

NOBLE BEGINNINGS & A DEADLY DISTANCE

# L.T. RYAN

THE GOOD  
SOLDIER

JACK NOBLE EARLY YEARS BUNDLE

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**BY: L.T. RYAN**

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**NOBLE BEGINNINGS**

A JACK NOBLE NOVEL

**BY: L.T. RYAN**

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# Chapter 1

## Baghdad, Iraq. March, 2002

I leaned back against a weathered stone wall. Muffled voices slipped through the cracked door. The night air felt cool against my sweat-covered forehead. A light breeze carried with it the smell of raw sewage. Orange tinted smoke from a distant fire rose high into the sky. Wisps of smoke streaked across the full moon ahead of the mass of artificial cloud cover, threatening to block the moonlight I used to keep watch over the sleepy street while the CIA special operations team did their job inside the house. The smart team leaders kept me involved. The dumb ones left me outside to guard the entrance.

Eight years on the job. Best gig I ever had. Then Bin Laden attacked the U.S. Forty-eight hours later everything had changed. Most teams were deployed to Afghanistan. Bear and I were sent to Iraq. We'd spent six months raiding houses just like this one inside and on the outskirts of Baghdad. And just like tonight, we were kept outside the house.

The only connection we had with the Marine Corps was the ten Marines over here with us. We only saw them a couple times a week. I had no idea where the rest of our Marine brethren were, and I didn't care. They didn't consider us Marines any more than we considered them brethren.

"Jack?" Bear said.

Bear had been my partner and best friend since our last day of recruit training. A recruit training experience cut four weeks short.

"Yeah," I said.

"I'm tired of this."

I turned my head, keeping my M16 aimed forward. Bear stared out into the distance. The faint orange glow of the fire cloud reflected off the sheen of sweat across his face.

“They just keep us posted outside,” he said. “Ain’t never treated us like this.”

I shrugged. He was right. But there was nothing we could do about it. Bear and I were on loan to the CIA and had to do whatever we were told. Before 9/11, we were part of the team. But the CIA agents we normally worked with stayed behind in the U.S. and Europe. The teams over here weren’t used to having two Marines with them and they weren’t receptive to the idea.

“What do you suggest we do?” I said. “Quit?”

Bear shook his head and straightened his six foot six body. He shifted his M16 in his hands and walked toward the end of the house. Beyond his large frame I spotted a group of men. Figured that was why Bear went on high alert.

There were six of them huddled together. They spoke in whispers and appeared to look in our direction. Another three men walked toward the group. From this distance they didn’t appear to be armed, but they had the cover of night on their side. Best to assume they were prepared to wreak havoc on our position.

“What do you make of that?” I asked.

Bear looked back at me with narrowed eyes and a clenched jaw.

“Trouble.”

Trouble lingered everywhere in this damn city. No one trusted us here. Every time I turned a corner I worried someone would be standing there waiting to take me out. The only person I could trust in Iraq was Bear. The CIA spec ops teams we’d been attached to looked down on us. They all seemed to be waiting for the right moment to drop us. Hell, for all I knew, they were inside that house negotiating our arrest.

Bear cleared his throat and then pointed toward the group. The nine men fanned out and began approaching our position. The sound of their voices rose from a murmur to light chatter. I made out distinct sounds. Despite being in Iraq for the past six months, I had a weak grasp on the language.

“What are they saying?” I asked.

Bear held up his hand, fingers outstretched. He cocked his head like he was looking up at the moon. His body crouched into a defensive position. The barrel of the M16 rose to waist level. He reached out with his left hand to support the heavy gun. I did the same. We both preferred the M16A3 because of its fully automatic firing capabilities in addition to single shot and semi-automatic options. The A3 was a much better option for security teams than the Marine standard issue A4. We could drop the entire group of men in under five seconds if we chose to do so.

“Talk to me, Bear,” I said.

He took three slow steps back, blocking my view of part of the street. He yelled something in Arabic.

The group stopped their advance. One man stepped forward. His tall, gangly body stood out from the short stocky men in the group. He lifted his arms, a handgun clutched in his right hand. I tensed and tapped my finger against the M16’s trigger. The harsh sounds of words spoken in Arabic filled the air. They echoed through the street. Then silence penetrated.

Bear turned to look at me, then smiled, then looked back at the men. He shouted in Arabic again and lifted his M16 to his shoulder.

The tall Iraqi raised his arms once again. He had put his gun away. He turned his back to us, said something to the group of men and started walking away. The mob held their positions for a moment. The tall man pushed past them. He spoke in an authoritative tone, his voice rising to a yell. They turned and followed him. A few looked back over their shoulders in our direction.

I exhaled loudly. Cool, calm and collected when others would panic. Now, however, I felt my hands trembling slightly. A deep breath reset me to normal. It was a typical sequence of events.

“Christ, Bear. What the hell was that about?”

He chuckled. “I think they’re on our side, Jack.”

“What makes you think that?” I used my sleeve to wipe a layer of cold sweat from my brow.

His smile widened. “They didn’t shoot.”

“What did you say to them... ah, forget it. You’re a crazy SOB. You know that, right?”

He shrugged, ignoring me and scanning darkened windows.

I leaned back against wall, joined him. “You think this is what Keller had in mind when he shipped us off to the CIA?”

I had kept in touch with General Keller since he took us out of recruit training and placed us into the CIA sponsored program some eight years ago. I knew this was not what he had in mind.

Bear said, “Beats what we’d be doing otherwise.”

I threw my head back and nodded over my shoulder toward the door. “You sure about that?”

Bear shrugged. His big head shook slightly. He wiped his face and then looked at me.

“I’m not sure of much anymore, Jack. This is what I know. They ship us somewhere. We do our job. Pretty simple.”

I nodded. It was pretty simple. Eight years now and we knew the routine. We do our job. Only here, our job had been castrated down to nothing but a security detail while they did the work that would get the glory. Hopefully they’d get it soon and ship us back to the U.S.

We stood in silence. I stared at the orange glow of the cloud that covered half the sky.

“Noble. Logan.”

The voice ripped through the air like a mortar arcing over our heads. The door whipped open. Bealle stood in the doorway.

“We need you two inside.”

I turned to face Eddie Bealle, fourth man on the totem pole of the four man CIA spec ops team. “We’re ready to go, Bealle.”

\* \* \*

We followed Bealle through the narrow doorway and down an even narrower hallway. The smell of burned bread filled the house. I looked over my shoulder and saw Bear shuffling sideways behind me, his broad shoulders too wide to fit square between the thin plaster walls. We turned a corner to another stretch of hall that opened up to a dimly lit room.

“What’s the deal here, Bealle?” I asked.

Bealle said nothing. He just kept walking. His rank on the team was too low to justify acting like a prick. I had wanted the opportunity to beat it out of him for weeks now. He stepped through the opening, walked across the room and rejoined his team.

I followed, stopped and stepped to the right. Bear stepped to the left.

Scott Martinez looked over and nodded. He said something in Arabic to the Iraqi man sitting on the floor. The man’s arms and legs were bound with the thick plastic ties we carried. Martinez rose from his crouching position and walked toward me. He ran a hand through his sweat soaked short brown hair and wiped blood spatter off his cheek. He stopped a few feet in front of me. Like most spec op guys, he was a good four inches shorter than me and a head shorter than Bear. There were exceptions. My eyes drifted across the room and locked



on Aaron Kiser. He stood six foot two and could look me directly in the eye.

I scanned the room, my eyes inching along the yellow stained walls and ceiling. Paintings and family photos hung crooked in obvious spots. The furniture had been pushed to the far end of the room. The captive family huddled together at the other end. The man stared blankly at the floor between his bound feet. His wife sat behind him, her black hair frizzed and disheveled. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Her hands rested in her lap, bound at the wrists. Hiding behind her were two small children, one boy and one girl. Their scared faces peeked over her shoulder. Their eyes were dark with fear and darted between the men holding their family captive.

I hated this part of the job. If we had something on the man, fine. He likely did something to bring us here. But why keep the family held up like this? It seemed to be the MO over here lately, at least when working with Martinez. And I had no choice but to go with it.

“Your job here,” Martinez said, as if he had read my mind, “is to provide support. No different than any other day. I give an order, you follow. Understand?”

I shifted my eyes to his and said nothing.

Bear coughed and crossed his arms across his chest.

Martinez dropped his head and shook it. A grin formed on his lips, but his eyes narrowed. We’d butted heads more than once, and I figured he had become as sick of me as I was of him.

“I’m so tired of you two Jarheads.”

I looked over at Bear and mouthed the phrase “Jarheads” at him. He laughed.

The bound man on the floor looked up. His glassed over eyes made contact with mine. I felt my smile fade and my lips thinned. The man’s eyes burned with hatred and desperation. He took a deep breath, and then looked down at the floor.

“Follow, Noble.” Martinez turned and held up his hand while gesturing toward me. He walked across the room and stopped in front of the Iraqi man and then kicked him in the stomach.

The man fell forward into Martinez’s legs. His face contorted into a pained expression while he struggled to fill his lungs with air.

“Get this bastard off of me,” Martinez said.

Kiser stepped forward, grabbed the Iraqi by the back of his head and dragged him to the middle of the room.

Martinez moved to the middle and crouched down. He looked the Iraqi man in the eyes.

“I want you to see this. See what your failure to give us any information has led to.”

Martinez stood and walked over to the man’s wife. He reached under her arm and yanked her to her feet. She gasped, and her children cried out. They grabbed at her with their tiny hands. Bealle and Richard Gallo led the woman by her elbows to the wall across from me. Martinez followed. He stood in front of the woman, leaned in and whispered in her ear.

Her eyes scanned the room and met mine. A tear rolled down her thin face. Her mouth opened slightly. Her lips quivered. She bit her bottom lip and then mouthed the word “please” to me. Martinez brought a hand to her cheek, and she started crying.

Martinez moved to his right and looked over his shoulder at the man on the floor.

“Isn’t your wife worth it?” His face lit up as he said it, and his eyes grew wide and the corners of his mouth turned upwards in a sadistic grin. I noticed his respirations increased fivefold. The spec ops leader appeared to find the exchange exhilarating.

The Iraqi man said nothing. He held his head high and his shoulders back. He stood defiant on his knees.

Martinez brushed the woman's hair back behind her ears and leaned in toward her again and whispered something to her. She let out a loud sob and then took a deep breath to compose herself. She looked toward her children and said something in Arabic, and then she turned to Martinez and spit in his face.

He stepped back and used the back of his hand to wipe his face. Then he struck her with the same hand. Her head jerked back and hit the wall with a thud. Her body slumped to the floor. Martinez reached out with one hand and grabbed her by the neck and with his other hand he pulled his pistol from its holster, pressing the black gun barrel against the side of her head. His hand slid up from her neck and squeezed her cheeks in. The pressure of his hands against the sides of her face jarred her mouth open. He jammed the barrel of the gun in her mouth.

"Is this what you want?" He paused a moment. "Huh? Want your kids to see your brains blown all over this wall?"

I felt rage build. This was wrong in every sense of the word. I took a step forward. Bear's large hand came down on my shoulder and held me back.

"Get the kids out of the room, Martinez," I said.

Martinez straightened up and cocked his head. His arms dropped to his side, and then he turned to face me. He stared at me for a few seconds and lifted a finger in my direction. The woman slid down the wall and crawled on the floor to her kids.

"Noble," he said. "I told you that you follow my orders. Not the other way around. You got it?"

"Let," I took a step forward, "the kids," another step, "leave the room." I kept moving forward until we met chest to chest and eyes to chin.

I heard weapons drawn around the room and the floor creaking behind me, a sign that Bear was moving into position.

“Gallo,” Martinez said.

“Yeah?” Gallo said, stepping out of the shadowy corner he had occupied.

“Move the man to the corner, then the woman,” Martinez said.

Gallo did as instructed. The family huddled together in the far corner of the room.

“Now stay here, Gallo,” Martinez said. “Rest of you outside. Now.”

I felt the barrel of a gun in my back but didn’t turn to see who it was.

“You two leave your weapons behind,” Martinez said.

We moved back through the narrow hall to the slightly wider doorway. Bear stepped outside first, I went second, and Kiser came out behind me with Bealle and finally Martinez in tow.

The moon now hovered directly above the street, beyond the cover of the orange smoke. I scanned the street and spotted a group of men hanging out a few blocks away. Were they the same men from earlier or perhaps a new group of men not as friendly as the last? Their chatter stopped. They turned to face us. A few of them stepped forward. Were they planning to attack? That wouldn’t be a bad thing, of course. It might give us and the CIA spec ops something in common to fight, instead of each other.

“You guys keep an eye on him,” Martinez said.

I swung my head around and saw Kiser and Bealle aim their guns on Bear. Like us, they carried Beretta M9 9mm pistols. Weapon of choice, it seemed. I followed Martinez’s movements as he paced a five foot area in the middle of the street.

“Noble,” Martinez said. “Step on out here.”

I looked at Bear, and he nodded in return, and then winked. I crossed the packed dirt yard and stepped into the street.

Martinez lunged at me the moment my foot hit the pavement.

I ducked his blow and followed up by pushing his back. His momentum sent him into the side of the house. He reached out with his arms and came to a grinding halt. He turned, rolled his head. His neck and shoulders cracked and popped.

Kiser and Bealle kept their weapons pointed at Bear, but their eyes were fixed on Martinez.

I made the next move and engaged Martinez. We danced in a tight spiral, trading blows of fist and foot. Every connection sent a cloudburst of sweat and blood into the air. The two of us struck and countered with the precision of two highly trained prize fighters. We were equals now.

Martinez threw a flurry of punches. One landed on the side of my head. The blow knocked me to the ground. I knew his next move would be to kick me in the midsection. I quickly rolled and got to my hands and feet.

Martinez backed up.

I looked to the side. Saw black combat boots less than four feet away. I didn't have to look up to know the boots didn't belong to Bear. He wore brown boots.

Martinez started toward me. I had to time my attack just right. If I struck too soon Martinez would be out of my reach. Too late and he'd be upon me before I would have a chance to react.

I took a deep breath as time slowed down. Martinez's boots hit the packed dirt, heel then toe, left then right. He was ten feet away, then eight, then six.

I launched into the air to the right and twisted my body. Kiser didn't have time to react other than to turn slightly toward me. His outstretched right arm moved too slowly. My body continued to twist to the right, and I whipped my left arm

around. My hand wrapped into a fist and struck Kiser's windpipe hard and fast. He let out a loud gasp as the impact caused him to drop his gun. His hands went to his neck as he stumbled backward and fell to the ground. He tried to suck air into his lungs, but his crushed throat wouldn't allow it. His lungs shriveled and his face turned red, then blue, and scrunched up into a contorted look of agony.

Martinez closed the gap between the two of us. It was the right move at the wrong time. What he should have done was pulled his weapon. Again, I ducked and slipped to the side, letting his momentum carry him a good ten feet away from me.

I cast a quick glance toward Bear, who held Bealle's limp body against the building with his left hand while his right delivered punch after furious punch.

With Bealle and Kiser out of commission, I turned to deal with Martinez, who had just scraped himself off the ground and was approaching. I still couldn't figure out why he didn't pull his gun on me. End it quickly. He stepped over Kiser's limp body, coming to a stop a few feet away from me.

I heard a body hit the ground behind me and then Bear appeared next to me.

Martinez lunged forward. I moved to the side and brought a fist down across the bridge of his nose, sending him to the ground, hard. Bear picked him up, and then drove two hard blows to the man's face and then tossed him onto the ground next to Bealle.

We reentered the house with our guns drawn and confronted Gallo. He gave up without a fight.

"You people should leave," I said to the family. "Tonight. Now."

Bear removed the thick plastic ties that bound their arms together.

The family huddled together. Each parent scooped up a kid.

“Follow us out and then go.” I grabbed my M16 from its resting spot on the wall and then led the family down the narrow hall. I stopped by the door, took a deep breath and then stuck my head outside. It was deserted. Martinez and his men and even the group of Iraqi men down the street had bailed. I saw flashing lights reflecting off the surrounding buildings as sirens filled the air.

“Bear,” I called down the hall. “We need to get out of here.”

## Chapter 2

Martinez and the others peeled away in the van we had rode in. That left Bear and I searching for a way back to headquarters. But before that, we had to get away from the house before the police arrived. We managed to slip around the corner before a squad car arrived.

“You pay attention on the ride in?” I asked.

Bear nodded. “I’ve been out here before.”

I scanned the street. Empty, except for a few small cars parked on narrow strips of dirt between the road and houses.

“Take your pick.”

He pointed at a blue two door that didn’t look like it could fit one of us, let alone both of us. He started toward the car parked a half block away. The sound of driving slowly echoed from behind.

“We better pick it up,” I said.

We reached the car. Both of us were ready to smash in the windows. I checked the door handle and found it to be unlocked. We got inside just before white light flooded the street. I looked back and saw a police car at the end of the road with its spotlight pointing in our direction. Bear pulled at the cheap plastic underneath the steering column and ripped it free. He touched the ignition wires together and the little car buzzed to life. He put it in first gear and we rolled to the end of the street. Anticipation and anxiety filled the front of the car. We stopped at the end of the road. The floodlight still illuminated the street. It didn’t get closer, didn’t fade away.

“Turn left,” I said.

“We need to go right.”



“I’m sure we can pick it back up, Bear. But let’s go left, circle back and see what these guys are doing.”

He nodded, eased the car forward and made a left turn. The shift from bright light to darkness messed with our vision and we almost didn’t notice the group of men in the road.

Bear hit the brakes. “Really?” He pounded on the horn. Short bursts of high pitched honks filled the air. “Doesn’t anybody hang out in a bar in this damn country?”

“Flash your highs and move slow, Bear.”

He did.

The group of men split in the middle, just enough for us to pass between the divided group. They leaned over and peered through the window. A few pushed against the small car, rocking it on its chassis.

“I got a bad feeling, Jack.”

“Just keep going.”

I clutched my Beretta M9 tight against my chest, ready to fire on the first man to punch through the window. The M16s were lying across the back seat. A chill washed over me at the thought of one or two of the men getting into the back of the car and getting their hands on the fully automatic weapons. One squeeze of the trigger and they could take us and half their group out before they realized they had fired.

The car slowed to a stop.

“What the hell, Bear?”

“Want me to run him over?” He flung his arms forward.

I opened my mouth to say yes and turned my head to look out the windshield. A small kid, maybe seven or eight years old, stood directly in our path.

“Put it in reverse.”

Bear’s eyes darted to the rear-view mirror.

“They’re blocking the path.”

I turned in my seat to get a look at the gathering of men behind us. Three silhouettes blocked the moonlit view of the street.

“Run them over.”

“What?”

“They put themselves there,” I said. “They have a choice. That kid didn’t.”

Bear’s hand moved to the shifter. He slid it over then down, into reverse. Hit the gas. Three quick thuds filled the car. Two men fell to the side. The car bounced as we rolled over the third.

The rest of the men separated and we sped backward. They regrouped and huddled around their injured friend. A few turned their attention toward us and then bottles and rocks rained down on the little car.

Bear whipped the car around in a tight circle. Threw it into first then sped away in the opposite direction. I kept my head turned and watched through the back window for nearly five minutes.

“I think we’re good.”

Bear nodded, checking the rear-view mirror every three to five seconds. “It’s getting too hot, Jack.”

“I know. I don’t like this any more than you.”

I leaned back in my undersized seat, rubbed my eyes with my thumbs, then turned my head and stared out the window. We were outside the city, past the suburbs. The barren landscape was a welcome respite from the hordes of roaming vigilantes and anti-American Iraqis we encountered on a daily basis.

“I’ll call Abbot and Keller after we get back. See about getting us out of here.”

Bear didn’t say anything. His big hands wrapped around the steering wheel, his eyes focused on the empty road. We

rode in silence the remaining twenty miles back to base.

\* \* \*

We shared a single room on base. Two single beds, a small kitchenette with a stove, mini-fridge and microwave, and a wooden table with two matching chairs. Frankly, we didn't need much else. We ate, slept, trained on our own and performed missions with the CIA ops teams. Outside of the missions, the operatives had no interaction with us. It wasn't a written rule or anything like that. They didn't want anything to do with us. These guys looked down on the Marines in the program. A stark contrast from the operatives based in the U.S. and Europe. They welcomed the help and our point of view on the missions. Christ, they pulled us eight weeks into recruit training, and we were then put through CIA training. It's not like Bear and I were hard core Marines.

Bear returned to the room carrying a twelve pack of piss warm beer.

“Get anything to eat?” I asked.

He held up the twelve pack. “Figured it's a good night to drink our dinner.”

“Only problem with that,” I said, “is six beers doesn't make a meal.”

He stepped through the doorway and into the room then lifted his other arm. “That's why I got you your own.”

I laughed, then grabbed the cardboard box holding my dinner and cracked open a warm one, taking a long pull from the bottle.

“God, this stuff is awful,” I said.

Bear chugged three quarters of a bottle then set it down on the table and let out a loud exhale.

“I don't know, Jack. It's not that bad.” A loud belch followed.

I finished my beer and pushed back from the table. “And with that, I’m going to get a shower.”

I exited the room into the dimly lit hallway. It was quiet. I checked my watch and saw it was only ten p.m. It was too quiet for ten, though. I shook my head to clear the thoughts and shrugged off the anxiety. I entered the bathroom and shower facility at our end of the hall, finding the communal shower room empty. I quickly washed the sweat, dirt and blood off and then moved to the far end of the row of sinks. I looked into the mirror and smiled at the growth of hair on my face. It had been almost two weeks since I had last shaved. I pulled out a can of shaving cream and my razor, but opted to keep the short beard, for now at least. I liked it.

I couldn’t help but think of how bad that night had gone. Everything was routine until the group of men showed up a few blocks away from the house. People never approached us unless they meant trouble. And lately we found plenty of trouble. A quarter of our assignments in Iraq ended up with us getting into an external conflict apart from our primary target. And it always ended up being a mistake on the part of the men who engaged us. Not just our group either, this was the standard for all ops teams. The men who tried to take us on had no way of knowing who we were. And they had no chance of living long enough to find out. Despite that, they always engaged us. It was like they had nothing to live for.

Or maybe they had everything to die for.

On this night, though, those men hung back, like they were waiting for something. Maybe they were playing games with Bear, the false advancement and the tall man yelling at us. That would have been enough to throw us off, make us think that they were a group of regular guys. Of course, they could have just been a group of regular guys. Maybe they were waiting for us to do something. It’d give them a reason, at least.

Then there was Martinez. He was in rare form tonight. Bear and I worked together, but we weren’t always assigned to

the same CIA team. We floated between four different groups. We'd spent enough time with Martinez to know he was a high strung, high motor midget. His guys weren't any different, either. This incident wasn't the first time that we'd squared off. It had happened three other times, including once on base. But this time he seemed to be daring me to make a move. Every time we got into it, it was because he pushed the limits on acceptable treatment of detainees. He pushed further than ever before with the woman, and in front of her kids, nonetheless. For a moment, I thought he'd pull the trigger. He might've had I not said anything. His guys sure wouldn't stop him. Pussies.

The gauntlet would come down on me over this. I knew that. It was their word against ours. There were four of them and two of us. Their bosses wouldn't bother questioning the family for their account of what happened. My bosses were in the U.S. in the Carolinas. I needed to call Abbot and Keller. Give them my side of the story before anyone else talked to them.

I got dressed, exited the restroom and walked back down the empty hallway to our room.

I pushed the door open and called out to Bear from the hallway.

“What do you say we go grab something to eat?”

No response.

“Bear?”

I stuck my head in the room. The back door stood open. I figured he'd stepped outside for some fresh air and decided I might as well join him. I grabbed a beer and found my jacket. My hand reached inside a pocket, searching for my cell phone. Oddly, it was missing. It had been in that pocket all night long. I hadn't even taken it to check the time.

“Bear, have you seen my phone?”

Still no response.

I stopped moving things around on the table and looked toward the back door and took two steps toward it. I saw Bear standing on the back patio, and he looked at me, but he said nothing.

“Bear?”

He clenched his jaw, but did not respond.

“Jack Noble,” a voice said from behind.

I stopped and turned my head and saw two men, both armed, standing in the back of the room. I knew them by face, not by name. They weren't friends of mine. I dropped my beer and clasped my hands together behind my head. I looked at the floor and saw fizzing beer wrapping around the soles of my boots.

Two other men led Bear inside. He looked at me and shook his head. Pretty obvious what he was thinking. Same thing I was.

“What's going on guys?” I said.

“Shut up, Noble,” one of them said from behind me.

“You can't just detain us without a reason,” I said.

The man laughed. “We're in Iraq, Noble. We can do whatever the hell we want.”

They grabbed my hands, forced them down and behind my back. I felt the thick plastic zip ties close around my wrist and draw my arms close together. The hard plastic dug into my skin the more I moved.

“If we want you to disappear,” he continued, “there are thousands of miles of deserted land where we can bury you.”

“That a promise?” I said.

“Keep talking.” He grabbed my wrists and forced them upward. “And it will be.”

“Jack,” Bear said, his voice was low and trailed off at the end.

I looked at him.

He shook his head and looked down at the floor.

I followed his gaze and saw my cell phone on the floor, crushed.

“You know, I already talked to Col. Abbot about what happened tonight.” I paused. “He’s sending a team to investigate Martinez.”

The four men laughed.

One behind me said, “You think we’re worried about Abbot? He has less say here than he does in America.” He walked around me, stopped with his face inches from the side of mine. “He doesn’t have crap for pull with us. Our chain of command moves up a hell of a lot faster and farther than yours.”

I cleared my throat but said nothing. I felt a knot form in the pit of my stomach but didn’t let my external expression change.

“Are you getting this, Noble? You’re screwed. Nothing is going to get you out of this.”

For what, I thought. Kicking that douchebag Martinez’s ass? Hell, the other ops teams we worked with all said they couldn’t stand him.

“Let’s go.”

They led us through the front door, down the hallway, and outside to a Humvee parked in front of the building. We climbed in through the back passenger side door. Bear and I sat in the middle. Two men sat in back with us, guarding the door. They held their weapons firmly pressed into our sides.

“Make sure you avoid the potholes,” I said.

Bear chuckled. The four men didn’t. These guys had no sense of humor.

“Shut the hell up, Noble,” the driver said.

I did.

We drove on in silence across the base. Stopped in front of the building we used for detaining persons of interest. Guess that was what Bear and I were now.



## Chapter 3

We waited in a gray concrete room. Mold covered the plaster ceiling and the rank smell of mildew overpowered my senses. There were no windows, only a single steel door, and just one table with two small wooden chairs. We were not in a cell, it was an interrogation room. We hadn't spent much time in this part of the building, as the CIA had specialized agents on site to handle the interrogations. Even if they used the field agents we were attached to, they wouldn't allow us in the room with a prisoner. We had been trained in interrogation techniques, though, and I had a feeling that training was about to come in handy.

Bear paced the room along the walls. "You believe this garbage?" He said it flatly, shaking his head.

I shrugged. "We knew it was coming."

"Yeah, but..." He threw his hands up and resumed pacing.

"Just sit back, nod your head and don't admit anything."

"You know I can't stand that suck up crap, Jack."

"Me either, big man, but we've got no choice. Let's just take our slap on the wrist, get out of here and get Abbot on the phone."

"Abbot," he said, shaking his head. "Who knows what they've filled his head with by now?"

I agreed. Chances were he and Keller had already been briefed and given Martinez's side of the story.

"He'll listen to us. Don't worry about that."

Abbot would listen, I felt sure of it. He had known both of us since we were eighteen years old. He oversaw our training and our placement within the agency.

“I still can’t believe he agreed to these garbage orders,” Bear said.

“Yeah, well,” I said. “I don’t think he had much choice.”

Following the attacks, the agency pushed hard for all of Abbot’s men to deploy to the mid-east. Most of the guys went to Afghanistan to join in the hunt for Bin Laden and the attack on the Taliban. The remaining twelve of us were sent here. The best of the best is what Abbot had said, and that meant our talents were being wasted away guarding frigging doors and doing grunt work for guys like Martinez while he and his team botched opportunity after opportunity. These guys weren’t operators, they were baboons.

“What the hell are you smiling at?” Bear said.

“Didn’t realize I was.”

He stopped in the corner opposite the door and leaned back against the wall. “I’m done with this.”

“The team?” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m ready to get out.”

Bear and I joined the Marines at the same time. And even though I only had a few months left until my enlistment ended, he still had two years to go. When the topic came up, neither of us could make a good argument for or against doing another two to four years. I didn’t know what I would do next, though. I’d spent enough time dealing with CIA operatives that I knew I wanted nothing to do with the agency, even though I had an open invitation after my enlistment was up. The FBI wouldn’t talk to us without law degrees, so they were out, not that they were ever really in. There was local law enforcement and government agencies like the DEA, but after everything I’d done, I didn’t take to the idea of having to follow laws in order to do my job.

“I’m starting to feel the same way,” I said.

I leaned my head back, resting it against the top of the wooden chair back, studying the mold patterns on the ceiling

that started in the corner near the door, spread out evenly across the ceiling and then turned to the right, stopping before it reached the opposite wall. I wondered what was above the room.

“Look, Bear-” A rap at the door interrupted me.

Bear straightened up and braced himself against the wall. His face looked tired and pale and void of any emotion. He stared down at his boots. They’d taken our laces, but left us with our shoes.

I thought about staying seated at the table, but if they decided to come in and rush us, it would be better for me to be standing. I got up and went to the far end of the room, away from the door, and leaned against the wall adjoining Bear’s wall.

We heard another knock and muffled voices, and then the distinct sound of a key entering the chamber of a lock followed by the latch turning. The handle bent down and the door cracked open a few inches. The barrel of a gun pushed through. I felt my stomach sink into that all too familiar personal pit of despair.

“Turn and face the wall!” a man shouted.

Bear looked at me, his expression spoke volumes. His cheeks turned red, his nostrils flared, his wide eyes were covered by his heavy brow, furrowed down. I knew that look. Hell, I’d been on the wrong end of that look a couple times in recruit training, before we were forced on this journey together.

“Take it easy,” I said.

He started toward the door.

“Bear,” I said, arms out, palms facing him. “Don’t do it.”

He stopped, face went slack, head lowered toward the floor. He turned slowly, placed his hands against the wall.

I did the same. Part of me wanted to turn and fight, just like Bear, but I knew the best option for us was to get out of

that room, off base, and back to the U.S. That wouldn't happen if we attacked the men who had the power to let us go.

The door creaked open on rusted hinges. The concrete walls absorbed the echoes of dull footsteps as several men entered the room. I turned my head to get a count.

“Face the wall, Noble.”

I felt a something in the middle of my back and quickly realized it wasn't a hand. It was the barrel of a gun. I turned my head toward the wall, focusing on an imaginary spot. The scuffs and cracks in the wall created an illusion of a woman with one arm over her head and the other across her belly. Maybe she was on an island somewhere. Then it hit me. I knew what I'd do instead of re-enlisting. I'd get out and head to an island where I'd open a bar and live the dream.

“Sorry to do this to you, Noble.” Hot stale breath hit my neck and wrapped around my face, entering my nose despite my attempts to exhale heavily and send it away.

Men appeared on either side of me, grabbing my wrists and jerking my arms behind my back. They wrapped steel cuffs around my wrists, and I heard them click as the cuffs locked and tightened. I glanced over and saw three men attending to Bear, two on either side of him working his arms, while another man stood directly behind him, holding a gun to the back of his head with one hand, handcuffs dangling from the other.

“Let's move, Noble.”

I didn't budge.

“Don't make us move you.”

I said nothing and didn't move.

“We warned you.”

I'm not sure what was worse. Knowing I was about to get hit over the head with a blackjack, or the blackjack actually hitting me over the head. It didn't matter. The world went black right after impact.

\* \* \*

I'm not sure how long I was unconscious. I couldn't be sure I had actually regained consciousness. My head hurt like hell. The dark room offered no signs as to whether the sun had come up yet or not. I blinked the sleep away, opened my eyes and squinted as they adapted to the dark surroundings. Tainted air burned my lungs during a deep breath. They stretched and filled to capacity. The slow exhale eased some of the pressure and pain in my head.

My hands and arms tingled. I shook them until full sensation returned. Then I sat up and stretched my arms behind my back and felt a twinge of pain in my shoulder followed by a shot of pain radiating across my back and down my arm. I must have injured it when they cuffed me, although I didn't remember resisting hard enough for my shoulder to sprain. It didn't matter. I took another deep breath and pushed away the pain, closed my eyes, tried to relax. I managed three exhales and then there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," I said, not bothering to get to my feet.

The key clanked against the lock. The latch clicked. The handle turned down and a crash filled the room as the door opened the first few inches.

Two men entered the room. Both were tall, skinny, dressed in camouflage cargo pants and dark t-shirts. No weapons visible. I didn't recognize either of them. I found that odd. I thought after six months I'd seen every person on this base. They took a seat at the wooden table in the middle of the room.

"Sit," the dark haired one said.

I got up slowly, using my hands to keep my balance in check. Took a couple steps and grabbed a hold of the wooden chair across the table from the men. I sat down and placed my hands on the table. They didn't appear to be armed, but that didn't mean they weren't. I didn't feel like finding out just yet.

They had two manila folders spread out in front of them. Both were open. They rifled through papers. A quick glance confirmed the files were all about me.

“You guys know what time it is?”

They said nothing, just continued to look at the papers.

“You know, most of that is fake,” I said. “Fodder for the guys at the Pentagon.”

Neither of them looked up. Neither of them said anything.

“What’s for breakfast today?”

“Noble,” the bald one said without looking up at me. “Shut up.”

I smirked, sat back. *Should I push my luck? Why not?*

“I’m an egg man, personally,” I said. “Pancakes hang in my gut too long. And cereal, shoot, cereal never fills me up. But give me three or four eggs and I can go all-”

The bald man looked up from his papers. “I said quiet. We’ll be with you in a moment.”

“Ok,” I said. “Just trying to pass the time.”

His partner pushed back in his chair and stood. He put his hands on his hips and stared down at me. His head bumped the single light in the room, which hung on a fixture suspended over the table, and sent it swinging. Shadows danced around the room and across his face. His look went from menacing to evil with each pass of the light.

The bald man turned his head. “Jim, don’t let him get under your skin.”

Jim sat down. He appeared to be done with the files in front of him, and he fixed his gaze on me. He worked thick muscles in his jaw while rubbing his cheeks and chin with one hand.

“Jack,” the bald man said. “I’m Bill, and this is Jim. We just want to ask you a few questions about last night.”

“I don’t remember anything,” I said.

“This will be a lot easier if you cooperate, Jack,” Jim said.

I shrugged and looked at the wall beyond their heads.

“Start with what happened between you and Martinez,” Bill said.

“He’s a great guy,” I said.

“He’s an asshole,” Bill said. “We know that. But he says you attacked him. Do you agree with that?”

“That’s what Martinez says, huh?”

They both watched me, arms in front of them, hands on the table. I’m sure they studied every subtle movement I made. I could answer one way, and these guys would know if I was lying or not based on how I shifted my eyes, twitched my nose or licked my lips. I did my best to mirror their posture and movements, which were meant to be as neutral as possible and draw no reaction.

I sat up straight and placed my hands on the table, palms down. “Martinez reached the point of using unnecessary and borderline force with members of a family who likely had no reason to be in the room.”

“Likely?” Jim asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Likely.”

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“You just know, Jim. Just like you guys just know.”

He blinked a few times, quickly, but said nothing.

“Then what happened?” Bill asked.

“I told him to stop.”

“You contradicted your team leader?” Bill said.

“He’s not my leader,” I said. “I’m a Marine, deployed here in support of your teams. I answer to Colonel Abbot and General Keller.”

“You answer to your team-”

“Jim,” Bill said, cutting his partner off. He smiled at me. “Then what happened?”

“He told one man to stay behind and then led me and my partner outside at gunpoint.”

Bill looked down, scribbled something on a pad of paper, and then resumed his neutral stance.

“Go on.”

I shrugged. “Then-” I paused and turned my hands up. “Then we fought.”

“And the outcome?” Bill asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, but a loud knock at the door interrupted. The balance that had been restored in the room was about to be offset.

Jim pushed back in his chair, stood and walked to the door, then cracked it open an inch or two. He nodded a few times and then pulled the door open all the way. A third man entered the room. He was taller than the other two and looked like he weighed as much as both of them combined. Sweat beaded up on his waxed bald head. He stood at the end of the table, between them and me, looking down across his wide nose in my direction.

“Jack,” Bill said. “This is Nathan.”

I looked up and nodded. Nathan grumbled.

“You just keep answering questions like you have been and Nathan here will stay nice and quiet.”

“And if I don’t?”

Nathan laughed. Jim joined him.

Bill frowned. “Let’s not go down that route.”

The set up was familiar. I recalled studying it, role playing it during my initial training. I knew they didn’t have anything



on me. They knew it, too. This was all a show. The only question I had was how far they would go with the charade.

“I’m going to get right to it, Jack,” Bill said. “When did you return and kill the family?”

*Kill the family?*

“I’m afraid,” I said, “I don’t know what hell you’re talking about. We didn’t kill anyone.”

My mind raced through the events of the night. Could he be talking about the guy we ran over? That dumbass put himself in our way while we were escaping an escalating situation.

Bill looked up at Nathan and shook his head. “Not yet.” He lowered his gaze and looked at me again. “Gallo says you told him to get out. He did. Says he watched the house and that you and your partner didn’t leave.”

“How’d we get back here then?”

“You know what I mean, Noble.” Bill’s lips thinned and he crossed his arms over his chest. “You didn’t leave before he left.”

“Yeah, well, his team had an interest in hurting us and the family.” I licked my lips and leaned forward. “If you are looking for the person or people who killed that family, you should investigate them.”

“We did,” Jim said. “They said before they left they heard gunshots from inside the house.”

I sat back. This wasn’t good. Not by a mile. Their word against ours and out here our word didn’t mean squat. It didn’t matter what I said in here, they wouldn’t believe my story.

“I want my CO on the phone. Get me Colonel Abbot.”

Bill shook his head. “It’s not going to work like that, Jack.” He looked up at Nathan and nodded. “We’re ready for your confession.”

The big man slipped past my peripheral vision. The thuds of his feet hitting the ground continued until he was behind me. If there was any doubt as to where he stood, it voided the moment he put his large hands on my shoulders. His hands slid down around my biceps, then threaded between my arms and my body, forming a knot behind my back. In an instant he jerked me out of the chair to my feet.

Jim moved to the spot where Nathan had been standing and pushed the table out of the way.

Bill stood in front of me, eye to eye. “Why’d you do it, Jack? Why’d you kill that family?”

I shook my head.

“I didn’t kill anyone. You got this backwards.”

“Then why is a family dead?” Jim said, pushing Bill to the side. “You go into a house, last known person inside. And now a man, woman, and two innocent children are dead.”

“They were all innocent,” Bill added.

My arms pulled further backward as Nathan’s grip tightened. The strain against my shoulder shot pain down my arm. They’d obviously rehearsed this several times with other detainees. I had an idea what would come next.

Jim leaned in close. His eyes darted side to side as he looked into my eyes. “You have any idea how much you disgust me?”

“I got an idea.”

He laughed and looked down while rubbing his chin with his left hand. He jerked to the side and his right arm swung up, his fist clenched and aimed at my head. The blow landed on the side of my face. A flash of white light filled my eye and faded as pain pulsed through me.

“Tell us what happened,” Bill said.

“Nothing happened,” I said. “We-”

He delivered another blow, this time to my stomach. I prepared for it by tightening my abdominal muscles. The blow didn't have the desired effect. Although, I did catch Jim shaking his hand afterward.

"We told them to leave," I continued. "Made them promise to leave."

"And now they're dead," Bill said.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm guessing they didn't heed our advice."

No one said anything.

"Look," I said. "You need to get Martinez and his guys in here. Separate them. I'm sure their stories of what transpired after they left will change."

"Thanks," Bill said. "But we don't need you to tell us how to do our jobs." He turned to Jim, nodded and stepped toward the door, his back to me.

Jim smiled, then swung twice. Both blows connected, one with my stomach, this time a bit higher and more damaging, and the other one to my face. He smiled at his handiwork and then backed up.

The second blow to my stomach had knocked the wind out of me. The burn in my lungs slowly gave way to the dull ache on my face where I'd been struck twice. I forced air through my nose and clenched my jaw while shaking my head violently.

"I can go all day," he said. "So keep up the BS."

"I got nothing to say," I said. "We didn't kill that family."

I wondered if Bear was getting the same treatment. There had been five guys in the room when they separated us. Three stayed with him, two came with me. They deemed him the greater threat because of his size. Would that translate to harsher interrogation techniques?

"Logan gave you up," Bill said.

I said nothing. I knew the line was fabrication.

“It’s true. We worked him before we came in here.” He turned and walked toward me and smiled. “He caved quickly. Of course, he pinned it all on you.”

“Bullshit,” I said. “There’s nothing to pin. Bear... Logan wouldn’t give in that quick even if there was.”

“I’m tired of this,” Bill said. He looked past my shoulder and nodded.

My arms pulled back further and I felt my body lift and then crash to the floor. Nathan had me locked up on the floor. I sat upright. His legs wrapped around me and crossed over mine. I couldn’t move them.

Bill and Jim leaned over. Jim grabbed a handful of my hair, forced my head back. I felt Nathan’s hot breath on my cheek. That wasn’t as bad as the smell of it, though.

“What do you want?” I said, struggling to break the big man’s hold on me.

“We want the truth.” Bill reached behind himself and retrieved a handgun. “You either give it to us, or you die.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I had their positions fixed in my head. I just needed to free one leg, so I pushed back and kicked out with my leg, only it wouldn’t move. Nathan pushed down with increased force and Jim adjusted his grip on my head, gathering up even more hair in his grasp.

Bill brought the gun up and placed the cold barrel against my forehead.

The room went still with only the sounds of our breathing filling the air. I rolled my eyes back and looked up at the mold covered ceiling.

*What the hell is above this floor?*

“I’ve got a question,” I said.

Bill smiled. “Yeah? What is it?”

“You guys spray in this mold for some tactical reason? Or is it just for show?”

His smile faded and his lips thinned. He brought the gun down to my mouth.

I clenched my jaw shut tight as he tried to force the barrel past my teeth.

Jim knelt down and used his free hand to squeeze my cheeks. Bill did the same. Eventually they succeeded.

I sat there, restrained by a man bigger than Bear, with two skinny agents holding my mouth open like they were feeding some kind of wild animal. Only it wasn't a bottle of milk in my mouth.

“I'm going to give you one more chance, Noble,” Bill said, his voice escalated to a yell. “Why did you kill that family?”

He removed the gun from my mouth.

“We didn't,” I spit the aftertaste out, “kill anyone.”

Bill nodded at Nathan and turned.

The grip on my body loosened and Nathan and Jim pulled me from the floor. Pushed me back to the wall and spun me around. They leaned in so that my cheek pressed tight against the cold concrete.

Soft thuds hit the floor behind me. Bill pressed the barrel of the gun against my head. “Sorry to do this to you, Jack.”

My eyes met Jim's. He smiled, turned away.

I held my breath and waited for the shot, wondering whether my ears would register the sound of the gun firing before the bullet penetrated and shut down my brain.

And then every muscle in my body tightened at the banging that cut through the air.

## Chapter 4

“Christ,” Bill exhaled loudly and grabbed the back of his head. “Let him go. Put the table back.”

Nathan and Jim let go of me. I turned, pressed my back to the wall and inched toward the far corner of the room. The two men slid the table to the middle of the room. Bill stood in front of the door, his head turned.

The three men nodded at each other.

Bill cracked the door.

“Yeah?”

The voice responded low and hushed. I couldn’t make out the words. Bill covered most of the door with his body. Nathan hung back in the corner nearest me. Jim stood a few feet from Bill.

Bill took a step back, looked over his shoulder at me and shook his head. “Nathan, watch him for a minute.”

“OK,” Nathan said.

Bill and Jim stepped out. The door closed behind them. Nathan walked backward to the door. He kept his eyes on me.

“Bet I could take you down,” I said.

Nathan laughed. “They let you Jarheads smoke some good stuff, huh?”

I gave him a half smile and winked. “Ten seconds, fifteen tops.”

His smile faded. Eyes narrowed. “Screw you, Noble. You wouldn’t stand a chance.”

I took a step forward. I held my shoulders back and my arms out to the side and back, ready to attack.

Nathan banged on the door.

The door clanked open and Jim stuck his head in.

“What?”

Nathan nodded in my direction. “He’s getting flighty.”

Jim disappeared. The door stayed open. Nathan didn’t move. I had hoped my actions would get him out of the room so I could have a few minutes to check the table. No such luck. Jim and Bill returned.

Bill looked at me. He shook his head. “You must give one hell of a reach around, Noble.” He pulled out a pair of steel handcuffs. Stepped toward me, slowly, his eyes fixed on mine. “You’re being sent back to the States.”

The left side of my mouth lifted into a smile. I held my hands out in front of me. I kept my eyes fixed on his.

“On whose orders?”

Bill didn’t respond. He grabbed my right wrist with his left hand, slapped the one side of the handcuffs over my arm, lifted and tightened and then did the same to my left wrist. He took a step back, lifted his head and looked me in the eye again. “Keller.”

I nodded. Keller or Abbot, it didn’t matter. The decision came down from both of them. I was sure of that.

“You’re not out of this garbage yet, Noble. They’re taking over the investigation, that’s all.”

He turned, pointed at Nathan with a nod and stepped out of the room. Jim followed.

Nathan walked toward me. “Think you can take me down in ten seconds now?” He chuckled.

“Faster,” I said. “I got a weapon now.” I held my arms up and let the chain between the cuffs sag in a u-shape.

“You’re something else, Noble,” he said. “Too bad we never got the chance to work together.”

He placed a large hand in the middle of my back and pushed me toward the door.

I didn't resist. What about Bear, though? I didn't want to turn their attention to him, but I had to know if he was getting out or if he was stuck here. It seemed like they had it out for me. Bear was just unlucky enough to be my partner, which was usually the case. I stepped through the doorway into the dimly lit hallway and saw Bear standing in the middle, surrounded by three CIA agents. He nodded with a wink. It looked like we were going home together.

\* \* \*

We piled into a sand-colored Humvee. Bear and I had the row behind the driver to ourselves. They removed the cuffs from our wrists before slamming the doors shut. The rest of the talk inside the interrogation room was just that, talk. We were free. Abbot and Keller weren't going to investigate this anymore than I would. Worst case, we'd be reassigned to Afghanistan. At least there we could do some good. Maybe they would keep us in the States and assign us to a new team.

I leaned over and looked between the front seats. Two men I didn't recognize occupied the front of the Humvee.

"Where are we going?"

Neither man responded.

I lifted my eyes and stared at the driver in the rear-view mirror. His eyes, set behind puffy cheeks, didn't move to meet mine. I sighed, turned to Bear. "Where you think they're taking us?"

"They said home," he said.

"You believe that?"

He shrugged and let out a loud exhale. "Think they're just going to take us out to the desert and leave us?"

"Thought's crossed my mind." I wiped sweat from my brow. "Although, I don't see them leaving us there alive," I added.



Bear laughed. “These guys can’t take us.”

The driver looked up and met my stare in the rear-view mirror. I smiled and winked as I watched to see what kind of reaction Bear had gotten with his remarks.

The driver shook his head. “We’re not leaving you in the middle of the desert. Just sit back and relax. You’ll be on a plane soon enough.”

“Back to the States?” I asked.

The driver shook his head. “No clue, man. I’m just driving you.”

I looked at Bear and shrugged.

“They tell you about the family?”

“Yeah.” Bear paused while rubbing his beard. “You think it was Martinez?”

“Makes sense. I showed him up. He had itchy fingers to begin with.”

“Pretty brazen of him, if he did.”

“Yeah. Maybe he figured he could pin it on us and get away with it.” I stared at the tattered canvas ceiling. “You know you’re going to have to shave that beard when we get back on base.”

“You too, Jack. You too.”

I nodded and scratched at the growth of hair on my face. Leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes. The only thing I could think of was getting the hell out of Iraq. Back home. It didn’t matter where. Any place in the U.S. would be fine with me. My thoughts slowed and I drifted off to sleep.

The car jerked to a stop. I woke up, opened my eyes. The side of my face ached from the cheap shots in the interrogation room. I saw Bear sit up straight and yawn. He’d fallen asleep too. He cocked his head, side to side. His neck popped and he grunted.

I turned my head to look out the window. We were parked next to what looked like a single landing strip tucked between hills of sand on all four sides. At one end sat a small commuter jet.

“We’re here,” the driver said.

“No shit, Sherlock,” I said.

“Get out of my ride,” he said.

“Gladly.”

I opened the door and slid out.

Bear appeared from behind the Humvee and took position next to me.

The Humvee roared into gear and drove away. We stood alone in the empty parking lot with nowhere to run to if things got out of hand. And lately, if there was one thing you could count on, it was things getting out of hand.

Four men waited next to the plane, all dressed in khaki cargo pants, plain t-shirts, and tan windbreakers. They had holsters strapped to their thighs. Two of them held assault rifles.

One stepped forward and motioned for us to come over.

I looked at Bear. He shrugged. We didn’t have any other options. If they were going to kill us, it would be now. And if that was the case, I’d just as soon get it over with. We crossed the narrow strip of gravel to the area next to the plane.

The man continued forward and met us halfway and introduced himself as Colwell. He had short brown hair and brown eyes.

“We’ll be taking you to Germany, Frankfurt International,” Colwell said. “Pulled some strings. You’ll bypass the terminal and customs. You’ll be escorted onto a flight that will take you back to the U.S.”

“Where to?” I asked.

Colwell shrugged and held out his arms. "My job is to get you to Germany." He turned and extended one arm out toward the plane. "Let's get on board and get out of here."

I passed the other men without making eye contact. I had no interest in getting to know them, and I was sure they felt the same way about me. I climbed the stairs into the small jet and made my way to the back. Found a seat and collapsed into it. I closed my eyes for a second and massaged the area around my cheek. When I opened my eyes Colwell stood in front of me.

"Up front."

"Screw you. I'm not moving."

He pulled his pistol from the thigh holster. The gun dangled at his side. "Jack, move."

I sighed and stood up. "I'm unarmed," I said, holding my arms up as I passed him. His dark eyes met mine and his lips thinned. His head followed me. I could tell he didn't like being that close to me in a confined space.

"Don't care," he said. "I know all about you, Noble." He nodded toward Bear. "Him too."

"Yeah, well," I said, "I don't know jack about you."

"And we're going to keep it that way," Colwell said. "Don't want you showing up at my door one night."

"No," I looked back over my shoulder, "you don't."

Colwell said nothing.

I took my seat. Bear sat down across the aisle. He smiled and shook his head.

Ten minutes of silence passed before they taxied the plane in a tight circle. Then the small plane barreled down the runway, cut through the air and turned to the northwest, toward Germany.

\* \* \*

I slept through most of the flight and woke up as the plane descended through the dark sky toward the city of Frankfurt. Lights from cars and buildings lit up the black ground like pins poked in dark construction paper and held over a lamp. I pried my eyes from the window and looked at Bear. He clutched his seat belt tight. Only thing I found that set the big man on edge was flying. Not so much the flying part, though. He hated landing.

He glanced over at me. Sweat covered his forehead. Beads rolled down his cheek and settled into his whiskers.

“Take it easy,” I said.

He nodded and took a deep breath. His shoulders heaved up and down, forward and back. I’d seen him do this ritual several times. He clenched and loosened his muscles while taking deep breaths. The series of exercises helped him overcome and tame the panic that flooded his mind. It’s how we were trained to handle any situation where our mind got the better of us. No shame in feeling afraid or panicked. *Improvise, adapt and overcome.* The unofficial mantra of the Marine Corps. It always stuck with us, even if we spent the majority of our time with the CIA.

Bear exhaled, and the tension left his body. He smiled, let go of his belt and leaned back in his seat. I didn’t think it appropriate to mention he’d have to go through this one more time before our ordeal ended.

The plane lurched and tires squealed as they touched down on the runway furthest from the terminal. I bounced in my seat a few times while the plane set down. The pilot brought the jet to a near stop, and then guided us along the outside track, toward a row of terminals. The plane stopped.

Colwell stood, passed by me and went in the cabin. A few minutes later he came back out and motioned for us to stand.

We did.

He opened the door and dropped the narrow set of stairs attached to the plane.

I stepped through first. A cold breeze stung my face and exposed arms. We weren't prepared for this weather. I hurried down the stairs. An idling truck waited for us near the front of the plane.

Bear came down the stairs with Colwell right behind him.

Colwell pointed toward the truck. "That's your escort to the international flight back to the States."

I nodded and waited for Colwell to join us. He didn't.

The passenger door opened. A man stepped out. He looked to be mid-thirties and wore a dark suit, red tie. He walked around the back of the truck, pulled down the gate and then turned to us. "Get in." He pointed to the bed of the truck.

I looked at Bear and rolled my eyes. He climbed up on the gate and took a seat on the wheel well, and I followed.

The man in the suit nodded at Colwell, returned to the front of the truck and sat down in the cab.

Colwell gave me a mock salute.

I gave him a middle finger salute.

He smiled.

"Friggin' cold," Bear said loudly over the rush of the wind and the truck's engine.

I didn't have to agree. My hot breath hit the chilled air and turned into a cloud of mist that rose above my head.

The truck rolled slowly on the asphalt, close to the cluster of white and gray buildings. Floodlights spaced every thirty feet lit the ground in an evenly spaced bright-dark-bright pattern. Planes were parked to the left, on the other side of a wide median filled with dead, brown grass. The truck slowed and turned toward the planes where a strip of road cut through the landscaping. We slipped out of range of the floodlights, and the sky turned dark again. I looked up, waiting for my eyes to adjust. The truck stopped before they did.

The suit stepped out of the cab.

“Get out,” he said.

We did.

“Follow me,” he said.

We followed him past two planes and stopped in front of a third. He held up his hand. “Wait here.” He continued on a few more feet, pulled out a cell phone and made a call. After a few moments, a door on the side of the plane just behind the cockpit cracked open. Light flooded to the ground from the opening. A man dropped a rope ladder.

Our escort walked to the ladder, stopped and turned to us. “Come on, we need to hurry.”

I jogged to the side of the plane and climbed up the ladder, ready to get out of the cold. The man at the top grabbed me under my elbow and pulled me up. Bear followed and our escort came up last.

“Your lucky day.” The suit pointed to the blue curtain, slightly pulled back. “First class.”

“You flying with us?” I said.

He nodded, put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me toward the curtain.

I stepped through and walked to the front of the plane. “What’s your name?”

“Where do you think you’re going, Noble?”

I turned, held out my arms. “Taking a seat.”

“Back here.” He pointed at three seats in the middle of the aisle, last row in first class. “You sit in the middle. I’m on that end,” he pointed across the row. “Big man right here,” he patted his hand on the back of the end seat nearest us. “My partner will stay right there, across the row from him.”

“You know,” I said, taking my seat, “I’m more dangerous than him.”

“I don’t doubt that one bit, Noble.”

“What’s your name?” I asked again.

“McMurray,” he said. “You can call him Otto.” He pointed at his older partner, who hadn’t said a word the whole time.

Otto looked up from his newspaper and nodded. His deep-set dark eyes revealed nothing. He brushed his silver hair back and returned to reading.

“What are the chances we can get some coffee?” I said.

Otto laughed. “Stewardess.” He tapped his fingers on his blue rubber armrest and waited a beat. “Guess you’re out of luck. They’ll board the plane in half an hour or so. Try then.”

We barely talked the rest of the night. I fell asleep before we reached the Atlantic Ocean and woke up over Georgia. Bear started his relaxation exercises when the pilot announced we were making our final descent to Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson airport. A few minutes later we were on the ground.

The stewardess announced first class could depart first. Bear and I stood. Otto remained seated. McMurray stood.

“You guys get off here,” McMurray said.

“You’re not escorting us any further?”

“I was told to get you to the U.S. You’re someone else’s problem now.”

I shrugged. Followed Bear off the plane. We walked down the jetway. I expected to find an armed escort when we stepped into the gate. It was empty. We made our way past the mostly empty seating area and headed toward the center of the terminal, where the escalators to the tram were located. Aside from a few early passengers, the terminal was barren. I checked my watch. Not even four a.m. yet. Another hour and the place would be packed with early morning travelers.

“Coffee.” Bear pointed toward one of the only open stores in a section between gates.

I followed him over, ordered a black coffee and a cream cheese Danish, and then paid for both of our orders. After the

girl handed me my change, I stepped further down the counter where I found a lid and grabbed a handful of napkins. I snapped the lid on the cup and lifted it to my face. The hot steam escaping from the lid burned my upper lip and outer edges of my nose. I inhaled anyway. The heat faded, giving way to the full, dark aroma of the coffee and its promise of caffeinated energy.

Hard and loud footsteps echoed behind me. *Click-clack*. They stopped a few feet away.

“Jack Noble. Riley Logan. Don’t move a damn muscle.”



## Chapter 5

“Christ,” Bear said under his breath.

I turned my head toward him. My eyes followed the speckled countertop then lifted to meet his. He shook his head, straightened his back and lifted his hands over his head.

I looked over my shoulder. Two men dressed in jeans and button up shirts stood ten feet back and aimed their handguns at us.

“I said don’t move a damn muscle,” one said. “Eyes forward. Arms up.”

I reluctantly placed my coffee, of which I still hadn’t had a sip, on the counter, and then I raised my hands.

The lady behind the counter stood motionless, mouth open, arms held out to her side. Our eyes met. A tear rolled down her ebony cheek. I gave her a halfhearted smile. She looked away.

Two men closed in from the side. They were dressed the same as their partners. They approached us slowly and cautiously, guns drawn.

“Nice and easy,” one said as he approached me from behind. “One arm behind your back.”

I lowered my arm. He grabbed it.

“Now the other,” he said.

I did as he said.

Cold steel gripped my wrist and pinched my skin as the handcuffs tightened and locked.

“Do we really have to go through this?” I said.

“Shut up, Noble,” one of them said.

I dropped my head and considered the odds. It was two versus four. Not so fair after all, for them at least. A hand at my back guided me to the side. I turned my head and watched three of the men converge on Bear while the fourth kept a gun aimed at me.

Bear cooperated by bringing one arm down, then the other. They cuffed him, turned him and led him toward me, one man on either side of him, their hands gripping his elbows.

One of them stepped forward. He had brown hair and a square jaw. He holstered his weapon. "This is going to go nice and easy, guys." He pointed down the terminal. "To the escalator, board the train, get off. Don't make eye contact with anyone. Don't talk to anyone. Don't talk at all. Got it?"

I nodded. Didn't look to see if Bear did or not.

He continued. "At Arrivals turn right toward the North Terminal. Continue past the baggage claim and head outside. A van will be waiting for us."

I wondered why he talked to us like equals instead of prisoners.

"If something happens, and we get separated, you meet us at the van," he said. "If we find you anywhere other than the van or on your way there, we have orders to shoot to kill." He paused, his eyes batting between the two of us. "Can I trust you guys for a few minutes?"

"Yeah," I said.

He nodded at one of the others, who then removed our handcuffs. "Let's go."

We followed him through the terminal, down the escalator and into the train. We sat in the back. They stood in front of us. The train stopped at terminal A. We all exited and followed the signs to the escalators that led to the empty Arrivals gate. It seemed that nobody had any loved ones arriving that early, or maybe they just didn't care at four a.m. We passed the baggage claim and walked through two sets of tinted automatic doors, coming to a stop outside.

The air felt cool and refreshing. Orange light flooded the sidewalk and six lane divided road between the building and the parking garage. A dark van with tinted windows idled nearby.

One of the men pointed and went over to it and opened the back door. He gestured toward us, and Bear and I followed and got inside.

“Middle row,” he said.

We sat in the middle. I didn't recognize the driver. He must have been waiting in the van the whole time. One of the men joined him up front, in the passenger seat. The other three sat in the row behind us. The van pulled away from the curb, followed the curved airport road and merged into the early morning traffic heading northbound on I-85.

\* \* \*

Half way through Atlanta we merged onto I-20, heading east. After leaving the city, the drive felt long and pointless. Our escorts didn't talk. We had no idea who they were. No names, ranks, or affiliations were given. Although, I had a feeling these guys were CIA.

When I tried to talk to Bear, it was met with a command to shut up. I resigned myself to staring out the window at the redundant scenery.

Darkness faded, and the gray clouds gave way to the rising sun. The sun painted the sky shades of orange and red. The sight held me captive for half an hour.

I leaned forward and stuck my head between the driver and passenger seat. “Where are we going?”

The man in the passenger seat turned his head to look at me and said nothing.

I sighed, sat back.

We reached Florence, SC around nine a.m. I asked if we could stop for breakfast. We didn't. Instead, we merged onto I-95 northbound. I hoped that meant we were heading to Camp

Lejeune. I feared it meant we were heading to Langley, which would be bad.

Our CIA command was held deep below the Air Force base. We'd be under their command down there.

Camp Lejeune was located on the coast of North Carolina. It was home to several Commands, including the Marines Special Operations Command, and was often used for amphibious assault training. Camp Lejeune also served as our unofficial command under Colonel Abbot. We weren't stationed there, though. We weren't stationed anywhere. However, we did have to report quarterly if we weren't on an extended deployment.

I leaned forward again, looking at the driver and then the passenger.

"Where're we going?"

The man in the passenger seat turned his head. "Lejeune."

"That's where we were heading, anyway. You guys saved us the cost of a rental."

He turned away. Said nothing.

I sat back and took a deep breath. Only one thing bothered me.

"Lejeune," I said to Bear.

"Yeah," he said then paused for a moment. "Brig's there."

That's what bothered me. The Marine Corps Brig was located there, and it was capable of housing up to 280 inmates.

\* \* \*

Four hours later the van rolled past a red brick sign that read, "CAMP LEJEUNE: HOME OF EXPEDITIONARY FORCES IN READINESS," and stopped in front of the base's main gate. The man in the passenger seat stepped out of the van then opened the side door. Two of the men in the back seat got out. They ordered us out and walked us to the corrugated

steel guard rail that surrounded the guard house in the middle of the road.

We stepped over knee high guardrails. A baby faced MP waited for us. He nodded to our escorts and they turned and got back in the van.

“Move to the front,” the MP said. He pointed past the red stop sign and extended red and white gate crossing the road. “They’ll be up to get you soon.”

We moved to the other side of the building. I leaned back against the brick exterior and stared down the deserted tree lined street that led to the main base. Things hadn’t changed much since the last time we were here. That was six months ago. Just before our deployment to Iraq.

Bear leaned over. “This garbage stinks.” He kicked one leg up, placing his heel against the brick wall behind us. “Abbot should have met us out here.”

“I thought he would,” I said. “He’s the reason we’re here, though, and not the island.”

“Think he knows we’re here right now?”

“I hope so, Bear. I honestly do.”

A dark sedan approached from the base, slowed down and made a U-turn in front of the guard station and stopped in the middle of the road, and then both front doors opened.

“Turn around,” an MP said as he emerged from the passenger side. “Hands on the wall.”

I turned to Bear, rolled my eyes, then continued around to face the wall.

The MPs were on us a few seconds later. They were cautious and calm. They didn’t shout or use force with us.

“Just a formality,” one of them said. “Nice and easy. Let’s get this over with.”

I didn’t resist when they pulled my arms down behind me and handcuffed me. Neither did Bear. A few minutes later we

were in the backseat of their cruiser.

“Take us to Colonel Abbot,” I said.

The driver looked up and made eye contact with me in the rear-view mirror. “He’s not here.”

My heart sank. Abbot was our only contact on base.

“Know where he is?”

The driver shook his head.

“I’ll need to get in touch with General Keller then.”

“You realize you’re detained, don’t you?” the other MP said.

I exhaled and shrugged.

“Just take it easy. You guys will be settled in soon.”

I kept hope up that they were taking us to the barracks and putting us up for the night. But the further we drove, the more I knew that wasn’t going to happen. The car finally stopped in front of the brig. The MPs got out. The back doors swung open.

“What are we being held for?” I asked.

“Not our concern,” the MP said while pulling me out of the car by my elbow.

I pulled back.

“Let’s not go down that route. OK, Noble?”

I eased up, swung my legs out of the vehicle and planted my feet on the ground. The MP pulled me up and dragged me over to where Bear and his MP escort waited by a door that led inside the brig.

“Let’s go,” the MP said.

He led me through the door into the building. We walked down a wide, dimly lit industrial gray painted hallway past several administrative offices. Signs next to each door indicated a name or division. We passed through two sets of

security doors then stopped in a cold square room, painted white with a foot wide gray stripe about four feet off the ground. A pale, skinny MP stood behind a counter at the far end of the room. He looked me up and down, did the same to Bear, then disappeared from sight.

“Strip,” one of the MPs said. “We’ll worry about your hair and beards tomorrow.”

Bear and I removed our clothes.

The skinny MP reappeared a few minutes later and handed us a pair of green sweat pants and a gray shirt, slippers for our feet, and some toiletry items. We quickly dressed and gathered up the other items. The MPs led us out of the room, down a darker and narrower hall and through one more set of security doors. We entered one of the housing areas. They split us up, leading Bear up a set of stairs and me down a set.

It was quiet, eerily so. The air was sterile and smelled of disinfectant. The place was everything you would expect a Marine prison to be.

We stopped in front of a cell. The wall was solid except for a small hole cut in the middle of the door. I held my breath in anticipation.

“Don’t move.” The MP let go of my arm and unlocked the cell door. Opened it and turned to me. “Go in.”

I stepped through and heard the door close behind me. The walls of the room were painted gray and a single light fixture was fixed in the middle of the ceiling. A toilet and sink sat in the back left corner. In the middle of the room was a small table with two permanently attached chairs. A small window in the middle of the back wall allowed sunlight to flood into the room. On the other side of the room, next to the window, sat a metal bunk bed. The top bunk was empty. A man with a shaved head lay on the bottom bunk, ankles crossed, one hand behind his head, the other on his bare stomach. A colored tattoo of a phoenix covered his hairless chest. His eyes shifted from the crossbars of the top bunk to me.

“Who’re you?”

“Noble.”

“Never heard of you.”

“That’s the way I like it.”

“What’re you in for?”

“Murder. You?”

He shrugged.

“How’d you get to keep all that crap on your face?”

I scratched at my short beard. “It bother you?”

He swung his feet over the side of the bed, planted them on the floor and stood. He was about the same height as me with a similar build.

“Yeah, it bothers me.”

“It won’t for long,” I said. “They’re shaving me tomorrow.”

“How bout I take care of it now?”

I held my ground, prepared for him to attack. Turned out, I didn’t have to wait long.

He took a step and reached out with a wide right hook intended for my face.

I ducked the blow and exploded upward, driving my right fist into his jaw. A crack confirmed that I had either broken or dislocated his jaw, perhaps both.

He hit the ground like a bag of sand and his head smacked against the concrete floor with a thud.

I waited a few seconds to see if he’d regain consciousness. He didn’t. I picked him up and dumped him on his mattress, positioning him the way I found him. Then I walked over to the door, stuck my face dead square in the center, which was open to the outside except for four iron bars.

“That all you got?” I yelled through the hole.



## Chapter 6

The adrenaline wore off, and I dozed off, managing to sleep the rest of the afternoon. I awoke to the sound of my cellmate moaning. I opened my eyes. It took a few minutes to remember where I was and why. I looked around the cell. The reddish orange light of the setting sun filled the room. I swung my head over the side of the bunk and looked at the injured man below me.

His eyes darted to mine. He held his hand to his jaw. Guttural sounds formed in his throat as he tried to speak. His wide eyes teared over.

“Shut the hell up unless you want the other side broken too,” I said.

He fell back onto his pillow, looked away and said nothing.

I continued to stare at him, driving the point home. The cell became quiet again.

A knock on the cell door broke the silence. Someone shouted something through the hole in the middle of the door, then a key clanked into the lock. The door swung open and an MP entered carrying trays of food. He stopped when he caught site of the man on the bottom bunk.

“Jesus Christ,” the MP said. “What the frig happened to him?”

“He slipped,” I said, “and hit his chin on the sink.”

The MP put the trays on the table then clicked a radio on his upper chest fixed to his shirt. “I need medical in echo wing, first floor, cell four.” He fixed his brown eyes on me. “Tell me what happened. The truth.”

I sat up. "I told you already. He fell and hit his chin on the sink." I leaned over the side of the bed and looked at my cell-mate. "Ain't that right?"

He grunted then moaned.

I smiled.

"Yeah, well, we'll figure this out," the MP said.

"You do that," I said.

"Why don't you get down and stand in that corner for now." He pointed toward the toilet and sink.

I swung my legs over the side and hopped down and moved slowly to the corner of the room without taking my eyes off the MP.

He didn't take his off of me, either, keeping his palm rested on the handle of his tear gas gun.

I sat down on the stainless steel toilet and placed my hands on my knees. The MP seemed jumpy, and I didn't want to give him a reason gas me.

Two medics followed by two more MPs entered the cell a few minutes later. The medics attended to the injured man on the bottom bunk while the MPs focused their weapons on me.

"Jaw's broke," one of them said. "Bruised to hell on the left side."

The MPs looked at me.

"He fell," I said.

The short medic left the cell then returned a moment later with a wheel chair. They helped the man off the bed and into the chair and wheeled him out of the room. I found myself alone with the three MPs.

One closed the door and leaned back against it. His wide frame blocked the hole in the middle of the door. The other two approached me and boxed me into the corner. Their names were affixed to their uniforms, Bates and Sanders.

Bates spoke first. "Like to beat up on our prisoners?"

I didn't respond.

Sanders reached down and grabbed my shirt and pulled up on the collar, presumably trying to lift me to my feet.

I didn't move.

"Get up," he said.

I didn't.

"Now," he said.

I still didn't.

They both reached down and pulled me from the toilet and slammed me against the back wall. I turned my head and caught a glimpse of the final sliver of the orange sun before it set behind the expanse of trees that ringed the brig.

The MPs jammed their elbows into my chest as they leaned into me, taking turns punching me in the stomach, making sure to avoid my ribs. I kept my abdominal muscles tight as long as I could. Eventually the blows wore me down and they landed successive shots that knocked the wind out of me.

They backed off, and I slid to the floor. I clutched and dragged my nails across the concrete in an effort to get to my knees and fill my lungs with air. The edge of my vision darkened. Finally, my lungs expanded and air rushed in through my mouth. I gasped and exhaled several times.

"We'll be back for you later, Noble," one said.

The last one left the cell, and the door slammed shut. I knelt on the floor until the sick feeling in my stomach subsided. Then I pulled myself off the ground and checked the trays on the table. Chicken, green beans, bread and lukewarm coffee. I hadn't eaten in nearly a day and it had been at least that long since my last cup of coffee. It ended up being one of the best meals I'd ever had.

There wasn't much to do in the cell, and the nap combined with the attack by the MPs left me too amped up to sleep. I paced the space between the bed and the table, walking from the door to the back window. Stopped and stared out the window. A few lights flickered in the distance. Other than that it was dark and quiet and serene.

A bang at the door jarred me back to reality and I spun around with my arms held in a defensive position. The door opened, just a crack.

"Noble," a voice called.

"Yeah," I said.

The door opened further and General Keller stepped in, stopping just inside the entrance. His close cut grey hair gave way to a face that looked like it was cut from steel. There were deep lines etched into his forehead, thinner lines spread out from the corner of his blue eyes and from the sides of his mouth.

I nodded at the man and felt relief wash over me.

He smiled, looked to the ground then back up at me.  
"Christ, Jack, what did you get yourself into?"

"We didn't do anything."

Keller looked over his shoulder. "Leave us."

"Sir, that man physically injured his cellmate earlier. It's not safe for you-"

"Dammit, I said leave us. Do you want me to kick your ass, Corporal?"

"No, sir."

"Then get the hell outta here."

The MP disappeared from sight, and the cell door shut and remained unlocked.

I cast a glance toward the door.

“Don’t think about trying to run, Jack,” Keller said. “Not now, at least.”

“OK,” I said.

“And what is this mess all over your face? And your hair?” He shook his head. “I remember when you were a clean cut kid. Now you look like... like one of those bums my daughter used to bring home.”

“With all due respect, General,” I said, “I’ve seen your daughter. Do you think she’d be interested in me with my present look?”

Keller tried to look stern, but gave up and laughed. “Sit the hell down, Jack.”

I sat across from him and waited for him to continue.

“I don’t know where this is coming from,” he said. “But I’m having a bitch of a time getting you two out of here. Did you piss anyone off over there?”

“Other than Martinez?” Jack said. “Not that I can think of.”

Keller nodded. “Someone is issuing this order.” He looked over his shoulder, then back at me. “I talked to someone, someone up high, who admits you had nothing to do with the murder of that family. Off the record of course.”

“Of course,” I said. “You think it’s the CIA then?”

“It’d have to be, wouldn’t it?” he said. “Who here would do this? I run the damn show and it’s not me. There’s no one between us.”

I nodded. “Have you spoken to Abbot?”

“Yeah. Haven’t been able to talk to him about it yet. But I’ll keep trying. I’m not as connected as I used to be, Jack. That’s what everyone says, at least.” Keller stood. Reached into his pocket then threw a pack of cigarettes on the table. “You keep those, Jack. Maybe you can trade them for something.”

I thanked him and rose. He stuck out his hand, palm facing me, indicating I should stay where I was.

“I’m working on getting you out of here. Stay alert, you got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

\* \* \*

The light in the cell cut off at ten p.m. The lights outside the cell dimmed and didn’t provide much illumination through the square hole in the door. I climbed into my bunk and tried to get some sleep. It didn’t happen. My face hurt. I tossed and turned most of the night, replaying the events of the past forty-eight hours, trying to figure out how I got from Baghdad to Camp Lejeune, from a free man on a mission, to an imprisoned soldier.

Every fifteen minutes a patrol passed the door. I’d hear them approach with deliberate steps on the walkway. They’d reach the door, stop and look in. The room would darken for five seconds, and then the patrol would back up and move to the next cell. I thought about getting up, standing at the back of the room, to see what they’d do. In the end I stayed in bed.

I dozed off a couple times, each time the sleep lasted longer than the last. By six a.m. I was fast asleep when banging erupted against the door, waking me up.

I sat up, shaking the sleep away.

The door swung open and two MPs entered the cell while a third remained firmly planted in the doorway, his taser aimed in my direction.

“What’s going on, guys?” I said.

“You should’ve been up an hour ago, Noble. Get the hell out of bed.”

They pulled me down and dragged me out the cell and down hall.

“Where are you taking me?”

They pushed and pulled me along and said nothing.

Prisoners hanging out on the walk parted to the side and ducked into open cells to make way for us.

We stopped outside the head. One MP opened the door, and the other two pushed me inside. All the showers were running, and the room was steamy. A group of four men stepped through the cloud of warm mist and walked toward me. They wore the same uniform as every person who wasn't an MP, and had to have been the four biggest guys in the place.

I looked back over my shoulder. Two of the MPs had followed me in and now blocked the only way out. I assumed the third was positioned on the other side of the door, blocking the only way in.

The largest of the men walked up to me. He had to be six-five, maybe six-six, and had forty to fifty pounds on me. He licked his lips and grabbed my shirt and leaned in close. I mentally flinched at the smell of his hot, foul breath as it washed over my face and invaded my nasal passage.

“You like attacking my friends?” he said.

I shrugged. “Depends.”

His lips curled as he grinned, revealing two missing front teeth, one up top, one on the bottom. As fast as his smile faded, he brought his forehead down into mine.

Tears flooded my eyes, and I felt a rush of blood flow through my nose and trickle down across my lips. I spun around and reached out for the wall so I could brace myself and get my bearings. I found the wall, steadied myself and blinked away the tears. My eyes refocused, and I saw the four inmates forming a semicircle around me.

“Guys, look,” I said. “We don't have to do this.”

The big man laughed.

I swung my foot as hard and fast as I could in the direction of his crotch. It connected with a thud. He dropped to the floor, a huddled mass gasping in pain. I twisted sideways and

drove my elbow into the nearest man's face. Blood sprayed from his nose upon impact, a crunching sound preceded his scream. I blocked a punch by the third man and countered with a shot to his neck, just above the sternum and just below his Adam's apple in the soft fleshy spot that offers little to no protection. His eyes bugged out and his face went pale, then turned a light shade of blue while he gasped for air.

The fourth man landed a blow on the side of my face. I wasn't expecting it and the force of it spun me. I regained my footing and charged him as he lunged at me. We met somewhere in the middle where a grappling match ensued. We rolled on the floor, fighting for position. I ended up on my back where he managed to get his arms wrapped around my neck in a choke hold. I arched my back and squeezed an arm between his, loosening his grip.

I caught sight of the MPs. They were leaning back against the wall, laughing at the action.

I scanned the room and spotted the big man on his knees, trying to get to his feet. The other two prisoners posed no immediate threat.

My legs climbed their way up the man I was wrestling with until I managed to get my shin across the front of his neck. A quick shift of momentum and I spun around, coming out on top with his neck in a death grip between my legs. I arched and twisted. His mouth opened and his face turned pale and his neck was close to snapping. He slapped and clawed at my legs. I felt like a savage, yelling as I neared the moment when I planned to lurch and end his life.

The MPs intervened, one hitting me over the head with a blackjack. They pulled at my legs and freed the man from the death grip. His loud gasps for air filled the room as he crawled across the slick floor on his belly to the row of sinks.

I felt my body pulled from the floor and flung through the air and pinned against the wall. The MPs held me there while three of the four men stood.



The door opened and the third MP stuck his head in.  
“What the hell is taking so long?”

No one said anything.

He entered the room.

“Jesus Christ,” he said. “What the hell happened in here?”

I caught his eye and smiled. “You guys got no idea who you’re messing with, do you?”

“Shut up.”

The MP with the blackjack slammed it across my stomach.

I grimaced against the pain, forcing a smile even though I couldn’t breathe.

“Just end him, and let’s get out of here,” the third MP said.

The big man stepped forward. “Let me do it.” He bared his teeth at me.

“No,” the MP said. He grabbed the big man by his shoulder. “You guys need to get the hell out of here.”

The big man spun. “Like hell, man. He’s ours.” His large arm stretched out toward me. He took two steps forward, looked back at the MP. “Just try and stop me.”

I knew the MP wouldn’t, so I did. I lifted my leg toward my chest and drove my heel down and into the side of his knee. Popping sounds filled the room as his ACL and MCL tore upon impact. He went down hard, his head slamming into the tile floor, a pool of blood forming under him.

All hell broke loose after that.

The MPs quickly took care of the two standing prisoners, restraining them and piling them near the door. Easy work, considering I’d already beaten them. With the prisoners out of the way, the MPs turned their attention to me. I stepped forward and was met with a quick strike to the side of my head by the blackjack. Searing pain traveled from the spot of impact, and then around my head. The impact knocked me off

my feet. I landed hard on my side. The MPs pulled me off the floor. Two of them pinned me against the wall. They leaned in with all their weight to hold me still. The third took the blackjack and placed it across my throat. He leaned on it in an effort to force my windpipe to close shut. My oxygen starved lungs screamed out in pain. The edge of my vision darkened while flashes of light filled the center. The last thing I remembered before passing out was the sound of the door opening and a deep voice yelling my name.

## Chapter 7

A hard slap across my cheek jarred me from my unconscious state. I opened my eyes. Bear stood over me. His eyebrows pushed down over his eyes. He helped me to my feet and steadied me against the wall. I tensed and checked over the room. Empty. Trails of blood led from the middle of the floor to the door.

“What the hell happened, Jack?”

I shook my head. “They wanted to cut my hair.”

“What?”

“Retaliation,” I said. “For breaking my cell-mate’s jaw.”

“Yeah, I heard about that.”

“He swung at me first.”

Bear took a step back. His lips thinned as he looked me over. “Christ, they did a number on you. How do you feel? Can you walk?”

I pushed away from the wall. Took a step, steadied myself.

“Yeah, I think I’m good.”

I walked to the row of sinks and looked at my reflection in the mirror. Blood trickled from a small gash on the side of my head. My nose was red and swollen, but not broken. That was the worst of it, though. There were no broken bones and no major lacerations. I came out it OK, all things considered.

“Where’d everyone go?” I said

“They scattered when I came in.” Bear said.

“How’d you know?”

Bear hiked his shoulders. “Word spread pretty quick down there,” he nodded toward the door, “that they were fixing to do

a number on you.” He shook his head. “Damn, they sure did. We’ve got to get out of here, Jack.”

“It’s not that bad.” I ran cold water over my face, grabbed a handful of paper towels and cleaned out the cut on the side of my head. It’d probably needed stitches, but it’d heal without them, leaving a scar behind of course. Scars were good for my line of work, though. They added an element of intimidation.

“I’m with you, Bear. Lead the way, and I’ll follow.”

At that moment the door swung open and a middle aged man dressed in his combat utility uniform stepped in. He looked around the room, his gaze stopping at spots where a struggle had obviously occurred. His eyes set on Bear, then shifted to me. He shook his head.

“What a mess,” he said.

I looked at Bear. He nodded at me. We both moved to the center of the room, within arm’s reach of each other.

The man took a step forward, letting the door swing shut behind him. He pushed his arms out in front of him. “I’m a friend.”

We said nothing.

“Abbot sent me. I’m Lt. Col. McDuffie.”

“Sent you for what?” I trusted nobody at this point.

“To get you guys the hell out of my Brig,” he said. “Look, this is a mess. I don’t like it. I don’t know where it’s coming from, and I don’t like it.”

His eyes bounced between me, Bear and the bloody mess in the bathroom. He turned, opened the door and stuck an arm out. When he turned around again, he was holding fresh clothes. He tossed a shirt and a pair of pants to Bear.

“Noble, why don’t you get cleaned up first,” he said, clutching the clothes intended for me.

I nodded, headed to the back of the room and showered. The hot water stung as it washed over cuts and scrapes. I

grimaced against the pain and hurried to finish. Then I put on the fresh clothing, which consisted of camouflage cargo pants and a plain gray t-shirt.

“I’ve got boots for you guys in the car,” he said.

“The car?” Bear asked.

“Yeah, the car,” he replied with a hint of annoyance in his voice. “I told you I’m getting you out of here.” McDuffie turned and opened the door and stopped and looked over his shoulder. “The MPs outside this door are mine. They won’t do anything to you if you stick with me. They’ll follow us and keep you safe.”

We followed him out of the head without any further questions, heading toward the stairs. We took one flight up and then passed through a security door. We followed the narrow hall to the check-in room where McDuffie retrieved our belongings from the pale skinny MP at the counter. I wondered if anyone else ever manned it, or if Lance Corporal Skinny was the only one. We left the room and continued on, through the wider hall, past the two sets of security doors and all the administrative offices.

I had to shield my eyes from the sunlight when we stepped outside. As my eyes adjusted, I caught sight of a platoon doing their morning PT jogging by. Their rhythmic pace matched their cadence:

*I know a girl dressed in Red,*

*Makes her living in a bed.*

*I know a girl dressed black,*

*makes her living on her back.*

*I know a girl dressed in green,*

*and she is nothing but a screwing machine.*

*Oooooorah up the hill, Oooooorah down the hill*

McDuffie walked around the front of a black Ford Crown Victoria parked against the curb ten feet away. He turned to us.

“Get in the back.”

Bear shifted on his feet and hesitated. He glanced at me, looking for confirmation that it was OK to get in the car.

I felt the same hesitation. At this point we only had McDuffie’s word. Neither of us knew the man, and Keller hadn’t mentioned him when he visited me the night before. There was the very real possibility that this could be a set up, and both of us knew it. We felt it, instinctively. But in the end, I decided I’d rather take my chances in the car with the middle aged Lt. Col., than with the prisoners and MPs in the brig.

“Go on,” the MP behind me said with a push to my back.

“Let’s go, Bear,” I said.

Bear opened the back door on the passenger side and got in the car.

I walked around the back of the vehicle and grabbed the handle, but stopped before getting in.

McDuffie stood with his hand on the open door to the driver’s seat. He studied me for a moment. “Go on, get in.”

“I can trust you, Lt. Col.?” I said.

“I’m on your side, Jack,” he said.

\* \* \*

We left Camp Lejeune behind. Houses, fields and stretches of forest passed by in a blur. We drove for forty-five minutes without saying a word.

McDuffie pulled into the parking lot of a small shopping center near I-95, just outside of Fayetteville. He parked the car and opened his door. “Let’s grab something to eat.” He pointed toward a 24-hour breakfast diner.

We got out and crossed the parking lot. McDuffie walked in front, and Bear and I followed close behind.

We must have missed the breakfast rush because the diner was empty. A cute hostess warily greeted us and sat us in a

booth then dropped off a carafe of coffee. Moments later a blond haired waitress with red lipstick and a name tag that read Jenny took our order.

Bear and I sat shoulder to shoulder, across from McDuffie. He said nothing to us. His eyes scanned the road in front of the diner. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, lit one and dropped the pack on the table.

I followed his gaze, stared out the window, watched cars pass by on the road we had traveled on.

“Glad you guys could make it,” a voice said from behind.

I turned and saw Abbot standing there, dressed in faded blue jeans, a white polo and a tan jacket.

“Sorry things got out of hand in there, Jack,” he said.

I hiked my shoulders. “Not your fault.”

“You should have never been in there.”

“Hear anything?”

He shook his head. McDuffie slid in toward the window and Abbot sat down next to him.

“No,” Abbot said. “I’ve called every contact I have.” He placed his elbows on the table and steepled his fingers. “Half of the bastards wouldn’t even take my call.”

“What about General Keller?” I asked. “Did he reach out to you?”

“Briefly,” Abbot replied. “After he spoke with you.” He grabbed a menu, looked it over, then poured himself a cup of coffee from the steaming carafe. “He’s looking into it, too,” he added.

“So what now?” Bear asked.

Abbot held the mug to his mouth and blew into it, sending ripples through the coffee and a puff of steam into the air in front of him. He took a sip and his mouth contorted in response to the aftertaste. He set the mug down then lowered

his hand to his lap, returning a moment later with a set of keys that he tossed onto the table.

“D.C.”

“Washington?” Bear asked.

“Yeah,” Abbot replied. “Neil Delaney.”

He slid a folded piece of paper across the table toward me. I reached out, grabbed it and then unfolded the paper, reading the name and phone number on it. I offered it to Bear, but he shook his head, perhaps because he trusted me with the information, or maybe because he didn't want to take his eyes off the men who sat across from us.

“Who's that?” I asked.

Abbot cleared his throat and fidgeted with his scuffed gold wedding band. He brought his hands to his face and rubbed his chin with the tips of his thumbs, holding his index fingers inches from his mouth. His eyes shifted toward the window and he said nothing.

“Colonel-”

Abbot raised his hand and shook his head slightly. “He's an old friend. He's got contacts that I don't. Delaney might not have any idea what's going on when you meet with him, but give him a few hours and he'll be able to tell you everything. Who's behind it, why they're behind it, how high it goes. Everything, Jack.”

He glanced over my shoulder and lifted an eyebrow while nodding once.

The waitress stopped next to me, a brown tray perched on her hand and shoulder. She expertly balanced it while setting our plates down in front of us, muttering each order under breath. In a thick, East Carolina accent she asked, “Can I get y'all anything else?”

We shook our heads in unison and waited for her to leave before speaking.



“What else?” I asked.

Abbot looked up at me with his mouth slightly open like he wanted to say something else but was holding back.

“I know there’s something else, Abbot. What is it?”

He placed his fork and knife on the edge of his plate, sat back in the booth, folded his hands together and placed them on the table. He stared at me for what felt like ages before finally speaking.

“There’s the chance, Jack, that this could be coming down his chain of command. Understand?”

“You haven’t spoken to Delaney,” I said, not a question.

“No, I haven’t. So you need to know,” he lifted his hand and wagged an outstretched finger between me and Bear, “that this could go badly. Once he digs into it, if it’s his, uh, organization behind it, he’ll turn. He’s that kind of guy. Personal loyalties are superseded by the job.”

I nodded. I understood, in a sense. In another I didn’t. The job was just a job. There was a personal code of conduct that couldn’t be violated. You might be able to move the line now and then, but there had to be a point where the line couldn’t stretch any further without breaking. And when a friend needed help, that line was drawn thick and deep.

“Who does Neil work for?” Bear asked.

Abbot shook his head and looked down at his plate.

Bear looked from him to McDuffie. “You know?”

McDuffie hiked his shoulders and shook his head. “Never heard of him in my life. I’m a damn prison warden. I’ll leave the spy stuff to you guys.” He chuckled and then stuffed his mouth with a forkful of butter and syrup covered pancakes.

“That information is on a need to know basis,” Abbot said. “Right now-”

“Don’t tell us we don’t need to know,” I said. “At least give us this.”

Abbot said nothing. He crossed his arms over his chest and turned his head toward the window.

I sighed and shook my head. “OK, then. How’re we getting up there? Can’t travel on a plane right now. TSA will flag us.”

Abbot turned his head, pointed at the keys. “You’re taking my car.”

I reached out, picked the keys up off the table and stuck them in my pocket.

“But listen,” Abbot said. “It won’t be long before that car’s hot. Understand? Like I said, I don’t know who is watching and who’s not.”

I nodded.

“You see blue lights, you be ready to run, Jack.”

I nodded again.

We finished breakfast without saying another word, and then we walked out together. Bear and I collected our things from McDuffie’s car. Abbot walked us to his.

“Delaney,” Abbot said to me. “He’s a bit of a shifty character, Jack. But you can trust him.”

“As long as his agency isn’t behind this,” I added.

Abbot’s pursed his lips together and drew his eyebrows down. “Yeah.”

We stopped in front of Abbot’s car, a new silver Audi A8. I whistled and ran my finger along the sleek body of the car. “So this is what my dirty work pays for, eh?”

He stood behind the car and smiled while I opened the driver’s door and slid into the leather bucket seat. He moved forward and rapped on the window. I started the car and rolled the window down.

“Take it easy with her,” he said. “Please. Oh, and no smoking.”

I shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“Here,” he said. I looked over and saw him holding a billfold stuffed with cash and a few credit cards. “This should cover anything you need. Pin numbers are in the center. Commit them to memory. There’s a bag in the trunk, where the spare would normally be. Inside that bag is an assortment of weapons.” He paused and stared at me for a moment. “Don’t get caught with them.”

By the time I had the money in my pocket, Abbot was gone. I turned the key in the ignition. The engine roared approvingly. We pulled out of the parking lot and then hit the I-95 north on-ramp. I pushed the gas pedal and hit 85 miles per hour before we merged onto the interstate, then wove the car through traffic and into the fast lane.

Bear was the first to speak. “What’s your read on this?”

I thought for a moment. “Abbot’s not going to BS us.”

“You still trust him?”

“He got us out of the brig.” I glanced over at Bear. He rubbed at his beard. “If he wanted us out of the way, what better place than in there?”

I kept my eyes on the line of cars, SUVs and minivans in front of me. A mental inventory of license plates piled up and nothing seemed out of the ordinary. I held my breath as we passed a parked state trooper and let my foot off the gas. I kept my eyes fixed on him in the rear-view mirror. He didn’t move. I felt a release of tension for the first time that morning.

“What about this Delaney guy?” Bear asked.

“We’ll have to get a read on him quick,” I said.

That much was true. We’d know within a few minutes of Delaney was friend or foe. A public meeting would be necessary.

“Make sure we meet him somewhere with a lot of witnesses,” Bear said.

“Reading my mind again?”

He laughed. “Guess I’ve known you too long.” The big man yawned, leaned back. “Think it’s time I get a new partner. You’re getting too boring.”

I smiled and looked up at the rear-view mirror. “Yeah, well you think this mess we’re in is boring?” I nodded toward the back of the car at the set of blue lights that closed the distance in a few seconds. The state trooper pulled his cruiser within a few feet of our rear bumper. The lane to the right was open, but he wasn’t passing. He must have clocked me going twenty over the speed limit. Or worse, Abbot could have reported the car stolen. Would he do that so quickly?

I cursed under my breath and moved into the right lane. The cruiser pulled over the same time I did. I hit the brakes and dropped the speed to fifty-five. Then I pulled onto the shoulder, prepared to stop. My mind raced thinking of the next set of actions I’d need to take.

Instead of following us onto the shoulder, the cruiser passed by.

Bear let out a loud sigh. “Thought we were goners.”

## Chapter 8

The drive to D.C. took just under six hours. We took I-95 past the outer loop to I-395. Crossed the Potomac and drove into downtown. I found a parking garage near the National Mall on 11th Street. We left the car there and exited the garage onto 11th Street, turning left toward Pennsylvania Avenue.

I pointed at a store across the road. “We stand out. Let’s get some clothes.”

I found a brown leather jacket, t-shirt, and a pair of jeans. Bear donned a sweatshirt and cargo pants. We paid for the clothes and left the store.

“Grab some lunch?” Bear pointed at a pizza place across the street.

I pulled out the paper Abbot gave me with Neil Delaney’s number written on it.

“Yeah, let’s eat, and then I’ll call our contact.”

We sat at a table on the front patio. A black gate stretched out and separated the open air dining area from the sidewalk. Pedestrians walked by with their heads tilted back, noses in the air, taking in the smell of fresh baked pizza. A waitress with straight brown hair and very little makeup came to our table. We ordered a large cheese pizza and two beers. The air was cool and the smell of melted cheese, rising crust, and tomato sauce overwhelmed my senses. It felt like a perfect day. It would be a perfect day if it weren’t for the fact we were trying to save our lives.

Tourists, business people, and even politicians passed by. “Look,” Bear said. “Robert Marlowe. Seen him on the news a lot over the last year. Deputy Secretary of Defense.”

I watched the group of men approach. Marlowe walked in between two other men. He wore a blue suit, red striped tie,

and a tan London Fog overcoat. His hair was a mix of silver and black, thin on top. He was clean shaven and wore thin glasses. He was tall and looked to be in good shape for a man his age. The men on either side were approximately the same age. I figured them to be politicians as well. Two Department of Defense agents followed close behind. They were younger than the three politicians and wore dark suits, dark glasses, and earpieces, just like you see in the movies. They scanned the street and sidewalk. I figured time moved in slow motion for them. They were trained to notice everything and take out a threat at a moment's notice.

“Wonder if he knows about us?” I said.

Bear smiled. “I could go ask.”

“Find out if he'd never heard about our program. Can you imagine what that investigation would uncover if he hadn't?”

“Don't want to,” Bear said shaking his head. He took a bite of thick crust, chewed on it for a moment, and then swallowed. “From what I gather,” he wiped his face with a napkin, “this guy is big on Iraq, us getting involved over there. So who knows, maybe he does know about us. Maybe he's the reason we're there.”

I watched the Deputy Secretary walk past us without batting an eye in our direction. One of the agents assigned to Marlowe appeared to take notice of me watching him. The agents gaze lingered on me longer than anyone or anything else he'd looked at. I glanced away, reaching into my inside coat pocket in an effort to give him something to think about. A moment later I looked up. They had kept walking and were fifty feet past our position. It looked like the agent had forgotten all about me. I knew looks could be deceiving, though.

The waitress dropped the bill on our table. I finished my beer and set the empty bottle on top of two twenty dollar bills so the breeze wouldn't blow them away. We exited the patio, and joined the stream of people walking toward the National Mall. We turned right on Pennsylvania Avenue and crossed the

road at 15th Street, near the White House. I cut through the grassy area between 15th Street and the Presidential Park to get away from the crowds. Groups of trees were spaced out along the lawn, offering shade from the bright sun above.

I stopped near a fountain, looking around to make sure no one was within ear shot. Once I was sure the area was reasonably secure, I reached into my pocket, pulled out my cell phone and the paper with Delaney's number. My fingers punched the numbers on the keypad. I brought the phone to my head and heard the call connect.

A man answered on the third ring. "Yeah?"

"Yeah, is this Neil Delaney?"

"Who's this?"

"You don't know me, but we have a friend in common."

I looked over my shoulder and saw a couple walking hand in hand in my direction. I turned to the right and walked toward a tree.

"Who? Who's the friend?"

"Colonel Abbot," I said.

Delaney said nothing.

I looked around again, as if he were standing nearby. "You there?"

"How do you know Abbot?"

"He's my CO."

Delaney cleared his throat and continued in a hushed voice. "This isn't a safe conversation to have on the phone." He paused. "People are - uh, you know where the Lincoln Memorial is?"

"Yeah," I said. "I can find it."

"OK, you do that. Meet me there in forty-five minutes. Got it? Can you get there by then?"

"Yeah, sure."

“Stand on Abe’s right side, fifth step from the top. Got it?”

“Right side facing him or his right side?”

Delaney sighed. “Facing. I got to go. Forty-five minutes. Be there. You got one shot.”

“What do you mean one-” The call disconnected before I could finish. I shook my head, and tried not to read too much into Delaney’s behavior. It was possible I caught him off guard and that’s why he acted the way he did. I pushed away from the tree and started walking toward the park, on the lookout for Bear.

He found me first.

“How’d it go?”

I put the phone back in my pocket and turned to face him. “He knew something, that much was obvious.” I looked past Bear, trying to figure out where he had been during the call. “The moment I said Abbot was my CO, Delaney freaked.”

Bear leaned his head back, looked up at the tree in bloom. “What do you mean, freaked?”

“Went silent. Started whispering.”

“Guess this won’t be a wasted trip then, will it.”

“We have to be at the Lincoln Memorial, forty-five minutes. Right side, fifth step from the top. He’ll find us.”

Bear pointed toward the Washington National Monument. “That’s at the far end, past the monument there.”

“Guess we should head over then.”

\* \* \*

It took twenty minutes to reach the Lincoln Memorial, which meant we had twenty some odd minutes to hang back. This was a great place for people watching. Didn’t matter who they were, the Lincoln Memorial, of all places, had the ability to have a profound effect on its visitors.



I checked my watch and saw it was about time. “Let’s go.” We walked up three sets of stairs, staying to the right and stopped on the fifth step to the top. I leaned back against the handrail. An older woman gave me a look for blocking the railing, so I stepped to the side and let her pass.

“Wonder what this guy looks like,” Bear said.

“Look for a suit.”

“That’s about twenty percent of the crowd.”

“He’ll find us. Relax.”

“Like hell I will. You don’t know who he might bring with him.”

“Not by his tone, Bear.”

Bear said nothing.

I scanned the incoming crowd looking for the mental image I had of the man I had spoken with on the phone forty minutes ago. A few people had the look, but weren’t quite right. Then I spotted him.

“There,” I said, my arm outstretched pointing to the base of the stairs. He stuck out like a sore thumb among all the tourists. And being that it was past lunchtime, a Fed this close to the memorial just didn’t make sense.

“Who?”

“Silver and brown hair, a little thin on top, glasses. Kind of mousy looking, but in pretty good shape for his age.”

“Got him,” Bear said. “Tell you what,” he looked back at me, “I’m going to hang back a bit. OK?”

“Good idea.”

I kept my eyes focused on the middle aged man ascending the steps. He reached the middle of the longer stretch of sand colored stairs and looked up in my direction. He scanned the area and fixed his stare on me. He gave me a slight nod as he came to a stop.

I nodded back and checked the area around him, looking for any sign of a threat. I assumed he did the same.

He started in my direction again. He stopped two steps below me. He looked past me, said, “Neil Delaney.”

I grabbed his hand and shook it. “Noble.”

He nodded. “I’ve heard of you.”

“I can’t imagine that’s a good thing.”

He pursed his lips and shook his head.

“Big man back there is Bear. Riley Logan.”

Delaney looked over my shoulder and acknowledged Bear. Then he held out his arm and said, “Let’s move to the back.”

We walked up the remaining stairs, turned right and took a path that led us behind four huge columns, stopping behind the fourth. There, we huddled close together.

“Any place less public we can go?” I asked.

Delaney shook his head. “This is the best place. For now.” He looked over his shoulder. “Less chance something will go down here. Got it?”

“Yeah,” I said. Paused and then added, “I got it.”

“So you two are part of the operation, huh?”

I leaned back against the thick column, crossed my arms over my chest and nodded. “What do you know about it?”

Delaney hiked his shoulders, cocked his head. “A bit. CIA sponsored. They take Marines out of basic-”

“Recruit training,” Bear interrupted.

“Yeah,” Delaney said. “Whatever. Take fresh *recruits*,” he looked at Bear and paused a second, “and then put them through their spec ops training. Turns you into well rounded operators that they can blame crap on when someone else screws up. You’re crazy enough for the job, ‘cause let’s face it, you wouldn’t have enlisted in the Marines unless you were

crazy to begin with.” He smiled and batted his eyes between us.

We didn’t smile back.

“Yeah, well, anyway, so they get you before you’re done. Before you’ve been completely brainwashed into that bullshit *oorah* culture. That was one of their initial design flaws. The first group to come through had been through basic, uh, recruit training and A school. They were Marines and it caused problems when you had a dick of a spec ops team leader. They scrapped the first wave. You guys were part of the next bunch. They hit the jackpot with you two and the others that came through around the same time. From 95 through early 2001 you pretty much handled domestic stuff that the CIA couldn’t legally touch,” he waved his hand in a semi-circle for emphasis, “and occasionally a friendly nation. You always traveled two by four, two of you, four of them. You spent some time in South America. Columbia, if I’m not mistaken?”

I nodded. He had done his research, or was more involved in this than Abbot let on.

He continued. “Then the attacks happened and you were re-prioritized. Almost all of you were shifted from here and friendlies to the Middle East. I’d say eighty percent of you guys went to Afghanistan chasing Bin Laden and the Taliban. But not you, though. You’re in Iraq, right?”

I nodded again.

“So over there you’re-”

“Look,” I said. “I appreciate the history lesson, but we got a situation going on here. Someone is setting us up and we don’t know who. We go through Abbot and Keller in the Marines and then to the CIA. It’s not Abbot. It’s not Keller. So it must be someone in the CIA. Can you help?”

He took a deep breath, held it a moment and then exhaled loudly, letting his lips flapped as his puffed out cheeks decompressed. “I can’t say much more than I have. Not here.”

“Who are you with?” I said.

Delaney flashed a crooked smile as he held out his arms and shrugged.

“You’re not CIA, not the way you referred to the program being sponsored. Definitely not FBI. We wouldn’t be talking to you if you were.”

Delaney chuckled and shook his head vigorously.

I continued. “NSA?”

He continued shaking his head. “No, Jack. Not CIA, FBI, or NSA. Look, who I’m with isn’t important. The information I have is what’s important.”

“Then let’s have it.”

“Not here, Jack. I guarantee you they are out there, watching us right now. They’ve probably been watching every move you’ve made since leaving Camp Lejeune.”

I fought the urge to look around. It appeared Bear was doing the same. I saw him cast his stare toward the ground.

“Give me an idea of what it is then,” I said.

“I’m not quite sure what it is. Well, I wasn’t sure. I think I know now. What I can tell you is there is some shady stuff going on, guys. Very shady. I have some documents for you.” He paused. “I didn’t know what I was looking at until today. Not till your call. You mentioned Abbot and everything came to me. I uncovered this stuff not too long ago. But it didn’t make sense. Got it?”

“No,” I said. “I don’t got it.”

“It’s going to make sense tonight.” He took a few steps backward. “Wait for my call. Tonight, Jack. I’ll bring the documents you need.”

I watched him go down the stairs, then cut diagonally across the mall and disappear out of sight.

“Ready to go?” Bear asked.

“Nah,” I said. “Let’s wait a few. Find a good tourist group to assimilate into.”

Bear laughed loudly. “I’m six-six, you’re six-two. We don’t assimilate anywhere we go, Jack.”

## Chapter 9

Delaney called shortly after six p.m. He told us to meet him at nine that night at a park in McLean, Virginia. At eight o'clock we went to the garage, got in the Audi, and left downtown DC. Took I-495 heading west and got off on the Georgetown Pike. Grabbed a bite to eat at a fast food joint then headed west. The entrance to Scotts Run Nature Preserve was less than a mile from the interstate. I parked the car in the deserted parking lot, choosing a spot close to the access road that led in and out of the park. I rolled my window down and cut the engine.

We sat in silence for ten minutes, looking and listening. The empty parking lot indicated all visitors had left before we arrived. The sound of an occasional car passed from the Georgetown Pike behind us. We were hidden from view. That worried me. We would be out of sight if this was a setup or if we had been followed.

"I don't like this, Jack," Bear said, right on cue.

I leaned forward and nodded. Checked the side mirrors. "I'm about fifty-fifty on it."

Bear pulled out a cell phone and flipped it open.

"Keep that covered." I pointed at bright square of light the small screen emanated.

A twig snapped from behind the car. Both of us froze. My eyes darted to the rear-view mirror, looking for the perpetrator. I saw nothing but darkness and the faint outline of trees and bushes. I placed my hand on the door handle and slowly cracked the door. I stepped out of the car, my body hunched over. I clutched my Beretta in my hand and walked to the back of the vehicle. Behind me, a light on a utility pole turned on with an electrical buzzing sound and faint orange light flooded the area. I stood five feet from the potential assailant. Our eyes

met and locked. He sat down, scratched behind his ear with his rear paw and then took off into the woods between the parking lot and the Georgetown Pike.

Bear had stepped out of the car just before the dog took off. He laughed and shook his head.

“Damn, if we ain’t on edge.”

On edge didn’t begin to describe how I felt at that moment. Considering everything we had been through and adding in the lack of sleep, I found myself surprised that I hadn’t taken poor Fido out. That would have been bad. I don’t think I would have ever been able to forgive myself if I shot a dog.

I returned to the car and placed my hand on the ignition. The orange light from above lit up the inside of the car.

“Don’t like sitting out here under these lights.”

Before I could start the car, my cell phone rang and I answered without looking at the display.

“Where you at, Delaney?” I scanned the small strip of grass at the edge of the parking lot that separated asphalt and trees.

“About one hundred yards in.” He spoke quickly and in a hushed tone.

“From where?”

“Go to the northwest corner of the parking lot and walk straight north.”

I covered the phone and looked at Bear. “He wants us to walk in there, blind.”

Bear shook his head.

“No deal, Delaney,” I said. “The parking lot is lit up. We’ll be sitting ducks crossing it. You come out here.”

His heavy breaths filled the ear piece of my phone.

“You there?” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll meet you at the edge of the lot. Drive over.”

“Delaney,” I said and then paused an extra second. “If this is a setup, so help me, I’ll end you first.”

I flipped the phone shut and started the Audi and drove as close to the shadows in the middle of the lot as I could. Parked in a spot where two circles of orange light couldn’t quite reach. I cut the engine and sat motionless for a minute.

After a pause, Bear whispered, “You see anything?”

I shook my head. Picked up my phone and dialed the last number that called me.

“I see you,” Delaney said.

“I don’t see you,” I said.

I heard rustling mixed in with his heavy breathing. “OK, I’m,” he paused to take a deep breath, “right in front of you.”

I strained to see past the orange glow that hovered over the strip of grass in front of the woods. The effect left the space between the trees darker than the night sky. I looked at Bear and nodded.

“We’re coming over.”

I hung up the phone, stuffed it in my pocket and slowly opened the car door. “High alert, Bear.” I turned my head as I said it and saw that Bear already had his gun drawn and held out in front of him, ready to go. We scanned the area as we walked. My pulse quickened with every step. The woods were so close, yet so far away, and there was plenty of time for a trained sniper to take both of us out.

“Here,” Delaney called.

I caught sight of his pale hand waving in between two pine trees. I gave him a quick “cut it” signal and changed course to his direction. A moment later we slipped behind the tree line. I nodded at Delaney and kept walking.

“Where are you going?”



“Further in,” I said.

I walked without light and without knowing where I was going. It didn't matter. We just needed to be out of sight of the parking lot should someone pull up and aim a floodlight in our direction.

Delaney followed behind, complaining. “Stop. C'mon, Noble, this is far enough.”

I ignored him and kept walking with Bear beside me keeping pace.

“No, no, no,” Delaney said.

I looked over my shoulder and saw him leaning against a tree.

“I know where this is going,” he said. “I keep following you and I'm a dead man. Right?”

I stormed up to him. “Turn around.”

He didn't.

I grabbed him by his jacket and forced him around. “You see that,” I stretched one arm past his face, toward the parking lot, “see those orange lights?”

“Uh, yeah, I see them.”

“OK,” I said. “Now imagine a car pulls up. Shines some powerful lights into the woods. If we can see those lights, then they will sure as hell be able to see us.”

“What about night vision, Jack?”

“We blend.”

His head bobbed up and down, slow and steady. I assumed that meant he understood and I began walking again.

“Just a bit further,” I said. “Now, come on.”

We walked in silence for a few more minutes, changed direction and came to a clearing in the woods. The moon provided enough light for us to see each other clearly. I

checked over my shoulder to make sure the lights of the parking lot were out of sight.

“What do you have for us, Delaney?” I said. “What did you bring us out here for?” I leaned in close enough that he could see the look on my face, even in the dark. “It better be damn good, too,” I added.

He reached into his coat pocket.

I drew my Beretta and pointed it at his head.

“Relax,” he said pulling his arms out slowly, a key dangling from a carbineer clip held tight between his thumb and forefinger.

“What’s this?” I said.

“A key to a locker.”

“What’s in the locker?”

“The documents you need.”

“Documents I need for what?”

“That will be answered when you see the documents.”

“Don’t screw with me, Delaney.”

“I’m not, Noble. Everything you need to clear your name and take down who’s behind this is in that locker. I couldn’t risk bringing it out here. Bringing it anywhere with me. I had them bring it-”

“Wait, them who?”

“Don’t worry about that. What’s important is the location of the locker.”

For some reason he waited until I asked the obvious question. “OK, Delaney, where’s this locker at?”

“It’s at the-”

A single shot ripped through the air and slammed into Delaney’s head with a thud. A cloud of blood rose above him.

His eyes rolled back and he fell to the ground, limp and lifeless.

Two more shots rang out. One hit the tree behind me, just above my head. Splintered wood and bark rained down and fell to the ground with a sound like playing cards being shuffled.

Another shot was fired, this time hitting Bear in the shoulder. The bullet hit with a thud and turned the big man sideways. He staggered a few feet then fell to the ground.

“Bear,” I said, dropping to the ground. I crawled toward him. “You OK?”

He groaned and clutched at his right shoulder. He cursed out loud then said, “They got me.”

“Keep pressure on it.” I took cover behind a tree. I saw the explosion created by the last bullet and had a bead on the attacker’s position. “I’ll be right back.”

I aimed my gun in the direction of the shooter and started firing until I had emptied the clip and replaced it. The sound of the shots echoed in my head. I fought against it and listened. I heard a voice calling out, getting further away. A different voice called back. There were at least two of them, and if I had to place a wager, I’d say they had night vision goggles on.

I followed in the direction of the voices, making sure to use every tree I passed as cover. I heard a voice and fired in that direction. They were running now, not caring if I heard and tracked them. They ran to the west. The parking lot was south. They hadn’t come in after us. They had been here the whole time. Were we double crossed?

I followed as fast as my legs would carry me. The moonlight penetrated through spring buds just enough for me to navigate past obstacles. A car’s engine roared to life. The faint glow of red tail lights became visible through the thinning trees. The car jerked forward and sped off. I fired three rounds, managing to shatter the rear window.

My lungs burned with each cold breath I took. I placed my shaking hands on my knees and bent over, catching my breath. I turned and started back through the woods. The path wasn't clear but I knew I hadn't run more than a half-mile, if that. I kept a quick and steady pace and five minutes in I started calling for Bear.

"Jack," Bear's voice rumbled in the distance.

I turned toward the sound and picked up my pace. "Keep yelling," I shouted into the cool breeze. Bear yelling was a risk, but if I didn't find him soon he might bleed out. I still had no idea about the severity of the gunshot wound.

Two minutes later I found the clearing. Delaney's lifeless body lay twisted on the ground. His legs sideways and sort of stacked one on top of the other. His torso belly down. His face turned to the side, the moon reflecting off his dull and lifeless eyes.

Bear had managed to move to a tree and leaned back against it. Best place to be. He could adjust and take cover from a gunshot at any angle.

"You all right?" I asked.

He breathed heavily and clutched at his wounded shoulder.

"Yeah, I'll live."

"Can you walk?"

He grimaced as he pushed back into the tree and dragged his large legs under him. They pushed his body up. "Let's go."

"I could have helped." I started toward the parking lot. "I want to take a look at that when we get to the car."

"I'll be all right."

"Like hell," I said. "I'm not going to have you bleed out in Abbot's car."

The walk back to the parking lot took longer than the walk out to the clearing. Bear moved in spurts, stopping to catch his breath every so often. Fifteen minutes after we set out, we

came to the edge of the tree line. Orange street lights lit up the lot. I took cover behind a tree and scanned the lot. Could they have circled back and hid out, waiting for us? There would be only one way to find out. The car was a good hundred feet away. We hid behind the dark veil of the woods.

“I’m going to jump in and start the car,” I said, “then back up and pull up parallel.”

Bear nodded. Said nothing.

“I’ll pop open the back door,” I continued. “As soon as you see that, duck and run. Dive into the back seat. I’m going to tear out of here like a bat outta hell. OK?”

He nodded again.

“Here goes,” I said. “Wish me luck.”

I unlocked the doors and started the car with the remote then paused. I watched the trees across the lot for any movement, but didn’t see anyone or anything. I ran to the car, opened the door and got in. I watched the mirrors for a minute. The area remained still. I threw the car in reverse, backed out and pulled up parallel to the trees then leaned back between the driver and passenger seat and opened the rear passenger door.

Bear emerged from the woods, huddled as low the ground as he could, his left arm still clutching his right shoulder. He dove head first, crashing onto the seat and pulling his legs in.

“Go, Jack.”

I put the Audi in gear and sped off, making a U-turn in the lot and speeding toward the road leading out to Georgetown Pike. Half way down the road I saw them.

They parked along the side of the access road. They stood outside the car, using its heft to shield them. They drew their weapons and aimed at the Audi.

“Brace yourself,” I said.

I hit the gas and swerved to the side, sideswiping their car with the passenger side of the Audi. If luck was on my side, the driver's side door would be damaged and they'd be unable to open it. Luck might just have been on my side. The men dove away from the car and the road moments before the crash.

Bear grunted from the backseat. I raised my hand and pounded on the roof, letting out a yell.

I reached the end of the road and turned left onto Georgetown Pike without stopping. I gunned the Audi, hitting close to one hundred miles per hour. The three quarters of a mile to I-495 went by in twenty seconds. Before taking the on ramp onto the highway, I checked my rear-view mirror and didn't see any headlights approaching from behind. Either they hadn't made it to the end of the road yet, or they turned the wrong way, or they were chasing me without their headlights on. My gut told me they were chasing without headlights.

I raced down I-495 doing close to one-hundred. The Audi rode as smooth as it did when it cruised at eighty. I took the second exit and pulled into a residential neighborhood and turned on a couple of random streets until I found a cul-de-sac with two empty lots and two houses under construction. I swung the car around and backed up, leaving the car facing toward the road.

"Christ, Jack. Think I have a concussion now."

I laughed as I leaned across the front seat and fished through the glove compartment box for a flashlight. I stepped out and turned the flashlight on and coerced Bear into moving his hand away from his shoulder. The wound was deep, but clean.

"Doesn't look like it got any further than the muscle. Rotate your arm?"

Bear grimaced as he lifted his right arm and twisted it. "Yeah, nothing's broke."

"We need to get that taken care of. Tonight."

“We can’t go to the hospital, Jack. Feds’ll be on us in a heartbeat.”

“Yeah, I know.” I looked up at the clear sky. The lights from D.C. drowned out the sky to the northeast, but above us, the moon shone bright and strong and beyond its white ring of light, stars dotted the sky. The cool night air washed over my face, stinging the cuts and scrapes I received while running blindly through the woods. “I need to clean these up, too.” I ran a hand across my face.

“What are we going to do then?”

I hesitated. “I know a place.”

“Where?”

“I think,” I paused a beat, “I think that it’s best you don’t know until we’re close.”

## Chapter 10

I drove without stopping for close to three hours. The clock on the dashboard said the time was after twelve in the morning. We crossed into the city limits of Charlottesville, Virginia. Shopping centers with empty parking lots lined the main road through town. Cars huddled around late night restaurants and bars. Neon signs announced their presence.

I pulled into a twenty-four hour gas station and stopped the car next to an outward facing pump. I placed the gas nozzle into the Audi's fuel tank and clicked the handle to auto pump. I walked inside the convenience store, grabbed a four pack of water bottles out of the fridge and filled a 20 ounce cup with fresh coffee. Hunger pains attacked my stomach, so I milled about a few minutes looking for something to eat, ultimately finding nothing. I stepped up to the counter where a freckle-faced teenager with red hair and a name tag that read "Stan" waited behind the register. He asked me how I was doing without bothering to look at me.

He grabbed the water bottles and scanned them. Looked at the coffee and punched a couple keys on his register. He looked up at me with a nervous tick of his head that threw his hair to the side and out of his eyes.

"That all?"

"Gas at pump three."

He looked at his display. "It's not finished pumping yet."

"Guess we're waiting then."

He rolled his eyes and looked away, adding a sharp click of his tongue to further express his annoyance. He walked away, pretending to attend to something else, anything to avoid dealing with people, I supposed.



I leaned back against the counter and looked around the store, taking note of all the security cameras. There seemed to be an overabundance of them.

“Have a lot of trouble with robberies here?” I said.

“Huh?” he said.

“The cameras.” I pointed to the four cameras positioned throughout the store, mounted to the ceiling.

“Nah, maybe just college kids stealing stuff.”

I nodded slowly. Time dragged. “Gas done yet?”

He walked back over, looked at his screen. “Yeah. Total’s forty-three fifty.”

I handed him three twenties and waited for my change.

I stepped out into the cool night air, put the coffee and water in the car and scanned the parking lot. There was a payphone butted up to the corner of the store.

“I’ll be right back, Bear.”

Two directories dangled from the base of the phone. I grabbed the white pages and thumbed through it, tearing out a page when I found what looked to be the correct listing. I needed a map, so I went back into the store and asked the kid if they had any regional map books. He pointed to an aisle full of books, magazines and car accessories. A large regional map book of Charlottesville and its surrounding areas sat next to a rack where the top of every magazine in the row was covered except for its title. I searched the directory in the back of the book, found my street and ripped out the corresponding page.

“Hey,” the kid said. “You can’t do that.”

I walked to the door. “I’m sure the cameras caught it, kid. You can report it.”

He yelled again as I pushed through the door. I paid no attention to him. Got in the car and started the engine. Backtracked half a mile and took the bypass around the city. Hopped onto I-64 for a couple miles then exited into a

residential area. I turned on the dome light and compared the street names with the map in my hand.

“Where’re we going?” Bear asked. He held his right arm tight to his chest. It had been partially numb for the last hour. I began to worry he suffered nerve damage. Not a good thing for his career.

I said nothing and kept my speed steady at forty miles per hour while checking the names on the street signs of every neighborhood we passed. Finally, I found the street I had been looking for and made a right turn into the cookie cutter neighborhood full of two story colonial style houses. It looked like the builder made three models available and decided to follow a model a, then b, then c pattern during construction. I pulled over to the side and stopped next to the curb. The page torn from the white pages sat on my lap. I found the address and compared the house numbers, then turned off the dome light and pulled away from the curb.

“Jack,” Bear said, half question, half demand.

“Jessie,” I said.

Bear laughed for the first time since being shot. “Kline?” He shifted in his seat to look at me directly. “Jessica Kline?”

I hiked my shoulders a few inches and looked away.

“After what happened to you two?”

I said nothing. After another thirty seconds, I found the house number I’d been looking for, drove half a block past and parked the car next to the curb.

\* \* \*

We stood on the front porch for five minutes staring at the red door. Bear leaned back against a post running floor to ceiling, clutching his shoulder, a look of pain spread across his face.

“Knock on the damn door, Jack.” His breath formed mist in the air, rising up, enveloping his head before disappearing. “C’mon.”

I leaned forward and rapped on the door with my knuckles. A moment later a light flicked on inside. I heard hands tap against the door, the way they would if someone leaned up against it perhaps to listen for a moment. The porch light turned on and the door cracked open as far as the security chain lock would allow it.

“Who’s there?” Jessie asked.

I took a step back and moved over so she could see me through the crack in the door. Our eyes met and locked in a stare that only two former lovers could share.

“Jack?”

“Hey, Jess.”

“What’re you doing...? Is everything OK?”

“Yeah. No. Can we come in?” I turned sideways and nodded toward Bear. “He’s hurt.”

“Riley?”

“Heya, Jessie,” Bear said.

Jessie closed the door. I heard the sound of the security chain sliding in its lock, and then the door reopened. She stepped back. She wore a white t-shirt and blue sweatpants. She smiled and tucked strands of her dark brown hair behind her ear while extending her other arm in a “come on in” gesture.

I took a step in and stopped in front of her and stared into her dark brown eyes. Opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I had no idea what to say.

She was the first to break off the stare.

“Oh my God,” she said. “Riley, what happened to your shoulder?”

“That something you can take care of?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah, we get a few gunshot wounds into the ER. I’ve assisted with enough of them to know what to do.”

She started toward the other side of the room. “Come to the kitchen.”

We followed her through the foyer and living room to the back of the house. Bear entered the kitchen first. The room was painted off white, with a tan tile floor and stainless steel appliances. Dark wood cabinets stretched along three walls and a decorative blue tile back splash stretched between the cabinets and dark granite counter tops.

“Sit,” Jessie said, pointing toward the kitchen table. She turned and rifled through a couple drawers under the countertop.

Bear took a seat. I leaned back against the fridge.

“Jack,” she said. “Above the fridge, in the cabinet, grab a bottle of whiskey. Put it on the table.”

I did as she said, taking a pull from the bottle before setting it down in front of Bear. He let go of his arm, grabbed the bottle and took a pull himself.

Jessie turned in time to witness Bear taking a drink. Her lips stretched into a frown. “That’s for your arm.”

“You don’t have anything else?” Bear asked.

She nodded. “Of course I do. This will numb it a bit, though.” She lifted a pair of scissors and cut his sleeve off. She dabbed peroxide onto a hand towel and wiped the blood away from the wound area, then poured peroxide into the hole in Bear’s arm.

Bear flinched at first. His face twisted. A moment later he eased up.

Jessie waited until the white fizz from the peroxide settled down, then opened the bottle of whiskey and poured it into the wound.

Bear grimaced and groaned.

“Works fast,” Jessie said.

He nodded and sighed.

I reached for the bottle to take another drink. My hand was met by Jessie's as she slapped it away.

"I'm not done," she said.

She grabbed a pair of small forceps off the table. "Riley, grab hold of the table and your chair. Squeeze tight."

He did. His large knuckles turned white.

"Don't break her chair," I said.

Neither of them said anything.

She placed the forceps against the open wound and Bear jumped an inch.

"Steady, Riley, steady." Her voice was low, breathy, soothing.

A shiver of remembrance traveled down my spine. Why I hadn't tried to call or reach out to her during the past five years?

"Now I'm going to extract the bullet," she said. "You ready?" She looked up at Bear.

Bear nodded and forced a loud exhale. He rolled his head to the side and then sat up straight.

She expertly guided the forceps into the wound and grabbed hold of the slug buried in Bear's shoulder, eliciting a groan from the big man as she gripped and pulled the bullet out.

"All done," she said as she dropped the bullet into a glass tumbler. "OK, now I'm going to clean this out and stitch you up."

I stepped out back while she stitched Bear's arm. The cold air hit me with more force than earlier, perhaps an effect of the whiskey, not that I'd had all that much. But it had been such a long couple days that the warming effect of the alcohol gripped me much sooner than it normally would have. I glanced up at the sky, figuring I would get a great view of the

stars out here in the country. No such luck though, as gray clouds had overtaken the sky.

The door opened behind me and Jessie poked her head out. “All done in there. Want to come back in?” She smiled. The gesture relaxed me.

I followed her back inside, through the kitchen and into the den. She clicked a black remote and the TV turned on, tuned to one of the twenty-four hour news stations. The sound was low and I couldn’t make out what was being said. I didn’t need to hear it, though. A familiar face appeared on the screen in the form of a picture.

Delaney.

“Christ,” Bear said.

I shook my head, knowing what was coming next.

The picture of Delaney shrunk and moved diagonally down to the side of the screen. My picture was shown next with the words “Armed and Dangerous” flashing underneath and the words “Person of Interest” in a smaller font below.

“Well, at least they got part of it right,” I said, turning to Jessie and Bear. “I am a pretty interesting guy.”

Bear laughed, Jessie didn’t.

“Jack,” Jessie said, her voice trailing off at the end. “What’s going on?”

I reached out to her. “Jess, you know what I do, right? The whole reason we split up is because...”

The remote dangled from her hand. Her mouth opened, a stutter escaping every few seconds in place of a response.

“Jess, I’m being...we’re being set up. That man, Delaney, he was trying to help us. We met at a park. He had information.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the carbineer with the key hanging from it. “This key, Jess, whatever this key unlocks will give me the information I need to clear us.”

She shook her head. “Get out.” She rose. “Get out. Now. Both of you. Leave.”

I got up and placed my hands on her shoulders. She tried to squirm away.

“Look at me, Jess. Look in my eyes.”

She stopped shaking her head and lifted her chin, her eyes meeting mine. We engaged in that familiar stare again that said too much had been left unsaid, left undone.

“It’s me, Jess. Jack. Look at me and tell me if I’m lying.” I looked between her eyes. “I didn’t kill Delaney. I’m being set up. The last seventy-two hours have been a cat and mouse game and I’m the mouse.” I paused. “Believe me?”

She shook her head. “I don’t...I don’t know, Jack. You come in here. Bear’s all shot up-”

“What happened to ‘Riley’?” Bear said.

“- and now this? I just...” She sat back down and curled one foot under her, looked up at me. “I believe you, Jack.”

I pulled the wooden coffee table closer and sat on the edge and took her hands in mine. “Thank you.” I squeezed her hands. “I’m sorry to have dragged you into this. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you’re-”

Her phone rang and I shut up and we all turned toward it.

“I better get that.” She stood, grabbed the portable phone and disappeared into the kitchen.

\* \* \*

The news coverage continued for another thirty seconds without providing much information. A good thing, I figured. It meant they know much, or someone hadn’t fed them much. Yet.

Bear turned to me. “Christ, Jack. We’re done for.”

“We need to get a hold of Abbot. He can stick his neck out for us.”

“The mountains are right there,” he said pointing over his shoulder. “We can hide out for a few weeks.”

I shrugged and said nothing while waiting for the commercial break to end and the news to return.

Jessie returned a moment later, holding the phone out. “It’s for you, Jack.”

I grabbed the phone from her hand.

She continued. “Who would know you’re here?”

I shook my head and held the phone to my ear. “This is Jack.”

There was nothing but silence.

“Hello?” I said.

“Yeah, Jack?”

“Who’s this?”

“This is Jack Noble, right?”

“Yeah, who the hell is this?”

There was another pause. I looked around the room, stopping at the two faces staring back at me. Bear sat back in his chair, he looked relieved that he didn’t have to hold his shoulder anymore. His clothes were covered in blood. His red cheeks stood out against the rest of his pale face. He held the bottle of whiskey in his hand, brought it up to his lips, took a pull and exhaled loudly.

Jessie forced a smile while tapping with her fingers at the edge of the seat cushion. She crossed, uncrossed, then re-crossed her legs.

“What kind of game are you playing?” I said.

“This is what’s going down, Jack.” He paused a few seconds, and then continued. “We got you for the murder.”

“You know that wasn’t me.”



“Yeah, well, we got you for it. It’s all on you. Pinned on you, Jack.” Another pause filled with the sound of the man taking a drink from a bottle. “You can’t escape us, Jack. We’re everywhere. We know everyone you know. We’ll know every move you make a second after you make it. Half the people you know are on our side and the rest can be persuaded by us through one means or another.”

I looked between Bear and Jessie, who now stood and paced along the far wall.

“We control everything, Jack.”

“Maybe you and I should meet,” I said. “Settle this like men. Frankly, I’m tired of the cloak and dagger crap. Know what I mean?”

The man laughed. “You think this is a joke? Listen up. You’re going down, Jack. And anyone that helps you is dead. Got that? Even the nurse. Dead as a doornail, Jack.”

The line went dead and clicked to dial tone. I looked down at the phone, turned it off. Placed it on the coffee table and walked toward the window. I pinched the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger and slid them down.

“What’s going on, Jack?” Bear said.

“We need to go.”

The sound of a car racing down the street filled the room. Tires squealed. Car doors opened then slammed shut. The voices of two men drifted in through the open windows.

“Get down.”

## Chapter 11

I cut the lights and moved into the next room and took position against the wall next to the double window. A lace curtain hung over the window panes. I peeled it back and parted the blinds with my fingers. A dark sedan was parked at the end of the driveway. Scanning the yard, I spotted two men, both dressed in dark suits. They didn't appear to be armed, but I wouldn't trust the outward appearance. Armed and dangerous would be the appropriate term. These guys had all the markings of government spooks, Federal agents, maybe even assassins. They hung out at the base of the driveway. One spoke on a radio or cell phone. He stood at an angle and his head blocked the device he spoke into. His other arm waved in circles as he spoke.

I clutched my Beretta M9 tightly. The only thing that stood between me and them was a glass window and I was prepared to break it and open fire if necessary. I went into the woods with two full clips earlier. I'd emptied one and fired three shots from the second. That meant I had twelve rounds at my disposal, which would be more than enough to take care of these guys.

The man with on the phone or radio shook his head and stuffed the device in his pocket. He said something to his partner and they both turned to face the house. The window next to me was open a crack, but I couldn't hear what they said. The two men started toward the house, walking slowly. Both pulled their weapons, holding them low with both hands.

I needed a plan and needed it to form fast. There were two men in front which meant that meant there were probably two out back. There was no way these guys would come here alone. Were they the men from earlier, the shooters in the woods? Had they really managed to follow us to Charlottesville? I guess it was possible, but it didn't add up.

The car looked similar, but it was dark now just like it was dark when I rammed the shooters' car while leaving the park.

The only solution I came up with involved me barging out of the house, guns blazing. Not the ideal choice. Getting into a shooting match with trained agents, killers or not, was not high on my priority list. I crouched down and took a look through the open part of the window. I set the barrel of my gun on the window sill. I had a clear shot at them if they took the porch steps. The only barrier was the screen. No glass to break.

The men were close enough that I could make out certain words spoken in hushed tones. They didn't say much, but hearing "Noble" was enough. They knew exactly who I was. They knew exactly where I was. Just like the man on the phone said. Could one of them be the man on the phone? I doubted that. For one, someone that brazen wouldn't be in the field. So it had to be their boss, or their boss's boss.

The faint sound of a cell phone ring-tone filled the air. The men stopped and the agent pulled his phone from his pocket. His voice rose. "What the hell do you mean?" He stepped back during a long pause. "Yeah, OK. OK, we're going." He turned and hurried to the car. His partner walked backward with him. He raised his gun and kept it aimed at the house. He fumbled behind his back for the door handle of the car and then slipped into the driver's seat. The sedan roared to life, then rolled away, stopping at the stop sign at the end of the street only a few houses down. The car turned right and disappeared from view.

I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes and listened. Silence filled the house. Silence crept through the open window from outside. Had they turned the corner and cut the engine? Were they now on foot returning to the house? Did they leave the neighborhood?

I took a deep breath and returned to the den.

"Can you see the side street from upstairs?"

"What?" Jessie said.

“The side street.” I pointed toward the other room. “The main road, whatever. Can you see it from anywhere in here?”

She shook her head and said, “No.”

“We have to get out of here. Jess, is your car in the garage?”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask me why.” My voice rose. I took a deep breath and regained control. “Is it or isn’t it?”

She bit her lip and looked to the side.

“Yeah, it’s in there.”

“OK, grab the keys. We need to go.”

“Where?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “Let’s go.”

Bear got up and walked toward the kitchen.

“Garage is that way.” She pointed to a hall on the other side of the den. “Do I need to bring anything?”

“Yeah.” I turned to walk away then paused. “But there’s no time. Any minute now they are going to start shooting.”

“What?” She grabbed her purse and pulled out her keys, blowing by me and Bear on her way to the garage.

I could be right. Most likely I was wrong. But I had no intentions of waiting around to find out.

I took one last look through the front window, and then, satisfied the spooks weren’t out there, went to the garage. I stepped through the open doorway. Bear and Jessie were already inside her white Chevy Tahoe. Bear sat in the passenger seat and Jessie behind the wheel.

“I’m driving,” I said, standing in between her and the door, preventing her from shutting it.

“This is my car, Jack,” she said. “I’m driving.”

“Get in back, Jess.”

She screamed and slammed her hands down on the steering wheel. The loud horn blared and echoed throughout the garage.

I shook my head and stared at her. “If they are just around the corner, they likely heard that.”

“Sorry,” she said and then she threw her hands in the air. “Fine. You drive.” She turned in the seat and brought her legs up. Slipped between the two front seats and sat down in the middle row.

“You could have used the door.”

“And risk touching you? No thanks.” She turned away and stared out the window at a wall covered with rakes and gardening tools.

Bear laughed and shook his head.

“You think that’s funny?” I said. “We got God knows who chasing us, ready to kill us, and you laugh at her jokes.”

I turned the key in the ignition. The Tahoe’s V-8 engine roared into life, flooding my ears as it reverberated through the garage.

Jessie cleared her throat and leaned forward, pointing toward the console on the ceiling of the Tahoe. “The garage door opener is right-”

I ignored her and threw the car into reverse and smashed through the garage door.

“What hell, Jack? My garage!”

I gunned the car down the driveway, slammed on the brakes and turned the wheel, sending us screeching backward into the street. I shifted into drive and raced to the stop sign, coming to a quick halt. I looked left and saw nothing, and then I looked right. I saw the spooks a few blocks away, parked behind Abbot’s Audi. At that moment I realized it was the car. They had been tracking us with the car somehow.

I looked over at Bear. He stared out the window at the dark sedan parked behind the Audi. His head bobbed up and down.

“The car,” he muttered, reaching the same conclusion as me.

They must not have heard the Tahoe smash through the garage door, because they didn’t move or turn to look in our direction. I tapped the gas and turned left and drove down the street with the lights off until I reached the main road.

\* \* \*

“Why did you destroy my garage door?” Jessie asked.

I looked up into the rearview mirror, taking my eyes off of I-64 for a moment. It was the first thing any of us had said in thirty minutes. Her stare caught me off guard. I started to speak then closed my mouth and said nothing.

“Jack,” she said.

“Surprise,” Bear said. “He did it for the surprise factor.”

“Yeah, well, it worked,” she said. “I sure as hell was surprised. Just like he’s going to be when I mail the bill to him.”

Bear laughed and shook his head. “Not you, Jess. If those feds had been outside your house, the crash would have surprised them. That moment of distraction would have been the difference between us living and dying.” He rolled his window down a crack. Wind rushed through the car, the cold air stinging upon impact. “Yeah, we’re in this big car, but those guys are trained. One of us would have been hit.”

I looked up at the mirror again. A look of knowing washed across Jessie’s face. Her eyes teared up. I could tell that the full gravity of the situation had finally hit her and it likely crushed against her chest.

“That was them,” she said. “Parked on the side of the street.” She looked into the mirror.

I nodded. “Sorry, Jess. We’re going to get you someplace safe.”

“Safe? How do you know they’re not following you now? How-” she pressed her hands into her face and rubbed to the side. “How did they know about me? That was them. The call. Right? How did they know you were at my house?”

“The same reason they knew the car was there.” I pulled over on the road’s shoulder and stopped the car. Got out and opened her door. “Look at me, Jess. We think...they had a way to track the car. It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“No, no it doesn’t make sense. They might know the car, but they called for you. Called for you on my phone.” By this time she was half out of the car and slamming her fists into my chest.

“There are files on me,” I said. “You know what I do and who I am. Well, they do too. They have to know. It’s their job to know. When they saw where the car went all they had to do was cross check that against anyone in my file and they found you. That’s all. It’ll stop there. I promise.”

She looked at me with tears in her eyes and shook her head. Her arms lifted over her shoulders and then fell onto me, wrapping around my neck and squeezing tight. A mixture of her tears and hot breath washed over the side of my face. A knot formed in my stomach. I fought back feelings that I hadn’t allowed myself to feel in a long time.

I held her tight, running a hand through her hair until she stopped shaking. I let go, turned and got back in the car. The back door slammed and I checked the rear-view mirror to make sure she had gotten back in. She had.

“I’m calling Abbot.” I pulled out my cell phone, dialed the number and put the Tahoe in gear. The empty road behind me was a green light to jump back on the interstate. I pressed the gas and got the speed up to sixty. Abbot answered as I merged back into the travel lanes.

“Hello?”

“It’s Jack.”

He said nothing at first. I heard the sound of his fingers or an object banging on a hard surface. I pictured him sitting in his home office, behind his dark cherry wood antique desk. “What happened up there, Jack? You didn’t kill Delaney, did you?”

“What do you think?” I didn’t kill him, but I couldn’t help thinking that, in some way, I was responsible for his death. If I’d have just kept my damn mouth shut in Baghdad, none of this would be happening. I looked up into the rear-view mirror and caught Jessie’s eye. She smiled, and I looked away.

“I don’t think you did, but, well, that’s what’s being reported on-”

“I know,” I interrupted. “I saw the report. It’s BS, Abbot. We were ambushed. Delaney was hit in the back of the head. Bear took a slug to the shoulder. I tracked them down through the woods, but they had a car parked at the edge. They took off, and then returned to wait for us outside the parking lot. Managed to get by and fled on the interstate.” I paused, thought about whether or not I should tell him about Jessie. I didn’t. “The report came on TV. Then someone called for me, not on my number, and next thing I know these two spooks showed up outside at-” I avoided mentioning any names. “Outside the place we stopped to patch Bear up.”

There was a pause on the other end. I assumed he was filtering the brief conversation, trying to decide what to believe, who to believe, me or the news. I turned my head and looked at Bear, then shifted my eyes to the rear-view mirror to check on Jess. She sat just out of view, resting against the door. I returned my attention to the road. The stretch of interstate heading east toward Richmond, Virginia was empty.

“OK, Jack,” Abbot said. “Come to North Carolina. I need you close.”

“I’m not returning to Lejeune. If you think that then you can kiss my-”



“Don’t come to the base, Jack, for Christ’s sake. You think I’m an idiot?” He paused. Was he looking for an answer? Before I could respond, he continued. “Pick a place, but don’t tell me where. Some place close enough to Jacksonville that you can be there in a few hours, but far enough away you won’t be spotted accidentally.” It sounded like he shifted the phone in his hands and changed ears, the phone rubbing against his face with a sound like static as he did so. “Definitely stay far enough away that you won’t be made for a Marine.”

“You’ve seen my hair, Abbot. Nobody is going to mistake me for a Marine.” I laughed.

He didn’t. “This is no time for jokes, son. You two are in serious trouble.”

I said nothing. My eyes focused as far out as they could, settling someplace between the road, the mountains and the black darkness of the night sky.

“Some place quiet, Jack. I’m serious.” He cleared his throat. “And don’t go making a commotion when you get there. Call me in the morning, Jack. First thing.”

The line went dead. I dropped the phone in the center console. He wanted us to go someplace quiet. Plenty of places in North Carolina fit that description. He had a point. I’d want to be close enough that I could return to base if necessary. And definitely far enough away that nobody would recognize my face. He didn’t say what I knew he was thinking. Stay out of trouble. Whatever you do, stay out of trouble. Don’t give the police, or anyone else for that matter, a reason to pick us up. That would be a death sentence wrapped up like a Christmas present under the tree. And the sticker affixed to the wrapping paper would read Jack Noble.

Bear broke the silence a few minutes later. “What’d he say?”

“He said we’re in serious trouble.”

Jessie leaned forward. “I could have told you that.”

Bear started laughing, wincing between outbursts. Jessie joined in, and I did too.

The laughing trailed off. Jessie spoke up. “You think they’ll put some kind of broadcast out about my car?”

I looked at Bear who was already shaking his head at me. “They just might.”

## Chapter 12

Four hours later I took a random exit off I-95 just outside of Rocky Mt., North Carolina. That put us about two hours away from Lejeune. Close enough and far enough away all wrapped in one. Bear and Jessie slept. Each had had a rough night of their own. The silence didn't bother me. I welcomed it. It was much better than the uncomfortable silence between me and Jessie when she was awake.

The exit looped in a circle before leading us to a blinking red stoplight. To the left, the road crossed over the interstate toward town. To the right I saw a gas station and not much else. I turned left. The empty road was in stark contrast to the tall neon signs, each shouting, "Stop here for gas, food, coffee and lodging!" Some places had all in one. Nothing looked promising in this section of town, though.

I recalled the sign just before the blinking red light. *Gas .5 miles. Lodging 1.5 miles.* I made a U-turn in the middle of the road. I panicked for a second. Whipping around like that, crossing the median, could be enough for a cop to pull me over and run my ID. How would that look? Big bad Jack Noble taken down by a country cop for making an illegal U-turn. I shook my head and grinned. The rear-view mirror revealed no such encounter would take place tonight, at least not yet.

We rolled across the interstate overpass, past the open-all-night 24-hour gas station. The motel appeared suddenly after a curve in the road. The neon sign placed near the parking lot entrance blinked on and off. When switched on, it read "vacancy," which was enough to convince me to pull into the parking lot.

I parked the Tahoe by the front office then opened the door and hopped out of the vehicle and made my way around the

front. I heard another car door open and close. Jessie made her way to the lobby entrance and waited for me.

“You don’t need to come in,” I said.

She shrugged. “Tired of sitting.”

“It’s best you’re not seen with me.”

“Whatever, I’m going in.”

I opened the door and gestured her through first. A middle aged man with a shaved, pointed head sat behind the desk. He propped his chin upon his open palm, fingers wrapping back along his jawline to his ear. He opened his eyes and blinked repeatedly at the chiming of the string of bells hanging from the door, shaking and clattering together as we walked into the small dimly lit lobby. It smelled like mildew and pine tree car air fresheners. The odor lingered in the back of my throat.

The desk clerk sat up and tugged at the shirt hugging his barreled chest, straightening it out. “How can I help y’all?”

“Need a room for a couple nights,” I said.

“Two rooms,” Jessie said.

“No,” I leaned against the counter and turned my head to her, leaning in so we were eye to eye. “One room.” I emphasized each word equally.

“Excuse me,” she said, poking a finger in my chest. “If you think I’m about to spend the night in the same room as you and your partner-”

I placed my hand on her shoulder. “Jess, think about this for a minute.” Out of the corner of my eye I could see that the desk clerk had placed an arm on the counter and was leaning over it, a smile on his face. “We’ll talk outside.” I stood and turned toward the clerk. “One room. Two beds. Three nights.”

The clerk stood, sniffed and wiped his nose with his sleeve. “That’ll be two hundred fifty.”

I pulled a wad of cash from my wallet and dropped it on the counter.

“We don’t take cash,” he said.

I pulled out another fifty, dropped it next to the pile of cash.

“Ok, room 114, ‘round back.” He slid two keys across the counter.

We turned and left the lobby. The moment the door closed behind us, Jessie ripped into me.

“What the hell was that, Jack?” She jockeyed for position in front of me, walking backwards and poking me in the chest. “I don’t know what you are thinking, but if you think, for one moment, that you and I are going to-”

“I don’t think any of that,” I said. “Damn, what the hell do you think is going on here? You are riding with two fugitives. We got CIA, MPs, and probably the damn NSA on us. You want to be in a room by yourself when those guys show up? Do you?” I stepped back and turned sideways, extending my arm toward the lobby door. “Well then march right in there and get your own damn room.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but said nothing. She threw her arms in the air, turned and got back in the Tahoe.

I smiled and then climbed back inside and turned the key in the ignition.

“Just like old times,” Bear said.

“Shut up,” Jess and I said at the same time.

I shifted into drive and pulled around the back of the building, parking in a spot a few rooms down from ours. I wanted to leave as much visibility through the front windows as I could. I didn’t like the fact that we were at the back of the building. The only thing it had going for it was that we weren’t in the front, and were shielded from the road. But the positive fed right into the negative. We could easily be ambushed.

I put the key into the door and turned the knob. Felt along the wall to the left until I found a light switch. A dim, yellowish overhead light flickered on and off for a few

seconds before staying on and flooding the room. The room was barely larger than the lobby and had the same moldy, pine tree infused smell.

Bear pushed in from behind me. “Five star all the way, Jack.”

I shrugged.

“Seriously, man. Weren’t there better options in town?”

“Yeah.” There were. But there were also more people in town. More cops in town. More chances of being spotted in town. “We’re national celebrities right now, Bear. Further we are from town the better.”

“I suppose,” he said, moving to claim a bed for himself.

“You two bunking together?” Jessie asked.

I spun on my heel, ready to rip into her for the remark. She stood inches from me, looking up and smiling. The yellow light above us reflected off her dark brown eyes. Her olive complexion absorbed the light and radiated it outward.

“What?” she said. “No witty come backs?”

I forced a smile. I felt a burning inside that had disappeared a long time ago. I wanted to be with her again. Lean in and kiss her. Make love to her. Talk all night afterward.

“Ja-ack,” she said, singing my name. “Snap out of it.” Her hand slapped across my face lightly.

I smiled without having to force it and took a step back. “I’m going toward town. Saw a store that was open on the way in. Need to grab a few things.” I moved to the door, opened it and stopped. “Keys to the Tahoe are on the nightstand if you need them.”

“You’re not taking it?” Bear asked.

“No,” I said. “I need to take a walk.”

\* \* \*

The wind picked up during my walk and the cold night air bit at my face. It stung. It felt good. The country air and peaceful surroundings gave way to the sound of vehicles traveling on I-95. Families on vacation for spring break, business people driving overnight for their morning meetings, and truckers making the long haul from Florida to New York then back again. I filtered the sound of the traffic in my mind and allowed my brain to distort it. It reverberated through the air like waves at the beach. That calm feeling washed over me again. I laughed at myself for being able to relax with everything that had occurred in the last few days and the probable consequences hanging over me.

I followed the winding road through a stretch of woods. A tall bright signpost appeared front and center as I stepped past the wooded stretch. Two cars were parked next to gas pumps. A middle-aged man walked a golden retriever in the patch of grass between the gas station's parking lot and a closed diner.

I crossed the street and stopped in front of the store entrance to think for a minute, using the time to acclimate myself to the store's surroundings.

The man with the golden retriever returned to his mini-van and opened the back door. The dog jumped in the back seat, cuddling up to a little girl. The man nodded at me and jogged to the driver's side of the car. A minute later the car turned left out of the parking lot and turned right onto the interstate on-ramp, disappearing from site.

I opened the door to the store, a single chime greeting me as I walked through the open doorway.

"Hello," a cheerful young woman said from behind her register. She was dressed in black pants, a white button up shirt, and wore a red and white checkered vest. A red tag had the name Michelle printed on it in white lettering with a black outline. She wore her dark hair in a ponytail and wore too much make-up, perhaps to cover the ever present dark circles under her eyes and the premature lines on her face from a

lifetime of working odd shifts at places like this. Or maybe places even worse.

I nodded and looked away.

“Looking for anything specific?”

“No. I’ll just be a few minutes.”

She put her hands on the counter, slumped over and frowned, all the while nodding her head. “Okies. I’ll be here when you’re done.”

She must live for moments when someone would come into the store in the middle of the night and carry on a conversation with her.

I grabbed a hand basket and wove my way up and down the aisles, grabbing various items as I went. I had no idea what I wanted. Just needed to pass the time and clear my head. Jessie had thrown me for a loop at the motel. Now wasn’t the time for me to think about relationships and life after the military. And not just because of the current predicament I found myself in. It went beyond that. The life I led, and the life I foresaw myself leading for some time to come, left no room for love and relationships. Those things were liabilities in my world, not assets.

The basket grew heavy. I looked down and saw I had filled it to the top. That was my cue that I’d grabbed enough off the stocked shelves. I walked to the counter and placed the basket on it.

“Anything else?”

I looked around at the display to the side and shook my head. “No, this’ll be all.”

She babbled on, but her words didn’t register in my head. I stared out the window at a group of four men cutting through the parking lot to the store. A couple of them yelled at an elderly man filling his car with gas. The old man cut it short, hung the nozzle up at the pump and got in his car, driving off



in a hurry. The men laughed and slapped hands and pointed at the store.

“-and so I’m only doing this until I have enough saved to go back to college and then I’ll-”

“You know those men?” I gestured with my head toward the window.

Michelle bit her lip and nodded.

“Troublemakers?”

“One of them’s my ex,” she said. “And he’s not a nice guy. Ex-con.”

“What’d he do?”

She looked up from her scanner and the item in her hand. Her eyes watered over. “Tried to kill me.” She wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “You should go. Just take the stuff and go. Those guys are bad news, especially if they’ve been drinking.”

“Keep ringing this stuff up. Don’t say anything to them. Don’t acknowledge them. Got it?”

She said nothing.

The electronic chime rang when one of the men pulled the front door open. They stepped through one at a time and cut to the left, behind me, laughing as they walked down the aisle. I got a good glimpse at them as they came through. All dressed the same, old jeans, black Doc Martin combat boots, and heavy flannel shirts worn as jackets. Two had long hair, one had a shaved head, and the fourth kept his cut close on the side and spiked four inches on top. Only the bald man came close to matching me in size, but that didn’t mean I’d underestimate any of them. You never knew what a man was capable of until the moment of impact.

“This your new boyfriend, Michelle?”

She looked at me and said nothing then glanced down at the empty basket on the counter.

I looked up at the small TV fed by the security camera. The group of men approached from behind.

I turned around, held my arms out the side, resting my elbows on the counter. I made eye contact with the bald man leading the group.

He stopped six feet away from me. Far enough away that he could escape if I made a move. His guys fanned out, two toward the door, one on the other side. The bald man leaned to the side, looking around me. “Michelle, you hear me?”

Her breathing picked up. She said nothing.

“Bitch,” he said. “You better answer me.” He looked at me and then at her. He started to redden, first his neck and cheeks, then the rest of his pale face.

“I think,” I straightened up, “you should apologize and then leave.”

“Screw you, Jarhead.”

*Jarhead?* How could he tell? I looked nothing like a Marine. “I’m not looking for any trouble tonight-”

“Yeah, well you just found some.” He took a step forward.

*Keep it coming, baldy.*

“-I think you should turn around and go home. Sleep it off. Hell, go down to the highway and play *Frogger* with the semis for all I care. Probably do the world a favor.”

His eyes narrowed as he processed what I said. He looked to the side, toward the door, and laughed. Two seconds later he was in my face.

I didn’t flinch.

He did his best scary guy impersonation, shoulders back, face inches from mine. He exhaled heavily through his mouth. I could have gotten drunk on his hot alcohol stained breath if he stayed there long enough.

“What you got to say now?” he said.

My hand moved to the one of the displays on the counter. I fingered a few items until I felt that I had the item I wanted. I smiled then brought my hand forward. "I think you could use a breath mint."

One of the guys behind him laughed. The bald man turned. "Shut the hell up." He took a few steps back, never taking his eyes off of me. He started to shift from his left to his right foot and back. Was he contemplating his next move? Preparing to hit me? Turn and run? He probably didn't expect me to stand my ground like I had, with no sign of fear on my face. Sure the feeling was there, but I'd learned to control fear a long time ago.

"Mike, let's go," the one with spiky hair said. "Cameras in here, man. You ain't s'posed to be near Michelle, anyway."

Mike took a few more steps back and went to the door. Stopped and turned to face me again. "This ain't over. Got it?"

"Yeah it is, Mike," I said. "Now get the hell out of here before I mop the floor with your face."

The men left the store. Mike stopped in the open doorway, pointed at me then pounded his chest twice with his fist. The door slammed shut behind him. He jogged across the parking lot, holding his pants up with one hand, and caught up with his friends. They walked past the glow of the gas station lights and the night swallowed them whole.

"I-I'm sorry about that," Michelle said.

I waved her off. "Don't be. I'm not worried about those guys." I leaned over the counter. "I am worried about you though. You should probably lock up and leave."

She shook her head. "They won't be back. Besides, I'd get fired if I did that."

"They could be. And fired is better than dead."

"They're just drunk. He'll apologize in the morning. He's," she paused and turned toward the front of the store. "He's not supposed to get within one hundred yards of me. One call and

he'll go to jail. He knows that. He'll apologize in the morning." A tear rolled down her cheek.

I shook my head. Was there any point in trying? She'd made up her mind about the guy. I knew then that she eventually planned to go back to him. And one day, she'd likely pay with her life.

"Keep your eye out. Call 9-1-1 the moment you see them."

She nodded then looked away.

I dropped a hundred dollar bill on the counter, picked up the bag she'd filled with my items, and started toward the door.

"Hey," she said.

I turned back to her.

"Don't you want your change?"

"Keep it."

I pushed through the door. The cold air hit me like a baseball bat. Beads of sweat felt like tiny icicles as they dried on my skin. I crossed the parking lot diagonally and continued across the street. Five minutes later the roar of a diesel engine filled the air. It wasn't until the engine idled lower that I became concerned. The truck slowed to a near stop next to me.

"Yep, that's him," a voice said from inside the cab.

The truck lurched forward. Red taillights illuminated the immediate area as the truck jerked sideways and screeched to a stop in front of me. Four doors opened. Four men stepped out. The two longhaired rednecks were the first to approach. One held a shotgun. Mike stepped around the one on the driver's side of the truck.

"Hello, again," Mike said. "Remember us?"

## Chapter 13

Mike stood at the back of the truck, seven or eight feet away from me. His eyes were wide, his body slightly hunched over. He clenched and unclenched his fists a dozen times. A wide smile spread over his face. The man with the gun was to his left, on the shoulder of the road. The other two men moved toward the field. I expected one to stop when even with me and the other to continue behind me. Of course, these guys were amateurs, which meant anything was possible.

I stood my ground. I wouldn't make the first move unless forced to. Something told me that wouldn't be an issue, though.

The gunman shifted side to side. He was jumpy and sweat beaded on his forehead even though a nice breeze blew cool air into his face. Was this his first time pointing a gun at someone? Or the first time he did so with the intention of pulling the trigger? Either way, it concerned me. I had to take him out first.

The heft of my Beretta pressing against my side felt reassuring. I preferred to not use it, though. Not for those guys. I only had twelve bullets left and the way this day was going, I was sure I'd need them before the sun came up.

"Well?" Mike said.

I said nothing, keeping my focus on him and the gunman.

"Aw, c'mon, Jarhead," Mike said. "Ain't you got nothing funny to say?"

"No," I said. "You just said it for me."

"Huh?"

His smile faded and he squinted at me. It looked like he struggled to make sense of what I said.

The gunman didn't. A wry smile formed on his face and his eyes shifted between me and Mike.

“By the time you figure it out, you'll be unconscious. So it might benefit you to concentrate on the task at hand.”

The gunman threw his head back and laughed.

At least one of them had a sense of humor, or maybe he had smoked enough pot that I could say anything and he would laugh. I thought about testing this theory out by throwing some nonsense at him, but it made more sense to throw a shoulder into his gut. I had two seconds, maybe three, before his senses would return and he'd take aim. Another second at the most between him aiming and pulling the trigger. Unless he really was stoned, in which case, double those times.

The width of the truck separated Mike and the gunman. Mike stood slightly behind the bumper and the gunman near the corner.

I lunged at the gunman. One hand aimed at his throat, the other at the barrel of the gun. I needed to disable and disarm him at the same time. I took two steps before he opened his eyes. My left fist crashed into the soft spot of his throat about the same time recognition flashed in his eyes. I grabbed the barrel of the gun and twisted it so that his wrist bent unnaturally backward.

The gunman gasped and gargled for air. He steadied himself by placing his free arm on the lip of the truck bed.

I struck again with my left arm, driving my elbow into his nose. I delivered a swift kick to his kneecap. He went down and let go of the shotgun. I spun and stepped back toward the road, aiming the gun at the group of men approaching me.

Mike stood in the middle flanked by the other two men. The gunman rolled on the ground next to me, clutching his throat and sucking in whatever bits of air he squeeze into his shriveling lungs.

“Don't move,” I said.

The moon glinted off the blade of the serrated edge hunting knife in Mike's hand.

"Drop the knife or lose your hand," I said.

"Screw you," he said.

I studied his face. His upper lip curled and his cheek quivered. He looked crazy enough to charge me with the knife extended. I had a decision to make. Take the truck and haul ass, or shoot and add to my already inflated murder count. I aimed the shotgun and fired into the air over their heads.

The knife fell to the ground.

I emptied the gun and moved toward the men. Mike stepped up. I drove the butt of the gun into his stomach and followed it up with a smack across his head. He fell to the ground. The other two men came at me together. I kicked the spiky haired man in the gut. He doubled over. I smashed the butt of the gun into the back of his head. The fourth man pulled a knife. I tossed the gun into the bed of the truck. The odds were already against the longhaired man.

"I'm going to cut you, man," he said. "Then I'm going to slice your gut open."

His words sounded tough. But his twitching and shaking revealed how scared he was.

I didn't waste any time. I took a step toward him. Blocked his swipe at me and took control of his wrist. I spun inward and drove my elbow into the bridge of his nose.

He grunted and went limp. The knife dropped to the ground. I darted toward it and scooped it up.

I heard a voice speak up from behind me. "You and me."

I spun around and saw Mike standing six feet away, knife in his hand. Blood covered his forehead and split into three lines at his eyebrows. The streams of blood poured down his face. He wiped his sleeve across his eyes. Blood smeared across his cheeks.

“You don’t want to do this,” I said.

“Scared?”

“For you.”

He laughed then spit. “You don’t know me man.”

“Sure I do,” I said. “I know all about you. I’ve run into bitches like you every place I’ve ever been.”

He said nothing. He stuck his arm out and lunged toward me.

I stepped to the side and watched him slip by and fall to the ground.

Mike got to his knees and turned as he stood. He approached again, this time slowly and cautiously.

He brought his hands up and flipped the knife around in his hand to a tactical fighting position. The kind of position they teach in advanced combat training. Had he been a Marine or in the Army? Is that how he pegged me so easily? He stepped in and took a swipe at me.

I countered and played defense while he attacked. He’d already taken a couple heavy blows from me. He might have a few broken ribs and a concussion. All I had to do was wear him down and then knock him out.

I kept an eye on his friends in between his attacks. Only one stirred, but he wasn’t a threat, yet.

“Attack me,” Mike said. “C’mon.”

I said nothing. His attack was weak and easy to counter. He might have had training but it had either been a long time ago, or it had not been very advanced.

He broke pattern and swung wildly, opening himself up to a counterattack. I took advantage of the opening and sliced then stabbed, first into his side and then his shoulder. I took care to avoid any major organs and arteries. Despite this guy’s overwhelming sense of asshole, I didn’t want his death hanging over me.



The strike to his shoulder did enough damage to cause him to drop the knife.

I kicked him from behind. He crashed head first into the truck's liftgate. Fell to the ground. He got to his hands and knees and then, using the truck to help him, stood. He was shaky at first and slowly steadied.

Cars had passed during the fight. A few slowed down, but none stopped to help or intervene. One of them must have notified the police, because I heard sirens approaching.

Mike turned his head at the sound. He looked back at me and smiled.

“What the hell are you smiling at?” I said.

“You're going down, Jarhead. I'm untouchable here.”

I hiked my shoulders up an inch and let out a quick laugh before taking a step forward and whipping my right fist across his face. The thud of my fist connecting with his head coincided with the snapping sound of his jaw breaking. He fell back onto the truck. His head rolled forward. His eyes rolled backward. He collapsed on the ground in front of me.

I looked over my shoulder and saw blue lights reflecting off the sky. My cue to leave. I cut through the field and sprinted toward the trees. I ran blind until I was hidden in the cover of the woods, and even then my pace didn't slow down.

\* \* \*

“Jack,” Jessie said as I burst through the door. “What the hell happened to you?”

I looked in the mirror mounted over the dresser and noticed four cuts on my face and several on my arms. My adrenaline had been pumping so high, I didn't realize I had received the injuries while running through the woods.

“Jack?”

I spoke between breaths. “Took a jog through the woods.”

Bear lifted his head. “Why?”

I fell back onto the bed and stared at the yellow tinted popcorn ceiling.

Nobody spoke.

After a few minutes I went to the door and looked through the window next to it. "Bear, can you go around front and see if any cop cars are out there?"

"Cop cars?" he said. "What the hell did you do?"

I crossed the room and stopped outside the bathroom door. "I got jumped."

"Then why were you running?"

"The cops were coming."

"Again, why did you run?" Bear asked.

"Something the guy said," I said. "He said he was untouchable."

Bear shook his head. He got up and moved into my field of vision. "What happened?"

"That's not all," I said. "He made me for a Marine."

Bear shrugged. He hunched over and we were eye to eye. He nodded slowly and changed facial expressions repeatedly, like he was thinking about saying something but was stuck searching for the right words.

"Just go check out front," I said. "Stay out of view, though. There were four of them and only two are hurt enough to go to the hospital."

He moved to the door. Turned back and nodded, then stepped outside. The door closed with a thud.

I looked at Jessie. She smiled, but her furrowed brow gave her away.

"Jess," I said. "I'm sorry I got you involved in this. I wasn't thinking when we stopped-"

She waved me off. "I'm glad you showed up."

“Are you kidding? Your life might be ruined. Is ruined.”

She crossed the room and stood in front of me. Placed her hands on my shoulders and leaned in. I felt her hot breath on my neck. “My life’s been ruined since I walked out of yours.”

I leaned back. Our eyes met and locked in that familiar stare. She brushed her lips against mine and held them close. We kissed. My stomach tensed and eased. I was transported back in time for a moment.

She pulled back and dragged her hand down the side of my face.

I winced as her nails crossed a cut on my face.

“I’m sorry,” she said, leaning in to kiss the wound.

“It doesn’t hurt.”

She smiled, stood and grabbed my hands, pulling me to my feet. “C’mon. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

I stood and our bodies pressed together momentarily. She smiled and turned.

I followed her into the bathroom and closed the door behind me. She turned the faucet on. I spun her around and grabbed her by the waist. Lifted her onto the sink and leaned in to kiss her. She kissed me back. Our hands rediscovered each other. I pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Bear,” I said.

“Why are you thinking about Bear? Don’t tell me I was right about you two?” A smile formed on her lips as she winked.

I grabbed her hands and pulled them together, resting them on my chest. “He’s going to be back any minute.”

“Send him out again.”

“Too risky. This place is not safe.”

She sighed and leaned forward, placing her head on my shoulder, lips against my neck. “Should have rented two rooms.”

I stepped back and lifted her chin with my finger. We stared into each other’s eyes for a few moments.

“I have to fix this,” I said.

“Fix what?”

“This situation. I have to clear our names. Something stinks and I need to get to the bottom of it. But I promise, I’ll fix it.”

She tucked her bottom lip inside her mouth and let it slowly roll back out from under her front teeth.

“Is that all that needs fixing?”

I leaned in and kissed her again. “I want to fix us, too.”

She smiled.

“I’m done after this. Done with the Marines, the agency, the life.” I turned around and walked to the door. Stopped and looked back at her. “I want to come home to you.”

\* \* \*

“Where have you been?” I said to Bear when he opened the door and stepped back into the room.

“Relax,” he said. “Just checking things out.”

“How is it?”

“Seems calm,” he said. “But the cops are everywhere, up and down the street, Jack. We should think about getting out of here.”

I went to the door. “I’m calling Abbot.”

The wind had picked up since I ran back to the motel. The tall grasses behind the motel rustled in the breeze, filling the air with a hissing sound. I followed the wall to a corner and peeked around. Empty. Moved into the corridor between the buildings so I could get a look at the parking lot, which was

empty as well. I pulled out my cell phone and found Abbot's number. He answered midway through the third ring.

"Hello?" Abbot said. His raspy voice indicated I'd woken him.

"It's Jack," I said. "I'm sorry to wake you. We're in trouble."

"Where are you?"

"We're-" I debated whether or not I should tell him. I didn't. "Don't worry about that," I said. "We've got to move. But I need to run something by you first."

He grunted into the phone. "Where are my damn glasses," he said under his breath. "Jack, you remember the lake house?"

"Outside Wilson?"

"Yeah."

"I think I can find it."

Wilson, NC wasn't too far from where we were, just a short drive down I-95, not even thirty miles away.

"That's where I'm at now. Come out here. I've got something else for you."

"OK," I said. "We'll be there within an hour."

Abbot said goodbye and hung up.

I stuffed the phone back into my pocket. I stopped outside the motel room and leaned against the vinyl siding between the door and window. I thought about Jessie and what she might be thinking. Having her around felt like home, and I felt like myself again. The Jack Noble I was before I left for the Marines, before I agreed to become part of this damn joint program with the CIA, before I became a killer.

The wind whipped the clouds across the sky and revealed a blue canopy with pinholes of starlight illuminating through the

fabric of the universe. I grew tired of the cold and entered the room.

“Well?” Bear asked.

“He’s close by,” I said. “We can go. It’s a safe place.”

Bear nodded and Jessie stood next to the door, her hand on the knob.

We piled into the Tahoe. I started the ignition and drove along the narrow road that ran the length of the motel in between the building and the empty field. I rounded the corner and drove across the main parking lot. Pulled out onto the road and headed toward I-95.

“You think it’s safe to get on the interstate?” Bear asked.

I shrugged. It might not be, but that was the quickest way that I knew to get where we needed to go. “We’ll be all right.”

A row of blue lights came streaming toward us in the opposite lane. I turned my attention to the rear-view mirror after they passed by.

“Think they’re going to the motel?” Bear asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“How?”

“No clue.”

My phone rang and I pulled it out of my pocket and glanced at the display.

“General Keller.”

I started to answer, but stopped and looked at Bear. Keller would have to wait.

“The phone.”

We said it at the same time.

“For Christ’s sake,” I said.

I stopped the car, stepped out and threw the phone as far as I could. It landed on the other side of the overpass with a thud,

skidding along the asphalt and coming to rest out of sight.

## Chapter 14

Tall trees wrapped around Abbot's lake house on all four sides. A winding gravel driveway and a simple path to the lake provided the only break in the ring. The trees kept the wind out. Despite the cool air, sweat formed on my brow as I stood on the porch and knocked on the door.

The porch light flicked on and the door opened. Abbot nodded and stepped back, waving us inside.

I scanned the room. Not much different from the last time I was here. Two full-sized dark leather couches were placed in the middle of the room and faced each other. A table made from the wide trunk of a tree was placed in between the couches. An old recliner nestled up to the corner of the room. A big flat panel TV hung from the wall. That was new.

Abbot caught me staring at the TV. "That was a gift. Once everyone found out, they all wanted to come up here on Sundays to watch the game." He smiled and shook his head. "Can I get you all anything? Food? Drink?"

"I'll have a beer," Bear said. "No denying that I need one."

Abbot disappeared through an opening to the kitchen.

Bear and Jessie sat on opposite couches. I stood by the front door.

Abbot returned a few minutes later carrying a six pack of beer and a pizza box. Smoke escaped where cardboard edges met. The smell of cheese and tomatoes and dough lingered in the air. He set the beer and the pizza box on the tree trunk table. Then he opened the box and gestured toward it.

"It got here a few minutes before you three. Eat what you want." He sat down on the same couch as Jessie, leaning back into the corner and placing his feet on the table. "I've got two



spare rooms. Divvy them up how you see fit.” His eyes shifted from me to Jessie, then back to me. He smiled.

Jessie looked over at me and smiled as well.

“Don’t know how much I can sleep,” I said. “Once all this is over I’m probably going to spend a week in bed.”

Bear laughed. Through a mouthful of pizza he said, “You speak the truth, Jack.”

Abbot smiled through tightly drawn lips. He crossed and uncrossed his arms. His facial expressions changed often, and he drew his brows tight over his eyes while his lips pressed together. I caught him looking at me several times, and instead of keeping eye contact, he’d look away.

“We need to talk,” I said.

Abbot nodded and set his feet on the floor. He put a hand down on the arm of the couch and pushed himself up.

“Follow me to my study.”

Bear dropped half a piece of pizza in the box and leaned forward to get up.

“Stay out here,” I said as I held my hand out toward him. “Stay with Jess.”

Bear shrugged, grabbed his pizza and leaned back on the couch.

I followed Abbot out of the room and down a hallway. We said nothing. When we came to a set of six stairs, he turned and climbed them. I did the same. He reached the top and flicked on a light.

“Room’s new,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Built it last year. My study.” He shuffled some papers on his antique cherry wood desk. “Clarissa calls it my grandpa room,” he added.

“Is that right,” I said. “She has a kid now?”

He shook his head and looked down at his desk over his arms folded across his chest. He then leaned back in his leather chair.

“No, and I prefer she keep it that way. That girl has no business raising a child at this point in her life. Not after being raised by me.”

“How old is she now?”

“Nineteen.”

I pulled the key attached to the carbineer clip from my pocket and tossed it on his desk.

“That’s what I got from your contact.”

He pulled open a desk drawer and reached in.

I fought the urge to reach for my gun.

He lifted his eyes in my direction while keeping his face pointing down.

“Just getting my glasses, Jack.”

I nodded and sat back in my chair.

He pulled a thin pair of gold rimmed glasses from the desk drawer and put them on. They slid down his nose and he readjusted them with his thumb. The key sat on a white notepad. He picked it up and studied it.

“What’s it for?” he asked.

“Don’t know. Bullet ripped through his head before he could tell me.” I leaned forward, interlaced my fingers and rested my elbows on my knees. “I was hoping you would know.”

Abbot shook his head and tossed the key back toward me. “What do you think it unlocks?”

“Whatever is holding the documents? Look, Abbot, I don’t know what these documents contain, but it must be some heavy stuff for someone to take out Delaney like that. Not to mention follow me all the way down here.”

Abbot lifted an eyebrow. “They found you down here?”

I shook my head, stopped and shrugged my shoulders. “I can’t be sure. I went out. Ran into some rednecks. One of them struck me as odd. The way he placed me as a Marine, and said he was untouchable.”

Abbot’s eyes narrowed. He pulled out his cell phone and placed it on the desk.

“That’s another thing,” I said. “I am pretty sure they were tracking me through my phone.”

He sat up. “You didn’t bring it here, did you?”

“No. I jettisoned it before we got back on the interstate.”

Abbot picked up the phone and spun it in his palm. “I need you to wait outside the room for a few minutes, Jack. I need to make a call.”

I stood up. “Before I go...”

“Yeah?”

“You talk to Keller yet? He finally called me back, but that was when I realized they were tracking through the phone.”

“No, I haven’t heard from him yet. We can call him after I make this call.”

\* \* \*

I waited in the hallway, halfway between Abbot’s study and the living room. Bear and Jessie talked quietly in between bites of pizza and swigs of beer. The heat cut off and the house fell still. I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes. I felt calm and relaxed. For the first time in days I felt like I could lie down on the floor and sleep for six hours straight.

I paced the hall. Smiled at Bear from the end and turned back and walked the other direction. A series of pictures in a single frame hung neatly in the middle of the hall. Most were of Abbot’s daughter, Clarissa. The pictures were a chronology of her growing up. It had been five years since I last saw her, and she had been a gangly young teenager then. Half the

pictures were from then or before. The last picture looked to be the most recent, and she appeared to be quite grown up now. Her bright red hair had darkened and the freckles on her cheeks and nose faded.

Bear called from the other room. I walked down the hall toward the sound of his voice. Thirty seconds after I stepped into the living room I heard a crash and the sound of glass breaking. I froze in place for what seemed like minutes. I turned to run down the hall. A gunshot rang out and echoed down through the house.

“Get her away from the windows,” I shouted to Bear.

I raced down the hallway, drew my gun and kicked open the door to the study. Immediately I rolled to my right and backed up to the wall next to the open doorway. I led with my Beretta and peeked around the corner, up the stairs.

“Abbot,” I called.

He said nothing. It was quiet and a cool breeze flowed through the open doorway.

I took each step slowly, one at a time. Once eye level to the floor, I scanned the room. The only person I saw was Abbot. He was on the floor in front of his desk. I looked to the wall and saw the broken window. A jagged hole in the middle told me that the gunman had most likely stood outside the window, jammed his gun through and fired. How long had he been waiting out there for the perfect shot? Was he there when I was in the room, my back to the window? I ran my hand over the back of my head.

Abbot lay on the floor. His eyes fluttered. His breaths were short and rapid. Blood pooled below him, leaking from a hole in his chest.

“Jessie,” I called down the stairway and through the open doorway.

I walked over to the window. A risky move, given that it was pitch black outside and light inside. Whoever did this didn't stay around, though. They would have stormed the

house if they were after me. I had the feeling that this was a hit on Abbot.

And it was my fault.

Bear and Jessie entered the room.

“Cut the lights downstairs and turn on whatever outside lights you can find, Bear.”

Jessie hunched over Abbot, applying pressure to the wound. “Call 9-1-1.”

I walked back to Abbot, dropped to my knees next to his head.

He sucked in air, his head bobbing an inch, and tried to speak. His mouth worked hard to form the words.

“Jack.”

I leaned in close to his head.

He took two short gasps.

“F-F-Find C-Clarissa.” He paused for more air. “Watch over her for...” The words trailed off.

I took his hand in mind and cradled his head with my other hand. “I will, Colonel.”

“Th-the desk.”

His body went slack.

“Help me perform CPR,” Jessie said.

I stood, looked around the room and then at the desk.

“Jack,” she said.

“There’s no point, Jess. Look at him.”

She ignored me and went to work trying to revive Abbot. The words “lost cause” meant nothing to her.

I stepped over her and moved to the back of the room and stopped and stood behind Abbot’s desk. What did he want me to find there? I went through each drawer one at a time not

knowing what to look for. The drawers were organized, each having its own purpose. One had pens, markers, paper clips and other office supplies. Two were empty. The third contained a few file folders housing documents pertaining to the property. There was no actual file cabinet. The house served as Abbot's weekend home and he likely did very little in terms of work while here.

My eyes scanned the desktop. Back and forth I looked for anything that wasn't there when I sat across the desk from Abbot. Nothing seemed out of ordinary. There was his computer monitor, an award of some sort, his desk calendar, and a picture of Abbot and Clarissa when she was a little girl. He held two fishing poles and she held up a nice sized largemouth bass.

Jessie rose from the other side of the desk. Her blood covered hands hung by her side. Tear stained cheeks were red with frustration. She shook her head and looked down at the floor. She blew upwards to get a strand of hair out of her face.

"I'm sorry, Jack."

"I know. Nothing you could do, Jess. This is my fault."

"No, Jack. Don't say that."

"I called him. We showed up. Half an hour later he's dead. Hard to ignore the damn pattern."

She said nothing. Her eyes scanned the desktop.

"I need to get you someplace safe. You're in danger with me."

"What are you looking for?" she asked, ignoring everything I had just said.

"He said, 'the desk.'" I gestured across the six-foot long, three foot wide desktop. "So I'm looking on the desk."

"Maybe inside the desk?"

I shook my head. "I checked. Nothing that made sense in there."

She started to speak, and stopped after letting out an *ah* sound.

“What is it?”

She hesitated and bit the left side of her bottom lip. She lifted her head and initiated eye contact. “202.”

“What?”

She reached out and pointed at the calendar.

“202.”

I followed her hand. There it was, 202, followed by a dash, three more numbers and another dash followed by three more numbers.

“202 is D.C.,” she said. “It’s a phone number. Missing a digit, but still a phone number.”

“And a name,” I said. “Look.” I put my finger down on the calendar next to the name and number. “Connors.”

“Who is that?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s either who Abbot was talking to or who he was being referred to.”

“The desk,” Jessie said.

“I need to find him.” I tore off the section of the calendar with the name and number and stuck it in my pocket, then gestured to Jessie to follow me.

Bear met us in the living room. “We should go, Jack.”

I nodded. I had a feeling the police would show up soon. Whoever did this would try to frame me for it. My prints were all over the house by this point, and we had no time to clean up.

“Go start the car,” I said. “I’m going to take a quick look around.”

Bear ran to the door. His heavy steps reverberated through the floor. He left the house.

“Should I go outside?” Jessie asked.

“Stay with me.” I led her into the kitchen. “Look for bottled water and food we can take with us.”

She scavenged the kitchen while I checked the table, drawers and cupboards. A phone hung on the wall. A piece of paper was held in place behind a piece of plastic above the number pad. The paper contained a few names and numbers. My name was there, so was Keller’s. That wasn’t what I was looking for though. At the top of the list was the name Clarissa. Next to her name was a 212 phone number. New York City. I popped the plastic off the phone, grabbed the piece of paper and stuffed it in my pocket. I checked over my shoulder. Jess didn’t seem to notice.

“We can go,” I said.

I left the kitchen with Jessie following behind.

Bear stood in the open doorway blocking our exit to the outside.

“Everything all right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Let’s go then.”

“It’s too all right, Jack.”

“What do you mean?”

“If you did this wouldn’t you do something to the car?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, most likely.”

“They didn’t.”

“What’re you thinking, Bear?”

“They didn’t even slash a tire to stop us.”

I said nothing. Bear’s brain was processing this in parts. I wasn’t sure where he was going with it.

“I half expected the car to blow up when I started it.”

“But it didn’t.”



“Yeah, I know.” He turned and crossed the porch.

I grabbed Jessie’s hand and led her outside with my gun drawn. The passenger side of the car was shielded to the woods. I opened the back door for her and then ran around the front of the Tahoe and got in the front seat. I shifted into drive and drove down the gravel driveway in the dark.

“Lights?” Jessie asked.

“Not till we’re on the road,” I said. “Might be an ambush.”

“They would have done it inside,” Bear said.

I nodded. “I’m not taking any chances.”

I eased onto the road and drove a half mile before turning on the headlights. I continued on to I-95 and took the northbound on-ramp.

Half an hour passed without a word being spoken.

“Jack?”

I looked over at Bear. He held his right arm tight to his chest.

“How’s the shoulder?” I asked.

“Hurts. I think the stitches came out. It’s bleeding.”

I focused on the road ahead at a steady stream of cars in tight lines heading northeast into the rising sun. The sky changed from dark blue to light blue to purple and orange as the sun peeked up over the horizon. I soaked the sunrise in. The colors calmed my mind.

“What the hell is going on, Jack?”

I searched my mind for the answer.

“I’ve got no idea.”

“All this, for beating up a couple damn CIA agents?”

“People are dying. We’re being framed. It goes beyond that, Bear.”

“They killed that family.” He paused and looked out his window. “Dammit, we stopped them and they still killed that family. Little kids. The wife.”

I said nothing. It had been on my mind the whole time. I felt responsible. Maybe Martinez had no intentions of hurting the family. But I stepped in and signed their death certificates in doing so.

“Maybe it’s that simple,” Bear said. “Maybe some other group killed the family ‘cause they were afraid the family talked to us. Easy enough to pin on us.”

The thought had crossed my mind already. But it was too simple, too clean. That would be easy to refute. “Doesn’t explain Delaney and Abbot. There’s something else going on here. Someone or some group behind this. And there’s a damn reason. We’re close to finding something out, and someone doesn’t like that.”

Bear leaned his seat back and crossed his left arm over his right. “What now?”

“I’m going to D.C.”

“We should be there in what, five hours?”

“Not we. Just me.”

“Like hell. I’m coming with you.”

“Look at you. You’ll weigh me down.” I hated saying it. If I had to run, Bear would be a liability. “Besides, I need someone to watch over Jessie.”

“Screw you, Jack.”

## Chapter 15

I dropped Bear and Jessie off at a hotel in Petersburg, Virginia and swapped the Tahoe for a rental car just outside of Richmond. It crossed my mind more than once that the Tahoe might have been bugged. It was risky driving the Tahoe as far as I did. But I figured whoever was after me had proved time and again that they would wait until I was settled somewhere before striking. Why would now be any different? Besides, I still wasn't sure that they followed us to Abbot's. The hit on Abbot could have been in motion long before he told us to come out to his lake house. That made sense. The hit had been planned before he talked to me. Otherwise, why not send a team and take all of us out?

I stopped at a convenience store and picked up a TracFone, then got back on I-95 northbound to Washington, D.C. The sedan provided a smoother ride than the Tahoe. I caught myself falling asleep more than once.

I exited the interstate in Springfield, Virginia and stopped at the first hotel I found. Paid cash for a two night stay. The hotel wasn't fancy, a two story place with outside entrances to each room. I drove to the far end and walked up a flight of stairs to room 228. I ran the green programmed key card through the lock and the door clicked open. I stepped into the room. To my right was a bathroom. To the left a full length mirror followed by a shallow closet. A dresser with a TV on it leaned up against one wall. Across from the dresser was a queen sized bed. On the far side of the bed was a round table with two chairs.

I pulled out the TracFone and the torn paper with Conners and the phone number missing one digit written on it. Blood stained the paper. Abbot's blood. My jaw clenched as anger built inside of me. I started dialing the number, stopping after the ninth digit. I tried to decide what number to press next. My

finger hovered over the button labeled with the number five. Instead of pressing the button, I flipped the phone shut. Once I heard a voice on the other end of the line I'd need to act on whatever information it gave me. Right now I needed sleep. Sure, I'd been trained to operate in sleep deprived situations, and I had been since leaving the little house in Iraq. But now I needed every bit of cohesion and clarity I could muster.

I took off my clothes and hung them over one of the chairs next to the table. Placed my gun on the nightstand and laid down. I was out within five minutes.

I awoke in a dark room. It took a few moments to remember my location and why I was there. I sat up and turned to look at the window. The sunlight that penetrated the folds of the drapes had disappeared. I pulled back the shades and saw that it was dark outside, too. I grabbed my watch. Seven p.m. I brushed off the initial burst of anger and took a deep breath. Seven hours of sleep would prove beneficial. A pen and pad of paper were placed next to my gun on the nightstand. I grabbed all three and moved to the table. My stomach growled. I leaned over and checked through the drapes. A Mexican restaurant next door caused my mouth to salivate.

I quickly dressed and left my room. Crossed the parking lot and entered the restaurant. I ordered take out and returned to the room to eat.

I picked up the pen and wrote Connors at the top of the notepad. Below that I wrote the nine digit number and below that I wrote the numbers zero through nine in order. My finger had hovered over five before I had lain down to sleep, so I decided to start with that one.

A raspy voice answered the phone midway through the first ring. "Hello?"

"Is this Connors?"

"Who's this?"

"This is, uh, a friend of the Colonel's."

“I know lots of Colonels. Which one?”

I took my chances. “The one who’s dead now.”

There was silence on the other end. Finally, the man spoke up. “Christ.”

“First guess. What a surprise.” After a pause I added, “I was in the house when he was murdered.”

“OK, so you are who I think you are and I am who you think I am.” He coughed. “We shouldn’t say much else on the phone.”

“Agreed. Where can I meet you?”

“Carlito’s, it’s a-do you know your way around the city?”

“Well enough.”

“19th and I Street. You can’t miss it.”

“You sure-” I searched for the right words. “Listen, Conners. People are dying everywhere I go. I get the feeling I’m being framed. But, do you...is this place safe?”

“It is, and you are. Meet me at nine thirty tonight.”

The line went dead. I flipped the phone shut and set it on the table. I stood and peeled back the curtains covering the window and studied the parking lot outside. The hotel’s lot was motionless. A few cars came and went as families stumbled out of the restaurant and others made their way inside to take the place of those who had just left. The cycle of life, somewhat.

I wasn’t sure about Conners. The cautious nature of our phone call and the reaction to Abbot’s death made me think he was on my side, or a good actor. Aside from Bear, General Keller was the only other person I could trust. But I’d have to give Conners the benefit of the doubt. If the meeting turned out to be a double cross, I’d be ready.

\* \* \*

I left my car in the hotel parking lot and walked two blocks to the Metro station. I didn't want to risk losing the rental in the city if things went wrong. No one knew I was out here in Springfield, and I'd be happy letting them assume I stayed in the city somewhere. The train ride took half an hour. I got off at the Farragut West metro station. A few passengers exited the train before me. I followed them through the station, staying close to a group of two men and a woman. Took the stairs up and emerged at the corner of 17th and I Street. I took a moment to get my bearings down. Across the street was the Farragut Park, a city block in length and half a city block in width. The park divided the north and southbound lanes of 17th Street.

I walked two blocks to the west, away from the park, and found Carlito's. The tinted windows of the restaurant made it impossible to see inside. I crossed the street and walked up to the entrance. A blue neon sign formed the image of a Martini glass with the restaurant's name next to it. I opened the door and stepped in. A man in a black suit and purple tie stood behind a wooden pulpit and asked for my name.

"I'm meeting someone."

"Name of the party you're meeting?"

I didn't answer. My eyes scanned the occupied tables in the restaurant. Eight couples, four families, a woman eating alone and in the back a single man. I walked toward the single man.

"Sir, you can't do that."

I looked over my shoulder. "I found him. It's all good." I continued walking, ignoring his protests.

The man at the table looked around the room. His head stopped when he saw me and his back straightened. He looked to be mid-fifties, maybe older. Short gray hair and a gray beard framed his face. He wore a blue sweater and tan slacks. He stood when I reached the table.

"Noble," he said.

“Conners.”

I sat down on the padded leather bench seat across from him. A wood and glass partition separated us from the table behind me.

“Hungry?” He nodded at the waiter standing beside the table.

“Coffee,” I said to the waiter.

Conners waited a moment then said, “Tell me from the beginning.”

“I have a feeling you already know.”

“That might be true, but I need to hear your version.”

“Why don’t you tell me your version?”

“We can go back and forth all night, Noble. But if you want my help you are going to start from the beginning.”

“What kind of help can you provide me?”

“More than enough.”

“You know where this leads?”

“I think I do.”

“You think or you know?”

Conners sighed and shook his head. “You’re not calling the shots here, Jack. Please, work with me.”

I studied the man’s face. His blue eyes didn’t waver. He slightly tipped his head down and lifted his eyebrows. An outstretched arm and extended fingers reached toward me. He looked like he genuinely wanted to help. I didn’t have much choice but to trust him, so I started from the beginning. I told him about the first six months in Iraq, shifting between different ops teams, each time given less and less responsibility. I told him about the family and Martinez’s behavior and then recounted the scene in the street when Bear and I were mobbed by the group of Iraqi men.

“Wouldn’t being attacked so close to the house be something that might have resulted in retaliation by you?” he asked.

“Why’s that?”

“They were ready to kill you.”

“No,” I said. “They were defending their turf.”

He shrugged and I continued telling him the events in order, as best as I remembered them. Occasionally he stopped me to ask a question or two, but for the most part he nodded as he listened to me rattle off the events of the last few days.

The waiter returned to the table with my cup of coffee while I was telling Connors about Abbot’s murder. I had to stop mid-sentence. I dropped my voice to a scratch above a whisper after the waiter left.

He exhaled loudly after I gave him my version of Abbot’s murder.

“Quite a story, Jack.”

“It’s more than a story.”

“I know.”

“Your turn. Spill.”

He looked around the restaurant.

“I don’t know how much I can tell. In here.” He shrugged. “Now.”

I said nothing and gave him a look that said he had better talk.

“Hey, aren’t you worried about being spotted? Your damn picture was all over the TV and papers here.”

“Stock photo of me in uniform.” I ran my hand through my hair. “Doesn’t look like me with this hair and beard.”

Connors shrugged.



I waited for him to talk while he took a few bites of steak and washed it down with the amber beer in front of him.

I lit a cigarette.

“This is a non-smoking restaurant,” he said through a mouthful of steak as he leaned forward and scanned the restaurant to make sure no one saw me light it, like a lookout in the boy’s room in a high school.

“Don’t care.”

“OK,” he put his fork and knife down on the edge of his plate, “I’ll talk.”

I waited.

“Delaney,” he said. “He gave you something, right?”

I nodded, didn’t say anything.

“Did he tell you where to go next?”

“A bullet stopped him.”

“Not yours, right?”

I cocked my head and didn’t answer.

“Right, I know. OK, so...Delaney, he gave you a, uh, something that leads to something else.” He lifted an eyebrow, waiting for a response.

I nodded.

“Only you don’t know where to take what he gave you?”

I waited for him to continue. When he didn’t, I responded, “That’s right. That’s what I told you a few minutes ago.”

“OK, OK, Jack. I’m just making sure-”

“Cut the crap, Conners. For all we know someone is twenty minutes behind me and is going to open fire in here in a few minutes.”

A couple of diners stopped mid-conversation and looked at me.

I smiled and waved.

“We’re actors. Just rehearsing lines.”

They shook their heads and returned to their conversations.

“Dammit, Jack. Calm down. Let me be thorough.”

I’d grown tired of thorough. I wanted names. I wanted reasons. None of this ‘confirm you did this and that’ crap he kept feeding me.

“Greyhound,” he said.

“The bus line?”

“Yes, the key goes to a locker at the Greyhound station.”

“What’s there?”

Conners clenched his jaw. Thick muscles worked in back and he pursed his lips together. “I don’t know for sure.”

“Who’s there?”

“Don’t know that either.”

“Did you work with Delaney?”

“Yes.”

“Who do you work for?”

“Can’t tell you that.”

I took a sip of coffee. “Why can’t you tell me?”

“Because, officially, we don’t exist.” He waved his hands in the air, partly to be demonstrative and partly to waft the smoke away. “Officially, I don’t exist.”

I nodded while keeping my eyes focused on his. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility. Even within the known agencies there were departments that didn’t exist. I was attached to one of them. There were also men who didn’t exist, men who were worse than Martinez. Men who did things that people refused to acknowledge could be done in the name of freedom. The things that had to be done to defend that

freedom. Nobody wants to think of what actions must be performed to keep them safe.

“Sounds like a cushy position.”

“Jack, you get those documents and call me. I need to take a look at them and then we can figure this out.”

“What’s the locker number?”

He shook his head and looked to the side.

“B915.”

I reached into my pocket, pulled out the key and tossed it at him.

“Here, you go get it yourself then.”

He pushed the keys back to me.

“Don’t be stupid. One call and you’re locked up for life.”

I narrowed my eyes and stared him down for fifteen seconds.

“That’s what this comes down to?”

He slumped over and placed his elbows on the table.

“I’m sorry, Jack. That was uncalled for.”

I said nothing.

“I know where this goes. Most of it at least. And if I go get those documents, and someone is waiting, I’m a dead man. Look at me.” He waved his hands in front of his body. “If I die, then all knowledge of this dies. And you’ll most likely die. As a traitor, too.”

“And if I go there and someone is waiting?”

“You got more than a fifty-fifty chance to take them out.”

I sat back and crossed my arms. There weren’t many possible scenarios, but each one that existed played through my mind. The best option was for me to go to the Greyhound station and retrieve whatever sat inside the locker. I reached

across the table and grabbed the key. Slid across the bench and stood next to the table.

“I’ll call you in a few hours.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

I turned and started to walk away.

“Jack,” he said.

I looked over my shoulder.

“Like I said, I know where this goes. If you decide to open those documents, you need to prepare yourself for what’s in there.”

I walked back to the table.

“Where is that?”

Conners shook his head. “I can’t tell you. Not until I know you are one hundred percent on my side.”

“You haven’t figured out that I am?”

“No. Once you return, I’ll know, though.”

## Chapter 16

The D.C. Greyhound station was located on 1st Street, about two and a half miles from the restaurant. I decided to walk. I went a block north to K Street then headed east until I reached 1st Street. I figured the later I arrived at the station the better. Chances were the schedule thinned out at night, resulting in fewer people around.

A cold wind blew down the street, numbing my face and carrying a combination of wood smoke and exhaust fumes. The sky clouded over. It looked as if a spring snow storm was brewing.

My watch read 11:30 when I reached the Greyhound station. I walked up 1st Street and turned on L Street. Continued past the bus station and stopped. A tree in bloom provided cover from the evenly spaced black wrought iron lamp posts that lined the sidewalk. I leaned against the tree and scanned the area. The activity across the street was virtually nil, with only a few people here and there. A red four door sedan pulled up and dropped off a young woman, late teens or early twenties, probably heading back to college after her spring break.

I scanned the parking lot behind me and didn't see anything out of the ordinary. There were only a dozen or so cars, all parked close to the lights. They belonged to employees, I figured. There was nothing that resembled a government official's car.

I pushed off the tree and walked across the street. The area behind the glass double door entrance was empty. I pulled the door open and stepped into the yellow tinted bus station. Directly in front of me was a large board displaying a digital schedule. To the left was a bank of windows. Ropes stretched out and across, creating a maze for passengers to wait in

before buying their tickets. No one was in line. Only one window was occupied by an overweight lady reading a book. She looked up and then quickly back down when I made eye contact with her.

To my right were several rows of seats in a blue and white checkerboard pattern. I turned and headed that way. The outside facing wall was blank, painted a drab brown. The back wall was lined with lockers, as was the area to the left of the seats. The place was filled with row upon row of gray and blue and green painted lockers.

Only six seats were occupied, consisting of two couples and two individual travelers. None took note of me. I walked down the aisle in the middle of the seating area and took a seat at the last row. Then I watched and waited.

I let an hour pass. I did nothing. I talked to no one. I let my eyes wander to the row of lockers and focused on row B. No one entered. No one exited. Nice and quiet. Part of me felt it was too quiet. Could I trust Connors? If he wanted me to go down, this was the perfect set up. I was trapped here. A tactical team would have no trouble extracting me, dead or alive. I brushed the thought aside. He could have had me taken care of outside the restaurant. The way I saw it, he wanted to get his hands on these documents as much as I did. If he planned on taking me down, he'd do it after I handed them over to him. The simple solution was to not hand them over.

I got up and went outside, stopped near the glass doors and watched the sparse traffic as it passed. A car drove through the loop that ran in front of the building. It slowed near the entrance, but never stopped. Tinted windows blocked any view inside of the car.

I took a deep breath before walking back inside. The cold air cleansed my lungs. I headed toward the rows of lockers and turned at the row labeled B and walked past locker B915. I stopped ten feet away and looked over my shoulder. No one followed me. I cut down a cross aisle and turned at row L where I grabbed the key out of a random locker. If I needed to

stash anything, I'd do it in that locker. Probably the last place they would look.

I went back to row B, peeking around the corner to make sure no one was waiting by locker B915. Satisfied that the row was empty, I walked up to the locker. I stood there for a few minutes, key in hand, debating whether or not to open it. I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being set up. I didn't know Connors well enough to put double crossing me past him. Hell, it didn't even have to be him. It could be any number of people I'd apparently pissed off recently.

I took a deep breath, exhaled and stuck the key in the locker. Turned it and opened the rectangular metal door. It squeaked against its hinges. Inside sat a black bag with a zipper on top and a mesh back. I grabbed the bag and turned away from the front of the bus station. I walked down the aisle until it opened up into an empty seating area.

This time I sat in the first row of seats. I pulled my jacket open, clearing a path to my Beretta. My heart beat fast and my breath quickened. The training I had been put through taught me how to control panic. I followed the steps and relaxed myself to the point where I could focus.

I unzipped the bag and looked up.

Two men stood fifteen feet away from me. Two men, that upon second glance, I knew.

“Jack Noble.”

I nodded while zipping the bag shut.

“Gallo, Bealle.”

Gallo stepped forward. A towel hung over his hand, a weak attempt at hiding his weapon. He smiled when my gaze lifted from the gun to meet his eyes. “Let's go, Jack.”

\* \* \*

Bealle walked in front of me. Gallo behind, his gun pressed into my back. I held the bag tight to my chest. For some reason they didn't try to take it, at least not yet.

We stepped through the front door and the wind hit like a wall of ice. The sweat on my forehead evaporated and gave me a slight chill.

They led me down L Street to an empty parking lot. We moved to the middle of the dirt and gravel lot, stopping outside the range of the street lights.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” Gallo said.

“What’s the gun for then?”

“Our protection.”

I said nothing and kept the bag secure in my arms.

“We aren’t too keen on taking you on again, especially after what you’ve been through.”

“How’d you know I’d be here?”

“We have sources,” Bealle said.

“Conners?”

“No. I don’t know any Conners.”

“Me either,” Gallo said. “Let’s go someplace we can sit down and talk.”

I wondered if that was for their protection as well.

We walked through the streets of Washington, D.C. until we found a twenty-four hour diner. Gallo asked for the booth in the corner by the window. He sat against the wall. I sat with my back to the restaurant and Bealle squeezed in next to me. I placed the bag between my left leg and the window.

A brown haired waitress came to our table. I ordered coffee. Gallo and Bealle ordered water.

“What do you know, Jack?” Gallo asked.

I shrugged. “Not much. I know that you guys framed me for the murder of that Iraqi family-”

“That wasn’t us, Jack.” Gallo placed his elbows on the table. He leaned forward. “Martinez was pissed. He probably



still is. You made him look bad and then kicked his ass. He's a hothead. But it's not like him to go back, murder a family and then frame you."

"What were we doing there that night?" I asked. "Were we there to kill the man?"

Gallo glanced at Bealle and nodded.

"Yes," Bealle said. "If he didn't give up the information he was to be terminated."

"What about the woman?"

"No, that wasn't part of it."

"Martinez took that too far," Gallo said. "That's something we agree on. But, you know, there are no rules, man. We're hunting out there and we need to get the information and neutralize the threat before it gets too far."

"And that's where you screwed up, Jack," Bealle said. "Repeatedly you've gotten in our way. Not just us, but other teams."

"It's because I can't work like that. I'm not some security detail. For eight years I've worked on these teams and always been involved. Now we go to Iraq after the attacks and I'm standing in doorways and providing the muscle. Hell with that."

I leaned back in my seat and crossed my arms over my chest and looked out the window at drunken people pouring out of a bar. I checked my watch and saw that it was now two a.m.

Gallo took a moment and responded. "It's not just you. Other teams in the co-op are having this issue as well."

I hiked my shoulders and held out my hands in a '*who-cares?*' gesture.

"What else do you know?" Gallo asked.

"I know that half the people who come in contact with me end up dead. Stick around and you might skew that ratio even

further.”

Gallo smiled.

“I know that somehow they tracked me. I figured they used the cell phone and got rid of it. Still, Abbot was killed.” I locked eyes with Gallo. “They murdered him and left me alone. So tell me, what the hell is going on here?”

Gallo took a drink of water and leaned back. “There were six teams. You know that, you were there with us. Six teams, a dozen Marines.” He turned and looked at the window at the crowd of people passing by, laughing and talking with each other. “Four are dead, six are in prison on base and you and Logan are on the run.”

The gravity of the situation hit home. I opened my mouth to speak. Nothing came out.

“You see where this is going?”

“What are they in prison for?”

“Returning to the scene of an interrogation and murdering any Iraqis there.”

I felt sick. “Why didn’t-why didn’t Abbot tell me this?” My mind raced as the world closed in. “He was about to. He had to make a call for my next contact, but he was going to tell me this before I left.”

Gallo shrugged and shook his head.

“What did you tell them when they asked about the family?” I asked.

“They never did,” Bealle said. “At least, they never asked us. Who knows if they asked Martinez?”

“Where is Martinez?”

“We haven’t seen him since that night. Word is he took leave and came back...”

“Here,” I said. “He’s in D.C.”

Gallo nodded and continued. “We never filed a complaint, signed a statement, nothing against you or Logan. And the other teams we’ve spoken with said the same. But...”

“But?” I hung on his words and watched as his face twisted in thought.

“There was always a team that didn’t have, uh, Marines attached. Six CIA agents, that’s it. I don’t mean us. Martinez and five agents.”

I knew where this was heading.

“We never worked with Martinez until a few months ago.”

“When they reorganized the teams,” I said.

Gallo nodded and continued. “Well, can you guess who took over the other five teams?”

“I’m guessing the other five men who worked on the CIA only team.” I said.

“Yup,” Bealle said.

I turned in the seat and leaned back against the glass so I could see both of them. I didn’t care who was outside. If someone was going to take me out, let them do it.

“Someone is trying to take apart the program then,” I said.

Both men nodded.

“That’s what we think,” Gallo said.

“Any ideas who?”

“We’ve been trying to determine that. Doing our own investigation. We can’t find anyone who knows. It’s coming from high up, whether in our agency or outside of it, it’s high up.”

I thought about it for a second before responding. “So why not just terminate the program? Send us back to the Marines to finish our careers behind a desk and merge your teams together. That would make more sense, right?”

“Absolutely,” Gallo said. “Why wouldn’t they do that? That’s what we can’t figure out.”

“Because someone else high up is pushing to keep the program going.”

Gallo shrugged. “Makes sense.”

“Another question, then. So we’re saying that someone wanted us out of the way. Any ideas why?”

“So we can act however they want us to. There were too many incidents like yours where a Marine got in the way.”

“You say that like we’re some damn choir boys.”

Both men laughed.

“It also makes me question what they were going to do once we were out of the way.”

Gallo nodded. “Yeah, I wonder too. I think I have an answer, but I don’t want to believe it.”

I held out my hands. “Might as well.”

Gallo opened his mouth to speak, but didn’t.

Bealle said, “I think you know where he’s going with that, Jack. Let’s not go down that road. Right now we just want to put a stop to what’s going on.”

“What do you care?”

“We might not agree with the new direction. And if that’s the case, we might be terminated also.”

We said nothing for five minutes. The three of us sat in silence. I went over the conversation, making an extra mental note of the most important parts. I hoped that whatever was in the folder in the black bag could shed some light on what they said.

Gallo slid out of his seat and stood in front of the table. “Jack, we’re going to leave you for now.”

Bealle placed a piece of paper in front of me. “Those are our numbers. Call in the morning and we’ll meet up. Give you

some time to absorb this. Think it over. Maybe something will click.”

With that, they left. I got up and switched seats so my back was against the wall, giving me a view of the diner. I watched Bealle and Gallo leave, keeping my eye on them until they turned out of sight. I had to shake my head as I looked around the diner. How had I missed so many people entering?

When the waitress came by, I ordered another cup of coffee. A few minutes later she returned and set the coffee down in front of me. I declined when she asked if I needed anything else. I watched her walk back to the wait station, and then I pulled the black bag onto my lap and unzipped it. I slid the manila folder out of the bag and set it on the table. My thumb and forefinger wrapped around the outer corner of the folder. I took a deep breath and opened it.

I didn't know exactly what to expect, but my initial reaction was disappointment. There were just a few papers inside and nothing else. I turned the papers over and read the first line.

Then I read it again.

“Holy shit,” I said out loud, garnering more than a few looks from the resident bar-goers in my presence.

There, on the first line of the first document was the name Robert Marlowe, Deputy Secretary of Defense, a man who had a vested interest in the situation in Iraq for sure.

## Chapter 17

The list of names on the paper included several that I didn't know. Marlowe was the most damning. I recognized a few other politicians as well as some of the upper brass of the Armed Forces. The best plan of action was to confront Marlowe. And that's why I stood across the street from his house at four in the morning.

Marlowe's house was an end unit on a block of row homes. The houses were recently built and designed to look two hundred years old.

The quiet tree lined block offered enough cover for me to watch the house from the street. So I did. I leaned back against a tree and staked out his house for half an hour. I watched for movement. Saw none. I crossed the street, walked past his house and turned right on the cross street. This led me along the side of his house. I looked to the side. All three windows were black.

An alley cut behind the row homes, separating their backyards from the homes on the next street. The alley was wide enough for a garbage truck to fit through plus a few feet on either side. Dotted along the alley were blue plastic trash bins, each pushed up against a continuous six foot wooden privacy fence.

I pressed back against Marlowe's fence and waited five minutes. The stillness of the morning allowed me to hear anything that moved, which amounted to nothing more than a cat.

I pulled myself up on the fence and threw my leg over. A breeze blew by, warmer and thicker with humidity than what I'd felt during the past day. I looked up at the sky. The moon hung high directly above. To the west a thick line of dark clouds approached. I couldn't help but think how convenient

the trashcan and impending spring storm were. If I needed to dispose of a body, this would be the day.

I crouched and moved to the back outer corner of the fence. Again, I watched the house for any signs of life inside. The windows promised darkness behind the brick and pale colored vinyl siding.

I reached into my jacket pockets and pulled out the thin gloves I purchased on the walk over. I put the gloves on and cut across the yard, my back against the fence. I made my way to the house in the same manner, avoiding the area beyond the shadowy cover the fence provided. Before I made my way to the back door, I lightly tapped one of the windows. If Marlowe had a dog, that should be enough to rouse him.

I waited, then tapped again and was met with silence.

Four steps led up to the back door. I took them from the side. Kept my back pressed against the house. I cracked the glass storm door and grabbed the doorknob. It turned. I couldn't believe it, an unlocked door in the middle of D.C. Was Marlowe really that stupid? I decided not to debate Marlowe's intelligence and instead gently pushed the door and slipped through the opening. I held my breath while waiting for an alarm to go off. I had thought about cutting the phone wires while outside, but I figured if Marlowe had a security system installed, it would be independent of the phone system and would likely detect my attempt to foil it.

The alarm didn't go off. At least not that I could tell. Maybe it was a silent alarm and was notifying the police at that very moment. Hell, maybe it was something the Department had installed, and they were en route. That actually made sense. If that were the case this would end badly. If I got caught here it would result in more than a simple breaking and entering. But had I really committed B&E? The damn door was unlocked. I planned to point that out to Marlowe.

I shook my head to clear the thoughts and continued through the house. I stood just inside the back door in the great

room. It was plainly decorated with two couches and a simple wooden table between them. Two stacks of books sat on the middle of the table. I didn't see a TV or stereo. I moved through the living area of the great room and past the dining room, which had a round glass table with four black chairs.

I walked to the door located at the far end of the room. It had no handle. I pushed it. It swung open, revealing the kitchen. A light was on above the stove. It was dim, but provided enough illumination to see the room. I heard a click and my eyes moved to the source of the sound. A coffee pot had turned on. A moment later percolating sounds promising fresh coffee filled the kitchen.

It wouldn't be long till Marlowe pushed through the kitchen door. I stood next to it, back against the wall. The open door would block his view of me, giving me the element of surprise.

A few minutes later I heard the rush of water from above. Marlowe, or someone in the house, had started a shower. Ten minutes later the thumping of footsteps coming down the wooden stairs echoed through the house. I squeezed my gun and pressed even harder against the wall.

The door pushed open with a knock, coming within inches of hitting me. It swung back shut and Marlowe, dressed in gray slacks and an untucked white t-shirt, shuffled toward the coffee maker. He opened a cabinet door and pulled down a blue or black mug with a golden seal of some sort on it.

“Grab one for me, too.”

He froze for a moment. Set the mug down and grabbed another. He turned around and looked at me with a blank expression.

“Noble,” he said. “Jack Noble, right?”

I nodded. Said nothing.

“I thought I saw you a couple days ago down by the National Mall.”



I shrugged and decided not to respond. I wanted to see how far he would go on his own.

He cleared his throat. "Mind if I fill these for us?" He turned without waiting for a response from me and filled the two mugs three quarters of the way full. He grabbed both by their handles and started toward me. "Why don't we sit, Jack?"

I moved in front of the door and nodded to the table in the back corner of the kitchen.

He went to the table, set the coffee down and took a seat in the corner.

I remained standing.

"I know why you're here," he said. "Let me start by telling you that I-

"Shut up."

He pursed his lips and sat back in his chair. Crossed one leg over the other and placed his hands flat on the table.

"How do you know me?"

"From the TV. You were on the news wanted in connection with that man, what's his name? Oh, yeah. Delaney."

"Don't bullshit me, Marlowe." I pulled out a chair and sat across from him. I placed my hand on the table and kept the gun trained on him. "You said you recognized me in the city. I was eating lunch outside. You walked by with two other politicians and a couple of agents assigned to you. One of them eyed me as you all passed by."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I saw you. Like I said I recog-

"That was before I had met with Delaney."

He looked down at the table and shifted in his seat.

"So you better cut the crap and answer my question."

He lifted his mug to his lips and took a sip while reaching one hand under the table.

I lifted the gun. "Stop right there."

“I’m just getting a pack of cigarettes out,” he said as he lifted his hand up, a cardboard box held between his thumb and forefinger. He offered me one and I declined, so he stuffed the pack back in his pocket.

I settled back in my chair and watched as he looked between me and the ceiling.

“Your name’s Jack Noble. You’re a Sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps. But that doesn’t matter. Your jacket says that you’re a Sniper. But that doesn’t matter, either. In fact, there might be one or two snipers who have never even heard of you and that’s simply because of your boot camp legend.” He stopped, tipped his head and stared me in the eye. “Eight weeks through recruit training you were optioned for a special joint program sponsored by the CIA in which you were essentially loaned out to become part of an Ops team. On the Marine side you had General Keller and Colonel Abbot running things. On the CIA side, well, that’s classified. If you know the names then you do. If not, I’m not at liberty to say them.”

He stopped and nodded with his eyebrows hiked. I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t say anything else.

“How do you know all this?” I said.

He crossed his arms and held his head cocked slightly to the side.

“If you’re stalling because someone is on the way, know that I will kill you before they take me down. As it stands right now I’m wanted on four counts in Iraq and at least two here. One more isn’t going to make a damn bit of difference to me.”

Marlowe smiled. A single chuckle muffled itself in his throat.

I stood and kicked my chair back behind me. I stretched out my arm, pointing the gun at his head. “Do you think I’m screwing around, Marlowe?”

He remained calm, lifting his hands and gesturing me to sit down.

I regained my composure, grabbed the chair and sat back down.

“Jack, I know all of this because it’s my job to know. It’s my program. I started it. I got the funding. I put the principal parties into place. They reported, ultimately, to me. Every month we would meet and discuss the operations. You were in the first group. First successful group, that is. Of course, you already know that. Your group turned out to be exactly what we wanted and proved that the program would be a success.” He gave me a slight nod. “Then the world went to hell in a hand basket because of that damn Bin Laden. Outside pressure forced us to turn our attention to Afghanistan and Pakistan.”

“I was sent to Iraq.”

He brought the mug to his mouth and sipped loudly.

“I was against that.”

“Against it? You run the program, right? That’s what you just said. Plus, Iraq is your policy. Damn man, I’ve read about you before. You’ve been pushing to get in there since the attacks.”

He smiled and shook his head. “Things don’t work that way, son. What I say is dictated by someone above me.”

“How far above you?”

“I...” He paused. “I’m not going to answer that, Jack. Besides, that isn’t what you came here to discuss. Is it?”

I nodded and said nothing. He had a point. I really didn’t care who ordered me to Iraq. I wanted to know who set me up and who killed Delaney and Abbot.

“So back to the program.” He reached for his inside pocket again, but changed his mind. “There was some dissension right away when we split the groups, especially when the roles of the operations were defined.”

“You mean like me and Logan guarding doors.”

He nodded and continued. “That was just scratching the surface though. Some people started to have an interest in shutting the program down.”

“You,” I said.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Why do you think that?”

I opened my jacket and pulled the documents from inside my coat pocket and tossed them on the table.

Marlowe picked them up and studied them for a moment and then set them down. “What do you think this has to do with anything?”

“I’m not sure, but two people died so I could get those, so they must mean something.”

He lifted his chin and exhaled loudly. “They do, but it’s not what you think.”

Through the window I could see the sky turning a pale blue in advance of the rising sun. Time was running out. I had to choose between the documents and the program. “Tell me this, then. Are you the one behind terminating the program?”

“Yes, Jack. But not in the way you think.”

“Explain.”

“I know where this operation is heading, and I don’t want to be responsible for it. I wanted to terminate the Middle East operations and reassign everyone. Unfortunately, certain people had too much to lose by me doing so. On the flip side, certain people had a lot to gain by me doing so. My stance deepened the divide, and not just between the agency and the Marines. In the past week a damn civil war broke out between everyone.” He clasped his hands behind his head and exhaled. “When I saw you, I thought you were sent to kill me. When things fell in place the way they did, I knew that wasn’t the case.”

I ran my hands across my face and through my hair while processing the information. “Four Marines are dead. Six are in prison. Two are on the run in the U.S.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Who in the CIA is responsible for that?”

He shook his head and looked down at the table. “It’s not the CIA, Jack. We’ve been watching them the entire time.”

My head started to spin. It couldn’t be. Could it? “Abbot,” I said under my breath. I looked up expecting to see a look of confirmation.

“No. It’s true that Abbot didn’t want you guys over there. But the program benefited him. Plus, he wouldn’t want you guys killed.”

I thought back to the Audi A8. The flat screen TV in the lake house, at a time when most people still had tube TVs. *The program benefited him.*

“Then who, Marlowe? I don’t have all day. Just get to it, and I’ll handle it.”

“Who’s left, Jack?”

I knew. I knew before he said it. It had always been there. “General Keller.” I said it flatly.

Marlowe nodded. “I can’t say with one hundred percent certainty how, but yes, Keller is who I suspect.”

“So why didn’t you act on it?”

He placed his forearm in front of him on the table and leaned over it. He rubbed his chin with his hand. “I’ve got too much to lose, Jack. Ultimately, whatever happens with the program and those in it, we’d just sweep it under the rug. No one worse for wear in knowing. Understand? If I come out and accuse a General of this...” He straightened up. “Hell, that would be political suicide, and I’m not willing to take that risk.”

I said nothing. I understood what he was saying. I didn’t agree, but I saw his point.

“I’d sure as hell like to know why, though. He turned on his own damn men.”

“He never liked the program.” I said it under my breath

“How’s that?”

“He never liked the program,” I repeated. “I remember sitting in his office when I was nothing but a recruit. He was sending us off. He hated it. But he had no choice.” I lifted my eyes and met Marlowe’s stare. “And now he’s trying to end the program, permanently. Abbot knew what he was up to. He was going to tell me. Keller had him killed. He didn’t know we were there though. I didn’t answer his call.”

Marlowe hiked his shoulders and held out his hand while his lips formed a frown.

“Anything else?” I asked.

“I’m afraid I’ve said too much already, Jack.”

I sat back and studied his face. He had more to tell me. I could see it in his eyes. I glanced at my watch. It was almost six a.m. I had to go, get back to the hotel in Springfield and get my car. I stood and turned to leave.

“Jack?”

I looked over my shoulder.

“It should go without saying that I never shared this information with you.”

I nodded, turned to face him and grabbed the documents off the table. “I’ll be taking these since you already know what they are.”

He started to stand in protest, but backed down when I turned my gun toward him. “Take it, Jack. It really means nothing to you.”

“We should play poker sometime, Marlowe. You’re horrible at bluffing.” I pushed the door open and stopped again. “I’m going after Keller. I’ll be back if your story doesn’t jive.”

## Chapter 18

I found a taxi willing to take me to Springfield. Figured that would be better than dealing with crowded Metro stations. The driver fought the traffic and dropped me off two blocks from the hotel. I walked the remaining distance. There wasn't anything of value in the room, so I didn't go in. I got in the car and merged onto I-95 southbound. Along the way I called Conners and told him I had to act on a lead and I'd get in touch with him as soon as I knew something.

Two hours later I arrived in Petersburg and parked a block away from the hotel where Jessie and Bear were staying.

I wanted Bear to come with me to Keller's. He could provide backup, even if he wasn't in the room during the confrontation. I still didn't trust Marlowe, and something told me Keller would be expecting me. I thought about taking this to one of my agency contacts, but knew that would get me nowhere. For one, the guys I knew could care less about political BS. They would wave me off and tell me to go piss up a tree. Regular authorities were out of the question. They'd arrest me without giving it a second thought. Hell, I probably had a shoot on sight designation on me by that point.

There was still the question of who Delaney and Conners worked for, and who pulled the trigger on Abbot. I hoped Keller could answer those questions for me.

I got out of the rental car and walked to the hotel. I kept my head down and wore sunglasses. Cars passed by at regular intervals, but no one seemed to care about the guy walking on the sidewalk while they were busying themselves driving to work.

The distance between D.C. and Petersburg, Virginia was approximately 120 miles. That made the difference in temperature even more astounding. At nine a.m. it was warm

enough here for me to want to take off my jacket. I kept it on to keep my weapon concealed, but I started to sweat under its bulk.

I reached the hotel and scanned the parking lot before entering the lobby. A young lady stood behind the counter. She glanced up at me, smiled, and then returned to her keyboard when she saw that I had no intention of approaching her.

An elderly woman stood alone in the elevator lobby. I stopped next to her and waited for the elevator doors to open. A minute passed. I glanced around and saw that the elevator call button had not been pushed. I looked at her, smiled and leaned forward to press the single button with an up arrow printed on it. A chime sounded and the doors opened. I stuck one hand in the opening and gestured her through.

“Three please,” she said.

I had already pressed the button for the third floor. That’s where Bear and Jessie were staying.

Less than half a minute later the doors opened and I waited for the woman to exit. She did so and turned to the right. I stepped out and turned left.

The room was located at the end of the hall. I jogged to the door. I wanted to tell Bear everything I had learned in D.C.

And I wanted to kiss Jessie.

I stood in front of the door and rapped on it with my knuckles. A pinhead of light shone through the peephole cut into the center of the door. A few heavy steps rumbled below my feet and the pinhead of light disappeared. A second later the door opened.

“Jack,” Bear said.

I nodded and stepped through the open doorway as he walked to the back of the room. I looked around, but didn’t see Jess. My eyes met Bear’s. He wore my disappointment on his face.

“She’s gone.”



“Where’d she go?”

“Don’t know. I woke up and she was gone.” He opened a dresser drawer and pulled out an envelope. “She left this for you.”

I took the envelope labeled “Jack” from him and stared at it for a minute. “You read it?”

“Nah.”

“She give any indication she was leaving?”

Bear shook his head and hiked his shoulders up an inch.

“You’re sure she left. She wasn’t taken?”

“Jack, no, man. We went to sleep. I got up and she was gone. If someone was going to go through the trouble of taking her from the room, don’t you think they would have killed me?”

I fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He had a point. If someone had broken in, they would have either taken him with them or taken him out. Plus, Bear would have woken up if someone broke in. The man might be nicknamed Bear and look like a bear, but he sure as hell didn’t sleep like one.

“Read the letter, Jack.”

I lifted my arms and held the envelope over my face. I decided against opening it, at least for a while. We had work to do. I sat up and tucked the sealed letter into one of the inside pockets of my jacket.

“I’ll read it later,” I said. “I need to catch you up on what’s happened.”

I talked, and Bear listened. He remained silent until I finished.

After I was done, he said, “You’re sure Keller is behind it?”

I took a moment to respond. “I don’t know, Bear. But I’m going to find out.”

He nodded and leaned back in his chair.

“What I need to know is if you think you can come with me. Can you?”

“Yeah, Jack. I’m good to go. It hurts, but it won’t stop me if things go south.”

We sat in silence the next few minutes.

Bear leaned forward, his mouth open an inch. He furrowed his eyebrows and pointed at the TV behind me. “Where’s the remote?” He got up.

I turned in my seat and saw what had shocked him.

Bear picked up the remote and unmuted the station.

The display under the woman said her name was Cassandra Phillips. She spoke in the serious tone all newscasters had to perfect.

“Once again, we are stunned and shocked to be reporting this breaking news. At six a.m. this morning, police found the bodies of Richard Gallo and Eddie Bealle, both CIA agents involved in the conflict in Afghanistan. The reports we’ve received indicate that the men were murdered, execution style, in downtown Washington, D.C.”

They flashed head shots of both men on the screen and then cut to a scene in front of Gallo’s home. A local news team spoke to his wife, who kept herself half hidden behind the door. A small child with blond hair clung to her exposed leg.

I tuned out the broadcast and turned to Bear.

“I just met with them last night.”

“That’s what you said.”

“Someone is going to recall seeing them with me.”

“You didn’t do it, right Jack?”

Cassandra’s voice returned on the TV and I spun around to watch.

“There are no suspects in the case at this time. Police have said they are looking for a person of interest, but details have not been released. We will keep you apprised of the story as we become aware of additional developments.”

I threw my hands behind my head and grabbed my hair. “It’s either the same people that took out Delaney, or it’s...”

Bear waited a second and then prompted me to speak.

“Martinez,” I said.

“Martinez? You think he’d take out his own guys?”

“They weren’t his guys. He was loyal to his original team. So, yeah, I wouldn’t put this past him.”

Bear turned off the TV and moved to the window. He pulled back the curtains and studied the parking lot.

“We should go.”

I got up and walked to the door.

“Yeah. Get your stuff.”

\* \* \*

We hurried down the block and got in the car. The hotel was five minutes from the interstate. I stopped and filled up on gas, and then hit the interstate heading south. We drove in silence until we crossed the North Carolina state border.

“It’s a good six hours to Savannah, so catch up on sleep if you need to,” I said.

Bear said nothing. He stared out the window. His elbow propped on the door sticking out the open window.

I reached inside my jacket and traced the edges of the envelope Jessie left me. I wondered what the letter said. Probably the same things she said five years ago when we split up for good. Although, for good didn’t mean forever. She even told me that. And I thought that maybe for good ended now. Apparently not, though. I needed to talk to her. To find out if it

would make a difference if I left the military and became a cop or a firefighter or anything other than what I was now.

“Did she say anything?” I asked.

“Who?”

“Jessie. Did she say anything at all that gave you any indication she was leaving?”

“Nah. She just slipped out in the middle of the night.”

I turned the wheel, adjusting to the curve in the road and said nothing.

“Maybe once we’re done you should go back to Virginia.”

“Think she went home?”

Bear shook his head. “After what’s happened? I doubt it, man. She probably got on a bus, went to the airport and picked a destination.”

“That’s how she ended up in Virginia.”

“I remember, Jack.”

## Chapter 19

General Keller lived halfway between Parris Island, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia in a housing development near Hilton Head where the homes cost half a million dollars. It raised some eyebrows when he bought it, but there were rumors that his wife had penned a series of romantic suspense novels and nailed down a seven figure advance from a major publisher. Still, for the regular working man it was tough to see your superior living in a McMansion and driving around a ninety thousand dollar Mercedes.

It didn't take a math whiz to put two and two together. Abbot and his new Audi A8 and decked out weekend home. Keller with his oversized house and overpriced Mercedes. They got it all from kickbacks. Blood money.

We pulled into the half-constructed neighborhood and turned away from the dirt packed street where the wooden framed skeletons of houses lined the road. Bear leaned back in his seat and did his best to stay out of sight. I turned on Keller's road and eased past his house, taking in as much of the yellow stucco two story house as I could in the few seconds it took to pass. We'd been inside the house the previous summer for a housewarming party he threw a few months after he moved in. I searched my mind for a map of the layout of the house, but couldn't recall it all. The house was big. That's all I remembered.

The street looped around and connected with the main road. I turned left and then left again on Keller's street and parked the car three houses down from his. There was a curve in the road that gave us a decent view of the front of the house. Keller's black full sized Mercedes was parked in the driveway, and a Jeep Wrangler with tires stained orange from mud was parked on the street in front of the house.

“He’s got guests,” Bear said.

“We can wait a bit,” I said.

“What if they don’t leave?”

“Then we deal with them.”

“Jack?”

I shifted in my seat to look at Bear. “Yeah?”

“What if-” he paused and ran a hand across his face.

“What if Marlowe lied?”

“You mean what if Keller wasn’t involved?”

“Well, that, yeah. But also, what if he set you up? Set us up?”

I nodded slowly, letting my eyes shift toward the front of the house. “I thought about that, Bear. I did. Here’s the way I see it. Marlowe gave up Keller without directly saying his name. He led me to figure it out, meaning one of two things. Marlowe is as deep in this as Keller, and I don’t doubt that for one minute, but it’s just what side of it he’s on. He’s for the program, but not the way it’s being run. In that case, he knows Keller’s involvement with what’s happened to us and the other teams. He can’t say anything for political reasons-”

“Or maybe Keller has something on Marlowe.”

“Yeah, maybe Keller does have something on Marlowe and if he came out and accused Keller, it would be political suicide. Maybe even more than that. With all that’s happened, jail time could be involved. None of us could be considered a choir boy. Top to bottom.”

Bear nodded and said nothing.

“Or, yeah, maybe they are working together. Sent us down here so they could finish what they started in Iraq. We could walk into that house and be shot on sight.”

After a minute Bear asked, “What’s your gut tell you?”

I thought it over.

“My gut tells me that Marlowe is on our side, at least, as much as he can be. That Keller was the architect behind this plan and somehow Abbot was involved. Whether he was for or against is anybody’s guess. I think he was going to blow the whistle the other night before he was murdered. But, whether Marlowe lied or not, I fully expect Keller to be ready for me when I knock on that door. They’ve been a step ahead the whole time it seems.”

“Yeah. Wait. You’re going to knock on the door?”

“I want you to wait outside, Bear. You’re going to wait in the car while I go inside. After five minutes, move to the house.”

“I’m going to look like a damn peepin’ Tom out here.”

I laughed, the reaction caused by nerves more than anything. “We’re waiting till sunset.” I pointed at the wide orange sun hovering over the houses at the end of the street. “Another half hour and it should be dark out here.”

Bear nodded.

“You remember the layout of the house?”

“A bit,” I said. “Walk into a ten by ten foyer. Stairs off to the left, beyond that a dining room. On the right, the foyer opens up to a huge living room. I’m going to try and stick to that area.”

“What’s your plan when you get inside?”

I hadn’t decided on an exact plan. I thought it over during the drive. There were a few possible scenarios. I could walk in and Keller could be alone. That would be simple. Get the confession and leave. But, if he was waiting for me, then anything could happen.

“Jack? You got a plan?”

“Winging it, big man.”

Bear cursed under his breath and whipped his head side to side. “I’ll go on record as saying if we die, it’s on your hands.”

“Sounds good.”

\* \* \*

My boots thudded against the white concrete sidewalk. The sound echoed through the air. I had debated whether to cut through backyards or just walk up to the house and knock. I decided to walk up to the house. I didn't care if he saw me coming. If things went the way I hoped, then he wouldn't think I was there to take him down. He would think I was there for help. On the other hand, if he knew we were coming, then he'd be prepared no matter how I entered the house.

Light shone through downstairs windows. A little white sign attached to a stake was planted at the corner of his yard. It read, “Don't walk on the lawn.” I kicked the sign out of the ground and crossed the grass to the steps leading up to the front porch. I stopped in front of the red painted front door. I leaned toward the door, my head turned sideways. Silence.

The handle turned. The sound of metal clicking broke the silence. I took a step back and the door swung open. I recognized the swollen face that stared back at me. The short dark stubble on the top of his head wasn't there a couple days ago when I broke his jaw, though.

“Jarhead,” he said through teeth that were wired shut. His nostrils flared and his eyes narrowed. He brought his arms in front of him and clenched his fists.

Keller stepped into view. “Hello, Jack.” He stepped into the foyer and placed a hand on the young man's shoulder. “You've met my stepson, Mike.”

I nodded and scanned the room behind them. Three brown leather couches formed a U shape in the middle of the room. Two small square tables joined the middle couch with the others. A plain rug covered the hardwood floor in the empty space between the couches.

“Why don't you come on in, Jack?”

Keller pulled Mike back and gestured me through the door.



I stepped in and felt his hand on my back.

“Can I take your jacket?”

I dipped my shoulder and spun around.

“No thanks.”

He lifted his hands in an off-putting gesture. “No problem.” He shut the front door and walked past me and took a seat on the couch facing me. “Have a seat.”

“I’m fine standing.”

He sighed. “What can I do for you, Jack?”

Mike walked past Keller and headed for the hall.

“I want him to stay in here,” I said.

Mike kept walking.

“Mike,” Keller said sternly.

The young man stopped and turned, then took a seat on the same couch as Keller.

A smug look crossed Keller’s face. “Why are you here?”

“You know why.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

“Four Marines are dead. Six are in prison in Iraq. Two are on the run and wanted for murders they didn’t commit.”

Keller shook his head.

“I don’t know. There’s some damning evidence against those two Marines on the run. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, Jack.”

I said nothing.

“If you need me to help you, I might be able to arrange something. But, to be honest, killing that man in D.C., and then Abbot. Christ.” He turned his head toward Mike. “Look at what you did to my boy here. The assault charge alone carries twenty years in prison.”

Mike lifted his head from his chest and stared at me. His lip curled. Even in his current state I didn't doubt that he'd attack like a junkyard dog if given the command.

"I know what you did, Keller."

Keller put his hands in his pockets and cocked his head to the side. He grinned and lifted his eyebrows a half inch.

"What I did? I don't follow, Jack. What do you know?"

I took a deep breath. I had to keep my composure, for now.

"You set all of this up. You had the Iraqi family killed and then framed me for the murder." I left Bear's name out on purpose. "You didn't count on Abbot getting us home, back to the U.S., though. Did you?"

Keller sat back in the corner of the couch, crossed his arms and legs and smiled at me.

"Abbot pulled a few strings and got his guys out of there, got us out of there. He didn't know that the others had been set up yet. You had a twenty four hour plan and set it in motion with me. You got wind of what Abbot had done and then had the plans changed. That's why the CIA met us at the airport and not Abbot or an MP."

Keller said nothing. He sat there with the same smile on his face with his eyes crinkled upward. He nodded his head slowly.

"So they took us to Camp Lejeune. Nothing out of the ordinary there, right? I had to report there at the base quarterly, at a minimum. Throwing us in the brig was a nice touch though." I waited for him to respond. He didn't. I continued. "Then you tried to have me killed, first with the psycho in the cell, which was a pathetic attempt, and then in the bathroom. Just nod if I'm right."

He sat motionless. The smile slowly faded from his face.

"Didn't count on Abbot getting McDuffie to get me out of there though, did you?"

“No, I didn’t.” He frowned and looked down at the floor. Back up at me.

I smiled. “You must have crapped a brick when you found out I was heading up to see Delaney. I just want to know, why didn’t you have him killed before he met with me?”

“Because I wanted both of you dead and making the hit at the same time seemed the best option.” He glared at me now.

“Who did Delaney work for?”

He shrugged and held out his hands. “We’ll never know, will we?”

“Then you tracked me to-”

“Let me save you some time, Noble. We tracked you through your damn cell phone.” He leaned forward and then stood. Crossed in front of one of the couches and then behind it, using the couch to separate us. He stopped and placed his hands on the back of the couch and hunched over it. “Tracked you to the girl’s house. Thought it would be good to give you a scare before taking you out. You know, the phone call.”

“All you did was gave me a head’s up.”

“Yeah, well...” He lifted a hand and ran it over his head. “We had the men in place to take you out.”

“I saw them.”

“Martinez called them back. He wanted to-”

“Martinez,” I said flatly.

Keller raised his voice. “Yeah, Martinez.” Then he continued. “He was about to take Abbot out. We knew you’d be heading there next, so why not try to coincide your visit with Abbot’s murder, then get you at the next stop.”

“Only you lost me. Isn’t that right?”

“Yeah.” Keller turned to glance over his shoulder, and then looked back at me. “Found your phone, though. Want it back?”

“Keep it. Hate the damn thing, anyway.” I didn’t give him a chance to talk. “So you gave the order to take out Abbot. Why?”

“He was going to screw it up all, Jack. Everything we had going for us.”

“You hated the idea. Don’t you remember that? You were pissed when you sent us off to Langley for this program.”

He nodded. “After a while they, uh, helped me see the light.”

“They paid you off.”

He hiked his shoulders a few inches and held out his hands.

“Admit it. You were getting paid off. That’s how you were able to afford this place.”

“No, actually, that’s not true. Nancy did get that book deal everyone talked about. We settled for this place only because I’m stuck here for a few more years.”

“So what did you do with the money?”

“That’s for me to worry about, Jack. And it goes beyond the money.”

I studied him for a moment before responding.

“Then what?”

“Politics, Jack.” He smiled and stood up straight. “The things I was doing were helping me get in with the right people.”

“You murdered Abbot and a man you didn’t know just so you could get a pass in D.C.?”

He smiled and winked.

I shook my head and turned toward the door.

“You might not want to leave just yet, Jack.”

Mike walked past me and stood in front of the door, blocking my exit.

I laughed and looked over my shoulder at Keller. “You think he’s going to stop me?”

“No,” Keller said. “No, I don’t. But you might want to wait a minute.”

I heard footsteps echo through the room. They came from the hallway behind Keller. A man stepped out.

“Hello, Jack.”

I nodded. “Martinez.”

A second man appeared from the hallway. I recognized his face from the base in Iraq, but didn’t know his name. His extended arm pulled at something from the hall.

Jessie.

Her glossy eyes and tear stained cheeks told me all I needed to know.

My eyes shifted from Jessie, to Keller and back to Martinez, who now aimed his pistol at me.

Keller laughed. “Didn’t you think I was a bit too forthcoming with my confession, Jack?”

I felt Mike’s hands touch my shoulders and then proceed to pat down my sides and my legs. He reached around my stomach. My Beretta pushed into my ribs when his hands discovered it.

“He’s armed,” Mike said.

Keller nodded. “Would have been surprised if he wasn’t, though. Nice and slow, Jack. Put it on the floor.”

I took a deep breath. I didn’t know if Mike was armed or not. Martinez was and he aimed his gun at me. His partner probably was, but his weapon wasn’t drawn. Keller didn’t appear to be, but most likely had a weapon hidden somewhere in the room. The moment I pulled my weapon, Martinez

would be on high alert and would shoot me if I made any movements that didn't lead to me putting my gun on the ground. I could try and take him out first. Two problems with that, though. One, he'd get his shot off at the same time, if not sooner. Two, his partner had Jessie and might kill her before I could manage a shot in his direction.

The next option was to take out the partner. There was nothing to stop a clean shot. Martinez would have the same clean shot on me, though. And then after he had killed me, he would kill Jessie.

"Jack," Keller said. "Remove the gun and place it on the floor. This is the last time I'll ask."

I held my hands out in front of me and then reached into my jacket. I froze in position. I had to stall as long as possible.

"Now," Keller said.

"I'm just moving nice and slow, just like you asked."

I pulled the gun from my jacket and held it out, extending my fingers so they weren't near the trigger. Martinez watched every move. He tensed. I sensed his urge to pull the trigger. He had probably dreamed of it since that night in Iraq, hell, maybe even before then. I held one arm out and gestured with the other for everyone to remain calm.

"Nice and easy," I said.

The door behind me crashed open. I didn't have to turn my head to know that Bear had kicked it in. The crash was enough to distract Martinez. I fired a shot at him. He collapsed where he stood. His partner took aim at me and I dove behind the couch and crawled toward the end. Bullets tore through the leather and thudded into the wall behind me.

Jessie's screams were silenced with a thud. I peeked over the couch and saw the man hovering over her. Then I checked over my shoulder and saw that Mike had charged Bear. The big man seemed to be handling him on his own. Keller had run upstairs. I'd deal with him in a minute.

I leapt up and fired at the man standing over Jessie. My shots missed. He dove into the hall. His footsteps echoed through the room as he ran down it. I hurried to where Jessie lay on the floor and pulled her by her feet so she no longer an easy target. She had been knocked unconscious by the man. I moved her further away from the hall and then backed up to the wall. I peeked around the corner and was met with a hail of gunfire.

“Christ,” I said. “Bear, finish him and get Jessie out of here.”

The big man delivered a heavy blow to Mike’s head and dropped him on the floor. He ran toward me. Dove over the couch as a shotgun blast ripped through the air from above.

“Guess Keller’s weapon wasn’t as close by as I thought,” I said.

Bear said nothing.

I pointed toward a hall that led to the kitchen. “There’s a door leading out back through there.”

He nodded, scooped up Jessie and started toward the hall.

I peeked around the corner again. Empty. I moved slowly down the hall. Each side had two doors. Three of the doors were closed. The last one on the right was open. I stopped a few feet from the door and listened. Complete silence. I checked over my shoulder to make sure Keller wasn’t standing behind me. He wasn’t.

I grabbed the TracFone from inside my jacket and threw it into the room. The man bumped the door as he turned to see what I threw. I exploded around the corner. He stood closer than I anticipated, and I had to strike him. I moved in sideways and hooked his right arm with my left. I applied pressure and bent his elbow in the wrong direction. He let out a roar and dropped his gun to the floor. I brought my right arm up to smack him across the face with my gun, but he managed to get his arm in between and the sudden jarring stop caused me to drop my gun too.

He continued bringing his arm forward and wrapped it around my head and took out my leg with a quick kick. A moment later he had positioned himself behind me and had me in a choke hold.

I fought for position. I fought to loosen his grip. I was losing on both counts.

“General,” he yelled.

I heard Keller’s footsteps as he walked down the hall. The barrel of his rifle appeared in the doorway. I knew he wouldn’t be far behind.

I reached behind me and found the man’s head. I jammed my thumb in his eye. That was enough to loosen his grip. I shifted my body weight and broke free from his grasp. Then I ducked and slipped behind him. I held his arm behind his back and pushed him toward the doorway.

Keller spun around and fired blindly. The bullet hit the man in the front of his chest and tore through the back, leaving an opening the size of a melon.

I lunged forward, using the wounded man as a body shield. We crashed into Keller and he fell backwards. He landed against the door across the hall. It broke from the latch and he continued his fall to the floor. He dropped the rifle. I tossed my human shield to the side and grabbed the rifle off of the floor and lifted it and aimed it at Keller.

“Jack,” he said as he wiped blood from his mouth. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Do what?”

I fired into the back of the room.

He covered his head and cowered close to the floor.

I aimed the rifle at his head. “Get up.”

He did.

“Down the hall.” I backed up and let him slip by me. “Nice and easy, Keller. Arms up, hands behind your head.”



He complied and walked slowly down the hall. When he reached the end he stopped.

“Keep going,” I said.

He took a few more steps and stopped again. I stuck the end of the rifle into his back and pushed. He took a few more steps forward. Mike was sitting on one of the couches, holding his arm to his chest. The arm was bent at an odd angle halfway between his wrist and his elbow. It had been a rough week for Mike.

“Go sit next to your son,” I said.

Keller did as he was told and walked to the couch. He stopped and turned toward me.

I kept the rifle steady and aimed at his chest.

“You won’t get away with this, Noble.”

“Why’s that?”

“You broke into my house. Attacked me and my son. Christ, look at his arm.” He swung his arm to the side dramatically and pointed at his son’s twisted arm. “Then you killed my guests, two government employees, Jack. You killed them in cold blood.”

“Who’s going to believe that story?”

He laughed. “Who wouldn’t? A General versus the word of a Sergeant?” He stepped toward me. “Put the gun down, Jack. You won’t get away with this. Even if you kill me, you won’t get away with it.”

I circled around the front of the couches, toward the front door. Kept the gun aimed at Keller.

Keller continued. “They will hunt you down, Jack. The Marines, CIA, local authorities. Hell, even the FBI will get in on the action. Everyone will want a piece of you.”

“Yeah, to take the fall for the murders you committed.”

“In a round-about way, yeah, Jack. The murders are all on me. I ordered them all. But it was for a reason, Jack. A damn good reason. We have to take this fight to them, Jack. Don’t you see?”

He stood ten feet from me. His head cocked to the side. The smile had left his face. He held his arms outstretched to the side.

I shifted the gun to one arm and reached inside my jacket. “Only problem, Keller,” I pulled my hand out and showed him the digital recorder that had been running the entire time, “is that I got you admitting it on tape.”

I stopped the recorder, hit rewind for a second and then hit play. “*The murders are all on me.*” I clicked the stop button.

“Without a doubt, one hundred percent your voice, sir.”

His face went pale and he backed into the wall. He shook his head and muttered something indecipherable under his breath.

I pulled the magazine from the rifle and dropped the gun on the floor. Looked around the room and soaked in the carnage. I turned and opened the door. Bear and Jessie had pulled the car to the curb and were waiting for me. I cut across the yard and got in the front seat. Bear pulled away without saying a word.

## Chapter 20

We drove north on I-95. Washington, D.C. was our destination. I'd wait for Marlowe by his house. Turn over the evidence and find out what he had planned for Keller. We stopped and picked up the cheapest laptop we could find. Jessie transferred the audio file to the computer and burned it onto a CD.

It turned out to be a good thing she had been held hostage by Martinez, notwithstanding the emotional scarring and baggage the ordeal would leave her with. She kept her spirits up, though, and regularly made jokes at my expense from the back seat.

We crossed the state line into Virginia. The topic of what her next steps were hadn't been discussed yet. I turned in the passenger seat and looked back at her.

"Do you want to go back home, Jess?"

"Do you think it's safe now?"

I shook my head. "Probably not."

"Yeah, I didn't think so."

"I can take you with me to New--"

"Dulles, Jack." She looked out the window to her side.

"Take me to Dulles when we get to D.C."

"Where do you plan to go?"

"I don't know." She shook her head slightly. "I don't know."

I cleared my throat and turned back to the front and stared out the window for a moment.

"What about you, Bear?"

"What do you mean?"

“Pretty sure with everything that’s happened we can convince Marlowe to give you an honorable discharge.”

He shrugged and didn’t say anything.

I waited a moment and then continued. “You’re thinking about staying in?” The thought hadn’t occurred to me. I figured he was as antsy to get out as I was.

“What else am I going to do, Jack?” He placed both his hands on the steering wheel. Gripped it so tight his knuckles turned white. “I’ve got two years left. I’m going to finish out those two years.”

Bear had principles, and the commitment he made meant a lot to him. I knew that. But what about the commitment they made to us and the fact that they broke that commitment? I don’t recall reading anything on my contract that stated permission to terminate at will. I brushed the thought aside.

“You know, even if they don’t scrap the program, there’s no way you’re going back to it.”

He shrugged and looked at me for a second, then back toward the road. He quickly scanned the cars. “That’s fine with me. I’ll take a desk job for a couple years.”

I laughed. Bear behind a desk? The big man would go crazy.

“Where the hell are they going to find a chair and desk big enough for you?”

A few seconds passed and then Bear broke out into laughter.

“I know, right. What the hell am I thinking?”

“Why don’t you leave? We’ll go into business together.”

“Doing what? Crime scene creation?”

*Doing what?*

The words hung in the air above me. I hadn’t given any thought to it. I had a few hopes. I hoped that Jessie would be

part of my own “doing what.” I hoped that I could travel for a couple months before my official retirement while using up my accrued leave pay. I hoped that something would just turn up. I’d only known the Marines, and more specifically, the joint program with the CIA. The actual Marines were a mystery to me. Before that, my future had been planned by my father and high school football coach. I tried not to think about either of them, nor the future I had left behind.

“What about you, Jack?” Bear said, interrupting my thoughts.

“I’ve got three months leave built up.”

“So you’re done?”

“Yeah, Bear,” I said. “I’m done. This is it. I’m giving this tape to Marlowe and getting him to put my honorable discharge in writing, effective the last day of my leave. Then I’m going to do-” I leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “Then I don’t know what I’m going to do. I’ll figure it out at some point in the next three months.”

He opened his mouth to say something and must have thought better of it. His grip had loosened on the steering wheel. A smile crept up on his face. He seemed relaxed. At peace. I hadn’t even thought about the possibility that our partnership stressed him out.

“Bear, does being around-” I stopped mid-sentence, deciding not to go down that road. “Never mind.”

“Never minded.”

\* \* \*

We drove straight into the city. Bear dropped me off a couple blocks from Marlowe’s place. He wanted to wait with me. I insisted that he take Jessie and find somewhere else to be in case something happened. I still didn’t know if I could trust Marlowe. Sure, he gave up Keller, but he might have done it to protect himself. The fact that I returned might spur him into additional action. He might decide to get rid of me. I had no doubt that he had that power. If that happened, I didn’t want

Bear and Jessie in the middle. Plus, they had the backup files on the computer and the audio CD that implicated Keller behind everything.

Keller's confession was one reason I trusted Marlowe. Keller didn't mention him. Maybe he did it on purpose, though, in the event that I walked out of his house alive.

For a moment I doubted my decision to just leave Keller's house. My rational side told me he knew he was beaten. Despite his recent horrible decision making, he had once been an honorable man. I'd only known him for eight years. He had been a good man most of those years. Those who knew him longer than that held him in high esteem. Maybe I was reaching. Maybe I was letting the fact that he had known and served with my father influence me.

I crossed the street and stood in front of Marlowe's house. I walked up the six steps to his front porch and rang the doorbell. Nobody answered. I took a seat on the third step and enjoyed the warm breeze.

The upscale neighborhood was quiet. That made it easy to hear Marlowe and his assigned agents approaching before they realized I was there. I thought about hiding on the other side of the stairwell. Instead, I sat still and kept my hands in plain view.

The agent who stared me down outside the pizzeria my first day in D.C. was the first to notice me. He drew his gun and barked orders at me. I looked past him. The second agent stood in front of Marlowe. Marlowe peered around the agent and nodded at me.

"I'm unarmed," I said. I had left my gun with Bear. Risky move, but I was over it at this point. The recording held the truth. The police could arrest me. Secret Service or the DoD could detain me. CIA and FBI could fight over who would detain me. In the end, I'd be set free by Keller's words.

"Hands up," the agent said.

“They’re in plain view,” I said. “Get your damn gun out of my face. OK?”

“It’s OK, Gerard,” Marlowe said.

The two agents relaxed a bit. Well, relaxed as much as uptight Defense Department agents could. Those guys were hard wired for action. They found it in everything they did. I bet even brushing their teeth turned into an anxiety inducing event. I wondered what the heart attack rate was for guys in their line of work within their first five years of retirement.

Marlowe pushed past the men entrusted with his life and stood on the sidewalk a few feet in front of me.

“Jack, let’s go inside and talk.”

I looked between him and the two men in dark suits behind him. “They have to come in with us?”

“Yes, unfortunately they have to go with me everywhere during working hours.” He climbed a single step. “But they’ll be well behaved. Won’t you boys?” He turned and smiled at the men.

They didn’t smile back.

I stood and followed Marlowe inside. It was nice going in through the front door. He led the way to the kitchen where he started a pot of coffee and pulled two beers from the refrigerator. The Defense Department agents tried to follow us in. Marlowe sent one outside out through the back door, and made the other wait in the living room, telling him to stay at least ten feet from the swinging door.

He cracked open a beer and handed it to me. I took it and put it to my lips without checking the label. A few sips later I was exhaling with contentment at the refreshing beverage.

He smiled, his eyebrows rising into his forehead as he poured his beer into a tall glass.

“It’s local, a craft beer. Excellent stuff. Brewer is a friend of mine.”

I nodded and took another pull from the brown bottle. Still hadn't checked the label.

"Anyway, Mr. Noble," he said, "I'm sure you didn't come here to discuss local breweries."

I shook my head and didn't correct him for calling me Mister instead of Sergeant.

"I take it you confronted Keller?"

"I did."

"How did it go?"

I reached into my inside pocket and noticed Marlowe tense for a second, the smile fading from his face.

"Relax," I said as I pulled the small digital recorder from my pocket. "It's all on here."

He smiled and walked in front of me and took a seat at the table. He crossed his legs and took a long pull on his beer, then set the bottle down on the table.

"Play it."

I hit play and placed the digital recorder on the table. Marlowe listened intently, nodding and making eye contact with me occasionally.

"That's some pretty damning evidence," he said.

"I've got copies."

He smiled and reached for the recorder. "Don't worry, Jack. I'll handle this."

I grabbed the recorder and pulled it closer. "What will happen to Keller?"

He took another pull from his bottle of beer and stared at me for a moment. "Worst case is a dishonorable discharge."

"No jail time?"

"I hope so, but you know there are many parties involved in this. It's up to them how they want to pursue the matter.



Implicating Keller might implicate them.”

I shook my head. “He’s responsible for the deaths of at least ten people.”

“I know that and you know that. Hell, the person responsible for making this decision will know it.” He got up and went to the fridge and came back with two more beers, already opened. “This is the dark side of these operations, Jack.”

I nodded. I knew. I knew when I was in his house that it might end up like this. I wanted to kick myself for not taking him out when I had the chance.

“What about me?” I said.

“What about you?” he said.

“I want out.”

“Jack, I’m pretty sure that even if the program is continued, you won’t be invited back in.”

“Not just the program. I want out of the Marines. My enlistment is up in September. I’ve got three months leave accrued. I’m taking my leave and I want my official retirement to be the last day of my leave.”

“I don’t have the power to-”

“Bullshit, Marlowe.”

He shifted in his seat. Crossed his arms over his chest and looked me over.

“Ok, Jack.”

He pulled a cell phone from his coat and placed a call. Five minutes later I had my freedom. He also instructed whoever he spoke with to remove me and Bear from any federal, state and local suspect lists.

“You’re free, Mr. Noble.”

I slid the digital recorder across the table. Marlowe picked it up, studied it and then dropped it into his glass of beer.

“Why?” I tried to appear angry, but felt confused. He knew I had a backup. Did he expect me to push this further or in a different direction? Was this his way of telling me he wasn’t going to do anything?

“Political suicide, Jack. On top of that, imagine when the media gets a hold of this information. A Marine General ordering the deaths of his own men and another commanding officer? It’s best to leave it be, Jack. I’ll take care of Keller in my own way.”

So that was it. He was going to take the political route. He could squeeze anyone I presented the evidence to. I felt like reaching out and striking him. I didn’t. I’d still present the CD to a few contacts and see where we could take it.

I nodded and stood and grabbed the bottle of beer off the table and finished it one pull. I spun the bottle in my hand and the label caught my eye, a coat of arms with two broadswords crossing one another. *Double Crossed Breweries*. Perfect.

“You did the right thing, Jack. No matter what happens to Keller. Who knows how many lives you saved?”

“Not enough,” I said. “One question, though. If you knew, why didn’t you come down on Keller?”

“I didn’t know. Not one hundred percent. It made sense. Evidence pointed that way. But I would have never got the confession that you did.”

“Not that the confession matters.” I turned and pushed through the door without saying another word.

\* \* \*

Two hours later I stood outside Dulles airport with Bear and Jessie. Bear leaned against a glass wall ten yards away while I talked to Jessie. The sound of planes taking off and landing roared through the air with a rhythmic beat.

“Don’t go, Jess.”

She smiled and leaned forward. “It won’t work, Jack, at least not now.”

“Why?”

“You need time. I need time. We both need-”

“Time,” I said. “Yeah, I got it.”

I turned my head and tried to think of something to say, anything to stop her from leaving.

“What about the other night? I thought that we made, you know, a connection.”

“I think that was just the surprise of seeing you after so long. It’s true I haven’t stopped loving you, Jack. But that doesn’t mean we’re meant to be together.”

“I’m taking three months and getting away. Doing some traveling. I’m going to get my head straight. Back to who I was.”

“You are who you were. And you can’t change who you are now.”

She glanced at her watch.

“Let’s give it a month or so, then. What do you say, Jess?”

She placed a finger to my mouth. Leaned forward and kissed me.

“I have to go now.”

She placed a folded piece of paper in my hand. “That’s my email address.” She turned and walked through the door, into the main terminal.

Bear pushed off the wall and walked toward me, his hand extended. I grabbed it and shook.

“Don’t know what I’m going to do without you around, brother.”

He smiled and wrapped his arm around me. We patted at each other’s backs for a few seconds and then took a step back. He reached down and picked up his bag and gave me a wink. We didn’t say another word. He turned and disappeared through the same set of doors as Jessie.

I stood in the middle of the walkway for five minutes, nearly every fiber of my being told me to follow her. I didn't, though. Instead, I returned to the rental car and left the airport. Inside the car, I popped the CD that had the recording of Keller's confession into the car's CD player. All that came through the speakers was silence. The CD was blank. It contained no confession and no evidence. Jessie had the laptop that held the original file. I had a feeling the track was gone. I cursed under my breath and slammed my fists into the dashboard. I pulled the car over onto the emergency shoulder and tried to call Bear. No answer. He had already turned his phone off. I thought about who else to call, but came up with no names. I had nowhere to go. In the end I decided to let it go. It didn't matter. I'd check in on Keller's status, and if I wasn't satisfied, I'd take care of it myself one day.

I found my way to the interstate and headed north for New York City. Bear hit up a few of his contacts and found Abbot's daughter using the number I swiped from his phone. I promised him I'd look out for her, and I'd start by letting her know her father had passed. According to Bear's contact, no next of kin had been informed yet.

It took just under three hours to make it to the city. I found a parking garage within a few miles of her apartment and ditched the car. She had a place in the Village on Bedford Street. I walked from the parking lot to her apartment building. The air was cooler here than in D.C. Still, not too bad for six in the evening. The sun was setting and streetlights were kicking on. I passed a coffee shop and stopped in for a cup, partly because I needed the burst of caffeine, and partly because I dreaded giving Clarissa the news.

I took my time drinking the coffee and reading a few pages of the newspaper that had been left on the table. It revealed that there was nothing new in the world. It had been six months since the attacks on the Twin Towers. I wondered if life was truly back to normal here in the city. I knew it wasn't for me. I wondered if it ever would be.

I assumed the teams were still operating in Afghanistan. I hoped that the combined power of the CIA and Armed Forces Spec Ops teams would bring Bin Laden and all those involved to justice, no matter how long it took. Our involvement in Iraq worried me. It seemed like a foregone conclusion that the work we were doing there would lead to more conflict.

The waitress interrupted my thoughts and asked if I'd like anything else. I smiled and told her no. I dropped a twenty on the table and left before she brought the check.

Clarissa's apartment was only a few blocks from the coffee shop. Despite its close proximity, it took me half an hour to reach it. I stood in front of the cracked green painted door for another five minutes before knocking.

She answered the door. Squinted at me and then smiled.

“Jack?”

It had been a few years since I had last seen her. She was still a scrawny teen at that time. She wasn't much older than a teen now, if at all, but she sure as hell wasn't scrawny anymore. The little girl I'd met all those years ago was now a woman.

“Hey, Clarissa,” I said.

She reached out and hugged me.

“What are you doing here?”

“Can I come in?”

“Yeah, sure.” She took a step back and pulled the door open. She waved me through and closed and locked the door behind me. “Make yourself comfortable. Can I get you a drink?”

“Nah, I mean, yeah. Something hard. Got any whiskey?”

“Sure,” she said as she crossed the room to the kitchen.

“Can I smoke in here?”

“Yeah, there's an ashtray on the table in front of you.”

I smiled. I hadn't noticed it. I hadn't been able to take my eyes off of her since I stepped through the door. I lit a cigarette and leaned over the coffee table. I tried a dozen times to start the inevitable conversation while she fixed my drink.

She returned to the room, set the drink in front of me and took a seat across from me.

“What brings you to New York, Jack?”

I took a drink from the glass. The hard liquor burned down my throat and warmed my stomach.

“I don't know how to put this, so I'm just going to say it.”

She sat back and crossed her arms. One hand went to her chin. Her eyes grew wide and she bit her bottom lip.

“Your father is dead. He was murdered.”

She gasped and took a deep breath. Her green eyes watered and a tear slipped past the corner of her bottom lid and traveled down her cheek.

“I killed the man who did it. Got a confession from the man who arranged it.”

“Who? Who was it?”

“You don't know the man who pulled the trigger. Martinez, a CIA asshole. But the man...” My voice trailed off. She knew Keller. The first time I met her, Keller was there. Keller and Abbot had been close. The man was like an uncle to her.

“Keller. It was General Keller who ordered it.”

She lifted her eyebrows and leaned forward. The tears flowed faster.

I set my drink down and slid off the couch. I walked over to her and dropped to my knees in front of her. Wrapped my arms around her and held her tight. She cried and talked, then cried some more. I held her and listened. We stayed up late into the morning hours, drinking and smoking. By the end of the night she seemed at peace with her father's passing. Or maybe she was drunk enough that she'd gone numb.

The next morning I woke up on her couch with a slight headache. She was in the kitchen making breakfast. I walked over and sat down at the breakfast counter.

“I’m going on a trip for three months. But I’ve got a new cell phone and will be available if you need anything.” I put my new phone up on the counter. It was a hell of a phone. It connected to the internet and could even send emails. The guy that sold it to me was completely geeked out about it. I really didn’t care, but since I would be traveling, I figured it would be a good thing to have. Maybe the email part would help me to reconnect with Jessie. Although, at that moment, I was struggling to recall much about her.

Clarissa turned and smiled.

“If you want to tag along, you’re welcome to do so,” I said.

She laughed and walked over to the counter and leaned into it, facing me. I had to fight back the urge to kiss her.

“I haven’t seen you in, what, four or five years now? And you want to walk in and sweep me off my feet?”

I smiled and looked away. “It’s not that. I promised your dad I’d take care of you. Watch over you.”

“Honey, I’ve been watching over myself for years. I’ll be OK.”

“Well, give me your email address so I can keep up with you.”

She laughed and snatched my phone off the counter. A minute later she set it back down in front of me. “It’s in there now.”

*Great*, I thought. *Now I just need to figure out how to access it.*

A minute later she set a plate with two eggs and five strips of bacon in front of me. I ate it quickly and then got to my feet. I wrote my phone number down and left it on the middle of the counter.

“I’ll be in touch,” I said.

She met me at the door and gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Her mouth lingered there for longer than it should have. I thought about turning my head and brushing her lips with mine. I wanted to turn my head. In the end, I didn’t. It didn’t feel right. Too close to her father’s death.

“See ya,” she said as she closed the door behind me.



## Chapter 21

It turned out I didn't travel all that much. I took a plane to Miami, a cab across a few bridges and found a small apartment above a bar for rent in the Keys. Two and a half relaxing months passed in the blink of an eye. The place was above a locals bar. At least the majority of its patrons were locals. I made a few friends. My hair grew longer, as did my beard. It felt awkward, but I went with it.

I kept in touch with Clarissa. We talked or emailed once a week. She had moved on and seemed to be doing well for herself. Her father's life insurance policy paid nicely and would take care of her for a while. I encouraged her to use the money to go to college. She planned to spend it all on a two year journey through Europe.

I had emailed Jessie soon after arriving here and asked her to join me. She only replied with a maybe and an apology for deleting the file and not burning it to the CD. She feared for her parents' safety. Martinez and Keller had threatened her that day they held her hostage. I was pissed that I had trusted her enough to handle the CD. Should have done it myself or at least watched over the process. I told her not to worry about it. Under the circumstances, I understood. Gave her a deadline to come to the Keys and told her that after that point I'd be unavailable. I don't know if that statement had any truth to it or not, but I couldn't go on waiting forever.

The deadline loomed, now just a few hours away.

I sat outside at a table on the bar's patio. On either side of me was an empty bistro table. A few people joined me throughout the day. They'd stay anywhere from a couple minutes up to an hour. It just depended on who and where the conversation went. I stayed sober during most of the day and

only started drinking around two that afternoon. At four I didn't feel drunk, but I certainly felt the effects of the alcohol.

"Noble," a voice called through the open window just above my head.

"Yeah," I said without looking back or standing.

"Got a call for you."

I looked at my watch. Four fifteen.

"Man or woman?"

"Man."

"Take a message." I didn't feel like talking.

My spot had a nice view of the water. Not a full view, but decent enough. It was early June. The sun stayed out until close to nine at night. I had every intention of sitting there until then. I had told Jessie six p.m. But I'd wait until nine. Or until I drank enough that I couldn't sit upright anymore.

As the next two hours passed, I found myself looking further and further down the street in an effort to spot her.

"Today's the day, eh, Noble?"

I smiled at the elderly couple who sat down at the table with me. Ralph had been a computer salesman in upstate New York. He and Marcy had been married for forty years. They left the cold a few years back for the laid-back lifestyle the Keys could offer those with the money to afford it.

Marcy straightened Ralph's blue Hawaiian print button up shirt and then leaned toward me.

"She'll show, Jackie."

Most people here simply called me Noble. For some reason, Marcy saw me as the son or grandson she never had and insisted on calling me Jackie. I stopped protesting after the first week. It was quite obvious she wasn't changing her stance.

"We'll see."

“Don’t get his hopes up, Marcy.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Ralph,” I said.

We talked for half an hour about nothing in particular. They offered to pay for my drinks. I declined and paid for theirs. It was a game of sorts, who could throw their hands up and protest the longest and the loudest. Four times out of five, they won. Tonight they let me take the glory.

Ralph looked down at his watch. “Six p.m. We should go and leave you to your woman.” He winked and helped Marcy out her chair. The couple joined hands and slipped through the open entrance of the bar and joined the rest of the Key West crowd who had become my family.

Six o’clock passed, and there was no sign of Jessie. I leaned back in my seat and stared out at the ocean. I lost myself in the crystal blue waters and sounds of locals and tourists on the street and beach. I had dropped into such a deep zone that I didn’t notice someone standing in front of me.

I shifted my gaze and looked at the person. It wasn’t who I hoped it would be.

“Jack Noble.” Not a question. The man knew me. He stood with his hands on his hips. His jacket pushed just enough to the side that I could see the handle of his pistol. What I didn’t see was a badge. He had to be a fed, though. Who the hell would be in Key West dressed in a suit in the middle of June? I found myself wishing I still carried a gun with me everywhere I went. Unfortunately, it didn’t jive with swim trunks and a tank top.

“Do I know you, friend?” I’d taken to calling strangers friend. Everyone down here was a friend. I couldn’t help thinking this was the life I could have had during off seasons and after my pro football career.

“I’ve got a proposition for you.”

“Does it involve handcuffs and a nine by nine cell? If so, I’m not interested.”

He laughed and pulled out a chair. “May I?”

“Have at it.”

He sat down and looked up at the open window. “Uh, sure, whatever he’s having.” He looked back at me and smiled.

I looked away.

“This has nothing to do with handcuffs or cells. I want to offer you a job.”

“Doing what?”

“Well, that’s complicated. You see-”

“Let me save you the time. No.” I grabbed my glass and took a sip. “I’m not interested in working.”

“You’ve got two weeks left until your government hand out ends.”

“Hey,” I said as I pointed at him. “I worked hard for that money. Went three years without a vacation. Don’t go around telling me it’s a freebie. And keep your damn voice down.”

“Apologies, on all counts.” He stood and took his drink from the bartender’s outstretched hand. “Ten years or so with us and you’ll never have to worry about money again.”

“Who are you?”

“Name’s Frank.”

I waited for him to tell me his last name. He didn’t.

“Who do you work for?”

“That’s classified.”

“Not the FBI. No badge.”

He nodded

“CIA wouldn’t want anything to do with me.”

“Correct again.”

“NSA?”

He shook his head.

“Then who-”

“I’ll save you some time, Noble. The only way you’ll find out is if you join.”

I looked around the street and didn’t notice anyone.

“What’s the job description?”

“Professional killer.”

I lifted an eyebrow. He smiled. It wasn’t the smile of someone that just told a joke. He meant business. It made sense. All my training had led to this.

“Who told you about me?”

“I, uh, I really can’t tell you that.”

“Marlowe.”

He shrugged.

It was Marlowe.

“I need a bit to decide.”

“You’ve got two minutes, Jack. After that, I leave.”

My mind started on the *what if* game. What if Jessie showed up? What if she didn’t? I was terrified of both. But the thing that kept pushing its way to the front of my mind was that I wanted to join Frank and his mystery organization. I wanted to be a part of the team. I craned my neck and looked down both sides of the street. I didn’t see her. I knew I wouldn’t see her. Not here. Not anywhere, never again.

“I’m in,” I said.

Frank stood and extended his hand. I reached up and shook it. He smiled at me for a moment and pulled a card from his pocket. He let go of my hand and pulled a pen from inside his jacket and wrote something down on the card.

“Two weeks,” he said and then he turned and left.

I placed the card on the table, then finished my drink while keeping my eyes open and aware. I kept up hope that Jessie

would show up. She didn't. At nine p.m., after a glorious sunset full of deep reds, oranges and pinks, I stood and grabbed the card off the table. It took a few minutes for my drunken eyes to focus. I read the note out loud.

“July 1st. East 64th Street and Park Avenue. Ten in the morning.” Below that line it said, “Welcome aboard, Noble.”

***THE END***

## **A DEADLY DISTANCE**

**JACK NOBLE No. 2**

**BY: L.T. RYAN**

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# Chapter 1

**December 19, 2004**

Six feet. A deadly distance. Especially when one man has a gun aimed at another. Close enough to take missing out of the equation. Far enough away that the target has slightly more than a zero percent chance of making a move, whether to disarm the assailant or duck and cover.

The guy I'd been hunting in the dusty and dimly lit warehouse found me first. I had taken a set of splintered wooden stairs to the catwalk that wrapped the interior edges of the building and cut across the center of the large rectangular room. I hustled up the steps, two at a time. The old wooden boards sagged and creaked and moaned, but held under my weight. The catwalk was stronger, sturdier. It didn't move in response to me. No bouncing. No side-to-side sway. One foot fell in front of the other as I sidestepped along the catwalk. I let my feet hit the floor from the outside in, minimizing the noise. Still, the planks gave off a slight thump in response to my boots hitting the wood. I knew if I wasn't careful, he'd hear me.

And he did.

Fortunately, I heard his footsteps, too. Unfortunately, I only heard them a second before he spoke.

"Stop," he said. His accent was thick, perhaps South American. "Drop your gun."

I froze and lifted my hands, letting the gun swing like a pendulum, upside down and with only my index finger holding it up by the trigger guard.

"Drop it," he said.

I dipped my finger to the side and let the gun slide off and over the railing. It hit the floor with a thud, managing to keep

from discharging a round. The cold handle of my backup piece rested reassuringly against my lower back, sending chills through me as the cold metal touched my sweaty skin.

“Now turn around,” he said.

I turned in a half-circle and got my first good look at the man I’d been chasing for the last twenty minutes. He stood approximately five foot nine and weighed probably one-eighty. He wore a tan jacket and black knit cap. Sparse dark hair covered his cheeks and chin. His eyes matched his hair. He stood six feet away, a pistol held close to his chest and aimed at me.

A distance of six feet increased his odds of being deadly accurate.

A distance of six feet reduced my chances of effectively neutralizing him.

Even at six-two, my reach wasn’t enough to land an effective blow in this situation.

“Who the hell are you?” he said.

“I’m the man who was sent to kill you,” I said.

“By who?”

“What?”

“Who’s your boss?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to write him a letter to recommend he fires you.”

I chuckled. The guy had a sense of humor, only the look on his face said he wasn’t joking.

“Why’s that?” I said.

“Because you failed this class, asshole.” He lifted the barrel of the gun and waved it back and forth, like a mother scolding her toddler.



“Only problem,” I said, “is this is only recess. Playtime for you.”

The man forced a laugh. “You’re the one following me, so you must have some idea who I am.”

“Not really.” And that was the truth. Frank Skinner and I had acted on a single piece of information that said a man fitting the guy’s description would be waiting at a bus stop.

“Well, let me give you the abridged version,” he said. “I’m someone you shouldn’t be following. You should have done your homework first. Now it’s too late for you.”

I smiled. “First, enough with the school analogies. Second, it’s never too late for me.”

His eyes narrowed. He brought his left hand up and wiped his cheek with his palm. His eyes darted upward and mine followed along. Light shone through a tiny hole in the roof. Bright, but gray. Rainwater dripped through the hole and splattered the man’s face. He cursed under his breath as a bead of water slapped against his cheek. He’d have to move and his next step would seal my fate.

The man didn’t move, though. Not immediately, at least. Two more drops hit him, then a third. Finally, he cursed and took a step forward. Six feet had been reduced to five. Still out of my reach, but not by much. If I lunged forward, I could reach him in one step instead of two.

“Give it up,” I said. “We’ve got the warehouse surrounded. You won’t make it out of here.”

“Then neither will you.” His eyes widened and he stuck his arm all the way out. Another mistake. His wrist flicked up and down, jerking the gun in and out of aim.

I saw my opportunity. The distance between the gun and me had been reduced by at least two-and-a-half feet. A full step and I’d have him by the wrist, neutralizing the immediate threat.

A crashing sound to my right startled both of us. I turned my head and saw a door to the outside open. Light flooded the ground floor of the warehouse and the silhouette of a man slipped through the opening and then disappeared into the shadows. I had lied when I said we had the building surrounded. There were only two of us, and I had left Frank behind a block away from the building. Either he had caught up, or the man hadn't been alone, in which case it would be two against me.

“Freeze!” Frank’s voice echoed through the warehouse.

The man forgot about me and turned toward Frank. Bright muzzle blast exploded in front of me as the man opened fire on my partner.

Frank didn't return fire, hopefully in an effort to avoid wounding me, and not because he'd been hit. I couldn't worry about that, though. The man stood five feet away, his body turned and his arms outstretched over the steel railing. The time to make a move was now.

I lunged forward, left arm out, right arm up, closing the distance before the man could react. I wrapped my left hand around his throat from the side, letting my thumb slide below his Adam's apple. He grunted against the pressure. At the same time I drove my right arm down, catching him on his wrist, which extended out a few feet over the railing. I twisted his arm and drove it down into the steel railing. Bone and steel met with a sickening crack followed by the sounds of the man screaming. His broken arm and spasming muscles could no longer muster up the strength required to hold the sidearm, and he dropped it. It hit the floor below us with a clank.

“Frank?” I yelled.

No answer.

The man reached across his body with his left arm and punched at my face, his fist connecting with my nose. Although he didn't have enough momentum to do any real damage, the blow managed to disrupt my grip on his neck. The

center of my face stung and my eyes flooded with tears. I felt him break away from my grasp.

“My arm,” he said. “You bastard, you broke my damn arm.”

I heard the sound of a knife being pulled from a sheath, blade against leather. I brought my palms to my eyes and wiped away the tears that blurred my vision. Once again, the man stood six feet away from me. His fractured right arm pressed against his chest. In his left, he held a knife with a six-inch blade. The light caught and winked off the stainless steel as he twirled it in his palm.

This time six feet didn't matter. I didn't have to contend with a bullet. In a fluid motion, I lunged forward and grabbed the railing on either side with both hands. Then I swung my legs forward while drawing my knees in. I drove the soles of my combat boots into his chest. He shrieked as they connected with his broken arm. The knife fell from his hand and bounced off the catwalk and fell to the concrete warehouse floor.

My momentum carried my body through, knocking the man down. He turned onto his stomach and began crawling away. His left arm scraped and scratched against the worn wooden planks while his right dragged behind, bent awkwardly at the wrist.

“Jack,” Frank shouted from below.

I walked up behind the man and stood over him and said nothing. I reached down and wrapped my right arm around his neck. His pulse thumped hard against the crook of my arm. I reached around with my left arm and grabbed my right elbow and pulled back hard. The movement squeezed the man's neck shut. I didn't care whether he died from asphyxiation, a broken neck, or if his head popped off.

The man clawed at my forearm. He swung his hips side to side, but he was no match for me. Desperate attempts to breathe were cut off by the force I exerted against his trachea.

“Jack, let him go.”

I looked up and saw Frank standing at the end of the catwalk.

“Come on, Jack,” he said. “We need this guy. He’s got info for us.”

“I don’t care,” I said as I squeezed tighter.

Frank approached with a hint of caution, perhaps thinking I’d snapped. He’d have been right if he thought it, too. “Let him go, Jack. Let’s get him to the office and question him. Then you can do whatever you want to him.”

The man’s knit cap had fallen off and his sweat soaked hair brushed against my face as his body went limp. I pulled back and looked at Frank and then the man. Frank’s words filtered through the rage that kept me from thinking straight, and suddenly they made sense. I let go of the man and his body fell against the catwalk, limp and lifeless.

I reached over and grabbed the railing and pulled myself up. “Christ, I think I killed him.”

Frank tucked his gun and squatted down. He reached out and placed his hand on the man’s neck. After a few seconds, he said, “He’s got a pulse. Help me get him downstairs and into the car.”

“So that’s where you were,” I said. “Pulling the car around instead of chasing him in here with me.”

“You took off, Jack. I lost you.” He looked up and I met his gaze with a smile.

“Only giving you a hard time.” I bent over, scooped my hands under the man’s shoulders, and lifted him up. Frank grabbed his legs and we carried him down the rickety stairs, which screamed in response to close to six hundred pounds of force pressing down on them.

Frank had parked the car right outside the warehouse entrance, trunk to door.

“I’m going to make sure it’s clear out there,” he said.

I nodded and leaned against the heavy steel framed door for support. The man started to come to. He coughed a few times and a deep, guttural groan emanated from his throat. I thought about rendering him unconscious again, but decided against it. A blow to the head might dampen his memory, and we needed to know everything he knew.

Frank opened the back door on the driver's side of his Lincoln and gestured for me to come out.

I backed out of the warehouse, dragging the guy with me. I looked to the left and to the right. The area was empty. I didn't bother to stare into windows, though. If someone was watching us, so be it. We'd be gone by the time the cops came. And even if they caught up to us, there was little they could do. We were, for all intents and purposes, untouchable.

The rain had stopped and the sun peeked through the melting clouds. The light penetrated my eyes like shards of glass. Cold wind whipped around the sides of the building, meeting at the spot where I stood. It felt like being pelted with icy snowballs from both sides.

"Give me a hand," I said.

Frank came closer and reached out for the man's right arm in an effort to stabilize it. Together we slid him into the back seat and buckled him in. I handcuffed his left wrist to the metal post that connected the headrest to the front passenger's seat.

"Sit in back with him," Frank said. "If he gets out of line," he looked at the man and smiled, "well, you know what to do."

I nodded, then walked around the back of the car and got in on the opposite side. I slid in next to the man and, for the first time, realized that he smelled like he hadn't showered in a week.

"If you hadn't been armed, I'd have thought you were a bum," I said.

The man pursed his lips and spit, his saliva smattering the back of the seat in front of him as well as the center console

next to Frank.

I drove my elbow into his solar plexus. He coughed an exhale as the air drained from his lungs. His body doubled over, chin to knees.

“Try it again,” I said.

He turned his head toward me. His face was deep red and the veins in his forehead stuck out like a snake swimming through water. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water as he tried to suck in air, but couldn't.

“Keep him quiet,” Frank said.

I nodded while staring at the man as he held his arm close to his chest. I said to Frank, “Go ahead and call the doc in to set and splint that arm.”

## Chapter 2

Frank drove us to SIS's unofficial headquarters. Though we said unofficial, the building outside of Washington, D.C. was our primary location. However, any building we occupied for the purpose of advancing our mission would be considered our headquarters and always labeled unofficial. The SIS was an agency that didn't exist. The primary focus of the group was counter-terrorism. We had complete and total autonomy. We could push any other agency to the back of the line if we felt our cause took precedence. The agents in our group were considered elite, and often handpicked from among the top recruits of the CIA, FBI and DEA. Only a handful of politicians and higher ups in the military knew of the agency's existence, and if you asked them, they'd flat out deny it, even if there was a gun to their head.

We pulled up around the rear of the building. Frank stopped in front of what appeared to be a wall. If you stood close enough, and in the right spot, you'd see a tiny crack that ran up its center, then turned to the right and met another thin crack. Frank pulled a device out of his pocket and pushed a button. A wide door opened out and Frank drove into a dark garage. The place was empty except for my car, a large SUV, and a four-door maroon Lexus that belonged to the doctor.

I waited in the back seat after Frank parked and cut the engine. He got out, walked around the back and opened the door next to the man. I removed the handcuff from his left wrist and pushed the man out while Frank pulled. The guy stumbled out and fell to the ground. He groaned and clutched at his broken arm.

"Get up," Frank told the guy.

I slid through the open door. The guy was on his knees, bent over with his forehead resting on the concrete floor. I

grabbed him by his shirt collar and pulled the man's upper body straight up. Frank reached under his left arm and started pulling. I grabbed his collar and the waistband of his pants. We got him to his feet, and then led him to the only door in the garage.

Frank swiped an access card through a security card reader and the light changed from red to green. He then placed his thumb on a pad. There was a series of beeps, and another light turned from red to green. Then the lock clicked and Frank turned the door handle. We walked down a short hall and came to the area of the main floor that we called the lobby. There were two doors on the far wall. Each door led to an interrogation room. A four by six foot mirrored window was placed a foot away from each door. Opposite the interrogation rooms was our infirmary, a state of the art medical facility that was equipped for everything from bee stings to surgery. There were six offices in the lobby, three on the north wall, and three on the south. My office was next to Frank's. The third office on our side was designated for all of team B.

The stale air of the lobby enveloped us. The smell of ammonia hardly affected me anymore, but the guy we were dragging down the hall coughed and gagged as he breathed in the fumes.

The doctor stood in the doorway of the infirmary. He was tall and middle aged. His full head of hair was half brown, half gray. His long, pointy nose was the only distinguishing feature on his face. He nodded toward our prisoner. "What's wrong with him?"

"Broken arm," I said. "Maybe a concussion, too. But that shouldn't matter."

The doctor shrugged and nodded over his shoulder. "Drop him in there."

"You want one of us to stay?" I asked.

"Him." The doctor pointed at Frank. "You ask too many questions, Mr. Noble."



Frank laughed and the doctor joined in. I said nothing. He had a point. I did tend to ask a lot of questions when he was working on one of us. I often thought that if my life had gone a bit differently when I was young, I could have ended up a doctor or trauma surgeon.

I left the infirmary and went to my office. I stacked a few manila folders and moved them to the corner of the desk, then started a pot of coffee. The rich aroma of the dark grinds soaked the air in my office. I didn't feel like waiting for the full pot to brew, so I emptied it into a stained mug as soon as there was enough. I held the mug in both hands and leaned back in my chair. The caffeine coursed through my veins, providing the jolt I needed.

I got up and left my office and walked back to the infirmary. Frank glanced at me and said nothing. He concentrated on the guy's broken arm. I took a few more steps and stopped inside the doorway and leaned against the frame.

"Out," the doctor said.

I could tell by his tone that he was serious. We tried hard to avoid pissing Doc off, because you never knew when you were going to need him to treat you. I shrugged and backed up a few feet. Turned around and leaned back against the wall a couple yards from the door. I lifted the coffee to my face and inhaled. Steam singed the inside of my nose for a second. I took a sip. It was strong. Perhaps a bit too strong, if there was such a thing. I decided it didn't matter. The brew helped clear the cobwebs from my head, and that was always welcome.

Behind me, I heard the sound of bone grating against bone. The doctor was setting the fracture. The man screamed as his ulna and then radius were placed in their natural positions. I took his cries of pain as a sign that the doctor hadn't bothered to numb the guy up. I was OK with that, and apparently Frank was too. Why waste our supplies on a criminal?

With the doctor almost finished, I started to think about what questions to ask the man. We didn't know much about him, except that he showed up at a place that our intel

indicated would be a spot where something would happen. But we had no idea who this guy was. What was he doing near the bus stop? Was he a part of the group we were tracking, or doing business with them? Why did he run from us? Why did he try to kill me?

Both Frank and I had a feeling we were closing in on something big. Every piece of evidence we had gathered so far pointed to this being a terrorist cell. The only good thing about that was that we didn't have to turn it over to the FBI or DEA. These guys had been running drugs and guns and smuggling people in and out of the States for months. If it were one of those activities, we'd be out of the loop. But it wasn't one activity. It was the full gamut.

It also appeared that they had funding from some big businesses in hostile places, as well as possible connections with powerful people in the U.S. Homeland tried to take over on account of this. Frank managed to push them back.

The men themselves were a mix of U.S. citizens, Colombians, and guys from the Middle East. That was the only thing that clouded our initial assumption. Why were so many different groups working together? I hoped that this guy, who looked like he might be Colombian, could tie some of those loose ends together for us. Assuming he talked, that is.

"OK, Mr. Noble," the doctor said from the other side of the wall. "He's all yours."

I drank the last of my coffee and pushed off the infirmary wall and met Frank and the man at the entrance. The doctor had set the bone and placed an air cast over the man's forearm. The guy sat on the edge of the gurney, shoulders slumped, head hanging, and eyes focused on the floor.

"Take him to room one," I said to Frank. Then I turned to the doctor. "Can he hold up?"

The doctor shrugged. "Maybe. I'll stick around. I've got a few things that can help keep him up and awake through whatever you do to him."

“You won’t want to watch if it gets to that.”

“With what you guys pay me, I can watch anything.”

“Go wait in your office. We’ll get you if we need you.”

The doctor held up his hands. He then crossed the room and went into his office, which was on the wall opposite of mine. He closed his door and took a seat behind his computer. I glanced in as I passed and saw the familiar green game board of computer solitaire.

Frank had placed the guy in the interrogation room and now stood on the outside, watching the man through the smoky mirrored glass.

“What do you think?” I said as I stopped next to him, a few feet separating us.

“No doubt he’s got information. And if our intel was right, he was at that bus stop for a reason.”

I nodded and said nothing, waiting for Frank to continue.

“Something was about to go down,” Frank said.

I nodded again, remaining quiet.

“Question is what, Jack? And is he one of them? Or was he there to meet them?”

“Great questions, Frank,” I said. “Only one way to find out.”

He nodded and smiled. “You ready?”

“Not quite.” I took two steps to the right and adjusted the thermostat, turning it down to fifty degrees. “Let’s freeze him out for a bit.”

Half an hour passed while we downed two cups of coffee each. Neither of us said much. After two years of working together, there was no need for idle banter between us. Both of us knew what needed to be done. We each had our own tactics, and they played well off one another.

I got up and went to check on the man. He looked considerably uncomfortable. “Let’s go, Frank.”

Frank entered the room ahead of me. He sat at the far end of a rectangular wooden table. I sat in the middle, opposite our prisoner. The man looked between us. His lips quivered and his teeth chattered. He sniffled and shivered.

“Can we get you anything?” Frank asked.

“A coat,” the man replied.

“We can do that,” Frank said. “Can’t we, Jack?”

I nodded. “Sure, but first you need to answer a few questions for us.”

The man stared at a spot on the table and said nothing.

“What’s your name?” I said.

The man said nothing.

“Your name?” I said again.

“Pablo,” he said without looking up.

“What were you doing at that bus stop?” I said.

The man slowly turned his head. His teeth stopped chattering as he clenched his jaw. Muscles rippled at the bottom corners of his face. He licked his lips and calmly said, “I want my lawyer. I’m not saying anything until my lawyer is here.”

Frank laughed. “I’m sorry. Do you think you have rights down here? Jack, did you read this guy his rights?”

I shook my head and said nothing.

Frank stood and positioned himself next to me, across the table from the guy. “OK, asshole, here are your rights. You have the right to sit in that chair. You have the right to answer every friggin’ question we ask you. You don’t have the right to remain silent. Your efforts to remain silent are going to be met with a pain so intense you’ll wish we had amputated your arm instead of breaking it. You don’t get a lawyer or a chaplain or

your mommy. That doctor over there, he's on our side. He can give you medication to keep you awake through any amount of pain we put you through. You won't pass out, asshole. You'll cry until you have no more tears. You'll puke until all your stomach is barren and all you can do is dry heave. So answer my partner's question or your pain is going to start in about thirty seconds."

The man clenched the hand of his good arm into a fist. His eyes watered. I assumed the reality of the situation hit him at that moment. We weren't the cops and there was nothing legal about us. At least not in any sense that he, or most people, understood. Frank and I were authorized to do our jobs, no matter what it took. We could come and go and shoot to kill without asking questions, and without having questions asked of us.

Frank placed both hands on the table and leaned over until he was no more than a foot from the guy's face. "So what's it going to be?"

The man pulled his head back a few inches. His lips thinned and his cheeks puffed out. Frank jerked to the side in time to avoid most of the spittle that flew out of the guy's mouth.

Frank reached out and grabbed the man's right wrist and yanked up, then down. The man screamed as the jagged edges of his broken bones grated against one another.

Frank pulled out a knife. "The bones are already broken. Shouldn't be tough to cut through. Then there's a mess of veins and nerves and meat and flesh. You want to see what it's like to hold your own severed arm?"

"Enough," the man said through clenched teeth. "I'll talk. I'll talk."

The left side of Frank's mouth turned upward in a smile. He broke the guy down fast. While we'd seen some turn faster, we expected this guy to last a few rounds before caving in.

Frank let go and the man pulled his broken arm to his chest and cradled it with his left arm. He let out a couple sobs, and then wiped his eyes dry. Tears stained his cheeks and settled into his thin facial hair.

“What do you want to know?” he said.

“I want to know what you were doing at the bus stop,” I said.

He licked his lips and leaned back in the chair and let out a loud exhale. “Got a smoke?”

I looked at Frank and nodded. Frank reached into his pocket and pulled out a soft pack. He tapped the open end against his palm and retrieved three cigarettes. He lit two and handed one to the man, then rolled the third across the table to me. I tucked it behind my ear, choosing to save it for later.

“The bus stop is where the pickup was going to be made,” the guy said.

“What pickup?” I said.

He shifted his eyes from the table to me. “The kid.”

I felt Frank’s eyes settle on me, but I didn’t look back at him. “What kid?”

The man’s facial expression changed. The pain and anger lifted, and a bemused look crossed his face. “What did you pick me up for, man?”

“We’ve been tracking you guys for months. We’ve got you for drugs, guns, and smuggling terrorists in and out of the country.”

The guy his head back and laughed. The spasmodic motion of his body jolted his arm a few inches more than was comfortable and he scrunched his face in pain. After a few seconds he steadied himself and said, “OK, you’re onto something with the guns and drugs. They pay well. But the terrorists in and out, you’re way off.”

“What then?” Frank said. “And what about the kids?”

“Is that all you got? You think these people entered and exited the country alone?” The smile returned to Pablo’s face.

“Stop screwing with us,” Frank said. “What are you talking about the-”

“Frank,” I said. “He’s talking about us being way off. This isn’t a terrorist cell.”

Pablo’s eyebrows arched up into his forehead and his smile widened. He looked between Frank and me and nodded vigorously.

I continued, “They’re child smugglers. He was at the bus stop today because he was going to kidnap a child.”

“You son of a bitch.” Frank charged the man and punched him three times in the head, rendering him unconscious.

By the time I got across the table, Frank had backed up. He looked down at the bloodied face of Pablo and shook his hand, which was equally covered in blood. I couldn’t tell if it was all Pablo’s, or if Frank had split a knuckle or two.

“Well, that was tactful,” I said.

“I got kids, Jack.”

“I know.”

“Christ,” Frank said as he stepped around Pablo and made his way toward the door. “What now?”

I followed Frank out into the lobby. The door slammed behind us, echoing through the room. The doctor looked up and saw us and opened his door.

“Need me to do anything?” he asked.

“Smelling salts,” I said. “And check his arm. It might need to be set again.”

The doctor reached for his bag. “That’s why I went with the air cast,” he said with a smile.

Frank stood in the middle of the room with his hands on his hips and his head leaned back.

“You need to get it together,” I said. “I’ll have you pulled from this.”

“I’m good. I’m good.”

“OK,” I said. “We need to get some more information out of him. Now, I don’t think he’s going to give up anyone else, at least, not yet. But maybe we can get the location of where they are keeping these kids.”

“You sure about this? What if he’s jerking us around?” Frank said.

“That’s why we need the location. We can verify it in person, then come back and hammer on him some more, and then we’ll lead a raid on the place.”

Frank nodded as the doctor emerged from the interrogation room.

“He’s ready for you guys again,” the doctor said.

I grabbed Frank by his shoulders. “Let me do the talking.” Then I pushed him toward the room. I wanted Frank to enter first, figuring it would cause the man to feel a little more unsettled.

Pablo was conscious when we entered, but he looked confused.

“Where are you keeping them?” I said.

“Who?” Pablo said.

“The kids.”

“In a house.”

“Where?”

“Northern Virginia. Suburbs.”

“Which one?”

“I don’t know the name of the neighborhood. Spring Street. Ninth house on the right.”

“Going which way?”



“You can only enter from the north.”

I looked at Frank. He nodded.

“Good enough.” I stepped to the door and pulled it open. Turned back and saw Frank stop in front of Pablo and lean over and drive his fist into the side of the man’s face again.

“Was that necessary?” I said.

Frank looked at me, then at Pablo, then back at me. “Yes.”

## Chapter 3

Spring Street was full of cookie cutter colonials that sat side by side, a few feet of lawn separating them. The exteriors alternated between white siding with red or blue trim, and brick facades. The target house's lawn was cut close, now a mixture of green and winter brown. Not quite alive, but not totally dead. The entryway was inviting. Christmas lights wrapped the porch rails and lined the edge of the roof. It looked like a normal house and certainly not one that held the deep and dark secrets Pablo inferred.

I started to wonder whether or not Pablo had purposefully led us in the wrong direction. Maybe he had something worked out with the group that if he didn't return by a certain time, they'd take off and go underground or into some state of emergency. In which case, we'd be screwed. And by sending me and Frank out to the suburbs, they'd have even more time to get the hell away, damn the consequences to Pablo.

We sat in a parked car three houses away. The engine had been off for close to three hours and the air inside the car was almost as cold as the air outside. Steam rose with each breath we took.

We positioned the car so the main road was behind us. If anyone entered or left the house, we'd see them. We could also monitor who turned into the neighborhood by looking in the rear and side mirrors.

“Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“Think we're wasting our time?” Frank turned his head slightly and looked at me out of the corner of his right eye.

I shrugged. “Was beginning to wonder that myself.”

Frank took a deep breath and exhaled loudly and said nothing.

A flash caught my attention. I looked from the house to my side mirror. A van approached from behind. I nodded and said, "Look."

Frank reached for the steering wheel. The muscles in his forearms flexed as his hands gripped the leather cover that wrapped around the wheel like a boa constrictor.

"Relax," I said. "Even if it's them, we aren't doing anything yet."

Frank's behavior, while understandable, was not typical. I referred to the guy as Ice Man at times because there was no one cooler under pressure. Stress rolled off him like water off a wax statue. He never made a mistake. Not while in the military, and not since I'd worked with him in the SIS. I believed he was incapable of screwing up. But his behavior started to worry me, and worry wasn't a feeling that men in our position could afford.

The van passed us at a steady pace. Stenciled on the side was *Freddy's Cleaning Service* and there was a phone number and the phrase *We've Got A Lust For Dust* written across the rear doors. It didn't slow down as it neared the house. Passed right by, and then continued to the end of the street where it pulled into a driveway.

"Watch the van," Frank said. "I'll keep an eye on the house."

"Got it."

A heavysset man got out of the van and walked toward the front door of the house. His shoulders were hunched over, like a man who'd busted his ass all day long to afford the four bedroom house that kept his family sheltered. I kept my eyes trained on the front door and the windows of the place after he went inside. A minute passed, then two. No action. I glanced to the side and checked the mirror. Another car had turned

onto the street and was approaching at a speed slower than the van had traveled.

“Frank?”

“Yeah?”

“Look behind us.”

The car slowed as it passed. It was red with four doors and had tinted windows. Our car had the same. We couldn't see him any better than he could see us if he had attempted to look. The driver slowed to a crawl as he passed the house. Frank tapped on the dashboard with his right hand and pointed.

“I see him, Frank. Give it a minute.” Despite the calming tone of my voice, I felt as anxious as he acted.

The vehicle continued past the house, but not for long. It came to a stop half a block away and parked next to the curb. The driver's door swung open, but no one got out.

“Think they're watching to see what we do?” Frank said.

“I think you're paranoid,” I said.

He waved me off. “I want to get one good look at the guy. If he fits the bill, I'm taking him down.”

“We don't know what the bill is. You bring this guy in and one of two things happens. A, someone tries to sue the government because they think they were illegally detained. Or B, you blow the operation.”

“Operation? We don't have an operation, Jack.”

“Not yet.” I felt like yelling at him, asking, *what the hell is wrong with you?* Instead, I bit my tongue and kept calm, at least on the outside. I needed to find my inner calm as well, because both of us acting like jack asses wasn't going to do anyone any good, least of all kids who might need to be rescued.

We watched the car for ten minutes. There was no movement. The door remained open. The brake lights lit up. A

slight halo circled the red dots due to a film of condensation on our windshield. Maybe whoever was in the car watched us. Maybe they had called another group of guys and were waiting for them to arrive. Or maybe it was some guy on the phone with his mistress, wanting to finish their illicit conversation before heading inside to kiss his unaware wife.

“Look,” Frank said. “He’s getting out.”

I leaned forward and watched as the man stepped out of the vehicle. There was nothing special about his clothing, which consisted of jeans and a sweatshirt. It looked like he wore hiking boots. He wore a red cap on his head. He looked South American.

He fully emerged from the vehicle and turned his head to the left, then the right. His eyes moved constantly, scanning every house, every car. He stopped on ours, watched for a few seconds, and then moved on. Were we not a threat? Or was he good enough that he identified us and knew not to give it away?

I looked over and saw that Frank had his left hand on the door handle, and his right hand wrapped around his pistol.

“Easy Frank,” I said.

“Making sure I’m prepared,” Frank said.

He had a point, but the fact was that we were closer to the house than the man who stood next to the car.

The guy closed his door and walked around the back of the red vehicle. He didn’t move fast. He didn’t move slowly. He rounded the trunk and came to a stop next to the back passenger’s door. He opened it and leaned over and then his head disappeared inside the vehicle.

“What do you think he’s doing?” Frank said.

“Probably getting his rocket launcher. Then he’s going to aim it at us and end our beautiful partnership.”

“Asshole.”

“Isn’t he?”

“Not him, you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Stop being so uptight. We’ve got...”

The man emerged, and he wasn’t alone. After his head popped back out, his right arm remained. A few seconds later, I could see a smaller, thin arm being pulled out. The body of a small child followed. The kid was maybe seven or eight years old. Of course, I’d always been bad at judging that sort of thing.

“You see that?” I said.

“I see it,” Frank said.

“How old you think that kid is?”

“Nine or ten.”

I shrugged. Frank had kids. He’d be able to tell.

The man and child started walking toward us. Even from this distance, it was obvious they were not related. The man had a dark beard, and dark hair stuck out from the edges of his cap and whipped in the wind. The kid, on the other hand, was pale and blond.

“Think they’re related?” I said.

“Not a chance in hell.”

“Maybe he’s babysitting.”

That, also, had no chance of being true. The kid let his body drop in an effort to break the man’s grasp. It did nothing but enrage the man, who yanked the kid up and proceeded to drag him along with the kid’s knees scraping along the pavement. Fortunately, he had heavy jeans on.

Frank and I both flinched forward. My hand raced to my holstered pistol and I pulled it out.

“Easy there, Jack,” Frank said.

I leaned back and turned my head toward him.

“Let’s see where they go,” he said.

Looking at the man’s eyes, it was obvious where they were going. He had tunnel vision, and the reward at the end of the tunnel was the house we were staking out. The kid still fought and pulled back. The man finally reached down and picked him up and tossed him over his shoulder.

“Pretty damn ballsy walking the kid in like that, don’t you think?” I said.

Frank nodded and said nothing.

“Maybe he’s had the kid around a while?” I said. “You know, neighbors are used to him. That kind of thing.”

Frank still said nothing.

I let a few moments pass without talking while I watched as the man walked up the cracked driveway, his foot trampling grass that struggled to survive in a concrete wasteland. He reached the door, and then reached into his pocket. His hand returned with a key, which he inserted into the knob. A moment later, man and child disappeared into the house.

“Seen enough?” I said.

“Let’s watch for a few minutes. If I think rationally, I can explain what we saw. That could be the guy’s stepson. He could have adopted him.”

Frank’s waffling emotions had started to concern me. Here he was neutral and calm, normal Frank. But not too long ago he had been ready to storm the neighborhood.

I shrugged. “Guess that’s possible.”

We sat in silence, watching the house and the street. No one entered. No one left. The sun was deep in the western sky and long shadows enveloped the house and the yard and our car. The vehicle’s tinted windows now worked against us, making it harder to see with accurate detail.

“Want me to call for the van?” I said.

“Let’s give it a few and if nothing happens we’ll head back to the office and work on Pablo some more.”

Ten more minutes passed, and with it, the light faded further. Then the glare of headlights reflected off the side mirror and caught my attention. I reached out and tapped Frank. Tension filled the car.

“I see it,” he said.

Both of us hunched lower in our seats and waited as a van passed and then slowed down in front of the house. The right blinker flashed rhythmically, as if telling us, *come on in boys, we got just what you’re looking for.*

Inside our car, it was dead quiet. We both held our breath, afraid that any noise or movement we made would scare off the van.

The vehicle turned onto the driveway and stopped near the garage door. The driver’s side was blocked from our view, but the front passenger’s door flung open and a man hopped down onto the concrete drive. He had on a green coat, but it was impossible to make out any facial features or even tell what his race might be. He faced our direction for a second while he arched his back and twisted side to side, then he spun around and reached for the sliding side door. He grabbed and pulled out and back, whipping the door open. The man that I assumed was the driver now stood at the rear of the van, his back to us. The other guy reached inside and pulled out a child. He pushed the kid toward the driver, then reached in and yanked out a second kid. He grabbed the boy by the collar of his jacket and led him to the side of the house. The four of them walked past the garage. Large hedges provided cover and they slipped past our line of sight.

“Christ,” I said. “Start the car and move slowly.”

Frank already had his hand on the ignition, and he fired up the engine and dropped the transmission into drive. We inched along and almost came to a complete stop once we had a full



view of the side of the house. We were too late, though. We passed by as the last man entered and slammed the door shut.

Frank raced toward the end of the street and whipped the car around in the cul-de-sac. Again, he floored it and we hit fifty by the time we passed the house again. A stop sign approached fast. Brakes and tires squealed.

“Christ!” Frank shouted.

“Want me to drive?”

Frank slammed his hands on the steering wheel and said nothing.

“First day of driver’s ed I remember them telling us to never drive angry. Or maybe that was never drive drunk?”

“Shut up, Jack.”

I grinned at myself for a couple seconds and then let my feelings turn somber. I knew what we had witnessed. One man and a kid was a coincidence. A van showing up with two more kids was evidence. Evidence of something I didn’t want to believe was real. How had this gone on for so long completely undetected?

“This shit’s legit,” Frank said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I want to go back.”

“Let’s do this right. Get a team. Decide if we need to consult the feds or the cops.”

“And hammer on Pablo,” Frank said as he pressed on the gas and peeled out on to the main road.

## Chapter 4

“Wake up, Pablo.” Frank kicked the table hard enough that it slid to the wall.

Pablo had been sleeping, his head down on the wooden surface. He jolted upright, lifting his chin off the table in time. “What the hell, man?”

“I should be asking you that,” Frank said. “Who are the men at the house?”

Pablo smiled and shrugged. He turned his palms up. His eyebrows rose into his forehead. “What house? What men?”

Anyone could have taken a single look at Frank and realized the man meant business. But for some reason, Pablo must have felt like he could string him along. It didn’t work out that well for him. Frank lifted his right knee and drove his foot into Pablo’s chest, sending the man and his chair careening backward into the wall. The chair hit first, colliding with a clank. Pablo’s head followed, smashing into the wall with a thud. He slumped out of his chair and to the floor. A long smeared line of blood followed him.

“Shit,” Frank said.

“Shit is right,” I said. “Better hope he’s not dead.”

Frank took three steps forward and leaned over. He reached out and felt along Pablo’s neck. “He’s got a pulse.” Then he stood, turned and walked to the door. “Hey Doc, we need you.”

The doctor shuffled in holding a half-eaten bear claw in one hand and a steaming cup of coffee in the other. White specs of the sugar glaze from the pastry stuck to his dark mustache.

“What happened to him?” the doctor asked.

“He fell,” I said.

The doctor nodded and grunted his affirmation. He handed his pastry and coffee to Frank, then squatted down next to Pablo and began his evaluation.

Doc had it made. None of us knew his name. We called him Doc for his own protection. We all figured he didn't have a job, because he was on-call twenty-four seven for us. I could only imagine what we paid him for his services.

“If you want to get any more info out of this guy, I'd recommend you stop beating him.” The doctor took his time standing. He turned and leaned back against the wall.

“Otherwise he ain't gonna 'member nothin'.”

“Got that, Frank?” I said.

Frank set the doctor's food and coffee down on the table and pushed his way past me and out of the room.

“What's his problem?” the doctor said.

I thought about it for a second. Frank had been taking this operation hard. I grew increasingly concerned that he'd go into the raid with nothing but vengeance on his mind, instead of fulfilling our actual purpose there. The whole point would be to neutralize the men in the house and get the kids out. After that, we'd bring the men back here and go to work on them, finding out the details of their little program.

“He's on edge with this case,” I said. “I am too. It's not pretty.”

“I don't want to know any details.”

“Yeah, I know you don't, Doc.”

“All righty, well, I'm going back to my office.” He grabbed his coffee and pastry and walked past me through the open doorway. “He'll be up soon. No more hitting him. If you need him to talk, come get me. I'll inject him with something that will have him singing the blues like he was on stage in a dive bar in Kansas City.”

*Sure he will* , I thought. The only thing this guy had going for him was the fact that he led us to the right house. I had no idea if he'd be useful to us anymore. Worth a shot, though.

I pulled the table to the center of the room and sat down at the far end, giving me a view of Pablo as well as the lobby. Pablo started to stir, but hadn't come around all the way yet.

Harris and McKenzie, both SIS agents, entered the lobby. We were expecting six more to help plan and carry out the raid. I wasn't sure who, though. That was up to Frank.

Harris poked his head into the room. "Who's that?"

"Name's Pablo. He fed us the intel that led to the house."

"What's going on at the house?"

"Frank didn't tell you?"

"Wouldn't be asking if he did."

I paused for a second before responding. Frank had a reason for not telling them what we were doing. I had no idea what that reason was, but I felt like I should respect it. "Frank'll go over it in a few. We got a few more questions for this guy."

"OK." Harris turned and walked away.

Pablo opened his eyes and crawled toward the table.

"Hey, Harris?"

"Yeah."

"Mind telling Frank I need him in here?"

"You got it."

By this point, Pablo had managed to get his forearm up on the table and began pulling himself onto the chair. The man looked like a prizefighter who'd lost his final fight. Left eye swollen shut. Lower lip split in two spots. His nose was crooked and dried blood caked on his upper lip.

"How you feeling, Pablo?" I said.

“Gimme’ a smoke, man.”

“Give the man a smoke, Frank,” I said.

Frank stepped into the room and let the door fall closed behind him. He walked around the table and stopped behind Pablo. What was he planning to do? Strangle him? I held my breath, preparing for Frank’s next move. I didn’t want to rush to Pablo’s defense, but we weren’t done with the man, and I’d do whatever I could to keep him alive. Until we had the kids, that is.

Frank reached into his pocket. For a second I thought he was going to pull out a wire, but instead he produced a pack of cigarettes. He grabbed two and stuck them between his lips, and then flipped the lid of his lighter. A two-inch flame shot out and he waved his head side to side. He removed one from his between his lips and handed it to Pablo.

“Gracias,” Pablo said.

Frank said nothing. He continued around the table, behind me, and then sat directly across from Pablo.

The room felt heavy. It was quiet except for the sound of Pablo’s labored breathing.

Finally, Frank spoke. “What should we expect, Pablo?”

Pablo shrugged. He took a long pull on his cigarette and held the smoke in for what seemed to be two seconds too long. He exhaled a stream of blue smoke into the air then said, “I’m thinking it’s gonna be a white Christmas, man.”

Frank’s face turned bright red. He leaned forward. His fists were clenched tight. It looked like he used every last ounce of self-restraint to keep himself from flying across the table and smashing Pablo’s head against the wall, again.

“We’re done screwing around,” I said. “Doc will inject you with something that will hurt worse than any pain you have ever felt. And as a side effect, you won’t be able to resist answering us.”

The half-smile on Pablo's face flattened. He turned his head in my direction, but kept his eyes on Frank.

"My partner wanted to give that to you right from the beginning," I said. "But from what I can see, you've been pretty straight forward with us. I'm willing to give you another chance. If you keep screwing around, we'll have no choice but to inject you."

Pablo shifted his eyes to me, then Frank, and then back to me. "You guys are gonna get me killed."

"Not if we get the guys you work for," Frank said. "The guys in that house."

Pablo chuckled. "You think it stops there?"

"I think it begins there," Frank said. "And we'll kill half of them, keep half of them alive. Bring them here. Question them. We'll get to where we need to go, eventually. Here's what I want to know. Are you going to be there with us? Or do you plan to work against us, leaving us with no choice but to dispose of you? You saw how we've been able to detain you without so much as a warrant. I've checked your background, Pablo. You're clean as a whistle. Totally legal. Not so much as a parking ticket. If we can do this, then surely you must realize we can dispose of you in such a way that no one will ever find your body."

I found myself impressed with how composed Frank handled himself. Two minutes earlier he was ready to kill the man, and here he was rationalizing with him.

"Just say you're ready to talk and we'll get down to business," Frank said.

Pablo nodded. "What happens to me if I do talk and give you what you want?"

"Then we keep you around a bit longer in case we need you again," Frank said.

"And then what? What happens when it's all over?"

"I'm sure we can work something out," I said.

That was the best I could offer. The truth was neither Frank nor I could guarantee him anything. Once we completed the operation, our superiors would decide what to do with the prisoners. Some would be killed. Others turned over to local or federal law enforcement. Some might even be let go. It wasn't up to us, and frankly, I didn't care what happened to them.

"OK," Pablo said. "What do you want to know?"

"Start with the house. Describe the interior."

"When you walk in the front door, the staircase is right in front of you. Dining room to the right, living room to the left. The dining room opens to the kitchen. The kitchen connects to the garage on the right and a family room on the left. A short hall leads from the family room to the front door and living room. Next to the door to the garage is the door to the basement."

"What about upstairs?" I said.

"Five bedrooms, plus a room over the garage."

"Who stays upstairs?"

"They do."

"What's in the basement?"

Pablo's eyes shifted and his head lowered and his voice dropped to a whisper. "The kids."

Frank's face darkened a shade. His jaw muscles rippled.

I continued with the questioning. "How many kids?"

"Uh, I haven't been there in a week."

"How many were there last time you were there?"

"A dozen."

"Twelve kids?"

"Yeah."

Frank turned to me. "We saw three go in yesterday. So we're talking fifteen."

I nodded. “Maybe more. Who knows how many they brought in since he was last there?”

“No,” Pablo said. “There won’t be many more than a dozen. That’s about as much as the basement can handle. If you saw them bringing in more kids, that means they moved some. I was supposed to bring one, too. Based on what you say you saw, they shipped at least four out.”

Frank looked like he was ready to explode. He placed his hands on the table and inched forward, subtly.

“Frank, leave,” I said.

He looked at me, eyes narrowed and mouth partly open. “What?”

“Leave for a few minutes. Get a drink and then come back.”

He got up, slowly, and made his way to the door. I waited for him to exit the room and then continued.

“Where do they take them?” I asked.

Pablo shrugged. “Dunno.”

“I’m only going to ask one more time. Where-”

“I’m telling you, I don’t know. I don’t stay at the house. I’m not that far up the ladder, man. All I know is when I bring a new kid in, ones that had been there are gone.”

I decided to change it up a bit. “Who were you targeting at the bus stop?”

“It’s not like that. It’s random. We’re not looking for ransom or anything. All kids sell.” Pablo stopped and grinned. “Well, some sell better than others.”

I felt my blood start to boil. I took a deep breath and composed myself before continuing. “So you’ve never been asked to pick up a specific kid?”

“Nah.” Pablo looked up, his face twisted. “Well, that’s not true. A few weeks ago they gave me a picture and told me to



get the kid.”

“What did he, or she, look like?”

“He. Blond hair. Maybe ten years old, not sure.”

“Where did you pick him up?”

Pablo leaned back and crossed his arms. Brought one hand up to his chin and rubbed his forefinger and thumb against his beard.

“Where, Pablo?”

“I followed him and his mom for a few miles. They pulled into a gas station. It was late, dark. I smacked the lady. She dropped to the ground. I took the kid. But, I can’t remember exactly where. I was, uh, not sober.”

Frank opened the door and stepped in. He didn’t sit down. Instead, he leaned against the back wall, never taking his eyes off of Pablo. I decided to get the questioning back on track. We could revisit the abduction after the raid.

“OK, Pablo, back to the house,” I said. “How many guys are there?”

“Five or six at all times.”

“Up to?”

“I dunno, maybe eight. Never seen more than ten. If you go after eight you’ll only have five or six. And one will be sleeping. There is always someone on duty watching the cameras, so someone is always sleeping in preparation of their shift.”

“What kind of weaponry?” I asked.

“I think everyone is armed in there. I know I’m always armed with at least a pistol on me. They have some assault rifles, too.”

“How many?”

Pablo shrugged and said nothing.

I glanced over at Frank. He met my gaze and nodded.

“See you for a sec, Jack.”

I got up and we stepped out of the room. I looked around the lobby. All the offices were full with agents waiting to meet and discuss the raid.

“Full house,” I said.

“Yeah.” Frank nodded as he looked left, then right. “So what’s your feeling? Is he telling the truth?”

I shrugged. “Guess so. He could be lying, but we know the house is there. We know there’s going to be people inside. I’m thinking we should have a sniper set up across the street and watch the house all night. Get another guy up there in the morning. That way we’ll have some kind of count on how many guys when we head in.”

“Think it’s really only five or six?” Frank said.

I leaned in and spoke low. “You worried?”

“A bit.”

“You and I can handle five or six guys and barely break a sweat doing so. We got this.”

Frank nodded. “OK. Take him downstairs and get him into a cell. No point in keeping him in the room.”

“OK.”

“We’ll be down in the conference room. Meet us there.”

## Chapter 5

I locked the solid steel door to Pablo's cell and made my way to conference room, which was located on the same floor. The underground levels of our building were twice the size of the first floor. Half of this floor was holding cells. The other half was split between the conference room and a few more offices. There were two more floors below. One was all offices, and the other had a workout room and our warehouse, which housed all our weaponry. An elevator on the bottom floor could take us down another hundred feet or so to an emergency bunker. I doubted we'd ever have to use it. At least, I wouldn't. I'd always been of the opinion that if something happened that destroyed the world, I wanted to go down with it. Call me spoiled, but the idea of trying to survive on cans of franks and beans held little appeal for me.

I took my time walking down the narrow hallway that led to the conference room. The *whirr* of the overhead fan was missing. The still air smelled like corn chips. I made a mental note to mention to Frank that we'd need someone to look at the system. And that we'd have to get the cleaners out soon. The situation warranted quick action, but I wanted to make sure all my thoughts were solidified before giving the group an overview, and the time between Pablo's cell and the conference room was all I had.

I stopped outside the open doorway of the conference room and leaned back against the wall. The soft murmur of chatter drifted past me like leaves on a windy day. Insignificant, individually. However, when taken as a whole, it was as if death brushed up against you, and circled you like a shark in the water. That's the vibe that voices in that room had. Everyone in there knew the stakes, no doubt about that. We always faced the very real possibility that one of us wouldn't return home. Not alive, that is. And it didn't matter. Not a

single man in the building could say that they didn't know the risks when they signed up for the job.

"The man of the hour," Frank said as I stepped into the room. The group gave me a mock cheer as I took my seat. Frank looked at me and said, "We're ready to go."

A large diagram of the house had been drawn on the white board. Next to it, a street map of the neighborhood had been pinned to the wall. I got up and went to the head of the room and pointed at the house. "We're looking at a minimum of five guys, possibly up to ten, with one asleep." I circled the upstairs. "Bedrooms are here. First two through the door are going to hit the stairs and head up. Next two are going to the right," I paused and pointed at the dining room, "and the two after that to the left. You'll meet up with the team coming in through the back, which should be in place before we enter the house. We'll have snipers in place as well, two across the street and at least one in the back. They'll be able to cover us against any outside interference."

Harris raised his hand and said, "Is two enough for upstairs?"

"No, it's not," I said. "Me and Frank will go in last and hit the stairs, unless things are out of control downstairs."

"What about the feeb's?"

"Good question. As of right now, the FBI is not involved."

"Right now, huh? OK. Locals?"

"No. You know how it is, Harris. Both are a possibility. We'll make tactical adjustments on site if necessary."

"And what's the objective? Custody? Kill on sight?"

I glanced at the drawing and pointed to the space between the garage and the kitchen. "The men are secondary. I'd say kill on sight except for the leader of the group, but we don't know who that is. We risk losing information by taking them out. Shoot to neutralize if you have to. If you feel threatened, then kill them."

I surveyed the faces in the room and saw everyone nodding, some in agreement and others just to be doing something. Frank shot me a look that said *let's get this thing moving*.

“The true objective of this operation is in the basement,” I said.

“What’s in the basement?” Carmichael asked.

At that moment my mouth felt like twenty cotton balls had been stuffed in it. I forced my tongue down in an effort to wet my mouth, and then licked my lips. A thin layer of sweat formed on my brow and neck. Why? I’d been preparing myself since we drove away from that awful prison of a house earlier that afternoon. Why all of a sudden was I panicking over it? Because I knew that telling the group would make it real.

I scanned the room. All eyes were on me. Anticipation hung thick in the air, like black smoke racing ahead of an out of control fire. They were expecting an answer like guns or drugs or a dozen illegal aliens. Christ, over half the men in the room had kids, and not a damn one of them was prepared for what I was about to say.

“Jack?” Frank said. “You want me to take this?”

“No, I got it.” I walked to the table and placed both hands on it, palms down. Sweat created a thin, cool barrier between the laminate top and my skin. I leaned over and looked at each man in the room, one by one. “A dozen kids, give or take. Each one taken randomly, save one, to be sold and shipped overseas.”

A collective groan filled the room. Faces turned red. Some men instinctively reached for their holstered weapons. Others clenched their fists or slapped the table. I began to wonder if we’d take any prisoners out of the house alive.

“Holy shit,” McKenzie said.

“Yeah.” I had to control the room before thoughts and tempers got too far out of hand. “So be extra careful when

we're clearing the house. I don't know for sure if the kids are allowed out of the basement or not. So watch for little people."

"I'm ready to go now," Carmichael said.

I raised both hands and held them in front of my chest. "We go tomorrow. Get your rest tonight."

"What if they move out with one or more of the kids?" Klein said.

"We've got a man there already. He's watching. We've got a few units nearby. In cars and ready to go. If they try to leave with a child, we'll be on their asses."

The room fell silent. An audible *whirr* sound slipped in from the hall. The fan had kicked back on. Maybe Frank had already called about it.

"All right, guys," I said. "I got nothing else. We'll reconvene here at noon. Go spend time with your families. And those of you still single don't get too drunk tonight."

The last comment elicited a couple of chuckles and grins. The men got up and left the room without a word. After they cleared out, only Frank and I remained.

"I think that went OK," he said.

I shrugged. "Suppose so." I sat down across from Frank. "Bout as well as I expected."

"You think they'll aim to neutralize?"

"No," I said. "You?"

Frank shook his head and didn't respond. He leaned back and crossed his arms. His head dropped back to the point where the edge of the back of the chair supported him at the base of his neck. His Adam's apple bobbed up then down, and then he cleared his throat.

I waited a few seconds for him say something. He didn't. I rapped on the table twice with my knuckles and stood. "I'm going to head out. Grab a beer with me?"

He shifted in the chair and straightened up. “Nah. Think I’ll head home.”

“Suit yourself.” I walked to the door and glanced over my shoulder. He’d slouched down again and was staring at the ceiling. There was no point in asking again. Frank would spend the night in the office, like he had most nights the last two months.

## Chapter 6

Frank pulled our car into the parking lot of a closed down donut shop about a mile from the house. I stepped out into the cold air. The wind hit me like a sheet of ice. My cheeks burned and my lips went dry. Dark clouds hung low in the sky, a prelude to a winter storm. As long as the snow held off a few hours, they'd be beneficial to us, blocking out the final rays of a dying December sun. By five o'clock it'd be as dark as night. Dark enough for us to move down the street undetected.

I grabbed my earpiece and wrapped it around the side of my head. Flipped my transmitter on and said, "Hall, come in."

Hall was positioned on top of the house across the street from our target. No one knew he was there, least of all the homeowners. The guy was a chameleon and could blend in anywhere.

A few seconds passed, then a gravelly voice responded. "Yeah?"

"What you got over there?"

"No movement since late last night. Two went in, three exited and haven't returned."

"No kids?"

"Affirmative."

"We're going to move in at five, so if anything changes between now and then, you let me know."

"You got it."

"I'll be in touch before we approach."

I changed the setting on my transmitter to only pick up my voice when I pressed the transmit button. I got back in the car and let the warmth envelop me, pushing the cold from my body inch by inch.



“All good?” Frank said.

I nodded. “Think we’re looking at five guys. He said three left last night and never returned. Two entered and no one’s left since.”

“They must shuffle crews in and out. Only a couple core guys stay at the house.”

That sounded reasonable, although, with an operation like they had going, the fewer people in the know, the better. All it took was one guy getting caught, and he could rat out the whole organization, like Pablo had.

Two more cars pulled up, carrying a total of eight guys. They parked on either side of us. Everyone got out. The ten of us made our way around the building. I’m sure we were a sight to anyone who passed by. Ten guys dressed in black cargo pants and black thermal shirts, utility belts around our waists. We had radios clipped to our shoulders and wires dangling from our ears. We quickly moved to the back of the building, out of sight. There, I gave a rundown of our plan.

“We’re going to make our first move at five. Judging by the cloud cover, it should be dark enough by then.”

“Do we want to go that early?” Klein asked.

“I’d prefer to wait till later,” I said. “But once the snow starts, it’s going to light up the area. We’ll be visible from half a block away.”

Half the men nodded in agreement. The others stared, anticipation spread across their faces.

“Eight of us are getting off at the end of the street. Thorpe and Lucero, you guys are going to the street behind the house. You’ll cut through to the backyard and wait for us to reach the front.”

Both men nodded and paired up to my right. They weren’t usually partnered together, but I thought they shared an asset that would be beneficial to the operation. Thorpe and Lucero

were the shortest in our group, both coming in at under five-seven.

“Harris and McKenzie,” I said. “You two are first in and will hit the stairs. Carmichael and Klein, you two will cover them, then to the right. Clear the dining room and kitchen, then meet Thorpe and Lucero.”

“Got it,” Klein said.

“Reid, Sabatino,” I said. “To the left, wrap around. Me and Frank’ll be last and it’s up in the air whether we’ll go upstairs or help downstairs. I’m betting most of the action is going to be downstairs since we are entering so early. If we’re lucky, there’ll be four of them sitting around the table eating, and one in bed sleeping.”

The group chuckled. Things were never that easy. Not for us. Not for anyone.

“We’re in vests and helmets. These guys’ll be armed. I don’t want any casualties.”

A hush fell over the group. No one wanted to acknowledge the possibility that someone could die, but every man thought about it.

“We still flying solo?” Reid asked.

“Just us,” Frank said. “Local authorities have been warned to stay away. I’m going to update my contact in the Bureau afterward.”

A voice chimed into my earpiece and told me that the van would be there in ten minutes.

“OK, van’s on the way. Grab your last smoke.”

## Chapter 7

We exited the van half a block away from the house. The angle of the path we took carried us closer and closer to the homes we passed. By the time we reached the fourth house, the last one before the target, we were pressed up against the siding so no one inside the target home could see us.

I reached the corner and lifted my left hand to make a fist. Pressed the transmit button on my gear and said, “You two in position?”

Thorpe answered. “Yeah. From here we can see two in the kitchen, none in the family room.”

I looked over my shoulder and scanned the faces of the men behind me. Each man nodded their acknowledgment that they understood.

“Start moving,” I said to Thorpe. “First man of ours you see, you burst in.” I turned and addressed the men with me. “OK, it’s time. Create mass confusion. Disorient them. Only shoot if you feel threatened. I’d rather have broken bones than bullet holes in these guys.”

I poked my head around the corner and saw a camera mounted on the side of the house. I had three options. Shoot it, or send someone out to disable it, or ignore it. If I shot it, someone would hear, even though I carried an H&K MP7S equipped with a suppressor. Sending someone out to disable could give them advanced warning that we were approaching. If they were going to get any warning, I’d prefer it to be when all of us were closing in on the house, not a single man sent out like a sacrificial lamb.

I chose to ignore it. Call it a gut feeling, but I reasoned that if two of the men were in the kitchen, they were getting ready to eat. That might be the one time each day that they let their guard down.

“All right, team,” I said. “Flip transmissions to on and move.”

We crossed the narrow strip of grass between the houses, hunched over and in a tactical formation. Frank and I waited under the camera. The first four through the door crowded on the porch. They knocked the door down and mass confusion began.

Harris and McKenzie rushed inside and Klein and Carmichael quickly dropped into position at the front door, crisscrossing their aim and covering the first two men. Then, they went in and disappeared out of sight. Reid covered them. The sound of gunfire erupted from inside. Muzzle flash lit up the porch. Reid was knocked back five feet and hit the ground. I felt my stomach drop.

“Shit,” Frank said.

“Updates,” I said.

“Upstairs is clear,” Harris said. “We’ve got one up here.”

“We’re going in,” Thorpe said.

No one else responded.

I rushed to the door and stopped. Frank took position next to me, ready to cover me as I entered. I ducked inside and headed left. The area in front of me was empty. I aimed my weapon into the living room and then down the hall. The living room was clear and Sabatino gave me a thumbs up from the family room. I rose up from a crouching position and looked over the stairs. I saw one man sprawled out on the table, lying on his back. A crimson stain quickly spread across his white t-shirt.

I nodded at Frank. He entered the house, veering to the right. He gestured in the direction of the kitchen, then turned toward me. “It’s good, Jack. They’ve got them kneeling down in the center of the kitchen.”

“How many?”

“Four.”

Four in the kitchen, one dying on the table, and one upstairs for a total of six men. Pablo had told us the truth.

“I’m going to check on Reid,” I said as I walked through the front door. I scanned the area, in case someone had pulled up. Porch lights were on and people poked their heads out of doors and out from behind curtains that covered their front windows.

Reid lay on the ground, wriggling in pain. I bent over and shined a flashlight in his direction. A couple bullets had hit him in the chest, right on top of his heart. If he hadn’t been protected by Kevlar, he’d be dead.

“Catch your breath,” I said as I loosened his vest. I held out my hand. “Come on, get inside.”

I waited for Reid to enter the house, and then followed him in. Harris and McKenzie were leading a man down the stairs. The guy’s dark hair stood up in a dozen different directions, but he was more than alert after being jolted awake by trained killers and gunfire.

I went to the right, through the dining room where the man lay dead on the table, having bled out. There was a potted plant on the floor, near the window with a black box next to it. Some kind of watering system, I presumed. I walked into the kitchen, stopped in front of the men kneeling on the floor and aimed my gun at them. “Who’s in charge?”

No one spoke.

I kicked one in the stomach. He bent over and fell forward onto his face.

“Who’s in charge?” I said again.

A middle-aged guy with a dark full beard lined with gray pointed toward the dining room. “Him.”

I looked at Frank, who shook his head.

“Dammit,” I said. “OK, Thorpe and Lucero, you two secure these guys. Van’s on the way. Load them up quickly once it’s here.”

“Got it,” Thorpe said.

I walked to the other end of the kitchen and into a short hallway with two doors at the end. One led to the garage and one to the basement. I leaned against the first door and heard the sound of children crying. Although I knew this would likely be the scenario, a big part of me still didn't want to believe it, didn't want to face it. I began to reach for the handle, but stopped, deciding to address the group.

“Let's be quick, but gentle. These kids have been through a lot.”

No one argued.

I started to turn back toward the door when it flung open and knocked me into the wall at the end of the hall. A barrage of gunfire tore through the small area, riddling Carmichael and Klein with bullets. The men flew backward into the wall. Their bodies were silhouetted by a mixture of each other's blood.

I kicked against the door, but could only get it to move a few inches. I raised my MP7 and aimed it at chest level. I couldn't fire, though. What if this lunatic held one of the kids? I grabbed the top of the door and pulled myself up. Before I reached the top I heard six bursts of three-round fire, telling me that my guys had taken care of the situation. The door moved freely now and I released it and pushed it as far as it would go. On the ground, a pool of blood formed and flowed under the gap between the door and floor. I made my way around and stood in front of the man that had murdered my men. He laid face down, head turned to the side, with his eyes wide open. I lifted my leg and drove the heel of my boot into his face.

“Jack,” Frank said. “Let's get the kids before more of these guys show up.”

My breathing was erratic and fast and heavy. My heart pounded like a snare drum. “Sabatino, watch the door,” I said

through labored breathing. I pointed at Harris and McKenzie. "Help us get the kids out."

Although I had braced myself for the worst possible scenario, nothing could have prepared me for what I saw when I reached the bottom of the basement stairs.

The far end of the basement had been dug out an additional eight feet into the ground, forming what looked to be a fifteen foot square pit, eight feet deep. A dozen kids huddled together in a corner. There were boys and girls. They looked like they ranged from five to twelve years old. All of them trapped like rats.

I'm a hardened man. I'd seen and done a lot in my time since joining the Marines at age eighteen, but that sight sent a rush of bile crawling up my throat. I brought a fist to my mouth, worried I was going to throw up. I didn't. Harris did, though, causing a reaction among the children below.

"Don't hurt us," one of them said.

"We're here to help you," I said. "We're the good guys."

Sobs riddled with fear quickly turned into tears of joy. Even the kids that hadn't been crying were now. I looked around the room and caught sight of the faces of the men I was with. Each man had tears in his eyes. Frank's cheeks were stained wet.

"How do they get you out of there?" I said.

A boy stepped forward. He looked to be the oldest. He had brown hair that hung past his eyebrows. His clothes were dirty and tattered. Hell, all of their clothes were. The boy said, "They use a ladder."

I turned and shined my light around the room. "Anyone see a ladder?"

"Over there," Harris said, crossing to the back of the room.

We extended the ladder and dropped it into the pit. I climbed down and asked the older boy to help me rush the kids up. There were twelve kids and four of us. I figured the

best thing was to get them up and out in groups of three. I started with the two youngest, and what looked to be the next oldest.

“Harris,” I said. “Get these three out of the house. Go through the back yard to the next street over.”

Me and the older boy ushered the kids up the ladder. The littlest one was a young girl, maybe five or six years old. Her blond hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

“I can’t do it,” she said.

“Yes you can,” I said as I crouched down so I was eye level with her. I placed my hands on her shoulders. “The sooner you get up that ladder, the sooner you’ll see your mommy and daddy.”

“Are they up there? Waiting for me?”

I lied. “Yeah, now go.”

Her little hands wrapped around the aluminum rungs. She pressed her chest tight to the ladder, stuck her butt out. I didn’t care how she climbed it, as long as she got out. She reached the top and the next two kids followed without hesitation. I think they all heard me say that parents were waiting for them outside and that seemed to light a fire under them.

I started the next group up the ladder when Thorpe came running in shouting.

“Fire,” he said. “There’s a fire.”

“What?” I said. “How?”

“No clue,” he said. “It’s upstairs and moving fast.”

Now we really had to move. Calm and careful wasn’t going to get us out of this alive. The terrified looks on the kids’ faces nearly sent me into a panic.

“You,” I said to the older boy. “Up the ladder.”

He scurried up the ladder without questioning me.



“I’m gonna hoist the kids up. You four get ready for them. If each of you pulls up two, we’re out of here without a problem.”

I gestured for the kids to step forward. They lined up in an orderly fashion. I was impressed with how calm they had remained in the face of danger. One by one, starting with the littlest, I handed them up to the waiting hands of my team. After the seventh had been pulled out of the pit, I noticed the last child had retreated to the corner and was sitting with his knees pulled tight to his chest and his arms wrapped around his legs, blond hair covering his kneecaps.

“Let’s go,” I said.

The boy didn’t move. Didn’t seem to care that I was there offering him a chance at freedom.

“Jack,” Frank yelled. “Fire’s almost to the door. Hand him up.”

I grabbed the boy and carried him across the pit.

“Stairs are catching fire,” Frank said.

“Go,” I said. “I got him.”

“Give him here,” Frank said.

I had the boy across one shoulder with my hand wrapped around his waist. My other hand was on the ladder. I started climbing. “We’ll be faster if each of us is carrying one.”

Frank turned and disappeared up the stairs without another word.

I reached the top of the ladder and sprinted toward the burning stairs. I made it halfway up when an explosion ripped through the house, sending a fireball down the stairs and knocking me off my feet. I lay on the floor of the basement. Flames danced all around me. Panic set in. I couldn’t see the boy. Where was he? I had him over my shoulder, and now he was gone.

The faint sound of crying penetrated through the maniacal crackling of the flames. I sat up and saw the outline of the boy on the other side of a wall of fire. To my right was a sink and a bunch of towels. They looked like they had been thrown down to the kids from time to time to clean themselves off. Or wipe themselves. It didn't matter. They were all I had. I turned the faucet on and doused the towels, then draped them over my head and shoulders and torso. I leapt through the fire, grabbed the kid and covered him with the remaining towels. I picked him up and held him across my body, close to my chest.

By this time, the stairs had been on fire for several minutes. I didn't know how safe the wood would be, but we didn't have much of a choice. It was the stairs or the pit. The pit might not burn, and would keep us from inhaling the smoke that sought to violate and render our lungs devoid of oxygen. If the house came down, there'd be nothing to stop it from crushing us.

I backed up as fast as I could and sprinted toward the stairs. My thought was that the less time I spent on a step, the lower the chance of it breaking under my weight. It was a good idea, in theory. My legs pumped high and fast and I hit the stairs at full speed, taking them three at a time. Two broke under me when I reached the top. I twisted my body to the side as I fell, so as not to crush the child.

A heavy veil of smoke surrounded me. The walls and ceiling were covered in muted oranges and reds, engulfed in flames. The fire winked and flashed an evil grin at me. It had me. Here we were, so close to the door, yet so far from freedom. A few more feet and we'd be out of the house. Instead, I was down with my legs dangling, and my stomach and chest on the hallway floor. The fall knocked the wind out of me. I was unable to get to my feet. The only way out of the house had been swallowed up in a wall of fire.

Then I heard a loud collective hiss, like steam escaping a kettle. Soon after, water pelted my body.

“Come on, Jack,” the voice sounded tinny, far away. It was Frank. I felt his hands grab my chest. They tried to pull the boy away, but I wouldn’t let go. Finally, they pulled me to my feet. My thighs and calves scraped against jagged wood. Splinters larger than fingers embedded themselves in my flesh. The pain they caused only served to push me forward. I moved past the men who rescued me and carried the boy through the smoldering doorway. I ran as fast as my legs would carry us.

Flashes from the edge of the yard blinded me and I stumbled. Again, I fell to the ground, making sure to turn so I received the brunt of the fall.

“Let me take him,” Frank said.

I relented and let go of the boy. Someone pulled me up from behind and ushered me across the joined backyards of the burning house and its rear neighbor. I managed to keep my legs going until we reached the street, and the safety of our van, where my body collapsed.

## Chapter 8

Frank had recognized the fire department battalion chief and convinced him to let us take the kids to the station house. The main part of the building was older and largely unchanged from the picture on the wall that had been taken during the twenties. They had added on a few years back, and the station provided more than enough room for our agents and the kids.

Two FBI agents met us at the station and began the process of gathering information from the kids and contacting parents. I sat close enough that I could hear the elation of the mothers and fathers through the phone as they were told their children had been found. I couldn't help but think of the dozens, maybe hundreds of parents of those kids who had already been sent away.

A couple firefighters made their way to our area shortly after the trucks and ambulances arrived. I pulled a gray wool blanket tight around my shoulders and across my chest. I thought that maybe I could hide by doing so. All it did was draw their attention.

“Sir, are you OK?”

It took a moment for my eyes to drift right and focus on her. She wore blue pants and a white shirt, which was smudged with soot. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail that reached past her shoulder blades. Dark brown eyes stood out against her pale skin. She had attractive features, and I couldn't help but wonder what she'd look like dressed up and with makeup on.

I nodded and let my eyes drift past her, hoping she'd move on. When she didn't, I spoke. “What's your name?”

“Sarah Parkerson.” She pointed to a nametag above her breast.

“I’m OK, Sarah. Check on someone else. We had a couple guys shot.”

Her eyes widened, and I realized what I had said. This woman had no idea who we were. I could only image what thoughts were racing through her mind at that moment.

That was the first sign that something was wrong with me.

“No, you’re not,” she said, brushing aside my last comment. “Let me check you out.” She pulled at the blanket until I relented. First, she checked me for a concussion. Then checked my blood pressure and listened to my lungs. “Sounds like you took in quite a bit of smoke. Concussion. Mild, though. You got a couple nasty cuts on you. We should get you to a hospital and get those stitched up. They’ll want to observe you for the night. Come on.”

I ignored her outstretched hand and tried to wave her off like I was swatting at a fly that had annoyed me. “I’ll be all right. Check on the kids.”

She smiled and squatted until she reached eye level. “We’ve already got guys checking on the kids. I was sent to check on you.”

“I’m not going to the hospital.”

“Yes, you are.”

I sighed. There was no getting rid of her, it seemed.

“No, he’s not,” Frank said. “We have the ability to take care of him.”

Sarah shrugged and said, “Suit yourself. It’s not on my conscience.” She stood and turned and walked away, stopping to look back over her shoulder. “I’ll be checking on the other guys. Shout if you need me.”

I watched as she walked toward Harris and McKenzie, who were sitting on a bench, their backs against a table. She tended to Harris in a matter-of-fact manner, then moved on to McKenzie.

Frank returned with a chair and placed it in front of me, backward. He kicked one leg over and placed his forearms across the chrome railing that outlined the chair back.

“What?” I said, now annoyed with Frank that he’d blocked my view of Sarah as she bent over to work on McKenzie. I leaned to the left to in an attempt to reestablish line of sight, but she’d moved on.

Frank reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. Lit it and didn’t offer me one. “Want me to see if I can get her number for you?”

“Hey,” Sarah said. “You can’t smoke in here.”

Frank waved her off without looking back. “Well?”

“Go to hell.” My head pounded in retaliation with every word that came out of my mouth.

“Jack, I got bad news.” Frank’s right hand dropped. His cigarette dangled from in between his index and middle fingers. The smoke twisted around his arm and continued upward, creating a withering fog between us. “We lost Klein.” He paused to take a drag. “And Carmichael.”

The scene outside the basement entrance replayed in my mind. Both men shot at point blank range with an automatic weapon. I remembered how Klein’s eyes focused on me as he collapsed to the ground.

“I know,” I said, casting my eyes downward.

“We’re gonna have to answer questions about that.”

“Christ, Frank. They’ve been dead two hours and that’s all you’re worried about?”

Frank leaned back. Had he worried I would strike him? “I’m hurting too, Jack. We lost two guys. Don’t think for a second that doesn’t affect me.”

My ears burned with anger, but I pushed the conversation forward. I saw the night in bits and pieces, but couldn’t find the thread to stitch it all together. It was like I was looking at a

giant jigsaw puzzle I had completed hours early, only to find that someone had come in and scooped up half the pieces and run off with them. Now I needed answers to put it all back in place.

“What about the guys in the kitchen?” I said.

Frank glanced around, then said, “They’re on the way back to the office. Our office,” he added as if it needed clarification. “We’ll get plenty of cracks at ‘em to figure out what the hell is going on. I’m probably going to get the other team on them as well.” He took a drag and then made an explosion gesture with his hands. “Any evidence in the house is gone. Burned in the fire.”

“How’d the fire start?”

Frank shrugged. “I’m hoping these guys can answer that for us at some point.”

I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. I felt the room start to spin, forcing me to reopen my eyes. I shook my head rapidly.

“You OK?” Frank said.

“Yeah.” I lied. That was the second sign something was wrong with me.

“Anyway,” he continued, “with all the bullets flying around, we could have shorted out something that set it off.”

I replayed scenes from the night in my head. They were distorted and disjointed, but I wasn’t trying to play the movie in sequential order. I needed something that danced behind a thin curtain, out of reach. Then, I saw it.

“Frank,” I said as I reached out for his arm. “In the dining room there was a potted plant in the corner. A big palm looking thing. There was a black box on the floor next to it. I thought it was some kind of watering device. And... damn, I saw one in the kitchen, too.”

“What kind of box?”

“Plain. A black box, square, nothing discernible about it.”

“So what about it?”

I swallowed hard and leaned in to whisper. “Someone started the fire from outside of the house.”

Frank cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. “You think-”

“The boxes were detonators.”

“There weren’t any explosions, though.”

“Yeah, think of flares. They sparked and leaked gasoline or some kind of flammable mixture. Caught the plant on fire. The one in the kitchen, ah hell, I can’t remember what that was next to, but I’d bet money it was something flammable.”

“We missed one.” Frank lowered his eyes. “We let one of those bastards get out.”

“Impossible,” I said. “We had guys on the roofs across the street. They would have neutralized them. It’s more likely someone pulled up while we were inside. If they remained in their car, our guys across the street wouldn’t have gotten a good look at them.”

Frank nodded. Said nothing.

A quick flash lit up the area in front of me and I blinked hard as I recalled someone taking pictures as we escaped the house. “Photographers. Frank, was someone taking pictures?”

“Yeah. Backyard as we got out. Some neighbors. A couple of them stayed. A couple ran off.”

“You don’t think the same person that set the fire snapped pictures of us, do you?” Panic filled my voice.

Frank’s eyes drifted up and to his right. His mouth dropped open an inch and he pointed over my shoulder. I turned my head to see what the hell he was staring at. The station had a TV mounted to the wall behind me. The picture was on and the sound off. The local news was on. And the topic of the day was the fire. Using the chair, I stood and stared at the picture



of me holding the blond haired boy with the house behind us, engulfed in flames and spewing dark smoke into the air like wily, wispy hair on a demon.

“Tell me they don’t have my name,” I said.

“Someone unmute this TV,” Frank said.

A man dressed the same as Sarah, minus the ponytail and other enticing parts, jogged over and fiddled with the TV until the sound came on.

My ears still rang from the gunfire earlier in the night, so I took a few steps closer to the TV to hear. The room started to spin and my vision closed in on me from the outside in. Eventually, everything went black. The third sign something was wrong with me.

I didn’t recall hitting the floor or being taken away from the fire station and placed in the back of a van and driven away.

When I opened my eyes and saw Sarah standing over me, I thought we were still back at the firehouse. But there was something familiar about the surroundings.

“Welcome back.” She forced a smile, but it did little to hide the concern in her eyes.

“What happened?” I said.

“You passed out. I think I misdiagnosed your concussion. It’s more severe than I thought.”

I felt the IV lines in my arm and realized we weren’t at the fire station anymore.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“I’m bound to you, legally,” she said. The corners of her lips turned up a bit. “At least until someone more qualified can take over.”

“Why are you still here?”

“I thought we were going to the hospital, and instead we came here. Like I said, I was your first responder. I had to stay with you.” She straightened up and looked around the room, then over her shoulder at the lobby past the window. “What is this place?”

I lifted my head and glanced around. We were in the SIS infirmary. “Somewhere you shouldn’t be. Has Doc seen me?”

She nodded. Said nothing.

“What did he say?”

“That you have a concussion.”

“Thanks, that was helpful.”

“That’s what I said.” She smiled, then went back to checking my vitals.

I wondered how she managed to get in the van in the first place, much less convince Frank to take her back to SIS headquarters. I must have taken a nasty fall for him to be that concerned.

Frank stepped into the room. Smiled at Sarah and nodded at me. “Gave us a scare, Jack. Doc says you’re going to be fine.” He turned his attention to Sarah. “Miss, I’ll need to debrief you. We’ll need to give you a statement and have you sign some papers. Basic stuff, really. In a nutshell, you’ll never be able to say you saw this place.”

“Don’t you mean I have to give a statement?” she said.

Frank shook his head and held out his hand toward her.

Sarah smiled as she glanced between Frank and me. The smile faded, and I assumed she figured out that Frank hadn’t been joking. The concern I had seen in her eyes moments ago turned to fear.

“What if I refuse to sign?” she said.

Frank’s expression remained stoic. “You won’t do that. No point in talking about hypothetical situations. At least not if

you want to leave.” He wrapped his hand around her elbow and led her to the door and out of the room.

She stopped a few feet into the lobby and pulled away from Frank. Turned around and made eye contact with me. The look on her face was one-third quizzical, one-third scared, and the rest, excited. Her lips were parted, but she didn’t say anything. Frank grabbed her elbow again, and guided her across the lobby toward his office.

I watched until she was out of sight. “See you around,” I said softly, wondering if it was the truth.

## Chapter 9

The concussion turned out to be severe, and Doc insisted I be kept in the infirmary for four days. He watched over me during the day and a nurse came in at night. She'd been coming around as long as I'd been in the SIS, and I figured we had an arrangement with her, too.

Doc let me leave headquarters on Christmas Eve. I spent the next two days alone. Me and a few bottles of whiskey. Against doctor's orders, of course. Christmas came and went and I barely noticed. My parents called a couple times. Mom, presumably. I didn't answer. I hardly talked to my brother Sean anymore. He was two years my elder, but once he turned sixteen it seemed we were much farther apart than that. I dialed his number a couple times, but never hit send. What was the point? There was no other family to speak of.

I received a call on Christmas day from my old partner, Riley Logan. He didn't go by Riley though, or Logan for that matter. I'd always called him Bear. And perhaps a few other choice words when we were rivals in Marine Recruit Training. We talked for an hour or so. He caught me up on his adventures in the Marines, working with the CIA. A lot of time spent in Africa, he said. That life seemed so distant to me now. I found it hard to remember what it was like to be tied to a contract with the Marines where I was a servant to the CIA. He said he was getting out soon and thought the two of us could go into business together. He had a few connections in New York who could help us get started. Offer us a contract or two. I wondered if the two additional years he'd spent in the military would clash against the two years I'd been out. I told him I'd think about it. For now, my gig in the SIS paid well and kept me busy. Plus, I didn't have to travel far from the mid-Atlantic. We ended the call after a bit of banter. My mind

wandered from Bear to the people we knew and the experiences we had together.

I ran out of alcohol late in the evening on the twenty-sixth and passed out before ten p.m. Woke up early in the afternoon on the twenty-seventh. I'd been staring out the window the night before and left the blinds open. The sun bore down on me, its rays cutting through my retinas like a knife through warm butter. I shut my eyelids tight and rolled away from the window. A loud rap at the front door echoed off the hardwood floors and walls of the narrow hallway that led to my bedroom. I rolled over one more time and swung my legs over the edge of the bed and stood up too fast. Blood took its time reaching my brain, leaving me feeling out of sorts. Another series of knocks reverberated off the floors and walls. I reached for my nightstand and pulled open a drawer and grabbed my Beretta.

I took my time walking to the front door. Whoever was out there rapped on it again. They had to have busted their knuckles by this point. I cracked the door with one hand, and held my gun in the other, shielding it with my hip.

“You look like shit, Jack,” Frank said.

Hung over and still feeling the effects of a concussion, I found myself in no mood for his jokes. I let my arm drop to the side, aiming the gun at the floor. It swung three inches forward, six inches back. Over and over, like a pendulum. “Thanks,” I said. “Come on in.”

Frank pushed past me and walked toward the couch and said, “Better put that thing away before you shoot your big toe off.” He sat down and crossed his legs and folded his arms over his chest. He shook his head side to side as his eyes followed me around the room.

“What do you want?” I said.

“You need to get cleaned up. Shower and shave. Got a nice suit?”

“Why?”

“They’re honoring us tonight.”

“Who?”

“Some politicians, and who knows who else.” He held out his hands. A large grin crossed his face. “Maybe the President.”

“For what?”

“The kids. Turns out *you know who* saw your picture on TV.”

“Carrying the boy?”

“You got it. He thought it might be a good idea to throw us a celebration.”

“Ah, Christ.” I poured orange juice into a cup and tipped the bottle to Frank. He shook his head. “They can’t invite many people then. Our agency doesn’t exist. What the hell is he thinking?”

“Supposedly they’ve worked up some cover story. Either we’re feebs or some special unit in the police. Not sure, exactly. They won’t tell anyone who we are.”

Sure they wouldn’t. In my ten plus years of government service, I’d learned the hard way not to trust a politician or superior with a secret. They looked out for themselves first. Hell, they only looked out for themselves. Screw their constituents and screw their employees and screw the people who protected their asses.

“I’m not going,” I said.

Frank smiled. “The hell you aren’t. The kids’ parents will be there and they’ll want to thank us. Go get a shower and shave. And don’t come back out here without a suit on.”

I started toward the hallway. Looked over my shoulder at the smirking Frank, and said, “Screw you.”

## Chapter 10

We sat behind a row of seven tables, butted together end to end and covered with black and white paisley tablecloths. Overhead can lights were aimed in our direction, casting a haze over the crowd gathered to honor us. The attendees sat together in bunches of four or five or six. Their tables were round, each with a single vase in the middle containing an arrangement of flowers that were yellow and red and white and unidentifiable by me.

Three tables lined up to form the first row. Sixteen white and brown faces smiled at us. Their eyes scanned left to right and back again, like they were at county lockup, trying to identify the man who'd mugged them on a dark street. If not for the smiles, that is. Beyond the first row, I had trouble making out the features on faces. And the row behind that might as well not even have been there, because I couldn't see the people at all, only the dull outlines of the tables.

Sweat formed on my brow. Was everyone having the same trouble as me? Was this a side effect of the concussion? Or maybe from too much drinking?

The lights were bright and hot and hit me like tiny bits of molten metal. Then a panicked thought crossed my mind. What if the concussion was gone and something else remained, bleeding in my brain? That was a real thing, I thought. I tried recall everything I'd ever read on head trauma and its after effects. My efforts drew a blank. By this point, my hands began to tremble. My heart pounded against the wall of my chest. I counted the beats for ten seconds and then extrapolated it out. One hundred and forty beats a minute. I reached for the tall glass of water that had been placed in the middle of the table. The outside of the glass was sweating, and the thin layer of condensation coated my palm. Cold and wet, my hand shot back. A reflex I had no control over.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

“Christ, these lights,” Frank said, leaning into my shoulder. “Can’t see a damn thing after the first row.”

I turned my head a few inches to the left. Frank’s smile pushed up into his cheeks.

“They better cut those lights when food is served,” he said.

My heart rate decreased. The thoughts of panic that clouded my mind dispersed the way steam from a kettle does when it reaches a foot or two above the stove and heads back to the atmosphere. Never gone, only a change of state until ready to be called upon again.

“No kidding,” I said. “One of those assholes could be out there right now, waiting to mow us down.”

Frank nodded. “Same thought’s crossed my mind, too.”

A man in the front row stood. He was dressed in a dark suit and wore a conservative red and blue striped necktie. His face was clean-shaven. So was the top of his head. He used his index finger to shove his gold-rimmed glasses up his skinny nose. He approached us. A toothy grin spread across his face. When he reached a spot two feet in front of my table, he spun and faced the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said. “Let’s stand and give a round of applause to the men sitting behind me.”

The crowd rose and began clapping. I felt Frank’s hand pulling on my elbow. I looked to the left, then the right and saw the other agents pushing their seats back and standing up to accept the acclaim the audience was heaping upon us.

Reluctantly, I rose to my feet. I felt more exposed than a few minutes earlier.

The man extended his arms to the side and motioned for everyone to sit. Once the crowd obliged, he said, “These men risked their lives.” He paused a beat, and I wondered what his facial expression looked like at that moment. Jovial with a smile? Or serious with drawn lips? “In fact, two of them lost



their lives. They did this to rescue your children. And when a fire broke out, they didn't cut rope and try to save themselves. No, they made sure every child was safe, to the point of leaving their fallen comrades behind."

Another round of applause swept through the audience. I found it a tad inappropriate. After all, the man had admitted that our operation was a failure because we left our men behind. That had never been acceptable and sure as hell wasn't now. No matter what other outcomes prevailed.

Once the crowd died down, the man continued, "Due to the nature of their work, we can't congratulate them individually by name."

I glanced sideways at Frank. He pretended to ignore me.

"But we can stand once more," the man said, "and offer our sincerest thanks and gratitude for what they have done for us all."

Again the crowd stood, and again they applauded us. A blond haired boy appeared through the haze of the lights and approached the table. I recognized him not by memory, but by the photos of me carrying him outside. He stopped in front of me and smiled. His two front teeth were missing. One on top, one on the bottom. The light wrapped around his head. His blue eyes stood out like pools of crystal water on a rocky landscape.

"My mom wants to thank you," he said in a voice slightly louder than a whisper.

Frank placed his forearm on the table and leaned over. "After we eat, son."

I held out my hand, palm toward Frank. "It's OK. I'll meet her now."

The little boy smiled and took three steps back. I got up and walked behind three tables. The little boy mirrored my movements and met me at the end of the row. He held out his hand. I took it, and he led me to the back of the room. Once past the lights, I studied the faces in the room as much as I

kept an eye on where the boy was taking me. Nothing seemed out of place. I didn't know anyone in the room, aside from a few politicians. None of them screamed terrorist or killer or asshole. Well, maybe a couple guys had asshole written across their faces, but that was a given anywhere you went.

A woman got up from her table and walked toward us. She looked nothing like her son. Dark hair, light brown eyes and an olive complexion. She wore a blue form-fitting dress. I thought it agreed with her quite well. It stretched down past mid-thigh, coming to a stop above her knees. Her hands grabbed for the hem and pulled down. My eyes had lingered too long. An after effect of the concussion, I'm sure. I looked up and grinned and apologized. She shook her head and smiled and looked away.

"I wanted to thank you personally, Mister...?" A curious eyebrow rose up, causing the small square bandage on her forehead to wrinkle.

"Call me Jack," I said.

"Jack. OK. Well, Jack, thank you for saving my little Christopher. If not for you... I can't even think about it."

"Only doing my job." I half-turned to face the front of the room and extended my arm, like I was showcasing a prize package on a game show. "Any of those guys up there would have done the same if they were in the position I was. Three of them were in the pit with me. I happened to be the last one out. Plus, we have two guys who couldn't make it tonight who deserve more thanks than I do."

She looked away again, her eyes flooding with tears. She reached up and dabbed at the corner of her eyes, trying to stop their advance before ruining her makeup.

"But the fact that these young lives were saved, especially this little guy here," I tousled the boy's hair, "justifies it all. And I'm glad we could get together and meet in person, Miss?"

“Oh, I’m sorry.” She extended her hand and said, “Tammy Nockowitz.”

The name didn’t match the features. “Married name?” I asked.

“Yeah, but I’m not married anymore.” She bit the bottom of her lip and dipped her head an inch. “So, if you wanted to ask me out...”

I smiled at her then looked down at her son who had lost interest in our conversation a few minutes ago. My smile faded as I met her stare. “I’m not boyfriend material. You should return to your table.”

Tammy’s cheeks turned a shade of red. She averted her eyes, then reached down for her son’s hand and pulled him toward their seats.

I watched her walk away, questioning if I’d done the right thing. Of course I had. I was in no position to be with a woman with a child. I placed myself in harm’s way six days out of every seven. It would be irresponsible to get close to a child and then disappear, whether physically or emotionally.

I took a couple steps back and turned a beat too fast. A pair of hands slammed into my solar plexus, nearly winding me.

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying to avoid looking at whoever I’d hit.

“Real slick, Jack.”

I stopped trying to get away and looked at the woman in front of me and recognized her as Sarah, the paramedic who had been roped into duty at the SIS.

“I don’t mean now. I mean, this is cool, too. The way you ran into me and tried to act like nothing happened.” She smiled and leaned in, placing her mouth inches from my ear. “But the way you rejected that woman, that was classy.”

I stepped back, holding my hands out in front of me to maintain separation. “You don’t know the first thing about me, lady.”

She laughed. "I know plenty."

I turned my head and saw that the majority of the seats around the tables were now empty. A line had formed in front of the tables where the rest of my group sat. "Christ," I muttered. "Come on, let's get a drink."

Sarah smirked and latched onto my arm. We moved to the back of the room and each took a seat on a barstool. I ordered a shot of Johnny and she ordered a beer. By the time she finished her beer, I'd downed four shots.

Doc would have been pleased.

We talked about nothing at all. The kind of mindless chatter people have when they are feeling each other out. I had a feeling that she had a feeling about me. And I found her easy on the eyes and equipped with the kind of tough take-no-crap exterior I found myself regularly attracted to. I wanted to know if it was an act, or if she really was as badass as she seemed.

She told me she was born and raised in D.C. Went to college at Georgetown, decided to join the fire department instead of going to medical school. She'd been married once, but it didn't even last a year. Apparently the guy couldn't handle the thought of his wife rushing into a burning building.

I told her a few select things about my past, like how I turned down a football scholarship and joined the Marines. Dumbed down the eight years spent there, but let her know that it led me to where I am now. Told her I'd never been married. Lied and said I'd never been engaged. She didn't need to know.

After fifteen minutes I began to feel the effects of the alcohol. My head buzzed slightly. She was already done with her second beer and began smiling a bit more.

I said something that made her laugh. Strands of hair fell across her face. She reached up and tucked them behind her ear, then said, "So how emotionally unavailable are you?"

“On a scale of one to ten, I’m an eleven. Or a zero, depending on which way your scale slides.”

“I like that in a man.”

“I like a woman who likes that in a man.”

She smiled and leaned in a couple inches. “Want to get out of here? Split a cab somewhere?”

“Where?”

She shrugged. “Whoever’s house is closest?”

I nodded then looked around to get my bearings and located the coat check. I felt her fingers slide in between mine. Her palm, cool from holding a beer mug, melted into my hand.

“Jack.” It was the right name, wrong voice.

I felt deflated. Frank headed toward me, another man close behind. The guy following was older than me, probably mid-forties, maybe early fifties. Hard to tell. His hair was blond, perhaps hiding traces of gray. He was wide in the shoulders and narrow in the hips. Looked like an athlete in a custom tailored gray suit. He had a winning smile and everything about him screamed politician.

“Man of the hour,” Sarah said from behind me.

I turned and caught her eye. “I’m sorry. As soon as this is over.”

“It’s OK. I’ll have a few more drinks. You won’t mind, will you?”

I smiled, tossed back another shot and hopped off my barstool. Walked a few feet away from the bar and waited for Frank and his friend.

“Jack, this is Senator Burnett. He’s, uh, he’s a friend of ours.”

The Senator smiled his politician’s smile and held out his hand. His grip was firm and comforting. “I watch from a

distance.” His smile broadened and he winked. “And you always provide one hell of a show, Jack.”

I had been prepared to hate the man. After all, he was holding me back from beginning a night with Sarah. But there was something about his smile and his grip and his voice that made me feel at ease with him. I presumed that most people felt that way about him. I assumed that’s why he was a successful politician. Half shark, half used car salesman, all bullshit.

“Let’s have a drink.” Senator Burnett draped his right arm across my shoulders, his left across Frank’s. He guided us toward the bar. I did nothing to stop him. I found myself liking the guy. At the very least, I saw why people voted for him.

I sat down next to Sarah. Leaned over and whispered, “You sure you don’t mind staying a bit longer?”

“I’ve got nowhere to go and we can always find a taxi willing take us there,” she said. “Plus, I’m off tomorrow. If you’re too drunk tonight, we’ve got the morning.”

I smiled. “I’ve never been too drunk.”

She laughed and winked and nudged me. The force of her push turned me toward the Senator.

“You guys did a great job here,” Burnett said. “Even if you did overstep some boundaries.”

Frank shrugged. “We talked to the right people. No one threw up a stop sign, so we moved. You think it would have been better to risk losing some of those kids?”

Burnett finished his beer and gestured for another. “No, of course not. I understand that you had to act fast. Next time something like this happens, clear it through to the top. It makes my life easier and-”

“Jack,” Frank interrupted. “Incoming.”

I swiveled to the left and saw Tammy approaching. “Shit,” I said.

Burnett glanced over his shoulder and stood. “That’s a grenade I’m dodging. Hitting the head. Back in a minute boys.”

Tammy leaned against the bar, in between me and Frank. “Jack, that offer still stands.” She reached out, grabbed my tie, slipped a business card into my shirt pocket.

Sarah leaned over my shoulder and said, “Mind taking your hands off my man?”

Tammy looked at Sarah, then at me. “Not boyfriend material, huh?” She said it matter-of-factly and with no trace of disappointment in her voice.

I shrugged and held out my hands. Tammy shook her head, then turned and walked toward the door, where her son was standing. I’d have figured she wouldn’t let him leave her side after what happened. To each their own, I supposed. There was no need to waste time questioning it.

After she slipped through the door, I turned to Frank and said, “I’m trying to get out of here. You think you can handle the Senator without me?”

“Humor him for a few more. He’s half pissed now. I’ll get a cab for him soon and then you can be on your way.”

## Chapter 11

Burnett spent another half hour talking with us. Mostly praise, some criticism. We took it with smiles plastered on our faces. The alcohol helped. The fact that we needed the man for our funding helped even more. If the SIS disappeared, I'd be looking for work at the Treasury Department. No thanks.

Finally, Burnett stood and held out his hand. I grabbed it, surprised when he pulled me off the stool and wrapped his other arm around my back.

“You do good work, Jack,” he said. “Good damn work.” He took a step back and grabbed my shoulders. His fingers dug in a bit. My initial reaction was to knock his hands away. But I figured he only did it because of the alcohol, so I eased up. He gave me a shake and then let go. Stumbled a bit and nearly fell off the ledge that separated the bar from the rest of the room.

Frank placed an arm on the Senator's shoulders and guided him toward the door. I heard the man protest that he could drive, and that his car was a block or two away. Frank insisted that he take a taxi. Whether he did or not, I had no idea. Frank didn't say, and I didn't ask when he returned to the bar and sat down next to me.

“We'll be taking off now,” I said.

Frank reached out and grabbed my wrist. “Stay for a few more minutes.”

I gave him a look, shrugged, said nothing. I had one foot on the floor and the other on the stool's footrest.

Frank gestured to the side with his head. “Let's make sure our guys get out OK. They're getting a bit rowdy over there.”

The other agents stood in the middle of a mostly empty room. A couple politicians hung around, but the families had



wisely dispersed when they sensed things were turning into a party their children shouldn't witness.

"Rowdy with each other," I said.

"Does that make it any better? You know how these guys get when they drink."

I sighed heavily and turned toward Sarah. "A few more minutes?"

She dropped her right elbow on the bar and propped her head up with her hand. She mouthed the word *fine* to me and motioned toward the bartender for another drink. Who would be the one that would end up too drunk that night?

My cell phone rang, cutting Frank off in the middle of a mindless sentence. The display said *unknown caller*. I picked it up off the bar, walked toward the door leading to the sidewalk and answered the phone.

"Hello, Mr. Noble." The voice was awkward, slow-paced and had a tinny sound to it, almost like a machine modified it.

I scanned the room to see if any of our guys were screwing around with me. Everyone was accounted for. No one had a phone to their head.

"Who is this?" I said.

"Mr. Noble, do you make a habit out of interfering in other people's businesses?"

I lowered my shoulder and pushed the door open. Stepped out onto the street and waited for a couple of younger women to pass by. "That depends on the business. There are some that require my intervention."

"That is a bad habit."

"Yeah, well, it's the only thing that keeps me from smoking too much."

"I'd never have pegged you for a comedian, Mr. Noble."

"I have my moments."

“I’m sure you do.” He paused a beat and the line went silent except for the faint sound of static. “You should savor those moments. All of them, for that matter. Because they are running out.”

I scanned M Street up to the corner of 10th and back. Turned and checked the corner at 11<sup>th</sup> and didn’t see anyone. The windows of the buildings across from me were dark and revealed nothing. Someone could be in there, I supposed.

“That’s good advice,” I said. “But I’m afraid I’m going to be ignoring it.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Whatever he was using to disguise his voice failed for a few seconds. Unfortunately, there was nothing distinguishing about the way the man spoke. His neutral accent and tone could have been any of tens of thousands of people.

My patience grew thin. This guy knew who I was, which meant he probably had an idea of what I did for a living. “I’m getting tired of this game. This is a government phone and we can track this call back whether you’re on the line or not. We’ve already been talking long enough. So get to the point or we’ll be showing up at your doorstep and you can tell me face to face.”

The man laughed. He sounded like a deranged robotic clown. “No you aren’t, and no you can’t. But, I’ll get to the point. You and your team of misfit agents, you all stuck your heads somewhere they didn’t belong. Two of them died for it. Who’s going to be next? I’ll tell you. You didn’t solve a problem, Mr. Noble. No, you created a mess. And I’m going to clean it up, starting with you.”

“You’re real convincing over a phone line, you know that?” I said. “Why don’t you meet me at my office tomorrow and we’ll get this squared away.”

He laughed again. “You are not in control, Jack. I’d suggest you listen up if you want to limit the casualties to yourself. It starts with the one whose hair is fair. A little boy,

from the fire, you emerged. Intertwined, but the fire could not dine. Now the sins of the mother have been purged. But there's more to be done, and you are the one, who will face the torture of a thousand souls."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You've got thirty-seven hours to figure that out, Jack."

The line fell silent. I scanned the street and storefronts again, and then walked to the corner of the building, staying close to the shadows to check the parking lot. I quickly returned to the front door and pushed it open.

Frank leaned back against the bar and raised a shot glass in my direction, leaned his head back and tossed the drink in his mouth. He wiped his face with the back of his hand and exhaled loudly. I crossed the floor and stopped two feet in front of him.

"What's up, Jack?" he said. The smell of stale liquor carried on his breath. "Old girlfriend?"

I noticed Sarah glance back over her shoulder.

"No," I said. "Stop screwing around. We've got a problem."

Frank's face straightened and so did his body. "What is it?"

I recounted the conversation I had on the phone with the man with the machine voice. Instinctively, I figured it had to be someone who knew us. Maybe had a beef with us. Someone involved with a terrorist group, using the riddle as some sort of decoy.

"The little blond boy you rescued?" Frank said.

I nodded. "That's what I figure. But why bring him up? That's all classified."

"Someone we busted or broke up their organization, right? So, he sees the picture in the paper. Remembers your face. Pulls some strings, throws around some money and gets your number."

I shook my head. “We got that picture cleaned up before they ran it. No one saw my face.”

Frank leaned back again. He shook off the bartender when asked if he needed another drink. “The news, Jack. Remember in the firehouse? You were on TV.”

“I was?”

“You were,” Sarah said. “Carrying that little boy out of the burning house. Same little boy who stood right there,” she pointed to a spot near the front door, “while his mother tried to pick you up.”

“The sins of the mother have been purged,” I said, recalling the words the man spoke in a singsong robotic voice.

“You don’t think he-”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the card Tammy had slipped inside it on her way out the door. On it was her name and phone number. “I’m going to find out.” I dialed the number and placed the phone on speaker.

“Hello,” a man said, his voice deep and dry.

## Chapter 12

“Who is this?” I said.

“This is Stallworth. Look, are you related to,” he paused a beat, then continued, “Tammy Nockowitz?”

“What?” I said.

Frank pushed out his hands and nodded fervently.

“Uh, yeah, I am,” I said. “This is her husband. Who is this? What’s going on?”

Frank leaned in. I had to pull the phone back before he got too close and deafened the man with his heavy breathing.

“I’m a paramedic with D.C. Fire. I’m not supposed to do this, but your wife’s been in a bad accident. Hit and run. She’s unconscious and losing blood.”

“What? How?”

The man said nothing.

“My boy, is he OK?”

“No boy here, sir.”

“What do you mean no boy? She left with him. Little blond haired guy, eight years old.”

The phone rustled and we heard the muffled sound of the man shouting something to the effect of had anyone seen a little boy nearby. A lump rose in my throat, and I feared that the child had been ejected from the car, his little body lying on the side of the highway. I assumed Sarah wondered the same thing because I noticed her eyes were wide and she held her breath.

“No little boy in the car or in the area. Look, the back seat is crushed. He wouldn’t have made it out of the car. I think it’s safe to say that your wife was traveling alone.”

“Where will you take her?”

“GWU Hospital.”

I hung up and placed my phone on the bar. “Christ.”

“Agreed,” Frank said.

“George Washington University isn’t that far,” I said. “The accident must have occurred pretty close to here.”

“What about the boy?” Frank said.

“The man’s got the boy,” Sarah said.

We both turned toward her. For the first time, we realized that she had been paying attention to everything that had happened. From me telling Frank about the phone call, the call with the paramedic, Sarah knew all of it. And when I saw Frank’s jaw muscles working hard, I knew what he intended to do about it.

Frank hopped off his stool and said, “We’re gonna have-”

I placed my left hand between them. “Frank, let’s not go there yet.”

“You’re not locking me up,” she said. “I’m coming with you.”

“Where?” Frank said.

“To the hospital,” she said.

“Bullshit you are,” Frank said. “You’re going into lock down until we know what the hell is going on.”

“I can give you an opinion on the injuries,” she said. “I don’t think this was an accident and I can prove it if you’ll let me take a look at her. Plus, if you need to leave with her, I can monitor her during transport.”

Frank shot me a look. I shrugged at first, then nodded after a moment of contemplation. I had no objections to keeping Sarah around for a little while, at least for as long as we were in the hospital. Chances are we’d head back to headquarters

after that, and I'd try to convince her to stay behind if things looked to be heading in a dangerous direction.

"OK, fine," Frank said. "I'm going to call us a cab."

"What about them?" I said.

"Who?" he said, not bothering to look at me.

"Our guys? Want to fill them in?"

"No," Frank said. "Not until we absolutely have to. And even then, no."

I moved closer to Sarah. "You sure you want to go along? This might be dangerous."

Her voice trembled with anticipation. "I live in danger. My job is full of danger. I can handle this."

Was it false bravado, the way she acted? I couldn't tell. Frank would make her my responsibility. If something happened, I'd have to answer for it. He didn't have to come out and say it. It was assumed.

The bartender placed three to-go coffee mugs on the counter. "Guys look like you could use this."

I nodded my thanks and grabbed my cup and Frank's, and then walked toward the door with Sarah. We waited for Frank. When he showed, I pushed the door open and stepped into the freezing night air. I hadn't noticed it when I stepped outside earlier, buzzed and preoccupied. But time and shock had sobered me. Now I felt the cold as it whipped and sliced and found its way into every opening in my clothing.

"Cab'll be here any minute," Frank said.

My phone vibrated inside my pocket. I pulled it out and held it above waist level. Frank and Sarah closed in on me and hovered over the screen. We all read the same thing, *unknown caller*.

"It's him," I said.

## Chapter 13

I answered the phone on the fourth ring.

“Thirty-six hours, Mr. Noble.” Same voice, still robotic, tinny, and evil.

“Till what?”

“That should be evident by now, shouldn’t it?”

I said nothing. My eyes met Frank’s and I watched as he tried to process the voice streaming through the phone’s speaker. It wouldn’t do any good. It was only a disguise. And in my experience, the only ones to use disguises were extreme cowards, or extremely dangerous men.

“I hear that Ms. Nockowitz is being transported to the hospital. She should be going to the morgue. Unfortunately, D.C. is the last big city in the U.S. to have concerned citizens. I’ve dispatched a few men to finish the job. But I’ll make you a deal, Jack. Interested?”

I fought back the anger that pushed up through my insides and said, “Yeah.”

“Get there first, and my men will back off, for now. But know this, if you try to notify the police, the little boy loses a finger.”

“How do I know you’ve got the boy?”

There was a pause, and then, “Mommy?” the voice was soft and sincere and clouded by tears. And it sounded human, which told me that the man was speaking through a device and it wasn’t something implanted in the phone.

“That good enough?”

Frank’s face turned a deep shade of red. Veins stood out. He clenched his fists. “Bastard! What did he or his mother do to you?”



The man said nothing.

“Hasn’t he been through enough?” Frank said.

The man said nothing.

“Why don’t you meet me in front of the hospital,” Frank said. “You’re obviously tough enough to take on a little kid. Why not take me on?”

“I don’t know who is speaking, but you can tell him that I’m not listening. Fifteen minutes, Mr. Noble. Don’t waste any more time.”

The screen lit up, the timer froze, the words *call ended* flashed in bold letters. I flipped the phone shut and stuffed it back into my pocket. He’d given us fifteen minutes to travel twenty. We had to get moving.

“What the hell is this?” Frank said. “Kidnapping and attempted vehicular homicide. Maybe we should turn this over, Jack.”

I stared at him in disbelief. A minute ago, he was ready to take on an army if necessary to get to the man on the other end of the phone. Now he’d flipped? Besides, the guy on the phone was serious as a stone. We couldn’t risk the boy’s life until we knew more, nor had some kind of leverage.

“Frank,” I said, “they’re sending a team to kill the boy’s mother.”

“He said that, yeah. But maybe they’re really coming for you, Jack.” He shook his head. “This guy has it in for you. Any idea why? Or who he is?”

The sixty-four thousand dollar question. There were plenty of people who I’d pissed off in the last ten years. From military officers to CIA agents to Special Forces guys. I could probably rattle off a list of names that would rival those on the Declaration of Independence. But none of that would explain why someone would come after me by kidnapping a little boy and trying to kill his mother. The kind of men I pissed off had a spine and would confront me head on.

“No,” I said. “I assume it’s someone I know, though. Why else disguise the voice?”

Frank placed his hands on his hips and tilted his head back. His breath mixed with the cold air and a stream of wispy smoke rose into the sky, melting with the full moon hovering behind him. “We need to coordinate with the feds, at the very least.”

“You willing to risk her life? That little boy’s life?”

Frank lowered his chin to his chest. His eyes focused on a spot somewhere between my feet. He ran a hand through his brown hair, then looked me in the eye. “Just be ready for anything.” He glanced in Sarah’s direction. “You too.”

Sarah nodded in response to Frank.

I’d forgotten she was there. Every second she spent listening to us talk meant additional hours she’d have to spend with us. I shook my head at the thought of the size of the document she was going to have to sign stating she’d never mention a word of this.

“Where’s that cab?” I said. “We’re running out of time and we’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

Frank hiked his shoulders an inch and said nothing.

I walked to the end of the building and saw Frank’s car in the parking lot. “Give me your keys.”

Frank grabbed Sarah by the elbow and guided her in my direction. “You sure you’re all right to drive?”

I nodded. He tossed the keys. They glided through the air in an arc, glinting in the moonlight. I tracked them until they were a foot in front of me, then reached out and snagged them. We hustled to the car and got in. Sarah sat in back and Frank in the passenger seat. He fiddled with the built in GPS unit and set a course to the hospital. Perfect for me. Now I didn’t have to drive using the map in my head. Don’t think, drive. I repeated the mantra in my head as the robotic voice of a

woman tossed out directions. I drove as fast as I could manage. It was a perfect union of logic and speed.

We had twelve minutes remaining when we hit the street. Twelve minutes to drive what would normally take twenty at forty miles per hour. The simple solution was to average eighty. We'd get there with two minutes to spare.

Frank's car didn't look like much, but it was a beast mechanically. It had a police interceptor engine, tweaked to get a little more out of it than the cops did, and a beefed up suspension. The result was that even though I drove over eighty miles per hour through the deserted nighttime streets of D.C., it felt like we were cruising along on a Sunday drive. I even flipped the radio on and found an old-time jazz station. The soothing tones of a tenor sax poured through the speakers like velvet, relaxing me.

Five minutes in and we were halfway there, mostly because I'd skipped through half a dozen red lights. I checked the rearview the first time and saw Sarah's eyes grow wide as she took a deep breath and held it. I had decided not to look back again. Seeing her in a panicked state like that ruined the ambiance the music created.

The GPS display continually updated the time remaining statistic for our route. It said eight minutes, which I knew meant we had six or fewer. We were making good time and were on track to arrive at the hospital with one or two precious minute to spare.

I glanced over at Frank, prepared to share the good news. He sat pressed back into the seat. Face tight. Knuckles white. Hands locked in a death grip on the center console and the armrest on the door. I suspected that if the drive went on much longer, he'd end up ripping one of them off, if not both.

We approached another red light. I didn't slow down. Frank hammered his right leg into the ground, pumping his imaginary brakes.

A tiny smile formed on my lips. Of everyone I knew there were two I considered to be fearless. Bear was one of those people. Frank was the other. I'd finally found his weakness. He wouldn't blink while staring down a gun, would walk into a hornets' nest if it meant completing the job, and wouldn't hesitate to rescue someone in a burning building. But being thrashed and slammed and crushed in a car accident had him looking like he stared down a path that led right to death's door.

I glanced at the clock, seven minutes in. I glanced at the GPS, four and half minutes to go. Roughly translated it meant I was still on time to arrive within ten minutes, leaving two to spare.

I don't know if I saw the flashing lights or heard the whoop of the siren first. My brain mashed the two together. I then realized we had a new problem to face.

"Friggin' cops," Frank muttered.

"Jack, are you gonna pull over?" Sarah asked.

I said nothing, choosing to gun the engine in response instead. I needed to keep the cops on my ass, instead of up it. We had less than three minutes to travel. I had to reach the hospital before they forced me to stop. The hospital entrance was the only acceptable place for the car to come to rest. Short of hitting me in the head with a bullet, they weren't keeping us from making it on time. Frank could deal with the fall out. That was his strong suit.

"Jack!" Sarah said.

"He's not stopping," Frank said. "We don't have time."

"This does add a new dimension to the task," I said. "He said no cops. We're bringing the cops with us."

"It's not the same," Frank said.

"Think he'll buy that?" I said.

Frank laughed. He had relaxed. Thinking tactically took his mind off of the danger presented every time I blew through

a red light, like I was about to do at that moment.

I sped up as I approached the light. The faint glow of headlights approaching from the cross street started to light up the recesses of the intersection, like the sun coming up over a mountain. You stand below, in the shadows, watching the light fill up every corner but the one you stand on. Until it finally stares you down and bathes you with its radiance. I pushed the car faster, glancing at the speedometer and noting that it read one-ten. The cop car lagged behind, as I hoped it would.

We hit the intersection, dipped and bounced. I turned my head slightly to the left and saw the headlights, up close and personal. It looked like a collision was unavoidable. The other car's horn blared. Tires squealed. I watched in the side mirror. Time slowed down and I saw the event unfold in stills instead of fluidly. The other car, possibly a big old Buick, skidded toward us, narrowly missing the rear quarter panel, spun then stopped in the middle of the intersection. I pushed the gas harder. One-fifteen. Another set of tires produced another squealing sound as a result of the friction between rubber and asphalt. I looked into the rearview mirror. Blue light silhouetted the big old Buick. I anticipated a crash, but didn't hear one. I didn't bother to check the rearview mirror again. At least, not until the blue lights began their second approach.

## Chapter 14

By my estimation, we were less than two minutes from the hospital. The cop car had fallen behind. There were only a couple intersections with lights remaining, no turns, open highway to the front doors of the ER, practically. I pushed the car even harder. The engine gurgled at first, then roared with a burst, and finally settled back into a steady hum.

Under a minute remained. The streetlights flew by in a blur. The hospital approached, small, like a scale building on a model railroad track, rising and growing as we approached. I began to slow down and the blue lights began to close in. No worries, though. They'd have to slow down the same as us.

The entrance to the hospital parking lot came up quick. I yanked the wheel to the right and hit the brakes and the car turned and skidded into the lot, narrowly missing a parked car. Forty had been too fast for the turn and I made a mental note of it. I slowed down, found the entrance to the emergency room, slammed on the brakes in front of the automatic double doors. Before the car came to a complete stop, I threw it into park, causing it to jerk and shudder. Sarah went face first into Frank's seat and then slammed back into her own. I didn't wait around to make sure she was OK. Strobing blue lights reflected off surrounding buildings and the sound of the cruiser's sirens were deafeningly close.

I flung my door open and raced around the front of our car. The smell emanating from the vehicle was a mixture of a gas station and a tire factory. I wondered if it would be in good enough shape to leave in. I left the car behind and headed for the covered entrance. The automatic glass doors couldn't part fast enough. I managed to slam my right shoulder into one of them, knocking it off track with a loud rattling sound.

“Hey,” a woman at the receiving desk next to the doors said to me. “What the hell?”

I ignored her and ran to the nurses’ station.

“Help you?” a plump nurse with red cheeks said. Too many late night shifts, I figured, as well as too many dinners from a vending machine.

“Tammy Nockowitz,” I said through heavy breaths. I hadn’t run far, but I’d sprinted, and possibly winded myself when I slammed into the door. It was then that I noticed a burning sensation on my right side, below my chest.

“She’s about to go into surgery. No one can see her.”

“I...I’m her husband,” I lied.

She eyed me up and down. “Got ID?”

“I left it in the cab. He’s probably gone.”

She craned her head and tried to look past me. I mirrored her movements and blocked her view. I worried that the blue lights flashing close to the door would draw her eye. They didn’t. I then realized that working in an ER would have made her immune to such things. It was nothing more than business as usual, judging by her casual tone and reaction.

“I’m gonna have to make a call on this,” she said.

I sighed my disapproval as she stepped away and picked up a phone. Her chubby finger hit a single button. I heard the word *security* muttered. I placed both palms on the counter and pushed myself up so that I leaned over the top. Saw a clipboard and grabbed it. My feet hit the ground again and I turned and started walking, pushing past a door with red signs and white letters that I didn’t bother to let form into words in my head. My eyes scanned the patient list until I saw Tammy’s name and room number.

The nurse might have called after me. Then again, maybe not. I didn’t pay attention. I lifted my eyes until they peered over the plastic clipboard. It took a second or two for my eyes to adjust from near to far, and the blur faded. The wide

hallway was full of the sounds of machines pumping and beeping, drowning out the moans and groans and cries of people in pain. I wondered who they were. Had they been in car accidents like Tammy? Had some been shot or stabbed or fallen down stairs? Or perhaps pushed? Maybe a homeless guy or two who didn't reach the shelter in time and found themselves needing a warm place to rest their head, needles and tubes and machines be damned.

The hall doglegged to the right. My eyes scanned open doorways, counting ahead. Tammy's room was halfway down the hall, by my estimation. Two men appeared from around a corner and approached from the other end of the corridor. They moved with purpose. They were carbon copies of one another. Carbon copies of the type of men I'd seen working private security in every corner of the world. Both men had close cut hair and wore dark pants and dark shirts, slightly baggy in order to conceal their holstered weapons. They were closer to Tammy's room than I was. I started to move faster than them. They broke out into a jog. I started to run. They reached the door first.

I reached behind and pulled my weapon. "Get the hell away from that door, or I'll blow your goddamn heads off."

Both men stopped and lifted their hands above their heads and took a few steps back.

Heads poked out from dark empty doorways, looking one way, then the other. They saw the men with their hands in the air and inevitably settled their stares on me, the crazy person in the hospital with a gun.

"Get back in your rooms," I said.

Most of them did. A few didn't. It didn't matter and I didn't bother to look behind me or past the men outside Tammy's room.

"Turn around," I said.

The men didn't. They did continue to back up, though. I figured they were trying to reach the hall that they entered



through, and there they'd turn and make a run for it.

“Get the hell out of here,” I said.

They made it a quarter of the way down the hall, looked at each other, and turned and ran, bypassing their exit. They slammed into the emergency exit and fell over themselves to get out of my aim. Turns out, they did me a favor. With the alarm blaring, security bolted past Tammy's room, ignoring the guy who a minute ago wielded a gun and threatened half the floor. To them, I was a visitor. They had bigger concerns at that time.

I stepped into Tammy's room. She lay on the bed, unconscious. Circles of blue and purple ringed her eyes. Two rows of stitches crossed her head. Bandages littered her body, covering smaller cuts and scrapes. I figured there were more bruises and cuts under her gown.

My cell phone vibrated against my leg. I pulled it out, flipped it open and answered it.

“I said no cops,” the familiar robotic voice said. “Did you not believe me when I said the boy will pay for your idiocy and failure to comply?”

“What did you want me to do? I didn't bring them, they followed me. You gave me fifteen minutes to drive twenty. I had to speed. They clocked me going a hundred in a thirty-five.”

The man started laughing. Short, chunky, clunky. The sounds of his cackles stopped, and he said, “Congratulations, Mr. Noble. You passed the test. I'll be in touch soon with further instructions. Playtime is over.”

“What? Wait-”

“And please, say hello to Ms. Nockowitz for me.”

The line went silent. The call had ended. I held the phone loosely in my left hand, half hoping it would ring again. It didn't.

Tammy started to stir. Her eyes fluttered open. She looked at me, fear spread across her face until she placed me, and then it turned into one of the most pained expressions I'd ever seen in my life. The same expression my mother made when the doctors told her my sister didn't make it.

"They took him," she said.

I sat on the edge of the bed. The tears streamed down her cheeks and rolled off her narrow chin. I placed my hand on her shoulder. She winced in pain at my touch.

"They took him again," she said.

I nodded. "I know. I'm going to do everything I can to get him back for you. I did it once, I can do it again."

"He might be dead already." Tears continued to snake down her cheeks in predetermined paths.

*Already?*

"I heard him on the phone, Tammy. He's alive. He sounded scared, but he's alive."

She said something else, but the words were lost in between her sobs, and as quickly as she had woken up, she passed out again.

I sat next to her, gun in one hand, the other gently caressing her arm. The alarm blared in the background and two more men streamed past the door. I got up and stuck my head through the opening. The four guys dressed in security uniforms stood at the emergency exit and worked to pull the doors shut. I didn't understand why something so seemingly simple appeared to be so difficult. Eventually, they were successful with their task. The doors closed, and the alarm stopped, and they turned their attention to Tammy's room.

I sat down in a short backed vinyl chair, waited, thought about how I would handle the situation. I could play it cool, like a super-agent in a movie. Sit in the chair, right leg crossed over my left, gun aimed at the doorway, smile on my face. I'd

make a joke about how they could bring me a mint julep or some other fancy drink I wouldn't be caught dead drinking.

I decided that the best thing was to wait for them and let them know I wasn't a threat. I got up from the chair and sat back down on the bed. I had to intimidate them, so I aimed my pistol at the open doorway. Two men entered the room, anger spread across their faces. They looked me up and down. Both stopped at the sight of my gun.

"I'm not going to shoot," I said.

One man nodded. The other was motionless.

"I'm one of the good guys," I said.

One man nodded, again. The other remained motionless.

"I'm a federal agent and I helped save this woman's son and I'm going to do so again."

Before the one man could nod again while the other did nothing, Frank stepped into the room behind them. Two uniformed police officers followed him inside.

"I hope they're not here for me," I said.

Frank smiled. "How is she?"

I looked past him. The cops explained the situation to the security officers, or at least some variation of it that Frank had fed them. All four men left the room, leaving me, Frank and an unconscious Tammy alone.

"Where's Sarah?" I said

"In the waiting room," Frank said.

"Figured she'd want to see the injuries."

"I wanted to talk to you first and make sure things were OK."

"Things are OK."

"Did he call again?"

"Yeah."

“What did he say?” Frank said.

“He laughed and said I passed the test. He also said he’d call back with further instructions.”

Frank exhaled loudly and placed his hands on his hips. “I don’t like this, Jack.” He pointed at Tammy. “She say anything about the accident?”

“Only that they took her son, again.”

“Anything else?”

“That he might be dead already.”

“Already?”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought, too. Why already? Did they say something to her or did something happen earlier that led her to believe this was going to happen? That the end result would be the death of her son?”

“Did you ask?”

“She passed out.”

Frank nodded. His lips worked side to side and I could tell he was thinking something through. “You think she wasn’t really coming onto you at the party? Maybe she was scared and hoped to get you alone so she could talk to you?”

I shrugged. “It’s possible, I suppose. But why wouldn’t she come out and say she needed help?”

“I don’t know. Maybe with everything she’s been through, she has a hard time trusting. Of everyone in that room, I would think you would be the one she felt she could trust. You did save her son from perishing in the fire, after all. She received the full story. She knows you could have left, but you stayed and risked your life for her kid.”

“And here I figured that was the reason she came on to me.”

Frank walked toward me and came to a stop at the foot of the bed. “Tammy,” he called in a soft voice. The woman didn’t

stir. “Dammit, I wish she’d wake up so I can ask her a few questions.”

“Me too,” I said. “I can’t help but feel we’re missing something.”

“We’re missing a lot of things, Jack.”

Someone cleared their throat outside the room. I looked up and saw Sarah standing there, half in the room, half in the hall. “Sorry, got tired of waiting out there.” She stepped into the room, walked over, stopped between Frank and me. “How is she?”

“Beat up, burned up, and passed out,” I said.

She nodded and took a step forward and leaned over me to inspect Tammy up close. Her body brushed up against mine and strands of her hair became caught in the stubble on my face. Her hair smelled of smoke and alcohol, but still retained a scent of lavender or some kind of exotic oil.

“What are you looking for?” Frank asked.

“I’ll know if I find it,” Sarah replied.

“What the hell does that mean?” Frank said.

After working with Frank for more than two years, I knew that of all the things someone could do to get under his skin, being indirect was the main infraction. It drove him crazy to not have all the facts and know what was going on at all times.

“It means I’m looking,” Sarah said. “I don’t know what for. If I find it, I’ll know.” She shook her head and continued examining Tammy. “And maybe I’ll tell you,” she added.

Frank waved his hand at her and shook his head. I could sense his frustration filling the room.

“Frank, let’s talk in the hall,” I said.

Outside the room, he said, “What?”

“I’ve been thinking we need to get a couple guys down here to watch over Tammy. I don’t trust this creep. His guys

could be anywhere, and the moment we leave, he could pounce and kill her, leaving him to slip away with the boy.”

“OK,” Frank said.

“We need to get some security around those other kids and their families, too.”

Frank nodded, said nothing.

“If he came after one, he might go after the others as well. I think this guy has an ego problem.”

“Yeah, we squashed it and now he’s trying to prove he’s bigger and badder than us.”

I nodded. “My thoughts exactly.”

“We don’t have the resources locally to pull this off. I guess I could recall a few of the teams from here to the mid-west...”

“Nah, don’t do that. We’ll have to bite the bullet and ask for help.”

“OK. You’re right.”

“Don’t tell them too much, though.”

Frank nodded and then looked up the hall, and then back down. His eyes settled on a room labeled *Conference* and he took off in that direction.

I backed into the room. Quiet and undetected. Sarah bent over Tammy’s motionless body. Her hands worked expertly around the woman’s neck, torso, and abdomen. She glanced over her shoulder, then flinched and stood.

“Didn’t hear you come back in,” she said.

“One of my specialties,” I said.

“Must have paid dividends in your younger years.” She winked.

I smiled and said nothing.

“I didn’t find anything unusual.”

“Didn’t think you would.”

“Why’s that?”

“A hunch.”

“Something tells me it’s more than a hunch.”

I shrugged.

“Don’t trust me?” She asked.

I didn’t reply.

“Whatever,” she said. “Don’t tell me.”

“I won’t.”

The click-clack of hard-soled shoes echoed down the hall. They moved quickly and with a purpose. A doctor, I figured, rushing to save a patient that had coded. Only thing was, I hadn’t heard an announcement or a series of tones through the speakers. I reached for my pistol and aimed it at the open door.

The footsteps came to a halt and Frank stuck his head in the room. “Jack, we gotta go.”

“Why? Did you get everything arranged?”

“Yeah,” he said. “And then I called into headquarters and got some bad news.”

“What?”

“Remember Pablo?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s had a heart attack.”

## Chapter 15

I sat in Frank's office with the chair pushed back to the glass window that separated him from the lobby. I leaned my head back against the cool glass and stared at the clock on the wall. Behind his desk, Frank pounded away at his keyboard, searching for who knows what. I didn't ask. He didn't tell. We barely talked, and during those moments when we did, it was about nothing in particular.

Sarah assisted Doc with Pablo in the infirmary. While not a cardiologist, Doc was capable of treating the man. That's why he'd been chosen for the SIS. The guy had experience in the field, running with Special Forces in some of the deadliest areas in the world. And the infirmary was state of the art. The care Pablo received was as good as any hospital in the area. I hoped it would be good enough to keep him alive. We couldn't afford to lose him, yet.

We had three of the guys from the house detained below, and they could offer information. However, Pablo offered us something none of them could. He was from outside their organization, a part of it, but not really. He could get in the house without a problem, and they all knew him. He knew everything, and kept his distance, which would serve to cloud his judgment and memory a bit less. He had other interests that they wanted no part of, or perhaps were allowed no part of. Either way, Pablo was the key to us bringing down whoever ran the ring. And that, I was sure, was the key to getting us close to the man who'd kidnapped the little boy.

I felt ashamed that I could only think of him as the little boy at that moment. Christ, what was his name? I struggled with my memory and eventually recalled Tammy calling her son Christopher. It seemed odd, that a man could rescue another human being and not be bothered to learn their name. I was built that way. Business was business. Everything that



happened went down in the line of duty. I didn't deserve any credit for what I did. Didn't want it, either. Wish I hadn't gotten it, because then we wouldn't be sitting up at three forty-five in the morning hoping that some asshole named Pablo pulls through after having his heart take up protest against living.

Frank must have noticed something was wrong with me, because he said, "Everything all right?"

I didn't answer. Watched the second hand sweep through the bottom half of the wall clock as it made its ascent back to twelve. After an hour or two, it becomes somewhat hypnotic.

I heard footsteps approach from across the lobby. I saw Sarah poke her head through the open doorway in my peripheral vision.

"He's going to make it," she said. "It was a very minor heart attack."

"Can we talk to him?" Frank asked.

She shook her head. "Not for a day or two. Like I said, minor, but he doesn't need the extra stress you'd heap on him."

"We don't have a day or two," Frank said.

"Take it up with Doc," she said. "I'm only here to help."

Frank looked at me, and I shrugged. It wasn't my call.

"All right," Frank said, resigned. "Send him in. I want to hear what he did."

"Well, he-"

"I want to hear from him," Frank interrupted.

Sarah stopped and stepped back, mouth open, hands held out in front of her. "OK," she said.

I turned in my chair to watch her walk away. She disappeared into the infirmary. I turned back, looked at Frank and said, "You didn't have to go dictatorial on her."

He hunched over his desk. “I know. I’m stressed. This thing’s going to give me a heart attack.”

“Don’t take it out on her.” I stood and wrapped my hands into a fist and set them on the desk where he could see them. “And you better not try and take it out on me.”

He looked up, nodded and didn’t say anything, which was the correct thing to do.

“Am I interrupting?” Doc said from outside the office.

I straightened up, turned away, said, “I was leaving.”

We squeezed past each other, chest to chest. He went in. I went out, catching a whiff of the sterile air that always hovered around his body. Sarah sat across the lobby on a vinyl wrapped cushioned bench. I walked to my office, poured two mugs of coffee and then went and sat down next to her.

“He always like that?” she asked.

“He’s stressed,” I said, holding one of the mugs out in front of her.

She grabbed it, brought the mug up to her lips and gently blew into the liquid, sending a puff of steam into the air. “So does that mean yes?”

I laughed. “You could say he’s wound a bit tight.”

“He’s wound a bit tight. There, I said it.” She smiled and locked eyes with me. Then her face drew tight and serious. “What about you, Jack? Are you wound a bit tight?”

I shrugged. “Sometimes, I suppose.”

She repeated what I said, substituting ‘you’ for ‘I’, and then added, “I’m going to be a bit bold here, if you don’t mind.” She took a sip of coffee to give me time to answer. I didn’t, not at that moment, at least. “Would you like to go out to dinner when this is all over?”

“I don’t mind, and I’d like to.”

She took a second to process my answers, forgetting that she asked me two questions. Her smile returned. “It’s a date then.”

I nodded my agreement. My knees opened to the side. Our legs pressed together, flesh separated by millimeters of thin fabric. Her right hand fell to her thigh. My left hand did the same. The backs of our hands touched, momentarily.

“So what now?” she said, bringing things back to the matter at hand.

What now? The question I had no answer for, so I told her the obvious. “We wait.”

“For?” She stretched the word a beat too long.

My cell vibrated against both our legs from inside my pants pocket. Reluctantly, I broke contact and stood up so I could retrieve it. *Unknown caller*. “This,” I said. I flipped the phone open and answered.

“Thirty-two hours, Mr. Noble.”

“Thanks for the update, asshole.”

The man said nothing. I heard him snicker, though. A robotic laugh, something akin to a second-rate fifties movie about a legion of robots out of control and hell bent on destroying every living thing on Earth.

“Thirty-two hours till what?” I prodded.

“You’ll find out soon enough. For now, I need you to show me a sign of faith and goodwill.”

“Screw you.”

“Let me finish, Mr. Noble.”

“OK, finish, and then I’ll tell you to go screw yourself.”

He chuckled in that creepy robotic way. “Release my men.”

Instead of screw you, I decided to have some fun with him. “What men?” Turned out to be a mistake. I heard a smack in

the background, and the little boy started to cry.

“Don’t mess with me, Jack. You’ve got ninety minutes to get them to Lake Pine, New Jersey.”

“Where the hell is that?”

“Google it. But you had better be there. Ninety minutes, Mr. Noble. You, your partner, the woman, and my men. I’ll call you when time is almost up to give you the drop point.”

“One condition,” I said. “Exchange the boy.”

“No.”

“You gotta give me-” The line went silent. The faint hum of static that was always present in the background during his calls faded away midway through my sentence.

“Christ,” I yelled.

“What the hell was that?” Sarah asked.

I looked down at her, well aware that the tone in my voice and the look on my face had given her cause to be taken aback. “It was him.”

Frank emerged from his office with the doctor close behind. His face was tight, twisted, and there was concern hidden behind his eyes. “Jack? What’s going on? Did he call?”

“Yeah.”

“What did he say?”

I walked across the lobby, hand covering my face. Thumb and little finger massaging my temples. I stopped at the other end of the room and turned around. “He said thirty-two hours. And he said he wants his men back. He said you and me and her, we need to gather up his guys and go to frickin’ Pine Lake-”

“Lake Pine?” Sarah said.

“-Yeah, what she said. It’s in New Jersey. And we have ninety minutes.”

“There’s no way,” Frank said. “It’ll take that long to get to Philly.”

“What about a helicopter?” Sarah said. “It’s how we transport patients with catastrophic injuries.”

I looked at Frank. He shrugged and said, “That’ll work. We’ll have time to spare. But I’m not crazy about turning these guys over. There’s still information to get out of them.”

“We’re not turning them over without some kind of contingency plan.” I looked and nodded toward Doc. “How long will it take you to install one of those tracking devices in one of them?”

Doc smiled. “Not even twenty minutes. Some laughing gas, a quick incision, then sew him back up.”

Frank smiled. He caught onto my plan. “They’ll lead us right to him.”

I nodded. “Sarah, would you mind assisting Doc with the procedure?”

“No problem.” She got up from the padded bench and stood next to Doc.

“OK,” Frank said. “You two go with Doc and pick one of the men. I don’t care which one. I’m going to get on the phone and get a car to meet us at Lake Pine and a chopper to get us there.” He jogged to his office and slammed the door shut. Sat down at his desk and started hammering on his phone.

The doctor disappeared for a moment, and then returned with the necessary equipment for the procedure. We followed him down the stairs to the holding cells.

“Still up for this?” I said to Sarah.

She smiled in response, but her eyes showed worry.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ve got your back.”

“This one work?” the doctor asked pointing at the first cell we came to.

“Sure,” I said. I punched in the security code and the door unlocked. I opened it and stepped in.

The man got out of bed and looked me up and down. He spat at my feet. “What the hell do you want?”

I smiled. Then I took a long step to build momentum and kicked him in the solar plexus. He bowed at the waist, head to knees. I grabbed him by the back of his head with my left hand, pulled him up a foot or two, drove a powerful uppercut into his chin with my right. His body slumped and fell to the floor in a heap.

“Save that laughing gas, Doc,” I said. “He’s out.”

The surgery took less than five minutes. Doc used a scalpel to make an incision where the neck meets the skull. Plenty of hair to cover the wound, I figured. Enough meat to hide the tracking device, which was nothing more than a thin tube, made from steel and hollow in the middle. That’s where the guts of the device lived. He stitched the small incision up. We lifted the man and secured him to a wheelchair. Shackles clamped down on his wrists and ankles.

I brought the other two men out, one at a time, and handcuffed them by the wrists and by the ankles. We took the elevator to the roof. Frank was waiting for us there. A few minutes later, the heavy thumping sound of the helicopter’s rotors and the whine of the turbine overwhelmed the silence of the still night.

We piled into the helicopter moments after it landed. Frank first, me last, Sarah and the prisoners in between. I settled in, sitting with my back to the pilot, which left me facing the men. They glared at me, snarled. I saw the curses they wished upon me in their eyes. I smiled in return, while aiming an HK MP7 at their stomachs.

## Chapter 16

The helicopter got us to our destination in under an hour. The three men across from me didn't move except when the helicopter pitched or rolled. The three of them swayed left, right, forward, and backward in unison, their eyes fixed on me, traveling between my face and the gun I held. One of the men had been sweating profusely, and I could tell he didn't like flying all that much. His eyes were wide and he tensed up every time the helicopter moved. I assumed he had to take a heavy sedative to make it to the U.S. from wherever the hell he was from. No such luck today, though.

We landed on an abandoned dirt airstrip covered with the iced over remains of a recent snowstorm. No plow had touched the soil, nor had a shovel scraped the ground in advance of our landing.

The pilot informed us that we were halfway between Cherry Hill and Lake Pine, neither of which was a place I had any familiarity with.

Sarah stood at the edge of the platform, prepared to hop down. I offered her my hand. She took it. I smiled. She did the same. Once on the ground, I pointed at the dark blue Chevy Suburban parked nearby and told her to wait at the front.

Frank was next. I didn't offer him my hand, nor did I smile at him. He hopped onto the ground and grimaced. Old feet or old knees it appeared, relatively speaking.

"My home territory," Frank said. He yelled to make himself heard over the thumping rotor.

I nodded, then looked away, then thought about the place I used to call home. My mind wandered for a second or two. The three angry faces waiting to exit the helicopter were blurs while I recalled a time and place that were now as alien to me as Mars. Or Portland.

As quickly as the interlude began, it ended. I gestured with the barrel of my MP7 for the three men to exit the helicopter, nice and easy. Frank helped each man down and told them to take ten steps, then get on their knees. Each man did as instructed, reluctantly. Frank twisted and turned at the waist and gave the pilot a thumbs up. Together, we yanked the men to their feet and guided them toward the Suburban. Behind us, the turbine whined, the rotors thumped, and the helicopter made a hell of a cyclone as it rose into the air. Any remaining loose snow whipped all around us. It felt like a thousand minuscule icicles embedded themselves into my cheek.

I glanced around at our surroundings and didn't see a single freestanding structure. We were in the middle of nowhere. I could discharge my weapon and the chance anyone would hear it over the sound of the helicopter's rotors was slim. By the looks on the faces of the men, they realized this as well. The whine of the turbine raised a few decibels. The rotors thumped faster. The helicopter lifted off the ground and began its ascent into the fading deep blue sky. I figured in a couple minutes the silence would be more deafening than the roar of the helicopter.

A weak wintry sun began to crest over the eastern horizon, peeking through sparse holes in the trees where foliage was missing or pine needles didn't mesh. It cast a dim pinkish light over us.

When the helicopter was far enough away that we no longer needed to shout to hear each other, Frank spoke.

“Turn around, assholes.”

The men shuffled on their knees until they were facing the other way.

“Ready to go for a ride?” Frank said.

One man nodded. The others remained motionless.

“It's your lucky day,” Frank said. “But know that we are going to be watching you after you leave us, and if you so much as fart in a crowded elevator we're gonna have an agent



there to collect a gas sample, then plug your asshole and then arrest you for polluting the environment.”

One man nodded, again, another remained motionless, and one cracked a smile. So did I. I turned my head and coughed into my hand in an effort to conceal the grin that spread across my face. I swung my head back around, avoiding the eyes of the men, settling on Sarah, instead. She had a bemused look on her face, presumably amused by my reaction to Frank’s words.

“You got it?” Frank said. “We’re gonna be watching every move you make.” He droned on for another thirty seconds, but said nothing important. Mostly tried to make himself sound like a badass and instill the fear of the SIS into the men. All in all, it seemed to have the intended effect.

We lifted each man to his feet, then brought them over to the Suburban and shoved them into the back row of the vehicle, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, knee to knee. I sat in the middle row, passenger side, leaning against the door so that my legs were in between the two middle seats. I loosely aimed my MP7 at the man in the middle.

My phone vibrated against my stomach from inside my coat pocket. I reached in and grabbed it, then checked the display, although I knew who it was. Unknown caller. Robot voice. I answered casually, betraying my feelings at that moment.

“I’m glad to see that punctuality is one of your strong suits, Mr. Noble.” Still tinny, still robotic and annoying as ever.

“Ingrained,” I said. “Growing up, if I wasn’t at the dining room table by six, dinner was forfeited.”

“How many dinners did it take for you to learn your lesson?”

“Plenty. I’m hardheaded.”

“And you must have been quite the runt.”

“I’ve filled out.”

“So you have.”

I looked at each man in turn. They sat hunched over. Their foreheads wrinkled, thin and bushy eyebrows alike furrowed over their narrowed eyes. They listened intently to every word I said, presumably trying to figure out what the man said in return. I figured I’d get to the point so we could move on. “What do you want from us now?”

“You will soon be approaching an abandoned gas station on your right. A place that looks like it operated in the fifties. You know, old time pumps, signs with smiling faces in-”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Good.”

“Then what?”

“Leave my men.”

“Then what?”

“Leave.”

“Then what?” I asked again, growing impatient with the one word, two-word game.

“Go back to Cherry Hill and get some breakfast. There is a great little diner on Springdale Road. The name escapes me, though.”

“What about the boy?”

There was a long pause and I grew concerned that something had happened to Christopher.

“What about him?” the man said.

“Leave him and then tell me where to find him. We’ll be done with this.”

The man chuckled. A voice spoke up in the background. Soft, sweet, innocent. At least it would have been if Christopher weren’t screaming. *“Let go of me.”*

“Dammit,” I said. “What do you want?”

“My men.”

“Then what?”

“We’re approaching thirty and a half hours, Mr. Noble. You’ll find out soon enough.”

The hum of static disappeared, indicating that the call had been cut short. I flipped the phone shut, then leaned back against the door, scanning the faces in the back seat. They all smiled, presumably at the site of me frustrated and angry.

“What did he say?” Frank said, glancing back from the driver’s seat.

“He said look for an old abandoned gas station,” I said. “Like something out of the fifties.”

“And?”

“And we need drop the guys. Then he recommended that we head into Cherry Hill and get some breakfast.” One of the men from the back seat laughed. I ignored him and continued. “Oh, and thirty and a half hours remain.”

“Till?”

“No clue.” I turned my head a bit to the left and looked at the men again. “Any of you know?”

They all shrugged. None of them spoke.

“Of course you don’t,” I said.

“There it is,” Frank said, pointing across the dash.

I leaned forward and turned to my right. The building had seen better days. Panes of glass were broken or shattered or missing completely. The pavement in the parking lot was cracked and overgrown with weeds. Bushes encroached from the unkempt stretches of lawn that surrounded the lot. Vines wrapped around antique gas pumps. The old signpost that once signaled to passers-by that this was the place to stop now lay on the ground, barely visible among nature’s chaos.

The Suburban stopped, and I opened my door and slid out. I flipped a lever on the seat, sending it forward and clearing a path for the men to step through. I pulled them down, one by one, and lined them up on the rear quarter panel of the Suburban. The bulk of the beastly SUV hid us from the road. Unfortunately, the big vehicle did not protect us from the wind.

“Aren’t you going to uncuff us?” the man with the tracking device in his head said.

I swung my right arm hard and fast and my clenched fist connected with his jaw. He dropped to the ground, his body folding over itself.

“Anyone else want to be uncuffed?” I said.

The two remaining conscious men shook their heads.

“Your boss will be here soon.” I turned and climbed into the Suburban, resuming my position in the same seat.

Frank turned the key in the ignition and the big V-8 engine roared to life. We idled for a minute, watching the men and watching the road and breathing heavily enough to fog up the windows. Frank shifted the transmission into drive and pulled out of the parking lot, heading east, toward Cherry Hill.

“What do you think?” Frank said.

“I think he’s got us by the balls at the moment,” I said.

“That’s going to change, though,” Frank said.

“I know.”

“Any requests for breakfast?”

“Doesn’t matter to me.” My stomach felt empty and my head like lead. I needed food and coffee, and not necessarily in that order. “Stay off Springdale Road,” I added.

“Why’s that?” Frank said.

“He recommended we go to a place on Springdale.”

“You think he was hinting at something maybe? Like you’d find something there?”

“Yeah,” I said. “A bullet to the back of the head.”

Frank chuckled the way that only a man who’d done the things we’d done, and seen the things we’d seen, could.

We drove for twenty minutes and found a place on the northern outskirts of the city. I leaned over and got a look at the clock in the dash. Almost six a.m. Almost thirty hours remaining. I laughed at the fact that I’d threatened myself. Only I didn’t know why.

## Chapter 17

We took a booth in the back corner of the diner. I sat so that I had a view of the restaurant, the front door, and the parking lot. The only thing missing was the entrance to the kitchen. Sarah sat across from me and had that covered. When Frank returned from washing up in the restroom, he sat next to me.

We had a laptop computer set up in the middle of the table, facing the window so that all three of us could see it. The computer ran a special program that linked up with the tracking device installed in the man's neck. I had no idea how it worked, and when Frank tried to explain something about GPS tracking, I waved him off. All I cared about was whether it would track the man with any measure of accuracy. And based on experiences, I knew it could.

We picked them up as they hit I-295, northbound. They stayed on the interstate for twenty minutes or so, then exited onto a major road. They stuck to main roads for another ten miles. A few more turns and they were driving through a stretch of map that didn't have a road that registered with our program.

Frank leaned over the table, his eyebrows hunched over squinting eyes. He reached for the laptop and pulled it close to get a better look at where they were heading, I assumed. This was his home territory, after all.

"What do you think?" I said.

He shrugged. "No idea where they're going."

"Maybe they have a house out there?" Sarah said, half statement, half question. This wasn't her specialty, so I figured she felt a little out of place or a little intimidated.

"Possibly," I said. "Let's give it a bit and see."

They drove until they were deep in the country. North of a place called Hopewell and west of Princeton. Then the dot on the screen stopped. It remained still for five minutes, then ten. Ten turned into thirty.

“I think we got them,” Frank said.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Harris. He answered on the second ring.

“When’s the last time you checked up on Tammy Nockowitz?” I asked.

“About fifteen minutes ago,” he said.

“And?”

“I went myself, Jack. She’s fine. Doing well. Healing up. We got two guys there and there’ll be a shift change at ten a.m.”

“OK.”

“How are things up there?”

“OK. I think we have their location.”

“Great,” he said. “Say the word and we’re there.”

“OK, will do.” I ended the call and placed the phone on the table in front of the computer.

“Everything OK with the woman?” Sarah asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “She’s fine.”

The waitress came by and refilled our coffee. For the first time in twenty minutes, I looked away from the computer screen and noticed that the crowd in the diner had thickened. The breakfast crowd, consisting of people in too much of a rush to enjoy the bacon and eggs and pancakes they scarfed down. A crowd could be beneficial at times. This wasn’t one of those times, though, and I found myself not wanting to be inside the diner much longer.

Frank must have felt the same way, because he said we needed to get ready to move and he tried to flag down our

waitress. The woman noticed him and nodded. She was busy with a half dozen new tables. I wondered how long it would take her to bring our check.

My phone lit up with a new call. The vibrations caused it to dance across the surface of the table, away from me. I grabbed it, flipped it over, and looked at the display. *Unknown caller*, my new best friend.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

Two things struck me at that moment. First, the voice wasn’t disguised. I recognized it, somehow, from somewhere. I couldn’t place it though. Of course, it could have been my mind working against me. With six billion people in the world, there’s bound to be some crossover in things such as looks and the way a voice sounds. I recalled the blip during an earlier call when the machine momentarily allowed his real voice to filter through the phone line. I decided I couldn’t dwell on it, at least, not yet. The second thing that struck me was that the man had likely discovered our tracking device, and that was the real reason it stopped moving.

Frank leaned in toward me, angling his head. Trying to listen in, I figured.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about.” I said, calm and controlled.

“The device, you idiot. You think I wouldn’t notice?”

I didn’t reply. Instead, I swallowed hard and tried to think of a way to control the situation.

The line went silent and I pulled the phone away from my head to confirm that we were still connected. When I saw we were, I said, “You didn’t leave us much choice-”

“Oh, shut up, Noble. You can reclaim your device whenever you want, if you’ve got the sack for it.”

“All right.”

“By the way, the boy will pay for this screw up. You might be picking him up along with the device.”



This time there was no sweet, innocent voice in the background disguised by pain and anguish. There was nothing but the heavy breathing and the occasional sound of sandpaper as his stubble scraped against the mouthpiece of his phone. Then I heard a gunshot, and then the line went completely silent.

I stared at the cell phone's screen. The words *call ended* flashed repeatedly in bold white letters. My eyes drifted to the upper right corner of the display and settled on the time. Eight a.m. "Twenty-eight hours to go," I said.

"What the hell happened?" Frank said.

His words hung in the air in front of me as I processed what I'd heard. An angry man called me. He caught us with our pants down. He told me to reclaim my property and said there might be a parting gift of sorts there. Then silence followed by frustration. And a gun shot.

"Jack?"

I looked at Frank and shook my head. "They found the device. Said we should go get it. Then he shot someone." I swallowed hard, and then took a drink. "After he threatened the little boy's life."

Frank's face went slack, then turned red. He leaned forward and slammed a clenched fist against the table. "Son of a bitch," he said, a little too loud. The heads of several patrons of the restaurant whipped around, and they were looking in our direction. Eyes peered at us. Ears opened, hoping to catch a glimpse of the conversation that had elicited such a violent response. Violent for a normal person, that is.

"Let's get moving," I said.

"OK," Frank said.

"OK," Sarah said.

"Not you," I said, turning toward Sarah. "This is too dangerous. I have no idea what we're going to find when we

get to that dot.” I gestured toward the map on the computer screen.

“There could be a hurt child there,” she said. “You need me.”

“I’ll call an ambulance.”

“No you won’t. You don’t want the attention if something went bad. You don’t want to have to answer those questions. Not now. You’re not calling anybody.” She leaned over the table and poked her finger into my sternum, like a cop does when he wants to make a point.

“Let’s bring her, Jack,” Frank said.

Surprised by Frank’s relenting, I nodded in agreement. Part of me didn’t want to have to watch her back and protect her, which would ultimately require me to drop my own guard a bit. But part of me was glad to have her along.

## Chapter 18

The drive took half an hour, maybe longer. I didn't bother to look at the clock. My mind raced through at least twenty different scenarios that boiled down to two possible outcomes. Either the boy was there, or he wasn't. I couldn't plan my next move without knowing that critical piece of information.

We exited I-295 near Trenton after about twenty minutes driving. Spent another ten miles on a country road. Turned off, headed down a snow-covered dirt road.

"Next turn is the last one," Sarah said from the back seat. She had the laptop and had managed to follow our progress along the map. Left out the guesswork, which was fine with me. I didn't want any guesswork today. Clear-cut, black and white, give it to me straight.

Frank turned right at the appearance of another dirt or gravel road. Couldn't tell with all the snow, only knew it was something other than asphalt by the crunch the tires made. The sound indicated that under the blanket of white was a road that man had hastily created.

"Couple hundred feet and we're there," Sarah said.

I strained to look past the barrier of evergreens. Noticed what could have been a driveway connected to the road. Red and blue lights blinked in between the trees.

Apparently, Frank saw it too. "What the hell is that?" he said.

I shook my head. "Someone beat us here. Somebody heard the gunshot. Called the cops."

"Dammit," Frank said. "Why can't anything..."

I turned toward him, waiting for him to continue. He sat there with his mouth open, then cranked his jaw shut and

shook his head. The SUV dipped and bounced in ruts hidden by the snow cover as he turned onto the driveway. We continued to bounce and rock and sway, side to side, up and down. If the road we drove in on was a suspension's bad dream, then this driveway was its nightmare. Packed snow continued to hide some of the peaks and valleys and ruts, but not all. Frank tried to swerve around the ones we could see, which only resulted in us hitting another. It would have made sense to slow down. But not knowing whether the boy lay injured or dead helped us cast sense aside.

We turned hard to the right and pulled around the tree barrier. We saw a cruiser and an SUV, both with stenciled gold stars on their doors and the name of their police department. I didn't bother to stop and look. Two men stood outside a worn and weathered wooden building. Blue and red lights bounced off the structure, highlighting planks of wood that were anything but uniform. They were lined up randomly. Quarter inch gaps had been formed by years of humidity and hot and cold and rain and snow. The elements had caused the wood to expand, contract, bow, and bend. The result was a structure worthy of condemnation if there has been a building inspector within thirty miles of the place.

One of the officers raised his hand. He was short and wide with a formidable gut protruding out and hanging over his belt. The other cop was tall and lean with a leathery face that, much like the barn, had spent too much time out in the elements. He clutched a rifle close to his chest.

"You deal with the cops," I said. "I'm getting inside that barn."

Frank opened his door, stepped out, walked around the front of the Suburban. He held his hands in the air. He clutched his SIS ID in his left hand. I heard him shout something to the men. The guy with the gun dropped his hand. The tall guy lowered his weapon and aimed it at the ground.

"Ready?" I said.

"Yeah," Sarah said.

I opened my door first then took two steps back and then opened her door. She stepped out. I shielded her with my body in case there were more surprises. Turned out, there were.

A third cop emerged from the barn, coughing and gagging. He made it ten or fifteen feet and stopped, which placed him about ten or fifteen feet away from me. If I'd been any closer, I could have identified his lunch, because he proceeded to bend over and vomit. Then he stood and wiped his mouth with his sleeve, only to throw up again.

Things weren't looking good for Christopher Nockowitz.

"What's in there?" I said to the guy.

He stood there, hands on his knees, bent at the waist, breathing heavily. His head rose up and he opened his mouth to speak, but he didn't get a word out. He couldn't. It appeared to me that he'd had a large breakfast. After he finished, he lifted his head again, and said, "Sorry. It's... Oh, God." He bent over once more.

I didn't stand around long enough to find out what happened. I grabbed Sarah by the hand and pulled her to the right, taking a wide berth around the unfortunate cop. We stopped at the door. I looked at the tall guy and said, "Why are you guys here?"

"Someone heard a gunshot," he said.

I knew it.

"Then," he continued, "Someone phoned in a bomb threat."

"Bomb threat?" I didn't see that coming.

"Yeah."

"Why would anyone care about a bomb threat out here?"

The man straightened up and shuffled his rifle in his hands. The barrel bounced up and down and settled in a few feet from my mid-section. Apparently, they take their bomb threats very seriously in the country.

“You looking for trouble, son?”

I felt Sarah grip my elbow. “No, sir,” I said. “One more question, though.”

He narrowed his eyes, looked down, then back up.  
“What?”

“Who’s that guy?” I nodded toward the man still heaving in the snow.

“Bomb squad.”

“You been inside the barn?”

“No.”

“Why not? The bomb?”

He shrugged and gestured with his head toward the dark opening to the structure. “You smell that?”

“What?”

“Death.”

I nodded, turned, and stepped inside the barn. The air felt warmer, but only by a few degrees. No wind, though, which made a difference when the temperature was below freezing.

The barn had the smell of death, as the officer noted. It also had the faded odor of gunpowder.

“We need a flashlight,” Sarah said.

I scanned the room, my eyes coming to rest on a bale of hay stacked six feet high. “No, we don’t.”

“Why not?”

“The boy’s not here.”

“How do you know?”

“Guess I don’t for sure, but we could always ask that guy.” I stretched my arm and pointed toward the hay. Perched atop was a head, and only a head. And the head belonged to the man we planted the tracking device in. “Although, I guess we could use a flashlight to see if the rest of his body is in here.”

Sarah groaned and backed up. I heard her bang against the barn door as she stepped through the opening. She asked for a flashlight and returned less than a minute later, casting an artificial beam of light into the darkest corners of the barn. The rest of the man's body wasn't far from his head. As far as I could tell, only his head had been severed.

I walked over to the makeshift altar and inspected it from all sides. They had sliced the back of the guy's head open and removed the tracking device. They'd placed it a few inches to the left, on top of the hay, in plain sight.

I walked toward the open doorway, taking Sarah's hand along the way. We stepped outside where Frank was waiting for us.

"Well?" he said.

"The boy isn't there," I said.

Frank sighed and let his head drop a few inches. "That's a relief. You find the tracking device."

I nodded.

"Where is it?"

"You can go in and see for yourself." I flipped the flashlight around in my palm, extending the handle toward him. He snatched it and brushed past me.

A moment passed, then two. I saw the cops standing by their cruiser. They quickly averted their eyes when they saw me look in their direction.

"Sweet mother of Jesus," Frank said. "What the hell?"

I waited for him to return from the barn and then I gave him my thoughts. "I'm guessing they figured if we put a tracking device in the back of his head, we might have put one somewhere else."

"Why kill him? Why not leave him on the side of the road?"

I shrugged. “He couldn’t be trusted anymore, not if he let us insert a tracking device in his head. Maybe the guy knew too much, like where they were going and why they were going there.”

“I suppose,” Frank said.

“It’s what I would have done, if I were so inclined to be involved in such an illegal endeavor.”

“Half of what we do would be classified as illegal.”

“Better watch your back then.” I smiled. Frank didn’t. Bad joke, I supposed.

“Why so brutally?” Sarah asked.

“Fear,” I said. “It’s a message.”

“For us?” she said.

“Partly. And for his own guys.”

My phone rang loudly. I had taken it off vibrate on the way out here. I looked at the display. It was him. I glanced at the clock in the corner of the display. Almost nine a.m. I flipped the phone open and answered, “Twenty-seven hours.”

“Your math skills are exceptional, Mr. Noble.” Normal voice, calm tone.

“What happened to the robot voice?”

“I deemed that unnecessary. Besides, you don’t know me.”

*Then why did you make a point of saying that?*

“You’re probably right,” I said.

“I know I’m right,” he said.

“So what now?”

“What now,” he repeated. “Well, first let me tell you that if you pull another stunt like that, it will be the boy’s head you find next time.”

“You keep threatening me with the boy’s life,” I said.

“Sooner or later I’m going to tell you I don’t give a shit. Your



game is getting old.”

“Twenty-seven hours,” he said, almost humming it.

“What the hell happens in twenty-seven hours?” I yelled into the phone, loud enough that it got the attention of the three cops. They perked up, leaned forward, then tried to act like they weren’t listening. I took a few steps toward the far end of the barn.

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

The line went to dead air. I moved to throw my phone against the old wooden planks of the barn. Stopped mid pitch and yelled.

“Jesus, Jack,” Frank said. “Get a hold of yourself, man. We gotta stay in control here.”

I shoved the phone back in my pocket and started toward the Suburban. The tall cop met me at the door. We stood there, eye to eye, not a word spoken between us. For a second I had a feeling he was about to arrest me. Why? I had no idea. A sad smile formed on his lips and took a step back.

“I became a cop after my boy was abducted and killed,” he said.

I looked over my shoulder at Frank, who nodded. He’d told them what was going on, which demonstrated a lot of faith on his part. Alternatively, maybe he had no choice if he wanted to keep this under wraps. I feared it wouldn’t stay that way for long.

“Sorry for your loss,” I said.

He nodded. Smile faded. “If you get these guys,” he paused a beat, “when you get these guys, make sure they suffer.”

“Will do.” I opened the rear passenger door and waited for Sarah to climb in, then I pulled the front door open and slid into the passenger seat, slamming the door behind me. As soon as Frank was in his seat and had the door closed, I said, “What the hell did you tell them?”

“Enough to get us out of there, Jack.” He turned the key and fired up the big V-8 engine again. “And they’re going to walk away from here. Say they found nothing. And our guys are going to show up in a little bit and scrub this site clean, after gathering all the evidence, of course.”

“Of course,” I said.

He backed the SUV up, whipped it around and drove back the way we came. We hit pavement and headed north.

“Where are we going?” I said.

“Newark.”

“Why Newark?” Sarah asked.

“We have a field office there,” Frank replied.

“OK,” she said. “But again, why Newark?”

“Outside of New York, close to Philly, close to airports. A big enough city, but far enough away from the big ones, allowing us to operate out of sight when we need to.”

She shrugged. “OK, I guess. Still don’t know why anyone would want to base themselves out of Newark.”

Frank laughed and turned his head toward me. “I like her,” he said.

*Me too*, I thought.

## Chapter 19

Halfway to Newark our plans changed. Harris called and said that Tammy Nockowitz was up and coherent and seemed to be holding something back when he questioned her, but he couldn't quite figure out what.

Frank got on the phone and arranged for a private jet to be ready for us at Princeton Airport. We doubled back the way we came, which was no big deal except that we were working under obvious time constraints.

We boarded and were in the air by ten a.m. Twenty-six hours to go. I left my cell switched on and waited for a call from the man to confirm it. He didn't.

I sat next to Sarah. Frank sat across from us, facing us. "What's on your mind?" he said.

"I don't get why he wants the boy. Why Christopher? Of all the kids, why him?"

"We've been over this, Jack."

We had, but that didn't erase the question from my mind.

"He saw you," Frank said. "The two of you, emerging from the house. The pictures of you and the fire. Whether he saw it on the news or saw a picture of you, that's why. He got the boy, and he's got you." Frank paused a moment. "I mean, he's got us."

"At some point it's only going to be me," I said.

"Not if I can help it."

I shrugged. He could talk all he wanted. Facts were facts. The guy called me. He spoke to me. He wanted me. In the end, this would boil down to the two of us. And anyone else he had on his side.

“Back to the guy,” Frank said. “He’s embarrassed and he’s pissed. He knew how to reach you, which means he knows you.”

“How?” I said. “He doesn’t disguise his voice anymore. I can’t place it, though. It sounds familiar, but not really.”

“Don’t know, Jack. But if I had to lay money down, I’d say this guy knows more about you than we want him to.”

Done talking, I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes. The plane would land in thirty or forty minutes and that stretch of time might be my only shot at sleep for the next twenty-six hours.

I woke up after the plane had landed. First time I ever recalled sleeping through a landing. Sarah stood in the aisle, looking down at me, a smile across her face. For a moment, the situation facing us slipped my mind and I couldn’t help but think about how beautiful she looked.

“What?” I said.

“You snore,” she said.

“No,” I said.

“Yes,” she said.

“Prove it.”

“How?”

“Bring a tape recorder to my house one night this week and sleep over.”

She smiled, turned and walked to the open door at the front of the plane.

“Time to get serious, Jack,” Frank said.

That was all it took. Everything that had happened in the past eleven hours rushed to the front of my brain, the weight of it nearly throwing me off balance. I glanced at my watch. Close to eleven a.m. I didn’t let my mind do the calculations. Instead, I hopped in front of Frank and moved to the front of

the jet, then down the small staircase that led to the ground. A black sedan waited for us. The driver's window rolled down and McKenzie nodded. I opened the door for Sarah and walked around the back of the car to get in on the other side. Frank sat up front.

“The office?” McKenzie asked.

“Hospital,” Frank replied. “We need to go see Tammy Nockowitz.”

We reached the hospital shortly after eleven a.m. I hesitated at the front door, waiting for my phone to ring. It didn't. But that didn't mean we weren't in for any surprises.

## Chapter 20

When we reached the room, it became obvious that Tammy wasn't in as good a shape as Harris had said. She faded in and out. Obvious head trauma, Sarah had informed us. Tammy smiled a little when she saw us surrounding her bed, and she fixed her eyes on me. I sat down on the edge, near her waist, facing her, like the night before.

"Tammy," I said. "We need for you to tell us everything that happened last night. What do you remember?"

She licked her lips and swallowed hard. Her words formed slowly. Her voice sounded raspy. "It's all bits and pieces. I remember being at the dinner, and then here. I also remember the accident."

"Let's start there, Tammy. What do you remember about the accident?"

"A man." She paused and blinked hard. "Several men."

"Paramedics?"

"No."

"Cops?"

"No."

"Firefighters?"

"No," she said forcefully. "I didn't see any flashing lights, like you'd see if the cops or medics were there. Only flashlights and men."

"What did they say?"

"I... I don't recall."

"How did they talk?"

"What do you mean?"

“Accents? Did any of them have a British accent?”

Frank flinched back and shot me a look. I shrugged in return. I figured that if she was forced to remember something we didn't think was a possibility, it might jog her brain enough to recall actual facts.

“No, I'd remember that,” she said.

“Do you remember anything at all about them that might have been different?”

“They were Hispanic, or looked that way, at least.”

“All of them?” I asked.

“All but one. One was white. American. I... I think I recognized him from somewhere.”

“From where?”

Her eyes closed and her head fell back into the pillow and tilted to the side an inch. Out cold. We waited by her side. None of us spoke. We all stared at Tammy, waiting for her to come to. Finally, she did, and she picked right back up where she had left off.

“The party,” she said.

“What about it?” I said.

“I saw the man there.”

“Can you identify him?”

She looked around and then lifted a bruised arm and pointed at Frank. “Him.”

Frank took a step back and shook his head. “What?”

“What about him?” I said.

“I remember him from the party,” Tammy said.

“And then at the accident?”

“What accident?” Her face contorted. She shook her head, just once in each direction. Then she passed out, again.

I looked at Sarah and held out my hands in a *what-the-hell* gesture.

“She’s got a nasty concussion,” she said. “Head trauma. Never know how someone will react.”

“This is getting nowhere,” Frank said. “I was with you all night, Jack.”

“I know, Frank. That’s not a concern. We’ll have to see what she says when she wakes up. Remember, first thing she said to me last night was, ‘they got him.’”

We waited for Tammy to rejoin us. Seconds turned into minutes. Minutes passed in bunches. I looked at the clock on the wall and it was close to eleven-thirty a.m. Close to a day left, according to the man on the phone. I half-imagined that he’d turn out to be a prophet. The countdown he gave me would turn out to be a doomsday timer, and when the world didn’t end, as per usual, he’d restart the timer. Maybe tell me I had two years, three months, and four days left.

“I’m going to grab some coffee,” Frank said. “Anyone else want a cup?”

Sarah nodded and so did I.

“OK,” Frank said. “Three coffees.”

He slipped out of the room.

Sarah turned to me. “I thought our first date would be much more romantic than this.”

I smiled at her, then glanced down at the broken woman who lay unconscious on the bed. The smile faded from my lips and I thought of another line of questioning that might be relevant.

Sensing my mood was too somber to discuss the start of our relationship, Sarah switched gears. “How did you manage to keep the cops out of this?”

I shrugged, unsure of how much I should tell her. “As you’ve seen by now, we have our own way of doing things.”



“Yeah. And...?”

I eyed her for a moment, and then said, “Nobody messes with us. We’ve got the contacts to make things happen. Our boss’s boss is a powerful man. The kind of man people avoid stepping on the toes of. If we want things to work a certain way, he goes to bat for us, and things work the way we want.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and shook her head. “You’re talking in circles.”

“Possibly.”

She huffed and I smiled.

A nurse stuck her head in the room and told us that she needed us to step out for a few. Sarah nodded, and since she was the resident expert in all things emergency medicine, I followed her out of the room. We headed toward the lobby, following signs that directed us to the cafeteria. Saw Frank a hundred yards down the hall and met him halfway.

He pulled Sarah’s coffee out of a cardboard drink holder, then mine, and then he asked, “What’s going on?”

“They had to run some tests,” Sarah said.

Frank nodded at Sarah and then turned his head toward me. He reached out and gestured behind him. “There’s an empty waiting room back there. Let’s sit for a few and figure out the best way to go about questioning her.”

## Chapter 21

The room was dim and the air was still and sterile. The smell of disinfectant was stronger here than in any other area of the hospital. It had a single door for entering and exiting, and it had been closed, providing no air exchange. Trapped Lysol, or whatever the hell they used in a place like this, prevailed. Sarah leaned against the wall next to a framed painting I'd never seen before. The artist has splashed red and purple and brown and yellow paint on the canvas. Randomly, I assumed. However, the way the colors spread, dripped, mixed and mingled formed an image. A tree and a sapling, or a flower and a petal, or a mother and child. Could have been all three. Could have been a football stadium, for all I knew.

“So look,” Frank said. “We need to get to the point with this woman.”

“What do you think we've been trying to do?” I said.

“I know, but with this in and out.” He paused to take a deep breath, then exhaled loudly. “We need to figure out where her mind is as soon as she's up.”

I looked at my watch. Eleven forty-five. “What if she doesn't remember?”

Frank swiveled in his chair and nodded toward Sarah. “Is that possible?”

Sarah's head bobbed up and down. “Yeah, unfortunately. Not likely permanent. But quite possibly temporary.”

“Shit,” Frank said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“So I guess we play it by ear, then,” Frank said.

“So we're right back where we started,” I said.

He nodded.

I stood up, stretched my back. Yawned and glanced at the TV. The images didn't register, at least not at that moment.

"Ready to go back?" Frank said.

"Yeah." I took a few steps toward the door and stopped when I noticed Sarah staring at the TV.

"Hey, hey," she said. "That guy looks familiar."

Frank turned and stared up at the images on the screen. "That's Senator Burnett. Hell, we were having drinks with him last night."

"Turn up the volume," I said.

Sarah stood on the tips of her toes and pressed the up volume button until we could hear the reporter. The news wasn't good. Burnett had gone missing. He didn't return home after an event last night, according to his wife.

Frank shook his head. "Next thing you know, we'll be getting a call to look for him."

"Guy's corrupt, from what I've heard," I said. "Maybe it caught up to him."

"He seemed all right to me," Sarah said.

"You're in the business of saving people," Frank said. "Everyone has to be OK to you, otherwise you'd have to let half of them die on principle." He walked to the door and looked over his shoulder, then said, "I don't like this, Jack. The mother hurt in what appears to be a malicious hit and run. Some creep calling you. Now a U.S. Senator is missing. And not any Senator, one with ties to us."

"Let's get back to the room," I said. "We need to get Harris to reach out to all teams and get a status update. We need to verify that everyone is accounted for and that no one else has been harmed."

We hustled down the hall, faster than a walk, slower than a run, not quite a jog, turning left into the corridor that led to Tammy's room. The latest revelation had me on edge. I knew

Tammy's place in all of this. She'd had the misfortune of being the kid's mother. Whoever was behind this wanted to get the kid to get to me. I'd screwed up their little group, disrupted their game. Now they turned their bats toward me. But what did the Senator have to do with this? I couldn't make sense of it. I didn't know much about his policy or even what state he represented. I knew it was something I'd have to look into once we got back to headquarters.

I ran the last fifty feet to Tammy's room, extending my right arm to grab hold of the doorframe and stop myself. Tammy lay in her bed, unconscious, as expected. What I didn't expect was to see the man who stood next to her bed, needle in his hand, plunging it into her arm. He looked over his shoulder and smiled at me.

"Who the hell are you?" I said.

His smile broadened. "She'll be out for a while."

The man didn't look like a doctor or a nurse or someone who should be in the room. It wasn't his hair, or his clothes, or his face. It was his shoes. The dirty, scuffed combat boots he had on had no place in a hospital.

I drew my gun and aimed it at his head. Frank entered the room. The man turned and lifted his arms. The needle hung from Tammy's pale forearm. A thin line of blood seeped out, letting gravity determine its path.

"What's going on in here?" Frank said.

"He just injected her with something," I said.

The man slowly turned with his arms in the air. "Only to keep her quiet for a bit, that's all." He looked at me and I looked at the mirror. He turned his head, then said, "Silly me, I left it in her." He turned around and withdrew the needle from her arm. He didn't turn back around slowly, though. Instead he whipped around, pistol in his hand.

I pulled my trigger before he managed to square up. The bullet hit him in the side of the head. A cloud of blood hovered where he stood and coated the wall behind him.

Sarah took a step into the room and stopped. Her face skewed and shock filled her eyes. “What the hell happened?”

“We need to get her out of here,” I said. “Now.”

Sarah went to work, freeing the woman from the wires that bound her, and then freeing the bed. She started pushing it toward the door.

“Stop,” I said.

“What?” she said.

“That won’t work. What are we going to do? Steal an ambulance?”

“What do you suggest then?” she said.

“There.” Frank stood outside the room and pointed at a wheelchair.

“That’s crazy,” Sarah said. “We don’t know the extent of her injuries.”

“We know she has a concussion and we’ll have to assume that’s it.” I picked Tammy up and stepped into the hall. Frank arrived with the wheelchair two seconds later and helped me set her down. “Frank, go get the car. We’ll meet you outside.”

Two members of the hospital’s security department were running down the hall toward us. They shouted something, probably stop, but I didn’t bother to listen. I started to push Tammy in the opposite direction. The only problem was that they were moving faster than I could with a wheelchair in front of me. I heard one of them yell *Jesus Christ*, and I assumed they’d reached the room and looked inside. The echo of their footsteps ceased, and without looking back, I figured they entered Tammy’s room.

The emergency exit doors loomed in the distance. There was enough separation between the room and us that we had a good chance of making it. “Go open those doors, Sarah.”

She ran ahead and hit the doors full speed, placing one hand on the red and silver handle and planted her shoulder into

the middle of the door. It popped open, letting natural light flood the end of the hallway. A piercing alarm blared through the corridor. The squeal penetrated my ears and was certain to rouse at least one of the guards.

I slowed as I approached the open doorway. I could see that the concrete walkway stretched out about six feet, but it had no rail to stop us from going over the edge if I burst through too fast. I'd dump Tammy out of the wheelchair, sending her careening into the asphalt. I angled the wheelchair through and descended the ramp as quickly as possible with Sarah on my heels.

"Stop," the guard shouted from behind.

I pulled my sidearm and reached back and shot into the wall above his head. He ducked into the building as chunks of plaster rained down. He slammed the emergency exit door shut.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sarah rose from the squatting position she took when I reached around with the gun. Her hands were still on her head and fire was in her eyes.

"Swatting a fly." I pushed on, toward the end of the building. A car nosed around the corner. I quickly judged it as being a government vehicle. Only question I had was whether it was Frank or the police. They gave us leeway, but I shot and killed a man inside the hospital. That would require significant ironing to straighten out, and would likely have to come from someone far above my pay grade.

The car pulled all the way around the corner and I recognized Frank in the driver's seat. He pulled up next to us and jumped out.

"Sarah," I said. "You get in the back with Tammy."

"OK."

She slid into the back seat. I lifted Tammy and sat her next to Sarah, who helped steady the woman. Ten seconds later, we were racing behind the hospital toward a rear exit, on our way back to headquarters.

## Chapter 22

I leaned back in my chair and placed my feet on my desk, crossed at the ankle. The sound of the ringing cell phone was stifled inside my pocket. It was barely audible. I cursed myself for switching it off vibrate. The display read *Unknown caller*. The clock said twelve p.m.

“Twenty-four-”

“Yeah, I got it,” I said. “You don’t have to keep reminding me.”

The man laughed. “So, Mr. Noble’s got it, does he?”

“What do you want?”

The man said nothing.

“What happens in twenty-four hours?”

“Time runs out.”

“For what?”

“You’re about to find out.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“You’re about to find that out, too.”

I stood and walked around my desk to the open doorway of my office. The lobby was deserted and silent. Frank stepped out of the infirmary, his mouth open, as if he was about to say something. I held a single finger in the air to stop him.

“Give my best to Ms. Nockowitz,” the man said. “If she ever wakes up again, that is.”

I flipped the phone shut without responding. Tossed it on my desk and left my office, slamming the door shut behind me. Frank waited in the center of the lobby, hands in his

pockets. His shoulders were slightly hunched forward and his head down.

“What is it?” I said.

“She’s up.”

*Good news for us, bad for the guy,* I thought.

I stepped into the infirmary, nodded at Doc, and smiled at Tammy. She twisted the left side of her mouth into a smile and blinked slowly.

“She OK?” I asked.

Doc nodded and said, “We countered what they put in her. She’s going to be fine.”

“Can she handle questioning?”

“Yes. As long as it’s not the way you normally do it.”

“OK,” I said. “Leave.”

The doctor puffed his cheeks and then blew the air out in a burst, letting his lips flap together. Perhaps he wanted to argue with me and decided against it. I didn’t watch him leave the infirmary, only heard the door close behind me, leaving Frank and me alone with Tammy.

“Tammy,” I said. “I’m going to be asking you some hard questions. I need you to answer the best you can. OK?”

“OK,” she said.

“Tell me about Christopher’s father.”

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“What do you mean?”

“He left a long time ago.”

“Where did he go?”

“Go,” she said with a chuckle. “That would imply he was there to begin with.”

“So would saying he left.”



She pursed her lips and nodded. "He's not in the picture. He's never been in the picture. Can we leave it at that?"

"When's the last time you had contact with him?"

She glanced between Frank and me and then let her eyes settle on the wall behind me. "Years ago. I asked him for help. Never heard back."

"Tammy?" I said.

"Yeah?" she said.

"Why are you lying to me?"

"I..." She looked away.

"We're trying to help. I think the boy's father has something to do with this."

I noticed Frank straighten and assumed he was a bit confused. This wasn't something we had talked about. In fact, I didn't know where I was going with the questioning. But limited time called for a change in procedure.

A tear gathered in the corner of her right eye. It built up until it could hide in the well no more. It slid down the side of her face and dripped onto her pillow, leaving a tiny stain that faded almost as soon as it appeared. "I want my son back, that's all. I didn't mean for this to happen."

"What do you mean you didn't mean for this to happen?" I said.

She sobbed lightly, but said nothing.

"Tammy?" I said, raising my voice.

She still said nothing.

"Dammit, Tammy, we're trying to help." My voice had escalated to a yell, and the door behind me burst open. "Get the hell out of here, Doc," I said.

"It's Sarah, and you need to take it easy on her."

"I know what I'm doing."

“Do you?” Sarah said.

She had a point. Did I? Lack of sleep and an overabundance of stress had me stretched to the max. I took it out on the poor woman who’d been beaten and battered and had her son taken from her. I decided to back it up and start over.

“OK, Tammy,” I said. “Aside from me and Frank, did you recognize anyone at the dinner last night?”

She nodded.

“Who?”

“Vernon Burnett.”

“From seeing him on TV?”

“No.”

“Where?”

She said nothing. Tears filled her eyes and soon streamed down her cheeks. She sobbed lightly.

“Tammy?” I said. “Talk to me.”

“You thought I was coming onto you, didn’t you?”

This time I said nothing.

She forced a puff of air that I figured had been meant to sound like a laugh. “I guess I wanted you to think that. You seemed to like me. I mean, you smiled and looked at me.”

Her words made little sense to me, almost like she’d begun babbling to throw me off the previous question.

“But,” she said, “that wasn’t what I was doing. And then when I gave you my number, I thought my look conveyed what I meant.”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about, Tammy,” I said.

Her face turned red and she lifted her clenched fists in the air. Her lips peeled back, revealing teeth gritted tight together.

A half-scream, half-growl escaped through narrow gaps where her teeth didn't line up correctly, top to bottom.

The three of us flinched in reaction to the sound the woman produced. Sarah moved toward the bed.

I reached for the door, and said, "I'll get the doctor."

"Wait," Frank said. "Just wait."

Tammy eased back into the pillow that supported her upper back and neck and head. Her face went slack for a moment, and then she began to cry. Her crying lasted thirty seconds, maybe more. She took a few deep, shaky breaths and wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. A meek smile crossed her face and she apologized for her outburst.

"I know the Senator," she said. She took a deep breath. "He's my son's father."

I straightened up and sensed the others in the room do the same. "Tammy, Burnett was reported missing after he didn't show up for work this morning."

She began to cry again. In between sobs, she said, "Oh my God, he's got my son."

## Chapter 23

I left the room and went straight to my office. I had a name. I had a face. I had to find the bastard and put an end to this. I placed my thumb on the fingerprint reader that controlled the locks on my desk. A click followed a beep. I slid the top-drawer open and grabbed my keys and wallet and an extra gun.

Someone cleared their throat from outside my office. I looked up and saw Frank standing there.

“What are you doing, Jack?”

“Going to get Burnett.”

“You don’t know where he is.”

“Yeah, but our buddy Pablo downstairs might.”

Frank cocked his head to the side and lifted an eyebrow half an inch. “He’s gone, Jack.”

“Where?”

“Someone else is working on him now. Trying to get information we couldn’t.”

Frustration and raged mixed like two foreign chemicals that reacted negatively with one another. I stood and kicked my desk, sending it sliding three feet, almost tipping over. My monitor fell off the edge of the desk and collided with the floor with a crash.

“Who the hell took him?” I said.

Frank shrugged. “The order came from above me, Jack.”

“What does this guy want?” I said. “If what she said is true, and he’s the father, then he has the kid. That means he’s the one calling me. What’s he want with me?”

Frank stepped into my office. He kicked the door closed, then leaned back against it. He said nothing for a long while, stood there, staring at me.

The adrenaline surge faded, and my head cleared. I tried to process the new information logically. There had to be a reason this guy had a hard-on for me.

“I’m going to find out who’s heading up the Burnett disappearance,” Frank said. “And I’ll get Harris and McKenzie involved. If anything, they can provide us with information that the news can’t.”

“OK,” I said.

“I want you to stay in here. Relax. Wait for that next phone call.”

“OK.”

Frank stepped into the lobby, and then turned abruptly. “And if he calls when I’m not around, don’t say a word about what Tammy told us.”

I nodded, but he’d already turned away. I reset my desk and sat down behind it. Leaned my head back and somehow managed to fall asleep. A short, shallow sleep that probably did more harm than good.

I woke to the sound of my phone chirping and buzzing. It danced across the laminate desktop. I didn’t have to look at the display to know that it would read *unknown caller*. It felt strange to read the words, knowing with ninety percent certainty that the voice on the other end belonged to Burnett. I didn’t have to look at the clock to know it was one p.m. Twenty-three hours to go. Till what? Only the unknown caller knew. But I was about to find out. I flipped the phone open and held it up to the side of my face.

“I needn’t give you my ominous greeting this time, correct, Mr. Noble?”

I nodded, then felt a bit sheepish, realizing he couldn’t see me. “No. That part of our relationship is down pat.”

The man laughed for the first time since revealing his voice. It was deep and raspy, from too many years of drinking and smoking, I assumed. I knew the laugh. I'd spent half an hour, at least, with that laugh the night before, sitting at the bar and shooting the breeze. There was no doubt in my mind that the man on the phone was Senator Vernon Burnett.

He stopped laughing and sighed. I had nothing to say, so I waited for him to make the next move.

"The time is now, Jack."

"You're turning the clock ahead?"

He snorted. "No. The time for you to move is now, Jack."

"Move where?"

"I need you to head to Miami."

"What's in Miami?"

"Well..." The man paused a beat too long. "I need you to take care of something down there."

"I'm not going."

"Then the boy dies."

"You're not going to kill the boy."

"I'm not? You a prognosticator now? You want to give me the winning lottery numbers while you're at it?"

I said nothing.

"Jack, you want this kid's blood on your hands?"

I said nothing.

"Miami. Alone. Commercial flight, not one of yours. Leave for the airport now, because I'm going to call you at six p.m. and you better be ready to move again."

I had no choice. The guy had me by the balls. And for the first time in fourteen hours, I was happy about it. He was going to put me in position to take him down. He'd make a mistake. They always did.

“OK,” I said.

“You know what?” He said. “Bring the woman with you, the brown haired one, but no one else.”

I lifted my head and looked into the lobby. Sarah sat across the way with her back to the wall opposite mine. She looked in the direction of my office, but not at me. I knew that I couldn't drag her down there with me. Not on a suicide mission.

“Just me,” I said.

I heard the sound of plastic banging on wood as he set the phone down, then the man's muffled voice. “Come here,” it sounded like he said. His words were followed by a smack, then a scream. A child yelled, “Let me go.” I didn't recognize the voice. The pitch was different, higher maybe, and more melodic. The voice belonged to a girl, not Christopher. My stomach dropped as I realized we'd lost one.

“She's a cute one, Jack,” he said. “You should see her. You can't imagine the kind of money she'd bring in.”

I buried my rage. “OK,” I said, maintaining a calm and controlled tone. “Me and the woman. We're heading to Dulles now and we'll be in Miami by six.” I ended the call.

My rage resurfaced. I tipped my desk and let it crash to the floor.

Frank appeared outside my office and yanked the door open. “What happened?”

“Who do we know in Miami?”

A confused look crossed his face. “What? Where?”

“Miami,” I said. “Bottom of Florida.” I stepped through the doorway and pushed past him into the lobby.

Sarah looked up at me and forced a smile. “What's up?”

“You're coming to Miami with me.”

“What?”

I'd heard *what* too many times by that point. "Listen, there's no time for questions. He's got two kids now. He wants me in Miami. He wants you to go with me."

"I can't leave and go to Miami," she said.

"You don't have a choice," I said, my words seething with anger, though not directed at her.

"Wait a minute," Frank said. "Two kids?"

"Yeah."

"Who?" He held out his hands. "We had everyone covered."

"A girl," I said. "I'd suggest you call around and see who doesn't answer. That'd be the place to start."

"Christ," Frank said. "What are we dealing with?"

I shook my head. "I'll figure that out on the flight. But for now, we've got to move." I grabbed Sarah's hand and pulled her across the lobby, toward the exit. I stopped and turned. "And Frank, I need a contact down there. I'm stepping off a plane completely unarmed in a place where I don't know a soul."



## Chapter 24

I blinked my eyes open and stared through the oval window, ignoring the glare from the sun and the smudges left behind from a previous passenger. From six miles in the air, the ground looked like scenery surrounding a toy train set. There were tracts of land, each a different shade of green or brown. Tiny black and gray asphalt roads and green rivers looked like snakes slithering through the serene setting.

I glanced to my left and saw Sarah leaning back, passed out. We both needed some sleep, and I was glad to see she would get more than I had. My watch said it was four p.m., which meant we'd probably already crossed the Georgia-Florida border and had less than an hour until we landed in Miami.

Burnett had only given us five hours to make the trip. Hardly enough time to get to the airport, book the first available flight, make it through security and then hop on a two-and-a-half hour non-stop flight from D.C. to Miami. We'd made it, though, managing to sprint onto our two-thirty flight as they were closing the door. Of course, my false F.B.I. credentials helped convince the airline staff to let us on. If caught, I'd likely spend a day in a cell. No more than two. And I'd be waiting for one of four people to come and clear me. That's how clandestine we were.

I returned my gaze to the window and the clouds and sky and perfect landscape below, sectioned off into square and rectangular plots. People think of resorts, theme parks, and South Beach when they think of Florida. The strip of country, farm, and swampland that runs through the center corridor of the state was often forgotten, and certainly ignored, by vacationing families and escaping snowbirds.

The greenness of Florida was in stark contrast with the day old snow that covered D.C. and New Jersey. I shrugged off my coat, acknowledging for the first time I wouldn't need it in Miami, maybe not ever again, for that matter. Just as the snow would soon melt away and soak into the ground or evaporate into the sky, I'd soon be recycled and returned to the Earth. I couldn't think like that, though. I didn't have time to think like that. Two innocent lives were on the line. Three if I counted Sarah. Countless more if I didn't put a stop to Burnett.

I refocused and replayed the last week in my mind. The events of the past thirty hours were my primary focus. At this point, I figured there was a ninety-five percent chance Burnett would be the man I'd be face to face with in Miami. Facts were he'd gone missing, and if I was to believe Tammy, he'd fathered her child and then abandoned them. I figured out the motive there easily enough. He had his political career to think of, and I doubt he abandoned them entirely. Probably paid her off, either one time or continuing to this day. Maybe he got tired of it. Maybe that's why he had the boy taken. The men that were the guts of the operation wouldn't question an order handed down by him. Sure, most of the kids had been taken at random, but Christopher had been targeted. I was sure of it. Pablo's statement of smacking the mother, and the bandage on Tammy's head confirmed it. Then the boy had been targeted a second time. He'd been pulled from the wreckage, supposedly. Something about the wreck bothered me. Tammy had been pretty banged up, and the car mangled. None of us were experts, although Sarah came close, but it sure looked like the only person who could have survived that crash would have been the driver. Of course, a little kid might not have been impacted. Without seeing the car in person, making that determination was damn near impossible.

Burnett had apparently masterminded the ring. Why, though? Why would a U.S. Senator get involved in such a thing? Money was the obvious answer, but there had to be more to it than that. Had he fallen in with the wrong people? Wrote checks his ass couldn't cash, as they say? Perhaps

someone had information on him, damaging information. Perhaps the kind of thing that could ruin the man's career. In exchange for keeping quiet, he'd been recruited to oversee the group. He had power. He had connections. It still didn't make sense, to me, at least. On the other hand, having the boy kidnapped did, for any number of reasons.

I felt like a man running a marathon, only I was stuck at the two-mile mark. The answer was right in front of me, but I couldn't see it through the thousands in the crowd that swarmed by me while I took endless step after endless step on a treadmill.

Finally, what did Burnett want with the boy now? Bait? I figured that's why he had the girl. If not bait, then presumably to escape with him. I knew that escape had to be in the plans. He said to come alone, but he knew all about me, so he said to bring Sarah, too. I presumed as a bargaining chip. He also knew who I worked for. And he had to be prepared for them to show up at some point, which meant he did not intend to stay in Miami after he'd finished with me.

Sarah's arm brushed against mine. I turned toward her and saw her eyes flutter open. Warm, soft, inviting. She arched her back, dropped her head, moaned. The sound sent a shiver through me.

"Where are we?" she said.

"In between Orlando and Tampa."

"They're kind of across from each other, aren't they?"

I nodded then smiled. Anyone watching might assume we really were two lovers on vacation. Worst case, they'd think we were two colleagues on a business trip. Not a single person on the plane, not even Sarah, would guess that we were two people on a suicide mission. I was the only one with that distinction.

"Will we have time to find a hotel?" she asked with a single eyebrow raised curiously.

I shook my head. “Unfortunately, not with Miami traffic at five p.m. We’ll have to wait for the next call at the airport and then figure out where to go.”

Of course, I knew where we’d be going, and it wouldn’t be to a hotel. I didn’t tell her that, though.

“Do you think Frank will come through with a contact to meet us and...?”

I nodded. A gesture betrayed my feelings. Frank would come through, that much was true. But we’d never meet the man. I knew that.

“We’ll have to play it by ear,” I said. “If at any time you feel uncomfortable, I want you to tell me. And I want you to go. Leave.”

She shook her head and placed her hand on mine. “I’m not going anywhere, Jack.”

I smiled while my stomach knotted. I trusted myself to get through this OK. But could I trust myself to get her through it too? Bravery was second nature for her. I wasn’t sure if her instincts were right for this job.

She closed her eyes again, and so did I. Neither of us spoke again until the plane landed.

## Chapter 25

The airport hummed with activity. People coming and going, and waiting for loved ones with anticipation, and watching them leave with sorrowful eyes. For me, it was another day at work. For Sarah, it was like a shot of adrenaline. I bet if I'd asked, I'd have found out the woman liked to jump out of planes and off bridges and go to one of those places where they let you drive a real race car around a real race track. The thought excited me, and for a second, I let my mind wander to what we'd do together if we survived this situation.

We picked our way through the crowd that surrounded the arrival's gate. Parts of it felt like scraping through molasses. For some, courtesy had been checked at the door that day. Sarah stayed close as we passed through the thickest spots. Her chest pressed against my side, arm wrapped around my waist. I found myself wishing we were two lovers on vacation. I'd have settled for colleagues on a business trip, that is if she insisted on remaining that close.

The crowd thinned and Sarah pulled away. Not much, only an inch or two. Her arm slid off my waist and wrapped around my arm. It felt comfortable and natural. Too much so, though. I found myself thinking more of her than paying attention to the crowd and the people that waited by the exit doors fifty yards ahead. Letting them spot us first was a recipe for disaster and something I generally tried to avoid.

Fortunately, I spotted him before he spotted me. He looked to be my height. His body was thin and athletic looking. He wore a dark blue suit with a conservative tie. His brown hair was cropped close to his head, with sunglasses perched atop. Knock ten years off Frank and he and the man would be spitting images of each other.

I exhaled a heavy sigh of relief. It didn't go unnoticed by Sarah.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Frank came through for us," I replied.

"Who? Where?"

"By the front door. Blue suit. Boring tie. Frank minus ten years."

Her head turned left, then right, then stopped. "I see him." A smile crossed her face. Mine, too. We'd be safe, for a while.

We walked another twenty-five yards. I deliberately slowed our pace down. I wanted him to see us. I had to see his reaction. Not that I didn't trust Frank to come through for us. That wasn't it at all. I was overly cautious when it came to meeting new people. And his initial reaction would tell me everything I needed to know.

The man's head inched side to side. He let his eyes do the bulk of the work. They scanned left to right, corner to corner. No face went unnoticed. Finally, his gaze landed on me. It was judgment time. His lips parted and turned up in a smile. He mouthed, "Jack," and waved both hands above his head.

I kept moving forward, same pace. I looked to his left and to his right. I checked beside me, then beside Sarah. Everything felt normal. Frank had come through for us. I almost felt bad for doubting him, then I realized he would have doubted me if the tables were turned.

I lifted my right hand above my head and waved. I nodded, smiled, and kept moving. Fifteen yards away. His smile broadened. Ten yards away. His smile faded. Two more steps. He looked left, then right. A new grin swept across his face, but his eyes were narrow, beady, and dark. I felt a hand on my elbow. I felt Sarah pulled away from me. She gasped, and then went quiet, presumably because she felt the barrel of a gun pressed into her side, poised to rip through her kidney. I knew she felt that because I felt the same thing.

Frank hadn't come through, not by a long shot. This guy was one of Burnett's men.

## Chapter 26

The men led us through the steel-rimmed glass exit doors. The hot, muggy Miami air hit me like a sledgehammer. I started sweating within sixty seconds. We crossed the street like a misfit rat pack.

The man in the suit stopped in front of a white Cadillac Escalade. The vehicle was adorned with gold trim. They shoved Sarah and me in the back row. The men that guided each of us with guns in our backs, respectively, sat in the middle row Captain's chairs. They twisted in their seats to keep weapons trained on me. They didn't view Sarah as a threat. I didn't blame them. She was too easy on the eyes to be a threat. Of course, that could make her more of one. However, Burnett knew who he was dealing with. He had access to my files, classified or not.

The man in the suit climbed into the passenger seat and nodded at the driver, who adjusted the mirror. The driver's head twisted and turned up. His eyes burned into me. Those eyes, dark and puffy, looked familiar. He twisted at the waist, stuck out his left arm and grabbed a hold of the seat next to him, then turned his head.

*"Hola, Jack."*

It took a fraction of a second for me to recognize the man. *Pablo*. The guy who had led us to the house. The guy who'd been beaten within an inch of his life by Frank. The guy who'd supposedly had a heart attack at SIS headquarters. Now, the guy who surely wanted to have the first crack at me.

I nodded without breaking eye contact. Pablo was scared of me before, and I'd do everything to maintain that power over him, no matter my personal predicament.

"Let's go, Pablo," the man in the suit said, dragging out the o in Pablo's name two beats too long. "Too many damn cops



around here.”

The men in the car laughed. Inside joke, I figured.

Pablo looked away and fired up the engine. Put the SUV in reverse and pulled out of the parking lot. Every time he looked into the rear view mirror, his eyes shifted between my eyes and the road behind me. I grinned, a little. He narrowed his eyes, a lot.

Sarah nudged me with her knee. I turned my head and saw pleading in her eyes. *Do something*, she mouthed. She might as well have said it, as I was sure when I looked, the guys in the middle row did so as well.

“Any chance we can stop at a diner for something to eat?” I said.

“Shut up, Noble,” the man in the suit said.

“How about a drive-thru then?”

“How about you shut up before I have one of them feed the girl a lead lunch?”

I turned to Sarah, shrugged, and mouthed the word *sorry*. She rolled her eyes, shook her head. I reached out and grabbed her hand.

“None of that, man,” the guy sitting in front of her said.

She tried to pull away. I wouldn’t let go.

The guy in front of her lifted his arm and aimed the gun at her forehead, leaving about four inches between barrel and flesh. It’d be impossible to miss at that distance.

“Let go,” he said.

“Do it,” I said. “Go ahead. You’re going to do it later, anyway. Get it over with now.”

I saw the light glint off the barrel of the gun a half second before the man in front of me slammed it into my forehead. My head snapped back like it was attached to a swivel on my neck. It rebounded forward violently. Warm blood flooded

over my brow, into and around my eye, and down my cheek. It dripped onto my shirt and pants.

“Jack!” Sarah said.

I held my left arm out, across her chest like we had hit the brakes and were skidding and I wanted to prevent her from flying through the window.

“It’s OK,” I said. “Only a cut.”

It wasn’t OK. The head wound I suffered the week before made any blow to the head that much more severe. I knew that. She knew that. But I couldn’t let these men know that.

One of them threw me a towel. I figured it was dirty, but couldn’t tell. One eye was flooded with blood, the other with salty tears. It was like I was underwater and nothing looked clear. Sarah grabbed the towel from my hand and wrapped it around my head, cinching it tight so it slowed down the flow of the blood through the wound.

“Gonna shut up now, Jack?” the man in the suit said.

I said nothing. Stared straight ahead and settled in for the ride. I tried to pay attention to the streets we followed, but everything passed in a blur. Had my brain begun to swell? Or was it the effects of sleep deprivation? How long had it been since I had more than a few hours of sleep? Two days or three? I couldn’t remember. Wasn’t sure what day it was anymore.

The localized ache at the site of the wound expanded, at first across my forehead. Then it wrapped around both sides, and then toward the middle. My brain hurt and felt like it had split into two. I saw stars in front of me, literally. I never believed anyone when they said that, but at that moment, I knew it to be true. The stars faded away into pinpricks of light punched into fabric.

Sarah whispered my name, perhaps sensing or more likely realizing that something was wrong.

I responded in kind, I think. I felt the hum of her name in my throat but couldn’t tell if my lips parted.

“Jack!” Sarah’s voice was loud, but muffled, like we were under water. The pleasant tone of her voice replaced by a thundering clap containing four letters, *J-A-C-K*.

“What the hell is going on back there?” A man’s voice. The man in the suit, I assumed, only because there was no accent. It sounded garbled, not like it was underwater, but speaking through a mouthful of water.

The sensation of fire spread through my head, while ice filled my veins and froze my body in place. I tried moving my arms and couldn’t. Tried to kick with my legs, but they remained rooted to the floor.

Delicate hands grabbed my arms. Sarah, I figured, although I couldn’t see to verify it was her touch. I felt the weight of her body over mine.

“We need...” Her voice faded into the depths. “... hospital...” Gone again.

Then the sensation in my hands and feet and legs and arms disappeared. A black curtain hung before my eyes. The pain in my head retreated. I thought that perhaps I’d died.

## Chapter 27

I hadn't died. It didn't take me long to come to this conclusion, although I did determine it while still passed out. Wherever I was at that moment, the place stood empty. Silent. When my time came, there'd be the souls of all those who'd perished at my hand. They'd be standing around waiting for me in an effort to be the one to capture my soul. Of all things in life, I was sure of that.

Slowly, the sensation returned to my hands, feet, legs, and arms. The pain started in the center of my brain and expanded outward, swelling and encompassing my head, and then retreating toward the spot of the gash on my forehead. The black curtain covering my eyes lifted. I stared ahead, unfocused, through a watery veil.

A thunderclap exploded to my left. "Jack!"

I blinked hard and looked to the right, out the window. The Escalade had stopped and high hedges, dark green through the tinted window, blocked any further view.

"Jack," Sarah said. "Can you hear me?"

I shifted my eyes to the left and turned my head until I saw her, then said, "Yeah."

She wrapped her arms around my neck. I felt her cheek against mine, her breath, hot and rapid, floating across my lips. I looked straight ahead and saw all four men staring at me, their brows furrowed, expressions of horror and confusion on their faces.

"What?" I said.

"Pull through, Pablo," the man in the suit said, turning in his seat to face forward once again. He took a final look at me and shook his head.

“You sure you’re OK?” Sarah said.

“Yeah, I think,” I said. “What the hell happened?”

She touched my forehead with a gentle hand, wiping blood from my brow. “You started convulsing, shaking. I thought you’d had an aneurysm and were dying on me.”

I forced a smile. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Good. Don’t.”

I strained to look past Pablo and the man in the suit. A black iron gate with twists and curls at the top and the bottom opened up and we pulled through. The artificial light faded and it was hard to make out the landscape beyond the edges of the driveway. I glanced down at my watch. Seven p.m. I looked back up. The house stood off in the distance another hundred yards or so. Pools of light adorned the facade, cast from garden lights spaced precisely across the front of the house. The calming pinkish orange hue of the stucco instilled a sense of relaxation in me. I knew it wouldn’t last long, though. This was the last stop before whatever was to come next. And I was certain that the next stop wouldn’t be any more pleasant than the seizure I’d experienced.

Pablo pulled up to the three-car garage and idled while a wide white garage door lifted open. Then he pulled the vehicle in and stopped. He stepped out. The man in the blue suit remained and turned to face us. Pulled out his sidearm and aimed it in my direction. The men in the middle seats got out on their sides of the car, respectively, then Sarah, and finally me and the man in the suit at the same time.

Pablo led the way into the house. We walked through a mudroom connected to the laundry room, then down a short hall, maybe ten feet long. It deposited us into the kitchen.

A man stood in front of an open refrigerator. He had on khaki cargo shorts and a blue t-shirt. He looked over his shoulder, revealing half his face. He recognized me instantly, as I did him. Senator Vernon Burnett.

“Hello, Jack,” he said. “And this lovely lady is...?”

“Sarah,” she said.

Burnett crossed the floor and stopped six feet away. “I might bring you with me, young lady.” He smiled at her. His eyes traveled to me. The smile broadened. “Not you, though, Jack. I’m about through with you.”

“Then get it over with,” I said. “Shoot me now.”

Burnett’s smile faded a little. The corners of his mouth withdrew, but he kept his lips parted. His eyes narrowed, nostrils flared. Something about it got to him, so I figured best thing to do was keep at it.

“You don’t have the guts,” I said. “Do you?”

He chuckled and looked me up and down. “I don’t have to, Jack. Any of these guys’ll do it.” He tossed a hand up with his thumb extended and pointed behind himself. “Especially Pablo. Man, was he pissed when he got down here.”

“You got him out,” I said, referring to Pablo while keeping my stare fixed on Burnett. No one had wanted to question him, I realized. It had been someone who worked for someone who worked for Burnett. They fed us that line and we bought it hook, line and sinker. The thought crossed my mind that maybe someone else high up in the government worked with Burnett on this.

He nodded. “When you’ve got the power and connections I’ve got, it’s easy to make things like that happen.”

“Who’re the other guys?” I said.

Burnett took a deep breath and eyed me for a few seconds, then said, “They work for me. That’s all you need to know.”

“What about him?” I gestured with my head toward the man in the blue suit. “He doesn’t seem like the others.”

“You gotta have someone to watch the hens,” Burnett said. “Reece is his name. He’s a,” he paused a beat and squished his lips to the side, like he was biting the inside of his cheek. “He’s in some kind of law enforcement. We’ll leave it at that.”

“Corrupt,” I said, looking Reece in the eye.

He smiled back at me. “The things we’ll do for money, eh?”

“Yeah,” I said, focusing on Burnett. “Why the kids, Senator? For the money?”

He took a deep breath, held it a moment, then exhaled loud enough for the sound to echo in the hallway behind me. “Frankly, Jack, that’s none of your concern.”

“Sick bastard,” I said.

He cocked back and swung at me. I could have ducked or moved to the side and avoided it. Could have stepped inside and wrapped my arm around his, snapping the bones in his forearm or dislocating his shoulder or elbow. But I didn’t. I let his fist connect with my jaw. The impact stung and sent me reeling back into the wall. I slid to the floor. He stood over me, eyes wild and dancing with adrenaline. Any trace of fear the man had of me disappeared at that moment. And that’s exactly what I wanted to happen.

Two men from the SUV picked me up and dragged me through the house. We stopped in the middle of a hall. They pushed me up against a wall. One of them kicked my legs out to the side and pinned me there, my arm held high behind my back and his knee in my lower back. I watched the other pull out a key ring with at least two dozen copper keys. He shuffled through them and then inserted one into the door handle. It unlocked with a click. He wrapped his meaty hand around the knob and pushed the door open.

“Your new room,” the man behind me said, only an inch or two away from my ear. His breath was hot against the side of my head and smelled like rancid fish.

“Alright, but don’t get any ideas,” I said. “I’m not in the mood for a threesome.”

He grabbed me by my hair, pulled my head back and then slammed it forward. The impact left a dent in the drywall and hurt like hell. He’d managed to plant the majority of the

impact on the same spot where he pistol-whipped me earlier in the car. I slid down the wall on the left side of my face, using my shoulder to keep me from crashing.

Two sets of hands picked me up. They pushed and pulled me, then tossed me into the room. They didn't close the door, though. The thin guy stood inside the room. The heavier guy stood behind him.

"He down?" Burnett said from the hall.

"He's ready for you," the skinny guy said as he stepped into the room with the heavier man a step behind.

Burnett followed them in and walked right up to me. "Easy or hard?"

I managed to get to my knees. Leaned my head back and looked him in the eye. Said, "Screw you."

Burnett shrugged and made an *I-don't-give-a-shit* face. Then he kicked me in the stomach with his right foot.

I bent forward, but refused to allow myself to collapse.

"Easy or hard?" he said again.

I couldn't speak, so I made a weak attempt to spit at him. Saliva dove from my mouth, landing somewhere between us. A few drops of spittle landed on his shoes. Most of it hung from my lip in strands and fell from my chin and onto my chest.

"Don't be stupid, Jack." Burnett stepped back a few feet and took his eyes off me, which was the only thing that made me feel like they were through beating me up. "Pick him up and tie him to the bed."

The men wrapped their hands around my arms, dragged me across the floor to the bed. I ignored them and watched Burnett leave the room. He looked over his shoulder and made eye contact with me from the doorway. He shook his head, then disappeared down the hall.



The men tossed me onto the bed and right away, I felt heavy straps wrapped around my wrists. They cinched them tight, then did the same thing to my ankles. Finally, they drew a thick leather belt across my midsection and pulled it tight enough to draw me down into the bed. They cut the lights and left the room, leaving me to wonder what the hell was happening to Sarah at that moment.

My head and stomach ached from the beating I'd taken. I tried to pass out, but couldn't.

A streetlamp cast long fingers of light into the room. They stretched across my chest and legs, across the bed, and climbed up the walls. I counted the seconds to keep track of time. Got bored after thirty minutes and closed my eyes. Somehow, I managed to fall asleep.

I didn't wake until I felt a hand on my face, his hand. Burnett smiled when I opened my eyes.

"Hello, Jackie," he said.

I didn't greet him back.

"Twelve hours," he said.

That answered the question of how long I'd been asleep. It was midnight and I'd been strapped to the bed for over four hours.

"You excited?"

I tried to shrug, couldn't.

"Where's Sarah?" I said.

He smiled then licked his lips. "She's fine. Cooperative, that one." He paused a beat and arched his eyebrows. "If you know what I mean."

I clenched my fists and tried to draw my arms upward, and was even less successful than I'd been at shrugging.

The smile faded from Burnett's lips and he leaned back, feigning a hurt look. "You've got to get past this, Jack. You

and I, we should be friends. When it comes down to it, there's little difference between us."

I turned my head toward the window and said nothing.

Burnett stood and grabbed something off the nightstand. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be a needle filled with clear liquid. He bent over me and slowly lowered the needle toward my forearm.

"What the hell is that?" I said.

He said nothing.

"Burnett," I said. "What the hell are you doing?"

He plunged the needle into my arm, striking a vein and releasing the venom into my bloodstream. A burning sensation worked its way up my arm and through my chest. Spread to my neck, then my head.

He turned his head to look at me, and said, "This is going to ensure that you sleep all night, Jack. And then tomorrow, it's going to make you cooperative."

I felt my senses dull, but managed to reply. "What's tomorrow?"

He pushed himself back up and walked to the door, then turned around to face me once again. "You'll find out in twelve hours, give or take."

I didn't know if he cut the lights off or if the curtain in my head had been pulled over my eyes again, but the room went pitch black.

## Chapter 28

They stuck Sarah and me on the rear bench seat of the Escalade again. The same two men sat in the middle seat, the skinny guy in front of me, the heavier guy in front of Sarah. I figured they did that so the big guy could come at me with momentum behind him if I gave him enough reason to do so. If he'd been placed in front of me, he'd have to loop around, giving me the advantage. Of course, it wouldn't matter now, not with handcuffs restraining me.

"Let's go," Reece said to Pablo, who once again sat in the driver's seat.

Burnett and another man were in the car in front of us. I could see the tops of three small heads bouncing as the car made its way down the driveway. I assumed the heads belonged to Christopher and the little girl. And another child I wasn't aware of.

For twenty minutes we drove. I wasn't familiar with Miami or its surrounding areas, having only passed through a couple times over the course of my life. But I was certain that the areas we drove through weren't popular tourist attractions. Old worn down buildings lined the streets. A mix of people filled the sidewalks, white, black and brown. They all looked poor, even the ones dealing drugs, a remarkable sight to kick off my final three hours.

It was nine a.m. and I had convinced myself that by five after twelve, I'd be dead. Sarah, too, I assumed, in some sense of the word. She'd either be lying next to me with no pulse or breath, or lying next to Burnett, her soul ripped from her body. I wondered if he'd kill one of the kids, perhaps two, leaving only his son alive. The only question I had was how many of the men I could take down with me. There were six of them. I'd already beaten Pablo mentally. The skinny guy wouldn't

pose a problem, nor would the heavy one. I only saw the man riding with Burnett from the back and for a few seconds. Not enough for me to judge. Burnett didn't scare me. Reece concerned me. He had some sort of law enforcement or military training, which meant he knew how and where to hit. He also had size and strength on his side.

We turned off a four-lane road into an industrial complex. Corrugated steel warehouses lined the road as far as I could see.

I turned to Sarah and spoke for the first time since midnight.

“Are you OK?” I said, feeling stupid that of everything I could say that was what I chose.

She nodded.

“They didn't hurt you last night did they?” I asked.

She shook her head, but her face betrayed her. Her bottom lip quivered, slightly, only for a second. Her eyes glossed over. She blinked and looked away. I knew at that moment that they'd gotten to her last night. One way or another, they broke her spirit. I hoped that they hadn't damaged her physically.

“What happened?” I said it too loud.

“Shut up,” Reece said. “Or I'll have them shut you up.”

The heavy guy grinned and lifted his eyebrows a couple times, taking too much pleasure in the thought of attacking a man restrained by handcuffs.

I brushed my left leg into Sarah's. She looked at me again, forcing a smile. I nodded in return, hoping she could read my mind. Because if she could, she'd know that I had plans to make sure every one of these men paid for what they'd done to her. They'd pay with their lives, but not before suffering by my hand.

I felt my body pull to the left and nearly toppled into Sarah. The car turned between two buildings, then turned again. We were now behind the last row of warehouses, a

stretch of buildings that buffered the decrepit part of the city from the warm waters of the Atlantic. How many kids in those neighborhoods felt they had nowhere to go and saw these waters as a barrier, white capped waves pounding at them, keeping them away from a better life? The undertow existed solely to sweep away their dreams.

We rolled to a stop. I glanced between the four men in front of me and saw Burnett's car stop as well. Beyond his car was a large white semi-truck with no cargo container or trailer attached. Burnett stepped out of the car and walked to the semi. He reached into his pocket and fished around for a moment. Pulled his hand back out and dangled a key, which he inserted into the truck's driver side door. The door opened and he climbed into the cab. A minute later his feet emerged and he hopped down onto the pavement. He appeared to be empty handed, but I knew he hadn't gone in there for no reason. He turned toward our vehicle, smiled, and gave Reece a thumbs up.

Reece pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. He placed the phone next to his head and waited. His eyes shifted and focused on the heavy guy, and I figured someone had answered the phone. "Bring it around," was all he said. Then he tucked the phone back into his pocket and opened his door.

Burnett met Reece halfway and the men spoke. Burnett was animated while he talked. Reece used his hands to shield his eyes from the sun. What kind of person in law enforcement heads out without sunglasses? After a few minutes, Reece returned to the Escalade.

"Everyone out," he said.

Sarah stepped between the two men in front of us. The heavy one made her step over his lap to get out. He smiled. She didn't.

I bit back the rage that started to build inside. I had to save it for the right moment, which was sure to come soon.

Both men reached for me and pulled me out of the seat. They pulled me forward, and then pushed me through the open doorway. I managed to twist my body on the way to the ground and landed hard on my side. Better than landing on my face, I figured. Fire spread through my right hip, and I worried for a second it had been broken. As quickly as I'd hit the ground, they pulled me back to my feet and forced me to walk. My hip wasn't broken, but it hurt like hell.

Reece took over at that point. He wrapped one hand around my elbow, while the other held a gun that was loosely aimed at my stomach. He led me over to where Burnett stood.

"Jack," Burnett said. "Glad you are here to see this."

I said nothing.

Burnett arched an eyebrow and nodded toward Reece. Reece let go of me and started walking toward the roll up door cut into the building. He pulled a set of keys from his pocket. He knelt in front of the door and inserted the key into a padlock. It unlocked with a loud click. He stuffed the lock into his pocket, then lifted the door up and over his head, his arms stretching as high as they could and then pushing one last time to send the door atop the railing.

Burnett nudged me in the side. "What do you think?"

I scanned the forty-by-forty space and shrugged at the sight of dozens of boxes.

"Uncuff him, Reece," Burnett said. "He's going to do all the heavy lifting."

I turned my head to the left, then the right, trying to figure out where he wanted the stuff moved. The semi had no container, and there was far more here than could fit in the trunks of the vehicles we came in. Unless they were planning multiple trips, that is. I quickly shook that thought from my mind. They weren't going to drive this stuff away. Burnett was a missing man. The last thing he needed was to be found carting around all these boxes, not to mention his son, who was also missing.

An engine approached from behind. Its deep roar was easily distinguishable as not made by a car.

“That’s my getaway car,” Burnett said with a chuckle.

I waited a beat, then looked over my shoulder and saw the boat pull up and two men jump onto the pavement. They began to moor it to weathered and splintered wooden posts. The water must have been deep at that spot, because the boat was big, at least fifty feet long. It was the perfect getaway car. A half hour or so and you’d be in international waters. Freedom, in more ways than one.

“Pablo,” Burnett said. “Take the woman and put her in the car with the kids. Take them around the other side.”

“What’re you doing with them?” I said.

“Insurance, Jack,” Burnett said. “You do what I say and they’ll be all right.”

Something about his smile told me he was lying. But I wasn’t ready to test him. Not yet.

The sedan pulled away. I was left standing with Burnett, Reece and the heavy guy.

“Start moving the boxes, Jack,” Burnett said.

I wondered what the boxes contained. No point in asking Burnett, he’d never tell me. The bad guys only do that in the movies. I jammed my finger into the tape that sealed the flaps of the first box I came to. I wedged my fingers into the tiny slit and pulled back. The tape ripped off and one of the flaps lifted and fell to the side. Inside the box, I saw wads of cash, sealed in plastic wrap.

“Money?” I said.

“In that box,” he said. He pointed at random and added, “Drugs in some of the others. Gold in a couple. Been amassing this stuff for a while, you see. I knew there might come a time I’d have to bolt. You know if things, uh, caught up to me, so to speak.”

“You sold kids,” I said. “Stole them from their parents and shipped them overseas.”

“Not all of them,” he said. “Hell, some of them are in better situations than they were in before.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it.”

He made no attempt at rebuffing me.

“How’s a man like you get involved in this?” I said.

“Money. Power.”

“You have those things.”

“They promised me more.”

“Who’s they?”

He laughed. “Agent till the end, eh, Jack?”

“And according to you, my end is near. Why not tell me who’s behind this?”

“I’m not going to do that, Jack.”

“We’re going to get them. Frank will keep working this until the whole thing collapses, bringing you down with it.”

“You’re never going to shut this down. It’s bigger than you, Frank, or the SIS. Ya’ll might make some strides over here with the FBI, and overseas with the CIA, but I can assure you, I’ve got men in both agencies that will squash it. That’s why no one ever got anywhere near close to us until you stuck your damn head in the way.”

“It won’t go away, Senator,” I said. “Like Pandora’s box. Once it’s open, there’s no going back.”

Burnett got to his feet and walked in a semicircle in front of me. Back and forth, he went for a minute without saying anything. Then he stopped and looked past me, toward the boat or perhaps beyond, to a spot somewhere over the Atlantic.

“I’m coming back, Jack. Eventually my boy is going to come around and accept me as his father. Once he does, well,



then it's a matter of time until he'll say whatever I tell him to say." He smiled and his eyes lit up. "Then it's a matter of getting back into the country. An anonymous tip will do the trick. Someone will send a group of Special Forces to rescue us. By the time they reach us, I'll have vanquished our captors. I come back to the U.S. a hero and adopt the boy I grew close to while held captive. He'll call me dad, and he'll mean it. But no one will know the truth but us. Should be enough to draw the majority vote."

I shook my head. "You're doing all this for political gain?"

His smile faded and he narrowed his eyes. His expression became quite serious.

"I'm doing all this to make my country a better place," he said.

I stood up and kicked the box to the side, then took two steps forward. We were only a foot or so apart. The smug look on his face faded, and I noticed his arms and shoulders grow tense.

"If that's what it's coming to, kill me now," I said.

He laughed, slow at first, then it built up. "Your time is coming, Jack. First you need to load my boat or the woman and the kids die."

I felt a hand on my back. It slid along my shoulder until it reached my collar, at which point I felt my body pulled backward, away from Burnett.

There were more boxes than I had anticipated. The room opened up to a second room, which contained roughly half the amount of cargo. For two hours, I made the trip from the warehouse, across the pavement, and onto the boat, where I loaded the cargo below deck. Reece kept a gun on me while I was in the warehouse and on the pavement. The men in the boat kept their guns on me, taking turns going below with me while the other stood at the top of the stairs. The process repeated itself over and over.

It was only a matter of time. Someone would get tired, look away and make a bad move. I was sure of it.

## Chapter 29

A half dozen boxes remained in the second room. They were bigger than the others, probably six feet long and three feet high and wide. I bent over the first and wrapped my hands around it until the tips of my fingers scraped the concrete floor. I slid them under the box and started to pull. Damn thing had to be a hundred and fifty pounds. It crossed my mind that there might be a human body in the box. Sweat dripped down my face and slid off my nose and chin and jawline, splattering on the box and proceeding to roll down to the floor.

I heard footsteps from outside the room. Two sets approached at a steady pace. Perhaps time was up.

“You can stop there, Noble,” Burnett said.

I dropped the box, stood up straight, wiped the sweat from my brow. I tried to dry my hand on my shirt, but it was soaked. The south Florida humidity was a bitch if you didn't have a cold beer on hand.

“Turn around, Jack,” Burnett said.

I scanned the room, looking for a weapon. I'd have settled for a baton right then. But the room was empty, except for the six boxes. And then I saw something that disturbed me. One of the boxes wasn't taped shut. The ends had been folded over one another to keep it shut. The dimensions matched the others in the room. All of them were large enough to fit me, slightly cramped since I had two inches on their length.

“C'mon,” Burnett said. “Arms out and turn.”

Dying in the back of a warehouse located next to a Miami ghetto held very little appeal to me. But if it was going to happen, I'd prefer to see the bullet coming. Go down with a fight. I lifted my arms out to the side, stopping halfway. I

turned, slowly. I kept my head low, eyes up. I offered up as menacing a look as I could manage under the circumstances.

Burnett and Reece stood outside the doorway. Burnett aimed a pistol at me. Reece held a rifle at his waist, loosely aimed in my direction. He stepped back and Burnett motioned with his pistol for me to exit the room.

I stepped through the doorway and caught Burnett's eye on the way through. "What's in those boxes?" I asked, concerned that he intended to use one as my casket.

Burnett shrugged. "Let's go outside." He looked past me and added, "Reece, I want you to take him down there with the others."

I figured that the unsecured box wasn't meant for me. At least, not yet. I walked across the empty warehouse. Burnett followed. Reece stayed in front of me, walking backward, keeping a good ten feet between him and me. My foot hit the pavement. He pointed his gun at the Escalade, then back at me.

"Get in the back," Reece said.

I reached out and grabbed the door handle. It pushed open before I pulled. One of the men from the boat was inside. He held a pistol in his right hand.

"Don't try anything," the man said. "I'll shoot if you so much as sneeze."

I did my best to look unimpressed while I pulled myself up and into the car. I took a seat and waited. A few minutes later Reece opened the driver's door and hopped in behind the wheel. He fired up the V-8 engine and dropped the transmission into drive. We inched around the semi, then slowly drove on the pavement in between a long warehouse and the ocean. He stopped where the building ended.

"Get out," he said. Then he turned to look at the man sitting next to me. "Take him to the others and walk back."

"You're not waiting?" the man said.

“Would I tell you to walk back if I was?”

The man shook his head and held out his arms. He stared me down for a couple of seconds, and then said, “Let’s go, man.”

“This isn’t over, Reece,” I said.

He smiled and leaned toward me. “Yes, it is.” He started to turn in his seat, then stopped. “Oh yea, Burnett had a message he wanted me to relay to you.”

“What’s that?”

“Time’s up.”

I glanced at my watch and saw it was ten till noon.

I opened the door. The sound of waves lapping against the concrete barrier greeted me. They carried a rhythm all their own. The man’s feet hit the ground and his hand hit my back. He pushed me toward the end of the building. When we reached it, he said, “Turn left.”

I did and saw Pablo, the heavy guy and the skinny guy, as well as Sarah. She stood with her back to a car. Her wrists were bound together by rope. The closer I got, the more obvious it became that she’d been crying.

“Sarah,” I said.

She looked in my direction. At first her face scrunched up, as if she were about to start sobbing. She filled her lungs with salt air and exhaled, seemingly to steady herself.

I got within six feet of her and Pablo told me to stop. From that distance, I could see inside the car. The two kids sat in the back seat. Neither of them were Christopher. Were their hands bound, too? I couldn’t tell.

“Arms behind your back,” Pablo said.

I didn’t move.

“Don’t make this any more difficult than it has to be,” he said.

I still didn't move.

Pablo did. He punched me in the kidney with his left hand and then reached for my arm. "How's that feel, huh?"

I said nothing. My body bowed sideways to the right. Pain spread from the point of impact to the middle of my abdomen. He had my left arm pinned behind my back with his plaster cast and managed to get my right halfway around.

"Someone help," he said.

The heavy guy jogged forward and planted a knee in my midsection. I was surprised that he managed to get his leg up that high. Surprise gave way to a momentary loss of control, despite preparing myself for the blow by tightening my abdominal muscles.

He wrapped his meaty hand around the back of my head and pulled me up by my hair. "Enjoy that?"

Pablo had my wrists together and bound by rope. I struggled and the knot tightened. He grabbed my collar and yanked me back, nearly sending me sprawling to the ground. Somehow, I managed to regain my balance.

I assumed a fighter's stance, much to the delight of the men.

Pablo took a few steps back, his smile faded a little with every movement. He came to a stop about six feet away. He lifted his left arm and aimed his gun at my head. Six feet. The perfect distance. A deadly distance. Even if my hands had been untied, he'd still be able to shoot me before I could lay a hand on him.

"This is gonna be fun," Pablo said, the smile returning to his face. "Hector, go help with the car. Get that bitch in back with the kids."

I forgot about Pablo for a minute as my attention shifted to Sarah. She stood with her back against the car, shoulders slumped, head down. She looked like a woman defeated. I didn't like it. It wasn't the look of someone who'd been

captured. Everything about her at that moment told me she knew she was about to die.

The heavy guy, Hector, grabbed her by the hair. I guessed that was his thing. With his other hand he pulled the car door open. Immediately the children began screaming, their little voices surfing on top of the salt air and echoing off the high steel and aluminum walls of the warehouses that surrounded us.

Hector forced Sarah into the car. He hit her twice. She went limp. I felt rage rise inside me like bile, bitter and hot and ready to spew out.

“Don’t move,” Pablo said, without looking at me. The guy must have had faith in his reaction time to take his eyes off me like that.

I didn’t move, my feet at least. But my hands went to work dismantling the knot that bound my wrists. Boy scouts these men were not.

Hector slammed the door shut. The voices of the innocent were muffled, for a moment at least. The skinny guy reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. He inserted one into the driver’s door and unlocked it. The keys dangled from the lock, reflecting a small, but bright ray of sunlight. He opened the driver’s door and slipped inside, leaving one foot on the pavement. His thin arm reached out and around the door frame and he retrieved the keys. It looked like he inserted the one into the ignition, but the car didn’t start. A moment later, the guy stepped out of the car and slammed the door shut.

He joined Hector at the back of the vehicle and they started pushing. The car began rolling, slowly at first, toward the edge of the pavement. The men pumped their legs. After twenty feet Hector fell to the ground because the car was moving too fast for him to keep up with. He wallowed on his stomach and then propped himself up using his elbows to watch the car as it headed toward the ocean. The skinny guy let go and

straightened up. He placed his hands on his hips and arched his back a little.

The three men watched, stone still, as the car went over the edge of the pavement and into the ocean.



## Chapter 30

The rope that had bound my wrists fell to the ground. None of the men noticed the barely audible sound of it hitting the pavement. Hector and the skinny guy stood on the edge of the road, feet from where Sarah and the kids were encased in a sinking tomb. Tiny hands banged against the rear window, the only sound in an otherwise eerie silence.

Pablo stayed rooted to his spot, six feet away from me. This time the distance wasn't so deadly, not for me at least, because Pablo had his back to me. Maybe he figured it was safe to do so, since my hands had been tied. It was unfair, almost. I thought about giving him a warning, but dismissed that as quickly as he dismissed Sarah and those children.

I passed through the space between us in a second. My torso twisted back to the right, then I whipped around with my left shoulder leading, pulling my right arm around with as much torque as I could muster. Pablo's head whipped to his right, perhaps because he'd heard my foot hit the pavement. My fist connected with his temple. Pablo went down hard, his hip hit, and then his head with a thud. It bounced half a foot in the air and then smacked the pavement again.

I located Pablo's pistol, then located the men. They turned around as if in a daze. They moved in slow motion at first, then picked up their pace. They had close to a hundred feet to cross. It wouldn't take them long, not even Hector with his heft.

I dove toward the gun. The pavement scraped my body and ripped my shirt. I didn't care. Wounds could be cleaned up later. I had to reach the gun before they reached me. My hand wrapped around the pistol and I rolled through the dive. The skinny guy stood closest. I aimed at him first. Time slowed. I saw his long hair bounding and tossing across his face with

every step he took. His knees pumped high, arms swung forward then back. I squeezed the trigger and hit him in the chest. The impact of the bullet stopped his torso, but his legs carried through. He flew back and his head crashed into the pavement. Hector grunted as he tried to pick up his pace. I was able to take a second longer to aim and waited until he'd almost reached me. Then I squeezed the trigger. The bullet hit Hector in the forehead. His eyes rolled in and up and his body jerked back, stopped and then fell forward. His knees hit the ground, then his thick chest carried the rest of him forward. A crimson sea formed around his head.

I placed my left hand on the pavement. My right held the gun in front of me, guarding against any sudden movements from the men I'd rendered incapacitated. I had no doubt Hector was dead. His dark, lifeless eyes staring straight ahead told me that. The skinny guy lay on his back. His dull and lifeless eyes fixed on some point beyond the clouds.

I turned my attention to Pablo, who by this time had managed to get to his knees. He faced away from me. I tucked the gun in my waistband and crossed the distance between us in a second or two. I reached down and placed my hands on either side of his head. With a quick and decisive movement, I snapped his neck like a twig.

By now almost half a minute had gone by and no one had drove over to see what was going on. I realized at that moment that this was the plan all along. Get rid of Sarah and the kids, and then shoot me. The men had failed to complete the job, and the rest of them would pay. First, I had to save Sarah and two children trapped in the back of the sinking car.

I sprinted toward the edge of the pavement. The car was underwater, but still visible. I didn't stop when I reached the invisible barrier between land and sea. I dove into the water and swam toward the car. With my pistol, I beat against the rear window until it cracked. I hit it a few more times until there was a decent hole. Water rushed through the opening, flooding the car. The water muffled the screams of tiny voices. I reached into the jagged hole in the window with both hands

and began to pull the glass back. A red cloud plumed in the water and floated past my head. I didn't care.

When the hole was wide enough, I reached in and grabbed the little girl and a boy I didn't recognize. The girl squirmed and fought against me. The boy was still, too still. Sarah's body twisted and thrashed. She was trying to get herself in a position to push through the broken window, but her bound hands made it difficult. I had to get the kids to the surface quickly if I was going to have any chance of saving her.

I used my legs against the car to propel us through the water. We flew to the surface. My head burst through and I filled my oxygen-deprived lungs with a gasp, and the girl did too. The boy did nothing. His face was pale. Lips were blue. I looked around, half hoping to see someone at the edge of the pavement. Glad that I didn't, because it would have likely been Reece or Burnett. A rusted ladder was anchored to the concrete piling. I dragged the kids over and pushed the girl halfway to the top. Then I wrapped my left arm through a rung and started performing CPR on the boy.

"C'mon, kid," I yelled between breaths. The little girl, still clinging to the ladder, yelled the same.

A tense moment passed, and then he gagged and coughed and threw up water. His blue eyes fluttered open.

"Can you hang on to the ladder?" I said.

He reached out and grabbed the ladder. His body pulled away an inch or two and then he nodded. "I can do it."

I kicked off the piling and dove into the water. The car had sunk further, no longer buoyant because of the hole I created in the window. It had reached the bottom and settled in on its side. I swam into the rear window. Jagged glass tore through the flesh on my shoulders and my side. I fought against the pain and reached for Sarah's lifeless body. It took a few seconds to free her from the back seat and then get her through the broken window. I wrapped one arm around her chest and swam straight up.

I sucked in air as my head broke through the surface. Sarah's face was a light shade of blue, and her lips were a bit darker. I hoped that I'd freed her in time, but the way she looked gave me doubts.

I pulled her toward the ladder. The kids stood at the top, their timid voices urging me on with words of encouragement. I wrapped my arm through a rung again and used my knees to support Sarah's body. I gave her a few breaths. Nothing happened. I checked for a pulse but couldn't find one. I had to get her on land to begin chest compressions. I placed her over my shoulder and climbed the five feet or so from the ocean to the pavement and placed her body on the ground. Water splashed the pavement and steam rose into the air. I knelt over Sarah's lifeless body. No matter how hard I worked on her, nothing happened. No breath, no pulse, no coughing or choking. The color of her face went from light to dark blue. Her skin felt like ice.

"Cops," the boy said.

"What?" I rose up and looked at him.

"Sirens," he said. "In the distance."

If the cops were on their way, I knew that Burnett would take off whether he was ready or not. No way I'd let him get away with this.

"You," I pointed at the boy. "I need you to keep pushing on her chest like I was doing. OK?"

"OK," he said.

"And you," I pointed at the girl. "You need to give her your breath, like I did. OK?"

"OK," she said.

I got up, grabbed my gun and started running toward Burnett's warehouse. I stopped and turned. "If anyone other than me comes from this way, you run."

## Chapter 31

I heard the men from the boat talking. Their voices placed them past the edge of a building that sat closer to the water than the others, but still a good distance away from Burnett's warehouse. I pressed back against the steel exterior wall and stepped sideways, moving slowly. I kept my gun up and ready. If I fired, I'd draw the attention of everyone. They had expected the two shots earlier. Those bullets had been meant for me. They wouldn't be receptive to additional gunfire. I wondered why they hadn't moved yet. Wouldn't the other men have returned by now? Perhaps Burnett anticipated a time gap while they disposed of my body. I couldn't go down with the car since the point was for me to watch. They probably had a plan to bring my body to the boat where they'd wrap chains around me and attach them to cinder blocks. I'd sink to the bottom of the Atlantic, lost forever. I found the thought tranquil, in an odd sort of way.

I was close enough to hear what the men were saying. They weren't part of Burnett's inner circle. Instead, they'd been hired to transport him. These weren't good men, not by any stretch of the imagination. They'd done some bad things in the past, and would again in the future, if given the chance. I felt no qualms about killing either one of them. I peeked around the corner. They stood with their backs facing me and at a distance of about four feet. Close enough.

I took a deep breath. The salt air filled my lungs with a slight burn. I looked down and for the first time noticed the gash across my left side. It'd need stitches, but I could manage for now.

I tucked the gun into my waistband and then burst around the corner. My arms whipped around, up and out, the way a master of the butterfly stroke breaks through the water and seemingly flies through the air. My hands wrapped around the

outside of their heads, respectively. The momentum carried my hands inward, smashing their heads together. I continued to slide my fingers around, cupped each man under their chin, dragged them around the corner.

I let the guy on the left drop to the ground semi-conscious.

I placed my left hand around the other guy's head. I stood with him in front of me, my arms crisscrossed around his head. He moaned and tried to talk. It came out gurgled. I pulled my arms to the left and right, toward their natural positions. His neck snapped and his body went limp.

I looked down and saw that the other guy had started to crawl away. I took a step, leapt, and came down with my foot on the back of his head. His face crunched against the pavement. Maybe his jaw broke or his orbital socket split in half. Maybe the sound was his teeth snapping off one by one. I didn't look. Didn't care. I reached down and pulled him back by his hair. His body bowed below me, waist on the ground, head pulled back so far it was behind his ass. I gripped his head with both hands and pulled hard to the side. Another snap. Another man who would never take another breath.

I searched their pockets. One had a knife and the other a gun. Perfect. I tucked the knife inside one of my boots. Kept one pistol tucked in my pants and walked with the other in front of me. From this point on, I'd shoot anybody but Burnett on sight.

It took me a couple minutes to reach the warehouse. The area was silent and empty. I stopped in front of the semi and leaned against the chrome grill. Bungee cords dangled. My foot caught one and the metal clasp on the end scraped against the pavement.

I heard a whistle behind me, then the shuffling of feet.  
"What're you doing, Jack?"

I looked over my shoulder and saw Reece standing there.

"Arms up," he said.

I lifted my arms to the side and said nothing. Hoped like hell he'd play the game.

“Place the gun on the hood of the truck.”

I did.

“Now turn around.”

I turned.

He smiled. “Burnett’s going to love this.” He took two steps toward me, then stopped, then leaned to his right, like he was looking past the cab of the over-sized truck. Most important of all, he stopped looking at me.

I pulled my shirt up with my left hand and grabbed the pistol with my right. His head moved first, then his body. His arm followed through last. By that time, I had mine extended. I fired two shots. One caught him in the shoulder; the other missed and slammed into the wall behind him with a thud.

He tried to lift his arm but couldn't. He fired anyway. The bullet smashed into the pavement, sending chips of concrete into the air.

I pulled the trigger again, hitting him in the chest. A red stain bloomed from the center of his shirt. I fired again, this time hitting him in the stomach. He bowed back, but didn't go down. I took one more shot and hit him in the forehead. His head snapped back, and then he collapsed onto his knees and fell forward.

I grabbed the gun off the hood of the truck and walked toward the open warehouse. Burnett stood against the back wall. He clutched the rifle across his chest.

“Don't come in here,” he yelled.

“Either shoot me or drop it,” I said, taking two steps inside the musty room.

Fear and hatred and rage mixed on his face. I wasn't sure if he was going to take aim or piss himself. He did neither.

“We can work this out, Jack,” he said.

“No we can’t,” I said.

“There’s tons of money. I can give it all to you.”

“Blood money. The money of how many children’s souls, Senator?”

“This has nothing to do with that, Jack.”

I stopped and lowered my weapon.

He let the butt of the rifle fall toward the floor, holding it by the barrel with his left hand. He held his other hand out and took a couple steps forward, slightly bent at the waist, trying not to look intimidating, I supposed.

“Listen, Jack, there’s no reason that you and I-”

“Why’d you do it?” I said.

He paused and tilted his head. “Money.”

“What was your plan?”

He nodded and looked over my shoulder. “My boy’s on the boat. We planned to sail down south. Hole up for a while and at the same time, a radical group was going to claim they’d kidnapped us. No ransom or any bullshit like that.”

“This group,” I said, “these are the men you sold the kids to?”

He nodded. “One of them, at least.”

“OK. Then what?”

He took a few more steps forward. Stopped and swallowed. “After a few months I’d return home. I’d have to get beaten up a bit, but in the end I’d free me and my boy and make it out alive.”

“Why drag your son into it?”

“It’s the only way.”

“Only way for what?”

He took another step, but this time I held out my pistol to stop him. His hand went up and he took a step back.



“The only way for us to reunite, you see,” he said.

“No, I don’t see. What do you mean reunite? You and Christopher?”

“Yeah.”

This time, I took a step back. “What about the garbage you fed me earlier about how you’d adopt him?”

He smiled and dipped his head an inch. “See, as far as anyone will know, I didn’t take him, Jack. Someone kidnapped him, and I risked my life to rescue him. In the process, I was taken as well. But those bastards slipped up and I killed them and got us out alive.”

“And you come home a hero,” I said. “And everyone will brush off the fact that you’d had an affair with a woman ten years ago and fathered a child with her. And while you’d been abducted, someone came along and killed her.”

“Great minds and all that.”

I heard the slight sound of shuffling behind me. Burnett smiled and looked over my shoulder. It wasn’t much, a second, but it told me plenty.

I dropped to one knee and spun. Saw a man I’d never seen before. He held a gun and aimed it at me. I fired before he did. The bullet hit him in the chest and he fell backward upon impact. I spun again and saw Burnett holding the rifle with both hands, taking aim. I squeezed the trigger and hit him in the right shoulder. He dropped the rifle and staggered backward until he reached the wall.

“You son of a bitch,” he yelled.

I crossed the room. He kept sliding along the wall until he found the corner. I grabbed him by his collar and threw him to the ground. Ran up and kicked him from behind.

“Move!” I said.

He scrambled to his knees. Blood poured from his wound, staining his shirt and coating his arm in crimson. There was

cursing mixed with yells of pain. We reached the open doorway. I kicked him from behind again, sending him headfirst into the pavement. I walked up behind him and grabbed his collar a second time. Pulled him to his feet and pushed him toward the semi.

“Walk,” I said.

“Where’re we going?” he said.

“To the truck.”

“Jack,” he said. “I’ll give you anything. Anything you want.”

We were next to the cab of the truck. I reached out, grabbed his left shoulder and spun him around.

“Anything?” I said.

“Name it. I’m good for it, Jack.”

“Bring Sarah back to life.”

“I... I...”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

I shoved him against the side of the truck’s cab. His right shoulder slammed into it and he yelled in pain. I grabbed him by his hair again and dragged him to the front of the truck. Blood from the bullet hole in his shoulder smeared along the white fiberglass. I pushed him back against the chrome grill, then threw an uppercut into his chin. His body slumped to the ground.

There were six bungee cords attached to the truck’s grill. They were various lengths and colors and designs. I hooked them all to one side in a straight up and down line, letting one end of each dangle.

Burnett lay on the ground, groaning. I reached down, pulled him up, and hoisted him a foot off the ground. I held him there with one hand, while I strapped the first cord across his shoulder. I looped the cord through the grill a few times to tighten it, then attached it on the other side. I pulled his left

arm out and secured it. Then I stretched another cord over his waist, then his thighs and calves. Finally, I secured his right hand.

I took a few steps back and smiled at my handiwork. He was fixed to the grill of the truck, arms out, legs tight together, and his feet off the ground.

“What the hell are you doing, Jack?” he said for the twentieth time.

This time I answered him. “One thing your research didn’t tell you about me, Senator. I kill in kind.”

“What?”

I ignored him, stepped around the side of the truck, pulled myself up into the cab. Once behind the wheel, I fired the big diesel engine up, and it roared to life like a pride of lions rising for the hunt. I looked around, but didn’t see what I needed inside the truck, so I scanned the area around the buildings. Saw a cinder block and knew that would work for my purposes. I got out and ran over to the block. Burnett watched me the entire way back. This time he said nothing.

I hopped back into the cab and put the truck in first gear. It jerked into motion and I steered it in a half circle, then straightened it out so that we were driving away from the kids and Sarah’s body. I got the truck to a steady speed and opened the door. I stood in the open doorway, one hand on the wheel, the other on the cinder block. I dropped the block on the gas and hopped onto the concrete. My body slammed into the ground hard. I was sure I had a few new scrapes and possibly a broken bone. The sound of Burnett’s screams rising above that old diesel engine made it worth it, though. I rolled too far and almost went over the edge into the water. I scrambled to my feet and followed the truck with my eyes.

Its path was taking it closer and closer to the edge, but there was another building that stood out further than the others did. At this point, it was a tossup whether it would hit the building or plunge into the ocean. I watched with

heightened anticipation. The truck had veered far enough over that if it hit the building, Burnett wouldn't be smashed into the steel exterior. Finally, the truck passed by and inched closer to the edge of the road. Twenty seconds later, the first tire went over the edge, and then the next. Finally, the big truck teetered on the edge, scraping the pavement and sending sparks into the air. And then it went over. The grill went in first and dove toward the bottom.

I turned and headed toward the kids and Sarah's body. I stopped at the boat and called for Christopher. The boy came above deck. I told him everything was all right. I helped him off the boat and carried him down the stretch of pavement between the warehouses and the ocean.

We reached the kids and Sarah's body as the cops did. All eyes fell on me, and their guns followed.

I set the kid down, then held up my hands. "My name's Jack Noble," I said. "I'm a federal agent. They took my wallet, but if you call Frank Skinner, he'll provide all the information you need." I gave them the number to reach Frank.

They told me to stay put, but I didn't. The boy pointed toward Sarah's body, which still lay on the pavement. Her skin was pale and her lips were no longer blue. Her chest rose and fell in an awkward cadence. She was alive.

## Chapter 32

By four p.m. that afternoon, Frank had a private jet waiting for us at an executive airport north of the city. He got the cops off my back and somehow managed to get them to escort us, first to the hospital and then to the airport once Sarah had been cleared.

I had been concerned that she wouldn't be able to return to us. She was still unconscious when they loaded her into the ambulance, and there was the possibility that she'd suffered some brain damage. The kids had kept working on her after I left to take care of Burnett. They didn't give up on her and she came through.

Doc had to pull a few strings to get Sarah out of the hospital, including agreeing to have a traveling nurse accompany us. She was young and pretty and nice to Sarah and the kids. I told her I didn't need any attention. She looked me up and down with a quizzical eye, but agreed to leave me alone.

I fell asleep in less than five minutes after takeoff and didn't wake up until we touched down outside of D.C.

Frank was the first to greet me when I stepped off the plane.

"We're going to blow the doors off this," he said.

I nodded, scanning the lot to see if there were any waiting parents.

"Working on a warrant for Burnett's office and his house and his car and anything else we can get our hands on."

"He's dead," I said.

Frank nodded. "C'mon, Jack, we'll discuss that later."

"What about the kids? Where're their parents?"

“We’re taking them back to headquarters first.”

Two black SUVs waited at the edge of the runway. The kids rode in one, me, Frank, and Sarah in the other. The nurse tagged along with us.

“Can you take me home?” Sarah asked.

“No,” Frank said. “We’re dropping the nurse at Dulles, then taking you back to our office. You go home when Doc clears you.”

And what he didn’t say was when we cleared her, she had to be debriefed and she had to sign a ton of forms that essentially made it illegal for her to talk about anything that had happened since she’d met us.

It took two-and-a-half hours to reach the office. Traffic was a bitch. But it gave us time to get a couple FBI special agents to our office.

Special Agents Duncan and Bishop met us in the lobby. I’d worked with Duncan on a few occasions. He’d been around the block a few times, to say the least. When he saw the kids come through the door, he smiled.

“Almost thirty years in,” he said. “Never get tired of a happy ending.”

Bishop was new and young and looked to be fresh out of law school. He smiled nervously and asked where he should take the kids to begin the process of reuniting them with their parents.

Frank led them to an interrogation room.

“The boy stays with us,” I said.

Duncan frowned. “You know that’s not how this works, Noble.”

“We know his mother. It’d be better if we did this in person. You can come with us. In fact, I’d like you to be there. A cop, too.”

He cocked his head and so did Frank.

“What’s going on, Jack?” Frank said.

“Why don’t we go now?” I said.

The men agreed. Duncan checked with Bishop and made sure his younger partner could handle the kids by himself.

Traffic had thinned, and it took less than half an hour to reach Tammy Nockowitz’s townhouse. Frank pulled into the driveway. We waited two more minutes for a local cop to arrive. We met the cop at the bottom of the driveway and I asked him to watch the boy for a few minutes while we spoke with the mother.

Frank knocked on the door and took a step back. Tammy pulled the door open, looked at the three of us standing there and then looked like she was going to cry.

“What’s happened?” she said.

“Tammy,” I said. “Christopher’s OK.”

She fell to her knees and cried.

“His father’s dead,” I said.

She rocked back on her heels and looked up at us. She bit her bottom lip. Mascara stained her face. She wiped her cheeks with her palms and then brushed strands of loose hair behind her ears.

“How?” she said.

“Some of that’s classified,” Frank said. “And until it passes through the proper channels, we can’t discuss it.”

She lifted herself off the floor. “Where’s my son? When can I see him?”

“In a minute,” Frank said. “Jack, you want to get this going?”

I cleared my throat stepped forward so I was right in front of her. I wanted to look into her eyes. I had to see the look on her face.

“Why’d you agree to it, Tammy?”

A confused look crossed her face and she shook her head.  
“What?”

“This is your chance,” I said. “Tell us now and we’ll see what we can do for you.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Mr. Noble.”

I took a step back, feigning shock. “How do you know my name?” I looked at Frank. “Our names were never given out, were they?”

“No,” Frank said with a confused look.

“Tammy?” I said.

Frank placed his hand on my shoulder and leaned in toward me. “What are you getting at?”

“Tammy and Burnett never stopped seeing each other. Isn’t that right, Tammy?”

It didn’t occur to me until we’d reached the plane that Tammy had been involved with this from day one. She thought Burnett was coming back for her, but in reality, he was trying to have her killed once he realized she’d told us too much.

She shook her head. “No, you got that wrong. Yeah, we had an affair, but that was ten years ago, a onetime thing. I got pregnant and told him, and he wanted nothing to do with me and Christopher.”

The look was there. Deception. Burnett wasn’t talking about reuniting with Christopher. They’d never been together, thus nullifying the opportunity at a reunion. He meant Tammy. And still, he didn’t really mean a reunion. The fact was that they’d never stopped seeing each other. Sure, he wasn’t involved in Christopher’s life, but the affair he’d had with the boy’s mother had stretched on for a decade.

“No, he didn’t want the public to find out about you and Christopher, but he still wanted something to do with you. See, being married while having a child with another woman would have been political suicide for Burnett. Continuing to see that woman while remaining married, well he could kiss away any



chance he had of being anything other than a mayor in a town with a population of three people. And he wasn't willing to risk that until now."

"No, no, no," she said. "You got it all wrong."

"Why'd you do it?" I said.

She shook her head. "I didn't do anything."

My voice escalated to a scream. "Why'd you let him take your son?"

"I didn't."

"You staged it so that Pablo hit you on the head. Hell, you even got a little cut out of it, didn't you? Pablo didn't work for the guys in the house. He worked for Burnett. I saw him down in Miami." I stopped and stared at her. When she didn't speak, I continued. "You let Burnett take your son, and then after we'd rescued him, you let him take him again."

"No," she said. "I didn't let him take him again. That's why he had me run off the road. I said I wouldn't do it again."

"Again," I repeated. "You left the dinner with Christopher, but when the paramedics arrived, he wasn't in the car. They even said if he had been, he'd have died."

She covered her face with her hands and sobbed heavily.

"Duncan," Frank said. "Why don't you take her to the car for us?"

Duncan entered the house and eased Tammy's hands to her side and then in front of her. He placed handcuffs around her wrists and guided her by her elbow.

She stopped and looked over her shoulder at me.

"I wanted to be a family, Jack. He said Christopher would be OK the first time. They'd treat him well."

"They didn't," I said. "I found him in a dirt pit dug out in a basement."

“And I didn’t want this to happen again,” she said. “That’s why I was trying to talk to you at the dinner. You could have prevented all this.”

I shook my head, said nothing. I was done with her. The FBI could take it from there.

Frank told Duncan to wait while he spoke with the police officer. The officer agreed to take Christopher and me back to SIS headquarters, while Frank and Duncan escorted Tammy Nockowitz to jail.

## Chapter 33

They gave me a week off to rest my body and clear my head. I spent most of the first day in bed, sleeping for close to sixteen hours, then getting up and going back to bed after only four alcohol-fueled hours. I don't remember what I dreamed about, but I woke up every few hours that night, soaked in sweat, with the overwhelming feeling I'd been drowning. The thought that I'd started suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder crossed my mind, but I brushed it aside. I'd seen and been through far worse than the events of the past week.

The next day I took a drive into northern Virginia and stopped at Sarah's firehouse. The guys there told me that she was off for a couple weeks. I convinced one of them to give me her home address.

I drove to her apartment building and parked in front of the main entrance to the building her unit was located in. I took my time walking up the three flights of stairs that led to her door. I thought about what to say to her. Twenty or so opening lines went from winners to losers in the span of two minutes. In the end, I settled on *hi*. I figured she'd understand.

I knocked on the door. A minute passed with no answer. I hadn't bothered watching the peephole, so I wasn't sure if no one was home, or someone looked through, saw me standing there, and decided not to answer. After another round of knocking, a woman I didn't recognize opened the door.

"Sarah here?"

She shook her head.

"Know when she'll be back?"

"She left yesterday. Said she was going home to see her parents."

"Where's that?"

The woman looked at me like I was crazy and started to close the door.

“Wait,” I said.

She stopped and arched her eyebrows with a slight shake of her head.

“Can you tell her Jack came by?”

“Oh,” she said. “You’re Jack Noble?”

I nodded.

“Wait here.”

I waited.

She returned with an envelope. “This is for you.”

As soon as I grabbed the cream-colored envelope, she slammed the door shut. I waited outside the apartment for a few minutes, listening for voices inside. I didn’t hear any and decided to leave.

I sat in my car for five minutes, staring at the envelope that had my name written across the front. I opened it and pulled out a single folded piece of notebook paper. I carefully read the words Sarah had written for me.

*Jack,*

*I’ve never met a man who excited me the way you did. When I was around you, I felt that I could do anything. Accomplish anything. Be anything. At first, I felt like I was in an action movie. You were the hero, and I was the woman who got mixed up in your dangerous world.*

*But, like all smart heroines, I came to my senses. I can’t be with a man like you. The job you have, and the risks you take, it’s all too much for me. No matter how hard I try, I can’t envision a future with you as a part of my life.*

*Please don’t try to find me, Jack. Don’t search for my parents. Don’t return to my apartment. Don’t go back to the firehouse. I think it’s best if you simply forgot about me.*

-S

I half expected it, in a way. Sarah had gone through a lot, and it was my fault. I believed that even if we had started seeing each other, she'd have held some resentment toward me for what happened to her in Miami. Part of me had wanted to make these same points to her, but in the end, my desire for her had won out. And now I'd never know if there could have been a future for us together.

I opened the car door and swung my legs over and set them down on the pavement. I pulled a lighter out of my pocket and ignited it. The flame hovered below the letter for a moment, then the paper burst into flames. I held it in front of me until the fire grazed the tips of my fingers and I let the ball of flames fall to the ground and watched it until it was nothing more than black ash. I stomped it out for good measure, then said, "Goodbye, Sarah."

Alcohol got me through the night. I managed seven hours of uninterrupted sleep. The next day I drove to SIS headquarters. Frank came out of his office when he saw me step into the lobby.

"Jack?" he said. "What the hell are you doing here? You're supposed to be off."

"Got bored," I said.

"Come on, let's sit in my office for a few."

I followed him into his office. He closed the door and then walked around the desk where he took a seat across from me.

"Burnett wasn't just involved in this thing," he said.

"Oh yeah?"

"Son of a bitch masterminded it. We got everything. Records of every shipment. Names of the kids. Names of suppliers and purchasers. I got back from setting up the biggest damn operation you ever heard of. FBI and local law enforcement all across the U.S. The CIA is helping globally. We even got Special Forces joining in, from all branches.

We're bringing them home, Jack. All of the kids are coming home."

"That's a lot of happy phone calls," I said.

Frank leaned forward. He narrowed his eyes and said, "What's going on? I thought you'd be excited."

"I am," I said.

"Then what is it?"

"I can't get past the fact that Sarah almost died, and it was all my fault."

Frank shook his head. "You can't blame yourself. Plus, she made it through OK. Some would argue that if you hadn't been there, she'd have died."

"She wouldn't have been there if it weren't for me."

Frank shrugged.

"She won't talk to me."

He nodded. "Sometimes that happens."

I nodded back.

"Hey," Frank said. "Why don't you head this operation up? You did so much to bring it down, it only makes sense that--"

"I'm done, Frank."

His body straightened, like he'd been taken a knife to the lower back. "What?"

I pulled my ID and badge out and placed them on his desk. His eyes followed my outstretched arms and settled on the items I'd put in front of him. I pulled my pistol from its holster and sat it next to my ID.

"Jack," he said. "Why don't you think this over for a while? You don't have to take over the operation. Take a vacation instead. Hell, you've been with me for over two years and these last few days are the only time you've had off."

I shook my head. “I’m done.” I grabbed the arms of the chair and pushed myself up, then pulled the door open and stepped into the lobby. I crossed the room and stopped halfway. Turned and looked back, first at my office, empty and dark, and then at Frank, who stood in his open doorway. The expression on his face was one of pain and confusion. I’d seen that look several times, usually when I left somewhere or someone. In this case, I was doing both.

I walked through the short hallway and stopped in front of the door that led to the garage. The overhead fan kicked on, a fierce *whirr* that settled into a hum after a few seconds. I grabbed the door handle and started to turn it.

“Wait,” Frank called after me.

“What?” I said without turning around.

“The President wants to meet us next week.”

“No thanks.” I pulled the door open and stepped into the garage. The door slammed shut behind me. I figured it’d open again before I reached my car. It didn’t.

I spent a few hours on the beltway, driving around D.C. while the traffic was light, searching for a moment of clarity. I didn’t manage to find one.

Later that night I sat alone in my apartment, drinking. Frank called a few times. I answered once and told him not to come over. Then the phone rang again after I told him to leave me alone. I answered, ready to yell at him for harassing me.

“It’s Bear.”

I said nothing.

“What the hell happened, man? Guys are saying something big went down with a Senator and that you were at the heart of it. What’s the deal?”

“I don’t think I’m allowed to say, at least, not yet. Definitely not over the phone.”

“You OK?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“OK,” he said. “Just wanted to check up on you.”

I said nothing.

“I guess I’ll give you a call in a week or two?”

“I quit my job,” I said.

Bear said nothing.

“You still interested in going into business together?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“How much longer until you’re out?”

“I got three months, then I’m a free man. No more Marines. No more CIA.”

“Meet me in Key West.”

“When?”

“When you’re no longer the government’s overgrown step-child.”

He chuckled. “Where’ll I find you?”

“I’ll be sitting outside a bar.”

## ***THE END***

Jack Noble’s story continues in *Thin Line* and the *Noble Intentions* saga. Links below!

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