He estimated his position to be no more than 300 feet from the neighborhood entrance.

The sound stopped approaching, leveled off. They had turned in.

Slowly, Jack pushed through far enough to see the street. No more blue lights, only red, fixed to large box trucks. Jack stepped out and started walking away from the entrance.

Across the street and another couple hundred feet down, a dark sedan idled at the end of a driveway. The driver's window was down. Jack caught the guy looking his direction for a moment before looking away.

Jack couldn't turn back, not with an onslaught of emergency services heading toward the neighborhood. So he stuck the pistol in his right pocket and kept his hand on the grip, ready to draw should the car move.

The sedan backed up. It stopped after a few feet, paused, and then continued backward until hidden by the trees.

Jack kept walking. He had no choice.

The sedan reappeared. It pulled out into the road, but came to a stop as a line of cars approached from behind Jack. After the vehicles had passed, the sedan started inching out.

An engine roared from behind. Before Jack could look over his shoulder, brakes locked and equalized as the tires grated against the asphalt. A dense chemical cloud washed past.

“Get in!”

Jack pulled the pistol into plain view. Glancing over the top of the vehicle, he spotted the dark sedan, which had crossed the street and headed toward him.

“Jack! Now!”

He leaned forward and saw Frank Skinner, one hand on the dash, the other clenched around a pistol. The man’s face was tight and lined with beads of sweat.

The dark sedan skidded to a stop, maybe fifty feet away. Doors opened. Hard-soled shoes hit the ground.

Jack grabbed the rear driver’s side handle and yanked.

A shot was fired. Went high. Whistled through the hedges and slammed into someone’s house.

Jack dove into the back seat.

“Turner,” Frank yelled. “Go.”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

THE CITY REMAINED a mystery to Clarissa, though it had been her *home* for several months now. Sinclair had kept her busy, working everywhere but there. Aspen, Miami, London, the months had flown by. During that time she spent all of three nights in the nation's capital.

Then she was handed a special assignment at the White House. But it only took a couple days for things to turn, and Clarissa was on the run, fighting to save her life.

It was after the resolution of that when Beck offered her a position in the Service. Only she had to attend training, which required her to live at the facility for the duration.

She walked from the realtor's office to the Lincoln Memorial. Leaned against a large pillar. Stared up at the imposing figure.

How about lending me some of that fortitude, Abe?

She'd need it. Facing Charles was the same as taking inner demons head on. It made her break out into a cold sweat thinking about the guy.

But there was a difference.

She wasn't just a bartender or a dancer anymore. She didn't serve criminal lowlifes. One thing remained the same. She could still kick their asses. Only now, it was legal.

Turning toward the stairs, she spotted a man at the base, aiming a camera up at her. Of course, chances were he was taking pictures of the monument. But there was a second where she caught him looking right at her.

Clarissa veered to the left where a large crowd of students all wearing blue shirts stood. She stood inches taller than even the tallest child. Both advantageous and not.

Winding her way through the tangle of kids, she glanced back. The man stood in the same spot, camera aimed toward the monument.

Her heart rate dropped a bit. Muscles relaxed. She moved until she was out of sight and continued back toward her apartment.

Seven blocks into the city, Clarissa stopped in a store. She lacked something nice to wear for dinner, figuring if Beck had made reservations, the place would be nice.

She picked out a blue sleeveless summer dress and paid cash.

As she left the store she glanced right before turning left.

The man was there. He quickly looked away, turned to his right and crossed to the other side of the street.

Clarissa continued as though she hadn't seen anything. She reached for her phone and called Beck. No answer. She stared down at her contact list. After months of basing herself out of the city, the only one she could reach out to was Beck.

A passing cab halted on her signal. She entered, gave the cabbie her address and asked him to take a long way there. As the vehicle pulled away, she spotted the man. He watched her pass, his hands covering his chin, mouth and nose. Sunglasses over his eyes.

Who was he, and how long had he been on her tail?

Fifteen minutes later, she entered her building. Her apartment was on the sixth floor. She took the elevator to the eighth floor, descended the eastern stairwell, walked the length of the building on floor number seven, then down the western

stairwell to her floor. Her door was a ten-second walk from there.

She drew her pistol, then grabbed and turned the knob. It didn't budge. She unlocked it and entered, sweeping the room right to left, then back. She locked the door behind her, then cleared the place and found it empty.

Through the windows, she scanned the street below. She only had access to one side of the building, but it was the front, and her money was that the guy would be out there if he knew her address.

Once again, she tried calling Beck. Again, she received no answer. Seven o'clock wasn't that far off. And she had no plans to leave until then. She'd tell him about the man at that time.

NICE, FRANCE.

ELECTRIC LIGHT PIPED in through parted blinds. Prison bars made from shadows stretched across the ceiling and down the far walls. Pierre bore a trail through the middle of the room, pacing from one end to the other. Every step slow, deliberate, heel-to-toe. His head down, focused on the next spot he'd step.

Bear alternated between the kitchen and a barstool positioned near the corner of the main room where the windows met. Despite Pierre's warning, Bear continued investigating the surrounding area. He hadn't stepped outside. Didn't intend to. Not until they left. From inside, he saw enough. And nowhere along the opposite side of the street or in the buildings that stood across from theirs did he notice someone looking back.

Perhaps the men were there. Maybe they had left. If so, it could have been at any time. Regardless, the inaction started to get to Bear.

"What're we waiting for?" Bear asked, averting his gaze from a recently illuminated window toward Pierre.

The Frenchman raised his cell phone and said nothing.

"How long should it have taken them to get there?"

"They were supposed to have arrived an hour ago."

Tightness started in Bear's abdomen and sprung upward, like a jaguar pouncing on its prey. Fear gripped his muscles,

his lungs, and nose. The air he drew in through his opened mouth bottlenecked in his throat, not making it any further. His heart pounded against his chest like a wild gorilla suddenly caged.

Pierre continued to pace.

The edges of Bear's vision hazed over. He reached out for the window, fingers spread wide and sending three vertical blinds swinging side-to-side. The prison bars that lined the ceiling and walls melted into one another. Bear fell forward. His shoulder and the right side of his face slammed into the window. The glass bounced but didn't break.

The persistent *thump-thump* of Pierre's pacing halted. "You OK?"

Bear nodded. At least, he thought he did. His abdominal muscles tightened and cramped and it seemed as though they were jumping underneath his skin. He could no longer feel his hands. The numbness crawled to his forearms, then his elbows, finally working up through his large biceps and triceps. The lights beyond the glass exploded with large halos. His oxygen-starved lungs burned.

Am I having a stroke?

The same thought arose every time panic struck this hard. Normally, air travel brought about his attacks, but none this intense. Bear managed to control the sensations with almost every other situation that occurred. He was an anomaly for that, considering the work he'd been involved in for twenty years.

Of course, with Mandy all bets were off.

He suffocated under an oxygen blanket, draped across him yet impenetrable. But he wouldn't die. Not at that moment, at least. He worried about the effect the stress of the attacks had on his body, his heart. Only in recent months did these concerns surface. The worry coincided with the increased role the girl had in his life.

Steadying against the glass, Bear sucked air through his nose. Didn't matter how far down it traveled. He held the

breath. Forced the air out through his mouth. He repeated the process several more times, each time inhaling deeper, exhaling longer. The veil of terror exited his system with every oxygen-stripped exhalation. Feeling returned to his extremities. His abs and chest muscles relaxed. Pain lingered. He could deal with that. The ability to think clearly would keep him alive, pain or no pain.

“You sure you’re OK?” Pierre asked from a few feet away.

Bear backed away from the window, steadying the swinging blinds. “I’m fine. Had a moment is all.”

Presumably satisfied, Pierre resumed pacing, as though the constant back-and-forth would accomplish something.

The slow, methodical breathing continued to ground Bear. Within ten minutes it was as if the attack had never happened, except for the trickles of sweat running down his forehead and cheeks. He resumed his post at the corner where the windows met. The throng of people on the street below morphed into a new crowd. Different, but still the same. Summertime nightlife in the South of France.

Bear stepped away to splash cold water on his face. When he returned, the Frenchman stopped pacing.

“You up for hitting the streets?” Pierre asked

“Beats standing in here doing nothing,” Bear said.

“Come with me.” Pierre led him into the master suite. They entered a sparse walk-in closet. A luxury in France. At the back was a small black safe. Pierre knelt in front of it. A few seconds later, he pulled the door open. The Frenchman reached inside and retrieved a pistol and some cash. He turned at the waist and handed both to Bear.

He balanced the Glock 17 in his open palm, gaining a feel for the weapon. He could tell it had a history to it. Well maintained though. Recently oiled. Perhaps Pierre’s early service piece, relegated to back-up duty in the past half-decade or so. Bear closed his fist around the grip and lifted the weapon to eye height and stared down the barrel at his reflection in the bureau mirror. Pierre appeared at his side.

“I have a shoulder holster that’ll fit you, but no jacket.”

Bear shrugged then tucked the pistol into his waistband. “Too hot out. Anyway, this’ll do.”

Pierre held up a finger. He opened a drawer and pulled out a small leather holster. Tossed it to Bear. “Fits inside your waistband. More secure.”

Bear fixed it into position and slipped the Glock into it. Better. Less chance of the pistol being detected. Easier for him to get a hold of. Reduced the risk of the sidearm slipping, becoming unreachable, or falling to the ground.

They exited the apartment. Tomato sauce saturated the air. The temperature rose ten degrees in the hallway. Another five or so in the stairwell. At each landing they paused. Listening. Confirming the silence after the echoes of their footsteps faded. When they reached the bottom, Pierre stopped at the thick metal door. Pressed his ear against it.

“No way they’ve been hanging out in the lobby for four hours,” Bear said.

Pierre glanced back, shrugged, resumed his position. “Maybe they’ve been across the street the whole time and only now entered because they saw us leave the apartment.”

“No chance. If they’ve been waiting there, they’ll continue to wait there. By now, they’ve got friends here, too. All of them hanging on, hoping for that perfect opportunity.”

“Which opportunity is that?”

“What do you think?”

For all Bear knew, the Frenchman had a hundred different thoughts. The life he’d led, much the same as Bear and Jack, would have provided him with plenty of possible outcomes to consider.

“Are you ready to become bait?”

Bear nodded, brushed Pierre to the side and opened the stairwell door.

CENTRAL FRANCE.

“ARE WE LOST?” Mandy stared at Kat’s face as the street lights briefly illuminated it. “I thought we’d be there by now.”

Kat glanced over and offered a smile that appeared to be for Mandy’s benefit only. Shadows returned, and all the girl could see were the whites of the woman’s teeth.

“No, not lost,” Kat said. “Just taking the long way around.”

The hilly terrain they encountered shortly after leaving Nice had given way to mountains that rivaled those Mandy had seen in Montana. Their peaks were barely silhouetted against the night sky. The only delineation being that the stars stopped where thrust rock met the horizon.

A sweet smell rode the air and was pulled in through the cracked windows. Mandy wasn’t sure what it was, and Kat hadn’t answered when she asked. The aroma made her mouth water, though, and since she had missed dinner, cod liver oil might have had the same effect.

“You still haven’t told me where we’re going,” Mandy said.

“And I’m not going to until we get there.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one you will get.”

“Whatever.” She turned toward the side window, squinting in an attempt to cut through the dark. Lights the size of pinheads dotted the landscape. She wondered how far away they were, and if one of them might be their destination. She imagined family sitting down to a late dinner, or in front of their televisions, huddled up watching their favorite shows. Football, maybe. No, they were in Europe. Soccer would be on. She wished it were her. Didn’t matter if she and Bear were watching table tennis. She craved the security of his presence.

A bright light reflected off the side mirror, hitting her directly in the eye. Pain knifed through her unprepared retina. She blinked hard, saw red through her closed eyelids. The driver pressed his high-pitched horn repeatedly, ten times at short durations, finally holding it in place.

Mandy heard her heart pounding in her ears like swirling water, and at once it became difficult to breathe. She looked to Kat for reassurance, but the woman glanced hastily between the road and the rear-view mirror, her mouth open, breathing hard.

“Are you going to stop?” Mandy said, both hoping the woman would and wouldn’t.

“Not here,” Kat said. “Too remote. Might not be another car by in ten or fifteen minutes. There’s a town close by, maybe five kilometers. I can get us there.”

The vehicle lurched forward. Mandy stared at the speedometer’s climbing needle as it exceeded one hundred fifty kilometers per hour. She clutched the armrest mounted to the door. Her fingernails dug into the leather upholstery. Ahead, the cone of light the halogen bulbs produced only lit up a small portion of the road. Mandy worried as much about what lay ahead as she did over the vehicle behind them. Glancing in the side mirror, she saw it had fallen back a ways, but continued to honk and flash hi-beams at them.

“Shit,” Kat said as they approached a curve.

Then everything happened in slow motion. The car began to slide counterclockwise. Perpendicular to the road, the headlights washed over the jagged face of the mountain, cut through to make room for the passage. Mandy glanced right. Barely visible was the guardrail. It didn't look sturdy enough to stop a vehicle traveling at such a high speed. The vehicle hit the rail. Grating and crunching and scratching filled the cabin. The noise was deafening. The car stopped spinning and rode the rail until reaching the curve. The sounds rose and became high pitched. Tension. The metal was close to snapping. The vehicle about to tear apart. Something had to give.

And it did.

The car peeled away from the guardrail and began spinning the other way. The sudden movement jerked Mandy toward Kat at first. Then she whipped back the other way. Her head collided with the glass. It might have shattered. Perhaps that was her skull. It was impossible to tell.

The impact rendered her unconscious.

LISBON PORTELA AIRPORT, PORTUGAL.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, if I can have your attention for a moment.” The speaker above Sasha and Mason hissed with static while the pilot gave his passengers a moment to silence.

What would it be now? Every half hour they were informed that it would only be another thirty minutes. After the fifth announcement, Mason attempted to locate a private plane, but no one could get them to Tenerife today. Even if their commercial airliner left now, it would be close to ten at night by the time they arrived. A private flight would take even longer. It might not even matter. It’s possible Sasha’s paranoia had gotten the better of her. Mason shifted in his seat and leaned into the aisle. He’d come along, she thought. And he wouldn’t have if her warnings hadn’t set off bells for him, too. He glanced over and smiled, grimly. It did little to hide the concern. They both felt it. Shared it. The longer they sat, the smaller Erin and Mia’s chances at surviving their getaway.

A burst of static signaled the pilot was ready to speak again.

“We’ve just been informed that our flight is canceled due to mechanical problems. There will be staff waiting after you exit the airplane. They’ll be able to help you with hotel accommodations for the evening, and get you onto another flight within twenty four hours.”

“A full day?” Sasha said, leaning toward Mason.

She wasn't the only one. The entire cabin filled with soft exclamations.

"We'll be there no later than noon tomorrow," he said. "I've got a friend in Huelva, Spain. My last resort, I suppose. He has his own plane. Let's get a car and head there. By the time we arrive, he'll have it prepped and ready for flight."

She could only imagine the plane they'd fly in, or the condition of Mason's friend. But it was obvious that Mason had made up his mind about this. He'd trusted her enough to come along. It was time she trusted him.

She glanced at his phone. "You going to call first?"

"After we're on the road."

"You're so sure he's going to help?"

"Not a doubt in my mind."

Short of commanding Mason to call the guy, Sasha couldn't think of any way to convince him to do so before they rented a car. They would be among the first off the plane, allowing them to make arrangements before anyone else. If this guy didn't come through, and they bypassed the airlines assistance, it could be three days before they secured a flight to Tenerife with the airline.

"Who is this friend of yours?" she asked.

"Old friend."

"Ok," she said. "Old friend of yours."

"Just a friend."

By this point, she'd grown beyond curious. Why the need for secrecy? She was along for the ride no matter what.

"Got a name?" she asked.

Mason rose, glanced down at her, shrugged, then looked away. "You don't want to know."

There was something about the look on his face, the way his skin had a tinge of crimson to it, that concerned her.

"Why don't I want to know?"

Mason glanced down, shrugged, then reached up and pulled a bag down from the overhead.

“Mason,” she said.

He walked down the aisle, squeezing past a couple grabbing their carry-ons.

Sasha rose and followed him. She caught up before they reached the door.

“Who is it?” she said, her hand wrapped around his forearm.

He sighed, shook his head, and said, “Gerry.”

“Gerry,” she repeated. “Gerald Harrington?”

Glancing away, he nodded and said nothing.

“Shit.”

“Right,” he said, breaking free of her grasp and reaching for her wrist. “Now come on. We’ve got to get moving.”

TENERIFE.

BRETT HAD SPENT a total of two hours away from the hotel. Not ideal, considering a second player might be involved. Was the man someone to be concerned about? Probably not. But Brett hadn't survived as long as he had by assuming the good in people. This was a case where he had to err on the side of presuming the man to look the part, but nothing more. If it turned out otherwise, so be it. He still had not heard from Ballard regarding the issue. Whether that was to be construed as a positive or negative development was up for debate.

Since returning, he'd remained in the area of the plaza. Tourists flocked to the spot, gathering near the restaurants and bars, drinks in hand, talking up friends and strangers alike. The groups afforded Brett some anonymity at a distance. The open area also provided him with an unobstructed view of the hotel. Dozens of people had entered and exited, but he had yet to see Erin or Mia or the younger woman accompanying them.

He gazed past the center of the plaza. It grew livelier as the sun set and flaming torches and artificial lights took over its duties. The crowds migrated and thickened in front of a jazz ensemble at the western end. The smoke from the grills of five different restaurants dissipated into the air, leaving the smell of steak and seafood in its wake. Brett's stomach ached in response. He stifled the sensation as best he could.

Brett decided to return to the hotel's lobby. He stuck to the shadows as he crossed the plaza. The smoky tones of a saxophone rose and fell. All gazes were directed toward the bronzed woman singing a Jobim tune. She hit each note perfectly. It would have been easy to get lost in a drink and her voice.

During the short trek, Brett thought through his plan one more time. The simplicity was what made it foolproof. He knew Jack Noble. Knew things about the man's past. He knew the woman's connection to Jack, about their daughter, something that not many others were aware of. Erin might have doubt, but ultimately, she would trust him. Mostly because she would have no choice.

Jack would be unreachable.

Brett rehearsed the lines to himself: *Jack sent me. You're in danger. There's a team coming to the island, and at least one is here now, watching you. They're either going to abduct you, or kill you. Come with me. I can get you off the island and we'll rendezvous with Jack in a day's time.*

After a few failed attempts at reaching Noble, Erin would agree to go willingly. It turned out the man he spotted in the lobby worked to Brett's benefit. Brett would be more convincing because of the guy. So long as the man had not acted yet. In fact, it would work to Brett's favor if he could catch the other guy in the act. Just not too far into it.

That was a jagged road, laced with traps. Get the women, he told himself. Don't wait.

Brett continued toward the hotel, scanning the crowd, going unnoticed.

Mostly.

"There you are." Female. American. Southern drawl. The girl from the elevator. They'd made it easy on him. They'd found him.

Brett prepped himself to give his emergency speech. He would have to tone it down amid the crowd. Perhaps after a few lines they'd seek a quieter spot around the side of the

hotel. That'd be better as they were currently close enough that the guy in the lobby could see them. If he was still there, of course. Chances were when the women had left, so had he. Brett turned, ready to face two women and little girl and at the same time locate the other man.

But instead of a trio, only the one woman stood there.

"You know," she said, "I thought you were going to wait around in the hallway to see if I'd come back out."

Her eyes glistened, her smile broadened, and in the faint light, her cheeks looked red. The smell of alcohol washed past as she approached. He thought back to the encounter earlier that day and considered whether he had shown interest in the young woman. Surely the few words he had spoken couldn't be construed as a come on? She was attractive, so it wasn't entirely out of the question that his gaze had lingered too long. But the purpose of his being on the island precluded any encounter with her, which should have prevented him from giving any indication that he might be interested in her.

He shrugged and said, "Sorry. I did wait around for a few seconds at the end of the hall."

She continued smiling and stepped even closer. "Can you show me where?"

Brett glanced behind her, looking for Erin and Mia. "Where are your mates?"

"They went out for ice cream."

"Are they coming back here?"

She nodded, her face inches from his. "But we are in separate rooms."

"Do you normally come onto strangers like this?"

The breeze lifted her hair off her shoulders as she shook her head. He smelled the sand, salt water, perfume and rum that soaked her skin and hair.

"It must be the unadulterated ocean air," she said.

Brett had hoped that the woman wouldn't be around when it came time to escort Erin and Mia off the island. And here she was, practically begging him to take her out of the picture. He stepped back. Smiled. Turned. Gestured toward the door.

“After you.”

UNKNOWN LOCATION.

“MANDY!”

THE VOICE sounded distant. Sort of familiar. Yet unknown. The heavy accent, what was that?

“Please, I can’t reach you. Are you OK?”

Why wouldn’t I be?

She went to answer, but couldn’t. She went to stand, but her feet were above her head. One, in fact, touched her head. She opened her eyes. Fluid, thick and dark, flooded them, burning. She opened her mouth to cry out, but nothing happened.

“I see your fingers moving,” the woman said. “We’ll get help, sweetie. Just stay as still as you can.”

Still? Why?

The pressure she felt increased after a few attempts at moving. Where was she? What was that weight she felt, and what caused the pressure? She managed to get one hand to her face, then let her body relax. The blood swept to the side. She opened her eyes. They stung, but not as bad. It was dark, but after a few moments, the girl realized she was inverted, twisted at the waist, her shoulders pinned to the floor. She wanted to scream out and ask where the hell she was.

The woman with the accent began breathing so heavily she was panting. Then whimpering. She let out a strange squeal,

then spoke to herself, then to the girl.

“Don’t move. Okay? I’m going to cover you with these scarves. Stay still until we’re gone. Understand?”

The girl tried to respond. Couldn’t.

“Wiggle your fingers if you do,” the woman said.

The girl complied. A moment later, she felt something soft and light and silky draped over her hands and legs.

“Don’t move,” the woman said again. “Not for a few minutes.”

Metal crunched. The sounds of crickets and cicadas roared in the girl’s ears. The woman screamed, to which a man laughed. He called her a bitch. He told her to come easy, or die right here and now. The girl’s heart pounded against her ribs like a wild horse trying to break down a gate. The woman agreed. She cried out in agony saying her leg felt broken. The man laughed again and said if he carried her, she was going over the cliff.

The cliff, the girl thought. She remembered the cliff, and the guardrail. The car hitting the metal barrier.

The engine choked. The muffler ticked. The crickets and cicadas grew louder. A vehicle approached, its small engine whining. Everything brightened and the girl saw the direness of her predicament. Please, she thought, don’t let the car be on fire. She sniffed the air, checking for smoke or the odor of gasoline. She thought she might have smelled it, but wasn’t sure. The other car passed and things grew quiet.

Except for the crickets and cicadas.

Their songs were deafening.

ITHACA, NEW YORK.

“WHAT THE HELL’S going on, Frank?” Jack looked through the rear window at the other sedan performing a three-point turn. “Who the hell was that?”

Frank stared straight ahead. Said nothing. The other sedan drove away in the opposite direction. Turning toward the front, Jack leaned forward and placed his hand on Frank’s shoulder. He clutched the pistol in his other hand and let it point toward the floor.

“Answer me.”

Frank glanced at the guy driving. Stared for a moment. Then looked over his shoulder at Jack. “You’ve been targeted, Jack.”

No explanation was needed. For several years, Jack had been the guy they’d call when someone else had been targeted. The why of it, however, escaped Jack. So had Charles’s involvement. And Frank’s.

Jack said, “You’re gonna have to tell me a bit more than that.”

Frank said, “I will. Let’s get out of here first.”

“Approaching the highway,” the driver said.

Jack couldn’t recall ever seeing the driver before today. Jack’s visits to SIS had grown fewer as the years passed, so it was possible the man was one of Frank’s agents, and that Jack

hadn't run into him yet. Presumably, the guy didn't know all the details. Frank and Jack went back far enough that Frank shouldn't care where they were. He held back because of the driver.

They drove north for forty minutes, then east, eventually reaching a road that ran alongside Lake Ontario. After a short silent stretch, they turned onto a narrow lane, guarded by two looming relics of the War of 1812. Finally, they parked in a lot overlooking the lake. The wind swept toward them, sending whitecaps toward the shore.

Frank opened his door, stepped out, and then opened Jack's.

"Walk with me," he said.

Jack joined him. The two men headed toward the lake. The breeze coming off the water neutralized the brunt of the heat, though it remained considerably warmer than inside the car. In the distance, boats streamed by, their wakes blending in with the churning surface.

At the shore, they turned left, away from a family gathered and playing at the water's edge. Fifty yards later, Frank stopped. Jack continued on a few more steps, stopped, turned.

"Let me see your phone," Frank said.

"Are you kidding me?" Jack said.

Frank shook his head while extending his hand. "I tracked you through it. Need to make sure no one else can."

Jack balked. Frank didn't fall for it.

"I'm not saying anything until you pony up with the phone."

The pistol resting against his back nearly provoked Jack enough to draw it. He could have it out and aimed before Frank could move. But where was the driver? The man could be positioned just out of sight, a rifle aimed at Jack's head. One wrong move, or a signal from Frank, and the driver would fire a shot that'd pierce Jack through the heart, and they'd leave him on the shore.

Frank offered both hands. Jack reached into his pocket, pulled out his phone and tossed it to Frank. The man studied it for a moment, turning it over, pressing a button, waking it. He looked over the screen. Then he powered it off and flung it over the lake. It skipped twice along the surface before plowing into a foot high wave and sinking from sight.

“Son of a bitch,” Jack said.

“Sorry,” Frank said. “But like I said, I tracked you with it. No doubt someone else might do the same thing next time you make a call.”

They hadn’t tracked his signal. They were watching numbers he might call. And when he did, they found him. He nodded, knowing how it worked. If Frank could do it, someone else could. But none of that explained why Frank was so close and able to show up minutes after Jack exited the house Charles had sent him into.

“All right,” Jack said. “Talk.”

Frank wiped a layer of sweat off his forehead, using the slickness to mat his hair back. There were a few more flecks of silver there than the last time Jack had seen him.

“Where to start?” Frank said.

“How about the beginning?” Jack said.

“Thanks.” Frank spit into the water, then juttied his chin toward a spot in the distance. He began walking, and started talking without checking to see if Jack was following along. “I’ve lost three guys in two weeks. Two were in the same vehicle, involved in a single-car accident. Tried to take on a two hundred-year oak. Left a nasty dent on the tree. And a couple teeth in the bark.”

Jack said nothing as the man paused and drew in a sharp breath of lake air.

Frank continued. “The other one was shot, execution style, after being tortured for at least two days. Missing eight fingers. We found them in pieces. They weren’t cut only at the knuckles. The digits that remained were missing nails. Same thing with his toes. And, you know, other obvious signs.”

They were approaching a thicket of trees. Jack looked back to make sure they weren't being followed by the driver. "I had nothing to do with any of this."

Frank stopped, held out his arm as a barrier. "You were moments away from being Ithaca's first drive-by shooting in, like, forever, Jack. You really think I would have saved you if you had something to do with my guys' torture and deaths?"

"So those guys were involved then."

Frank held out both arms, palms up, shrugged. "All I know is they're dead, and I got a hit on you. Your file, to be exact. So I started digging around. What I found helped me make a little sense of it."

"OK?" Jack tried to figure out where it was going. Every thread his mind created wound up at a dead end. What did anyone want with him? Someone was hell bent on taking out a couple SIS agents. Even tried to get information from one of them. It happens. Everyone who signs up knows it can. Still, none of it had anything to do with him. He was off the radar. Wiped clean by friends, and friends of friends. And the people watching out for him had said nothing.

At least until Frank showed up.

"Someone's trying to clean up a lot of loose ends in the black op community. And I mean a lot. Agents and contractors. Business associates of targets if necessary." He looked away. "Other associates. The more you operated under the cloak of secrecy, the more they want you dead."

"Why?"

Frank shook his head. "This is way over my rank. Not for me to know. All I'm trying to figure out is why I'm not dead yet."

"Easy," Jack said. "You're too public. You meet with people on Capitol Hill. If you go missing, people will talk."

"The people I know could make something like this happen."

“Apparently not all of them. All it takes is one outsider to start asking questions.”

“Didn’t help our old friend Sinclair.”

Jack said nothing.

“You haven’t heard?”

“No.”

“Killed in Boston recently. At the airport. They’re going after the rest of his team, too.”

Jack thought of Clarissa. Last he had heard from her, she was working with Sinclair. He had to push his concerns to the side. For now.

“So why’d you come all the way up here to save me? And how’d you know I was here if you only grabbed my position because I made a phone call?”

“I have access to certain systems. You know, things gained over the years that I probably shouldn’t have. Someone from Langley or Quantico being careless while showing me something. Anyway, I saw the hit on your file. Saw when they located you. Started tracking you myself then. I couldn’t believe how careless they were being transmitting this information back. Nothing in code. It was almost as if...”

“They were trying to draw out other targets.”

Frank nodded, slowly.

“So why not go after them then?” Jack said. “Sounds like you’ve got enough evidence.”

“Well, for one, I don’t know who’s at the top of this thing. I’m not trying to stand out here. Second, they were careless with their information. Not their identities.” Frank paused, looked out over the water. The pelting wind caused his eyes to glass over. “Anyway, this situation with DeCosta and one of his guys arose, and I suppose they figured it was the perfect cover. Get you away from the city, away from your friends, and make it look like you were performing a hit. Everyone would know it was for DeCosta, and what for, but no one

would move on him. That organization ain't the same with him running it, but it's still pretty damn powerful."

Jack took a second to think things through. Everything Frank had said, while pushing the bounds of Jack's current thoughts on reality, made sense. He still didn't understand why whoever wanted him dead didn't just do it. He assumed the meeting in the condo had something to do with this. They could have taken him out there. Would've been easy. The right person could have cleaned it up there, too. Why go through this elaborate scheme to get him to Ithaca?

"Charles said he had a guy watching Erin and Mia in Tenerife," Jack said. "I'd spoken to her the day before -"

"Pretty sure that's how we found you."

"-planned on hopping a flight tomorrow after checking on something in South Carolina."

"What's down there?"

Jack waved him off. "Some other thing. Probably not important now."

Or perhaps it was more important than ever.

Frank said, "Look, if DeCosta was threatening it, then maybe these guys do have someone in position there. You said you spoke with her recently?"

"Yeah, but what are the chances?"

"I told you, Jack, this goes deep. They could have been watching her. They could've flagged her credit cards and followed the trail."

It was more than a possibility. Why make a bluff like that? Because it grabbed him by the balls and pinned him to the wall. That's why. He had no choice once he thought his daughter and her mother were in danger. Maybe it was an idle threat. Or maybe they'd tighten the screws a bit more.

Frank said, "This wasn't some random encounter. They've been looking for a way to take you down. See how they knew about your relationship with DeCosta? And these guys, they know your weaknesses. I've seen some of the information they

pulled. They are prepared to exploit whatever they can to get to you.”

“We’re wasting time out here,” Jack said. “I’ve got to get over there. Now. I need you to put me on a flight.”

“I know. I’ve got a Gulfstream waiting. The pilot can bend some rules. Fly you direct. All in all, should take a touch over six hours. I’ll give you something so you can sleep on the way.”

As they headed toward the car, Frank got on the phone and arranged the flight.

TENERIFE.

JARED AKERS WATCHED the girl and her mother sitting at a counter licking ice cream from gigantic waffle cones. How long would he be relegated to watching them? Something had to go down sooner or later, or he'd fall asleep from boredom.

The cell phone vibrated in his pocket. It gave him renewed hope. He tapped at the button on his earpiece.

“Do you have the targets in sight?”

“Yes,” Jared said. “Mother and daughter. Twenty yards away.”

“The time to move is now.”

“OK.” Jared slid the phone into his pocket and continued watching the woman and the girl. When they got up and left, he followed, waiting for the right opportunity.

UNKNOWN LOCATION.

HOW MUCH TIME had passed since the woman had left? That wasn't quite correct, the girl thought. She'd been taken away. Forcefully. Against her will. And for some reason, the woman knew it was coming and remained in the car. That's right, her leg. She'd broken her leg. The pain was too much to free them both. The woman knew what was coming and did everything she could to protect the girl.

If only she knew how long ago that was. One moment it felt like minutes ago. The next, it could've been hours. And no cars had passed. Where was everyone? Why didn't anyone take this road?

The girl tried to remember where they had been going. She realized that she wasn't even sure which country she was in. The woman had an accent. A thick one. European? Was that even a thing?

For the first time, the girl began crying. Frustration had taken hold, and with being pinned under the dash of the vehicle, there was nothing else she could do.

Then lights splayed across her legs. As the beam intensified, so did the hum of a car engine. Car doors opened and shut. A voice called out. A second followed it. A man and woman. The woman continued talking amid approaching footsteps. She spoke hurriedly, but the girl understood much of what she said.

A single car involved in a crash. Mangled. No one else is around. The driver's door is open. No, there's no one inside. Oh, God. Please, God. No. Someone is trapped. Might be a girl, eleven or twelve or so.

The girl wanted to speak badly enough that she didn't care about the pain associated with it. She shifted side to side, then drew in a deep breath. Her chest burned in retaliation. She opened her mouth, intending to scream the word help. Instead, she let out a primal sound.

"She's alive," the woman exclaimed in French. "Please, get someone here now to free her from the wreckage."

The girl smiled as tears streamed down her cheeks. A mixture of pain and happiness.

She saw the man and woman, standing on the other side of the wreckage from her. They pulled on her door. Opened it a crack. Fingers stuck through the opening and gripped the frame. They yanked and tugged, finally freeing it enough for the woman to wedge her head and torso in. She smiled at the girl.

"It's going to be okay," the woman said. "Help is on the way."

The girl smiled. The tears ceased.

"What's your name?" the woman asked.

The pain she had felt in her chest didn't compare to the sinking feeling she felt all over.

The woman had asked a simple question.

And the girl couldn't answer.

NICE, FRANCE.

BEAR FOLLOWED PIERRE away from the apartment building. Away from the beach. Away from the crowds. The lights grew thinner. The heat and humidity felt thicker. Sweat coated his forehead, his brow, his upper lip and beard. He didn't bother to wipe off. Since they'd left, his head had been on a swivel, looking back and forth for anyone following them.

Pierre, on the other hand, continued forward with his eyes ahead. If he had a destination in mind, he hadn't said. In fact, he'd failed to tell Bear anything since they left the building. It was as though he wanted to be seen. Like he hoped someone followed them.

The few people they passed didn't let their gazes linger long on either man. The two of them, Pierre with the steeled look of purpose, and Bear the look of a deranged madman, were not to be messed with. Anyone could see that. In fact, some saw it from far enough away that they dodged traffic to cross the street.

Ten minutes into their walk, Pierre said, "Seen anyone yet?"

"Nobody," Bear replied.

"Keep looking."

"Where are we going?"

"This way."

Bear resisted the temptation to knock the Frenchman down. "I can see that. What's our destination?"

"I've got a car parked at a friend's house. Whoever these men are, they've likely never seen it. But we have to arrive there unnoticed."

"You really think it matters?"

For the first time, Pierre glanced back. "What?"

"If they see us. You think that matters?"

Pierre shrugged, said nothing.

"They could be tracking us other ways. That's probably why they aren't following us. They don't need to. They'll wait until we stop, or our course changes, then they'll move."

"Good. I want the bastards to find us. So long as we are a bit past the city. Then we can stomp on their throats and find out what the hell they want."

"Should've invited them up to the apartment for that."

Pierre pointed at the street sign and then aimed his finger right. "Couldn't do that. Not with Kat there. And especially not with Mandy present."

"She's a tough girl."

"I don't doubt she is." Pierre slowed enough for Bear to catch up to his side. "And you don't have to worry. Kat's taking care of her. No one will find them where they're going. Trust me. We'll be there soon, too, and then you two can hide out for a while until we figure this out, or you can disappear."

"Figure what out?"

Pierre almost slowed to a stop, sidestepping on the curb and glancing around. "Not here, my friend. I'll tell you what I know, or what I think I know, I suppose. I can't make sense of this. No one can. The chatter is loud and as usual, deceitful."

"You're talking gibberish, man."

"Up here." Pierre squared up and increased his pace. He led Bear through three more turns, left, then right, then left

again. The streets here were deserted. Streetlights were placed even further apart, leaving dark spots along the sidewalks where the canopy of trees shielded the ground.

And Bear heard footsteps. Not theirs. Not anyone visible.

“We’re not alone,” he whispered.

Reaching behind his back, Pierre nodded. “I am aware.”

Bear followed his lead and retrieved the Glock. Never trust a firearm you’ve never fired. The words had been drilled into his head. Unfortunately, he had no choice. If this was some elaborate scheme to get him alone to dispose of him, he was screwed. No other way to put it. But he wouldn’t go down easy. Whoever was closest, be it Pierre or someone else, was going down with him. At least Bear wouldn’t suffer long. The bullet would make sure of that. His victim wouldn’t be so lucky.

“It is time for me to play the role of bait,” Pierre said. “Hide behind that tree there. I’m going to continue another twenty meters. There, I’ll stop and get on the phone. You watch every direction. If the right person appears,” he glanced down at the suppressed Glock, “you know what to do.”

They separated, with Bear heading for the cover of the tree and the blackness it provided, and Pierre continuing another sixty feet or so, where he stopped and placed a phone call. The phone’s screen lit up, and Bear could only assume the call was real, although he questioned whether Pierre had actually called the weather line.

From his position, Bear scanned both ends of the street. He watched the gaps between the houses, searching the darkness of the alleyways. Pierre was a sitting duck. If someone was there they’d shoot him. There would be no confrontation.

“Come on, Pierre,” he muttered under his breath. “Get out of the middle of the damn street.”

And then the Frenchman stopped talking. For the first time, he produced his gun. A pang of fear ran down Bear’s spine. It didn’t last long, a second at most. But it served to send his adrenaline and senses into overdrive. If they were

going to set him up, they'd have to work for it. He stuck to the shadows and moved toward the house, keeping his body facing the street so he could watch.

Pierre moved to the sidewalk, traveled on the lawns to stay out of the pools of orange light cast by the street lamps. Even in the dark, Bear could see the man straining to locate him. Pierre focused on the tree where Bear had been. By the time he reached it, Bear had distanced himself.

“Where are you?” Pierre called out. “Was a false alarm.”

Bear waited a moment before beginning his approach. He had no false ideas that he'd get out of this alive. He was in a foreign city, in a foreign country. His only contact might be trying to kill him. His best chance was taking the guy and getting the Frenchman to call it off.

“We're wasting time,” Pierre said.

Bear crept through the shadows, pistol drawn, aimed at the Frenchman's silhouette.

“Don't move.”

Pierre ignored the request and turned toward the sound of Bear's voice. “What are you doing?”

“Where are they?”

“Fuck if I know. Not here, that's all I can tell you. I thought my call would draw them out. It didn't, so now we have to move.”

Bear took a few steps forward. Pierre's eyes widened at the sight of the gun aimed at his head.

“The hell are you doing?”

“Tell me you aren't setting me up.”

“I'm not setting you up.”

“Liar.” Bear kept his distance, aware that Pierre was the kind of man you couldn't touch with a gun. It would take him half a beat to disarm Bear and another half beat to shoot him.

“Listen to me, I am not sure what the hell you’ve been drinking since we separated, but I am on your side. In fact, you’re about the only person in France I trust right now.”

Bear said nothing. Held steady.

“How could I set you up if I had no idea you were coming until you arrived? How could I have arranged for those men to be there, for you, if I didn’t know myself?”

The gun felt heavy in his hands at that moment. He’d allowed his mind to weigh too heavily on Mandy’s predicament. So much so that his own judgment had become cloudy. Pierre was on his side. They had a common goal. And once it was achieved, things might be different.

“Sorry,” he said.

“No worries,” Pierre said. “Now let’s go. We’ve got three blocks left to the car. Then a four hour drive following that.”

WEST OF MADRID, SPAIN.

MASON HADN'T ALLOWED Sasha to drive. He thought he was being a gentleman, handling the duty after their ordeal on the plane. In reality, he'd only pissed her off. Four hours in the passenger seat had done a number on her. She was over it. Tired. Exhausted. Sick of staring out her window at the blackness.

The smell coming from his bag of chips gnawed at her. She'd given up carbs a couple years ago. Normally, resistance was easy. But tonight, when she hadn't eaten in half a day, the pangs of hunger were winning. But to grab a handful, she'd have to acknowledge Mason's existence, and she wasn't ready for that.

"Coming up in a few more miles," Mason said.

She continued staring out the window at nothing. "What?"

"The airfield."

The moment she dreaded, seeing Gerald again, was minutes away. Sasha didn't quite understand the apprehension she felt. She'd dumped him, after all. And then he'd quit the service. Just up and left. During their time together, which hadn't been all that long as far as relationships went, she'd never realized that Gerald and Mason were friends. For as bad as she was about her MI5 brethren, the male agents were ten times worse. Everything was a pissing match. Or so it seemed.

Mason turned onto a narrow road. The headlights washed over two strips of dirt and gravel, buffered by tall grass. Sasha rolled down her window. The humid air coated her, and she didn't care. It beat the dry air conditioning. The soft rumble of a plane engine could be heard. Ahead, the road curved through some trees. On the other side, she saw the source of the sound. An airstrip with a plane waiting.

Gerald climbed down after they emerged from the trees. He'd aged considerably since the last time she'd seen him some five years ago. At least, that's what she told herself.

She and Mason exited the car. He led the way to the plane. She'd already decided the less she said, the better. Exes were always awkward to deal with. Let alone one she abandoned after he proposed. Left him on his knees in her family's restaurant. And that was the last time she'd seen him.

"Sasha," Gerald said. "Good to see you."

She smiled, nodded, and continued toward the plane.

"Don't mind her," Mason said. "Cranky from the day's delays. Just know we both thank you for this."

"Not a problem," Gerald said.

Sasha stopped and looked back. "We should get going. There's a woman and child that might be in danger."

Mason leaned in and whispered to Sasha. "See, he barely remembers you. This won't be bad at all."

On board, Gerald completed his pre-flight checks, then said, "Go ahead and get comfortable. Gonna be a long flight."

UPSTATE NEW YORK.

THE GULFSTREAM HUMMED amid a torrent of activity. Maintenance performed final checks and fueled the aircraft. Members of the crew boarded. Non-essential staff, obviously. The ones that mattered were already in on board, reviewing flight plans and settling in for the trip. The jet maintained a cruise speed of over six hundred miles per hour. It would take a commercial airliner eight hours to travel from Buffalo to Tenerife. The Gulfstream could do it in under six. Quicker if the pilot ignored certain rules that required commercial jets to stray no further than ninety minutes from land.

The driver - whose name Jack still hadn't caught - pulled into an unmarked parking spot and shifted the transmission into park before coming to a complete stop. The vehicle rocked back and forth, hard at first. Frank sat idle for a moment, staring at the jet. Jack followed his gaze. But his focus was on the men and women working around the craft. Every face had to look like it belonged. A single person out of place meant he had to take a different course of action. It wouldn't be hard, either. Frank had been sloppy holstering his weapon, and no time during the drive had he made an effort to correct the issue. All Jack had to do was secure the pistol. The driver would yield and do exactly as instructed, despite training that taught him not to. Things changed when the situation and danger was real.

It wouldn't come to that. Not today. Everyone passed the eye test, not that it hadn't failed in the past. But today was different. Despite their differences over the years, an understanding existed between Jack and Frank. They had each other's back. They stood up for one another. That's the way it was with men who'd been through the things they'd seen together. And the fact that they could royally screw each other over helped them co-exist.

"We should get going," Frank said in a solemn tone.

"You sound a bit broken up," Jack said.

Frank shook his head. "I just don't know where this is going. After we separate, you're on your own. You understand that, right? I can't help you from here out. I don't know if anybody will be able to. We're all on high alert now. I've got everyone staying in groups of two to four. Relocated spouses and kids."

All along, there'd been a suspicion that Frank knew more than he'd let on. Now Jack was sure of it. And he knew he'd get nothing else out of the man. As soon as he stepped foot on the tarmac, they were through. For now, hopefully.

Frank and the driver exchanged a quick glance.

"Let's get going, Jack," Frank said.

The men exited the vehicle. The driver stood beside his open door, one hand out of sight. Jack and Frank crossed the blacktop to the waiting Gulfstream. One man emerged from the fuselage. A second joined him. They descended the stairs, gazes locked on Jack.

"Who're they?" Jack said.

"Couple of my guys," Frank said.

"They coming with me?"

"Accompanying you, but they won't be getting off the jet with you."

"I don't need babysitters at forty thousand feet."

"Didn't say you did."

“Then why are they going to be on board?”

“Just to make sure you wind up where I want you to.”

Jack slowed, allowing Frank to get a few paces ahead. One man stopped at the bottom of the stairs. The other approached Frank. Jack glanced back, saw the driver approaching.

And then he heard the pop.

At first, it didn't seem like much. A stinging sensation in his thigh no worse than a basic bee sting. The warmth radiated outward in a spiraling fashion, knees and hip, shins and abdomen, chest, arms and feet. Then he began to feel both numb and heavy. He started forward, stumbled because his feet had turned to lead. Frank and one of the guys from the plane came toward him. Mustering his strength and focus, Jack reached behind his back and wrapped his concrete fingers around the pistol's grip, managing to free the weapon from his waistband. But he couldn't hang on.

“Hit him again,” Frank said.

Another pop. Another sting, this time in the hamstring of the other leg. His heart whooshed in his ears. Hard. Rapid. It drowned out the Gulfstream's engine. His right knee hit the ground, followed by his right hand. The other leg extended backward and his free hand searched the ground for the pistol, like he was in some disjointed yoga position.

“Just relax, Jack.” Had to be Frank. The other men didn't know his name. Except for the driver. Maybe. “This is for your own good. Just let go and we'll take care of you.”

Cognizant thought faded fast, but Jack had enough of it left to know not to go without a fight. But he didn't have a choice. His supporting arm collapsed, as did his leg. He lay face down on the tarmac. The scorching asphalt singed his cheek. Probably. He couldn't tell after a couple moments. The pain faded. Everything faded. The sensation of weightlessness followed. Managing to open his eyes, Jack saw himself floating a few feet off the ground, then up the stairs, and finally into the fuselage. He was set down on a leather couch and strapped in.

Frank appeared in Jack's field of view. The man narrowed his eyes and reached out for Jack's shoulder. "It's for your own good. Trust me. Just let go."

And Jack did. He didn't have a choice but to let go and faded into the darkness.

TENERIFE.

THE WOMAN'S NAME was Hannah. Brett had learned that on the way to her room. He didn't want to know. It was always easiest when he didn't. Of course, he had no choice when it came to his actual target. But collateral damage, the necessary lives taken and pain inflicted, ceased to exist when nameless. The faces faded faster.

Hannah looked up at him. Eyes large and dark. She'd finally stopped trying to speak through her gag. It only took him telling her ten times that doing so was making things worse. He tried to answer all the questions she might have. Who was he? He didn't give more than a simple explanation: a government operative. Why her? She was in the way. What was he doing here? Sorry, but I can't answer that. Will I die? Not if you do what I say, when I say.

None of his answers to her presumed questions appeared to help the woman. Tears welled in her eyes and streaked down her cheeks, coming to rest in the makeshift gag created from her dark red tank top. He actually preferred the color, should blood be involved.

Glancing at his watch, Brett performed a calculation in his head. The time didn't really matter as much as how long they'd been in the room: seventy minutes. Where were Erin and Mia? Hannah had said they were going for ice cream. She must've expected them to remain out for a while. Why else invite a stranger up? Wouldn't the risk of embarrassment if her

employer spotted him in Hannah's room preclude the young woman from taking the risk? He looked over at her. She glared back. Perhaps not, he thought. Not with the alcohol, and the wind, and the ocean air. Caught up in the moment, she'd made a mistake.

Brett rose and approached her, mindful of her unbound legs. "If I remove the gag, do you promise not to scream?"

She gave no response. Continued staring at him.

"I'm only going to ask one more time. Do you promise not to scream?"

She nodded, once, then leaned her head back and to the side.

Brett took a wide berth, clear of her legs, and reached for the exposed knot. With a tug, he freed it and let the tank top slide off the young woman's face, onto her chest.

"You asshole," she said, subdued.

"What were you thinking inviting a stranger up? You had to have known something like this could happen."

She said nothing.

"Regardless, if you keep quiet and do everything I say, you're going to be all right. My purpose in being here has nothing to do with you."

"It's Erin, isn't it," she said. "Because of her aunt. Right?"

Brett said nothing. He held her gaze and showed no signs of emotion.

Hannah shook her head. "No. Not Mia."

Brett still said nothing.

"Look, do whatever you have to do to me. Not them. Not Mia. She's just a child." Hannah's voice rose. "Say something, you dick."

"Keep your voice down."

"Screw you."

He only had a few moments before he had to reapply the gag. “Where else were they going?”

“I don’t know. She said ice cream, then a walk, then back here.”

“A walk? You didn’t mention that before. Where to?”

“The beach, I guess.”

Brett shifted toward the window and split the drapes in the middle. The lights of the plaza faded on the paths that led to the ocean. By the time one reached the black sands, there’d be little to illuminate. He hadn’t been concerned over the other man on the island simply because he wouldn’t do anything in public. If anything, he’d follow Erin to her room and break in later. In which case, Brett would have already escorted them off Tenerife.

But on the beach, they were vulnerable. How far would they walk? Would they continue past the crowds that likely gathered around the beach access. He let go of the drapes. The room darkened a touch as they fell shut.

“Sorry to do this again,” he said, reaching down for the tank top and looping it around Hannah’s head. The girl kicked and bucked in the chair. Brett didn’t blame her. He’d do the same, and a few other things that he was grateful she wasn’t aware of. He cinched the shirt tight enough to prevent her from manipulating it and letting out a yell.

After a few minutes, Hannah stopped fighting and settled in. Did she really have a choice? At this point, if she toppled the chair over, he would leave her that way.

Brett stopped in front of the door and looked back at her. “I’m sorry to do this to you, but I’ve got to go look for your friends on the beach. I’m afraid they’re in danger.” He bled irony, but it didn’t stop him from being convincing. “If I’m not back by morning, housekeeping will find you. Feel free to tell them anything you wish. I’ll be long gone.”

TENERIFE.

HOW HAD THE woman been so careless? To take her child off the beaten path, walking a mile away from the crowds located near the beach access. She led her daughter deep into the dark. It made Jared Aker's job easy. Relatively. A mother might fight to the death to protect her young. Or she might go along with him and do whatever he said. He'd find out soon enough.

The roaring waves simplified his approach. He had no concerns over being heard. Likewise, he didn't fear them looking back and seeing him, because what would they notice? A shadow against the blackness? Hardly.

The girl was his first priority. Take control of her, and the mother would follow as soon as she realized a 9mm was aimed at her daughter's head. At least as long as she felt the threat was real. If he gave any indication he wouldn't take action, then she might be inclined to do so.

At twenty yards away, Jared closed the gap between himself and the women in a few seconds. He grabbed the girl and pulled her back. Her screams were barely audible amid the wind and waves. But her mother, she heard. And she whipped around, eyes searching in the darkness, settling on the figures of Jared and her daughter. She lunged forward, but stopped at the sight of Jared's weapon. But whatever fear had been there vanished. The woman dove toward him, unleashing a violent scream. He drew back and whipped the pistol forward. The

blow caught the lady on the side of her head and she fell to the ground. The little girl began kicking, screaming, fighting against him. She sunk her teeth into the back of his hand. Jared started to swing the pistol down, but stopped inches from her head. The blow could kill the child, and if he knew anything about the situation, the girl was worth ten times as much to him as the woman. He yanked his hand free and scooped the child up by threading his arm under hers.

The woman lay motionless on the ground. Jared pulled a flashlight from his pocket and shone it on her. Her eyes didn't open or flutter. Blood from a large gash on the side of her head pooled on the ground around her face. The little girl caught sight of her mother and shrieked. The yells faded to sobs.

Jared pulled out his phone and placed a call.

"I've got the girl. Mother is on the ground. Unconscious. What's my next move?"

"Where are you?"

"On the beach, about a mile north from town."

"OK. Continue north about another mile. I've got a resource there. He'll pick you up on the beach and get you off the island."

"Ten four." Jared paused, looked down at the woman bleeding on the black sand. "What about the mother?"

"She's useless to us. Kill her."

"Sir, I've got her daughter right here."

"Now you care? That didn't bother you when you knocked her out, did it?"

"I..."

"You fucked up. Now clean your mess and kill her, then get moving."

The call disconnected. Jared nearly flung his phone into the Atlantic. He stared down at the woman. She hadn't stirred. He could leave her here. Maybe she'd die. Perhaps someone would come along and take her back to town. The blow she'd

received had done plenty of damage. Even if rescued, she might not be the same.

But if she was, that'd mean Jared's life would be at risk.

"I'm sorry," he said to the girl as he straddled her mother, turning the girl away and aiming down with his pistol. He tucked the weapon under his chin for a moment while reaching into his pocket for the suppressor. He threaded the device on the weapon, then took a few steps back. Took a couple deep breaths. Held in the last one. Squeezed the trigger. Twice. He didn't need to shine his light on her to know that the mother of Jack Noble's only child was now dead.

They didn't linger. Someone might have seen the muzzle blast from a distance and already be on their way to investigate. From far enough away, it might look like someone flashing a lighter. Or it might look like a gunshot. Either way, Jared wanted nothing to do with more liabilities. More people to kill. He jogged north with the motionless girl under his arm. He'd carried heavier loads during his career. She weighed less than a rucksack. Less than some of the weapons he'd used in the past.

Eight or nine minutes later, small dots appeared in the dark. White headlights. Jared stopped, crouched down, and waited for strobes of blue and red to break through the darkness. But they didn't. The lights grew brighter and larger. He heard the four-wheeler rumble closer. Jared rose and moved forward. He pocketed his pistol in favor of his flashlight, which he flipped on and off, three times on, then nothing for a few beats. Repeated the process. The headlights flipped on and off in the same pattern. Jared held the flashlight in his mouth, switched on, and retrieved his pistol. He did not know the identity of the man sent to meet him. And he didn't care to. All he wanted was to make sure the guy was legit and had a plan to get him and the girl off the island.

The ATV halted in front of them. The driver switched the engine off. The sudden roar of the vehicle faded, and the wind and waves took over.

“Get on,” the driver said. “I’ve got a boat docked two miles north of here at an inlet. She’ll get us anywhere you want to go.”

Jared adjusted his light toward the ATV. It had plenty of space. Two rows of seating. The rear large enough to accommodate him and the girl. He hefted her over his shoulder, then stepped over the crossbar, placing her on the seat first. Jared sat next to her, one arm around her shoulders, the other holding the pistol, aimed at the child. She didn’t seem to notice. She made no movements at all. Catatonic described her best. He tried not to care. It was, after all, his fault. He knew the response he’d get to that line of thinking. Not your fault, son. They put themselves in this situation. It wasn’t true. He knew it. But he had to believe it.

They continued north until they reached the inlet. Orange lights sparsely placed lit the area. First glance indicated the place was deserted. The driver led them along a concrete walkway, then down a wooden pier. They came to a stop in front of a forty-foot boat. Jared knew little about the crafts and trusted the man at his word that the vessel could handle the Atlantic.

On board he placed another call. His boss instructed him that they were to head toward the Mediterranean and call back for further instructions in the morning.

TENERIFE.

THE NOISE OF the crowds slowly faded and gave way to the wind and the ocean. Brett remained close to the shoreline. Salt spray enveloped him, a sensation he enjoyed from as far back as he could remember. Though he had grown up within an hour of the ocean, visits to it were limited. The joys of being an orphan and foster child.

He produced a small pen light and used the weak beam to scan the area in front of him. Its glow barely lit ten feet up. And that's why Brett nearly stumbled over the body when he reached it. Kneeling, he focused the light on the woman's head. Or what was left of it. Two bullets had entered from the rear and taken out chunks of her forehead and face.

There was no doubt who it was.

Brett had arrived too late.

He swept the area with the light in search of Mia. The girl was nowhere to be found. Fear of drawing attention to his position prevented him from calling out too loudly for her. Still, he tried, to no response. He searched the ground for tracks. What he found was a mishmash of a day's worth of beach-goers' prints.

Think, he told himself. The man had brought them this far only to kill Erin. He wouldn't double back with the girl. Right? Brett knew the guy wouldn't. He had somewhere to go. Brett ran north, scanning the ground with his small light. After

a mile or so, he found the tracks of an ATV. Someone, he presumed, had picked the man and Mia up.

He had to contact Ballard and find out if he had uncovered who else was on Tenerife.

Ballard, however, beat him to it.

“Tell me you found something,” Brett said.

“I’m going to tell you to abort your position and get to the airport. You have a reservation with a small executive airliner.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Get moving and call me when you get there.”

“Whoever I spotted has the girl. And he killed her mother. If you know who was here, tell me, Ballard.”

There was a long pause before Ballard responded. “I don’t know. And it doesn’t matter. The woman was a target anyway.”

“But not the girl. We’re not child killers.”

“Keep telling yourself that.”

“Dammit. Tell me what you know.”

Ballard cleared his throat. “Here’s what we know. We know where Noble is going to be tomorrow morning. Now it is up to you to finish him before someone else does if you want your paycheck.” Ballard paused to clear his throat again. “And to live.”

“You threatening me now?”

“I’m just telling you the situation. You knew going into this that the job was unlike any other. If you fail, you’re done. Plain and simple. So, I’d recommend you get to the airport, get on that plane, and handle Noble the moment you spot him.”

NEW YORK.

CHARLES LINGERED NEAR the railing, looking over Niagara Falls. The place had always had an effect on him. He'd learned it was something to do with positive or negative ions. Couldn't recall which. Same thing they said about those Himalayan salt lamps, though he'd never tried one. A couple days near the falls, though, left him feeling pretty good. Damn near invincible. More so than usual.

But the Paolo situation weighed down on him. He'd held up his end of the bargain by delivering Noble to Merrick. And what had he heard since then? Not a damn thing. Complete silence. His calls wouldn't even go through to the guy. Son of a bitch, he thought. But, the upside was that right about now, Noble was being fitted for a toe tag. Somewhat of a consolation, he figured.

Returning his thoughts to Paolo, Charles decided that he'd take care of the guy himself. He had the kind of contacts that could tell him the moment the man surfaced. And then Charles would be there, ready to pounce.

After a few more minutes of gazing at the rushing water, Charles found a quiet area inside a touristy spot loaded with t-shirts and hats, a coffee shop, a diner, and tables spread throughout. He waited while a young family finished their meal. Then, when the general area surrounding him was empty, he called in a favor.

PAOLO KEPT THE speedometer pegged at fifty-five. No point in drawing attention to his catatonic sister and himself. His hopes that she'd break free from the condition hadn't materialized. If anything, she was worse. A few hours earlier, she had responded to his questions. Vocally, at first. Then with gestures. Now she stared blankly. Through him. Past him.

"Just hang tight, Essie," he said. "A glass of wine and a good night's sleep will make it better."

She said nothing. He hadn't expected her to.

Essie's condition left him in a predicament. He obviously couldn't cross the border with her. Taking out the danger factor of border patrol being on alert, her presence would be an issue. They'd want to ask her questions, and she wouldn't be able to respond. Leaving her with an associate was out of the question. Anyone he trusted was within reach of Charles. The right threat - or offer - would seal Essie's fate. The people he knew in western Pennsylvania and New York weren't the kind of men he'd leave a semi-conscious woman with.

So the new plan called for Paolo to drive. Past New York, into Ohio. Perhaps travel along the edge of the lake, looking for the right kind of place to stop for the night. A place with cabins in the woods. Hidden from view. If he didn't find it, then they'd continue on into Indiana or Michigan. Hell, he'd go as far west as necessary. Traveling fifty-five miles per hour. Staying under the radar.

A while later, on I-86, they skirted the city limits of Jamestown, the last city he recalled on the map before they reached the northwestern tip of Pennsylvania, then passed into Ohio. Maybe twenty more miles to go. The border symbolized a barrier between Paolo and Charles. He had to reach it. Drive past it. Then, he'd be one step further from his boss's reach.

TROOPER BARRET JOHANSON seldom paid attention to the scanner on his day off. It had irked him when they required him to install it in his Tundra. His personal vehicle, for Pete's sake. Always the good trooper, in more ways than one, Johanson relented. Didn't mean he had to keep it on. Only when on-call. Which was today. It was a pain in the ass,

but a necessary one. With over twenty thousand square miles to cover, and only a handful of troopers on duty at any given time, someone had to be ready to pick up a call.

And so it happened that he had the scanner on instead of his CD player blaring through the speakers. And it happened that he heard the call to be on the lookout for a car suspected in a homicide. And it happened that he approached a matching car about five miles east of Jamestown. Johanson lowered his speed, made a slow approach. The plate matched. He eased off the gas until he matched the vehicle's pace, a tranquil fifty-five miles per hour.

The instructions had been specific. Stay with them. Don't make any attempt to pull them over. The man is believed to be armed and dangerous. The woman his captive.

Johanson called it in. Dispatch rerouted him to his boss, a grizzly old bastard by the name of McGillicuddy. The man's words were clear: *Stick with them, even past the border, don't bother to attempt to detain, and let me know when and where they stop.*

Trooper Johanson agreed, partly because he was a good cop, but mostly because he had no choice.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

BECK ARRIVED ON time. Early, in fact. Clarissa expected no less of the man. He knocked on her door at two minutes to seven. She had a hunch he had been in the hall longer than that.

“You see anyone unusual out there?” she said after opening the door.

“This suit? Had it for years. You look great by the way.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m serious. I tried calling you earlier. Someone was tailing me. Don’t know where they picked me up, but I first spotted him at the Lincoln Memorial, then as I exited the store after buying my dress. He made no bones about me seeing him as the cab drove off. His face was hidden though. Only knew it was him by his hat.”

“What was on the hat?”

She pictured the man in her head. “It was a Mets ball cap.”

“Could you give enough of a description to a sketch artist?”

She led him to the kitchen, opened a beer for each of them. “The first time I saw him, he had a camera to his face. When I looked back, he was blocked from view. Next time was outside the store. But he turned away immediately. And a few minutes later, on the sidewalk, he had his hands over his mouth and nose, and sunglasses on.”

“So a guy in a Met’s hat with no discernible facial features?”

Frustration passed and Clarissa smiled. “Guess we’ll have to see if he shows up tonight, huh?”

FOR THE FIRST time in months, Clarissa had a conversation about something other than work. Beck had been charming and funny. And normal. Took her a bit by surprise.

The topic of Charles, or the FBI agents, or the guy they were going to see tomorrow never came up.

She started to feel normal.

How long had it been since she’d had that sensation?

After dinner, she declined Beck’s offer to go out for a few drinks with some guys from the office. Knowing he’d use the drive to her apartment as an opportunity to convince her to go out, she preempted the pitch by stating she’d grab a cab home. Otherwise, the temptation to extend the evening would be too great.

She had the cabbie drop her off two blocks from her apartment building. The streets were dimly lit. Lingering heat left behind a veil of haze. Couples strolled past on either side. After a casual glance, she ignored them.

There was one person she was looking out for, and she had no idea what he looked like.

By now, the guy with the camera will have changed his clothes, and in effect, his appearance.

The lights wrapping the awning that stretched out from the front door lit the sidewalk. From where she stood, the entrance looked deserted. Another hundred feet, and she’d be inside.

She approached the alley before her building. Her pace slowed. Her hand slipped into her purse and wrapped around her pistol’s grip. She rested her index finger on the trigger guard. The muzzle pointed toward the brick wall to her right. Soon, it would aim directly in the alley.

She turned her head toward the opening as she passed, careful to take in all of her surroundings prior to doing so. She

knew the location of every visible person on the street.

She narrowed her eyes in an effort to allow her vision to cut through the dark. The immediate area proved to be barren. She stepped back onto the sidewalk with fifty feet left to go to the door.

Clarissa's sweeping glance showed that the few people on the street had moved the same distance as her, in their respective directions. She cast a glance back at the alley. No lingering shadows advanced from within the corridor.

And then the car door opened.

Whipping her head around, she regretted the decision to release her pistol.

The guy rushed toward her, his ball cap pulled down, the shadows hiding his face. He held something in his hand. A weapon, perhaps, Clarissa couldn't make it out.

She turned quickly in a tight semi-circle. Her purse responded by continuing around her back.

The man lifted his arm. From a black handle emerged a telescoping black pole about three feet long. He lifted it up and back over his shoulder.

Clarissa tried to pull her pistol, but the purse was in an awkward position. She had to decide, compromise her position in an all-out effort for the gun, or stand her ground and attempt to dodge the blow.

She stood her ground.

The guy swung the nightstick as he continued forward. Its trajectory put the weapon on a crash course with her skull.

Big mistake.

Dodging the blow was easy. She rolled away, managing to deliver an elbow strike to the side of the guy's head.

He halted his momentum and spun back toward her. He swung the nightstick blindly.

Clarissa stepped forward, using one arm to stop his swing, and the other to strike him in the throat.

It only half-worked.

The guy coughed and gagged after her fist connected with his windpipe. But at the same time, the nightstick slammed into the back of her head.

Pain radiated out from the spot of impact. She dropped to a knee.

He dropped to two, releasing the nightstick and wrapping his hands around his throat.

Clarissa's vision darkened. As the pain localized, she felt the slow warm trickle of blood crawling down her neck. She fell forward. Her left arm stopped her progression. She spotted the nightstick off to the side and dove for it.

Rolling, she secured the weapon and then rose up to her knees.

The guy had also managed to get himself under control and was scrambling toward the car. The vehicle roared to life before the man reached it. Headlights cut on. The glare blinded Clarissa.

Her attacker dove into the passenger side of the car, then the vehicle peeled away.

Clarissa hopped to her feet, took a second to regain her balance, then hurled the nightstick through the air. It hit the back of the car, shattering the rear window.

A couple ran across the street toward her.

"Are you OK?" the guy asked.

Clarissa reached behind her head, felt the cut. A surface wound. No underlying damage. Lots of blood, though the pain had faded a great deal already.

"Did either of you get the license plate?" she said.

They both shook their heads. The woman said, "Too dark."

"Can we call the cops or ambulance for you?" the guy said.

Clarissa shook her head. “It’s OK. I live right here. Cops won’t do anything but waste my time.”

The couple continued to ask her if she needed help even as she slung her purse over her shoulder and walked away.

Once inside the building, she headed to the stairwell and called Beck. His voicemail picked up.

“Beck, call me when you get this. The guy from earlier showed up outside my building. He tried to attack me, but I managed to send him scrambling. He was with someone, too. Don’t like this. At all.”

By the time he called back, she was in bed and nearly asleep.

He can wait until morning.

EASTERN FRANCE.

BEAR HADN'T REALIZED the road they'd been on for five minutes was in fact a driveway. He hadn't seen a streetlight in over an hour. Everything was black: the sky, the horizon, the earth. All except for the orange glow of a porch light at the end of the lane. Who or what was inside the house? His heart skipped a beat. Several, actually. He gritted his teeth against the sharp pain on the side of his head. Since leaving Nice, it hadn't dissipated. Seemed to occur more frequently lately. The duration longer. The pain more intense.

Pierre had cut his headlights when the porch light was a pinprick. Now he switched off the parking lights. How he knew where to go was beyond Bear. What if the road curved? Were there ditches along the side? Probably not. Like most country driveways, it probably followed the natural contours of the path. Presumably, Pierre knew it. Or the guy had great night vision. Whatever the case, Bear kept from worrying by thinking about Mandy being present. From here, the two could go anywhere.

Fifty feet from the house, two floodlights exploded in a wash of white. Motion activated, Bear guessed. The front door swung open. A slender figure waited. The silhouette bore a resemblance to Kat. Bear craned his neck as though it would allow him to see past the woman and locate Mandy. A short expanse of concrete led to the garage. The white door was down. No windows. The Audi Kat and Mandy had left in had

to be parked inside. Pierre stopped there and cut the engine. He left the keys in the ignition and exited the car.

Stepping out to join the Frenchman, Bear heard the woman on the porch call out in her native tongue. The voice was too mature to be Kat's. He looked over and saw her standing in the light. She looked to be in her late forties. Slim, attractive, hair still dark. But not Kat.

"Pierre," the woman said, looking past the man. "Where is Kat?"

The feeling in Bear's stomach was something he'd only felt on a couple occasions. The day he'd been falsely told that Jack had died was one. He struggled to recall another. If Kat wasn't here, neither was Mandy. He rushed forward, colliding with Pierre at the base of the steps leading to the porch. The Frenchman appeared to be in a similar state of panic. They hadn't been able to contact Kat since leaving Nice, but that was easily explained by the fact that cellular service was spotty at best in the region. And local phone service outages were common, according to Pierre.

"You tell me," Pierre shouted to the woman. "She should have been here hours ago. Are you saying you haven't heard from her at all? Why didn't you call me?"

She shook her head violently, as though the action could keep the inevitable truth at bay. "Our phone has been out for quite some time."

Pierre didn't seem to hear her as he pushed past and entered the home. Bear and the woman remained outside. Her on the porch. Him on the walkway. Staring at each other.

"Who are you?" she asked in English after a few moments.

"Friend of Pierre's," he said. "My girl was with Kat."

"So you're a criminal, too." Her eyes narrowed. She stepped back.

Bear didn't know what to do so he shrugged. It'd been years since he had been anything other than a contractor. Never considered himself a criminal. Not in the sense of thugs who hang on the street mugging innocent people. Not in the

way that bank robbers, rapists, or serial killers are. He'd worked with Jack, offering services to the highest bidder.

"What did you want with my Kat?" she asked.

Bear leaned back; an attempt to dodge the verbal blow. He'd never met the old lady before, much less had a conversation about her daughter that would result in her seeing through his facade. Able to tell he was in love with Kat.

"Nothing," Bear said. "She was accompanying my girl."

"No man just relinquishes control of his daughter to some woman he doesn't know or have feelings for."

Bear didn't correct her about Mandy not being his daughter. He'd come to think of her as his own.

"So?" the woman said.

Behind her, Pierre passed by the door. He glanced out, made eye contact with Bear and offered a slight shake of his head, then continued past.

"So, what?" Bear said.

"What about my daughter?"

"I've worked with Pierre in the past," he replied, unsure why he felt he owed the woman an explanation. "He trusted her. That was good enough for me."

"You trusted your daughter's life in the hands of a woman who can barely hold down a job waitressing." Her head moved side to side, like a swinging door. "Makes no sense."

Bear took a few steps forward, stopping on the second stair, bringing him eye to eye with the woman. "What do you know?"

She leaned back at first, then eased forward. "About what?"

"What's happening here tonight."

The toughness left her face. Eyes watered over. Tears spilled out over her cheeks. "What happened to my daughter?"

Rusted hinges scraped as Pierre pushed the screen door open. “No sign of anyone here.”

Bear pushed past the woman and met the Frenchman halfway across the porch.

“What should we do?” he asked. “Who can we call?”

“First, we need to get Kat’s mother out of here. She’s not safe. If someone has Kat, they’ll find this place.”

“OK.”

“Then I’ll start making calls. Get eyes out looking for the Audi. Looking for them. I’ll take any lead at this point, because as it stands, I don’t have a clue.”

Bear could only nod in agreement. He had no idea which way to turn next either.

“Where is your car?” Pierre asked the woman.

“In the garage behind the house. Why?”

“I don’t know that we should use mine anymore. If there is a chance they found the Audi, they can find this.”

“Agreed,” Bear said.

“Get your keys,” Pierre told the woman. “We need to go.”

“Where?” she said.

“First, to get you on a train. Then to find Kat.”

“And Mandy,” Bear said.

“And Mandy,” Pierre repeated.

TENERIFE.

THE EARLY MORNING sky remained dark blue except at the horizon. It was close to six a.m. There wouldn't be sunlight for a few more hours. Lights along the highway gave their surroundings an orange glow. Taillights dotted the landscape ahead.

“We should be there within twenty minutes,” Mason said.

Twenty more minutes until the journey was over. Actually, she thought, it might just be beginning.

They reached the resort and left the vehicle parked in front, next to the curb. A man approached, telling her she couldn't park there. Sasha ignored him. Mason did, too. Inside the lobby, Mason spotted the check-in desk and tugged at Sasha's elbow. The guy behind the desk glanced up at them and held up a bony finger while his other hand pressed a phone to his head.

Sasha ignored the man's request. “Erin Carlisle's room.”

The guy shot her a cross look and continued his conversation.

Sasha turned to Mason. “Little help here?”

Mason unclasped his watch. Slipped off his wedding ring. Slipped both in his right pocket. Then he placed his left arm on the counter and leaned over it as he left his feet. His free hand reached out. The guy on the other side of the desk stopped talking. His eyes widened. He dropped the phone. Mason

grabbed him behind the head, securing a thick patch of hair in his grasp. Then using his planted forearm, he forced himself back. The other guy came out of his seat with a howl. He tried to plant his palms on the surface, but it did no good. Any resistance meant more pain. He gave in and allowed Mason to drag him halfway over the counter.

“My partner asked you a question,” Mason said. “You rudely ignored her. Now, first I want you to apologize to her. Then you are going to give her the information she asked for.”

The guy flailed about in an attempt to find balance atop the counter. Mason pulled his head up so he faced Sasha.

“Tell her,” Mason said.

Sasha felt the stares of everyone in the lobby fall upon her. The guy stammered out his apology then insisted he’d give her any information she wanted.

“Erin Carlisle,” she said. “I want her room number, and a key.”

“I can’t give you a key,” the guy said.

Mason yanked the guy’s head toward him, then fished around in his pocket and produced his badge. “You see this? This means you do whatever the bloody hell we tell you to. You have any idea what we can do to you? Borders mean nothing to us. For all I know, you’re hell bent on setting off an attack on England. All I have to do is think that, and I can haul you in and keep you detained for two weeks.”

“OK, OK,” the guy said. “Whatever you want. I’ll do whatever you say.”

“Good,” Mason said. “Now tell us Erin Carlisle’s room number and produce a key.”

Several hotel employees had gathered near, including a security officer. They shuffled left to right. Shook their hands. Glanced at one another. No one had any idea what to do in this situation. And Sasha worried what Mason might try to do should one of them act. The sooner the desk guy produced a room key, the better. Fortunately, it didn’t take long. He handed the plastic card over to Mason along with directions.

He also insisted the security guard escort them and provide whatever support they needed. When the guard tried to protest, the desk guy insisted everything was OK. It was all a misunderstanding, and entirely his fault.

Mason smiled and agreed. Sasha rolled her eyes. There were other ways to handle situations such as these. Better ways. Nonviolent ways. That didn't matter, though. Getting to the room did.

They rode the lift up with the security guard. He asked questions. Sasha and Mason ignored him. She stared ahead at her reflection in the mirrored door. Mason stared at her, too, but she ignored that as well.

The lift came to a halt. The floor indicator dinged. The doors parted. The trio stepped into the lobby. The security guard looked right, then left, perhaps acclimating himself to the floor. Might have been one of those that no matter how many times they'd walked it, the enclosed casing of the lift left his sense of direction misaligned after a ride up.

"This way," he said, pointing down the hallway.

They followed his lead. It was impossible to tell whether the rooms they passed were occupied. She wondered if anyone had seen Erin and Mia. Would they recognize a picture of them? Had anyone been asking about them? She wondered if anyone watched the hallway through the peephole in their door. Her gaze traveled from the room numbers to the gap at the door. She watched for obstructed light. Shadows moving. Shifting. Someone ready to move should their prey be tampered with.

"Here it is," the guy announced.

Sasha wanted to hit him. Mason nearly did. She reached out and grabbed his wrist.

"Keep it down," Mason said.

Sasha stepped in front and slid the key into the magnetic reader. The light flashed red, then green, blinked a couple times then remained solid. The lock disengaged. She pulled

her pistol. The guard made a noise, but otherwise didn't interfere. Mason stepped forward.

"I'll lead," he whispered, reaching for the handle.

She dropped to a knee, extended her pistol. The approach wasn't ideal. There was already a rift between Erin and her. This would widen it. And probably scare Mia. But if something had already happened - if whoever had pinged Erin's records had already found her - then the way they were handling it was ideal. Minus the security guard, obviously. But he was there, and might even prove useful.

"Going," Mason said, exploding through the door, sidearm drawn and aimed in front of him. He shouted once inside. "Everyone down. Hands up. Let me see your hands."

Sasha followed him in. Covering the room. Staying low. Watching the shadows. Finding nothing.

"It's empty," Mason said.

"I know." She rose and walked past him, toward the window. Splitting the blinds, she glanced out over the plaza. "Check the hot water in the shower."

"Why?"

"If they were here recently, it might run warm right away."

"Water heats up pretty fast here," the guard said.

"Shut up," Mason said as he passed the man on the way to the bathroom.

Sasha continued to stare out the window. "What kind of security camera system do they have in place?"

"You asking me?" the guard said.

She glanced back, nodded.

"Halls, elevator lobbies, main lobby, front and rear and sides of the building."

"What about in the plaza? Does the city have a system in place?"

The guard nodded. “Don’t know much about it, but yeah. If you look up at the light poles, you see them cameras aimed down.”

“And do you know anyone with access to those?”

“I’m private security, ma’am. Work for the hotel. I suppose you’d have to reach out to the local authorities.” He looked to his left, toward the wall, then back at her. “What do you think happened here?”

She shrugged, feigning uncertainty.

He glanced to his left again, head titled, like a dog who’s heard a squirrel padding across the back patio. “You hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Come here.”

She crossed to him, called out, “Mason, cut that water and come here.”

The guard pressed his ear against the wall. Sasha did the same. Mason stepped out of the bathroom, started to speak, but said nothing. Sasha held up a finger in response to the questioning look on his face.

“Shit,” she said.

“What?” he said.

“That’s someone calling for help.” She pushed past the guard, toward the door. “Get someone up here with a key right now.”

They waited in the hall for three long minutes, unsure of what waited for them on the other side of the door. The guy from the desk handed her the room key. She and Mason followed the same entry procedure, only with her taking the lead.

The woman sobbed when the light from the hallway hit her. It took Sasha about three seconds to recognize her as Hannah. Perhaps she feared she would now die. Maybe she realized she was saved. Sasha didn’t make her wait long.

“It’s OK, Hannah,” she said as she removed the gag from the woman’s mouth. “You’re OK now.”

“Where’re Erin and Mia?” Hannah asked between sobs.

Sasha glanced back at the Mason and the other two men. “We’re going to find that out now.”

The group traveled to the lobby where they met with the local police. First up was reviewing the security footage. Hannah immediately identified Brett in the footage of her and the man entering the hotel. It took Sasha’s team in London less than five minutes to return everything MI6 had on Brett Taylor. They were working on his current location when one of the policemen received a call. He informed the group of the woman found murdered on the beach.

“Where is the body?” Sasha asked.

“They are transporting it to the morgue,” the officer said.

“Take us there,” she said.

“Don’t you think you are being a bit hasty?” Mason asked.

“No,” she said. “I’ve got a bad feeling. The same kind of bad feeling I had when I noticed someone had accessed Jack’s files.”

“You’ve been monitoring Noble?”

She ignored his question. “It’s her. We need to go now.”

“There could be more on this tape, Sasha,” Mason said. “Let the police do their job and we do ours.”

“This is our job,” she said. Then she turned to the cop. “Take us there.”

One officer remained behind so that Hannah could ride along with Sasha and Mason to the morgue. It took less than five minutes. It was obvious the place was nothing more than a holding room. They’d keep the body here for identification, then move it to another facility for the autopsy and any forensics work. She figured the process corrupted ninety percent of any possible evidence left behind on a body.

The cop led them inside. Despite Hannah's protests, Sasha made her wait outside the chilled room. Together, Sasha and Mason waited while the tech pulled the chilled locker out and removed the sheet draped over the body.

Though the wounds affected the face, there was no doubt that the body was that of Erin Carlisle.

"Shit," Sasha said.

"That her?" Mason asked.

"Yes, that's her. Jack's ex. His daughter's mother." She turned toward Mason. "Shit."

Her phone cut off his reply. She saw the number and answered immediately.

"South Africa," Brooks - one of her guys - said. "He was transported on a private flight to Johannesburg a few hours ago."

"How soon can you get us off this island?" she asked.

Brooks tapped on his keyboard. "Commercial flights will take way too long. They all connect at least once in Europe. Start making your way to the airport, and I'll work on finding a private jet that can take you ASAP."

She lowered her phone and turned to Mason. "We have to go now."

"Where?" he said.

"Airport."

"To go where?"

"Johannesburg."

"South Africa?"

"Yes."

"You're crazy."

"I know."

"What about the girl?"

“I’ll have Brooks coordinate with the locals to get her home and placed under our care.”

“You’re crazy,” Mason said again as Sasha exited the room with no intention of stopping until she was on a plane bound for Johannesburg, South Africa.

NEW YORK.

CHARLES LAY ON an overstuffed bed in a cheap hotel room. The kind of place he never stayed. But tonight he didn't care. He hoped that the condition would keep him from getting too relaxed. Perhaps give his brain a chance to figure things out. He stared at a patch of yellow ceiling, near the outer wall. A leak, he supposed, from the window in the room above his. As long as it didn't cave in tonight.

He couldn't stay away from the city for too long. Things would go to hell quick if his captains started thinking Charles had abandoned them. Everyone looked out for themselves. No one had his best interests at heart. He was sure some still thought there was a way for them to take over. He had to prevent a group of them from banding together and trying. Of course, chances of that occurring were slim. Because they all looked out for themselves. No one else. Not him. Not each other.

Still, this trip had to come to an end. And soon. He considered the possibility of letting Paolo go. It'd only be a matter of time before the guy surfaced somewhere. A standing order on the guy's life would put a swift end to him as soon as he did. But that would require a certain amount of airing dirty laundry, so to speak. And Charles was against that. For the most part.

A glimmer of hope surfaced when his cell phone rang and the number calling was that of Trooper McGillicuddy,

Charles's contact out in these parts.

"What do you got for me, Gilly?" Charles said.

"We've found your guy."

"You don't say." Charles sat up, smiled at his reflection in the mirror. "Where at?"

"In Ohio, near the lake, about twenty minutes past the Pennsylvania border."

"You didn't call in anyone over there, right?"

"Nope. Got one of my guys on him. Staking it out. If your guy moves, so will he. Won't make any attempt to detain, even if things get out of hand. He can't out there."

"Good. Tell him to stay put. He doesn't want to mess with that guy anyway."

"You owe me, DeCosta."

"Do I? I thought it was you that owed me?" Charles rose and walked to the bathroom. "Ah, forget about it. I owe you. Or, more accurately, I will owe you if this works out the way I hope it does. Now give me that address."

Charles copied down the address and directions, then washed up and left the hotel.

"JUST CLOSE YOUR eyes now, Essie," Paolo whispered as he stroked his sister's hair back. She still hadn't spoken. Seemed worse than she had a few hours ago. He was worried that when she finally came out of it - if she came out of it - that she wouldn't be the same for a while. Maybe not ever. Post-traumatic stress was awful. He'd seen it in some of the guys that worked in the organization. The ones who'd served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

He rose and walked to the sink, poured two cups of water. Set one next to Essie, then sat on the bed.

"We're safe here," he said. "These cabins are deep in the woods. Ours is the furthest back. We can come and go and no one will see us. I figure we'll stay here for a week, maybe two, then move on. Perhaps cross the border at the Upper

Peninsula, or continue west to Montana. Go far enough into the mountains there and you're practically in another country without having to go through customs."

He glanced down and smiled at Essie. She stared blankly at the ceiling. He wondered if she even heard anything he said.

"Good night, little sis." He leaned over, kissed her cheek, then cut the light.

Essie's breathing remained steady. The way Paolo saw it, she was already asleep. Had been that way most of the day now. So what if her eyes had been open. He glanced down at her. The soft light that filtered through the window glinted off her still-open eyes. He place his hand on her forehead, gently massaged her temples, then drug his palm toward her nose, letting his thumb and index finger drag on her eyelids and shut them.

TROOPER JOHANSON NOTED the time the lights went out in the cabin. He wasn't sure how long he'd be here. McGillicuddy had told him as long as it took. Might as well make himself useful and keep track of habits and patterns. It'd come in handy when the next guy arrived.

UNKNOWN LOCATION.

EVERY MUSCLE WAS on fire, but Jack could barely move. His head felt worse than it had after he'd been waterboarded some years ago. It was like someone had combined the ten worst hangovers in history and slammed them over Jack's head. He couldn't tell if his eyes were closed, or the room was dark, or if he'd gone blind. A steady drip splashed on the floor near him. It intensified in sound with every passing second. He clenched his right fist, squeezing, digging his nails into his palm until some sensation returned. How could he hurt so badly, yet have no sense of touch or feel? Pins and needles spread through his fingers, hand, wrist, arm. He began working his other hand in the same manner. Then he clenched his eyelids tight. The left opened easily. The right was tougher to part. Slowly he adjusted to the dull light. He lay face down on a dirty concrete floor, the right side of his face pressed against the damp surface.

The drip sounded closer now. Right behind him. He brought his hands in close, placed them palm down on the floor, pushed up. His torso rose an inch or two, then collapsed, cheek colliding with the concrete, sending a shockwave of pain through his orbital bone. A different pain than he'd been experiencing. It was superficial, not deep and muscular. It meant he was coming around.

From what, though?

He had no recollection of ending up on the floor. He thought back, trying to recall anything. Nothing surfaced immediately. Frustration building, he returned to the physical challenge of getting off the floor. The ever-intensifying water drip now pelted the back of his head. He managed to turn his body and pulled his face off the floor. Glanced up. Saw a long metal pipe running from one side of the room to the other, directly above him. Large drops of water clung to the rail. Another fell and hit the side of his head with a smack.

How the hell did a drop of water hurt so much?

Jack rocked back then forward, sliding his hands along the floor so they were directly under his shoulder. His legs were still numb, but that was only a sensation. He directed his feet to straighten and dragged his knees up. Felt nothing. Heard them scraping against the floor. He pushed his chest off the concrete. It required as much effort as a hundredth push up might. When was the last time he'd attempted that many? Had to be Recruit Training, or one of the Spec Ops schools he'd attended during his early years in the Marines. He kept pushing, locked his arms when they were straight, drew his knees up closer. He pulled his hands off the floor and rocked back so he sat on his heels, knees out in front. Now, to stand.

The water dripped next to him, splashing and spraying over his bare arms. The wall stood a few feet away. Too far to simply reach out and touch it. He shuffled on his knees until he was close enough to fall forward and remain upright. He pressed his hands against the damp plaster or drywall like it was the floor. He pushed out with his arms. Up with his legs. Inched his way up, face pressed against the wall. Sweat dripped down his face, chest, back. Or was that water from the pipe? He didn't have enough feeling to know if he was hot or cold. He burned, but not from heat.

The pain in his head intensified with every inch of progress he made. He had flashes of events. A meeting in a dark apartment. A phone call with Erin. Tenerife. Something about the island off the North African coast. Charles DeCosta in his apartment. What the hell? None of it made sense. Not

the body he recalled seeing in a strange house, or standing with Frank on a lakeside beach.

Finally, Jack was upright. He forced himself around and leaned back against the wall. His lungs cried out for oxygen. His chest heaved in an attempt to satisfy the requirement. Feeling returned to his legs, starting at his toes and working up. The burning sensation followed. It now spread throughout his entire body. Skin and bone and muscles on fire.

He realized he was naked except for a pair of boxer shorts. He stared at his bare legs and chest and at his clenched fist. And then he laughed. It was the only thing he could do at that moment. Had he lost his mind? What the hell had happened? Was he a prisoner?

Memories flooded him. Flashes of images appeared and faded just as fast. A time line formed, starting with the meeting. He couldn't put it all together, though. He reached down and pulled up the legs of his boxer's and saw the two dark bruises. All that remained of the tranquilizers someone had shot at him.

Who? Why?

Jack took his first timid steps toward the door at the other end of the room. Light, brighter than that in the room, filled the cracks on the top, sides and bottom. It'd be locked. He was sure of that. No one would hold him captive and leave the door unlocked. But he had to check for himself. What kind of idiot would he be if it turned out otherwise? Not that it would. But he had to check. If only to prove to himself that he could cross the room. He looked down again in search of additional bruises. Saw none. Couldn't figure out how not, considering how badly his body ached. No, burned. An ache was different. The feeling after a car crash or getting your ass kicked was different. This was like every nerve in his body had been frozen and then thawed with acid.

Foot by foot, step by step, he crossed the room. He shuffled when his feet wouldn't lift off the floor. He had to keep going. Only other option was to collapse. And as bad as

it had been where he had been lying, this side of the room looked like the other had taken a shit on it.

Finally, he stood a foot in front of the door. He placed his left hand on the wall for support. Then he reached out for the knob with the other. The metal handle felt cold and wet. He gave it a turn to the left. It didn't budge. He inhaled and sighed. Let his forehead come to rest against the door. Then turned the knob the opposite direction.

And found it unlocked.

UNKNOWN LOCATION.

THE DOOR STUCK after moving about an inch. Locked on the other side, Jack figured. He gave it a shove, but the door didn't budge. Jack took a step back, looked up toward the top, past it, to the ceiling. Water didn't just coat the pipe. The entire ceiling was covered in slick condensation. For the first time, he noticed the putrid smell. What the hell had this room been used for? He checked the floor for grates, concerned that bodies were dismembered and dissolved in acid in there. If so, he wouldn't find any trace there.

He reminded himself that the door moved. It wasn't a latch binding it. Worst case, it was barred on the other side. But it might just be a security chain. And there was no way a simple chain was going to hold back Jack's solid 220 pounds, especially with a running start.

A direct path was best, but it had to be clear of puddles. He still had little trust in his balance and the ability of his muscles to hold up to a sprint. A line through the middle of the room worked best. Jack walked to the other wall backward, focus on the door. He stopped when his shoulder blades made contact with the cool, wet wall. Then he took a deep breath, crouched with his left leg forward, then powered off the wall toward the door, twisting and dipping so his left shoulder would take the brunt.

Bone and muscle smashed into the heavy barrier with a smack. There was no resistance. Whatever secured the door

gave way like it was nothing more than dental floss. Jack lost his balance and stumbled. He forced himself to twist so he wouldn't end up slamming face first into a wall, knocking himself unconscious.

But there was nothing to stop him. Not immediately, at least.

He continued forward, bent at the waist, arms flailing in an attempt to regain his balance. Didn't find it, though, and collapsed to the floor, his left shoulder once again taking the impact of the fall. Pain radiated down his arm, to the tips of his fingers. He balled his fist just to make sure he still could.

After a moment of silence, the space filled with noise. New noise. Not necessarily better than the dripping water. Different, though.

Jack rolled over, opened his eyes. The hallway was wide and painted beige. The ceiling above was white and absent of water. Someone nearby coughed. A baby cried for a moment. He arched his back and looked down the corridor, getting an upside-down view. A woman cradling a baby to her breast took a hit off a small glass pipe. Her eyes were glazed over. Looked like a damn zombie. Crack zombie. And feeding her child at the same time. Disgust turned Jack's stomach. He rolled over, got to his knees, reached out of the wall, stood.

"These are for you," a man said from behind him.

Jack stopped and turned. The guy was older. Probably in his sixties. Frail with a head full of short white hair. He spoke English, but the accent was not one Jack was familiar with.

"Pardon?" Jack said.

The guy lifted something off his lap. "These are for you."

Jack still couldn't place the accent. It was heavy, like people in New Zealand. Jack understood the words, but it was as though they spoke in another language.

"What is it?" Jack said, although it was clear the man held pants and a shirt. He wanted to hear the guy talk again.

“What’s it look like, man? It’s clothes. Take ‘em or I’ll give em to someone here.”

Jack held out both hands in surrender. “Fine, give them here.” He shook out the shirt and slipped it on, then the pants.

The guy stood and reached into his pocket. Jack eased back, tensed his core. The man produced a cell phone. “Almost forgot this. They said to give you this.”

Taking the cell, Jack said, “Who? And where am I?”

The guy looked at him funny. “You had that good a time last night, eh?”

“What are you talking about? Who told you to give me this stuff?”

“Man, you need to quit fucking around.” The guy smiled. “Gonna be late for your wedding if you don’t get going. Bus comes by every ten minutes.”

Jack lunged forward, grabbed the guy by his shirt and lifted him out of his chair. He noticed for the first time the man had no legs. The crack addict gasped. Her baby cried. She shushed the child, perhaps redirecting it to her breasts.

“What the hell you doing?” the man said. His mouth hung open. Alcohol laden breath washed over Jack.

“Who told you to give this stuff to me?”

“Three guys, man. All Americans, like you. They said you was passed out from too much drinking. You know, bachelor party. Wedding today. They paid me a couple hundred to stay here and wait for you. They said you’d do just like you did and bust out of that room after about four hours.”

Jack searched his memory, hoping the guy’s description of events would help, but he had no recollection of being brought to the room. He eased the guy back into his seat.

“Where the hell am I?” Jack asked.

“Hillbrow.”

He thought of every city he knew in Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, and Amsterdam. Couldn’t place Hillbrow

in any of them.

“Where?” Jack said.

“Hillbrow, in Johannesburg.”

Jack stared blankly at the guy.

“You in South Africa, man. How do you not know this? You’re here to get married. Man, you gonna have a pissed off bride.”

“South Africa,” Jack repeated. “What?”

“You need me to call someone for you?”

Jack shook his head and backed away from the old guy. “How do I get out of here?”

“Stairs at the other end of the hall. Emergency exit at the bottom. But don’t worry, no alarm sounds.”

Jack turned away from the guy, passed the crack-addict mother, staring at the child that had no chance at a decent future. He reached the end of the hallway and kicked the metal door open. He wasn’t sure what he’d find on the other side. There was a part of him that wanted to believe this was all some kind of joke. But then he thought of the bruises on his thigh, and he remembered the shots fired. Tranquilizers.

And things began to make sense.

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA.

BRETT DROVE TO the center of the city, figuring there he'd be able to get to any other part in equal time. Ballard had only told him Johannesburg. Beyond that, the guy had no details. But he would in time. The man insisted on it. At some point, someone would tell someone else where Noble was, and then Ballard would relay the information. And Brett had to trust the guy would. After all, Ballard had found a way to transport him to South Africa without Brett needing to give up his weapon. Sure, they could find a safe house through whatever agency Ballard was associated with, but that would take time. And when tracking a guy like Noble, time was not a commodity. It worked against you. Every second that guy had to figure out his next step was another second Brett would be closer to failing.

And failure was not an option in this operation.

He located a parking spot near a bank of stores and stepped out into the cool morning air. Quite a difference, going from ninety all day long in the States to fifty degrees even as the sun stood directly above, bright and glaring.

His cell phone vibrated in his hand. The display read unknown. He answered anyway, certain of the caller's identity.

"Got a location for you," Ballard said.

"OK."

"Hillbrow."

“Where is that?”

“I’m going to send you an email with a secure link for a program you’ll download to your phone. The login credentials will be listed in the message. Use those for access after you have the application installed. Then you’ll need to enter 6-X-Z-N-Y-R-# into the form box. Repeat it.”

Brett repeated the code.

“Good,” Ballard said. “Now, once you do that, you are going to have a link to Noble’s cellular signal. It’ll overlay onto a map. Follow the signal and you’ll find him.”

“How’d you get his phone information?”

“These people who brought him there, they’re idiots.”

“Why’d they bring him here instead of finishing the job?”

“Cause they’re trying to protect him, not kill him.”

“SIS.”

“Right.” Ballard’s heavy breathing indicated he was excited over the prospect of closing in on Noble.

“What happens after this?”

“I guess you’ll need to get back to the States.”

“How?”

“You’re a smart guy. You’ll figure it out.”

With that, the call disconnected.

“Bastard,” Brett muttered, opening his mail application. As Ballard had stated, there was a message waiting with a secure link. He tapped on the link and was redirected to a page with an icon and nothing else. Another tap initiated the download. He navigated back to his inbox, reopened the message, and memorized the login credentials. After the application finished installing, he logged in, then entered the code Ballard had verbally delivered into the dialog box.

A map took over his phone’s screen. The terrain layered in first. Then the streets. But it stopped there. Brett walked to the

corner and took note of the street signs. Then he looked at the map. It was synced perfectly to his position.

“Where are you, Jack?” he asked the phone.

The answer was so obvious that Brett nearly slammed the device on the concrete once he realized it. With two fingers, he zoomed the map out, uncovering more of the city.

And he found Jack’s signal. Roughly seven miles from where he stood. A couple turns was all it would take to reach him. The end was in sight.

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA.

HE HADN'T EXPECTED it to be so cool outside. Throughout his career, most of Jack's ops kept him in the Northern Hemisphere or around the equator. He'd never traveled this far south except for a trip to Australia, but that had been years ago. As his skin pricked, he wondered why Frank's guys hadn't left him with a coat or sweatshirt. He looked through the windows of the shops he passed, but it was useless unless he planned on walking out without paying. And while he wasn't opposed to doing so at the moment, he had no weapon to handle any security guard that might come tailing after him. The only option was to move faster.

The street buzzed with activity. Cars passed. Kids worked the corners for the dealers inside the buildings. Someone would walk or pull up and hand the kid something. The kid, in turn, would set off on foot or on a bike, sometimes going to a visible building, other times heading around the corner. They'd return and hand the waiting person a bag or a box or just shake their hand. Depended on the size of the order. If they got pinched, which Jack figured didn't happen often because the dealers paid off the police, it'd be the kid taking the rap. And like most places, that wouldn't amount to much. Even if they did some time in juvie, the dealer would see fit to help them out afterward.

Or not.

Jack continued on, watching the groups of guys hanging out on stoops as he passed. He made direct eye contact with each of them. A way of saying: *I know you're there, don't bother trying anything.* And no one did. On the one hand, he hoped someone would, for the chance they might have a weapon on them. On the other, he still felt weak. His muscles still burned. And at times, he felt as though he didn't have complete control over his body.

The part he hated most was walking blind. Sure, he could see the street in front of him and all that occurred, but he had no idea where the hell he was going. He knew where South Africa was on a map. He had a loose outline of Johannesburg stored in his brain. But there was no mental map of the city, and certainly not of a slum called Hillbrow.

The further he walked, the nicer the area looked. Iron bars over windows gave way to curtains. Pawn shops turned into jewelry stores. With every area, there's a demarcation point. A spot where things go from bad to good. The more urban the area, the shorter the transition. A million dollar renovated townhome might be right next to one that houses twenty people living off government subsidies. Of course, it was all observation. Without any real clue where he was, Jack couldn't be sure the area he walked through now was any better than where he had been ten minutes ago.

And when he saw the white vehicle slowing to a near stop, the window rolling down, the faces of two men who didn't belong in the neighborhood, the dark barrel of the guy's pistol as he lifted it above the windowsill, Jack realized it didn't matter where he was.

They'd found him.

Trusting muscles that still burned and occasionally misfired, Jack sprinted forward. He heard the high-pitched whine of the small vehicle's engine ramping up. Tires chirped as the car whipped around in a U-turn in the middle of the road.

Jack set his sights on a narrow alley, no more than twenty feet ahead. Close enough that he could hit it before the vehicle

caught up to him. Without looking back, he went all out, knees pumping, feet hitting the ground, propelling him forward. He cut right when he reached the alley. It was a blind turn. With no idea what wait at the other end, he could have screwed himself by running into a dead end. The men wouldn't have to work hard to take him out.

He looked back as he made the turn. The car was close. The driver slammed on the brakes. Small spires of smoke rose around the tires as the brakes ground the vehicle to a halt.

Ahead, Jack's worst fear was realized. The alley was a long corridor that led nowhere. It was walled in. He'd get to the end and scale the wall if he had to. Let the men shoot him in the back. No way Jack would watch the bullet hit him.

A brick canyon rose around him. Footsteps echoed throughout. Theirs. His own. It didn't matter. The sound and the fear and his survival instinct propelled him forward, sprinting toward the end of the corridor.

A shot rang out.

Jack tensed, but kept moving. He waited for the pain and the burn, the seared skin, the impact that would knock him off his feet. But it didn't come. Were they toying with him? Sending a signal to stop? Maybe because he was really there to help?

Perhaps the shooter had he simply missed.

A second shot that missed by inches answered that question. They wanted Jack dead.

The corridor closed in on him as he approached the end of the alley. Nowhere else to go. Except up. Sixty feet, at least. Small brick, packed with mortar. No real hand or foot holds. Absent the sound of gunfire, all he heard was the whooshing of his heart. He couldn't recall it ever beating so fast. The explosion of energy and adrenaline, and the tranquilizer's lingering effects all competed against one another for the precious oxygen his blood transported.

How had he not collapsed yet?

A third shot. It slammed into the wall above him, reducing brick and mortar into dust. It coated his hair and skin.

Jack glanced back. One man stood at the end of the alley, silhouetted against the sunlight. He hadn't advanced. The further away Jack was, the harder it would be to make the shot with a pistol. Of course, the guy only needed for him to reach the end. Then he could make his way down, confident that Jack had nowhere to go, and no means to defend himself. Except that the man had been firing a weapon in broad daylight. How long would he remain there? How much time would it take for the police to respond?

Perhaps the area was bad enough the residents paid little attention.

The guy had to be waiting on something, or someone. Maybe his partner to join him. Maybe they planned on apprehending Jack. But why? Who would go to all this trouble to do so? It wasn't as though he'd come into the country announced. They had to have tracked his progress across the Atlantic. Which meant a leak somewhere. He thought back to the airstrip. How many men had been there? Had Frank been in on it from the beginning? He must've been. That, or Frank was dead now, because he certainly hadn't been waiting in that room with Jack.

Jack thought back to the airstrip when he went down. Where was Frank? There was shouting. Frank's voice, rising above the others. Had they taken him down too? Jack had a glimpse of Frank in front of him. Reaching out to him. What had he said?

If Frank was still alive, he had the answers. But in order to get them, Jack had to get through this situation alive. And the chances of that were looking pretty damn slim.

The wall halted his progress. It was almost over. He'd stop, and the guy would approach and would fire while out of reach.

Jack's heart continued pounding as though he were still sprinting. It was dark enough down here that the guy wouldn't be able to accurately aim from the other end. He'd get about halfway down before the next shot.

Jack placed his hands on the cool brick as though he expected the wall to open up in the middle for him. It didn't.

But the darkly painted door to his right did.

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA.

BRETT HAD FOLLOWED Noble's movements for several minutes. Now, he remained focused on the screen, wondering what the guy was doing at the end of a dead-end alley. He didn't put it past the realm of possibility that Noble had a contact in the city. What if he was now meeting that person, arming himself, or securing transport out of Johannesburg?

Then the dot on the screen moved, not out of the alley, but to the right, then behind it. Too slow to be in a vehicle. But what was at the location? The map didn't provide satellite imagery, and Brett didn't have time to try to find the location on another application that did.

"What are you doing, Jack?" Brett said, referring to the target by his first name for the first time in years. He had to ignore their history together. To do otherwise could cloud his decision-making at a critical juncture. The results of that would be the wrong person dying.

The dot once again stopped, at a place between the alley and the next named street.

"What are you doing, Jack?" Brett said again, well aware that he was humanizing the man.

NEAR LAKE ERIE, OHIO.

THE DRIVE TOOK about as long as Charles expected. Which was to say, too long. But as long as the trip paid off the way he expected, he could deal with the commute. The campground had an unassuming sign posted about six feet off the side of the road. A dirt and gravel path led through the woods. A camper was the first structure he saw. Christmas lights wrapped around the door and windows, and lined the extended canopy. Coals burned dim in the fire pit.

The contact was Trooper Johanson. An idiot, according to Gilly. But a trained one. Which meant he sat on his position all night.

Charles pulled over in front of a cabin that looked deserted and placed a call to Gilly to let him know he was there. The trooper told him to wait for his call back.

TROOPER JOHANSON HAD been asleep. According to his clock, it'd been at least an hour. He stared at the ringing cell phone for a moment before composing himself enough to answer. As he said his hellos, he caught sight of the cabin and studied it for any changes. The light had gone out.

“Your relief is there,” McGillicuddy said.

“OK. Who is it?”

“Someone I know. We’re doing him a favor. Got it? So you just tell him what you know, what you’ve seen, and then you get your ass back here without giving him any trouble.”

“What’s he look like?”

“Just get out of your car and go stand behind it. He’ll find you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And remember,” McGillicuddy added with a pause.

“Yes?”

“Don’t give him any lip. I’m serious. This guy has a temper.”

Has a temper, Trooper Johanson thought with a smile. Almost every person he knew in law enforcement had a temper. At least around him.

PAOLO IGNORED THE guilt he felt over leaving Essie in the cabin. Not like she noticed when he’d left. She’d opened her eyes again, but her focus, if there was one, remained on the ceiling.

The middle-aged couple that had been sitting on opposite sides of the fire pit near the entrance told him they’d walk by and check on her before turning in, while he went out for a drink. They also told him that the bar he was now sitting in was closer than the one he recalled passing on the drive in. Saved him at least forty minutes. And he was only a short walk away. If the couple found anything amiss, the man promised to drive up and let Paolo know.

He stared into his mug, at the last sip of beer remaining. *Down it and go*, he thought. He lifted the glass, tilted it back and swallowed what was left. Set the mug on the counter. Dropped one foot off the stool to the floor.

“Another?” the woman tending bar asked.

She wasn’t all that pretty, but her smile felt inviting. Enough so that Paolo decided to have another drink before heading back to the cabin.

CHARLES SPOTTED THE truck from fifty yards away as he rounded the corner. It looked like the guy had left enough space for Charles to park in front. He drew closer, spotted a man standing near the tailgate, looking up at the sky.

Charles rolled down the passenger window and pulled to a stop.

“Gilly sent me,” he said.

The man approached Charles’s vehicle, leaned over. “Trooper McGillicuddy?”

“Who the hell else would I refer to as Gilly?”

“Right, sir. I mean, yes, sir. No problem.”

“Would you shut the fuck up, you blabbering idiot?”

Trooper Johanson nodded quickly and looked down at the ground, hands tucked behind his back.

“Which cabin is it?” Charles asked.

Johanson pointed toward the cabin that had a light on before he fell asleep.

“How many people?” Charles asked.

“Two,” Johanson said. “Man and a woman. She looked kinda sick or something.”

“What kind of ‘or something’?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then why would you say it?”

Johanson glanced away. Charles could hear the guy thinking what a prick Charles was.

“She just kind of shuffled around, if you know what I mean.”

“I think I do.” Charles stared at the cabin. He’d always shook his head at people who said something was so close they could taste it. But now he knew. Revenge had a taste, a flavor. And it was sweet.

“Anything else, sir?” Trooper Johanson asked.

“Stop calling me sir, for starters. Second, tell me what you’ve seen.”

“Not a whole lot, I guess.”

“You guess?”

“They got here and been inside, mostly. I mean, the whole time. The entire time I’ve been here, they’ve been inside.”

Charles studied the guy. He truly was an idiot. How he’d made the state troopers, Charles didn’t know. He wished the guy worked in the city. A cop like that, he’d have him on his payroll in no time at all.

“Anything else?” Johanson asked.

Charles shook his head as he reached into his pocket. Pulled out a wad of bills. Peeled off three hundred dollar bills and extended them toward Johanson. The guy stared at the money, but didn’t make a move.

“Take it, you moron,” Charles said.

“I don’t think... I don’t know if I can.”

“If you don’t take this, so help me God, I’m gonna call Gilly and tell him to fire your ass.”

Johanson reached out for the money, then turned and got inside his truck.

“Jesus,” Charles muttered, watching the guy back up and then pull away. At least he waited until he was past the cabin before cutting on his headlights. That would’ve made a mess of the whole thing.

TROOPER JOHANSON FELT dirty. No other way to put it. He’d worked off duty, outside his jurisdiction - hell, he’d crossed state lines - and taken payment from a man that he doubted had anything to do with law enforcement. Except for maybe being wanted by it.

And he’d been told to do it by his boss. So if anyone gave *him* crap about it, he’d refer them to *Gilly*, as McGillicuddy’s good buddy back at the campground called his boss.

As far as Johanson was concerned, he’d washed his hands of the whole thing.

PAOLO GOT THE attention of the bartender. “One more, my dear.”

She smiled and winked and took his mug and refilled it.

CHARLES APPROACHED THE cabin from behind. He'd gone right of it, past two others, then about one hundred feet to the rear. Plenty of tree cover, which, he figured, would provide a guy his size with just enough cover. To his disappointment there were no windows in back. He had planned to locate the targets and shoot them from outside. If he'd known he would end up inside, he would have gone through the front door to begin with.

Seconds away from death, and the guy is still pissing me off, Charles thought. No bother, though. Soon enough Paolo would be dealt with. Then, anyone within the organization who thought they could pull a stunt like the man had would have second thoughts about doing so.

He walked to the corner, continued around the side and stopped before he reached the front. Someone approached, crunching gravel with every step. They came from the other side of the cabin. Charles surveyed the landscape in front of him. Didn't appear anyone was outside. He flattened himself against cabin's exterior. Whoever it was, they'd pass by and not notice him.

It was in their best interest to do so.

But the person didn't pass by. They stepped from the gravel onto the porch. Hard soles, like boots, clicked against the two-by-fours that spanned the space. The knob jiggled. The door opened.

"You doing all right?" a guy said in soft tones.

Paolo.

Charles pushed off the wall, stepped softly onto the porch. The door hung open. A gap of six inches. Dark inside. Dark outside. He couldn't see in, and he doubted they could see out.

But he was armed. Maybe Paolo was, too. Charles had surprise on his side.

He pushed through the door, sighted the man and squeezed off a suppressed round into the back of his head. The guy lurched forward and collapsed to the floor.

Charles walked up to him, spat. He pulled out his phone and used the screen to illuminate the floor.

“Shit.”

It wasn't Paolo.

Charles wasn't averse to taking a life. He'd done it plenty of times, whether deserved or not. But he'd just fired a round in the middle of the night. Sure, his pistol had a suppressor attached, but that didn't silence the shot, only muffled it a bit. Someone had to have heard.

Against his better judgment, he felt along the wall and flipped on a light switch. He had confirmation then that the man he shot was not Paolo. And the guy wasn't breathing.

What to do now? He couldn't leave with Paolo alive. At the same time, he couldn't remain in the cabin. Someone heard. Someone would investigate. It wouldn't be long until the cops swarmed the place.

He glanced up and for the first time noticed the woman in bed.

“Esmeralda?” he said.

She said nothing. Her eyes were open, focused on the ceiling.

“Where's your brother?”

She still said nothing.

“Well, if I can't have him dead, I can take you alive. He'll figure it out. And when he comes for you, bye bye, Paolo.”

Esmeralda didn't put up a fight when Charles lifted her off the bed and slung her over his shoulder. He cut the light. Stopped at the front door. Inched it open. Scanned the area. No one was out. None of the lights were on.

He smiled.

Maybe they figured it was a hunter's shot. Far off in the distance. Taking down a bear, or something.

“THIS ISN’T RIGHT,” Trooper Johanson said out loud. He’d taken an oath. And his gut told him he’d broken it outside that cabin. He’d put that man and woman’s lives at risk. They could be dead now.

He glanced at his clock. Not twelve minutes had passed since he left. If he picked up his speed, he could be back there in eight. Would it be enough?

He could only hope so.

“YOU SURE YOU have to leave?” the bartender asked Paolo. “We don’t close for a while. And since I’m the one closing the place down, you can stay as long as I’m here.”

Paolo smiled at her. “As much as I am enjoying your company, I must get back.”

“You sure you’re all right to drive? Might not look it, but this area is crawling with cops.”

“No, I don’t think I am.” He downed the remaining beer in his mug. “Fortunately, I only need to walk to the campground.”

“I can give you a lift when I’m done, you know. Go right past there. Maybe I could even bring a bottle for us to share.”

“Ah, only one problem.” He held up a finger.

“A woman,” she said.

He nodded. “But not like you think. She’s my sister, and she’s not well, I’m afraid.”

“You sure she needs you?”

The words had a sobering effect on him. He glanced down at the bar top. A condensation ring had formed and remained where his mug had been. The liquid wept toward him.

“She does,” he said. “And I must go now.”

He rose and dropped a hundred dollar bill on the counter for the bartender with the sweet smile.

THE WOMAN HAD lain down in the trunk like she’d done it a hundred times. With a brother like Paolo, perhaps she

had. Charles chuckled.

He glanced at his GPS. Seven hours, give or take, until he reached the city. If he pushed a little, he might even beat the morning traffic.

TROOPER JOHANSON CUT his lights after he passed the first cabin. The solar LEDs that lined the dirt and gravel road were enough to navigate by. He slowed to a crawl as he neared the cabin he'd watched over earlier. The man who'd paid him off had left. Only tracks where his car had been parked remained.

Johanson pulled into the same spot and studied the cabin. The inside light was on again. Porch light still off. Looked like the door sat ajar.

He checked his pistol. Exited the truck. Stuck to the edge of the road as much as possible to avoid letting the crunching gravel announce his presence.

The shades were drawn over the window. There was no way to see inside without going to the door. Johanson didn't expect to see much. An empty room. Maybe some clothes strewn about for extra effect. He guessed it possible that the two men tussled. If so, they could have broken a chair, or the bed, or the lamp.

Except that the light was on.

Don't start assuming, he thought. *That's how troopers die.* The biggest mistake he could make was to assume that it was safe inside. He'd walk in without a plan, his guard down. He didn't want to go home to his parents in a body bag.

So he crept across the porch, careful to keep his heels from tapping on the wood. Johanson pressed his left index finger against the door. It glided a couple more inches, then stopped. He leaned forward, gun at chest level, pointed inside.

It looked empty, at first. Then he realized there was someone on the floor.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," he said.

Then Johanson did something out of character. He ignored his instinct to call it in, and he went inside the room to check on the man.

PAOLO THOUGHT ABOUT going back. Telling the bartender he'd go home with her. Why the hell not? Essie wasn't going to wake up anytime soon. And if she did, she'd stay put until he got back.

Wisps of smoke rose out of the fire pit. The middle-aged couple's lights were out. He thought about stopping, asking if everything checked out. But the guy hadn't come to find him. And he didn't sit out on his porch now, waiting to update Paolo with Essie's condition.

So he walked on. Past cabin after cabin. He followed the road until he came to the stretch that led to his home for the night. He saw the pickup, parked where it had been. The muffler ticked, like its owner had taken it out recently. People did that, he reminded himself. They go out. Just like he had.

He looked up, toward the cabin. The light was on. Had Essie risen? Maybe the guy had gone in to check on her and left the light on? Why would he, though? Perhaps Essie had heard him, figured the guy for Paolo, and called out for help. The man should have come and picked him up from the bar if that was the case. Before leaving, Paolo decided he needed to have a talk with that guy.

He hurried toward the door, which he noticed was open a foot. Paolo refrained from calling out for his sister. He stopped on the porch, reached down, pulled a knife from the ankle holster.

From inside, it sounded like someone was panting. Slowly, Paolo stepped through the door. He saw the man on the floor. A pool of blood surrounding him. Even though he hadn't said anything, the guy looked back, hands up, in view. They were covered in blood.

"You son of a bitch," Paolo shouted as he lunged toward the guy.

The man's eyes widened. He looked scared. Not like a killer. But it was too late. Paolo whipped his arm around and plunged the knife into the guy's neck, slicking the carotid. A stream of blood sprayed across the wall, curtains, ceiling and floor. It slowed to a heartbeat-driven trickle as the man bled out. He collapsed to the floor, and fell backward on the body of his-

"That's not Essie," Paolo muttered.

He rushed toward the bathroom and flung the door open. She wasn't there. Ran back into the room; ripped the sheets of the bed. Checked underneath. There was no closet, or any other rooms.

"Essie?"

No answer.

He said it again, louder.

Still no answer.

He went to the doorway, yelled it.

She still didn't answer.

He turned back to the carnage in the room. Two men dead; one by his hand. The other man was the guy from the first cabin. The guy who promised to check on his sister. Someone had killed him. And that someone had Essie now.

Who?

The answer was obvious to Paolo.

Charles.

He grabbed their bags, securing his pistol, left the cabin, and rushed to the vehicle.

And without hesitation, he turned toward New York when he reached the road.

FRANCE.

IT TOOK LONGER than it should have for one of Pierre's associates to locate the Audi. After driving west for three hours, the trio of Bear, Pierre and Kat's mother had to double-back ninety minutes to reach the crash site.

Shattered glass littered the site. All that remained of the vehicle. Bear stood at the edge of the road, looking out over the valley, his knees pushing against the guardrail. He didn't feel the hollowness in the pit of his stomach, not because of the heights at least. His concern over Mandy outweighed that.

Pierre joined him at his side.

"Any news?" Bear asked.

"Even the report of the Audi is gone now."

"What's that mean?"

Pierre offered his phone. Bear took it, glanced down at the pictures of the vehicle. To call it totaled was an insult.

"They managed to get these for us," Pierre said. "But now everything is gone. The police report. Witness information. All of it."

"How does that just disappear?" Bear said, pointing at the images on the phone's screen.

Pierre said nothing.

"Where's the closest hospital?" Bear asked.

“They aren’t there.”

“What?”

“I... My people checked already.”

“They could be a part of this, man. Don’t you see that? How else would they know your every move?”

Pierre shrugged as he looked down and kicked rubble aside with his foot. “Lots of agencies are capable of that. My people, they would come for me if that was their intention. Not a young woman and child.”

“I want to go to the hospital.”

“We’ll just be wasting time.”

“As opposed to what? What do we have to go on?” Bear turned and took a few steps forward. “Not a damn thing, that’s what. Your people could be lying. I’m not satisfied until we check it out ourselves.”

A moment later, Pierre caught up to him. “We have to take Kat’s mother someplace secure. Foul play cannot be ruled out here. And I can’t put it past these people going after extended family.”

“Fortunately I don’t have any of that.”

“Neither do I.” Pierre moved forward. “But Kat does, and we have to protect her mother.”

Bear studied the woman in the back of the car. Distraught didn’t begin to describe her. She had been unwilling to exit when they’d arrived at the crash site. Didn’t want to accept it, he figured. Neither did he. And he hadn’t.

Mandy was somewhere. And he’d reach her. Somehow.

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA.

IF ANY DOUBT remained about whether Jack was still in the ghetto, it was answered now. The building's hallways were littered with beer cans, liquor bottles, cigarette butts, and broken glass. Half the lights were out. The ones working cast a depression-inducing yellow haze across the dull walls and puke-green carpet. It was quiet, though. An observation that might lead some to conclude that the residents held down day jobs. Jack figured most of them were still passed out from the previous night's activities.

He positioned himself at the other end of the hallway he entered from the alley. He gave the guy four minutes, at most, to step inside. After that, Jack had no plan other than to wait for the man to traverse the length of the hall. Then he'd strike with hopes of neutralizing the guy and getting him to speak.

A baby cried from within one of the nearby apartments. Jack tuned it out. Did the same with the mother yelling at the infant to shut up.

The seconds continued to pass with no activity from the other end of the hallway. Was waiting a mistake? The man could use the extra time to call in backup. If enough of them were out looking for Jack, there could be another team close by. They'd seal him inside the building.

The lingering effects of the tranquillizer clouded his thoughts, and he wasn't sure which ones to trust. What of his physical abilities? If it came down to it, could he face the man,

or worse, two or more of them? He could barely run ten steps without feeling like he was going to careen head-first to the ground. He still lost feeling in his hands and feet. Muscles still burned as though a fire raged within his body.

He had to run. There was no other choice. For now, at least. Get away, off the grid, and recuperate. Then figure out what the hell was going on.

The baby had silenced. The woman in the apartment wept. One instinct told him to kick down the door and find out what happened. Another dragged him further down the hall, away from the alley. The path felt like a maze, forcing him to turn right and left and right again. As long as he continued forward, he knew he'd reach an exit. Of course, it could be the same one he had entered through. The ultimate irony. Walking into the waiting arms of his assailant-to-be.

He turned a corner and came face to face with a man he'd seen a few minutes before. Big, bald head. Goatee littered with gray.

The man's eyes widened. He drew his arm back, then lunged forward.

Jack dodged, but not far enough. He took the blow on the ear, sending him into a spin. As he looked over his shoulder, the bald man threw another punch. Jack dropped to a squat. The blow missed overhead. Jack delivered an elbow to the man's midsection, bowing the guy back. He followed the move with a reverse head butt to the top of the guy's forehead.

A dull thud was followed by the sound of the man hitting the floor.

Jack jumped on top of him. Delivered two more strikes to the man's face.

“Who are you? Who the hell do you work for?”

The man's eyes fluttered and rolled back. Jack backhanded him.

“Answer me.”

“Screw you.”

A door slammed behind them. Jack looked back, expecting to see the other guy from the car.

There was no one.

He felt a hand around his throat. Then another. They tightened and cut off his air supply.

Jack drove his thumbs into the guy's eyes. Then he worked his leg forward and pressed his knee down on the man's neck.

Who would last longest came down to each man's cardiovascular conditioning. And right now, Jack didn't trust his.

Down to his last few seconds, Jack withdrew his thumbs from the guy's eye sockets and grabbed the sides of the man's head. Then he exerted force on each side, one high, the other low, and snapped the man's neck.

The hands released and fell to the ground.

Jack searched his clothes. Found nothing but a cell phone. He looked back at the empty hallway. Where was the shooter from outside? He had no plans on waiting to see if the guy was in the building. Jack continued down the hall until he reached a set of double doors that led outside.

Jack crept toward the exit, cautiously, scanning the street for signs of familiarity. They were everywhere, and nowhere. It looked the same as the one he had been on when he spotted the small car and the driver staring at him. Yet, it wasn't the same. The signs on the buildings were different. The faces on the stoops didn't match. He stopped at the door, pressing his face against the glass to see as far as possible down both sides of the street. He looked for the car or the man or a clone of either. It wouldn't change much if he spotted one. As far as he knew, there were two ways out of the building. One was most likely covered. Perhaps this one was too. He'd have to face it at some point. Might as well be now.

He shoved the door forward. It didn't budge. Jack tried a second time and received the same results. There was no obvious lock. No reason it shouldn't open. He took a couple steps back, ready to kick the glass, and noticed a green button

mounted to the wall a few inches to the right of the doors. He pressed it, and the magnetic lock released, and he eased the door open and stepped out onto the street.

It smelled the same here as it did on the other side of the building. The breeze continued to push chilled air around. A patch of clouds obstructed the sun providing welcome relief to Jack's light sensitive eyes. One of the lingering effects of the drugs used to sedate him.

He glanced up and down the street. To the left, buildings lined the street with no obvious breaks between them. Right offered him the quickest routes of escape. There were two alleys and an intersection all within a couple hundred feet. But he didn't go in either direction. Instead, he crossed the street toward a light blue compact, idling on the opposite curb. The driver tapped on his steering wheel in time with a song Jack couldn't hear. He approached the vehicle from the rear, using the natural blind spot to surprise the driver. It worked. The man didn't flinch until after Jack grabbed the handle and yanked the door open. He wasn't old, nor was he young. Not fat. Not skinny. Just an average guy. And though Jack couldn't feel the impact due to his numb hands, the punch he threw knocked the guy out.

BRETT MADE THE decision to move while Jack's tracking signal had remained motionless. Like a texting driver, he glanced from his phone's screen to the road and back again. When the dot started moving, it didn't concern him too much. Alterations to his route could be made when he reached the area. But when it took off at a rate of speed similar to his own, Brett watched the phone's screen more than the road in front of him. If it hadn't been for the aware driver with right-of-way to the intersection honking his horn, it might not have mattered where Jack ended up.

He slammed on his brakes. Came to a stop underneath the traffic lights. Drivers turned as they passed, shaking their heads. Brett watched for a second, then turned his attention back to his phone. Noble had almost slipped off the screen. Brett zoomed out and adjusted the map so that Noble was centered. The man was driving away

“It’s all right,” he muttered. “Just keep him in your sights.”

Simple, really.

Hopefully.

JACK KEPT HIS speed within the legal limit as he drove away from the building. Getting stopped was never a good thing. And considering he had no idea who had shot at him, or who they worked for, showing up on anyone’s radar at this juncture would lead to his death.

Almost at the point where Jack thought he was getting away, the small vehicle appeared. The man spotted Jack as the two cars passed one another. Their eyes locked for a brief second, after which Jack pressed the accelerator to the floor and the other man slammed on his brake and violently whipped the small car around in the middle of the road. Before the vehicle completed its arc, Jack turned hard right at the first intersection. The tires fought to maintain their grip. He slid into the other lane, facing oncoming traffic in the form of a box truck being trailed by a couple sedans. Jack turned hard against the slide. The back end of the car fishtailed, sending him on an uncontrollable course to the oncoming truck.

“Dammit,” he shouted. He knew better than to turn away from a slide. The sedative he’d been shot with had left him in such a mental state that he’d argue down was up if given the chance. That didn’t matter, though. What did was the large truck bearing down on him, honking its horn, obviously because it wouldn’t be able to stop in time. The driver tried. Hydraulic brakes worked hard, but there was nothing they could do to slow down five tons of machine.

Jack eased off the gas, let go of the steering wheel momentarily, then regained control of it, turning into the spin. In a matter of seconds, he corrected the vehicle and straightened. The truck’s driver covered his face with his arms. Jack swerved out of the way at the last second.

There wasn’t time to relax, though. Glancing back, Jack saw the small car. The man had already caught up.

The rear window burst into a thousand tiny shards.

The man wasn't intent on chasing. He was going to kill Jack no matter what. If he was crazy enough to fire from a moving vehicle, then he'd probably be willing to run his car into Jack's.

Distance. He had to get some, quickly. Problem was, the vehicle couldn't go any faster.

Jack made a hard left, managing this time to keep from losing control, while hoping the other driver wouldn't be so lucky. But the guy was. He didn't miss a beat. Stayed as close. And he hadn't fired again. Why? What if the guy wasn't trying to kill Jack, only get his attention?

There was that foggy thinking again. Keep pushing forward, Jack told himself, unsure how it would work out.

Street signs passed by in a blur. Not that it mattered. The city was a mystery. He had no idea of its layout. He could have been driving straight into a maze of traffic, or heading out to the country. Either would suffice.

After five minutes, the road widened, adding lanes. He saw signs for what appeared to be an interstate. Cars crowded the right lane. Jack stayed to the left, with the other man close behind, seemingly willing to wait it out. Only reasonable explanation was that he had informed his chain of command and been told to do so. The downside meant that there'd be more people on the way soon.

The on ramp approached. A line of vehicles moved at a snail's pace.

Jack gunned the engine and swerved in between two vehicles, cutting across perpendicular, passing in front of a minivan that clipped his rear fender. The car shimmied, but Jack maintained control. He scraped against one of the cars turning onto the on-ramp, then pulled over a few feet and raced down the shoulder toward the highway. Glancing back through the rear view, he saw no signs that he'd been followed.

It wouldn't last. The other guy would recoup soon enough.

BRETT PULLED INTO an abandoned parking lot. All that remained of the structure it butted up to was a concrete foundation with grass and weeds growing up through thick cracks.

The distance between him and Jack had grown to a point where he had to zoom out further to ensure he didn't lose him. Studying the map, he attempted to determine where the man was headed. How well did Noble know the city? Better than Brett? Wouldn't be difficult, as this was Brett's first visit to the country.

Noble was on Metropolitan 1, heading south, out of the city. From there, if he remained on the freeway, he'd either take Route 82, or merge onto 12 and then take that southwest, or 1 south. 12 appeared to be the more rural route of the two, and Brett figured that's where Jack would go.

So instead of heading east to follow Jack, Brett went west, merged onto the N1 western bypass, and then south, in hopes of intercepting the man.

DRIVING BLIND IS no way to drive, Jack thought. But he had little choice. With no idea who was after him, or how many there were, he had to keep moving. Drive until you can't drive anymore.

Was it the best option?

Perhaps. At the moment, at least. Every minute that passed led to him thinking a little clearer. Another reason to push forward. Soon enough, he'd be operating with clarity, and his decisions would be the right ones. He'd come far enough to realize that.

Searching the glove box, he found a roadmap. He unfolded it and scanned until he determined his approximate location by finding Hillsbrow and then the nearest freeway. The signs which had made little sense at the time now appeared fully realized in his mind's eye. He was southbound on Metropolitan 1. From there, he had a few choices. Away from the city was his best option, and there were two routes that would allow him to travel unrestricted. One went due south, but judging by the map, it intersected with several other cities.

That might lead to traffic, which meant he'd slow down and whoever was chasing could catch up.

That left one option. National 12. The freeway would buy him enough time to figure out his next move.

BRETT SNATCHED UP his cell and answered on the second ring.

"Update?" Ballard asked.

"He's on the move."

"Are you on his tail?"

"Relatively speaking."

"What's that mean?"

"Closer now than I was a day ago."

"Don't let him slip away."

"If you think you can do my job better than I can, then feel free to come out here and take over."

Ballard hung up without replying.

"Little rat bastard," Brett muttered. He stole a glance at his phone, confirming that he was on the right path. As predicted, Jack had taken 12 to the southwest, and Brett was less than five miles from his position.

He'll stop, Brett thought. And when he does, I'll have him.

UNKNOWN LOCATION.

SHE WOKE TO a sunrise unlike any she'd seen before. Even staring directly upward at the star while standing between large buildings hadn't been this intense. The light, bright and hot, left a red impression long after she closed her eyes.

“Pouvez-vous m'entendre?”

Her mind chewed on the phrase for a moment. It worked it from one set of words to another.

Can you hear me?

“Yes,” she said. “I can.”

“You are American?” the woman said. Her voice sounded funny, heavy, whispery almost.

“What?” she said.

“From the United States, yes?”

The girl blinked her eyes open and saw the source of the sunrise: a large circular light which now pointed at an angle toward the ceiling, casting a large halo around the corner of the room.

“I...” she looked from the light to the woman dressed in blue smocks. “I don't know.”

The woman's face scrunched up and she turned and looked at the girl out of the side of her eye. “You don't know where

you are from?”

The girl shook her head.

“What about your name?” the woman asked.

The girl said nothing.

“I am Marie,” the woman said. “And you are...?”

The girl felt hollow in her chest and stomach. Tears began to well in her eyes. She whispered, “I don’t know who I am.”

Marie reached out, took the girl’s hand. Squeezed it.

The girl pulled back and drew her knees to her chest, threading her arms underneath and locking her hands together.

“We’ll figure it out,” Marie said. “I promise.”

The girl studied the woman, her kind eyes, soft smile. She wanted to trust Marie. Wanted to believe her. After all, the nurse was the only person in the world she knew.

OVER THE ATLANTIC.

JARED AKERS DOZED in and out of sleep as the plane cruised at 600 miles per hour at a height greater than 36,000 feet. He wanted to close his eyes and give in completely. Slip away until they landed. But he had to keep an eye on the little girl.

So far, she had posed little problem. Still in shock, he figured, from witnessing her mother die. His threat to do the same to her, only slower, might've helped keep her in check as well. And to ensure her cooperation, before leaving for the airport, he'd crushed up and slipped into her drink enough valium to knock out a three hundred pound man. By the time they checked-in, she was asleep in his arms.

He'd have preferred to leave her behind, but his boss insisted that until they knew Noble was dead, they needed the girl. She would be the ultimate bargaining chip. Not that it'd matter in the end. Both she and Noble would be dead when it was all said and done.

Akers turned his head and watched her sleep. Most people might feel a pang of guilt, or something similar, in such a moment. Not him. He killed indiscriminately. Had for more than twenty years. Men, women, children. Made no difference to him. Depending on where he'd been, Jared didn't always need an order to do so. The way he figured it, things had always been that way. Not everyone he'd worked with over the years agreed with him. Especially during his time in the Army.

But they were party to his misdeeds, so they kept their mouths shut. One man's word against another. Could go either way.

These days, he stuck to his orders. It helped he spent little time if any in some wasteland of a third world country. Being older helped too. The anger he felt as a younger man had dissipated. Somewhat, at least. But he'd also grown colder than ever. Some might consider him a sociopath. Akers would disagree. Everything he did was for money. He never broke into someone's home and slaughtered a family. Or stalked some young lady with intent to rape and kill her. And he never felt bad for the people things like that happened to.

Feeling like he was not going to fall back asleep, Akers checked his email for the next step of his job. All he knew to this point was that his plane was going to arrive in Boston in a couple hours. He knew of no safe houses in the area, so there had to be another leg of the journey to complete. The first message he read confirmed it.

Rent a car. Go to New York.

Clear and simple. The way Akers liked it.

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA.

“THIS IS ABSURD,” Mason said, confined in the small rental’s passenger seat. “We’ve got no support here. No idea where this guy is. No clue what he’s doing here.”

Sasha weaved through traffic on the M1, south through the city. She had no idea what to expect from the traffic patterns. So far, they hadn’t seen much. The motorway was thick with cars, but flowed.

“Sasha,” Mason said. “Are you listening to me?”

She nodded, said nothing. Too busy thinking ahead. Keeping her mind occupied while waiting for the next call. The trail on Brett had gone cold. All they knew was the man had been on a plane bound for Johannesburg. He might’ve met a connecting flight and already left.

“So?” Mason said.

“What?” She turned her head toward him for a second.

“What’s the plan here?”

“Don’t have one.”

“We’re just going to drive around the city in hopes of spotting this guy?”

“Yes. If that’s what it takes, then that’s what we’ll do. You know my people are the best in the business. They’ll come through for us.”

“They’ve been working on it for hours now. If they couldn’t come up with anything by the time we landed here, what makes you think they will now?”

“He’s been silent. That’s the only answer that makes sense. But he won’t be for long. He’ll check in with someone, and then we’ll know. We’re close, Mason. I know we are.”

They drove another five miles without speaking. They were roughly at the city’s center. They would have reached it minutes earlier had they gone west from the airport, rather than north along the N3, then south on the M1. Sasha estimated another ten to fifteen minutes and they’d reach the south end of the loop. Where to go then? Stop, perhaps. Make a few calls and see if anything new had been determined. Maybe even attempt to reach out to Jack again. She had some concern over doing so because of the chance that someone was monitoring his number. It’d be easy for them to determine the origin of the call. They’d trace the number to her. Most couldn’t, but this organization obviously had the ability to skirt security clearances. Once her identity was revealed, the questions would begin. What is a future MI6 director doing in South Africa? But who would be asking, and who would they ask?

She startled when her phone rang, jerking the car to the left. The motorist in her path hit his brakes and honked. Sasha ignored it and answered the call.

“We picked up a call from his cell, not ten minutes ago.”

“Where?”

“Johannesburg, south end of the city, on National 12 southbound.”

“Mason,” she said.

He turned toward her.

“Locate the N12.”

“He’s there?”

She nodded and spoke into the phone. “Anything else? Do we know the content of the conversation?”

“All we can get is the signal. We’re working on tracking it in real time.”

“And how did we get that?”

“It’s who he’s working with. We’ve been monitoring Joe Ballard since mid-morning. Once the call was made, we put two and two together.”

“Christ,” she said, glancing at Mason. “This is going to cause a political shitstorm, isn’t it?”

The guy on the other end of the call said nothing. Mason lifted an eyebrow, imploring her to continue.

After she ended the call, Mason said, “Good news?”

“Partly,” she said. “He was through here not too long ago. We need to continue south, on 12, and hopefully we’ll reach him.”

“Hopefully?”

“They don’t have his signal live. Yet, at least.”

“And the whole political shitstorm comment?”

“Right, they’re spying on Taylor’s contact back in the States. Take a stab at which agency you think he’s in. Frankly, I’m not sure it matters. Whichever one it is won’t appreciate us monitoring them.”

“Like they don’t do it to us.”

She said nothing. Truth was, it happened more routinely than she was willing to admit.

“So we keep driving,” Mason said.

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA.

“SHIT.” JACK RAPPED his knuckles against the steering wheel as the car rolled to a stop on the side of the freeway. Out of gas, even though the gauge indicated more than a quarter tank left. He investigated the glove box. Found nothing. Before exiting, he popped the trunk. It rose up a foot and then settled to rest on the frame. If there was a weapon to be had, it’d be in there.

Outside, the temperature hadn’t changed much from earlier that day. The sun sat lower in the sky, though. A quick glance indicated he had maybe two hours of light left. Exits were frequent along the highway. He’d walk to the next one and figure it out from there. Probably find a place to settle in for the night. Get a phone and try to reach a contact or two.

At the rear of the vehicle, he lifted the trunk lid. Inside there was nothing. He pulled back the flap. The spare was gone, as were the tools. He cursed under his breath as he slammed the lid closed, then stepped around the side of the vehicle and began walking along the shoulder.

There weren’t many cars this far south of the city. The ones that passed paid little attention. Soon enough, that wouldn’t be the case.

The phone in his pocket bounced against his leg with each step. He pulled the device out and stared at it for a moment. His first instinct was to make a call. Bear, Brandon, Clarissa. It

didn't matter. All three would go out of their way to help him. But he didn't dial them. Instead he called Frank.

The man answered immediately. "Jack? That you?"

"You son of a bitch," Jack said.

"Take it easy, man. I had to get you out of the country. Once you mentioned your ex and daughter, I knew there was no way I could talk you out of it."

"Yeah, and what about the guy that tried to kill me a few minutes after I hit the street?"

There was a pause. "Not sure what you're talking about, Jack?"

Jack started to reply. An eighteen-wheeler passed, drowning out his voice.

"Where are you?" Frank asked. "On the side of the road? Are you alone?"

"Doesn't matter," Jack said.

"Look, Jack, we need to figure out what's going on here. You were supposed to be left with my contact, a man named Jorge, north of the city."

"I woke up in the damn maintenance room of some slum building. Old guy sitting outside the door, paid off and told to wait for me. Handed me some clothes and a phone. This phone that I'm calling you on."

"That's not right. None of that is right. You're supposed to be with Jorge. Jesus, Jack. Look, don't move. I need to make some calls. Stand by on that line for a minute."

Just enough static hummed through the line to let Jack know the call remained connected.

"WHERE THE HELL did he go?" Brett stared at his cell's screen, the map zoomed out, no sign of Jack anywhere. The dot was there the last time he checked. Now it was gone.

Glancing back, he whipped the wheel to the side and pulled onto the emergency shoulder. It had to be a mistake. A malfunction of the software. In which case, it would return, so

sitting on the side of the freeway was no way to deal with the situation. He had an idea of Jack's last location. If something had happened, say an accident, he'd find Noble there. After a few moments of scrolling through the map, Brett re-centered his position and merged into traffic.

JACK'S CONCERN GREW with every second that passed. What was taking so long? All the guy had to do was find someone to meet Jack, then give him the address. He could take it from there. Somehow. It wouldn't be easy, so far out of town, no money for a cab. There were other ways, though. He'd already stolen one car today. How much more damage could he do by taking another?

First, he had to get off the highway. Eventually someone would pull over to help. Worse, that someone could end up being a cop. They'd run the tag, find the car reported stolen, and then it'd be over. Assault. Robbery. Whatever else they could throw on top of it.

"C'mon, Frank," Jack shouted into the phone.

Frank didn't respond.

"Screw this," Jack muttered as he ended the call. The next exit wasn't in sight, and the previous one was at least five miles behind him. He decided to take his chances moving forward.

BRETT SPENT THE better portion of the drive glancing at his phone, hoping the tracking beacon would come back. He tried to tell himself it hadn't been a mistake coming to South Africa. But making the journey and coming up empty handed wouldn't sit well. Time was limited. Once it was up, it was his head that'd be served to the government.

A small car parked on the shoulder drew his attention. He hadn't noticed, but that was something he hadn't seen thus far on the freeway.

"You don't believe in signs," he reminded himself.

But glancing down at his phone, he realized the tracking signal had returned, was moving slowly, and was less than a mile away.

AFTER CLOSE TO a mile, there was no exit in sight. Perhaps something better, though. Jack hopped the guardrail and descended the grassy slope to the narrow lane below. The freeway passed right over it, but offered no ramp for exiting or entering. There was a chance that the man from the alley was still in pursuit. Maybe the guy had made the right choices and ended up on 12, like Jack had. If so, he wasn't that far behind. This bought him some time. Maybe an hour. Maybe a day. But now he had a chance to get a new phone, a ride or a vehicle, and to get in contact with someone that could help.

So he passed underneath the interstate and continued south, walking along the grass, next to the trees.

“ALL RIGHT, JACK,” Frank said. “Here's what I want you to do and where I want you to go. From there, we'll get you back here, with me, until this is finished.”

He waited for a response, but didn't get one.

“Jack? You there?”

Complete silence. Jack had ended the call.

“Dammit.”

BRETT SLOWED AND pulled over on the side of the overpass. There was a road below, and the tracking beacon indicated Jack was on it. But there was no method of accessing the street from the freeway. And guardrails lined the shoulder, meaning he couldn't pull off and try to descend the hill.

So how had Jack done it?

Easy, he thought. That was his car back there. He'd hiked to this point and took the opportunity. Brett had him, though. Once again, he zoomed out and traced the freeway to the next exit, attempting to connect a path of country roads from a spot five miles ahead to the road below him.

There wasn't one.

And the signal could go out at any moment. As it was now, Jack was only a half-mile away. It'd be easy to figure out his pace, and then all Brett had to do was travel a little faster.

So he ditched the vehicle and went over the side, down the hill, and set off in the same direction in pursuit of Jack. It was the closest he'd been yet, and he had no intention of failing now.

UNKNOWN LOCATION.

ALL KAT SAW was darkness. Whether it was night, or she was in a dark room was irrelevant. The hood covering her head was thick and dark. Her breath, stale and bitter, deflected off the fabric and washed over her. It was hot under the hood. So much so the sweat dripped down her forehead and pooled in her brow before slipping down her eyelids. When she blinked, the salty fluid found its way and bit and stung at her eyes. She tried to reach up and wipe it away, but her hands were bound behind her back.

For the first time since coming to, she heard a knocking nearby. On a door? Perhaps. But it sounded more like hard soles on a wooden floor. She scraped at the ground with the tips of her bare toes. It was rough, hard. A needle punctured her right big toe. A splinter, she figured.

The knocking approached. The vibrations through the floor grew stronger, deeper. Step by step, someone approached. Someone heavy judging by their footsteps.

Kat struggled to draw in breath. In part because of the hood over her face. And also because of the approaching stranger. Her captor. The man, she assumed, who would do what he wanted with her.

Which was what?

Until this point, no one had approached her. She'd lost all sense of time. Dozing in and out of sleep, it could have been hours or days that she'd been here. The only thing that

indicated it hadn't been too long was that her hunger pains weren't too great.

The footsteps stopped. Ragged breathing originated from above her head. She felt the person's body heat against her skin. Had they undressed her? Left her tied up and blindfolded while in the nude? Tears, real ones, not sweat induced, formed and trickled down her face.

"Well, well," the man said. "I see you're awake now."

She said nothing and forced her body to go still. Too late, though. Her shuddering had already given her state away.

The guy yanked violently at her head, jerking it up and back and side to side. He stopped to loosen the hood, then lifted it off.

She couldn't tell whether the light in the room was bright or dim, only that it hurt like hell. Fighting against the pain in her eyes, she forced them to remain open in order to get a look at her captor.

The guy was tall, thick with muscle and a bit of a stomach. He wasn't particularly tan or pale. His hair was short, and a couple days' worth of stubble covered his chin and cheeks and jawline.

He reached down and removed the gag covering her mouth. "Tell me who you are." His accent was American.

Her throat was parched to the point where she couldn't do much other than grunt. "Water. Please."

He glanced down at her. Remained motionless for a few seconds. Finally, he turned, left the room and returned with a plastic bottle. "Lean your head back."

Kat did as instructed and opened her mouth. The guy tilted the bottle over until it was completely upside down. Water rushed out, faster than Kat could drink it. She downed what she could, while the rest of the liquid poured across her face and ran down her neck and bare chest.

The guy seemed unfazed by her breasts.

"Who are you?" he asked.

She recalled Pierre's instructions to her. Don't give up anything without getting something in return.

"Nobody," Kat said.

"You know what happens to nobodies?"

She said nothing.

"They wind up dead and dismembered."

She still said nothing.

"You insist on being nobody?"

She shook her head.

"Then who are you?"

"Kat."

"That's a good start. Kat who?"

"Kat Lyon."

"How long have you been working with Pierre Allard?"

"I've never worked with him."

"Remember what I said about nobodies? Same thing goes for liars."

"I'm telling you the truth. I've never worked with him. I'm a waitress. Pierre is my lover."

"What do you know of his operations?"

"Nothing. I never knew what he was involved with until he was shot. And since then, he had a long recovery in the hospital, then we left Paris. He wanted to be away from it all."

"He hasn't been."

"Yes," she said. "He has. He's been in the hospital or with me for months now. He hasn't been involved in anything."

The guy stared at her without speaking.

"Who are you?" she said. "What do you want with Pierre?"

"I'll be back after we figure out what to do with you."

He dropped the hood and the gag on the floor beside her, then exited the room. Kat watched the heavy door fall shut. Heard the lock click over. And then she cried.

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA.

“WE’VE GOT HIM,” Sasha said. “They locked onto his cell phone. He’s about forty miles outside of town. Went from traveling around sixty miles per hour to a crawl. Car troubles, maybe. He’s gone off the highway, though.”

“We’re sure about this?” Mason said. “We can trust this intelligence?”

“Stop with the constant pissing match. My analysts are every bit as good as yours. If they say they’ve locked in on Taylor, then they have.”

“And you think we’ll find Noble’s girl, then.”

“I don’t know, Mason. But I think we’ll at least get a few answers.”

Mason turned his attention to his phone. “So if he’s about forty miles, then we’ve got approximately twenty more to go. Guess it was luck we went this way.”

“Wasn’t luck. We took the intelligence my people provided and ran with it.” She glanced over and saw him grinning, obviously enjoying egging her on. “Real funny.”

“Just trying to ease the tension.”

“Let’s get this guy and figure out what the hell is going on, and then we can worry about easing tension.”

They continued on another fifteen minutes, reaching a point halfway between two exits, where a vehicle had been

abandoned on the side of the motorway. Sasha eased onto the shoulder then backed up to within a few feet of the vehicle. They both exited onto the shoulder.

“Where would he go from here?” she asked.

Mason looked behind them. “Last exit was maybe five miles ago, right?”

She nodded.

Mason said, “Would he have taken his chances going backward? Or pressed on until the next?”

“How far away is that?”

He checked with his phone. “Another five miles, but maybe he didn’t know that. Maybe he’d been watching the exits and realizing that each one was a little further than the last. Thinking back to two exits ago, there was maybe four or five miles between. So he says to himself, at the distance he’s gone since the last exit, it should only be another mile, two max to reach the next.”

Sasha nodded her agreement with Mason’s assessment.

“Let’s drive on for a bit,” she said. “Perhaps we’ll catch up with him.”

They returned to the car. Sasha slipped back onto the motorway. Not a mile further, they encountered another car on the side of the road, abandoned.

“Coincidence?” she said.

“Don’t believe in them,” Mason said.

“Well, let’s check it out anyway.” She pulled over, came to a stop behind the vehicle.

“Rental plates,” Mason said.

“What were the last?” she asked.

“Local. I remember them.” He exited and walked forward.

“We should get my team to run them.”

He nodded.

Sasha got out and walked to the midpoint of the overpass. Leaned over the steel guardrail. Glanced down expecting to see a creek or railroad tracks. Instead she saw faded blacktop.

“Mason,” she called out.

He looked back at her.

“Down there.” She headed toward him. “There’s a road. My gut’s telling me he’s down there somewhere.”

Mason stepped over the guardrail and studied the terrain. Pointing, he said, “Look there. Those tall stalks of grass, all broken, aiming toward the road. A line straight down.” He knelt down and inspected one of the breaks. “It’s fresh, Sasha. This happened recently.”

“We have to find a connecting road,” she said.

He joined her a moment later, phone in hand, map pulled up. They both returned to their seats in the car.

He said, “I don’t see anything that connects.”

“There has to be,” she said. “Somewhere. Keep looking. That can’t just be a random road that leads to nowhere, can it?”

“Explains why there’s no exit here. Maybe we should start walking.”

“He’s got a mile, at least, on us.”

“And he could get another mile, or shelter, or veer off into the woods in the time it takes us to realize we made a mistake and get back here by car.”

Sasha pulled out her cell and called her office. “We think we’ve found where he exited. Where is he now?”

“We lost the signal.”

“Can you get mine?”

“One moment.”

The seconds passed. The car rocked side to side every time a vehicle passed in the nearest lane. The sound of the idling

engine and fan blowing intermingled with their breathing. Finally, her analyst came back on.

“You are in the location we last saw him. From there, he headed east.”

They both turned their heads to the left. The road wasn't visible from across the motorway, but the path cut between the trees was.

“I can't find any way back here,” Mason said, holding up his phone.

“I need for you to find me a route to reach this road,” she said to her analyst. “Can you do that? I don't care if it is an old logging road or a trail cut by elephants.”

“It might not be pretty, but I'm sure I can.”

“Call me back.” She shifted into drive and pulled onto the motorway once again, headed south for the next exit.

“We're gonna lose him,” Mason said.

“No we won't.” She pushed the speedometer well past the speed limit. “My guys will find a way.”

CENTRAL FRANCE.

BEAR WAITED NEAR the entrance while Pierre dealt with the receptionist. The guy applied no pressure. Asked the same questions over and over. The woman grew flustered, face turned red, hands started shaking. She was lying. Bear knew it. Pierre probably did. But he did nothing about it.

The glass doors rattled as they slid apart. A woman entered with her young son. She directed him to take a seat while she took a spot in line behind Pierre. The first one to do so.

Bear glanced back, wondering when the next patient would appear.

Pierre asked the woman about Kat and Mandy again. She pursed her lips together, tightly, and said nothing.

“Enough.” Bear charged the counter and slammed into Pierre’s side, knocking the Frenchman a foot to the side. The woman behind him protested, but one glance back silenced her.

The woman pushed back in her chair to create a bit of distance. Not that it mattered. She wouldn’t get away if that was Bear’s intention.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wallet. Opened it. Pulled out a photo of Mandy taken during their time in Iowa. He extended his arm, placing the picture inches from the old woman’s face.

“I’m only gonna ask you this one time,” he said. “After that, I’ll start breaking things. Have you seen this girl?”

The woman said nothing.

Bear grabbed the top corner of her monitor and flung it to the side. The screen cracked with a hundred simultaneous thuds.

“Next time it’ll be you.”

She glanced toward the door. Any hope that remained on her face vanished. But Bear knew his time was limited. She’d done something to alert the authorities. Or she presumed someone else had, and now she held out hope for their arrival.

“Have you seen her?”

Pierre placed a picture of Kat on the counter. Bear grabbed it with his free hand and extended it.

He said, “And her?”

The woman started crying. She shook her head, then nodded.

“Which is it?” Bear said.

“I... I’ve seen the girl, but not the woman.”

“Where is she?” Bear stepped back and looked at the three hallways branching off the waiting room.

“She’s not here.”

He snapped forward, and yelled, “Bullshit. Which room is she in?”

The woman was crying too hard to answer.

Bear almost hopped the counter, but it wouldn’t have done any good. He’d smashed the monitor. Behind the woman were offices, one of which was occupied by a man watching the scene unfold in the waiting room. Bear pointed at the guy.

“Take us in there and pull it up.”

The woman rose and stepped out from behind the receptionist desk. She waved the two men toward her, to the

office. The guy inside shook his head as she opened the door. He tried to speak, but couldn't manage to put a word together.

"Get up," she said. "I need to show him that the girl left."

The guy rose and stepped back. By the time the woman, Bear and Pierre were all behind his desk, the guy was crammed into the corner. He breathed quickly and loudly through his nose. Bear expected the guy to pass out any minute.

"Here." The woman pointed toward the screen. Bear leaned forward and read the minimal information.

"Jane Doe. Auto accident. Checked out." He glanced back at Pierre. "That's it? That's all you have? And what does 'Jane Doe' mean?"

The woman looked to the guy for permission. He nodded. She said, "It means she had no idea who she was, and she had no identification on her."

Bear heard her, but didn't allow himself to process the information yet. "Where is she now?"

The woman waited a moment before speaking. "We can't divulge that information."

"You better divulge it or your boss here is going to end up with his head through that wall."

Pierre grabbed Bear and tugged him to the side. "Listen."

Everyone went silent. Just the man breathing and the whirr of his computer's fan.

And sirens.

"Could be the ambulance," Bear said.

Pierre shook his head. "Not in France. It's the police."

The office guy choked back a sob.

"Bastard," Bear said, pushing Pierre toward the door, where he stopped and looked back at the pair in the corner of the room. "I'm gonna find you, lady. You hear me? And when I do, you better have the information I'm looking for."

The police had already turned into the hospital's parking lot. Fortunately, thinking ahead, Pierre had parked on the side of the building.

"This way," he said pulling Bear toward the leftmost corridor.

They raced down the hallway. Double doors at the end bled sunlight through small rectangular windows. They had to get there. The sirens echoed off the walls. Surrounded them. Sounded like the cops had driven their cars right into the waiting room.

But they never heard the shouts of the cops. Maybe the lady's conscience weighed on her. Maybe she wanted to tell Bear, but feared for her job. Reasonable, if he placed himself in her position. Bullshit any other way he looked at it.

They pushed through the exit doors. The car was twenty feet away. The sirens cut off. The cops weren't in sight.

Pierre took the wheel and Bear crammed into the passenger seat.

"Don't go far," Bear said.

"We're getting as far away as we can," Pierre said. "You have no idea the trumped up charges the government could place against me if they want to."

"Why would they want to?"

"I have a good feeling they're behind all this. They were pissed that I refused to return to the agency after recovering from my injuries."

"Why mess with Kat and Mandy? If they want you, they should get you."

"You know why. To draw me out. They could torture one thousand people in my name, and I wouldn't bat an eye. But take the woman I love and I'll hunt you down and sever your head from your neck."

Bear understood. He'd say it was because of the woman involved, but at this point, Mandy was his only concern.

“Shit,” Bear said. “Look out.”

Ahead, a police car pulled out into the road. Pierre veered to the left as if to go around it. But another pulled out and made it impossible to pull the maneuver off. He slammed the brakes. The momentum carried Bear forward. He slammed his forearm awkwardly into the dash to keep from slamming his forehead into the windshield. A dull ache spread from his elbow to his fingertips.

“Reverse,” Bear shouted.

The Frenchman, staring at the rear-view mirror, shook his head. “We’re blocked.”

“So what? These are hick cops. You and I can take on their entire force.”

With his gaze remaining locked on the mirror, Pierre shook his head. “Look.”

Ahead, four cops approached. They aimed assault rifles at the front of the car. Bear shifted in his seat and looked back at a mass of police cruisers and black vehicles. A mix of sedans and SUVs. At least ten men armed with what looked like MP5s approached. Some wore dark suits. Others were dressed in black fatigues. He made out thigh holsters where their sidearms were secured.

He glanced toward Pierre, caught site of two more men, dressed in fatigues and carrying submachine guns. Bear swung his head around, looked out his window. Three guys approached him.

“The hell is going on?” he said.

“Put your hands up and do what they say,” Pierre said. “I’ll do my best to get you out of this.”

SOUTH AFRICA.

JACK SPOTTED THE gas station as he reached the far end of a bend in the road. The trees thinned to a field with the pumps and a small store just beyond. There was a car fueling up, unattended. Looked that way, at least.

He picked up his pace, growing less aware of his surroundings and more focused on reaching the car. Could be his chance. Out here, it'd take half an hour, maybe more, for a cop to show up and take the guy's report. In that time, Jack could be forty or so miles away.

As he stepped off the curb and onto the store's lot, a woman exited the store. She glanced at him, then the car. She was closer. Presumably he was faster. A plan B formed. He could attempt to talk her into a ride. Say he had a breakdown, was lost, could she get him to the nearest town.

The woman stopped, looked back, waved toward the door. A child stepped outside, bundled in a checkered flannel coat. Jack slowed his pace. The child raced past his mother and toward the car.

Dammit, he thought. The woman alone, he could risk it. But not with a child. Not with the uncertainty of what followed him wherever he went.

The woman glanced at him, eyes narrowed, lips thin, hands in her pocket no doubt clutching her keys and perhaps a can of pepper spray or mace.

Jack nodded in her direction, then turned toward the small store. He jogged toward the entrance. A chain of gold-tinted bells jangled when he pulled it open. An elderly man behind the counter greeted him.

Jack said, “Restroom?”

The old guy jutted his chin to the back of the store, toward the beer cooler. Said, “Through that door. Second door on your right. Mind the mop.”

BRETT HEARD THE engine ramp up. A high-pitched whine that settled into soft idling. First car he’d heard since gaining some distance from the freeway. Asphalt and trees remained in front of him. He’d been jogging since he descended the hill and traveled underneath the overpass. Now he picked up his pace to somewhere just below a sprint. He could maintain it for a minute, maybe a few seconds beyond, but not much longer.

He rounded the bend. The trees gave way to a grassy field that butted up to a store and gas station. A small car pulled away from one of the pumps.

Noble?

Brett reached behind his back and grabbed his pistol. He kept it pressed to his thigh. Didn’t want to alert the driver should it turn out to not be Jack.

The vehicle turned right, and drove away. No matter how fast Brett ran, he wouldn’t catch up. Had he just missed his opportunity to catch Jack?

He slowed to a walk as he neared the store. If Jack had been by, whoever worked inside would remember. Not often Americans show up in this part of the country, Brett figured.

Every step, he slowed his breathing and his heart rate. He re-holstered his pistol. Wiped the sweat from his brow. Brett crossed the lot, pushed open the front door. A set of bells clanged next to his head. He resisted the urge to yank them down.

“Help you?” the old guy perched atop a stool behind the counter said.

“I need to know if you’ve seen a guy come through here. About six-two, athletic looking, brown hair.”

The guy nodded. “You must be a friend of his, huh? I can’t recall ever having two Yanks in here in one day.”

“Yeah, he’s a friend of mine. How long ago was he here, and where’d he go?”

The old man nodded toward the back of the store. “He’s here right now, in the washroom.”

Brett drew his pistol and aimed it at the old guy’s head. “Get up nice and easy. Step around the counter and lead me back there.”

JACK CUT THE faucet off after he heard the bells ringing. Water dripped off his face and into the basin. He reached for the paper towel dispenser and tore off the half sheet that hung down.

He’d grabbed the mop on his way back. He stepped on the fabric tendrils and twisted the pole free. Someone knocked on the door as he did so.

Jack said nothing.

“You doing okay in there?” the old guy said.

Jack looked back, at the window. It was a good six feet off the ground, and only about two feet high by about three feet wide. He could get through it if necessary. But it didn’t look like it led anywhere. No light came through.

“I said you doing all right?” the old guy said.

“Yeah, fine,” Jack replied. He glanced down. Bars of light poured in through the crack at the door. He knelt and peered through. Four feet. “Just need a minute or two. Okay?”

“Sure, mate, sure.”

How had they found him? He was as off the grid as one could be, yet they’d managed to corner him in a gas station bathroom. Bit by bit, his mental clarity had returned to the point he almost felt like any plan he came up with would be the right one. So he had to decide, offense or defense. The

hallway was dim and narrow, but the door opened inward. That gave the other guy the advantage. In the bathroom, the guy would have to bust in and come around the door to reach Jack. First strike with the pole could disarm the man. The next would be to the neck or the groin, whichever presented itself first. By that point, the guy would be on the floor and Jack would have answers.

As he shifted against the wall, the phone pressed against his leg.

And he realized how the guy had tracked him down. They'd been following him all along with the phone. Something so simple. Something he'd been paranoid about for some fifteen years now. The damn cell phone had led them here. He chastised himself for not realizing it sooner.

Then he started to doubt his plan to wait. Perhaps it would be better to charge the hall. Whip the door open and lunge out with the pole.

A stick versus a pistol in open combat. Something told Jack that wouldn't end well.

BRETT GRABBED THE old guy's collar and pulled him back a foot. The man offered up no resistance. Thirty years, maybe more, the poor sap had run the place. Never had a problem. Then the special day not one, but two Americans show up in his store, he winds up with a gun aimed at the back of his head. The old guy had checked the knob. It was locked.

"I want you to go to the end of the hallway and lay down," Brett whispered.

He didn't worry about having the gun pressed to the guy's head. A younger man, or a trained soldier, sure, he'd never do it. Someone like that could gain control of the situation, and possibly the firearm. But this guy, time was not on his side. Brett had no plans on shooting him, but he'd knock him unconscious if necessary.

And it wasn't. The guy lifted his hands, stepped to the side, then shuffled to the end of the hall. He dropped to his right knee, using the wall to steady himself, then his left.

Slowly, he lowered his torso to the floor. His chest hit the ground. His ass stuck up in the air. Then he let his legs slide back and his body flopped down.

Brett lifted his pistol in front of his face, closed his eyes, took a deep breath.

You or me, Jack. Guess it was always meant to be this way. We just delayed it a few years.

Ignoring the buzzing phone in his pocket, he lifted his knee, then struck forward with the heel of his foot, aiming for the spot next to the door handle.

JOE BALLARD TAPPED his pen on his desk with one hand, pressed his phone to his head with the other.

“Come on, Taylor,” he said.

He had to reach the man. Their line of communication had been compromised, and someone might be tracking Brett now. The fact that the man didn't answer told Ballard that either Brett discovered this, or he was found by whoever was looking for him.

SOUTH AFRICA.

“YOU SURE THIS is it?” Mason asked, hand to his brow, shielding the sun as he stared at the old wooden building.

“Affirmative,” the guy said through the phone Sasha held between them.

“Place looks deserted,” Mason said. “Don’t see anyone inside.”

She pointed at a puddle near one of the gas pumps. “Looks like someone’s been here recently.”

“Telling you, the signal leads to about 30 meters from your location.”

Sasha pulled the car around the side, parked and cut the engine. The building looked worse from this side. Age and the seasons had warped the wood. A few boards were broken off on one end, resting on the ground. There were no windows, so unless someone saw them enter, or there were cameras, they were out of view here. A cursory glance indicated there wasn’t a security system installed here.

Mason opened his door and stepped out. By the time Sasha joined him, he’d unholstered his weapon. She did the same after she slipped her phone into her pocket. The line was connected. She kept the mouthpiece visible so her team could hear and record everything that happened. If everything went well, the file would be deleted.

They walked around the back of the building. A large propane tank blocked a third of the wall. There was one window in the middle. Looked like it had been painted over in black. There wasn't much space between the structure and the woods. Ten meters at most. Still a bit of distance should someone pop around the corner and open fire.

It didn't come to that, though. They reached the other side, which looked like the rest of the building. Old and dingy and decrepit.

Mason stopped in front of her, at the corner. He surveyed the lot, looked back at her, said, "Empty." After a pause, he added, "I'll lead."

She followed him, peering through the dirty front windows as they made their way to the door set on the other side of center. Mason confirmed no one was visible inside. The counter unmanned. He pushed the door. Bells rang out.

And from the back of the store, there was a crashing sound.

SOUTH AFRICA.

BRETT TAYLOR DIDN'T hear the bells ringing as the front door opened. At that moment the heel of his foot connected with the door about an inch to the left of the handle. The weakest point. The door buckled inward. It groaned on dirty hinges like an old man jumping out of bed. Brett allowed his momentum to carry him forward in a lunge where he landed on his striking foot. If he could have prevented himself from doing so, he would have. Because outside of the light peeking in from the dim hallway, the bathroom was pitch dark.

JACK WASTED NO time. He stepped left, past the door, with pole drawn up over his shoulder, ready to whip it around. The man stood a few feet inside. He heaved forward, arms out. An attempt to steady himself. His pistol was out of reach. Jack swung the pole, aiming for the man's throat. The guy saw it at the last moment, brought his left arm up and deflected the blow.

The blow hadn't hit Jack's intended target, but at least it slowed the other man down for another second and allowed Jack to get another foot closer. He brought the pole back, lined up another swing.

The man turned toward Jack. He brought his right arm up. Jack swung the pole over his shoulder without scraping the ceiling and brought it down over the guy's right wrist. His arm dropped a foot. The pistol went off with a bright flash. The

shot echoed through the room. Jack's ears rung and he felt slightly dazed. But he hadn't been hit.

Jack released his right hand from the pole. Let it slip about halfway down in his left. He drew it up and struck out with it. Followed the blow with a right hook. Both connected with the side of the guy's head. He staggered backward. His pistol hit the floor and slid toward the darkened corner of the bathroom. Jack lost it in the shadows.

The guy collided with the wall, remained upright, his arms limp, head hanging down. Jack lunged toward him to deliver the final blow, but the guy managed to burst forward. He landed a shot on Jack's chin that stopped his momentum and snapped his head back and to the left. He dropped to one knee and tried to engage the man by wrapping his arms around the guy.

It did no good.

The guy struck again, this time sending Jack onto his back. Light glinted dully off a urinal above his head. Then the room brightened as Brett flipped the switch.

"Pretty good idea," he said.

Jack managed to get his left elbow underneath him and propped himself up a few inches. He watched the guy walk to the corner, bend over and pick up his pistol. The man inspected it, then turned it toward Jack.

"Brett?" Jack said. "Brett Taylor?"

The guy nodded once as he wiped the blood off his upper lip with his wrist.

"What the hell is this? What are you doing here?"

"What do you think, Jack?"

Jack knew. He was trying to buy a few minutes. Enough time to recover some strength and make a final move. But he knew against a guy like Brett that would be pointless. He had to resort to a tactic he wasn't fond of, but might save his life.

"Why?" Jack said.

“Not that it matters to me, but you did some bad shit in your time. Because of that, you’ve been marked for termination.”

“Who else?”

Brett shrugged, said nothing.

“At least give me that, man.”

“A shit load of people. That’s who.” He took a few steps forward, cautious to remain out of Jack’s reach, but close enough to not miss. “You wanna see it coming?”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“Yes, I do.”

“No. You have the same choices available as I had six years ago.”

Brett said nothing. He steadied his pistol with his left hand.

“Brett...”

“What?”

Jack closed his eyes. There was nothing he could say that could stop the guy. Brett had been trained to detach himself from the event, much as Jack had. In fact, all those years ago, it hadn’t been Brett who convinced him to abandon the job. Not initially at least.

“How’s Reese?” Jack said.

Brett froze in place. He said nothing. Made no expression. Didn’t move. And he didn’t shoot.

Reese McSweeney was Brett’s sister. The only family he had. She had been a New York City homicide detective. Until she became mixed up with Jack. It was her plea to hear Brett out that led Jack to call off the hit.

“Have you talked to her recently?” Jack said.

Brett shook his head. “They put her in witness protection.”

“I gave you a chance because of her. You remember that, right?”

Brett nodded.

“She would want you to do the same for me. At least talk this through with me. If we can’t come up with a solution, then pull the trigger.”

Brett said nothing. He remained frozen.

And Jack realized that the pounding he heard wasn’t inside his head when it resulted in a door crashing in.

SASHA FOLLOWED MASON down the dim hallway. She saw an old man cowering at the end of it. He covered his head and peeked from under his arm, then looked away.

“Gun down,” Mason screamed. “Drop the gun! Get on the damn floor!”

Sasha followed him into the bathroom. The man standing in the middle of the room didn’t move. He pointed toward the corner. She followed his aim and saw Jack sprawled out, propped on his elbow. He looked at her, smiled, diverted his gaze back to the gunman.

“Drop it,” Mason said.

“My name is Brett Taylor. I’m a United States federal agent. I have an executive order to kill this man.”

“I don’t care,” Mason said. “We ain’t in the flipping United States.”

Jack said, “Brett, you know this doesn’t come from the top.”

“That’s right,” Brett said. “Because they don’t know about the things you and I and those like us do. But they have people paid to make these kinds of decisions. And they decided you had to die.”

Mason said, “You won’t make it out of here. I promise you that.”

“MASON, SHUT THE hell up,” Jack said. Every second that passed was equivalent to a bomb’s timer counting down. Brett would reach zero and squeeze the trigger. The part of him that had been programmed to do his job without thinking

was at odds with his rational side. Jack saw it. He saw it because he'd been there before. Mason had been MI5 his whole life. An agent, but never a killer.

Sasha said, "He murdered Erin, Jack."

Jack felt the world close in on him. He and Erin went back years. They'd nearly married. He still loved her, and felt the feeling was reciprocated, although both knew it would never work. For the sake of their daughter, they left the relationship at friendship. He tried to ask about Mia, but his throat couldn't form the words.

Brett blinked and took a step back. His pistol wavered. "I didn't, Jack. I was there, scouting them. I planned to use them to bring you out. But innocent women and children, that's not my game."

"We found the American girl," Sasha said. "Hannah said you went to the beach in search of them. We saw footage of you on the island."

"And I found Erin," Brett said. "I found her on the beach. She was already dead. Shot in the head."

"Mia?" Jack asked.

"She wasn't there."

"If not you, then who did this?" Jack asked. "Who are you working with?"

Brett lowered his pistol. Mason glanced at Jack as if to ask permission to take the guy down. Jack shook his head.

"I'm solo," Brett said. "That's the only way I work."

"You have to tell us everything you know," Jack said, rising to his feet. "Everything."

WASHINGTON, D.C.

BECK ARRIVED EARLY that morning. He chided Clarissa the moment she opened her door.

“You could have returned my call last night,” he said.

“You could have returned mine earlier than you did,” she said. “Instead, you stayed out late drinking with your buddies when we have a big day today.”

He waved her off as he entered. “It’s not like that at all.”

“Then what’s it like?”

“I had a couple drinks, then went back to the office to make sure we’ve got everything covered.”

Her defensive posture eased. “And do we?”

“I thought we did, but now that you’ve been tailed and attacked, I’m not so sure that I like it.” He pulled something from his backpack. “Have a look at this.”

“What is it?”

“Security footage of your attack.”

She took the disc and inserted it into the DVD player. It started with her approaching. What she hadn’t noticed the night before was that the car had driven past around the same time she came into view, albeit as a small shadowy figure at the other end of the road.

She watched the attack play out.

“You could have sustained a concussion,” Beck said.
“Why didn’t you go to the hospital?”

“Because they would have involved the police.”

“And?”

“I don’t like the police.”

Beck shook his head. “What have I gotten myself into with you?”

“I ask myself the same thing almost every night.”

They shared a smile, easing the tension.

She watched the video a few more times, slowing it frame-by-frame the first time the car passed.

“There,” she said. “New York plates.”

“If only we could make out the tag number.”

She zoomed the image, but it only distorted the tag further. They both noticed something else, however.

“See that?” Beck said.

She nodded. “Fraternal Order of Police sticker.”

“That son of a bitch, Harris.”

“My guess too.” She turned toward him. “But we don’t have any evidence to support that. It could have been someone else there, listening in to our conversation with him, who has contact with Charles.”

Beck wrapped his hands around the back of his head, leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. “I suppose you’re right. We’ll have to turn the screws on Harris next time we see him. In the meantime, I don’t think you should stay here.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m tired of running. Plus, the guy got his ass kicked. No way he’s coming back here.”

“Clarissa...”

“Beck...”

He said nothing.

“Come on,” she said, wanting to put the incident behind her, for now. “We’ve got a con to con.”

QUEENS, NEW YORK.

CHARLES HATED ALMOST everything about the Queens compound. The flooring was out of date. It stunk from too many men being in the place twenty four hours a day. And when Feng had run the organization, he'd forced Charles to spend all his time there.

But there was one place that gave Charles reason to smile.

The dungeon.

At least, that's what he called it. The Old Man had referred to it as his special guest house. The place where his most despised friends, associates and enemies ended up, often to never see sunlight again.

Charles excelled in the dungeon. A guy his size was intimidating to most people. Shackle them to the floor and he almost never had to break a sweat to get information.

Most of the time.

He recalled an evening with Clarissa. The woman refused to cooperate. Tough lady, he conceded, but not tough enough. If it hadn't been for the contractor interfering, Charles would have buried Clarissa in the ground that night.

Maybe some other time.

He descended the stairwell. The guard at the entrance nodded his greeting.

"She move?" Charles asked of Essie.

The guard said, “No. Still lying on the floor, same as when you brought her in.”

Charles nodded and instructed the man to open the main door. There were three locks that secured it. The first was a ten digit code entered on a number pad. Then a badge that had to be swiped. Only ten people had one that worked. Finally, a biometric lock had to be disengaged. It worked off thumbprints. This was something new. Ten people had access. There used to be fifteen. Two of those five thumbs had been reclaimed and burned by Charles. Two others belonged to Milano and Endrizzi. The final thumb belonged to Paolo.

Charles walked down the hallway, glancing into empty cells as he passed. He ignored the one long term resident of the dungeon. A hold over from Feng’s regime. The guy was to remain on one meal a day until he died. Eventually, Charles would have the guy killed and disposed of. But he couldn’t do so until the final Feng loyalists had turned or were gone.

He stopped in front of Esmeralda’s cell. She lay on the floor, eyes open, fixated on the ceiling. He knocked against the glass. She didn’t move. Her eyes remained motionless. Only her breasts heaved up and down with each slow breath.

Charles opened the door and stepped into the room.

“Hope you are enjoying your accommodations,” he said.

She did not respond.

“It’s temporary. You see, you’re only bait until your big brother shows up. He screwed me over. Maybe he told you about it. If so, then you’ll realize that the reason you are here is all his fault. He screwed you over too, I guess. Dumbass should have never went to your house. Now, I think we’d have found you regardless, but at least then you could blame me, and not him.”

She continued to stare at the ceiling without saying a word.

“The hell happened to you back there? Left you all catatonic and shit?” He walked to the middle of the room and stopped. Stared down at the woman. “Makes me wonder if

Paolo is even going to come for you. Shit, I might've done him a favor."

He turned and walked back to the door. Looking back, he said, "Don't matter, though. Soon enough you won't be anybody's problem."

QUEENS, NEW YORK.

PAOLO STOPPED A mile away from the compound. Any closer, and he'd come across the first spotter. He felt a little uneasy. Given the circumstances, it was possible Charles added a few others on some of the major arteries leading in. They'd be looking for him.

In general, Paolo knew what to look for. There had been a time when it had been his job to recruit and place the spotters. They were mostly kids, aged ten to sixteen. Feng never put anyone younger than seventeen out in the field to do real work. Charles allowed the rule to stick.

It didn't matter if there were none out today. Getting into the compound was practically impossible. It was heavily guarded. Within two blocks, spotters gave way to armed guards. Some were in fixed positions, while others patrolled. They were certainly issued orders to kill Paolo on sight.

If he managed to get past the external guards, gaining access to the main house would be next to impossible. Every door had a sentinel present. It took codes and cards to get the door opened. Then the eye test. Every single man in there knew Paolo. The number of them between him and Charles was insurmountable. He would never be lucky enough to hit every shot and avoid every bullet that came his way.

So what then? Flee the city? Leave Essie to suffer in Charles's dungeon? He could never face his family again. They'd spit on him.

There was the tunnel. And the question of whether it really existed.

He'd heard tales of a tunnel that ran from the house and after a mile or so merged with a sewer drain that dumped out into an empty field. If it existed, it most likely connected with the lowest level of the house. As far as he knew, that was the dungeon. As one of the few with access, he'd spent some time down there.

In all that time, he'd never come across a tunnel entrance. So it was hidden well if it really existed.

Who would know?

He racked his brain. Thought of every man who worked in the place, past and present. There were only a handful that ever went down to the cells. Of the ones remaining at the compound, none would ever help him. They were loyal to Charles. That's how they kept their access.

Paolo shifted his focus to the members who had moved on to new posts. All he needed was someone who owed him a favor. Or who hated Charles enough to give up any information they might have.

Only one person fit the description. Scott Hood. Sent to white-collar prison on trumped up charges. Speculation was that Charles had given the Feds what they needed to put Hood away.

Paolo took another ten minutes to think it through. There was no one else. Hood was his only chance, other than a total suicide mission. Which wasn't a bad idea. Walk into the place, laden with explosives, and kill them all, himself and Essie included. Had to be some redeeming karma there, he thought.

He turned the car around, drove to Brooklyn. Then he used his phone to look up the details of Hood's sentencing. Once he had the prison's number, he placed call to ask about visiting hours.

"I can see if he's available to speak now," the guard said.

Paolo waited a few minutes.

“Who’s this?” Hood asked.

“An old friend,” Paolo said.

“Named?”

“Paolo.”

“I only know one man named Paolo, and from what I hear, he’s in deep shit.”

“Is that right?”

“Deep enough that I don’t think I want to talk to him.”

Paolo laughed. “Doesn’t sound like the Scott Hood I knew.”

“Things change.”

“That they do. And I’m thinking it is time for a change in leadership.”

“This isn’t the best place to have this conversation. Can you get here today?”

“Yes.” Paolo ended the call and planned his route to the prison.

SOUTH AFRICA.

JACK LISTENED WHILE Brett recounted his story for the third time. The details never changed. Not from his meeting with Joe Ballard, to the information he found in Jack's files, to the man's time on Tenerife. He believed Brett. The guy hadn't pulled the trigger when he had the chance. Even before Jack mentioned Reese McSweeney. Brett could have done it. He didn't.

The guy knew the reasoning behind the hit was bullshit.

"Are you buying all this, Jack?" Mason asked.

"Not sure what you mean," Jack said.

"He would have killed you if we hadn't shown up."

"I think the fact that he hadn't yet proves that he wouldn't have. I think he's been agonizing over this since he received the orders."

"And why would that be?" Mason said.

All eyes turned toward Brett. He glanced away, took a deep breath.

"See," Mason said. "You were good as dead, and now you're going to let this guy go and he'll come back and make you pay for it."

"I wasn't going to kill him," Brett said. "Jack's right. I've been fighting it since I got the assignment. I owe him greater than I owe anyone. He saved my life. My sister's life. He

believed in me when there were multiple contracts out on my head.”

“Then how come we found you moments away from killing him?” Mason said.

“Training is hard to overcome, I suppose.”

Jack laughed. He turned and stared up at the darkened sky. When they’d found the clearing off the road, the sun had been out. Now only faint traces of light remained.

“Who’s next on your list?” Jack asked.

“I’m to terminate your closest associates.”

“Bear?”

“Yeah.”

“Clarissa?”

“She was in the file.”

“Who else?”

“The Frenchman you worked with over the years.”

“Pierre.”

“That’s the one.”

Jack hesitated, then said, “My family?”

Brett shook his head. “Families, unless present at the time of the hit, are to be left out.”

“So why is Erin dead? And who killed her?”

“I’m wondering the same. Really, I am. Double booking this job is not a mistake they would make. Someone did this deliberately, and it makes me wonder why. What’s the point? They know my track record. If I failed, so be it, but at least wait until that point. Right?”

Jack nodded.

Brett continued. “It’s almost like they wanted to lure both of us into a trap.”

“How many jobs had you performed for this op?”

Brett shrugged and glanced at Mason and Sasha. “You know I can’t say.”

“Fair enough. We’ll say it’s a few then. The fact is, this is a black op cleansing, and to complete it, they are pulling off one of the biggest black ops ever.”

“By my estimation, yes.”

“Well, only makes sense they’ll have to tie up a lot of loose ends, including the assassins.”

“That’s the thought I’ve been fending off for the past day or so.” Brett walked past Jack, stopped, placed his hands on the back of his head. “Maybe we should both disappear.”

“What names can you give us?” Jack said.

“Other than Ballard? None.”

“So we need to get to him.”

“We?” Brett laughed. “Hate to break it to you, but you aren’t getting anywhere near the U.S. anytime soon.”

“Correction. Jack Noble isn’t, but that won’t stop me. In fact, I think the best thing for everyone is if Jack Noble is dead. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“What are you talking about?” Sasha said.

“You want me to call it in?” Brett said. “A confirmed kill?”

Jack nodded.

“And what happens when they discover that you’re still alive? Wait, I’ll tell you. They’ll have twenty spooks so far up my ass I’ll have to shoot myself in the gut to hit them.”

“By the time they find out, they’ll all be dead.”

“How will you get back?”

Jack looked at Sasha.

“It’s not that easy,” she said. “Out of London, sure, I can get you across borders with few knowing. But from here, it’s not going to happen. Even trying to get you into London is going to be next to impossible. The cameras. Facial

recognition technology. They'll have you figured out in an instant. That's a big risk, Jack. For both of us."

He hadn't considered Sasha balking at helping. She had a lot to risk. She probably would get a severe reprimand for coming all this way and dragging Mason along with her. While he was disappointed, he couldn't fault her for drawing a line.

Sasha continued. "We can find some way to support you here. Maybe find an asset to take you in for a while as things blow over. Perhaps in time I can arrange for you to come to England on asylum. You know, once the facts are known."

"They'll never be known," Brett said. "Not something like this. It goes too high."

"How high?" Jack asked.

Brett said nothing. An answer that revealed more than words could.

"And I appreciate the offer," Jack said. "But I can't live under those terms. Someone will find out. They always do. And once that happens, I'll be fighting for my life again. And it will put you at risk. Plus, I've got to find Mia. And to do that, I have to face these people back in the States. Someone there knows. And I'll question and kill every last one of them until I find her." He paused and looked at Brett. "Even if I have to go to the top."

They spent some time solidifying stories and plans. Sasha and Mason agreed that they were working jointly in an effort to track a suspected terrorist. They had information and wanted to act on it at once. Both felt their positions within MI5 and MI6 gave them the authority to take the actions they had without requiring additional authorization. She assured Mason that her analysts would back her.

If that failed, they would reveal a distorted version of the truth. One where they left in an attempt to help her friend who ended up murdered.

She also promised Jack that she would do everything she could to locate Mia, including sending a team to Tenerife to work with law enforcement there.

“Can I talk with you alone?” she asked Jack.

He nodded and led her north into the woods. They walked for five minutes in silence.

“I’m so sorry about Erin,” Sasha said. “I know how much she meant to you. When I saw that they’d tagged her, I did everything in my power to get there. We would have been there hours earlier. Probably in time to save her.”

“You don’t have to do this,” he said. “I don’t blame you. Like everything else, this comes back to me. It’s my actions, the life I’ve led, that caused this.”

“Don’t say that. You’ve done so much for your country. For this world.”

“And I’ve done a lot for money. It motivated me a lot more than doing the right thing. At least, it did for a number of years. Now, I’m not sure which was worse. Fighting for a figure head, or the almighty dollar.”

“The world needs people like you and me. Don’t you ever forget that.”

Jack saw Sasha return his smile in the moonlight. For a moment he considered kissing her. He’d denied any chemistry between them. But at times it was there.

Perhaps sensing his thoughts, Sasha said, “We should get back. Don’t want them thinking we’ve wandered off.”

He nodded his agreement.

“One thing,” she said.

“Yeah?”

“How do you do it, Jack?”

“What?”

“Talk about Erin like her death was ages ago and you’ve had time to get over it?”

“After all these years I’ve learn to compartmentalize every aspect of my life. Don’t see how else I could get through each day.”

They headed back toward Mason and Brett. Jack hoped the two men hadn't killed one another while he was gone.

"Is her body going home?" Jack asked.

"Yes. Once it has been processed, it'll be shipped back to London."

"She doesn't have any family. I'm not sure if there's anything legal, but do what you can to hold the body until Mia is found."

A few minutes later they reached the clearing and found the two men standing by the car. The only thing left to be determined was how Jack would get home. It seemed traveling by air was out. That left one option.

Boat.

"I've contacted a friend," Brett said. "It is going to take him three days to get here. He has a vessel that can cross the Atlantic. On board will be a Zodiac. You'll have to take that in the last five miles or so. It won't be easy, even on a clear day. And he won't wait for perfect weather, either."

Jack had trained with the Small Boat Teams for a spell early in his military career. It had been years since he'd used the training. He hoped it'd come back to him if needed.

The four of them piled into the small rental and drove southwest to Cape Town. They hardly spoke. Wasn't much to say. After dropping Brett off near the airport, they continued north seventy miles to Saldanha. It was there that Jack was to rendezvous with Brett's contact, a former merchant marine who'd retired off the coast of Africa a few years back. Apparently, they'd been foster brothers at one time.

Part of him wished Sasha would remain with him there. At the same time, he was glad she was heading back to London. Jack knew they'd never work.

They hugged their goodbyes with Mason sitting behind the wheel of the rental. She pulled a phone out of her bag and handed it to Jack.

“It’s one of my personal phones. Completely secure. I can’t even track you on it.” She held up another phone. “You can reach me on this line. It’s in the contact list as Phone One. Call me when your ride gets here, and then let me know when you get back to the States.”

With that, she got inside the car and her and Mason drove off. Jack watched until the taillights were out of sight. Then he turned toward the ocean. Letting go was the hardest thing. Everyone who knew him faced danger. And he couldn’t protect them all. He also had to trust. Trust that Brett would stick to the plan. Trust that Sasha would continue to work the police in Tenerife and come up with a lead on Mia.

The thought of his daughter caused a knot to tie his stomach in two. The one aspect of the situation he’d filed away, compartmentalized the most, was his daughter. In his line of work, people taken didn’t live long if there was no clear reason for them to be held hostage. If someone held her because of him, then once word leaked that Jack was dead, she would serve little purpose to her captors.

Unless they knew Jack’s history well enough. Then they might’ve traced her lineage and discovered a very sizeable trust fund in her name. Dottie never had children of her own, so Erin was like a daughter, and Mia her granddaughter. Dottie’s estranged husband, Thornton Walloway, never removed the provisions in their will for his fortune to fall to Erin and Mia.

Perhaps the other team wasn’t after Jack after all. They used it as cover. The whole time, their purpose had been to take Erin and Mia in hopes of taking a bit of their fortune.

It made enough sense that Jack hoped it was true.

ANDERSON FEDERAL MINIMUM SECURITY PRISON.

SCOTT HOOD WAITED alone in the room. There were at least a dozen tables in there. Sunday visiting hours weren't very popular, Paolo thought as he was escorted through the security door. He and the guard stopped a couple feet inside. Hood nodded at Paolo, winked at the guard. Paolo felt a nudge against his lower back. He glanced over his shoulder in time to see the guard slip into the hall. The door shut with a heavy thud. A solid reminder the place was still a prison.

Hood's interaction with the guard, however slight, left Paolo uneasy. Had he winked because the guard had helped arrange the empty room? Why would he? A setup, perhaps? Hood could have contacted Charles immediately following Paolo's call. The motive was simple. He knew the boss had his balls in a vice, and now he wanted back on his good side. What better way than serving up Charles's enemy of the moment to the guy?

"It's good to see you," Paolo said, remaining on the spot where the guard had left him.

"You too," Hood said. "We can skip the formalities, though. Nothing happens for me in here. And I really don't care what you've been up to. I assume you did something pretty bad in order to turn to me for help."

Paolo nodded as he recalled surviving the attempt on his life. He smiled as he thought of killing Milano and Endrizzi.

"I heard something about two caps being found upstate."

Paolo nodded again.

“OK, that’s all I needed to know. Never cared for those stupid fucks either.” Hood rose and paced to the back of the room. He leaned against the wall, lit a cigarette, then locked eyes with Paolo. “Frankly, I didn’t like you either.”

If this was a setup, it was going down now. That’s why he moved. Got out of the way to make space for the fight that would ensue. Paolo stepped to the side and glanced back at the door. Through the small window he saw nothing but the guard. He faced the opposite way.

“Relax,” said Hood. “It’s just us. You’re safe in here. Safer than you think. I practically run this place now.”

His words did little to comfort Paolo. Everyone he knew was a pathological liar, a crook, and a killer. Hood was no different. He’d get the information he wanted out of Paolo, then have him killed. If that was his intention.

“Why?” Paolo asked.

“Why what?”

“You said you never liked me. Just curious why.”

“I did at one time. But once the Old Man passed, the line was drawn. You were on the other side. For a while, I thought I was going to win. It wasn’t a matter of being anti-Charles. No, more to it than that. They were going to put me in charge once we took him down. Obviously that hasn’t happened. Yet. I’m biding my time in here. Building resources. Making connections. You wouldn’t believe the corporate power in here. When I get out, I’ll have enough to start my own thing if need be.”

“Charles has more connections than you can make in here. He’ll have you killed if you try and move in on his territory.”

“The people outside the organization will side with who they think is most powerful, and who they feel can benefit them most. I think they’ll quickly realize that I’m the right guy.”

There was no point debating him. Paolo had more to gain by agreeing with the guy, however disillusioned he was, getting the information he needed, and then moving on.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Paolo said.

“I know I’m right.” Hood crossed his arms and grinned, the cigarette dangling from his lips.

“I want to know about the tunnel.”

“Which tunnel?”

“Under the compound.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’ve got no other way in. And to take Charles out, inside the compound is the best bet. Yeah, the place is crawling with goons, but his guard is most down there precisely for that reason.”

Hood dropped his cigarette on the floor and crushed it out with the tip of his shoe. He stood there for a moment, focused on Paolo. Finally, he nodded and waved Paolo over to the table. Hood reached into his pocket, pulled out a pen and some paper.

“Only two people know about what you speak of,” Hood said. “Well, I guess you make three now. Not even Charles knows the truth. The Old Man didn’t trust him enough. Feared the guy would use it to bring him down in some way. To most guys, it was a legend. How can something you can’t see be real, right?”

Paolo nodded. He felt that way up until this moment.

Hood continued. “It runs about a mile and a half. You enter through the sewer. There’s lots of ways. Was done like that so you had options if it was necessary to escape, or if you had to bring someone in and one of the entry points was inaccessible for whatever reason.”

“So where do I enter?”

Hood gave him the locations. “There’s a false entrance and the real entrance. See, takes a code to get into the tunnel, but

you can't stick a security box in the sewer. So, you go through the first entrance, which is hidden and you're going to need the schematics because I know it by feel, not really distance. Once inside, you travel another fifty yards and you reach the security check point." Hood repeated the access code. "Since Charles doesn't know about this, I'll assume it is still the same. At the other end, enter the code in reverse. You'll come up into the last cell on the left. But first, check the box right of the ladder. There should be an access card there that gives you override to all doors, even the ones with the fancy locks."

"I'm cleared for those anyway."

"You think you still are? After what happened?"

Paolo said nothing as he considered this. Hood was right. Charles would have deactivated Paolo's access card, and erased his biometric scans. At least after the front door. He wouldn't have any issue with Paolo getting inside so long as he never reached the interior.

Hood had been making notes on a sheet of paper. He scribbled one last note that appeared to be a series of numbers, and slid it over to Paolo.

"That's your contact. You don't know him, but you can trust him. He was an associate of the Old Man's. He didn't have anything to do with what happened after Feng's death, but he was against Charles. Don't tell him what you're doing, only that you need the schematics for the tunnel. Tell him I sent you. He'll hook you up."

Paolo folded the paper and slipped it into his pocket. One step closer, so long as Hood didn't sell him out.

"Do this right," Hood said, "and I'll make you my number two when I get out of here."

Paolo rose, smiled, extended his hand. *No*, he thought, *you can be mine*.

SCOTT HOOD LOOKED at the guard with surprise when he was informed he had another set of visitors.

"I thought visiting hours were over?" Hood said.

“Come on, Hood,” the guard said. “I’m off shift in five minutes. I don’t have time for your talk.”

Hood stretched out on his bed, glanced at the television. He was one of the few in the place with his own room. Extra privileges paid for with a stack of fake money.

“Hood, now. I *can* report you, you know.”

This made Hood laugh. “Sure you can. But you won’t. Just hold that door for a moment while I take a piss.”

CLARISSA WATCHED THE man step into the room. She recognized him right away. He’d been a patron of the bar she ran years ago. Back before Hood and Charles had reached the next level of the Old Man’s organization.

Judging by the look on Hood’s face, she wasn’t even a distant memory to him. Though Beck had told her it was safe to use her real name now and that she had moved up to a highly restricted level of security clearance required to access her files, she knew there were men out there that didn’t care about such things. If Charles had a price on her head, she was dead.

Beck took the lead. “I’ll make this short and simple. My name is Beck. I’m with the Secret Service, and I’m here to make you a deal.”

He explained who and what they were after. Hood smiled at the mention of Charles DeCosta. Five minutes later, the smile hadn’t faded.

“Give me everything you know,” Beck said. “And if it all checks out and gets us a conviction, you’ll have your sentence reduced to thirty-six months, with a day for day good behavior incentive.”

“And what would it take to get the rest of that time reduced?”

“There may be options with the FBI,” Beck said.

Shaking his head, Hood held his hand up and cut him off. “Fuck them. I deal with you and only you.”

“Can you give us any other names? Perhaps someone that could help us bring up even more charges?”

“I do this and you knock off the remaining three years?”

Beck nodded. “So long as it leads to what we expect.”

Hood smiled, leaned back and spread his arms. He let his hands collapse on his stomach. And he gave them everything he had on Paolo Almeida, including the man’s plans to infiltrate the compound.

“Sounds like the perfect candidate,” Beck said. “We’ll be in touch, Mr. Hood.”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

BRETT LEANED AGAINST the wall next to the window watching the falling rain. Lightning exploded and thunder clapped. The sidewalks below, for once, were deserted. Water pooled on his porch. Happened every time it rained. Sometimes it took an hour for it to drain.

He'd been back for two weeks. His first visit had been to Ballard. The man took the news of Jack's death at Brett's word. Then he asked about Noble's associates. Brett recalled the conversation.

"Logan is off the grid," Brett had said. "I can't locate him."

"We'll keep trying, then," Ballard had said. "What about the others?"

"I suppose I can go after the woman, Abbot, if you'd like me to."

"No, she's off limits. Just forget that name. Forget she ever existed. In fact, erase Jack Noble and everything you know about him from your memory. We're moving on."

With that, Ballard had assigned Brett to kill an active member of the SIS. A man named Turner. There was nothing dramatic about the operation. Brett had followed the guy home and shot him while he watered his lawn.

The next set of instructions had advised Brett to wait. They wanted to monitor for Frank Skinner's reaction. By now, the

man had to be wary that something was going on. Before long, he'd close up. Or flee.

The last communication from Ballard had been five days ago. Brett had pushed him on each call to reveal more about what was going on. The names of other targets. The names of the main players. Ballard revealed nothing. But he wasn't the kind of guy that Brett figured would hold up under intense stress. So, when it came time, he'd place the guy under it.

Brett's phone buzzed on the kitchen table. He glanced at it. Decided to ignore it. Turned his attention back to the rainy streets for another five minutes.

Then his phone rang again. This time he answered.

"Brett? Is that you?"

It wasn't tough to place the female British voice.

"Hello, Sasha," he said. "I've been waiting to hear from you."

"Our friend reached out. The package has been delivered."

"Where can I pick it up?"

"Stand by and you'll receive further instructions."

"I can assure you that this is a secure line."

He heard her breathing through the phone while she paused. "Nothing is secure right now. We'll be in touch once you've picked up the package."

The line went dead, and Brett's frustration level rose. Two weeks he'd been waiting, and that was all they could communicate to him. He'd risked his life for this. He could have completed his job and killed Jack. Sure, he might've been shot in the process. But there was also a chance that Mason wasn't a quick shot. The guy had the look of a desk jockey. Two shots. Two men dead. And Sasha would have been simple to deal with.

He brushed the thoughts aside. Things hadn't gone that way, so there was no point in dwelling on them.

She said they'd be in touch once he rendezvoused with Jack. But he had no idea where that would be.

A few minutes later, an encrypted message came through. It took him a few minutes to work out the string of numbers. He determined they were coordinates. He dialed them in. They revealed a location north of Charleston, South Carolina.

Another message went to his personal email. It contained five digits. He then received a text with another series of numbers. Putting them together revealed a UK telephone number. He had a hunch the line would go right through to Jack when called.

Brett left his apartment and went to the nearest drug store. He purchased a throwaway phone and some minutes. He returned to his building, but went to the top floor instead of his own. The eastern stairwell led to the roof. The rain fell heavy, but a canopy provided enough relief that he could make the call.

Jack answered almost immediately. "Who's this?"

"It's Brett. Our friend put me in touch. She gave me some coordinates, too."

"I arrived a few hours ago. Got a house to check out down here."

"I'm coming down. Should take me about seven or eight hours to reach your location."

"What's the world think about me?"

"You're dead."

After ending the call, Brett returned to his apartment and packed a bag. He stored an extra pistol, some cash, and another secure phone for Jack. He considered bringing a false identity for Jack to use. The driver's license and passport photo were of Brett, though. He brought them, but for his own use.

Bags in hand, he left the building and hailed a cab. Had the driver drop him off three blocks from a Hertz where he rented a full-size sedan. No point in driving in a vehicle the

government could track. He paid for the car with a credit card under the name of his false identity.

Thirty minutes later, he was out of town on I-95, headed for South Carolina.

NEVERS, FRANCE.

She lay still as the boy entered her room. He was older than her. Fifteen or sixteen, she figured. Her foster parents had taken to calling her Madeline. It felt almost right, but not quite. Now the boy whispered her adopted name over and over. Closer and closer.

She pulled the sheets tight across her face. Pinned them down with her feet. Lifted her body in an attempt to secure the rest of the bedding under her body.

And it didn't matter when the boy yanked them off the bed.

Her feet and body offered little resistance. She managed to hang on with her hands for a moment, but a second yank by the boy freed them.

She remained still. Hopeful that if she didn't put up a fight, he'd move on.

He didn't.

The streetlight cast a bar of light into the room. The boy passed through it. He was stripped down to his underwear. She saw that he wasn't much bigger than she was. He lunged onto the bed. Pinned her arms down with his hands.

He might not have been much bigger, but he seemed stronger.

She fought anyway.

He let go of her left arm. For a moment, she thought he was giving up. Then he struck her. But before she could cry out in pain, he placed his hand over her mouth.

Seize any opportunity to hurt your opponent.

The voice in her head, so familiar, yet unknown. It barked commands at her. She had an opportunity, and she took it.

The girl bit down hard on the boy's hand. He yanked it back. Pulled his other hand away and wrapped it around his bleeding palm.

"You bitch," he said as he released his injured appendage and swung for her face.

She saw his fist passing through a finger of light. Without thinking, she moved her head. His punch connected with her pillow. It wasn't much further than her face would have been, but it offered an entirely different stopping resistance. The boy lost his balance and tumbled to the side.

Know the weakest points on a man's body. Strike fast and hard. Strike two or three times. Do what you have to until he is neutralized.

She swung her right arm in an arc, formed a fist, connected with the boy's neck.

He continued to slide off her.

She wriggled to her side and swung again, unsure where her blow connected. Her knuckles cried out in pain, and it didn't seem to affect the boy as much.

He rolled off her and the bed and got to his feet.

"Come on," he said. "Fight me."

She swung her legs over and stood, leaving the bed between them, and nowhere for her to go. He had the door behind him. She was trapped. A smile crossed his face. He realized it too.

Use any and all assets available to you.

He hopped on the bed, effectively cutting off any escape route. She backed up to the corner of the room and brought her

hands to her face and started to cry.

His laughter told her that he'd bought the act. His feet thumped on the floor as he hopped down in front of her.

“Got any more fight in you?” he said.

She sobbed some more.

He reached out and grabbed her shoulder. “Why don't you get back in that bed and let me do what I want with you.”

She removed her hands and lowered her head. With eyes out of sight, she nodded. He was close. Maybe a foot away. She could smell his body odor.

Another step, you little bastard.

The overhead fan ticked and whooshed. She felt the cool air on her sweat-soaked skin. She became aware of the heat from the boy's body as he stood inches from her. His hand fell upon her shoulder. It wasn't soft or gentle. He squeezed. Dug in with his nails. He chuckled softly. A sinister sound.

Weakness! Attack the weakness!

He had both hands on her now. One clutching her shoulder still. The other wrapped around the back of her head, tightening around her hair. He wrapped it around his wrist. He pulled her closer.

Her forehead touched his chest. He drew in a sharp breath.

So did she.

And she brought her right knee up with all the force she could muster. Her kneecap connected with his groin and the boy let out a hollow howl. Sounded like steam escaping, without the whistle.

But he didn't go down. And he didn't let go. His right hand dug deeper into her shoulder. The left yanked her head left and right.

So the girl struck again. Her knee carved through the few feet of air, building power and momentum. It struck between his legs, crushing his testicles.

This time, he released her and bowed over. His hands disappeared between his legs.

The girl didn't hesitate. She grabbed him by the back of his head, yanking his hair upward then forcing his head down as she delivered another strike with her knee. She heard the crunch of cartilage. The sickening muffled scream and then the boy choking on his blood.

She could have left it at that. She almost did. But he had intended to do her far worse harm.

Plus, he was still standing.

So she pulled his head up, then yanked it down in time to meet her knee a second time. The thud wasn't quite as satisfying as the crunch. He didn't scream this time. Instead his body went limp. He dropped to the floor. She held him up by his hair.

The girl let go and backed up a foot. Perched on his knees, he swayed side to side.

"Fall down," she whispered.

He didn't.

"Do it," she said.

He still didn't.

She backed up another foot, then lunged forward and struck with her heel to his throat.

The boy collapsed backward. Landed with his feet pinned next to his hips.

She stepped over him, changed into shorts and a shirt, grabbed a few additional articles of clothing and stuffed them into the small bag the hospital had given her. She glanced back at the boy. He still hadn't moved. Was he even breathing? She didn't care. She stepped over him again, slid the window open, and disappeared into the darkness.

NEW YORK CITY.

AKERS WISHED HE'D killed the girl along with her mother. He'd spent the past two weeks acting as a babysitter to the whiny little bitch.

And he had no choice.

Under no uncertain circumstances, his boss had said, was he to let her out of his sight. That meant no leaving the suite.

He kept her locked in the bedroom and took to sleeping on the couch. She had a bathroom. He provided her with three meals a day. When she cried, he turned up the radio or the television volume. When she banged on the door, he banged back.

The worst was when she shouted for her mother. Not because Akers felt bad for providing her with an exit from this world. But because he couldn't send the little girl to meet her.

Not yet.

He didn't understand why. Noble, by all accounts, was dead. Taken care of by the other team. The one that had the actual authority to terminate him. So the girl had no purpose. At least as far as he knew.

Akers had to trust his boss. Really, he had no choice. Disobedience would be met with death, and likely not as swift as the one he had given the girl's mother.

LITTLE RIVER, SOUTH CAROLINA.

THE TOWN WAS quiet. And quaint. Hardly the kind of place where a spook would live. Not that looks mattered. Jack knew better than that.

Brandon had given him the lead two and a half weeks ago. Might as well have been two lifetimes ago. So much had happened in the time since. What started off as a meeting to discuss heading a supposed millionaire's security detail turned into a race for his life.

The millionaire turned out to be something different altogether. He hadn't given a name, but Jack had a hunch it would turn out to be John C. Merrick, or an alias thereof. Then again, Merrick could've been the fake name. Maybe Brandon had figured it out by now. Jack couldn't call him to find out, though. The guy's lines were certainly being monitored for activity.

Once the unfamiliar line rang through, the NSA would be all over it. They'd trace the number to Sasha, then line up the pieces to connect it to Jack. He could use a throwaway line, but that would result in four teams swarming the town within a matter of hours. All they had to do was nail the point of origin. Jack could be gone by then. But what if he wasn't ready? There was something here, he knew it. And he didn't want to be rushed in finding it if it could be the one piece of information or evidence that put all this to an end.

A face-to-face meeting with Brandon was Jack's only option. And given that he had no idea where the guy lived anymore, that had to be ruled out. So he'd have to use someone else. Problem was, who could he trust? There were only two people he could depend on, and both were out of his life.

In the few hours he'd been in Little River, he'd managed to solve one piece of the puzzle. Merrick's address had been listed in the phone book under J C Merick. The misspelling accounted for Brandon being unable to find the listing. Although, with his experience, he should have considered the option. Jack didn't fault the guy, though. He could have just as easily asked the guy to check.

He considered the possibility that Brandon had. See, paper couldn't be changed quite so easily. There had to be fifty thousand phone books, at least, that had that listing. Databases and online records didn't pose that problem. A couple keystrokes did the trick.

Didn't matter. He had the address. Now he had to wait for the most unlikely of partners. A man he'd been sent to kill years ago. The same man who was moments away from taking his life a few weeks ago.

Jack waited on a bench in the middle of the park. He was surrounded by thick oak trees. The sun had set hours ago. The leafy canopy hid him in a ring of darkness. The shops and restaurants had all closed. The bars had let out. The occasional police car drove past. They didn't bother to check the park. Nothing ever happened there. The cops were riding out their shift.

Another two hours passed before the dark Ford pulled into one of the many empty parking spots. A car like that at two in the morning left one of two possibilities. A spook sent to kill him, or one who was there to help.

Jack pulled his pistol. He positioned himself behind a thick oak and watched the car. His phone buzzed once then went still. The car door opened. No one got out. His phone buzzed again. A hand grabbed the top of the door. A foot hit the

ground. The man rose and glanced around. Jack surveyed the area. He didn't care about a drunk stumbling around, or a cop bored out of his mind while on patrol. He had to make sure Brett hadn't been followed. That meant he had to believe that Brett was competent enough to know when someone was following him.

Brett closed his car door and walked around the perimeter of the park. Presumably, he had the same question as Jack. No matter how vigilant they were, a skilled trail team could beat them. Enough cars working together could make the job seamless and impossible to detect. At least until you arrived at your destination. Then ten agents would appear out of nowhere and your night officially went to shit.

Jack's phone buzzed again. This time the caller didn't hang up. He didn't have to look at the screen to know it was Brett. He saw the guy with the phone to his head.

"I'm in the park," Jack said. "I can see you now."

Brett clicked off and turned and walked into the shadows. Jack met him halfway.

"Quiet place," Brett said.

"Too quiet for my tastes."

"I don't know. Kind of like it, myself."

"Great, you can retire here then. But let's get this mess cleaned up first."

"You know where we need to go?" Brett asked.

Jack nodded. "Got the address. Figure this is as good a time as any to investigate."

"Not concerned about waking up the inhabitants?"

"I'd rather wake them than approach while they are awake and allow them time to prepare."

Brett agreed. They returned to his vehicle and made the ten minute drive past the outskirts of town. The streetlights thinned then disappeared altogether. The narrow road had deep ditches on either side. A sleepy driver's nightmare. Jack

glanced over at Brett. The man seemed alert and awake enough, despite the journey from New York. They had both been trained to operate in any condition, and to function without sleep.

“That’s the place,” Jack said.

Brett drove by and they confirmed the address on the mailbox. Use of a GPS had been out of the question. Someone could be monitoring the address. As soon as they plugged it in, it would alert the agency to their location.

A few hundred feet past the house, Brett cut the headlights and did a three-point turn that left the front and rear of the vehicle hanging over the ditches. The tires remained firmly entrenched on the asphalt the whole time. They drove past the house again, parked after a hundred feet, then got out.

Both men drew their pistols as they crossed the street. Pine groves lined either side of the driveway. They cut through the woods, using them to conceal their presence in the event that the house had security cameras. Considering the possible identity of the owner, cameras were the least of Jack’s concern.

They continued under the pine canopy until they were a few feet past the house, next to the garage. There was no side door as Jack had hoped.

“Let’s continue around back,” he said.

Brett took the lead. They crossed at the rear corner then located a sliding door at the halfway point. It was locked. Brett shined a light inside. The track was not secured. Brett began rocking the glass door until the latch snapped.

They stepped into the narrow rectangular room.

“Empty,” Brett said as he shone his light from corner to corner.

A hallway led them to the kitchen. The appliances were missing. There was no table. Jack opened the cabinets. No plates. No spices or food or utensils.

“Place is deserted,” Brett said. “You’re sure this is the right address?”

Jack nodded and left the kitchen. “Let’s check the whole place.”

Room by room, they investigated and found nothing. The dust and cobwebs indicated that the place had been empty for some time.

“Garage,” Jack said.

They headed back toward the kitchen. A door in the hallway led to the single car garage. As they entered, Jack noted it smelled like the outdoors. If a car had ever been kept inside, it had been a long time since.

Brett panned the light around the room. In the corner were three dirt-caked shovels. Jack picked one up. He scratched at the dirt. It was dry and flaked off in chunks.

“Been a while since these were used,” he said.

“Perhaps we should search the backyard for buried treasure.” Brett flashed a smile.

“Or a body.”

Brett shrugged. “Guess that’s possible, too.”

Jack glanced down and saw what had once been muddy boot prints tracked from the shovels to the hallway door. Brett might not have been that far off about something being buried after all. If someone had been gardening or doing lawn work, why not enter and exit through the garage door?

“We’ll check back there. First, I want to go into the attic.”

They returned to the hallway. Halfway down was the attic opening, covered with a piece of wood. Jack jumped up and pushed it out of the way. Then he jumped again, grabbing either side, and pulled himself up into the opening. Brett handed up the flashlight. Jack panned around the attic, which was more spacious than he would have guessed. And in the corner, he saw a rack lined with folders.

“And there it is.”

QUEENS, NEW YORK.

THE SEWER SMELLED exactly as Paolo had expected. To associate filth with freedom was quite a stretch, but he'd take it. And he was sure Essie would, too. He'd taken a chance and made contact with one of the guards at the compound. The guy was a secret loyalist. He did what Charles said because he needed a paycheck. But if and when the time came, he'd be the first to switch sides.

The guy had told Paolo that his sister was there. She'd come around some. She got up. Ate. Showered. Didn't speak, but made eye contact now.

Whether she knew she was in the armpit of the compound Paolo worked out of was up for debate. Regardless, he knew she'd blame him for this. And he swore he'd do whatever it took to fix her.

He sloshed through the putrid water. Boots that were supposed to keep his feet dry didn't. The thought that he'd get a deadly infection crossed his mind. So be it. He had to push forward.

Paolo had committed the schematics to memory. To most, it made little sense to spend six figures on copies of the blueprints and then burn them. But he had no choice. If someone showed up at the fleabag motel he stayed at and found them, he'd be executed on site. No chance at offering an explanation. No credence given to him offering a bribe in exchange for his life.

He made the final turn of the first leg of his journey. The false door was now in sight. Before opening it, he switched off his flashlight and glanced back. The water still bounced off the walls. A remnant of his journey thus far. He heard a multitude of drips, something that had gone unnoticed until now.

All of it sounded like someone approaching. His mind raced. He gripped the MP5 and aimed it in the direction he had traveled from. His eyes adjusted, and for five minutes he stood in the dark, waiting for a shadow to appear.

But none did.

So he switched on his light. And he turned. And he made the final few steps toward the hidden door.

It gave with ease. Paolo stepped up onto dry ground. Then he shut the door behind him and sat down. In his bag were a second pair of socks. He removed his boots then peeled off the soaked socks. For a few minutes, he remained that way, his light aimed at the ceiling, letting his cold feet dry out.

And he listened to the sounds of nothingness.

Finally, he slipped on the dry pair of socks and stuck his feet back in the boots. They were damp, but at least his feet were no longer soaked.

This section of the tunnel continued on for close to one hundred feet. As expected, it curved so that the end wasn't in sight of the beginning.

It was at the end that he found the security panel. He removed the cover with the compact power drill he had brought, and then punched in the code. A few seconds passed and nothing happened. Paolo's heart rate increased. Had he pushed the wrong numbers? If so, what would happen? Would an alarm go off in Charles's office, signaling his presence? Then he recalled that Charles didn't know of the tunnel's existence. Even if an alarm went off, it would take the man a while to figure out what it was.

Paolo's fingers hovered over the pad, ready for a second attempt at the code.

Then there was a hiss and a click and the door in front of him cracked open a sliver.

He exhaled and brought the back of his hand to his face to wipe away the sweat that had formed on his brow. He released the MP5, allowing it to hang in front of his chest, and used his other hand to push the heavy door open.

His light washed over the dark room and down the tunnel in front of him. He took a few steps in. The door swung shut. Feet shuffled. And before Paolo could even grip the MP5, he was down on the ground with four hands wrenching his arms back.

“DON’T YOU FUCKING move,” Beck shouted as he secured his handcuffs to Paolo’s right wrist.

Clarissa followed his lead and wrapped hers around Paolo’s left. Then they connected the two empty cuffs together and locked them.

The door behind them opened. Four agents entered one at a time. Beck instructed them to take the guy into custody.

“What the hell is this?” Paolo asked as they peeled him off the ground.

“Secret Service,” Beck said. “We’re placing you under arrest.”

“What? I’ve never been near the White House or the president.”

Clarissa said, “Remember that counterfeiting ring you run?”

Paolo glanced at her, then looked away.

“Yeah,” she said. “That’s right. Who knew you couldn’t get away with printing your own money?”

“Piss on you.” Paolo spat at the ground near her feet.

Beck struck the man in the midsection. Paolo bowed over, mouth open, trying to suck air into lungs that weren’t ready to accept it.

“Go on,” Beck said. “Do it again.”

Paolo composed himself a few moments later. “I don’t know anything about a counterfeiting ring.”

“That’s not what your buddy says,” Clarissa said.

“What? Who?”

“The one you paid a visit to a few weeks back. Remember that? You took a trip to Anderson, met with him. He gave up your entire plan to get back at your boss for forcing you out of your biggest money maker.”

Paolo glanced between the two agents. He started to speak, then went silent. After a pause, he said, “I’m not saying anything else without my attorney present.”

“Do what you want,” Beck said. “But know that I’m much more likely to cut you a deal without some bloodsucker in the room. Especially a corrupt one like Romano.”

Paolo said nothing.

“Doesn’t have to go down here,” Clarissa said. “Just tell us you’re willing to talk and we’ll get you someplace safe and go over the details.”

“Who are you looking to take down?” Paolo asked.

“Who do you think?”

Paolo shrugged, said nothing.

“Charles DeCosta,” Beck said. “I can’t promise you immunity. Not yet, at least. But if you can serve him up, I’m sure we can deal.”

Paolo said nothing. He’d dropped eye contact and now stared at the ground.

“Or not,” Beck said. “You’re facing forty in a federal pen. From the evidence we’ve got, the witness testimony, you’ll go down for this.”

“Wait.” Paolo paused for a long minute. Clarissa felt the hair on her neck raise, like an attack was imminent. Finally, Paolo continued. “Let’s talk. Alone. No lawyer.”

“Get him to the van,” Beck instructed the other agents.

UNKNOWN LOCATION.

BEAR GLANCED UP as the light washed over his feet. Someone had lifted the iron flap that covered his cell window. For two weeks, he'd been confined in the nine by nine space. That window had opened twice daily, on a schedule. This was the second time today, but the schedule was off.

A head blotted out the light. Bear made the outline, definitely a man's head. But he couldn't see the features. Could have been anyone.

Then the flap closed.

He leaned his head back against the cold wall and stared up at the ceiling. Two weeks of his life lost. Two weeks for Mandy to drift further away from him. He'd decided if he ever saw that nurse again, he'd kill her first, then ask questions. She could have given him the information. Instead, she notified the authorities.

But he had a strong inclination that this was not how prisons were in France. Reminded him of something from the Middle East. The makeshift prisons and interrogation rooms the CIA had set up. He and Jack had never been part of the crew that was allowed to enter. But they'd been taken down there a time or two for prisoner extraction.

He shook the thoughts away. That was a segment of his life he had little desire to recount.

“Mandy,” he muttered. “I hope you’re safe. As soon as I’m outta here, I’m coming to find you.”

His eyes drifted toward the floor. His head followed until it came to rest with his chin on his chest. There were roughly three hours until dinner. Might as well catch a nap. Nothing else to do.

His eyes closed and he repeated a soft mantra that had helped him sleep over the years. He hadn’t completed three lines when the door to his cell opened.

A tall wiry man approached. The first full bodied human Bear had seen in two weeks. As his eyes adjusted to the light that flooded in, the man’s features came into view.

“Pierre?”

He extended his hand. Bear saw two keys dangling from Pierre’s fingers. The Frenchman reached down and unlocked the shackles that bound the big man. Bear rubbed his wrists for a few moments.

“How?” he asked.

“They let me go almost immediately. I’ve been working at securing your freedom since.” He looked up, away from Bear. “It wasn’t easy, and I had to make some concessions, but you are now free to go.”

Pierre extended his hand and helped Bear to his feet.

“That’s it?” Bear said. “Just get up and go?”

Pierre shrugged. “There’s some paperwork you have to fill out. Can’t hold the government accountable. Can’t speak of this. That sort of thing. You know how it goes.”

Bear nodded, said nothing as they walked out of the cell. Two armed guards waited at the end of the tunnel. What struck him was that there were no other cells lining the hallway.

“I was a VIP, huh?”

“The entire place is laid out like this. That way if there is a breach here, we can contain it up there.” He pointed at Bear’s cell, then at the solid door at the end of the short hallway.

“What about -”

Pierre cut him off and in a soft voice said, “Don’t ask in here. Wait until we’ve left this place.”

Bear remained silent for the rest of his time in the facility. He signed off on all the paperwork. Didn’t matter to him. Outside of France, the provisions carried little weight. Before leaving, his personal items were returned to him, minus the weapon he was carrying. He changed his clothes, and then he and Pierre exited the facility.

They waited until they were ten minutes away before speaking.

“So what the hell happened?” Bear asked.

“This whole thing is a mess,” Pierre said. “We were both being targeted by an outside agency. And you know why?” He glanced at Bear and continued without allowing him to respond. “Because of our connection with Jack.”

“Jack?”

“They’d been monitoring me is all. That’s what they say. Well, my agency was monitoring the other agency that was watching me. What I thought was because of a perceived slight due to me not rejoining was actually a large-scale operation. They wanted to see if I still had any connection with Noble.”

“Do you?”

“Not in some time. But when you showed up, they assumed we were all working together and the hit was given a go. They were going to take both of us out.”

“Why Jack?”

Pierre shook his head. “SIS. Only thing that makes sense to me. There have been quite a few former and current members that have ended up deceased in recent months.”

“I was never a part of that. Neither were you.”

“That is correct, but both of us worked with him during or after that phase of his life.”

“So why have I spent two weeks in prison?”

“They followed us from Nice.”

“Who?”

“My agency. Their assumption at the time was that you were working with this other team. They closed in on us at the hospital. It wasn't the staff that notified the police. They were purposefully trying to flush us out. We moved faster than they anticipated.”

“What happened to you after?” Bear asked.

“I was questioned, then let go. And for the past two weeks I've been going at it with them to get you out.” He slowed the car down and turned right. “And it wasn't easy. But I got it done.”

Bear made a note of the road they were on. “You said you made concessions.”

Pierre nodded and said nothing.

“What was it?”

Pierre pointed. “Look at that. It's the hospital.”

They pulled into the lot and parked close to the main entrance. When they entered the first person Bear saw inside was the same woman behind the counter. She did a double take at the sight of the men and reached for the phone.

“That won't be necessary,” Pierre said as he produced a badge and ID.

That was the concession, Bear realized. He had taken a position with his agency.

Pierre walked around the desk and placed a hand on the woman's shoulder. “I believe you had some information to pass on to my large friend.”

The woman glanced up. She forced a timid smile, then started typing.

“I like the new monitor,” Bear said.

“It’s much better than the last,” she said. “I suppose I should thank you.”

“Just get me the information I need.”

The woman jotted on a pad of paper, then tore a sheet off. She handed it to Bear. He read it over. Satisfied, he nodded at the woman and he and Pierre exited the hospital.

Back in the car, Bear said, “Was your agency behind it? Moving her, I mean.”

He nodded.

“Then why’d we come back here?”

“Because I don’t trust any of those bastards.”

LITTLE RIVER, SOUTH CAROLINA.

JACK LEAFED THROUGH the documents. As his instincts had told him, they were classified and had to do with clandestine operations. But not a single one was newer than 2006.

“Doesn’t make sense,” he said. “Why would these be here?”

“Someone in intelligence lived here,” Brett said. “This Merrick guy, I suppose. We can put out some feelers on him.”

A photo fell to the floor. Brett scooped it up.

“I recognize that man,” he said.

“Let me see.” Jack reached for the picture.

Brett turned it so they both could see and shined his light.

“His name’s Butch Monaco,” Brett said.

Jack studied the image. The hair was silver and black and short. A scar ran from one earlobe to the corner of the Monaco’s mouth.

“Shit,” he said. “Put a curly wig on him and that’s who I met with in New York.”

“You met with Monaco?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Posing as the millionaire. That meeting is the reason why we’re standing in this attic right now.”

“So, you mean to tell me, Monaco is Merrick?” Brett shined his light on the picture, then at Jack.

“I’d say at the very least the two men are intertwined with one another.”

Jack and Brett went through the folders again, looking for additional pictures, names, or anything else to tie Merrick and Monaco together. After thirty minutes of searching, they hadn’t uncovered anything.

“What do you know about Monaco?” Jack asked.

“He was a legend in the agency when I was there. I only met him once or twice. Didn’t get to know him personally, but you know as well as I do that you don’t need someone’s history once you’ve spilled blood with them. He was cold and calculating and he never made a mistake. From what I recall, he had left either in 2000 or 2001. Whichever, it was before the attacks. His new position made him instrumental in the formation of Homeland Security, and later, SIS.”

Jack searched his memory for an instance where Frank or other member of SIS had mentioned Monaco. There was none that he could recall.

“What day did this meeting occur?” Brett asked.

“It was on a Thursday,” Jack said. “Had been arranged a day prior. I ran into you a few days later.”

“I got my orders to kill you that Friday.”

“The day after I met him.” The coincidence was not lost on Jack. “He was scouting me.”

“He wanted to use you, like they are me.”

“I must have said something he didn’t like. So instead of hiring me, they issued the order to kill me.”

Brett paced to the other end of the attic. “So why not do it there? Why go through all this to make it happen?”

It was a good question. It could have ended then and there. Unless there was more to it. They wanted something from Jack. And it wasn’t possible for him to give it to them in death.

The way he saw it, a gun pointed to his head in their presence would have been far more effective. Then he thought of a possible explanation.

“He’s involved,” Jack said. “But too far involved to be able to pull the trigger.”

Brett walked back to the empty rack. He glanced down at the files strewn about on the floor. “Given his past history of achievements and positions in clandestine agencies, I’d say he’s more than involved, Jack. I’m betting he had a major hand in orchestrating the entire thing.”

“So it’s plausible. Now we have to stay alive long enough to prove it.”

“I think I can help there.”

“How?”

“Ballard.”

Jack recalled Brett mentioning the man while they were in South Africa.

“Joe Ballard,” Brett said. “Little weasel nose rat bastard acting as my handler.”

“Where do we find him?”

“D.C. Maybe at Langley.”

The men dropped through the attic opening then exited through the rear of the house.

“Can’t stop thinking about those shovels,” Jack said.

“What do you want to do? Search the property for a hole?”

Jack looked out over the expansive backyard. “Let’s scan the perimeter.”

They searched the yard and a few feet beyond the tree line, but couldn’t find any disturbed ground. Something had been dug up, or buried, and those shovels had been used. But what? And when? For all they knew, landscapers could have been out last summer and left them behind.

“Let’s go,” Brett said. “We’ve got more to worry about than a phantom hole.”

Two minutes later they were traveling northwest, en route to I-95.

UNKNOWN LOCATION.

IT HAD BEEN three days since Kat last saw her captor. He'd come in and placed a cooler in front of her, then left. She worked the ropes around her wrists and ankles until she was in a position to remove the lid. When she did, it was empty except for three bottles of water. At some point they'd put a white t-shirt on her that hung to her mid-thigh.

It'd taken the better portion of two days to work the ropes off her wrists. Thirst led her to down the entire first bottle at once. She realized her mistake as the liquid came flooding up her esophagus. She couldn't hold it down. Any of it.

At least she was free. And to celebrate, she had curled up in a ball in the corner and fell asleep. It was the best sleep she'd had in two weeks.

Still concerned that someone remained beyond the door, she took her time before even approaching it. If they knew she'd freed herself from the ropes, they might use something else to restrict her movements.

Not this time. If someone entered the room, it'd be a fight to the death. No longer did Kat care if that meant it was her life that would end.

The fact that the man who'd been visiting her cell had been American cast several doubts about the other man she knew from the United States. But how could any of this have to do with Bear? No, it had everything to do with Bear, but he had

nothing to do with it. She knew it wasn't him that cast her in the dirty pit and tied her to the chair.

But things hadn't escalated until he and Mandy arrived.

What had happened to the girl? Pinned in the vehicle after the wreck. Had she survived? Was she injured in the crash?

These bastards had caused the wreck. If not for Kat's quick thinking, the girl would be with her now. She wondered which fate was worse.

Kat wiped the tears from her cheek.

"Time to go," she whispered.

She tipped the chair over. It was a heavy wooden thing. She began kicking at one of the legs, working it free. In time, it became loose enough that she was able to twist it off. She wrapped the rope around one wrist. Never know when it might come in handy, she figured.

She crept to the door. The dirt was cool against her bare feet, loose in some areas. She stopped and piled it to her right. If someone rushed her from the hall, she'd try to direct them to the loose dirt. They might lose traction there. A fight against an off-balanced man was preferred to one that could square up to her.

Kat stopped in front of the door. She leaned forward, pressed her ear to it. If someone was there, she couldn't hear them. The knob was cold to the touch. She turned it, expecting it to give a half-inch then stop. To her surprise, it spun freely. The door was unlocked. She pulled it open and stuck her head through the opening.

A short landing led to stairs that ran up. Light pooled near the top step, but the source was out of sight. They could be up there. Her gut knotted. Intuition? Fear? A combination, perhaps? Kat glanced back at the room where she'd spent the last two weeks. Death would find her in there. She had to take the chance that the light led to freedom.

Armed with the wooden chair leg and the rope wrapped around her wrist, Kat ascended the stairs. The silent first step fueled her adrenaline and she quickened her pace. But the next

two creaked under her weight. She froze, eyes wide, staring at the bright opening not fifteen feet away.

Shadows passed. Should she turn back? Lock herself in the room again?

No.

She hadn't left only to return. From this point on, anyone who got in her way should expect a fight. If she lost, so be it. She would do her damndest to take down any and all assailants who crossed her path.

After thirty long seconds, the shadows didn't reappear. No one approached.

The voice in her head was not her own. It wasn't Pierre, either. It was gruff, and American, and it pushed and prodded her forward up the steps. She moved with a purpose that led to reckless abandon. If someone met her at the top, she'd knock them over.

At the top step, Kat paused, both arms planted against the walls, holding her in place. Her knees felt weak. Her drive to push forward strong. She filled her lungs with mold and dust-ridden air. Exhaled slowly. Closed her eyes and repeated it two more times.

Leaning forward, she opened her eyes. Looked left. Nothing. Swung her head in the other direction. A hallway stretched out in front of her.

It led to a door. Four panes of glass made up the top third of it. Sunlight poured through and warmed the spot where she stood. She saw trees beyond that. They swayed in a stiff breeze. The sun hovered close. It had been the trees that cast the shadows, probably the result of a strong gust.

She went to the door, opened it. Stuck her head out. Glanced in all directions. Nothing and nobody. A vehicle rumbled in the distance. How far away? She couldn't tell. But the direction was obvious.

Kat reached deep and found the energy to run. Her bare feet pounded the dirt, then through the fields, where thorns and briars tore at her flesh. She didn't care. Each scrape, each

needle penetrating her, only served to push her forward. The road was in sight. It was empty, but she'd heard a vehicle passing, which meant another would come along.

She sunk into the overgrowth. It wasn't that the brush grew higher. The ground dipped. Tiny knives tore at her shirt, and dug into the flesh of her hands and arms and torso and neck. They punctured her cheeks. She brought her hands to her face to protect it. Did little good.

When the earth leveled out again, the road was a mere twenty meters away. The brush dissipated. Kat slowed to a walk. She reached the edge of the road. There was no gravel shoulder. It transitioned from grass to asphalt.

She fell to her knees. Her body bowed forward. She placed her arms on the road and her head on her arms. Her limbs trembled. Her muscles cramped. How she managed to run as far as she had was a mystery.

Heat rose up from the blacktop. The sensation comforted her. Kat felt her mind slipping. The colors faded to gray.

Get up. This isn't the time to give up.

The voice again. Pushing her forward.

She took a deep breath that tasted of cigarette butts. The tar from the road, she supposed.

Then she felt something different. A trembling vibration of some sort. It didn't come from within. It started low and built. Kat lifted her head, looked to her left, then right. She heard it now. The tremble had grown into the sound of a roar.

The car appeared from around the bend. Two headlights penetrating the daylight. It seemed to stand still. Not advancing, nor retreating. As the seconds passed, it slowly moved closer.

Kat rose and remained on the side of the road. Half her foot in the grass, the other half on asphalt.

The vehicle came to a stop next to her.

Kat's reflection in the windows caught her off guard. Her shirt was stained brown and red. Her face was gaunt, lined

with cuts, scratches, and blood.

The driver's window rolled down.

“Bist du okay?”

She stared at the man, processing what he had said. He repeated it. The phrase clicked.

“*Are you okay?*”

She nodded, told him in German that she needed to get away from this place.

The man, presumably detecting her French accent, switched to French as he stepped out of the car.

“Yes, get in,” he said, glancing in all directions, perhaps on the lookout for someone following Kat. He pulled a blanket from behind the backseat and wrapped it around her.

Kat thanked him and made to enter the car. There were two women in back. They slid over to allow her room to sit.

“Can we take you to a hospital?” the driver asked.

Kat shook her head. “Just take me wherever you are going.”

“That's across country,” he said.

“Which country are we in?”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Germany, of course.”

She glanced out her window at the field that stretched before her. The small house with the cellar she'd been confined in was out of sight. The men weren't coming after her. But what if she returned to France? Would they find her?

“Miss?” he said. “Have you decided?”

She nodded and replied in German, “Take me to your destination.”

GERMANY.

THE HOSPITAL COULD only tell Bear that the girl had been placed in foster care. She had no major injuries. Cuts and bruises. And she didn't know who she was. Pierre had to restrain the big man to prevent him from getting arrested again.

Bear had questioned why Pierre didn't already have this information. To that, Pierre had no answer. Only that he would get someone he trusted to work on locating the girl.

As they left the hospital, a call came in on Pierre's cell phone. Bear felt his heart skip a beat, then deliver a pounding surge of blood that had caused him to see a burst of light in the outer reaches of his vision. A subtle version of the headaches he had been facing had followed.

The conversation was quick, and after Pierre had hung up, he stared anxiously at his phone. It had buzzed. The Frenchman fumbled through a few menus, and then opened a map.

"We have a lead on Kat," Pierre said. "It's about three hours from here."

Bear felt himself being pulled in two directions. What if during that time Mandy's location was revealed?

"I know what you are thinking," Pierre said. "But we know she is somewhere safe. There is a great chance that is not the case for Kat."

Bear nodded slowly. He said nothing while thinking through the scenarios Mandy faced. She likely was in an orphanage or a foster home. According to the hospital, she didn't know who she was, but she functioned fine. Knowing the girl's temperament, he considered her a flight risk. But it wouldn't matter as long as he didn't know where she was.

Perhaps sensing Bear's line of thinking, Pierre said, "I can have a team pick her up the moment we have her location. She'll be protected by the people I trust."

"Okay. Let's get Kat."

Pierre had little regard for the speed limit. The government issued credentials could get him out of most any situation, and he once again took advantage of it. The three-hour drive only took them two hours and fifteen minutes.

A long gravel driveway led to the small ivy-covered house. The front windows were shattered. Shingles had blown off the roof and never been replaced. The surrounding lawn was thick and overgrown. Bear studied the brush cover. Lots of places to hide. Few places to escape cleanly through. Back down the driveway was the only sensible option.

He drew his pistol.

Pierre glanced down at the weapon. He shook his head. The trunk popped open. The Frenchman retreated to the rear of the vehicle and produced two MP7s. He held one out for Bear.

"Compliments of the French government," Pierre said.

Bear took the weapon, inspected it, switched it from single shot to three-round burst.

"I'll take left," Pierre said. "Meet me in back."

Bear moved to the house and swept around to the right. He glanced inside windows, or empty panes in some cases, but for the most part he focused on the field surrounding the place. Why after two weeks did they reveal Kat's location to Pierre? Admittedly, Bear knew little of what had happened over the past fifteen days. Once he was incarcerated, that was it. And the two men had spoken little during the drive out. It had been

preparation time. Neither man had been on the offensive in some time. They had to right their minds.

He saw nothing in the surrounding brush. The only sounds were birds and the occasional car passing on a road he couldn't see. But the vehicles kept moving. If they had stopped, he'd have grown concerned that someone had followed them, either visually, or using Pierre's cell phone to track them.

Bear rounded the corner and saw Pierre waiting by an open door. Whether that was good or bad was yet to be determined.

"Found it opened?" Bear asked.

Pierre nodded. "I'm going in first."

Bear didn't object. He covered the opening as Pierre stepped inside. Both men held their MP7s with both hands, ready to open fire. Bear took one last look at the brush before stepping inside. They followed the narrow hallway to a set of descending stairs.

"Smell that?" Pierre said.

"Human waste," Bear said.

Pierre hurried down the stairs. All attempts to follow protocol had been voided.

"Dammit," Bear said as he followed the man down. By the time he reached the bottom, the Frenchman had already entered the adjoining room. Bear scanned it. Saw the empty bottles. The chair on its side. Dried, clumped dirt in the corner.

"She's not here," Pierre said.

Bear nodded and said nothing.

"There must be another room, or another structure." He pulled out his cell phone. "Shit. No signal."

"Probably 'cause we're underground."

Pierre pushed past him and started up the stairs.

Bear remained behind for a minute. He walked the perimeter of the room. The chair was missing a leg. Odd, to

say the least. Why would it be like that? Could Kat have snapped it off to break the door open or use as a weapon?

He exited the room and headed up the stairs to run it by Pierre. Got up there in time to see the Frenchman exit the door at the end of the hallway, holding his phone toward the sky. Pierre cursed about not having a signal.

And then half his head disintegrated.

“LA CIBLE EST morte.”

The target is dead.

France’s top assassin, a man Laure Desault only knew by his codename Geai Blue, said the words.

Laure thought about the implications. Pierre, the man who’d once led the team she now run, was gone. The charade complete. At least he died while working for the government and not as some alcoholic bum on the street.

Then she heard something else. Gunshots. But they didn’t originate from the assassin’s sniper rifle.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“I’m taking fire.”

“I thought you said he was alone.”

“I only saw him come around the side of the house.”

“What about at the car?”

He said nothing.

Laure said, “I asked you a question. What about at the car? How many were there.”

“I didn’t see him pull up. Only come around the house. By the time I reached the nest, he was inside.”

“Goddammit,” she shouted. After a pause to collect her thoughts, she added, “Don’t bother reentering the country.”

BEAR PRESSED HARD against the exterior wall. The shooter hadn’t returned fire, which meant he was on the run. Or wanted Bear to think so.

He fired off into the brush again, then returned to Pierre's body. There was no saving the man. He was dead before he hit the ground. Bear grabbed Pierre's MP7 and headed toward the brush in the direction he estimated the shot had come from. He zigzagged his way there, making himself small. Well, small for him. He was still a large target, and that concerned him.

It was obvious he was dealing with a sniper.

And the sniper wasn't prepared for him, otherwise he would have nailed Bear in the head the moment he stepped through the open doorway.

The brush had looked impenetrable from the house. Up close, it wasn't as bad. Bear disappeared into it. Took him about thirty seconds to locate the nest. He'd fired directly at it. And if the blood on the ground was any indication, he'd hit the sniper.

The trail went cold ten feet later. Bear looked for other signs. Broken branches led the way. Another ten feet further and the blood reappeared.

The sniper was losing strength.

Bear led with his submachine gun aimed straight ahead. He followed the sound of the sniper's ragged breathing. Only a few more steps. He pushed through the thick brush.

The man leaned back against a stump. His right hand held the butt of his rifle. He tried to pick it up.

Bear depressed the trigger once. Three bullets fired in fast succession. The first hit the man in the thigh, near his waist. The next passed between the guy's abdomen and arm, and slammed into the ground. The third smashed into the sniper's upper arm, obliterating his Humerus.

The sniper yelled out, then gritted his teeth. Blood poured from his wounds. Bear saw that the first shot had hit the guy's upper right chest. He must've risen up after making the fatal shot, either preparing to disassemble his weapon, or to move right away. It had been a lucky shot on Bear's part. Had he not hit him, the next bullet the sniper fired would have hit him in the head.

“Who are you?” Bear asked.

The sniper said nothing.

“Who do you work for? Which government?”

The sniper turned his head away without a word.

Bear squeezed the trigger again. Sent three shots into the guy’s other arm. They all hit near the same spot. The arm hung on by a thread.

“Answer me.”

The guy forced his head to the middle. His chin rested on his chest. He looked up at Bear, then down at the phone on the ground. It appeared to be connected.

“Screw you,” the guy said with a French accent.

Bear pulled the trigger twice. The bullets traveled in a line up the sniper’s body, starting at his belly button and ending at his forehead.

Then he reached for the phone.

“Who the fuck is this?”

No one responded.

“I’m gonna come kill all of you.”

The line went dead.

Bear dropped the phone and exited the brush. He started toward the car, stopped, went back to Pierre’s body.

“You deserve better than to be left out here.”

Bear slung the remains of the Frenchman over his shoulder and returned to the vehicle. He opened the trunk. Inside was a blue blanket. He wrapped Pierre in it, and placed him inside the trunk.

“THIS IS OVER,” Laure said. “Enough. We are no longer cooperating.”

BEAR FELT HIS phone buzz. He pulled over and fished it out of his pocket.

“Hello?”

“Listen closely, Mr. Logan. This is the only time I’m going to tell you this.” She provided him with an address in a suburb of Paris. “That is where your daughter is.”

The call ended before he could correct her.

NEW YORK CITY.

“SEEMS YOU’RE IN a world of trouble, Paolo.”

Beck sat across from the guy while Clarissa remained outside the room. She was joined by Special Agents Howell and Shelton of the FBI, and Detective Harris from the NYPD. She had grown to distrust all three of them. Beck told her that made her a perfect agent.

The men were like vultures, waiting until she and Beck had maimed the suspect enough that they could swoop in and clean up, levying charge after charge. It was as if they hoped Paolo wouldn’t talk. Getting a conviction against him would be far easier than taking down Charles DeCosta. All these guys cared about was their won/loss record. As long as they were on the winning end, it didn’t matter what monsters roamed the streets.

“This is pretty simple,” Beck said. “If you want to survive with minimal jail time, give up your boss. Simply implicate him in this scheme, agree to testify, and we’ll make the deal.”

Paolo stared away, saying nothing.

After everything they’d uncovered, how Charles had sent Paolo upstate to be executed, sent in a hit team to kill him after he escaped, and the rumors that Charles had kidnapped Paolo’s sister, why would the man hold his tongue?

“I’ll never understand these guys,” Shelton said, shaking his head. “Guess they consider them old school. You know

damn well almost every other guy in that organization would flip on Paolo here if given the opportunity.”

Inside the room, Beck switched tactics. He leaned over and reached into a bag. Produced a handful of photographs and laid them on the table. Clarissa knew that the photos were of the crime scene upstate. The evidence was circumstantial. But these were men that Paolo had known for two decades. They'd been together almost daily. One of them was married to his other sister.

They weren't looking for a confession.

They wanted to see his reaction.

“Look at them, Paolo,” Beck said.

The man glanced down, averting his eyes.

“Longer.”

Paolo didn't budge.

“Humor me, Paolo. Take a look at what you did to these guys.”

Paolo's eyes drifted toward the picture. He focused on the one that showed both bodies lying next to one another. Clarissa thought she saw a slight smile form. He didn't allow it to linger.

“What do you make of that?” Beck asked.

Paolo jutted his chin toward the window. “Who's back there?”

“Where?”

“Behind the glass, man.”

Beck shook his head. “Not sure what you mean.”

“Humor me,” Paolo said.

“Just my partner. You met her earlier.”

“Who else?”

“No one else. We're the only ones here.”

“Bullshit, man.”

“How so?”

“You drag me into a building in Manhattan. We take a service elevator up who knows how many floors. Then we come into this office, which is really nothing more than a cell inside four walls. There’s a reason why. What is it?”

Beck straightened and placed his forearms on the table. “The reason is that you’re in deep shit, Paolo. You may not think so, but I’ve got enough evidence to put you away for forty years. Then, when I turn this other evidence over, you’ll probably get life for murder. And believe me when I say we’ll try to pin something on you out of state as well, just so we can apply for the death penalty.”

Paolo smiled. “You think that scares me? I’ve been living with that hanging over my head for twenty years. Ain’t no one safe doing what I do.” He took a drag on his cigarette, then added, “Now answer my question. Who’s back there?”

Beck said nothing.

“FBI? NYPD? That’s it, right? You got everyone back there. Just gonna turn me over to them once you’re done with me?”

“I’d rather do a deal with you and make anyone else irrelevant.”

“Send them away, and I’ll talk to you.”

Beck remained silent for a moment. Then he glanced back at Clarissa and nodded.

“All right, gents. Need you to step outside.”

The three men argued with Clarissa, but in the end nothing they said swayed her. She locked the door behind them. Entered the interrogation room.

“This is my partner, Clarissa,” Beck said. He turned to her. “Is the room empty?”

“I locked them out,” she said.

“Satisfied?” Beck asked Paolo.

The man stared at the glass for a long time. “Guess I have little choice but to trust you right now.”

Beck nodded.

“OK,” Paolo said. “Here’s what I need from you: a solid promise that you are going to get my sister out of that compound safely.”

“What is she doing there?”

“Charles kidnapped her.”

“One more charge we can bring up.”

Paolo shook his head. “She’s seen too much. I need to get her away from there. Away from all this.”

“Where is he keeping her?”

“In a place he calls the dungeon. It’s the basement. Outfitted with several cells.”

Remembering the layout, Clarissa looked away for a second. She glanced back in time to see Paolo narrowing his eyes.

“Hey, I remember you. He had you down there. Threatened our lives if we interfered.”

“Not a man among you,” she said.

Paolo shrugged. “Business decision, lady.”

“Yeah, well you want to hear mine? How about I say no deal on your sister. Give us what we want, or hang.”

“Hey, look, I was on my way to get her out of there when you idiots arrested me. Counterfeiting? Give me a break. Go take care of a real crime, like putting that asshole away for forty murders over the past six months.”

Beck said, “That’s what we’re going to do, but first, we have to charge him with something we know will stick. So give us the details of the counterfeiting ring, and then we’ll turn you over to our friends and they’ll put together the other charges.”

Paolo said nothing.

“And if you do this, we’ll do what we can to get your sister out of that compound alive.”

Beck and Clarissa said nothing else. It was up to Paolo now. If he refused to cooperate, they’d file their charges, and let the FBI and NYPD have at him too. The guy would never see sunlight again, and he’d have to live knowing that he failed his sister.

Five minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. Clarissa was ready to exit the room and bring the three men back in.

“I have your word?” Paolo said.

“About?” Beck said.

“Essie.” He looked up and met Clarissa’s stare. “My sister. You’ll get her out of that hole, right?”

Clarissa said, “You have my word.”

For the next three hours they listened as Paolo detailed everything he knew about the counterfeiting operation. He didn’t stop there. He told them about shell corporations they had never heard of that Charles, and the Old Man before him, used to launder money, avoid taxes, and fund organizations around the world that weren’t necessarily friendly to the United States.

When Paolo had finished, Beck remarked, “We have enough to put DeCosta away for five hundred years. I almost hate to turn you over to those assholes in the hallway. If it weren’t for the families of the deceased, I wouldn’t. Fact is, though, you have immunity now. They can’t go back on that.”

“So do we do this here?” Paolo asked.

“No,” Beck said. “We’re bringing you back to D.C. They can conduct their interviews at our facility. We’ll control every aspect of this until you go into the program.”

“Program?”

Clarissa said, “Witness protection.”

Paolo lowered his head and shook it. “Never thought I’d be a snitch. I mean, I know he’s a bad man. Guess I’m really not

much better, though.”

Beck said, “I’d be happy to let you back on the streets after this is all over. If you feel like you need some kind of punishment, they’ll dole it out.”

“Just get my sister out of there.”

“Don’t worry,” Clarissa said. “We’re gonna hit them hard.”

“The tunnels,” Paolo said. “That’s the only safe way.”

“It’s compromised, Paolo,” Beck said. “You had a guy waiting. When you didn’t show, you can bet he grew suspicious. Wouldn’t doubt if he’s already started asking questions.”

Clarissa left Beck to finish up. She headed out into the hall where the FBI agents were waiting.

“Where’d Harris go?” she asked.

Shelton gestured toward the elevator. “He got a call and split. Guess homicide never rests.”

“Do me a favor,” she said. “See what dirt you can dig up on that guy.”

“Don’t trust him?” Howell said.

“I don’t trust you guys,” she said, smiling. “He creeps me the hell out. I can smell a rat from a mile away, and guys, let me tell you, Harris stinks.”

Neither man said anything. They both stared toward the elevator. She could see them thinking over the channels they would utilize to research Harris’s background. Where he lived. The kind of car he drove. What his wife did. Where the kids went to school. Who he hung out with. Financial records would be scrutinized. If the guy was on the take, they’d figure it out. Quick.

“Anyway, that aside, we’ll see you guys back in D.C. You can have at Paolo there.”

“Ah, what the hell?” Shelton said. “We’ve been waiting all day. That’s bullshit, and you know it.”

Clarissa shrugged. "Take it up with my boss."

HARRIS DUCKED INTO the deserted alley. He stayed in the shadows, watching the entrance. Five minutes passed. He hadn't been tailed. He pulled out his cell and placed a call. The man answered with a gruff greeting.

"You're in it deep," Harris said.

"Why's that? And why are you telling me this over the phone?" Charles said.

"Because you're running out of time."

"What the hell is this about?"

"They got your guy, Paolo. And he's rolling over on you, man."

"What'd he say?"

"They kicked me out for that. But as long as they had him in there, it can't be good."

"Where're they keeping him?"

"In Manhattan right now, but that won't last."

"Well then why don't you call me back once you know where he is and we'll take care of this."

Harris shoved his phone in his pocket and entered the flow of pedestrians, unaware that at the moment, the FBI had begun an investigation that would turn his life upside down.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

JACK HAD SLEPT for seven hours. Even the sunrise hadn't been enough to wake him. He studied the highway signs and noted that they'd reached the northern Virginia suburbs.

"Coffee," Jack said.

Brett pointed at an upcoming exit. "We'll get off here."

Five minutes later they were seated inside an IHOP.

"Can finally get some pancakes," Jack muttered.

"What?" Brett said.

Jack shook his head.

The waitress dropped off the coffee and took their orders. They each downed two cups without saying much. It was too busy to discuss what they had planned for the day.

After eating, they gassed the car, then got back on the highway.

"He lives in D.C.," Brett said. "That's what my contact tells me at least."

"You trust them?"

"Of course. Wouldn't have called them otherwise."

"Mention me?"

Brett nodded. “Don’t worry. They’re so buried in this that if they tell, they’ll be marked for termination.”

What’s done was done, so it didn’t really matter. Jack would exercise extra caution. Nothing new.

“We can’t get to him during the day,” Brett said.

“Langley?” Jack asked, referring to the CIA headquarters.

Brett nodded.

“Live in the city?” Jack asked.

“No, out here. We’re heading there now. Figure it makes sense to set up inside his house and wait. That way we can get to him the moment he gets home.”

Jack had no argument. He sat back and watched the exits as they passed. Studied the faces of those in other cars. Watched the vehicles behind them in search of a tail. He saw a few candidates behind them. There always were. But after a few minutes of monitoring, they all checked out.

“You can relax,” Brett said. “This is a rental. No one knows where we are.”

“Sure about that? What about your phone?”

“Nobody knows about it.”

“You made a call to your contact?”

“From a throwaway device. And I’ve already discarded it in pieces.”

Brett had all bases covered. Jack felt somewhat at ease. He wasn’t in control, which bothered him. But sometimes that’s how things went. Go with it, he told himself.

Twenty minutes passed. They exited in Alexandria, Virginia. Jack had spent considerable time in the area years ago. It had changed a lot since then. And in some ways, not at all. It’d just been added to. He doubted it improved anything. Made it all more crowded and congested.

Brett turned into a suburb of modest two story homes with well-kept landscapes. It was the kind of place Jack could never

envision himself living. The upkeep. Tied to the restrictions set forth by some HOA. Not the kind of life he wanted.

Then a thought crossed his mind. He blurted it out to Brett.

“Kids and a family?”

Brett glanced at the houses on both sides of the street. He took a moment to respond. “Not that I’m aware of. Would that be a problem?”

Jack shrugged. “Depends on what you plan to do with them.”

“Take away their phones and stick them in the bathroom, I suppose.”

“They’ll see us.”

“There’s ways around that.”

“Good enough.”

They continued on. Brett drove the whole of the neighborhood. There were two exits, and a park that backed up to a heavily wooded area. Worst case, if they had to make a run for it, that would provide some cover.

They circled back to Ballard’s home. Brett drove past, made the first right turn and parked the car out of sight of the other road. They exited and walked to Ballard’s.

Jack checked the door. Locked.

Brett pulled tools from his pocket. Took him under fifteen seconds to pick the lock.

“Sorry,” he said. “Bit rusty. Not much thieving in my work these days.”

Stepping into the foyer, Jack noticed the problem right away. Apparently Brett did too.

“Someone’s been here,” Brett said in a hushed tone.

Jack nodded. He already had his pistol out and aimed down the hall.

They traveled together, with Brett covering their flank. Every sound presented a potential threat, though most could be

attributed to the noises a house makes.

They reached the great room. The couch lay on its back. A table was flipped over. The television was shattered.

Jack pointed to the kitchen. A long island was the only thing separating it from where they stood. He gestured for Brett to go left, and he took the right.

The two men timed their movements in tune with each other and crouched as they approached the island. Each burst around the corner at the same time. They leveled their pistols at one another.

But they both stared at the floor.

At the corpse of Joe Ballard.

“Shit,” Brett said.

“Looks like someone beat us to it,” Jack said.

“We need to clear the house.” Brett rose and started toward the stairs. “Stay down here.”

Jack remained with Ballard while Brett headed upstairs.

“What did you do?” Jack said, not expecting a response.

The man had to have screwed up to end up dead. There was no doubt it was an agency job. He glanced around at the destruction in the other room. Then he looked at the kitchen. The fight had stopped at the island, yet the shot was obviously close range. He saw the scorch marks on the guy’s forehead. Ballard had taken the bullet point blank.

“Upstairs is clear,” Brett said as he descended the staircase.

“Come look at this and tell me what you see,” Jack said.

“Well,” Brett said as he stepped around the far end of the island. “I see a dead guy.” He knelt and looked at Ballard’s head. “Close range. Muzzle blast got him.”

“And?”

Brett rose. He looked at the kitchen. Then the living room. Down at Jack, then around the kitchen.

“No signs of struggle in here,” Brett said.

“That’s right,” Jack said.

“It’s like someone walked right up to him, maybe waited for him to turn around, and fired. He wasn’t expecting it. Christ, he hadn’t finished dressing yet. Probably in here, getting ready to make coffee and breakfast, when someone shows up at his door. He lets them in. They’re talking. Then wham, he’s dead.”

Jack said, “And then they trash the place to make it look like a struggle. A break in, perhaps.”

“Plausible.”

Jack checked Ballard’s pockets. Found his cell phone and wallet, which upon investigation he found had been emptied. But the phone, leaving that behind had been a mistake.

“Why?” Jack said.

“As far as I know, I was the only one he was working with on this. Now, whether he was running other ops, I’m not sure. I can’t imagine that he was.”

“That’d be too much for one man. Did he have a team?”

“Never said.”

“Partner?”

“A handler? Doubtful.”

“And you’re sure he never worked in the field?”

Brett glanced down. “Look at him, Jack. Would you or I end up dead this way?”

“Good point.”

Brett nodded, said nothing.

“So that leaves one option.”

“What’s that?”

“They know I’m alive. They think he lied to them. Didn’t even question the guy about it. Simple execution.”

“Tough group.”

Jack nodded. “Sure is. So let’s do our best to keep off their radar.”

“Obviously a bit late for that.” Brett paused a beat. “He had the answers. He knows how this all originated. Now we’ve got nothing. No leads.”

“I’ve got his phone. Look for his laptop and anything else he might’ve used for work. Let’s hurry. Someone could be watching. We need to get the hell out of here.”

NEVERS, FRANCE.

THE TREE PROVIDED little relief from the rain. Bear didn't care. He was a block away from the address the woman had given him. It easily could have been a trap. Every fiber of his being told him to stay away. Going there would only result in his death.

But it had happened so quickly. And the tension in her voice, the frustration, the fear. It sounded real. As though the woman attempted to wash her hands of all that had happened by offering Mandy to him.

A peace offering.

Take your girl and get out of our country for good.

And while he planned on doing so, his thoughts kept turning to Kat. What had they done with her? He presumed they had killed her prior to setting the stage for Pierre's death.

What a plan, he thought. Bring the man back on board after haunting him for months. But make it a concession on his part, that way he'd revel in his power a bit more. Even hook him up with his old team. That had been one of the few morsels Pierre had fed him on their drive.

His old second in command, Laure Desault, a woman Bear had met years earlier, had stepped down and allowed Pierre to resume control of his old team. Not even the position he'd had when he left the agency.

Bear already had her address. And after he had Mandy in a safe location, he was going after Laure. She set it all up. She'd told him where to find Mandy. She would know Kat's location.

He slowed his breathing, cleared his head, and waited in the rain for another hour. Behind the dark clouds, the sun slipped deep to the west. Streetlights clicked on. The falling rain distorted the lampposts cones of light.

In the hours he'd been watching, Bear had seen kids enter the home. A woman left. Then returned. There were no threats on the street. No faces lingered longer than a few minutes. No strange cars parked nearby. The rooftops were clear.

Sticking to the shadows, he made his move. He hadn't thought about what he'd say when they opened the door. Or what he'd say to his girl.

My girl.

He smiled at the thought. Time passed quickly. She was growing up, and would soon set out on her own. From here on, he was not going to put her in the position to become part of such a situation again.

"One last time," he muttered as he stared up at the rainclouds. "Cut me a break this one last time."

He stopped short of the landing. Leaned back against the exterior and watched the street and sidewalk again for five minutes. Comfortable all was well, Bear resumed the walk. He only had a few feet to go.

Bear hopped up the steps to the landing. He rapped on the door with his thick knuckles.

A boy who looked like he'd used his face to attack a two by four answered.

"Your parents home?" Bear said in French.

The boy nodded and ran off. A moment later, a woman who looked to be in her early fifties approached with caution. Bear was used to it.

"I'm looking for my daughter."

The woman shrugged.

“Her name is Mandy.”

The woman shook her head.

Bear pulled out a picture. The woman glanced at it and then looked up at him, eyes narrowed.

“She was here. That boy who answered, she did that to him. Then the little wench fled.”

“Mandy did that?”

The woman did not respond.

“He must’ve deserved it then.”

“And another thing, she had no name when she came here. Knew nothing about herself. We started calling her-”

“Wait, what?”

“Amnesia or whatever. Had no idea who she was, or where she was from.” She looked Bear up and down. “Makes sense she comes from your stock.”

“When did this happen?”

“Overnight. She was gone before sunrise.”

Bear stepped back, looked down the street, wondering which direction she had gone. Where she had gone.

“I need whatever-”

The woman slammed the door shut. Bear stepped forward and banged on it. No one answered. He hit it harder. Still no one answered. Bear punched the door twice, then stepped back to kick it. A window above him answered. The woman stuck her head out.

“I’m calling the police,” she shouted at him. “Go away.”

With everything that happened, last thing Bear needed was the police to be involved. They might serve him back up to the DSGE and then he’d disappear.

He hopped off the stoop and went back to where he’d taken position earlier.

“Where are you, Mandy?” he said.

She couldn't have gone far with no ID and presumably no money. But which way?

He walked back toward the house, staying on the other side of the street. He closed his eyes, took a few deep breaths. Pictured the girl attacking the boy - for good reason - and then imagined what she would do if she were him.

Opening his eyes, he studied the street in both directions. To her left, it was open, bright. People could have been out, even at a late or early morning hour.

To her right it would have been dark, narrow, abandoned. Alleys ran between townhouses.

And that's the direction Bear headed. He'd honed her instincts enough to know that she would have taken the path that offered her escape and the ability to hide if someone chased after her.

He showed her picture to a few men cowering under an awning. They'd seen her, earlier that day, about two miles down the road.

Bear raced to his rental car and started down the street. He pulled over after four miles, figuring she should have gone this far. The rain let up. Two women were standing outside a door, smoking. He approached them and showed them the picture of Mandy.

The older woman nodded. She pointed across the street.

“Our family runs that restaurant. I sent her in there about an hour ago to get warm and eat.”

“Thank you,” Bear said as he turned and ran across the street.

A car slammed on its brakes, skid on the wet street. Bear leapt forward, just missing the opportunity to get hit. The guy rolled down his window and shouted something, but Bear only had to look back at the guy for the driver to move on.

Bear stopped in front of the door where he caught his reflection. The rain had weighed his hair down, making his

beard-clad face look puffy. His clothes were drenched. He ran a hand through his hair and pushed the door open.

“Mandy,” he called out.

Several people turned to look at him. None of them were her.

At the bar, a mane of blonde hair draped over the back of a stool.

“Mandy,” he said again, heading toward the bar.

The girl seated there didn't move.

Bear placed his hand on her shoulder. Felt her tense up. Then she reached across and grabbed his wrist. She attempted to twist his arm, but only spun herself around in her seat.

“Mandy, look I know you are having some problems with your memory, but look at me. You have to know who I am?”

She looked frightened. “Let me go.”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out her photo. “See, I'm carrying around this picture of you. C'mon kid, you know me. I know you do. You know you do.” He'd leaned forward so they were eye to eye.

During this time, a patron watching the exchange had risen from his table and approach.

“Is this man bothering you?” he said in French.

Bear turned toward the guy. “Piss off.”

The guy backed away.

“Listen, Mandy. I always taught you to strike at the opponent's greatest weakness. And you always asked me what's my weakness. You remember what I said?”

Tears had filled the girl's eyes. She blinked and two streams formed on her cheeks. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“I always said I have no weaknesses, so you can't take me down.” He paused, wiped his own eyes. “But that's not true, kid. I have a weakness, and it's a big one. You, Mandy. You

are my greatest weakness. And despite that, I want to continue raising you and make sure you reach adulthood.”

The girl said nothing.

But the bartender did. He aimed a pistol at Bear’s head and said, “Step back.”

Bear lifted his hands to chest level, close enough to his weapon he could reach it, and took a step back.

“Listen,” he said. “This is my girl. She was in an accident and lost her memory. But she’s mine. She just don’t remember.”

“We’ll let her be the judge of that.”

“I just told you, she don’t remember.”

“And I’m holding the gun.”

So am I.

Bear backed off.

“Child, who is this man?”

HIS VOICE SOUNDED so familiar. But surely a man of such stature would register in the girl’s mind if she knew him. She looked back at the man behind the bar, now flanked by two other armed men and shook her head.

The man said, “Get the hell out of here before we kill you and bury you out back.”

The big man said, “Mandy, I won’t give up on you.” He stepped back toward the door, stopped, pointed over her shoulder. “And I’ll be back for you. Count on that.”

“Get out,” the guy screamed.

“Mandy,” he said from the open doorway over the sounds of cars passing by on a wet road. “Remember the lessons I’ve taught you. They’ll keep you alive.”

His voice played in her head. Dozens of lines that she heard constantly, like she had when the boy attacked her. Why couldn’t she remember him if he had played such a part in her

life. And here he was, pleading with her, while three men aimed guns and threatened to kill him.

I'm his greatest weakness .

“I’m not telling you again,” the man behind her said.

The man at the door locked stares with her. She sensed his pain, yet she felt nothing. He turned to leave. One door fell shut. His big hand held the other open as he stepped to the sidewalk. The girl felt a slight yearning. A feeling of home disappearing.

“WAIT!” HER VOICE cut through the humid air.

Bear spun and re-entered the restaurant. Mandy rushed toward him. He held his arms out. She hit him with the force of a truck.

The armed man hopped over the bar and said, “What is this? Are you sure you know this man?”

Mandy looked at Bear, tears in her eyes, then turned her head. “Yes, I do. He’s my father. I was angry with him for not letting me go out with some friends, so I ran off. I was trying to punish him.”

Bear took her hand and pulled her to the door. Better to get out while the men mulled over her words than to allow them to question her further. They turned left at the next corner. Bear stopped after another half-block, grabbed the girl by the shoulders and leaned over.

“Way to think on your feet back there, kid. That was a great time for your memory to come back.”

He noticed tears running down her cheeks.

“Mister, I have no idea who you are,” she said. “But your voice... I hear your voice, like, all the time. Little bits of information. Lessons, I guess.”

“Mandy, that’s-”

“Is that my name? Mandy?”

He nodded.

“They were calling me Madeline in that house. It sort of felt right. Guess I know why now.”

Bear nodded again, said nothing.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Riley Logan, though you and most other people call me Bear.”

She looked up at him. “That fits you.”

He laughed. “Sure as shit does, kid.”

They continued down the lit street for another few blocks in silence. He figured the kid had a lot to process. Hopefully some of which would lead to her memory returning.

“Mr. Bear?”

“Just Bear.”

“Bear?”

“Yeah?”

“Where are we going?”

“Train station.”

“To where?”

“Paris.”

“Why Paris?”

“I’ve gotta visit with an old friend.”

BETHESDA, MARYLAND.

BRETT HOVERED OVER Ballard's computer. They'd managed to get into the file system, but there was little of use there. A bunch of empty folders. It seemed possible that Ballard knew something was going down and had managed to delete anything of importance.

"Give us something we can use," he said to the laptop.

"Maybe he did everything on USB drive," Jack said.

"That's how most of it's done these days." Brett tapped a few more keys. "But I'd expect there to be some remnants on the system. Especially with all these empty folders."

"How secure is your cell?"

Brett pulled out his phone. "Don't think the NSA could crack the connection."

"What if the other end of the call was in doubt?"

"It'd look to them like we're in Islamabad." Brett spun the cell in his palm. "What are you getting at?"

Jack rose and walked over and held out his hand. "I've got someone who can help us with our computer problem."

Brett relinquished the phone. Jack dialed the number from memory. Two rings later, Brandon answered.

Jack said, "Bet you thought you'd never hear from me again."

“Shit, that really you, man? What the hell happened? I’ve heard reports you were toast over two weeks ago.”

“It’s me, and I’ll spare you the details other than to say whoever is behind this has a world of hate and pain heading their way.”

“Yeah, well I’ve been fighting goons from three agencies off daily. Finally found a solution yesterday. Been watching them try to crash my connection all day long with no luck.”

Jack nodded at Brett and covered the mouthpiece. “See, he’s the right guy.”

Brett nodded.

“So what can I do to help you?”

“An agency analyst/handler wound up dead today. Not by our doing, but we managed to confiscate his laptop. Got into it, but haven’t been able to find anything other than some video clips.”

Brandon said, “OK, first off, who’s we?”

“Brett Taylor,” Jack said. “Name ring a bell?”

“On a couple levels. Weren’t you supposed to kill him some years back?”

“Yup.”

“And isn’t he the guy who supposedly killed you a couple weeks ago?”

“Correct.”

“Man, you’re gonna have to take a couple hours and explain this to me when it’s all said and done.”

“Will do, Brandon. But for now, can you help with this computer?”

“I sure can.” Brandon proceeded to explain to them how to connect the laptop to a secure SSH tunnel he created. “The agency can have that machine rigged however they want. They won’t be able to see a damn thing now.”

With the computer connected, the line fell silent while Brandon searched the laptop. Jack took note of the concern on Brett's face. When he caught the guy's gaze, Jack nodded and assured him that Brandon could be trusted. He'd always said there were two people he trusted in this world.

Bear and Clarissa.

In truth, there were three. Because Brandon always had his back. Just in a different way. But if the guy had arms and legs that worked properly, he'd lay his life on the line if Jack asked.

Like he was doing right now. If anyone traced the action back to Brandon, a hit team would be en route immediately.

"OK," Brandon said. "I can tell you this is going to take a while."

"Define a while," Brett said.

"Four hours, give or take."

"Kidding, right?"

"The stuff you are looking for is in there. But it's buried."

"Brandon," Jack said, "we don't have four or five hours to kill right now. We need to be on the move."

"Yeah, well then I suggest you start moving toward New York City."

"Why's that?"

"Because from the content of this email I'm reading, seems that's where your daughter Mia is right now."

Jack picked the phone up off the bed. "I never told you about Mia, Brandon."

"I know, and I gotta say, I'm a little hurt you didn't share something like that with me. Disregarding that, I can tell you that your guy received a message and it clearly states, 'Jack Noble's daughter, Mia.'"

"Date?"

"Yesterday. It tells Ballard to stay put, and that they'll use his guy to put an end to it."

Brett leaned forward. “Did they use a name with ‘his guy’?”

Jack assumed they had meant Brett. “And put an end to what?”

Brandon said, “You guys are gonna have to give me some time to figure all that out.”

Jack said, “What’s going to happen to the laptop when you’re done?”

Brandon said, “Depends on you, I guess.”

“It has provisions to notify the agency of its location, right?”

“Affirmative.”

“How about you make it light up their monitoring system as soon as you’re done with it. And by done, I mean plant a bunch of bullshit information that they’re going to have to wade through for two weeks before they realize they’ve been duped.”

Brandon laughed and said, “You got it.”

“OK. We’re out of here. Will call you in four hours.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were merging onto I-95 north. Brett was at the wheel. Jack kept his eye on the side mirror, watching for tails, which was considerably harder to do in the middle of the night.

“So what do you think went wrong?” Brett asked.

“With what?”

“Ballard gets a message to stay put another day or two, and then to recall me to finish something. Then he winds up dead. He had to have done something, right?”

Jack thought it through as he stared at the passing streetlights. Their orange gaze lit up the interstate, but failed to penetrate the thick woods that lined the highway. Then it came to him.

“Yeah,” Jack said, “he did do something.”

“What?”

“He lied. And so did you.”

“Shit.” Brett started checking his mirrors.

“They know I’m alive.”

I-95, NEW JERSEY.

HELP COMES AT the oddest times. Like a call at three o'clock in the morning from a friend four thousand miles away.

The phone that Sasha had given Jack rang for the first time. He wondered if she had uncovered something, or if the call was to check up on him.

"I'm getting some strange hits here, Jack."

"On what?"

"There's an account, two of them, actually, that are linked to you."

"Mia's trusts," Jack said without hesitation.

"Right, and from what I can tell, they are hefty accounts."

"So what about them?"

"Someone is trying to access them."

"They'd need mine and Erin's permission." He paused, realizing the slip. "Well, I guess mine until Mia is of age."

"You're dead, Jack. Remember?"

He said nothing. Didn't need to. He knew where this was going.

"I dug a little deeper. Someone has filed custody papers of Mia."

Jack didn't have to ask her for the name.

"John C. Merrick is listed on the paperwork," she said. "But it isn't approved, yet, so I don't know what they are doing trying to access the account."

Jack had a clearer picture of what was going on. "They're trying to gain access to it now because they know I'm alive. My guess is that they are going to push their lawyers to get this custody ruling through quickly. But how did they find out? Christ, you think they knew all along?"

"I'm going to file an injunction to stop it here, Jack. And I'm going to freeze those accounts. OK?"

"Sounds good." He paused, then added, "One more thing."

"What?"

"Can you pinpoint their location for me?"

"I can't, and I'm not sure I can use any of my assets here to do that for you. This is dark territory we're dealing in."

"What if I put you in touch with someone who can?"

"I suppose we can do that."

Jack gave her Brandon's information and told her it would be OK for Brandon to contact him with the results. If he got any at all.

Brett glanced over after Jack hung up. "What was all that about?"

Jack turned to the window. He rolled it down and let the warm air wash over him. Beyond the haze of orange stood the dark woods. The only constant on the highway.

He turned to Brett. "Let's stop and get some coffee."

The guy shrugged and moved to the far right lane. Took the next exit. Two minutes later, they were parked in front of a convenience store. Brett went in, while Jack remained behind on watch.

Brett returned with two large travel mugs. He set one on the roof, opened the door, grabbed the second mug and

lowered himself into the driver's seat. As he turned to hand Jack his coffee, he found a pistol aimed at his forehead.

"The hell, Jack?"

"How much did they offer you?"

"For what? To kill you?" Brett glanced between Jack and the gun. "It was a standard fee. Why do you think I let you live?"

Jack ignored the guy's smile. "No, not for killing me. You know what."

Few men could remain as calm as Brett did at that moment. Like Jack, it wasn't the first time a gun had been aimed in Brett's direction. The man had options. Jack was aware of that, and he remained vigilant should Brett try to throw the coffee at him.

"You're going to have to give me a clue here," Brett said.

"You're leading me right to them. They stand to make billions off this. What's your cut?"

"I can assure you that I'm only here for two reasons, both of which amount to the fact that I owe you. You spared my life years ago. And now, because of me, Erin is dead, and your daughter is being held by some very dangerous men. If I can help you get her back, then in some way I'll have repaid you."

Jack considered his words, but said nothing.

"It's up to you whether to believe me or not. But I ask that you make the decision quickly, because these paper mugs are starting to burn my fingers, and when it comes time, I'd like to be able to operate my weapon properly."

Jack lowered the pistol an inch and shifted it to the right so it wasn't aimed at Brett.

"If you're lying to me," Jack said, "I'll kill you first."

"I wouldn't expect any less from you." He set the mugs in the center console cup holders. "What's going on? What did you find out?"

"Ever hear of the name Thornton Walloway?"

Brett glanced up, then shrugged. “Refresh my memory.”

“British billionaire. Dabbled with criminals, then terrorists. Dottie Carlisle worked with British Intelligence, and did some stuff on the side. That’s how I met her. Anyway, she and Walloway hooked up a few years back. Neither had children. Walloway had no family at all, and Dottie only had her niece. Erin. Which makes Mia her great-niece. Get the picture?”

“Mia’s the heir to Walloway’s fortune.”

“That’s right.”

“Could this whole thing have been a plan to get to that money?”

“The scope of this, from what you’ve said and with what I expect Brandon is going to tell us, is far too great to pin it all on that. Why kill off so many people when all they needed was me for the payoff? I think this goes back to that first meeting. It was contrived to put a face to a name. When they started digging into my past, they came across Erin and Mia, which led to Dottie and Walloway, and someone saw it as an opportunity.”

“Who?”

“They’re trying to gain custody of Mia. The name on the paperwork is John Merrick.”

“Which means we’re dealing with Butch Monaco and whatever team he cobbled together. That pretty much confirms he killed Ballard. They probably thought you got to him and turned the guy. Why else would he report you dead when you’re not?”

Jack nodded as he sipped coffee. “Unless it was you, which it was. So, I wouldn’t doubt that they’ve paid your apartment a visit just to cover all bases. You probably left town at the right moment.” He paused a beat. “Back in Johannesburg, someone found me minutes after I hit the street. I was so disoriented at the time, all I could do was run. Honestly, I lucked out getting away with my life. Had to be someone they sent. I just can’t see it being Frank. If he wanted

me dead, he'd have done it in New York, not waste the resources sending me to the other end of the world."

"That meeting you had, though," Brett said. "Before I even had orders to terminate you. If they wanted you dead, why not do it there?"

"Doesn't make sense, right?"

Brett nodded. "They sent Erin's killer." His features darkened as he recalled his time in Tenerife. "Dammit, I saw him, Jack. Saw him in their hotel lobby. Wasn't someone I knew, but he had the look. Know what I mean?"

Jack nodded, said nothing.

"In SA, we rarely met the others, but you could always tell. Anyway, he took the same seat I had used when I was scouting the place. I left to make arrangements..." He paused and looked away. "I was going to take Erin and Mia offshore to draw you out. And when I left to do that, he must've started trailing them."

Jack bit down against the anger rising. "You were doing your job, Brett. Same job I did dozens of times before. It'd be hypocritical of me to blame you."

Brett said nothing. They drove on in silence for a few minutes.

Jack recounted the events that led to him ending up in South Africa, as much for his benefit as for Brett's. From the strange meeting with who he believed to be Monaco, to the encounter with Charles. The supposed hit in Ithaca. Finding the dead man in the house. The team closing in on him there. And then Frank showing up. Finally, being shot with a tranquilizer and then waking up in South Africa.

"Have they been working against each other?" Jack said. "Or together? And if that's the case, why send me so far away? Just do the damn job and get it over with."

"You know I don't trust Skinner," Brett said. "But as you've explained it, I don't see him selling you out. But it sounds like he knew what was going on and was trying to get you as far away as possible."

“How did you find out where I was?”

“Everything came through Ballard.”

“And unless Brandon finds something, we’ll never know who was feeding him.”

Jack’s cell rang. It was Brandon.

“Tell me you found something,” Jack said.

“I found lots, mostly irrelevant. But I’ll get to the most important, which is totally backed up by the info your girl in London just passed on to me.”

“Lay it on me, man.”

“You know where the Excelsior Hotel is in NYC?”

“West 81st,” Jack said. “I was there a few weeks ago. Had a run in with a couple stewards and one of their maintenance men.”

“Hope you left on good terms, because that’s where your daughter is. I’m close to pinpointing the room they tried to access the account from.”

Brandon said he’d call back as soon as he had it, then hung up.

“Now’s your chance to erase your guilt,” Jack said to Brett. “Upper West Side. Excelsior Hotel.”

PARIS, FRANCE.

BEAR LOCATED LAURE'S home with a little help. The same help that put him in touch with private security for Mandy. A thousand dollars for two men. Non-refundable. He prayed that meant they were *that* good.

His instructions should he not return by ten p.m. were explicit. Get the girl on a plane to Heathrow, and call Sasha Kirby.

After all, it had been her that had given him Laure's address and recommended the security firm.

She had also caught him up on everything that had happened to Jack. The guilt Bear felt was worse than bile rising in his throat. He'd deactivated the number Jack had always used to reach him. Cut the man off. His partner. One of his oldest friends. The only one who could understand how Bear thought and felt and acted.

He'd pressed Sasha for additional details, such as where Jack was now and whether she knew who was behind everything. She had declined to answer, telling Bear he had enough on his plate at the moment. As usual, it was what she hadn't said that spoke the loudest.

The situation was dire, and Sasha had said nothing more in an effort to protect Bear and Mandy.

He suspected it had something to do with the forces that had come after Pierre. They might've even been tailing Bear

and Mandy when they had arrived in Nice. That was part of the reason he had to get to Laure. She knew where he could find Mandy. Bear assumed that at a minimum she had knowledge of why Pierre had been killed. Might've even had a hand in it.

It was late morning when he arrived at her apartment. He headed down the deserted hallway, walked past her door. Did it again in reverse. On his third pass, he stopped and checked the knob. To no one's surprise, the door was locked. He pulled out a set of picks and had the door open within fifteen seconds.

He slipped the tools in his pocket and reached around his back for the pistol. He pushed through the doorway and came face to face with Laure.

She stood in the middle of the room with a towel wrapped around her otherwise naked body. Her hair was wet and slicked back. Drops of water rolled down her smooth arms and legs.

Laure spun, dropping one leg back, ready to sprint.

“Don't fucking move!” Bear shouted. “I'll blow a hole through the back of your fucking head.”

She pulled to a halt a few feet away from where she had been standing. Her arms went up. The back of her towel slipped a few inches.

“Turn around,” he said.

She slowly spun in a half-circle, dropping one arm to support the towel. Bear didn't stop her.

“What do you want?” she said.

“Answers.”

“I gave you back your girl. What more do you need to know?”

Bear walked over to the couch. He moved the cushions around and checked the seams. There was nothing hidden there. He gestured with the pistol for her to take a seat.

“What more?” he said. “How about you answer me one question. Can you do that?”

She nodded.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

Bear kept the pistol trained on her chest. “Why all of this, Laure? Why go after Pierre in the first place? Why take out the girls? Lock one up in a cell over the border in Germany, and move another around from hospital to hospital?”

He paused for her to respond, but she said nothing.

“Why kill Pierre after releasing Kat?”

“We had no choice. Don’t you see that?”

“See what?”

“I’ve known Pierre longer than you. I came up in the agency under him. He taught me everything I know. And among those lessons was that if I wanted to live, I should never question my superiors. I might not like what they ask me to do, but I’d better do it.”

Bear shook his head. “That man bucked authority on a regular basis.”

“And he refused to come back. Started freelancing too much. Got in over his head.”

“OK, Laure. So why then? What was so bad he deserved to die?”

“I don’t know. We were given the order. You showed up in Nice and threw a wrench in the plan. We were already tailing you, but just to see what you were up to. At first it looked like nothing, but you found Pierre and we weren’t sure.”

“Why send us out to Germany if Kat was already gone?”

“You were never supposed to be there. And we didn’t know Kat was gone until the sniper arrived. His recon indicated she wasn’t there. Three days earlier, the team

holding her had left. Somehow she got out. If she hadn't, the sniper would have put a bullet in her head."

"Why? She's practically a kid."

Laure looked away. "I know that. But she'd been with him for a while. Chances are she knew."

"Where is she now?"

Laure stared at him for a moment before answering. "No idea."

Bear stepped forward and leveled the pistol with her forehead. "Not good enough."

"It doesn't matter. In my report I stated there were two shots. One for Pierre. One for her." She looked up at him. "Not like our sniper is alive to state any different."

"What about your team? No one was in the room with you?"

"One person. He won't talk."

"The superior thing."

"Exactly."

"One more question, then I'll decide whether you live or not."

Most would have buckled under the statement. Laure straightened up, the look her face more defiant than it had been.

"Mandy," Bear said. "Why'd you tell me where to find her?"

"She had nothing to do with this, and obviously, you were better for her than some foster family. How is she? Has her memory come back?"

Bear glanced toward the window and shook his head. "She knows me, but doesn't know me. It'll get there."

They fell silent for a minute. The refrigerator hummed. The fan, which had drowned out the fridge a few moments

earlier, shut off. Laure glanced toward a closed door, presumably her bedroom.

“You want to get dressed.”

She nodded and leaned forward. Her gaze shifted to the door again. She looked like a lioness, preparing to pounce.

Bear took a step back.

The bedroom door burst open, and a man rushed out, armed, shouting at Bear to get down.

Bear spun and fired, the round ripping through the guy's bare chest. He returned fire, but his aim had been altered. As the man fell, he dropped his pistol. It hit the ground and slid a few feet toward the middle of the room.

Bear turned to Laure to keep her from going after the gun.

No chance of that happening.

She lay back on the couch, blood pouring from the gunshot wound to the side of her head, lifeless eyes staring up at him.

“The hell were you thinking?” he shouted at her as though she could respond. “Why didn't you tell me he was in there?”

He walked over to the man on the floor. The guy tried to scoot back, but didn't get far. The wound was bad, but possibly survivable.

“You were in the room with her, weren't you?” Bear said. “When that sniper killed Pierre. Who did the order come from? Huh? Which of your bosses sanctioned it?”

The guy worked his mouth like a fish out of water until he managed to speak. “Laure. Laure did.”

“And she thought you'd never tell.”

“Help... help me.”

Bear looked up and spotted a towel on the floor. He stepped over the guy, grabbed it, then wrapped it around the man's neck, squeezing until the guy's face was blue and he no longer fought back.

He took the towel, wiped down the front door with it. Looking back at the dead bodies, he thought of Pierre. Before exiting the building, he discarded the towel in a maintenance closet.

A half-hour later, he was at the hotel. Mandy smiled at his return. She'd forced the gesture, but it was a start. In time, she'd remember.

He tossed his clothes in the trash, then washed up. Afterward, he considered dismissing the two-man security team, but decided he had a few hours left, might as well take advantage of it.

Bear placed a call to Sasha.

After the formalities, she said, "I'm hearing word that a high-ranking agent in the DSGE and one of her subordinates were killed today. Both of them found half-dressed. He killed her, but they aren't sure who pulled the trigger on him. They suspect an affair, and her ex-husband is the leading suspect at the moment. I figure that gives any other possible suspects about twelve hours to get out of the country."

"That's why I'm calling," Bear said. "Can you help with that?"

"Depends on where you want to go."

"I was thinking Germany."

Sasha paused before responding. "I'm not sure I can do that, but if you'll come here first, I can help with documentation for the two of you, then you can go wherever you want."

Bear cracked the door open. Mandy sat at the table, eating a sandwich. She looked up at him and smiled. A little less distant. A little more genuine.

"Actually," Bear said. "It doesn't matter where I go, as long as she's safe."

"Then come to London and I'll bring you to one of the safest places I know. My family has an estate to the north. Fully staffed, but no one is there for at least the next three

months. You can stay there and allow this some time to blow over. Maybe Mandy's condition will improve while you're here."

Thirty minutes later, the security team escorted them out of Paris to a private airport where Sasha had arranged for a Gulfstream to bring Bear and Mandy to London.

Sasha met them on the runway. By late afternoon, the trio had arrived at the estate, about forty miles to the west of Newcastle.

NEW YORK CITY.

BRETT LET JACK out of the car on 77th Street. Opposite end of the Museum of Natural History. The men donned comms units Brett had brought from his apartment. He also had a couple changes of clothes. The men were roughly the same size. Jack wore gym shorts and a t-shirt, hat, and sunglasses. It wasn't the best disguise, but it'd do.

The early morning rays of the sun cast the city in red and orange hues. It looked clean. Fresh. He knew the day would be anything but.

He headed north on Columbus, gaze traveling side to side looking for Monaco's men. As he approached 81st, he still hadn't spotted anybody. Monaco felt secure in his location. Who would come looking for a bunch of killers at the hotel?

By now the agency knew of Ballard's death and was looking for his laptop. If Brandon did his job, they'd be searching for days before finding it.

He questioned whether Monaco remained in contact with anyone at the agency. With his experience, he could have been kept on the payroll, even if he took a backseat to most operations these days. He was a legend in Clandestine Ops, according to Brett. It wasn't a stretch to assume today's leaders consulted with a hero from the past. It benefited both sides. When shit hit the fan for Monaco, all he had to do was call in a few favors.

Don 't let this be one of those times.

He traveled the block around the hotel, scouted the alleys, and walked along the park, all while keeping in constant contact with Brett. There was no obvious security in place. Didn't mean it wasn't there. Only that he couldn't see it.

"It's clear," he said.

"OK," Brett said. "I'll meet you behind the hotel near the maintenance room."

Jack entered the hotel through the front. The staff looked tired after a long overnight shift. No one bothered to greet him. He walked through the lobby and continued past the elevators. He made a right at the first hall he came to, then stopped in front of the maintenance room and knocked on the door.

A few seconds later it opened up. Grease Stain stared at him.

"What are you doing here?"

"I need your help."

"Not a chance in hell. Get out of here before I call the cops."

"For what reason?"

The big maintenance man said nothing.

"I'm going to give you the chance to help me get my daughter back. She's being held here."

"Why should I care?"

"Do you need for me to give you a reason?" Jack gripped his pistol behind his back with his right hand. "Let's not make it get to that point. OK?"

Grease Stain stood there like a mountain blocking the doorway. He looked at Jack, then over his shoulder, then back. Both hands were out of sight. It was easy to envision the guy wielding pipe cutters or a baseball bat.

"Your daughter?" the guy said.

"She's just a kid," Jack said. "If you have even the slightest inclination of what kind of guy I am, then you can

probably assume what kind of men they are.”

Grease stain nodded and stepped back. “Use whatever you need.”

The room hummed. The warm air was charged with static and smelled of oil.

Jack made his way to the opposite side and opened the exit door. Brett stood on the landing, gun in his hand, pressed to his thigh. He stepped inside. His stare went to the large man at the other end of the room.

“Friend of yours?” Brett said.

Jack ignored the question. “Did you get the call?”

Brett nodded and told Jack the room number Brandon had given him.

Jack led him over to Grease Stain and said, “You got a master key?”

“Why?” the man asked.

“Because I need one.”

“I could get fired.”

“I won’t let them do that,” Jack said. “Trust me.”

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. He used it to unlock a drawer on his desk. From the drawer, he pulled out a plastic card and handed it to Jack.

“Bring it back,” said Grease Stain.

Jack gathered a few items from the maintenance room, then exited into the hallway. He and Brett took the elevator to the sixth floor, walked to the end of the hallway, taking note of the room numbers, and then took the stairwell down one flight.

“It’s going to be five rooms from here,” Jack said. “On the left. I’ll unlock. You open and cover me. I’ll lock down the first guy I see and call out the location of any others to you. Got it?”

Brett nodded and reached for the hallway door. Jack went through first, pistol drawn and kept out of sight just behind his

hip. The thing they weren't sure of was whether there were multiple rooms in use. Both men had to remain highly vigilant. There could be a guy positioned behind one of the doors, a lookout, staring into the hallway in case of a moment like this.

"We should have made your friend pull the records for each room," Brett whispered.

Jack shrugged. That didn't matter. These men were more than capable of using false identities. By the time they reviewed that and any camera footage, the opportunity could've been blown.

They stopped in front of the door. Jack to the right, Brett on the left. Both out of view of the peephole. Jack slid the master key through the electronic reader. On the click of the lock, Brett reached over and turned the handle. He drove his shoulder into the door. Jack burst through the opening.

A man sat in a pair of boxers at the other end of the room, eating cereal. He spilled the bowl on himself as he attempted to get up. Milk dripped down his chest and stomach and soaked his underwear.

Jack rushed forward to the end of the small hallway, his pistol aimed at the milk-soaked man.

"One guy, directly ahead. He's mine. Room's empty otherwise. Check the bathroom."

Brett kicked in the bathroom door and began shouting at someone to turn around and get their hands up.

"Don't move," Jack said to the guy, now standing with his arms up. The guy kept glancing toward the bed. "You got something over there?"

The man said nothing.

"What did you find?" he called out to Brett.

"One guy."

"Bring him out here and get him against the wall." Jack turned his attention back to the man. "Where is she?"

"Who?"

“I’m gonna give you a pass there since I didn’t tell you the rules. You do anything but answer my questions with the truth and I’m gonna cause you immeasurable pain.”

Brett appeared at Jack’s side. He leaned in and whispered, “That’s him. From the hotel in Tenerife.”

Jack nodded. He looked at the guy who’d been in the bathroom. “I recognize him from Johannesburg. Son of a bitch shot at me. Check the bed. They’re hiding something there.”

Brett tossed the pillows and stripped the sheets. He returned with a Glock, a wallet and a cell phone.

“Where is she?” Jack said.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” the guy said, smiling.

Jack set his pistol down on the bed, then walked up to the man. “You know who I am?”

He nodded. “I got an idea.”

“Then you know why I’m here. Right at this moment, you’re in a damn awful position. It’d be in your best interests to tell me what I want to know.”

The guy said nothing. Which is about what Jack expected. The man looked like he could still be in the CIA. His relationship with Monaco indicated that he had been trained to keep his mouth shut under all circumstances.

Jack delivered a shot to his solar plexus. He hadn’t put a lot behind the blow. Didn’t have to. The man bowed forward as he tried to suck in a mouthful of air. Jack shoved him backward. The guy bounced off the table and fell into the chair he had been sitting in. The guy against the wall looked back. Brett lunged forward and threw an elbow into the guy’s spine.

“Where is she?” Jack shouted.

The man’s face was dark red. Despite that, he raised his middle finger.

Jack reached out and grabbed the extended digit. Then he pulled a pair of heavy gauge wire cutters from his pocket.

“Where?” Jack said.

The man said nothing.

Jack flicked the tool open. The sharp inch-and-a-half long blades were separated wide.

“Tell me what you did with her,” Jack said.

The guy made ragged attempts at deep breaths, but still said nothing. He could’ve grunted or forced a word out.

Jack delivered an elbow strike to the guy’s nose, then wrenched around until he had the man’s arm barred between his torso and upper arm. He held the cutters up to the man’s second knuckle of his middle finger.

“Last chance.”

“Fuck you.”

Jack squeezed the rubber padded handles together. It took a couple additional pumps to complete the job since he wasn’t going for a clean cut between the knuckle and bone. The majority of the guy’s finger fell to the table. Blood poured from the stump. Brett had muffled the man with a pillow. His screams were barely audible.

“You want any more?” Jack said.

“Ah, Jesus.” The guy moaned as he stared at his lifeless finger on the table.

Jack grabbed the guy’s wrist and extended his arm out again. He put the blades of the cutter close to the base of the guy’s index finger. Pressed in hard enough to break the skin and stopped at the bone.

“Ready to tell me?”

“Stop,” the guy said. “Stop, and I’ll tell you.”

“Then do it,” Jack said.

“They took her, man. Told me to stay here another day or two.”

“Who took her?”

The man shook his head and said nothing. Brett backhanded him.

Jack dug in with the cutters. The bone cracked. The man screamed.

“Butch,” he said. “Butch took her.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

Jack squeezed again, jerking up and down as he did so. The finger snapped. Jack gave it another tug, then released. The digit dangled from the guy’s hand by a strand of skin.

“Christ! South Carolina! Butch has a place down there. Maybe he took her there.”

Jack glanced back at Brett and nodded. Then he picked up a sheet off the floor and tossed one end of it to the man. The guy wrapped it around his bleeding hand.

“CIA?” Jack asked the guy.

He nodded.

“Active?”

“Yeah. Special Activities.”

“Been to Tenerife?”

The guy clenched his jaw and said nothing.

“That woman you killed, the girl’s mother.” Jack wiped his brow and held out his left hand. “She was special to me.”

Brett placed his pistol in Jack’s hand. Threaded to the muzzle was a suppressor.

Jack said, “If I had more time, you’d get special treatment.”

“I told you where the girl is man,” the guy said. “Just leave me be. I won’t tell Butch or anyone.”

“That’s right,” Jack said. “You won’t.”

He lifted the pistol. His finger slipped behind the trigger guard. The man’s pleas went unregistered. Jack squeezed and

fired a round into the center of the guy's forehead. The man slumped in the chair, sliding on the milk-covered padded seat.

“What about him?” Brett said, jutting his chin toward the man facing the wall.

Jack returned Brett's pistol. “He had the chance and didn't speak up. Kill him.”

Brett put two bullets into the back of the man's head. Then he opened the wallet he'd found on the bed. Fished out the ID. The picture matched the guy Jack had interrogated.

“His name is Jared Akers,” Brett said.

“No,” Jack said. “His name was Jared Akers.”

NEW YORK CITY.

THEY EXITED THE room and headed down the stairs to the first floor. Grease Stain did a double take at the two men entering his office.

“The hell happened up there?” he said.

“He didn’t have what I was looking for,” Jack said.

Grease Stain pointed to a sink. “Better wash that stuff off you.” After Jack and Brett rinsed off, the big man said, “Come with me.”

He led them down to the basement, to a small room with multiple monitors.

“Security feeds,” he said. “What’s she look like?”

Jack reached for a wallet that wasn’t there. “They took everything I had a few weeks ago.”

They focused on three screens as Grease Stain wound backward through the footage.

“There,” Jack said. “Freeze that.”

The image on the screen was of two men and Mia. One guy’s identity was revealed right away. Butch Monaco. The other was shielded from view. They backtracked a bit and found the same at every point where the trio passed the camera.

“I’d seen her before,” Grease Stain said. “Man, if I’d have known, I’d have done something about it.”

“It’s not your problem to worry about,” Jack said.

“I got five daughters, man. I’d have made it my problem.” He pointed to the screen. “They got about two hours lead on you.”

They spent another ten minutes going through footage on all cameras at the same time, but were unable to determine the second man’s identity.

“You know where they’re headed?” the man asked.

“Possibly to South Carolina. We’ve got intelligence people looking, too. They’ll help us.”

“Don’t worry about the scene in the room,” he said. “I’ll dispose of the body in the furnace. It’s hot enough to reduce him to ash. Don’t ask how I know that. Also, I’ll get a crew to clean the room. Won’t be a trace left behind. Nations top forensics team wouldn’t be able to figure it out.”

Jack and Brett thanked the guy and exited the room, found the stairwell and made it up to the lobby. As they reached the front door, a booming voice called out from behind.

“Wait!”

Jack turned to see Grease Stain standing by the elevators, hands on his knees as though he’d taken the stairs four at a time and sprinted the rest of the way.

“What is it?”

“I got the other guy.”

They raced back to the room in the basement. Jack arrived first. The guy had frozen the image on the main screen and blown it up. Jack knew the face well.

Frank Skinner.

IT TOOK LESS than five minutes for the men to reach the car. Another fifteen to get out of Manhattan. Two hours later, they flirted with the outskirts of D.C.

Jack had worked the phones, calling Brandon and Sasha. He updated both with the events of the morning. But he left out the information about Frank. It'd come out, in time. If at all possible, he wanted to confront the man.

It made no damn sense.

Jack wanted to know how and why and when the man became involved. He had Jack at that airfield. He could have killed him then. Instead, he shipped Jack off to South Africa. Why go through all this trouble?

Brandon told them that he found little else of use on the laptop and had returned it to broadcasting its heartbeat. He loaded it up with a bunch of false intel that would have the agency's police running down bullshit lead after bullshit lead.

What Brandon had managed to find indicated that Ballard was involved in the planning of the op, but was not a part of the plan to steal Mia's money. He was dangerous to the overall plan. When they had something worthy of pulling the trigger, they did so. Whether it was sanctioned was anyone's guess. Jack knew they'd never find out, so he stopped worrying about it.

Neither Brandon nor Sasha had managed to track the men and Mia after they left the hotel. It had been luck that they even found the original signal. Their phones, like Brett's, were secure enough to eliminate all attempts to locate them.

For now, they had to wait until the next attempt to move on Mia's custody and inheritance. They'd screwed up once. They'd do it again.

Entering the city, Jack hoped they made the right decision. If Monaco and Frank had taken Mia to South Carolina, they now had a considerable lead on Jack and Brett. Flying was not an option, unless they could get a private charter on a moment's notice. As the thought crossed his mind, he decided it was one they should act on. They were on Brett's turf, so the guy reached out to a contact and within twenty minutes had a flight on standby.

They stopped near SIS headquarters. The place had always looked deserted. Now it appeared condemned. Plywood covered the main floor entrance to the building, and all the windows. None of the offices were ever in use, and the front desk never manned. It was all for appearances. Just a typical D.C. office building.

“Drive forward and circle the block,” Jack said.

As they passed the side alley entrance, Jack saw that it had been closed off. And not by the security gate toward the rear. The alley had actually been blocked with five layers of concrete jersey walls.

“Did they move?” Brett asked as he pulled over and grabbed his cell phone.

Jack exited onto the sidewalk and crossed the street. He hopped over the jersey walls and made it to the back gate. ‘Do Not Trespass’ signs had been hung. He hopped up and looked over and saw nothing there. On his way back to the car, he called Brandon.

“Tell me what’s going on with the SIS,” Jack said.

“What do you mean?” Brandon said.

“I’m standing outside of their headquarters, and it no longer exists. Where are they now?”

“I should ask why, but I’m not gonna. So just give me a minute.”

Jack stood in the shadows of the building, across the street from Brett and the car. It was late morning and already over ninety with no relief from the humidity. He wiped the sweat from his brow before it pooled and poured into his eyes.

“I don’t know if they bumped up a level in security clearance, but to me it looks like the SIS is no more. In fact, when I cross check my last known roster, there’s only one man standing.”

“Skinner.”

“You got it. Wanna tell me what it means?”

“No.” Jack saw Brett emerge from the car. The look on the guy’s face told him that Brett had arrived at the same conclusion. “Just do whatever you can to find him, Brandon. Can you do that for me?”

“You got it.”

Jack ended the call and crossed the street, stopping in the middle to allow a mini-van to pass.

“They’re no more,” Brett said. “The SIS has been dissolved.”

Jack nodded as he passed toward the passenger side. “Not only that. Frank’s the last man standing from the group.”

“No surprise there. Seeing him on tape with Monaco kind of places him right in the middle of the damn thing.”

“From the beginning though?” Jack couldn’t let go of what happened in Ithaca. “He saved me, then shipped me off. If the point was to kill me, why not do it then?”

“I’m not sure, Jack.”

“Frank knew what was going on. Someone had tipped him off, or he had uncovered intelligence, or maybe he just pieced it together when his agents started dying. Perhaps after he couldn’t save me, he decided to sell his soul to Monaco?”

“What could he offer? If what you’re saying is true, then the noose was already around Skinner’s neck. All Monaco had to do was yank on it and the guy was history.”

Jack leaned his head back and stared at the car’s ceiling. They could go back and forth for days and never figure it out. “I guess we’ll have to find him and ask then, won’t we?”

They drove past Brett’s condo building. There was no going in. Agents were posted on the corners surrounding the building and at the entrances. They continued on with no destination while waiting for calls to be returned.

Finally, one came in. Sasha.

“Jack, I’ve got both good and bad news.”

“Hit me with the bad stuff.”

“Someone is really pushing this hearing through, and it seems like they are on track to gain custody. I’m trying to block it, but so far I’m failing. I can’t tell from where, but it looks like they have someone on the inside working for them. My guess would be a hefty bribe. After all, they stand to make a couple billion here. I can’t say how long you’ve got. A day? Maybe two?”

“Unless we go all out and reveal I’m still alive.”

“That might be the only choice. But perhaps we should hang onto that until the last minute?”

“You’re right. Now what’s the good news.”

“We’ve located the site of their last transmission.”

Jack relayed the coordinates Sasha provided. Brett plugged them in and waited for the mapping program to respond.

As it came into focus, Brett said, “Christ, Jack. Do you realize where that is?”

Jack looked at the map. To him, it looked like Any Street, Washington, D.C. An area with lots of businesses and residences contained in large buildings. Hundreds, maybe thousands of businesses in the small area.

Brett said, “That’s the location of one of the Special Activities Division buildings. The one I worked out of. Thing is, it’s supposed to be defunct now.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe we should go see for ourselves.”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

NOTHING LOOKED OUT of place as they passed the building. No obvious security. There was no manned desk inside. When they went in, they saw a bunch of plaques on the wall indicating which business was located in which office. Jack wondered if any of them were real entities.

“The first four levels were nothing but empty offices,” Brett said as he studied the name plates. “These were always here, a way of making the place look legit even though anyone who knew better was aware of the truth. Everything happened on the top floor. If anyone still works here, my guess is that’s where they are.”

The elevator was out of service. Brett led the way to the stairwell, explaining that you couldn’t get from the main level to the top floor directly. It required switching elevators or stairwells.

A few minutes later, they reached the final landing. Wires poked out from the wall. Brett said that’s where the security began, starting with a magnetic card reader.

With the device gone, the door opened freely. Jack had his pistol out. Brett had the HK MP5 he found at the Excelsior strapped around his chest. He aimed ahead with it as he stepped into the hallway.

The drab gray carpet and paint ran the length of the building. There were five doors spaced evenly from one end to the other.

“They all go to the same place,” Brett said. “Beyond that wall is a fairly open room. Glass walls, for the most part. In the corners facing out were the rooms for VIPs. They were private. As was the briefing/discipline room. That’s at the other end, in the corner against this wall. My guess is that’s where they’ll have her, if they’re in here.”

“Which door should we go in through?”

Brett looked as though he searched a mental image store, recalling the layout and position of every desk, cubicle, printer, coffee maker, and other obstacles.

“They’re all fairly open, Jack. Not gonna lie. We’ll be vulnerable when we step through those doors. If it were me, I’d have three guns positioned between each of the doors with orders to shoot first. But, considering what these two are dealing with, they’re probably keeping it as hush as possible. Plus, they figure we can’t track them here. You know, maybe we only got to New York because of Ballard. They saw the laptop was compromised, so they ran here.”

“Monaco knows this place as well as you.”

Brett shrugged. “I suppose. This isn’t the only unmarked building in town. Or the nation, for that matter.” Brett glanced down the hallway. “Fortunately for us, it looks like all of the security systems were dismantled. We could probably wait right here until they step out and ambush them.”

“No,” Jack said. “As soon as they have control over Mia, and her money, she’s dead. They won’t need her. We have to go on the offensive. We need to attack.”

“Then let’s do it.”

The men formulated their plan and entered at the closest door, which put them furthest from where Brett suspected Mia was being held.

A few rows of fluorescent lights were on, but other than that, the sunlight filtering through the tinted windows lit the room. The carpet obviously had not been cleaned in some time. The room smelled like stale corn chips.

Rows of cubicles had been dismantled, leaving floor track and modular desks in place. It gave them a view clear across the room. It also gave anyone on the other side a clear view of them.

But they saw no one.

Brett pointed to the corner office. Both men hunched over and used the chairs and desks as cover as they made their way to the door. While the other offices were surrounded with glass, this one was encased in drywall. Jack wondered if it was bulletproof drywall. It made sense, considering some of the men who had occupied the building time to time. Mostly, it was analysts and handlers. The shooters rarely spent time at the place. They had offices scattered through other facilities. It was not often that teams met, and even less frequent that they intermingled with individuals from other teams.

Jack reached for the handle. Found it unlocked. He opened it a crack. Brett peeked in and gave Jack a clear signal. He threw the door open. Both men rushed in, guns scanning in advance of their gazes.

The room was clear.

It was an empty box. No desk. No table. No chairs. Just a window looking down on the back alley and over the top of the building behind it.

“So down the hall, or take our chances through the room?” Brett said.

“The hall seems like the more logical choice,” Jack said. “Unless we encounter a team in it. Then we’re dead.”

“So through the room?”

“Let’s do it.”

They exited, stayed low, and worked in tandem to the midpoint. There they stopped for a moment. The building had no air conditioning. It was upwards of a hundred inside. Both men were drenched in sweat.

The silent room offered no clues as to whether someone was there. So they continued moving, slowly, using desks for

cover.

Brett stopped, held up his hand, balled in a fist.

Jack approached. Whispered, "What is it?"

Brett pointed at a thin wire running down what used to be an aisle.

"Think it's an explosive?" Jack said.

"Silent alarm would be my guess." Brett glanced over his shoulder. "Someone's monitoring. And now I'm worried we tripped one of these without knowing. Maybe when we opened the door to the office. Could have been on the inside, you know, like the traps we set on our own doors, only this one linked to a system."

"It's plausible. Place still has power, even if no AC."

Brett smiled. "Just be careful here on. I could be wrong about the function of the tripwire."

After five sweaty minutes, they managed to clear the floor and reach the other office. This time, the door was locked. Both men pressed their ears to the wall. Heard nothing.

"We can't wait," Jack said.

Brett agreed. "Cover me."

The guy stepped back and kicked the door open. It swung and slammed into the wall. Brett rolled to his right, out of view of the opening. Which likely wouldn't matter if someone started shooting.

But no one did.

Jack stepped around the corner, into the room. He ducked and checked under the desk, then rose and kicked it back. Except for being furnished, it was the same as the other office.

Empty.

"Shit," Jack said. "They're not here. Should have trusted my gut and gone to South Carolina."

"We had to clear it, Jack, after the intel Sasha provided."

Jack walked past him and out of the office.

“The plane is only a twenty minute drive from here,” Brett said. “We’ll be in the air in less than forty minutes if we leave now.”

They started toward the door, mindful of the path they took. No one was in the building, but that didn’t mean a trap hadn’t been set. One false step could alert a murder squad and Jack and Brett would pay with their lives.

Jack grabbed the knob, turned it, stopped. A faint noise, soft and high, from somewhere nearby.

“You hear that?” he said.

Brett nodded and looked up.

They both turned toward the room Brett had said had been designated for briefings and discipline.

“It’s her.” Jack rushed past Brett.

“Wait,” Brett called out.

“Mia!” Jack yelled.

The small voice grew loud. Her muffled calls of ‘Jack’ were clear.

“Don’t open the door, Jack.”

Jack grabbed the knob. Felt a hand on his shoulder. Brett yanked him backward.

“Hold on or you’re going to blow the roof off this place.”

Jack took a step back. Glanced down. Four wires ran from the room, two running under the carpet, one along the wall, and the last on the ground.

“It wasn’t a tripwire,” Brett said. “This place is wired to blow if that door opens.”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

“HANG ON, MIA,” Jack said, his cheek pressed against the door.

Brett followed each wire as far as it went. They all disappeared into the floor or behind the walls.

“Someone planned this well,” Brett said.

“Or took advantage of what someone had already done,” Jack said.

Brett shrugged as he considered this. “Regardless, they wouldn’t put her in there with no way to get her out. She’s their meal ticket. They have to keep her alive for a while. Even if they planned on killing her, it had to look natural. I’d say that blowing up in a former secret CIA office building doesn’t qualify.”

“I’m sure there’s a way, but that doesn’t help us.” Jack looked up at the drop ceiling. He turned and walked toward a desk. “I’m going up and over.”

They dragged two desks and placed one against the wall, then stacked the other on top. Jack climbed up. He knocked a ceiling tile out of the way.

“Not much room,” he said as he stuck his head through. “Dammit, it’s walled to the roof.”

“Christ. I told you, that room was used for discipline at times. Guess they figured it might have to be used to detain

someone, so they locked it in.”

Jack hopped down. “Let’s check the other side.”

They moved the desks, stacked one on top of the other again, and Jack climbed up. He pushed a tile out of the way and stuck his head through the square opening. Again, he found that the wall extended to the ceiling.

“Maybe roof access?” he said after he hopped down.

Brett shook his head. “Doubtful. Why wall the room to the roof if only to allow someone to move in and out?”

“I can think of a few reasons, but none that make sense under the scope of the agency’s plans here.”

They stood there, staring at the wires protruding from the wall.

“You think it’s bullet board?” Jack asked.

“One way to find out, but that’s probably not the best idea.”

He was right. They could have Mia get down on the floor, but one deflected bullet could end her life. It wasn’t worth the risk.

Instead, Jack kicked the wall. It gave a bit, cracked a little, but that was it. It wasn’t going to break.

“The device, if there’s a device, is on the inside.” Brett knelt down and inspected where the wires went in. “This could be old. Might have nothing to do with this. They left her here, so I’m betting they didn’t plan on being found.”

“Then there’s only one thing left to do.”

Brett slid out of Jack’s way as he flew forward with a kick that landed inches to the side of the handle. The door bowed inward, but the lock held. Jack kicked again. The door flung open. The room didn’t explode.

In the middle of the room was a wooden table with four chairs pushed under. He looked past it. Saw Mia, in the corner, huddled with her arms around her legs and her face buried against her knees.

“Mia,” Jack said.

She wouldn't look up.

“It's me, Mia. Jack.”

She cried softly as he approached. He knelt down and ran his hand through her hair.

“Did they hurt you?” he asked.

She looked up, big blue eyes, tears streaking down her cheek.

“They killed my mum,” she said.

Jack nodded. “I know, Mia. I know.”

Brett said, “Jack, we need to get her out of here. I know some guys we can have watch the building. Let's get her to safety.”

Jack scooped Mia up and rose. She clung to his left side. He held his pistol in his right hand. Brett let them out, then checked under the table to see if any effects had been left behind.

“Be right out,” Brett said.

Jack continued forward, toward the first hallway door. A few feet from it, it swung away from him. Stunned, he stopped.

So did the man on the other side when he saw Jack carrying Mia. The guy scrambled for his holstered pistol.

Jack could've told the guy to stop or freeze or get down or hands up.

He didn't.

The gun went off. The bullet slammed into the guy's forehead, between his eyes. He fell to his knees, then collapsed forward.

Brett ran past Jack, stepped over the body and went into the hall with the MP5 at the ready. The corridor must've been free of danger, because he turned back and looked down at the

body, the question of who was the dead guy forming at his mouth.

“Monaco,” Jack said.

NORTHERN VIRGINIA.

THEY LEFT TOWN with Mia in the back seat. She fell asleep before they hit the interstate. With no safe house to go to, they pulled into a parking lot and both men started working their phones. Neither Sasha nor Brandon had any information on Frank.

Brett, however, had better luck.

“You’ll never believe this,” he said.

“What is it?”

“The agency absorbed Frank. Not only that, he’s been put in charge of Special Activities SOG.”

“Son of a bitch cut a deal.”

“Most likely, and now he’s untouchable.”

“Not to me.”

“Yes, to you, Jack. Jesus, you got Mia. You’ve ended their attempt to take her, and steal her money. I think you need to let this go.”

Jack looked in on his daughter, still sleeping in the back seat.

“Would you?” he said.

“Honestly? No. But I’d be smart about it. You try to pull that off now, they’ll know it’s you.”

Jack reached into his pocket and wrapped his hand around the cell phone he swiped off Monaco. The only one who had answers now was Frank. And Jack was intent on getting them out of the man. The cell had buzzed twice already, presumably because they had set times to communicate, and Monaco was M.I.A.

It wouldn't be long until Frank paid a visit to the abandoned building.

Or sent a team.

On the chance Frank was tracking the device, Jack switched it off. Although, he thought there might be a chance the agency could still track it down. In a way, he welcomed it.

“So, what now, Jack?”

He looked over at Brett. “Guess you're off the hook. But I wonder if your professional credentials are ruined now.”

Brett laughed. “Most will never hear about this. In fact, I think most who have are dead now. With the dissolution of the SIS, and the termination of some of the top black ops operators, I'm assuming they've pulled up stakes. Moved on. You know?”

Jack did. He assumed the same. He could go on, and they'd never realize he was alive. There was one problem with that. Mia. To protect the girl, he had to be out in the open, at least until he had her taken care of.

“I do have a proposal, though,” Brett said.

“I'm listening.”

“Been thinking about expanding my business. Maybe take on a partner. I know you and Bear have pretty much gone your separate ways, at least in business. So, if you're interested, I'm officially offering.”

The life would never leave Jack. He knew that. But he had to make an effort to leave it. For a while, at least.

“Appreciate it,” he said, glancing over at Mia. “But for now I have to pass.”

“You seriously going to play daddy with her?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know if I’ll make the best father. But until I have her settled, I have to do what’s best for her.”

“Perhaps afterward, then?” Brett extended his hand.

Jack reached out. “I’ll never say never, so, perhaps.”

A red Jeep Wrangler pulled into the parking lot, flashed its highs, and pulled to a stop.

“That’s my ride.” Brett handed Jack the car keys and a slip of paper. “Take the car. On the paper is my secure phone, email account, and messaging terminal. Reach out any time. About the business opportunity, or for any other reason.”

Jack nodded as Brett walked past. Wondered if they’d ever cross paths again. If so, he hoped it wouldn’t be because one of them had orders to kill the other. The Jeep drove off.

Lingering in the parking lot seemed a bad idea, so Jack got inside the car and started the engine. Mia stirred in the backseat.

“Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“Where are we going?”

“Someplace safe for a few days.”

He checked the glove box. Brett had left behind a roll of cash and an extra pistol.

Jack left the parking lot, headed west. He stopped at the next shopping center he found. Inside the general purpose store, he purchased a tent and a few other camping supplies. Two hours later, he had a spot at a state park outside Charlottesville, Virginia.

He wanted to stay there with Mia for a month.

That couldn’t happen.

There were things he still had to take care of.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

SIMPLE, YET EFFECTIVE. That was how Beck had sold the plan to everyone involved. With the inside information Paolo and Hood had provided, gaining access to the compound would be a hundred times easier. They knew the locations of the scouts. They knew the communication channels used to alert inside personnel. They'd started watching the outer perimeter armed guards, taking note of switch times, when new sentries would come from the compound to relieve those who had been on duty.

The opportune strike time, according to Beck. The compound would be at its weakest. Guards positioned at the entrances would be expecting those outside to return from their shifts. They would not be as vigilant when FBI and Secret Service, dressed as Charles's armed guards, approached with full knowledge of the compound's layout and entry procedures.

When the meeting adjourned, Howell tapped Clarissa on the shoulder. As she glanced back, he nodded and gestured toward the hall. She rose and followed him to the stairwell where they were out of earshot.

"Harris is dirty as hell, but I can't prove it," Howell said.

Clarissa cast a look to the meeting room. Harris stood outside the room, arm propped against the door frame. Coffee in his other hand. Shelton stood next to him, arms crossed, engaging the detective in conversation.

“And now he knows our plans.” Clarissa’s pulse quickened at the thought of betrayal.

“Which is why I suggest you guys detain him.”

Clarissa caught Beck’s gaze and motioned him over.

“What is it?” Beck asked.

“Harris,” Howell said. “I don’t have enough to get the guy kicked off the NYPD or tossed in jail, but I can tell you that his relationship with Charles goes way beyond informant. After all, Charles is well past that stage. No point in meeting with the guy if there isn’t some kind of exchange going on.”

Beck looked up at the ceiling as though it held the answer.

Howell reached into his pocket and produced a device smaller than a cell phone. “It’s a sweeper. You run it past him, and if he has a recording device on him, it’ll light up. But, Beck, listen to me. You better be able to detain him until we’re done with all parts of this. If he gets out of this building and relays that information, we might as well pack it up.”

“He’s not going anywhere.” Beck took the device and started toward Shelton and Harris.

The look the FBI agents shared told Clarissa they were more than convinced by what they had discovered.

Time seemed to slow down. The vent above piped out cold, stale air. It chilled the sweat that had broken out on her forehead.

Harris had a lot to lose. And when men were in that position, Clarissa knew they could react unpredictably. Armed, the detective might choose to kill himself after taking out as many of them as he could.

“Detective,” Beck said. “A word before you go?”

Shelton took that as his cue and backed up a few feet. Beck reached out like he wanted to shake hands with Harris. Instead, he waved the device in front of the guy. It went off near Harris’s chest. The detective backed into the wall, arms out to his side. He could go either way from there.

Clarissa reached for her pistol. Howell did the same.

“The hell is going on here?” Harris said.

“What’s in your shirt pocket?” Beck said.

Clarissa and Howell moved forward. Shelton had positioned himself on the other side of Harris. The detective was pinned. Nowhere to run unless he managed to bust through a few walls. And with bulletproof drywall, that wouldn’t be too effective.

Harris grabbed his shirt.

Clarissa and Howell both stopped and drew their firearms. The look on Harris’s face as his head swiveled toward them was unclear. Panic? Fear? And if fear, why? Because he knew he’d been busted?

“See,” Harris said. “Nothing in there.”

Beck grabbed Harris’s shirt with both hands and yanked outward. Buttons flew and bounced on the hard floor. And taped to the detective’s chest, right over his heart, was a small black box.

“Has that been transmitting?” Beck said.

Shelton moved in and disarmed the detective.

Harris said nothing. The panic and fear had vanished. His cheeks were red. Lips drawn tight. Nostrils flared. Brows arched down toward his nose.

Beck ripped the device off Harris’s chest. He tossed it to Clarissa. “Take this down to Miriam and have her figure out its capabilities.”

They placed Harris in cuffs as she passed. She could see in his eyes that he knew she’d been the one to question his motivations. He’d been the one to send the men to D.C. to attack her. She bit down the anger and continued to the elevators.

AN HOUR LATER, Beck knocked on her office door.

“Miriam just emailed me,” she said.

“What’s the verdict?”

“Had the entire meeting recorded.” She looked away. “We would have walked right into a trap had we not looked into him.”

Beck lowered himself into a chair. A whiff of his aftershave blew past her. He leaned forward and draped his arm along the edge of the desk.

“Things go like that,” he said. “You’ve seen firsthand how it can happen. Money and power corrupt. I’m sure Harris is just the tip. Who knows how many are on DeCosta’s payroll? Cops. Judges. Politicians.” He looked back at the empty hallway. “Federal agents.”

She glanced over his shoulder. It wasn’t the first time she’d considered the possibility that someone in the Secret Service could be turned. She’d undergone a battery of psychological tests, in part to determine if she was susceptible to doing just that. Every five years she’d have to go through it again. If she stayed with them that long.

“The device had no broadcasting capabilities,” Clarissa said.

“Suspected as much. He’d have guessed at the curtain we have around the place. Any data he tried to broadcast out would have flagged. Busted for sure.”

“Think he knows someone on the inside?”

Beck waved her off. “Doubtful. He’s likely aware of the precautions taken now. That’s all.”

She licked her lips and swallowed hard. “Did you ask about -”

“The men who attacked you?” He paused and waited for her to nod. “He wouldn’t talk, period. You and I both know he had something to do with that. At some point, he’ll trade information, and we’ll get that out of him. Even if only to drop a few charges against him and get the attackers’ names in exchange.”

Beck rose to leave. He stopped in the doorway. “You and I will be leading the raid on DeCosta’s office in Manhattan. We’re going to leave early, so make sure you get some rest tonight.”

She forced a smile. Rest hadn’t come easy the past few nights. Perhaps it never would again. Not as long as she teamed up with Beck.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

THE HARDEST PART had been trying to find somewhere for Mia. Even harder than that, was that he had failed to. So Jack brought her back to town.

The best decision?

No.

But the situation couldn't linger any longer. He had everything in place. Sasha had flown out that morning and was set to meet them soon. She'd take Mia.

Brandon had wormed his way into the phone Jack took off Monaco and now made it look like he was somewhere other than outside the unmarked agency building on the west side of D.C.

He'd switched the phone on a few hours ago. Placed a couple calls to dummy numbers. It worked, because after the second call, Frank called.

Jack ignored it.

Too soon.

But not for Brandon. He locked on Frank's signal tight enough that he could tell when the guy dropped his pants to his ankles to take a crap.

The other cell phone Jack had in the car rang. He reached for it. Answered while looking back at Mia. She sat in the

back seat, coloring, headphones on listening to a kid's CD mix he'd picked up when he purchased the camping gear.

Brandon said, "Jack, he's on the move. Gone from his floor down to the parking garage."

"OK. Let me know when he's approaching the street. I'll standby."

There was a long pause. Brandon's wheezing breath overtook the line. The guy had problems with humidity. Wherever he'd moved to, Jack figured it was on the east coast somewhere. Maybe a bit further south than Pennsylvania, where he'd lived when his house burned down.

"All right, he's on the move. Closing in on the street."

A Cadillac appeared from the side alley. Frank sat behind the wheel. He checked for oncoming traffic, then pulled out, crossed the road, and headed away from Jack.

"I got him," Jack said. "I'm gonna trail, but hang back. You be my eyes, OK?"

"Yessir."

For ten minutes, Brandon relayed Frank's turns as he continued west, out of the city and into Virginia. Sasha beeped through on the line. Jack ignored it. He had to, at least until they had determined Frank's destination.

The man continued on, deeper into the country. Did he know Jack was on his tail? When Frank turned onto a dirt road, Jack could only presume so.

This was his only chance, and it was about to be blown.

Jack checked his mirror and confirmed Mia was buckled in. Then he hit the gas, made the turn, raced toward Frank's Cadillac.

Red brake lights lit up. Jack slammed into the right side and turned the other car parallel. He hopped out, pistol aimed at Frank's door. But the guy wasn't upright.

Jack pulled the door open. The maneuver had caused enough of a jolt that Frank whipped forward and slammed the

bridge of his nose into his steering wheel. Blood poured from the cut and his nostrils. His face had already begun swelling.

“Get out and on your knees,” Jack said. “Hands where I can see them.”

“Jack, what the hell?”

“Don’t even try, Frank. I know what you did.”

“I saved your damn life. More times than you know.”

“Shut up. Get out of the car. On your knees, ankles crossed, hands behind your head.”

Frank stumbled out of the car. His face hit the dirt. Blood mixed with it and formed dark clumps.

Jack kept his distance. Never let up on his aim. The road behind was rural, but that didn’t mean deserted. He had to remain vigilant. If Frank had expected this, there’d be a team close by.

“Listen to me,” Frank said as he righted himself, arms out wide.

“No, listen to me. I saw you on the footage at the Excelsior. I saw you with Monaco and Mia. How long have you been involved in this?”

“I was trying to make sure she wasn’t harmed, Jack.”

“By leaving her in a box inside a building with no air conditioning? Sending Monaco back there alone? You sold me out, you son of a bitch. Did it start after you shipped me off to South Africa to die, or was it before?”

“Dammit, no, Jack. I sent you to South Africa to protect you.”

“Then how come I woke up practically naked in the ghetto. Five minutes after I stepped outside, a gunman was on my ass.”

“That wasn’t me. Yes, I ordered you to be sedated, because I knew you wouldn’t go along with it otherwise.” Frank leaned his head back, coughed, spat blood to the side. “I had a guy

there. He met the team. But he'd been turned. I don't know how, but he had."

"He didn't kill me, so who turned him?"

"Merrick, best I can tell."

"You mean Monaco."

"No." Frank wiped blood from his upper lip with his sleeve. "I mean Merrick."

"They're the same, aren't they?"

"What?"

Jack resisted the urge to kick Frank. "What are you saying?"

"They were cousins. Damn near looked like one another too."

"You know what? It doesn't matter. Monaco's dead, and if this Merrick guy shows up, he'll suffer the same fate."

"He's not showing up. He's dead too. We buried him in South Carolina."

Jack recalled the shovels. The dried dirt. Had been there at least a week. Frank had been involved longer than a few days. Could have been since the beginning.

"This makes no sense. Why, Frank? Who the hell have you been working for?"

"They had me by the balls. They'd killed my entire team. All active agents. The SIS was no more. They figured I might have some dirt, something they could use. So instead of killing me, Monaco held me. I knew about Mia, so I told them. I thought... I thought you were dead. We'd just found out they'd caught up with you in South Africa. I swear, I thought you'd be safe there. It was Merrick. They'd managed to turn one of my last remaining guys." Shaking his head, Frank closed his eyes. "And they already had Mia. Didn't take long to come up with the rest."

"I met with the guy in Manhattan. Why didn't he kill me then?"

The blank look on Frank's face told Jack he had no answer.

"And Mia," Jack said. "You were gonna let her die."

"No, I promise, I wasn't."

"How'd you end up with this new job?"

"Part of the deal. I'd get a small cut of the money, with the rest held in an account to be released five years from now. In the meantime, I'd run the SOG, and do whatever Monaco wanted."

"So he controlled you."

Frank lowered his head, and sounded defeated when he said, "Yeah."

"For how long?"

Frank looked up. "Years, Jack. Years. Monaco was involved in starting up the SIS."

"Tell me again how you were going to keep Mia alive?"

Frank said nothing.

"You want to see it coming?"

Frank looked up. He spat again, this time at Jack's feet. Blood pattered his shoes. "You're gonna have to look me in the eyes, Jack."

"That's not a problem."

He stepped forward, leveled the gun at Frank's head. Jack didn't have a problem staring into a dead man's eyes. But Frank couldn't take it. He closed his, apparently resolved to the fact this was the end.

Jack threaded his finger through the trigger guard. Silently he counted down from five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

“Jack?”

He couldn't pull the trigger. Not in front of Mia. She'd already seen her mother murdered. Jack had avenged that death. But that had nothing to do with Frank. Even if it had, he couldn't expose the child to another murder.

“Get back in the car,” Jack called out.

“Please don't shoot him,” she said.

Frank opened his eyes. Jack wasn't sure if the tears that stained the guy's cheeks were from his injuries or a belief that he might live.

“Mia, I said get back in the car.”

The little girl cried.

Jack took a step back, lowered the pistol. “This isn't over, Frank.”

But it was. He knew it. So did Frank. Getting close enough to the man to pull off a hit would be next to impossible.

“I won't forget this,” Frank called out.

Whether that was a good or bad thing, only time would tell.

TWO HOURS LATER they waited in a mall parking lot in Hagerstown, Maryland. Jack figured it put them far enough away from D.C. for the moment. Sasha arrived in a rental car. She ran up to Jack and wrapped her arms around him. Her tears felt cold against his cheeks.

She stepped back, wiping the tears from her eyes, careful not to smear her eyeliner.

“So this is over?” she asked. “You'll come back to London and let me protect you two for a while?”

Jack looked away as he took a deep breath. “This isn't over yet. Not for me.”

“Jack, you can't take on Frank now. It'll be a death sentence. Not even I will be able to protect you if you do that.”

“I’m done with Frank. He’ll get his in time. Maybe by my hand. Most likely by some CIA spook.”

“So what is it you need to do?”

“Let’s start with what you’re here for. I need you to take Mia. You’re going to go west on the interstate, then pick up I-81. Go south until you reach Lexington, Virginia. Find a hotel room there.”

“OK, but don’t you think it’d be better for me to take her back to London?”

“If you don’t hear from me in forty eight hours, then yes, take her home. Raise her as your daughter and make sure she has the life she deserves.”

Sasha stepped forward, lowered her voice. “Where are you going?”

“To visit an old friend in New York.”

NEW YORK CITY.

NO ONE HAD a clue what was about to happen. Not Charles DeCosta. Not his men at the Queens compound. Not the thousands of civilians wandering the streets.

Not even the NYPD.

They were going to be the last to know. As soon as the signal to begin was sent, local law enforcement would be notified.

Clarissa and Beck sat in a windowless black van, monitoring a dozen feeds and conversations. The final three teams were getting into position in Queens. Once they were in place, she and Beck would organize their team and begin their ascent up the building.

How would she react when she saw the man who had brought her so much physical pain and mental anguish? Arguably, her life would be much different if she hadn't crossed paths with Charles DeCosta. Could she stop there, though? Wouldn't her life be different if she had never become involved with Jack Noble?

"Excuse me for a moment," she said as she opened her van door.

"Clarissa, we're about to go," Beck said.

"Just a minute." She slammed the door and headed to the rear corner of the park, where she'd be out of sight. Not that Charles would recognize her now.

“Get it together,” she muttered. She wasn’t the same woman she was then. She’d grown tougher, stronger, better at taking care of herself. Clarissa had prided herself on her resilience and self-sufficiency. Now, after training and working with Sinclair and Beck, she’d taken it to another level.

He’s not prepared for me anymore.

She leaned back against a tree and closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. A feeling passed through her. One of knowing and longing and finding all in the same emotion. Each exhalation settled her. She felt calm and under control.

Clarissa made her way back to the van and got inside.

“Good to go?” Beck asked.

She nodded. “Good to go.”

“All right,” he said, readying his MP7. “It’s almost time.”

NEW YORK CITY.

IT HADN'T BEEN easy leaving Mia. Again. But it would have been a mistake to bring her to the city. He couldn't even visit his apartment. Risks were too great. Frank was a vindictive bastard, and chances were, he had someone positioned close by watching in case Jack was stupid enough to try it.

The apartment held nothing he wanted anyway. Things would die down in a few months. Maybe a year. Then he could return, if he wanted to. The place was paid for.

He stood in Washington Square Park, surrounded by enough foliage to hide him as he stared up at the building. It was late morning, and the sun hovered almost directly overhead. He'd learned of Charles's office a few months ago. Now it was time to pay the guy a visit.

Charles had threatened Erin and Mia's lives, after all, and led Jack right into a set up. There was a price to pay for his transgressions.

Dressed in loose cargo pants, a t-shirt and lightweight button-up shirt, Jack was armed with two pistols - one front and one back - and a knife strapped to his lower leg. He hoped he didn't have to use the blade. Last resorts were never a good thing.

He exited the park on the opposite end from the building, went one block deep, then cut back around counter clockwise. The trip left the entrance of the building out of sight for more

than five minutes. If Charles left, there was no way to know. Jack was flying solo on this one.

The building's lobby was cool, quiet, empty. No one sat behind the front desk. Nobody at the front door. Jack glanced at the building's directory. Ignored it. He didn't need it.

He entered the elevator and hit the second to the last button. One floor below Charles's office. Jack found the stairwell, and hiked up to the next floor. The elevator lobby was visible from the stairwell. Again, no one there. He'd expected to encounter a situation similar to the Queens compound. Armed guards positioned everywhere. Couldn't do that here, though. The building was legit. Charles had to appear like a legit business, even if everyone knew he wasn't.

So that meant Jack would face resistance inside the office.

He drew his front pistol as he neared the frosted-pane double doors. A plaque next to them read CDC, Inc. It was the right place.

Jack tested the door. It was unlocked and opened outward. He pulled it open a crack and looked in. The room was empty. Had to be a camera or two, though he couldn't spot them. He pulled the door open, drew his second pistol and entered, following the logical path laid out before him. It led him around the corner.

That's when he saw them.

Three people. One receptionist. Two guards.

He disregarded the receptionist. Worst she could do was hit an alarm. Jack aimed at the men. Smiled.

They both held their hands out.

One said, "Don't hit that button, Jenny."

She held up her hands.

The guy said, "Jack, you mind if she leaves?"

Jack knew the guy by his street name. Marbles. Had a penchant for going crazy when shit went down. The other guy

was Clint. Jack knew both. And they knew him well enough to not try anything.

Charles wasn't worth it.

Jack said, "Is he in there?"

Both men nodded.

"Then I'd prefer it if all of you leave."

"Roger that," Marbles said. "Jenny, get your purse. We outta here." Then he handed Jack a card and gestured toward a magnetic reader. "You'll need this to get in there."

Hired men weren't any better or worse than those in your organization. But when it came time for them to lay their lives on the line, they'd bolt a lot faster. Charles had made a major mistake. Jack could only surmise that the guy felt safer with mercenaries than his own guys around.

Jack didn't wait for the outer door to close before entering Charles's office. He waved the card in front of the reader and heard the lock disengage. The door swung open with a nudge. A flood of light coming from the massive window washed over the floor. The peripheral was dim.

Charles stood with his back to the door, staring out over the park.

"The hell do you want?" he said, presumably thinking one of his henchman had entered.

"I want to know why you sold me out," Jack said.

Charles straightened up. Kept his hands in his pockets. Didn't look back.

"I suppose you don't have to tell me," Jack said. "Either way, you're dead."

"I could say I didn't have much choice, which is true. But even if they hadn't tightened the screws, I'd have done it anyway. Hell, I offered to do it myself, but they wanted it to go down a certain way, so, you know, whatever."

"Why?"

“Why what?”

“Why’d they want it to go down a certain way?”

Charles turned, had a half-smile on his face, and met Jack’s stare. “The hell do I know? You know how those government assholes are. You were one of them. Still are one in spite of being a hired gun. Whatever reason, you pissed someone off. They wanted you dead. But it had to look like something between two criminals. That’s why they involved me. You know, thinking about it, they probably wanted a fall back. Someone to pin it on if shit went wrong.”

“Yeah, well, shit went wrong for them. Really wrong. It’s mostly cleaned up, with the exception of you.”

Charles chuckled. “And let’s not forget your old friend Frank.”

Jack said nothing.

“Yeah, you see, Feng wasn’t the only one with connections on the inside. I got ‘em too. And I inherited some of his. You put a bullet in me, you’re gonna be worse off than you are now.”

Shaking his head, Jack said, “No, that’s where you’re wrong. I got a retirement plan going into effect as we speak. By the time they find you dead, I’ll be gone. And, really, do you think anyone is gonna go out of their way to find your killer? I’ll be all over the camera footage here and they won’t lift a finger to find me.”

Charles looked down, slowly nodding his head. His hands were in his pockets. Shoulders slumped. He looked defeated.

Then he exploded forward.

NEW YORK CITY.

JACK FORGOT HOW fast the big man could move. Charles was similar to Bear in that sense. Goliaths with the speed of cheetahs.

He managed to fire a shot, but in his retreat, the bullet went wide and smashed into the glass, denting and spidering it, but nothing more. It appeared Charles had it replaced with bulletproof glass at some point.

Smart move.

In seconds, Charles was on top of Jack, and he found himself falling backward. It put the bigger guy at more of an advantage because Jack couldn't use his speed and agility to dodge and maneuver.

He braced for the impact, and went on the offensive before hitting the ground by lifting his knee. Charles landed on top, effectively knocking the wind out of himself.

Jack seized the opportunity and smacked Charles across the head with the pistol he'd clung to. The other had become dislodged and skated across the floor.

The blow had knocked Charles to the side, but not off entirely.

Jack struck again.

Charles went to an elbow.

Jack bucked his knee up into the man's gut, but the move had little power behind it.

Charles delivered a blow of his own, then wrapped one hand around Jack's throat, while pinning Jack's arm back, rendering the pistol useless.

With his free hand, Jack kept striking Charles against the side of the head. He ignored the pain knifing through his wrist, likely due to a broken bone or two.

Charles lifted up, like he was performing a down dog in yoga. It created massive pressure against Jack's neck.

Jack got his hand on Charles's face. His middle and ring finger were broken, and pretty much useless. But he managed to get his thumb into Charles's eye. Pushed in hard.

The big guy let out a scream, and let go of Jack's neck in favor of fighting off his arm.

Jack could escape. But he had to let go of his gun to do so. Releasing the pistol, he turned to his side, reversing his hands. The move allowed him to grip Charles's wrists. As Jack slipped out from under Charles, he yanked hard. Since the big man was in an awkward position, he toppled over onto his side.

Jack drove his knee into Charles's gut, then delivered three strikes to the guy's head. He located the nearest pistol and picked it up.

Now he stood five feet away from the huddled mass of a man on the floor. The guy looked up, winced in pain as he tried to lift himself. The knee, Jack figured, had broken a few ribs.

The room was silent with the exception of Charles's labored breathing and the computer fan whirring in the background. Clouds had rolled in, reducing the light pouring in through the windows.

"Put up a good fight," Jack said as he aimed the pistol at Charles's head. "Just not good enough."

And as he rested his finger on the trigger, the door to the office flung open.

NEW YORK CITY.

“DON’T DO IT, Jack!”

The voice registered instantly. The face, too. But not the hair. It was short and dark when it had once been long and red.

“Clarissa?” Jack said. “What are you doing here?”

“Drop the weapon,” the guy standing next to her said.

Jack had never seen him before.

“Who is this?” he asked.

“Drop your weapon, Jack,” Clarissa said.

Jack kept his pistol trained on Charles. A smile had crossed the big guy’s face. Despite his injuries, he sat up.

“Don’t you fucking move,” the other guy yelled at Charles. “We’re here for you.”

“Clarissa?” Jack said. “What the hell is going on?”

She looked to the other man and nodded. He and two other guys entered the room and handcuffed Charles. They ignored the guy’s requests to go easy because of his broken ribs. One might’ve even thrown an elbow toward Charles’s midsection.

After the room had cleared, Clarissa lowered her weapon.

“We’re bringing him up on counterfeiting charges.”

“What?”

“It’s a long story, Jack. One I don’t really have time to tell right now. But let me handle this, and I promise I’ll call you later tonight. Same number?”

He shook his head and gave her the number of the phone Sasha had provided.

She glanced at his hand. Stepped forward. “Looks like it hurts.”

He nodded. “A bit.”

She reached for his hand. “We have someone downstairs who can wrap that up for you.”

“I still don’t understand what’s going on here.”

“Like I said, I’ll tell you tonight.”

“Tell me in person.”

“I’ll be back in D.C.”

“I can be there too.”

“Jack...”

“Clarissa.” The voice came from the hall.

She took a step back. The guy appeared in the doorway.

“We need to go.” He looked at Jack. “And it’s probably best if you disappear. The Feds are gonna be all over this place in a couple minutes.”

Jack watched them leave, then exited the room two minutes later.

THE RAID ON the compound had been coordinated with Charles’s takedown. It involved the NYPD, FBI, and Secret Service. With the intelligence Paolo had provided, they managed to successfully complete the operation with only one casualty, a fifteen year veteran of the NYPD. Charles’s organization had suffered eight fatalities. Most within the first twenty feet inside the compound. The rest, when faced with the overwhelming odds surrendered.

Clarissa later discovered that the man who had attacked her in D.C. perished during the raid. He’d been one of

Charles's guys. Another nail in the coffin for Harris. If they could get him to confess.

They led two FBI officers to the basement where they found Paolo's sister Essie in poor health, but mentally alert.

WHEN PAOLO SAW Essie, he fell to his knees, grabbed her hands and pulled them to his face and wept. The nurse in her took over. She stroked his hair, telling him she forgave him. It wasn't like his job had been a secret from the family. She knew what he did. She was well aware of where the money to purchase the house she lived in came from. She just hadn't ever expected it to hit home like it had.

But things had worked out. In a way.

The men from the FBI explained how the witness protection program would work. When it came time for trial, Paolo would have to return to New York, while Essie remained behind wherever they were located. They made no promises that she would be able to secure employment as a nurse, which visibly upset her. Paolo tried to argue for a provision that they would find her a job, but in the end, he had little power to negotiate with the agents.

"Where will we go?" Paolo asked.

The agent in charge shrugged. "So long as it isn't prison, does it matter? You're getting away with a lot of shit here, Paolo. And you're keeping your sister safe by doing this. That means you do it on our terms. And if you ever fuck up, it won't only be you going to jail. Esmeralda will be taken too."

By the time they signed the papers, Paolo felt numb.

A few hours later, he was inside a two-bedroom hotel suite, guarded by the FBI. Esmeralda sat at the table, reading a book. She glanced up at him and smiled.

"Thank you, Paolo."

"For what?"

"Saving my life."

"I nearly got you killed."

Shaking her head, she said, “No. You gave up everything you had so that I could be rescued.”

He rose, walked over to her, pulled her hair back and kissed her forehead.

“Goodnight, Essie. Our new life begins tomorrow.”

CLARISSA NEVER CALLED.

Jack had driven south, stopping in Bethesda, Maryland. Close enough to the city for his liking. Not too far away for Clarissa to travel to meet him.

But she didn't reach out.

That was that, he decided.

At midnight, he left Bethesda. Arrived in Lynchburg, Virginia at 3:30 am. Mia was asleep in the king size bed in the separate bedroom. Sasha had waited up.

They sat up talking. Jack recounted what had happened, leaving out Clarissa's name. Maybe Sasha knew about her. If not, there was no point in putting her on the woman's radar.

“So can we leave in the morning?” Sasha asked.

Jack shook his head. Said nothing.

“Why not? You're not safe here. Mia is not safe here.”

“What's to say we'll be safe there? And then I'm putting you at risk too.”

“That's what this is about? You fear for my safety?”

“I fear for everyone's safety. That's why it's best you return tomorrow.”

“Then I'll bring Mia back with me.”

“How're you going to take care of her?”

“She can go to the same school as the Prime Minister's daughter. It's a wonderful boarding school up north.”

“To be raised by teachers and other kids?” Jack shook his head in protest. “No, that's not gonna happen.”

Sasha pulled her legs under and sat upright. “You’re going to raise her?”

“No, but I know who is, and it ain’t no damn boarding school.”

She continued arguing, but there was no swaying him. Eventually, she fell asleep on the couch. Jack stayed up and watched her. Counted her breaths. He came close to changing his mind. They could be together. Be a couple. With her position in MI6, things wouldn’t be bad, so long as no one tracked him down.

Then she was at risk of being a target.

And so was he. Which put her at risk of compromising her position within the agency.

It wouldn’t work.

Sasha woke at six. Jack was still up. She readied herself without saying anything. By six-thirty, she was at the door with her bag.

“I’ve got to go now if I’m going to make my flight.” The look on her face told Jack she wanted him to tell her to stay.

He didn’t.

“All right, then,” she said. “Guess I’ll see you when I see you.”

WASHINGTON, D.C.

THE DOORBELL CHIMED five or six times. From her bedroom, Clarissa called out.

“Be there in a second.”

She wasn't expecting visitors, which was enough to make her stop and retrieve her pistol, even though the kind of men who would come to do her harm wouldn't bother with the courtesy of announcing themselves first.

Clarissa stopped in front of a mirror and fixed her hair. She had no makeup on. Didn't really need it. The guy she hoped was there wouldn't care.

Seeing Jack had thrown her off. It always did. But this time she hadn't called, even though she told him she would.

Part of her wanted him to come after her.

Part of her hoped he'd stay away.

Life wasn't necessarily easier without him in it. But it was less complicated.

The doorbell gave way to knuckles banging against wood.

“Coming,” she said. “Just hold on.”

She approached the door from the side. Avoiding the peephole. Anyone trained would wait for the pin of light to dissipate, then shoot. Instead, she opened an app on her phone

that linked to the tiny camera she had mounted on the door frame.

Her heart sunk a little. She opened the door, smiled, said, “Beck, come in.”

“Don’t look so happy to see me,” he said.

She shrugged and went to the kitchen. Grabbed two beers from the fridge. She opened and set them on the island.

Beck took a seat on the other side. “You were expecting someone else?”

Clarissa took a pull from the bottle and said nothing.

“You don’t want him in your life,” Beck said.

“Who’s that?”

“Noble.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why would you say that?”

He picked at the edges of the bottle’s label. “I know you have a history with the guy, OK? But, let’s just say that your future goals don’t align with someone like that.”

“And what would you know of my future goals?”

Beck had backed himself into a corner. “Well, obviously, I can’t say for certain. But, you did agree to be my partner, so something tells me you want to work for this country. Not against it. And a guy like Noble, his interests don’t always lie on one side of that line. It blurs for him. He’ll cross over if interests require him to do so.”

Clarissa couldn’t deny anything Beck said. And it had been so long since she had a real conversation with Jack that she didn’t know where his head was at the moment. He’d been moments from killing Charles when they arrived. But why? Because Charles was a bad man, or simply because he’d wronged Jack?

“Look, I didn’t come here to talk about Noble, or your personal life, for that matter.”

“Then what for?” She reached for two more beers, cracked them open and set one in front of Beck.

“On Monday we leave for the Rome field office.”

“Rome, Georgia? There’s an office there?”

He slid his bottle from hand to hand, leaving a thin trail of condensation on the granite. Smiling, he said, “Rome, Italy.”

Intrigued by the prospect of returning to Italy, Clarissa asked, “What will we be doing there?”

“You know, I’d rather not spoil your weekend with the details. I’ll tell you on the flight over.”

Clarissa decided against arguing with Beck. Whether she found out today or Monday, it made little difference.

They sat in silence, him on one side of the island, her on the other. Something about it felt comfortable.

“I’m glad it was you,” she said.

“What?”

“At the door. I’m glad you were standing there when I opened it.”

Beck smiled and glanced down at the bottle in front of him.

“Speaking of Italy,” she said. “I heard about this great Italian place around the corner. Wanna get a bite?”

CRYSTAL RIVER, FLORIDA.

THERE WAS ONE place Jack felt Mia would be safe. A few months ago, he might not have felt that way. But Sasha had assured him that all records of his family had been redacted from his files at the major agencies.

He stood in front of his brother Sean's front door. Mia reached up and pushed the doorbell button. Chimes went off inside.

Sean's wife, Deb, opened the door. She looked startled when she saw Jack. Speechless when she saw Mia.

"Can we come in?" Jack asked.

She nodded and waved them through, stopping Jack to hug him as he passed.

They walked through the living room into the kitchen, where Sean sat at the table with his laptop and a mug of coffee.

"Hey, big bro," Jack said.

Sean looked up, smiled. "What's this?"

"Surprise visit."

Sean rose, walked over and hugged his brother. He looked down at Mia. "And is this my niece?"

She looked unsure, but Jack's nod encouraged the girl and she reached out and shook Sean's hand.

“My daughter is at a friend’s house right now, but we’re going to pick her up in a bit.” He looked up at Jack. “You’ll be staying for a while, yeah?”

“I need to talk to you about that.”

The two brothers went out back. Sean leaned back against the deck railing. Jack placed his hands on it, faced the yard. They looked at each other.

Jack started at the beginning, and for the first time, filled Sean in on his clandestine life. He told him about everything that had happened in the past few years. The Old Man. The Russians. Time in London. And the events of the past few weeks.

“She’s not safe with me,” Jack said. “She’s not safe with Sasha. I won’t ship her off to a boarding school. I want her to grow up in a family. For now, at least.”

Sean didn’t hesitate. “She can stay here. We’ll raise her until you’re ready.”

They went back inside and had breakfast. Jack’s father was living with Sean. The three men spent the day together.

Later that night, Jack prepared to leave.

“Where will you go?” Sean asked.

Jack thought about it and shrugged. “Not sure. I have a bank account in Tampa no one knows about. Safe deposit box there with a couple identities. Figured I’ll grab that, some cash, buy a Jeep and drive off. South, maybe. West, possibly.”

He grabbed a notebook off the table and scribbled in it. There were two email addresses.

“Those are secure,” he said. “Top one’s yours. Bottom one is mine. We can’t use it regularly, though, so only message me if something big has come up.”

“So that’s it?”

Jack nodded. Then he left the room and found Mia. The girl was asleep on the couch.

His heart ached for leaving without saying goodbye. But that was the way it had to be.

He didn't drive straight to Tampa. He had time. The trip was under an hour, and the bank wouldn't open for thirteen more hours.

The cemetery was dark, but Jack knew the way. He found his mother's headstone. For a few minutes, he stood in silence. Wasn't much to say. He liked to believe she'd be proud of him, but he'd just dumped his daughter off on his brother. He knew what she'd say, so he didn't give her the opportunity.

Before leaving, he wandered a few rows over. Knelt down in front of his sister Molly's grave.

"I'm sorry, sis. I should have stopped them. I know I could have."

The guilt had lasted for over twenty-six years. It fueled most everything Jack did. Every situation he found himself in resulted from that guilt. It told him to go back and get Mia. Protect her.

And that was precisely why Jack Noble disappeared that night.

Alone.

THE END

JACK NOBLE'S story continues in *Never Cry Mercy* (Jack Noble #10), link and excerpt below!

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NEVER CRY MERCY: CHAPTER 1

Lost.

No other way I'd rather have it.

I'd been driving for close to four weeks. Easy to do when there's no destination.

I left Florida and continued north. Every mile of distance between me and Mia was a good thing for her and my brother and his family. I was fortunate he was willing to take her in, and that they could disappear for a few weeks. As far as I knew, they were still out of the country.

Every state line I crossed meant another buried memory. Ohio was good to me for a couple days. The rolling hills of Iowa lulled me into a state of serenity for a little while. Next, I headed southwest and stopped off in Colorado for half a week. Montana took the second half, and I holed up in the mountains, soothing my soul. Unfortunately, the feeling never lasts.

And it was that restless sense of uneasiness that drove me south again. The Jeep I'd traded for started having problems before I'd reached Oklahoma. I pushed on anyway. No way I planned on stopping in Kansas. The old Wrangler finally quit on me along a dusty highway in the Texas panhandle, not too far from New Mexico.

The engine choked, spit smoke, then groaned through seven gritted teeth. None of the instrument gauges worked, but it didn't take a mechanic to figure out the Jeep was dead. I

knew she was on her last leg a couple hundred miles ago. I figured I could get to Albuquerque at least.

I was wrong.

An eighteen-wheeler cruised past, honking, kicking up a fresh layer of dirt and grime that settled on top of me, turning the lines of sweat on my forearms a shade of dark brown. It looked like the aftermath of a flash flood that had raged through the desert. I watched the trailer, waiting for brake lights that never lit up.

I craned my head to look in the direction I'd come from. Had to be at least thirty miles to Boise City. Only a couple miles to the last little outpost I'd passed through. But there was nothing there. Just a small town with fewer than a hundred people, if that.

So I shifted my attention to the west again. The eighteen-wheeler had raced out of sight. In its wake, New Mexico lay a few miles down the road. Maybe a town, too. All I needed was a mechanic, or a car lot. Could find another Jeep.

I stood there on the blacktop, staring at the shimmering road ahead and contemplating my next move. The heat hit me from every which way. The asphalt, the sky, riding the wind.

Live with the misery you already know, or stake out on an uncertain future. Everyone faced the dilemma at one point in their lives. Most more than once. I'd stared down that barrel a thousand times. No matter which decision I made, the outcome was routinely the same.

But I often fared better when I plowed ahead rather than traced my steps backward.

So I slipped the keys into my pocket, grabbed my bag, and set off toward New Mexico.



The pickup looked like it had weathered its share of storms. Pockmarks lined the hood. The front and rear were different colors. It slowed, came to a stop half on the highway, half on the shoulder. I wasn't sure if it would last much longer than

the Jeep, but after thirty minutes in the sun and heat, I'd take any ride I could get.

The old guy's eyes looked like large brown orbs trapped behind thick glass walls. The frames of his glasses were bent, held together with paperclips and tape. The lines in his forehead were so deeply etched, they told the stories of five lifetimes. He wiped away a layer of sweat with his forefinger and flicked it out the open window. Drops hit the side mirror and slid down a jagged path.

"Seems to be the problem, son?"

I shrugged and looked back at the Jeep. "Engine blew."

With a nod, he said, "From around these parts?"

"No, sir."

"Well, that's probably a good thing, but mostly a bad one."

"Why's that?"

"Hop in," he said, ignoring my question.

The old truck vibrated as though we were driving down railroad tracks. Diesel fumes filled the cabin. The old guy lit a cigarette, took a single drag, then held it between two fingers set atop the steering wheel. I was surprised the sudden burst of flame hadn't created an explosion. The shaking truck kept the ash low as the cigarette burned down. We passed a couple cars on the desolate highway. The old guy managed a nod and slight raise of his hand at each. The motorists replied in kind, their gazes sweeping past him and settling on me.

Who's the stranger, they likely wondered.

"Up ahead." He aimed the cherry of his smoke down the road.

I broke my stare off from the flat, brown landscape and spotted the town. The road turned into a canyon bottom, running between a line of two- and three-story buildings on what I assumed was Main Street, or some other common street name. Everything shimmered, appearing to send every last bit of the Texas heat back into the atmosphere.

We slowed to a crawl. The old guy glanced over at me a few times. I wasn't sure if he wanted to tell me something, or was reluctant to bring me into town. What if I was trouble? He'd be the one responsible. No one wanted that.

He pulled over onto the shoulder and shifted into neutral. The diesel engine grumbled low. The old guy folded his weathered hands in his lap.

After a minute of silence, he said, "This is my cousin's shop we're heading to. I'd like to tell you he'll treat you fair, but I'd be lying. He knows you're pretty much screwed out here."

"I can always buy something used."

"Where?"

"No lots here?"

"Nope."

"Up the road then."

"How're you gonna get there?"

"Call a cab. Maybe try that Uber thing."

"Uba...what?" He shook his head. "See, this is why I'm hesitant to bring you into town."

"I'm just saying there's options."

He shook off my suggestions. "We're gonna go in and talk to my cousin. Then I'm bringing you back to my house."

"Sure about that?" I said. "You only just met me."

He chuckled. "Don't worry, son. You ain't my type." He fingered another cigarette, turning the butt brown with dirt, but returned it to the pack. "My wife and I have a spare room at the house. You'll stay there until your car is fixed. It's better than anything else you'll find in this dusty old town."

"That's generous, but you don't need to do that."

He held up a hand to silence me. "Listen, things aren't so great these days, and we can use all the karma we can get."

There was no point in arguing. I agreed to meet his cousin then go back to his house. A shower and a good night's sleep wouldn't hurt. I could start fresh in the morning. Bound to be a trucker coming through who'd give me a lift to Albuquerque. At least there I could pick up a halfway-decent clunker that might last a few months.

A couple minutes later we pulled into an oil-stained parking lot. Water filled a pothole, reflecting a greasy rainbow. On one side of the lot were two antique gas pumps that probably hadn't been in use since the sixties, judging by the price per gallon of thirty-three cents. On the other side a tow truck about the same age sat empty. Probably dead, too. A few other late model cars were parked nearby.

A younger, heavier, less handsome version of the old guy emerged from a shaded car bay. He wiped his face with a grease-covered rag, brushing his wiry grey-and-brown hair out of his eyes. The two men nodded at each other, then both looked at me. A familiar sensation passed through me. I had the feeling I was being set up.

The old guy hopped down, crossed the lot. He and his cousin stood a few feet apart. No handshake. Only the nod they shared when we pulled up. I stood back and watched the encounter as the two spoke for a few minutes. The old guy waved me over.

“Keys?” his cousin asked.

I fished them out of my pocket.

“No surprises?” he asked.

“None.”

“Name?”

“Jack.”

“Just Jack?”

“Just Jack.”

“Sounds good.” He turned and moved slowly to the tow truck. Guess I was wrong about it. “If it's the engine, it'll probably be a week.”

“A week?” I said.

“Gotta get parts, friend.” There was nothing friendly about his tone. He climbed into the truck and fired up the diesel engine. The fumes clung to me as the smoke cloud washed past.

“Ready, Jack?” the old guy asked.

“Sure, why not.”

“Hey,” he said after we were seated in the truck. “You wanna know my name?”

“Nope.”

NEVER CRY MERCY: CHAPTER 2

The old guy navigated through piles of rubble stacked in the rear parking lot, which dumped us into a narrow alley. We were blanketed by weathered wood, and decades-old brick on both sides. The buildings looked worse back here. Whatever effort the townsfolk had put into maintaining them over the years clearly stopped after the front facade. Half the structures looked as though they were moments away from collapsing.

A few blocks later, he turned right onto a fairly busy street, by small town standards at least. A couple old men were sitting outside a barber shop. A young woman pushed a stroller on the wide sidewalk, the wheels mushing down the weeds and grass that grew through the cracks. There were other folks out walking, standing around, loitering. Couldn't be many jobs available in a place like this. Wasn't like it was close to anything. They had to be in retail, school, or farming. The rest were out of work, I presumed.

“Good steak in there,” the old guy said, pointing at a square, faded-green building with a sign that read BAR. “But keep to yourself. You don't want to draw the attention of some of the locals in these parts.”

I nodded, said nothing. I avoided attention as best as possible. It typically managed to find me, though. I knew that would be part of the problem with being trapped in this town. It was also the reason I had no intention of staying around past tonight. I'd head down to the bar, have a steak, a couple beers, grab a decent night's sleep, and find some way out of there the following morning.

A minute or so later the old guy slowed the truck to a crawl. The tires crunched against the curb. The whole thing groaned as he punched the emergency brake a couple seconds too early.

I followed him up to the weathered house. The grass was a month overdue for a mowing. The whitewashed wood siding looked as though someone had taken heavy-grit sandpaper to it. It sagged in places. Hung off in others. Cinder blocks stood where porch steps had once been. The screen door sang a hollow song as he pulled it open, longing for a forty-year-old memory.

He stopped there and forced his shoulder against the main door. Pushed several times before it opened with a crack.

After entering, he stepped aside, gestured for me to step into the kitchen. They say the longer you're with someone, the more you grow to look like each other. It was true in this house. A slim older lady who could've been his twin stood with her back to the stove. Flames rose up around the bottom of a small pot. Water rumbled as it boiled. The woman scowled at me, but managed a smile and slight nod.

"Jack," the old guy said, "this is my wife Ingrid."

She crossed the room with a grace that belied her age. I imagined at one point she had been a dancer, perhaps ballet or maybe ballroom. Although, if she'd grown up in this town, chances of that were slim. I grabbed her extended hand and gave it a gentle shake. Any more might have broken her delicate fingers.

"Herbie didn't give you too much trouble, did he?" Her smile widened, seemed genuine.

"No, ma'am," I said. "Whatever you're cooking over there, he earned it."

"Jack's car broke down a few miles from town," Herbie said. "He's gonna stay with us while my cousin is fixing it."

The two exchanged a long glance before Ingrid cut off the burner, then turned toward the hallway. The look spoke

volumes about her feelings toward the cousin. Or perhaps my being there.

“I’ll get the guest room ready,” she said.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a wad of cash. “Don’t worry. I’ll pay you for your trouble.”

“I wouldn’t think of it,” Herbie said, pushing my hand away. But Ingrid stopped at the bannister, looked toward us, and nodded.

I shoved the money back in my pocket for the moment. They both knew they needed it. I’d slip it to Ingrid later. Herbie, like many men, let pride get in the way of help. Hell, I was reluctant to accept their assistance. I wanted a decent night’s sleep was all.

A few silent minutes passed. Herbie and I exchanged a couple glances. Ingrid returned and lifted the weight off the room. She led me upstairs and showed me where I’d sleep. It was basic, with a bed, dresser and nightstand. Window facing the west. Nothing stood out. Which was how I wanted it.

“Can I make you a sandwich, or a cup of coffee?”

“No thanks, ma’am. I think I’m gonna lie down for a few.”

A couple minutes turned into two hours. I woke to fading sunlight knifing through a slit between the curtains. I lay there for a few moments. Heard the raised voices of the old couple as they went back and forth. Their words were muffled, but their tone sharp. I stepped out of bed as the argument subsided, made my way downstairs, and found them in the kitchen. He was seated at the table and she was standing in the same spot where I’d first met her. They avoided looking at each other, and me.

“If you folks don’t mind, I think I’m gonna go check out that steak dinner you recommended, Herbie.”

He nodded without shifting his gaze from the same spot on the floor it had been focused on since I entered the kitchen.

Ingrid held out her hand. Said, “I think that’s a fine idea. Just stay out of trouble. There’s some unsavory kinda folks

that hang out in that bar.”

And I figured she'd say that about most bars, too.

I smiled, nodded, yanked the door open and made my way into the cooler evening air. The smell of burning charcoal lingered. The smoke rose over a neighboring fence. The voices and laughter of kids and adults rose and fell in stark contrast to the tension behind me.

I thought about Ingrid's comment about the bar's patrons. Herbie had shared a similar sentiment with me. Now, it could've been that these old folks were part of the old guard in the community. The last few who believed in and lived certain values. Held specific beliefs. And anyone who thought or acted otherwise was an unsavory type of person. No point in reading too much into it. I'd get a feel for the place within five seconds of entering anyway.

I found myself on Main Street, which had slowed down compared to earlier. There were a few people out, and a couple vehicles passed, but the feeling was subdued now.

That'd change.

The car that stopped next to me had slowed a few moments prior, staying a little behind, following me. I hadn't bothered to turn around and see who it was. And I didn't stop walking when two sets of boots hit the ground, and a guy said, “Who the hell are you?”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee “L.T.” Ryan lives in the suburbs of Atlanta, GA with his wife, daughters, and two bully breed dogs. He enjoys writing fast-paced suspense thrillers, and post-apocalyptic fiction. When not writing, he enjoys reading, hiking, mountain biking, fishing, and spending time with the ladies in his life.

Current and upcoming projects include continuations in the Jack Noble, Mitch Tanner, and Affliction Z series.

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