

THE
PRESIDENTIAL
PRETENDER.©

Also by Jay Lumbert

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The Varicose Vigilantes

The Varicose Vigilantes II - Hedge Money

THE PRESIDENTIAL PRETENDER

Jay Lumbert



Shaksper Books
USA

THE PRESIDENTIAL PRETENDER

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This is a work of fiction. All names, characters and events are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, businesses, events or places is purely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to Christi, Sabrina, Allyssa, Billy & Katrina.
You are my greatest joy.

Author's Note:

The Presidential Pretender began as my Master's Thesis at Wesleyan University. A few years ago, I began assembling the many pieces of this novel, stitching it together like a quilt. I studied politics and religion. I studied cosmology and technology. I studied personal and international warfare. I studied punishment and forgiveness.

What evolved was a book is about the human experience in its most glorious and heinous forms, a story of love and hate, goodness and evil, all woven into today's complicated world of politics and terrorism. The book explores the innate character of mankind and how far we can justify abhorrent behavior as normal. It explores the depths to which a good man or woman can fall, crawling deep within in the darkness to find where that bottom might be. It also celebrates mankind's extraordinary capacity to forgive.

Set within Jack Trance's incredible world of wealth, mystery, legacy and duty, this book will lead you on a journey that (I hope) will take you to places you rarely get to go—where the adrenaline rushes and the mind flows freely, where the emotions of love and hate combine with concepts like duty, forgiveness and country—perhaps into Sammantha's spinning world.

I hope this book will move you. It will certainly make you think. Where the book ultimately takes you, will depend on your experience with life. I hope it is a good place, because we all deserve one.

There are many people that helped with this book. As always, I must thank my extraordinary wife, Deb. Without her, none of this would exist. I must also thank my family for providing me the emotional support to bring such a project to completion. This isn't easy and I thank you for your sacrifices.

Thanks must go to Dianne Eaton, Matt Gross, Pat Hull, Paul Corrigan, Stan Alexander and Alicemarie Adams, independent readers, who gave suggestions on the manuscript.

As always, I express my profound thanks to all of the men and women who (daily) volunteer to trade their lives for my freedom. Without you, and the patriots who came before you, I would not have the great opportunity to share my stories. America is an extraordinary experiment that owes its sustenance to you.

I hope this book is as enjoyable for you to read as it was for me to write.

Beyond a doubt truth bears the same relation to falsehood as light to darkness.
There are three classes of people: those who see, those who see when they are shown, those who do not see.

Who sows virtue reaps honor.

Leonardo da Vinci

A man that studieth revenge keeps his own wounds green.

God hangs the greatest weights upon the smallest wires.

In taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior.

Sir Francis Bacon

Like the physical, the psυχical is not necessarily in reality what it appears to us to be.

Illusions commend themselves to us because they save us pain and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead. We must therefore accept it without complaint when they sometimes collide with a bit of reality against which they are dashed to pieces.

Sigmund Freud

A man who has not passed through the inferno of his passions has never overcome them.

Great talents are the most lovely and often the most dangerous fruits on the tree of humanity. They hang upon the most slender twigs that are easily snapped off.

Knowledge rests not upon truth alone, but upon error also.

The most intense conflicts, if overcome, leave behind a sense of security and calm that is not easily disturbed. It is just these intense conflicts and their conflagration which are needed to produce valuable and lasting results.

Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.

Carl Jung

CHAPTER 1



In the center of the room, on a splintered wooden floor, with knees clenched against her chest, Sammantha Starodubov began to rock. Back and forth like a baby's cradle. The rocking never faltered, never slowed. For minute after minute she just kept rocking, ticking with the precision of a slow moving metronome. Sammantha's breath trailed white in the fetid, frigid air, slipping out in vague plumes from under the coarse woolen blanket draped over her head. An hour passed. The seat of her jeans was wearing thin but she didn't notice. Her mind was elsewhere.

Sammantha thought of blood. Blood on her feet, on her hands, and blood on her lips. She thought of sunlight, pouring through the windows like a searchlight onto the bodies of her parents as they lay dead on the kitchen floor. She thought of twenty-five years of being alone.

Another hour passed. Sammantha saw her mother in the summer sunlight. Her face was serene, as if feeling love or the afterglow of sex. Her father was smiling, tossing her high against the sky so she could splash down into their backyard pool. She saw her puppy, Boris, as he licked the blood off her hands.

She didn't know who killed her parents or why. She knew only what she had been told. It was *The Americans*. The American government had forced her to be carried off like a circus animal and perform like one. Never again. Sammantha's nostrils swelled with the sweet, sickly smell of death. Her eyes were closed, but she saw her father's hand stretched out, almost touching the face of her mother. A quarter century of pain. She remembered it as if it were yesterday.

"Never again," she said.

She'd repay them. She'd repay them all.

Blood spread from her father's head, across the floor to Sammantha's feet. The odor reached up into her nose like dead fingers. She reached down to shake her mother's head. Wake up! There was blood on her hands, her mother's blood. Blood she could never wash away.

Sammantha could feel the anger bubbling deep within her belly. It felt hot and frothy and powerful. She could feel it pressing against her, like a tidal surge, the pressure building, threatening to breach the wall she had built against its strength, leaping up and over and onto the floor in steaming chunks. She would have to break this wall, if she were to survive. It would have to be soon. For now, she took her other defense against it. Sammantha began to cry. "I have not forgotten," she said softly. "Never have I forgotten."

Sammantha rocked harder. She remembered the shoes. Black, thick-soled work shoes with heavy brown, poorly cuffed pants draped across the laces.

"They killed your parents," he'd said. He spoke Russian, her native tongue. "The Americans killed them, your mother and father. Do you understand?"

Twelve years old, she had nodded wordlessly. Then she'd let that man take her into his arms. Those hairy, smelly arms. And he did things...unspeakable things while she wept.

Sammantha took a long, steady breath and looked to her watch. Three hours gone. Just three hours more. She shook her head and looked to the water-streaked ceiling and sobered. *God, give me strength.*

Sammantha wiped her tears and tried to stand. Her legs quivered; and she sat back down. Only then did she feel the pain, the physical pain. She looked to her jeans and saw a wet stain spreading along the fabric. Blood. New blood. Fresh blood from rocking on the splintered floor. Her body was bleeding,

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her nerves raw and open to the world.

Sammantha narrowed her eyes. She pressed her arms against the floor and willed herself to her feet. She stretched her oxygen-starved legs until she steadied. She frowned, as she looked at the darkness seeping along her thighs. She couldn't worry about minor body aches. Not today. Today was a day of triumph. *Today you begin repayment*, she thought. Repayment to the few who had helped her. Retribution for the others, that sordid series of users and abusers who had discarded her like a dirty paper towel.

Sammantha leaned down and pressed her palms against the floor. She wrapped her hands around her ankles and pulled her face to her knees. She held there, like a dancer, until she felt herself loosen and relax. Taking a deep, measured breath she stood erect. She gazed around the room and shook her head slowly. A grim smile spread across her lips. Age, smoke and dust had turned the wallpaper into the color of sun-faded newsprint. Crude pictures and desperate cries for recognition were scrawled across the wall with crayons and spray paint—in obnoxious shades of purple and red, fluorescent orange and puke green. Jesus Saves...God is dead...Free Mandela...Obama is king...Crips die...Bloods suck...The Nightriders...I did it with Gina... Bobby and Carmen forever...

The dregs of America, thought Sammantha. *The discarded souls of America...I've lived here like them...as one of them. I paid the price. But not after today. Never again. Never again.*

Sammantha took the morning newspaper and crumpled it into a group of tight balls. She thrust the balls into a small, rusty cast iron stove that sat against the wall. She took her last three meager sticks of firewood and dropped them inside. She lit a match and watched the paper catch fire. *Burn baby burn.*

Sammantha began to walk slowly around the room. She traced her right index finger along the wallpaper and thought of how much it was like *her*—torn in countless places, with ragged pieces pulling away at the corners, scribbled upon, barfed on, ripped and forced to wear obscenities like a badge. She stopped beside what had once been two fine brass lamps built into the wall, amazed they were still there at all. They might have fetched a full dollar or two from the local scrap vulture. The lamps were dented and scratched. They were surrounded by holes made by errant fists and crowbars. The wall around them was a mosaic of air vents and rats' nests, with the two broken-down lamps serving like drunken sentries. They came out at night, the rats. She'd often sat on the floor in the darkness, picking them off with a pellet gun. It was good training and it soothed her mind. She liked rats; they were like soul mates.

A flash of childhood tried to sneak back into her consciousness. She fought it off by walking to the far end of the room, to the part her landlord referred to as "the kitchen."

She flipped on the single working unit of a two-burner stove, poured water into a chipped teapot from a plastic jug and set the pot down to heat.

"Today you die, too, Sandra," she said. Her lips tightened into a grim smile. "I'll almost miss this place." Sandra Smith. Not her real name, just the one she had been using for the past six months. It had served her well. She and Sandra had reached a place she had only dreamed she could attain. She was on the brink of something great.

Sammantha looked to her hands—skilled hands, surgeon's hands, avenger's hands. That was what they would be today, if all went right. Sammantha studied the thin leather gloves that covered those fingers. Protected, they looked sleek and benign.

Sammantha's mind was dragged back again, kicking and screaming across the Virginia countryside—to the white Colonial with its black shutters, its stained-glass windows and its broad green lawns. Twenty-five acres, three horses, the below-ground swimming pool and two green Buicks in the circular driveway. Her American nightmare. She sees her bedroom. It is painted yellow and it houses a world full of dolls. Cabbage Patch and Barbie. Raggedy Ann and Andy. She leaves these dolls behind, all of them orphans, just like her. There is a birthday party. Her birthday, with young, innocent, happy girls. They

sing karaoke. It is a new thing, something none of them have tried before. It is something foreign and rare and exciting. They eat cake and ice cream at the dining room table. She helps her mother clean up in the kitchen. She walks across that very same floor, the one covered just a week later with the debris of death.

The kitchen, she thought. She sees her mother staring at the ceiling, her hair twisted, some of it clotted black, a swatch of it still gleaming red in the sunlight. She sees her butterfly cup, shattered beside her mother's ear. She was so excited, bursting through the door to tell her mother the news. Straight A's again. Five dollars for each and another year of riding lessons earned. Life is a cup full of promise. Then she falls to her knees beside her mother, her tongue so thick in her throat that it feels like a dry sponge. She fights for air.

"Momma? Daddy?"

And then...the shoes. Those black shoes.

"They killed your parents...The Americans killed them, your mother and father. Do you understand? They are dead because they came to America."

"I understand. I will never forget. Never."

The teapot whistled. Sammantha glanced at her watch and began to wring her hands. Ten minutes. Instant coffee. A nervous need. Then she'd begin to prepare for the reception. The British Embassy. The beginning.

Sammantha reached into the cupboard high above the stove for her cup, her single cup, her special cup. The cupboard had no door, just strips of splintered wood where the screws had been ripped away. She felt the cup through her gloves. She smiled as she pulled it into the light, her cup, with colorful butterflies flying happily in the faded sunshine. It was glued together in so many places that it resembled an archaeological ruin more than a functioning coffee cup. That's what it was, the one priceless ruin of her aborted childhood.

Sammantha's mind veered again, like a car skidding on a patch of ice, leaving her powerless to steer or stop. It was all she could do to hold on. Her mind stops at the horse corral behind her parent's home. It sees the small pond where she and her father go fishing, and out beyond the pond to the wooded paths where she likes to ride. She sees the great bay windows of the kitchen, where she sits looking out while her mother hums happily as she makes hot cocoa and pours it into Sammantha's butterfly cup.

"Mama...dear Mama..."

Sammantha swiped at an escaped tear that was dripping along her cheek. She carried her cup carefully, with two hands like a child, to the solitary chair in the dusty room. The chair was puffy and brown, tattered and torn, with thick white clumps of stuffing peeking out through its exposed springs. Sammantha lowered herself carefully into the seat and winced when the metal clawed at the rawness of her ragged skin.

Mother, she thought. *Mother was always there when I had a bump or bruise.* "I'll see that they pay, mother. Today we'll begin to exact our price."

Minutes later, her coffee drained, Sammantha walked to the far edge of the room to a free-standing sink. Beside the sink sat a dingy porcelain bathtub that smelled faintly of urine no matter how many times she cleaned it. Across from the tub, a cracked and blotchy mirror stretched from the floor to eye height. Sammantha undressed before the mirror, watching intently as each piece of clothing fell away from her body, until she stood there naked, except for her gloves, her thin satin slippers and her hair net.

Sammantha could have been a Broadway dancer. She was long and lean, her edges taut but rounded. Her muscles were smooth but dense with strength. With proper training she might have been a gymnast or an Olympic skater. Her caretakers had deemed other training more useful. Sammantha could kill a man with the flick of a wrist, and deliver a lethal injection that could not be traced. She raised computer

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viruses like a mother nurtures children, and she could cut a brain as naturally as a housewife sliced carrots. In the next few months she would use that training. Her life would come full circle. She would repay the ones who had damned her to hell. She would take them there with her, every last one of them.

Sammantha studied what she saw in the mirror, the intense face with the thoughtful, tortured eyes. Her hair was the color of corn silk. It was thick, straight and smooth. It would fall several inches below her shoulders, framing a Slavic face that had sharp, angular cheeks, a high forehead and rounded sensuous lips. Her lips parted to reveal an orthodontist's vision of the ideal mouth, with straight front teeth bleached to perfection.

It was her eyes that made her unique. One was green, the other blue. They were like shades of the ocean. Like the ocean, they moved without stop, changing colors with her movements and her moods.

With a flash of her teeth and a crinkle of her nose, Sammantha could transform a deathly, calculating stare into the warmth of sunshine. This gave her power over men. With a subtle glance she could spin a man into her web. She could reach inside him and shudder his loins, fill him with desire—and the thought that he, and he alone, was the one man who could satisfy her.

Sammantha stuffed her clothes into a small canvas suitcase. This was all that was left of Sandra Smith. Everything else had been burned the night before. She had cleaned the room of stray hairs and fingerprints. Only the mattress on the floor, the lousy tea kettle and the smelly brown chair remained. She'd leave her door open and it would all be gone by morning.

Sammantha spread her legs and sneered at herself in the mirror. "That's what they've always wanted, isn't it? They didn't care about your mind. They didn't worry about what you might *feel*, what *needs* you had, what *pain* you felt." Sammantha ran her fingers through her pubic hairs. "I'll give you what you want, my princess, now just spread your legs and everything will be fine..." Sammantha closed her eyes and bit her lip. She saw her dead mother's face and shook it off. "But you didn't kill me, did you? None of you had me. Not really. None of you. You hear!"

Sammantha stepped toward the mirror and stopped only inches away. "I got something from you, every last one of you. I salvaged my life. I earned my education, I made my money...My..." She closed her eyes. After several moments she whispered, "And now it's time for revenge—on all of you, every single last one of you."

Sammantha cleaned herself, then began to apply her makeup. After thirty minutes she smiled, pleased with her looks. She reached down and dabbed a finger into a jar of black powder. She massaged the powder under her eyes until they were both surrounded by pronounced, well-darkened, raccoon circles. She painted small, nearly invisible brown stripes around her lips and eyes to give her the subtle, saddened look of a clown. She viewed herself again and smiled slyly.

"Much better." No one would look at her now. She inserted two brown contact lenses into her eyes and examined them closely. Even better.

Sammantha had looked this way the day she had applied for her job at the British Embassy. She had looked this way every day since. No one at the Embassy had seen the sensuous beauty that could turn a strong man's knees to jelly. They knew the dour but efficient Miss Smith—with muddy-brown hair tied in a tight bun behind a stern, worn-out face.

Sammantha wrapped her hair into a thin rubber cap and fit it tightly against her head. She covered the cap with her Miss Smith wig. With the wig securely in place, Sammantha reached into the cupboard under the basin. From inside she pulled a brown paper bag, in it were a servant's uniform and a pair of white, rubber-soled shoes. She dressed quickly, and within moments the transformation was complete.

The Sandra Smith standing in the mirror bore no resemblance to the Sammantha Starodubov underneath. She was a dull-witted, slow-moving, plain-faced twit, lumbering through world in an ignorant fog. She was sweet, kind, gentle, and boring—not the tortured, provocative genius that suffered inside.

Just two things left, thought Sammantha. She walked to the pitiful kitchen and dropped to her knees. She reached into a tilting wooden cupboard. It was dusty with cobwebs and guarded inside by three rusty rat traps spaced on the outer edge of the bottom. Sammantha reached over the traps for a wooden pointer that she'd left inside. She took the pointer within her gloved fingers and used it to touch beneath a small plastic vial that was resting in the jaws of a fourth trap, a bear trap, with jagged, rusty fangs. There was a loud *crack* as the pointer snapped in two. Only then did Sammantha reach for the container and grasp it with her hand. As she pulled back her arm, it scraped against a rough piece of veneer, just a tiny tweak that Sammantha noticed, but ignored.

Sammantha stood up. With effort, she twisted the heel off her right shoe. She held the shoe toward the light. A hollow space had been expertly carved inside the heel to match the vial. Sammantha snapped the vial into place and fit the heel back onto her shoe.

"How I have waited for this," she said softly.

Sammantha took her butterfly cup from the counter. She wrapped it in a dishtowel and placed it gently into her suitcase. She took one last look at the room, threw the key onto the counter, and walked out.

CHAPTER 2



Jason “Jock” Tilson sat down at the foot of a king-sized bed with an ornate, 19th century canopy. He leaned back on his muscular arms, gazing across the room as a woman pulled a cream colored silk evening dress over a plain white camisole.

“Nice view, Kiki,” said Jock.

“Keep your eyes to yourself.” The woman leaned over to straighten the folds of her dress. Her breasts bulged above the top of the dress and Jock angled for a better look.

“Even better,” he said. Jock swung his feet off the bed and walked slowly toward Kiki.

“You take another step toward me and I’ll scream.” Kiki backed away. Jock didn’t stop. “If you don’t keep your hands off me—” Kiki turned away and giggled.

Jock touched Kiki’s shoulders and ran his lips along the back of her neck. He inhaled the damp sweetness of her clean skin and rocked her gently in his arms. He ran his broad fingers down along her slim frame until she grabbed his hand.

“I’m warning you,” Kiki said sharply.

“Do you know how much I love you?”

“No.”

Jock pouted. “I am deeply offended.”

Kiki sighed and let her gown drop to the floor. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She took a long, resigned breath and pulled herself against her husband’s bare chest.

“That’s better,” he said.

“I really wanted to make a good impression,” Kiki said. She twirled an errant wisp of her husband’s hair before cradling his face with her hands. She kissed him gently, lovingly. “And now look what we’re doing.”

“We’re supposed to be late.”

Kiki chuckled. “You? Late?”

“Really. I think we should be late.”

“Why don’t you just say it,” she said.

“Say what?”

“You know.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

“I’m not scared.” Jock lifted a spotless crystal ash tray off one of the end tables and turned it over in his hands. He peered at it as if it were something odd and unusual.

“Yes, you are scared.”

“Of what?”

“You know.”

“I won’t fail.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Where’d this ash tray come from?”

“It’s historic. Sit on the bed.”

Jock put down the ash tray and sat beside his wife. She took his hands and looked at him intently,

almost motherly.

“Remember that eight year old boy?”

“No.”

“Yes, you do.”

“What about him?”

“You remember that day? Down on his knees, with flowers in his hands.”

“He was young and stupid.”

“And so sure of himself. You proposed to me when you were eight years old, Jock.”

“Children say lots of silly things.”

Kiki laughed. “You told me that we would be married. You said you would be president. You said we would live happily ever after.”

The president frowned. “Yeah, well—”

As the first lady lay back upon the bed, her breasts spread flat across her chest, making her look like a teasing nymph in a Rubens painting. She smiled. “And you were right.”

“But—”

The first lady held up her hand. “Stop. In all this time, never once have I doubted you.”

“But, Jesus, Kiki. This isn’t some childhood fantasy. We’re *here. Now*. I’m not eight years old. I’ve learned things since then.”

“This is what you have worked for your entire life.”

Jock Tilson closed his eyes. “They say, be careful what you wish for...”

“...for you may get that wish,” finished the first lady.

“What if I fail?”

Kiki laughed. “And when have you failed?”

Jock stood suddenly, his back stiff. “Failed?” He began to pace and his lips turned into a pouting frown. “You know damned well when I failed. The Yale game.”

“Not that again.”

“The Ivy championship on the line—”

“That was over twenty years ago.”

“I struck out.”

“That’s baseball, Jock.”

“The bottom of the ninth and I struck out.”

“Copley was on fire that day. Two others struck out in that same inning. He struck out eighteen in the game.”

“But they’re not president.”

Kiki laughed. “I ask you when you’ve failed and you talk about baseball. A boy’s game. Half a lifetime ago.” Kiki tried to stand but the president pressed her back against the bed.

“Have I told you that I love you today?”

Kiki sighed. “Yes. Twice.”

“Oh...Well, I love you. And it’s a *man’s* game.”

“Boy’s game. You’re all boys. Go get dressed, so we can get to work on time.”

“First things first.” Jock drew the straps of Kiki’s dress across her shoulders and began to slip it down her back.

“Darling,” she said. “You’ve never doubted me, have you?”

Jock smiled and shook his head.

“Of course you haven’t,” she continued. “You’ve made me the happiest grandmother in the world.” She hesitated. “I left my diaphragm at Camp David yesterday. Since you’re not clipped and I’m not on

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the pill... Unless you want to be changing diapers for your second year in office, I suggest you get your butt over to your side of the room and put on your clothes.”

Jock groaned good-naturedly. “I’ll send Kelley out for condoms.”

“He’s the vice president, not an errand boy.”

“It’ll give him something to do. He needs something to stay busy.”

Kiki looked at Jock, waiting for him to crack. She waited for half a minute, her eyes never blinking, until they both erupted in laughter.

“Wouldn’t the press have a field day?” Kiki said between tears. “You think they were hard on Quayle and Biden...”

“We could—”

“Not on your life.”

“I’ll send the—”

“Get dressed! I love you, but get dressed.”

Jock pinched Kiki’s thigh. She gave a muffled shout, then slapped her husband’s bare bottom. She pushed him off the bed. “Just remember who’s boss.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“As much as I’d love to, at forty-six, I’m just too old to be lugging another child on my hip.”

“As usual, you’re right,” said the president.

It was the middle of winter, only weeks since Jock Tilson had been sworn to the presidency. Tonight was one of his first official acts. The Washington temperature hovered around zero. A biting wind was blowing down the Potomac, an arctic chill on the heels of snow.

“You’d think the British would wait until it was warm,” said Kiki, as she straightened her dress.

Jock smiled as he pulled a starched white shirt up over one arm. “It’s the international hierarchy, dear. We couldn’t very well attend a reception at the Italian embassy until we’ve first been hosted by the British, the Germans and so on. The world’s a global village, remember? With all of the usual sibling rivalries.”

“Don’t they know you’re leaving tonight?”

Jock thought about his secret meeting with the new king of Saudi Arabia. Arab tensions were high and OPEC members were grumbling, as usual. He needed to discuss oil policy with the king, far outside the glare of public opinion. He would be spending the night upon Air Force One. While America was starting breakfast, he would be seated on a ceremonial pillow drinking coffee and eating goat’s eyes with the king.

“That’s all hush, hush. Not a word to anyone.”

“You’ll be leaving right after the reception?”

“Have to.”

“Good. I’m tired. I can use some rest.”

Jock finished buttoning his shirt, then began to rub Kiki’s shoulders. “You sure you don’t want to come along? Maybe join the mile high club?”

“Not tonight, dear.” Kiki turned and pulled her husband’s chest close to her face. “Have I told you that I love you today?”

“Twice.”

“Well, I love you today.”

“You make me very happy.”

“You still can’t have sex.”

CHAPTER 3



Jack Trance stared at his reflection in a full length mirror that was built into the wall. His tuxedo was expertly cut to his hardened frame. His shirt was the color of cream, expensively smooth and rich. His brown hair was expertly cut and stylishly long in the back. His brown eyes seemed to radiate strength and intelligence. There were other things behind that focused stare. There was a quiet confidence, but there was also a kind of *Weltschmerz*, a hollow, longing sadness borne from seeing far too much of the world's darker sides. Trance's cheeks were high and chiseled. In normal times he would have looked sleek and elegant. Now there was a gaunt, haunting shadow surrounding him, like the life had been carved out of him by a hidden disease.

Trance frowned as he fumbled impatiently with a black, silk bow tie. He glanced across the room to a woman seated at a blue marble vanity. The woman was primping her hair, working her way ever-closer to declaring sartorial success. The woman was in her mid thirties, athletically slim, with sensitive walnut eyes, and tawny auburn hair that flowed smoothly down her shoulders.

Trance said, "I really don't want to do this. Let's go to St. Croix."

The woman ignored him. She reached for a tube of mascara and began touching up her eyelashes. "Remember last year, how the president asked you to be nice to his successor?"

"That doesn't mean I have to go to Tilson's parties. I hate these things."

"The president asked you here as a personal favor."

"I've never met the man. Can't be too personal."

"Jack—"

They had been discussing this for days. The last place Trance wanted to be was Washington. Things happened to him here. Bad things. But, as the nation's most accomplished operative, as well as one of its richest men, the new president had called personally to ask for a private meeting at the British Embassy.

"This is a free country, you know. We don't *have* to do anything." Trance pulled fruitlessly at his tie and groaned. He looked at his fingers, still trembling from drug withdrawal. "Damn this tie. Can't we go somewhere else?"

Lauren Haverford continued looking into the mirror, calmly plucking her eyebrows. "I think you should give the guy a break. He's new. He's got a lot to learn."

"He doesn't need me, Lauren. There will be plenty of people clamoring over themselves to brown their noses on his butt. He's got no use for a small town lawyer." Trance gave up on the tie. He focused on his French cuffs. He managed to slip his cufflinks on without a problem. "Besides," he continued. "I told Miller I was out."

Lauren smiled but didn't speak. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed Trance begin to fumble again with his tie.

"You told that to Miller years ago," said Lauren sweetly. "Since then you've been anything but retired."

Trance's eyes darted toward Lauren, but he held back comment. Instead, he strode to a phone and punched for room service.

"How may I help you, Mr. Trance?" said the concierge.

"Clive, could you please bring me a black clip-on bow tie? A formal one?"

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Lauren stifled a laugh as Trance dropped the receiver back into place. “I heard that,” he said.

“Get over here, hotshot. I’ll tie that thing.”

“But—”

“Get your butt over here.”

“Yes, sir!”

Lauren motioned for Trance to take a seat at the vanity. She settled him upon the wide, thickly cushioned bench and patted his shoulders.

“Honey,” she said. “This is a party, a social engagement, not a crisis.” Lauren pulled Trance’s aborted knot apart and began tying a new one.

“It doesn’t feel right.”

“It’s been nearly a month since your kidnapping. So, you were tortured and hooked on drugs. Big deal. You need to move on. Get back in the game.”

“I don’t want the game.”

“The game wants you. It needs you.”

Trance closed his eyes. “Lauren, you know what happens. The president will get to know me. Miller will shoot his mouth off. The next thing you know, I’ll be in some Godforsaken place fighting for who knows what...”

“Just tell him *no*.”

“Good idea. Let’s go see Wilson in Austria. I hear the skiing is *fantastiche*.”

“I thought you wanted warmth?”

“Okay. We’ll visit Stick in Fiji.”

“Who says your friends want to see you?”

Lauren looked at Trance. She felt like a girl staring into a store window, coveting a priceless doll she could never afford. She wished that things were different, that she could ease his fear. Perhaps if she hadn’t pursued her career, if she’d married him when he had asked...maybe then, things would be different. But now?

Lauren thought of that day—the darkest day of her life. She sees herself dressed in a pink chiffon gown, holding a bouquet of spring flowers, staring blankly forward as the words drone on. Trance’s young bride stands trembling beside her. *She’s pretty*, Lauren thinks. *She’ll make him a good wife*. Lauren wipes at tears she can’t hide. She looks across the aisle to the groom. Trance fiddles nervously with his cufflinks and shifts his weight from one foot to the other and back. Lauren looks to him and they lock eyes. *What is he thinking?* she wonders. Finally, someone will make him happy. She aches to be that woman, but it will never be. If only she could go back and change the past.

“And do you, Janice, take this man...”

Trance’s eyes glance toward Lauren. He smiles, as if fortified by her strength.

It should have been me, she thinks. *If I’d only said yes*.

“...’till death do you part?”

“I do,” whispered Lauren. Her heart jumped, as Trance’s touch brought her back to their suite at the Ritz-Carlton on 22nd Street, N.W..

“You do what?” Trance asked.

Lauren blushed. She brought her hand up to gently caress Trance’s face.

“I...” She hesitated. “...I was just remembering your wedding day.” Lauren felt Trance’s jaw tighten. “I was remembering Janice, and how I wished you both a life of happiness. I was also remembering how much I wished it had been me.”

Trance shook his head. “No, Lauren.”

“Jack—”

“No.”

“Jack, it’s been over six years.” She let the words hang and continued, “You’ve got to move on.”

“Lauren—”

Trance sat down on the bed and slumped his shoulders. He drew a deep breath through his nose and exhaled slowly. Lauren stood beside him and cradled his head against her hip. She could feel him shudder.

“I love you,” she said. “I always have. I always will. You know that.”

“I can’t let it happen again,” he said firmly.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“My fault?” Trance got to his feet and began to pace the room. “Of course it was my fault.”

“She was a fine woman, Jack,” said Lauren softly. “We both loved her. But she knew what she was getting into.”

Trance stopped abruptly and laughed. “She had no goddamn clue. Only I knew what she was getting into and I should have stopped it.”

“Bullshit.” Lauren took hold of Trance’s shoulders and squeezed them. She shook him gently. “Listen to me, Jack. It was terrorists that killed Janice, not you. Not Miller. Not anyone else. So let it go. It’s not...your...fault. It won’t happen again. It won’t.”

Lauren relaxed her grip and sank back against the bed. She grabbed a feather pillow from beside the wooden headboard and laid it over her face.

Trance looked at her, feeling helpless. His eyes glazed, and he began to look aimlessly about the large suite, as he remembered the day he’d learned of his wife’s death.

The office is not overly large, but it reeks of money and influence. Along the walls hang faded pictures of the Miller family mansions, including the Newport monstrosity on Bellevue Avenue, just down the street from a home owned by Trance’s uncle. There are pictures of sailboats docked at private harbors. There are large family portraits with no one smiling. The floor is covered with a thick oriental carpet. The furniture is from seventeenth and eighteenth century European royalty.

“She’s dead, Jack,” says Miller, only seconds after Trance has been shown into his office.

“Don’t play me, Jake.”

“It happened nearly a month ago. You couldn’t be contacted.”

“Couldn’t be contacted? My wife is dead and you can’t call me in?”

“We couldn’t jeopardize the mission.”

Trance smiles angrily. “Ah, yes, the mission. Of course, we couldn’t sacrifice the mission.” He hesitates, staring across the ten feet that separates the two men. “You *had* her killed.”

“Jack—”

“You had her killed so I wouldn’t quit.”

Trance takes two quick steps toward Miller. He grabs him by the collar and pushes him against the wall. He lifts Miller up with one hand. Miller’s feet are dangling off the floor and he is wiggling like a captured squirrel.

“Who did it?”

Miller sputters, “It...was...terrorists—”

Trance presses his free palm against Miller’s throat. Miller begins to choke and his legs begin to flail against the wall. His shoes make a rhythmic *thump, thump, thump*, but no one rushes in to see what

is wrong. No one dares.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” says Trance.

Miller shakes his head. Spit begins to drool down his chin. His eyes begin to bulge until he looks like a bloated fish. Trance lets him hang there for several more seconds. Then he slowly lets him down. Trance turns and sinks into a Queen Anne chair. He covers his face with his hands and begins to moan. *Like a frigging child*, thinks Miller. A child at the helm of the Starship Enterprise. Miller hunches over and coughs. He rubs at his swollen red neck until his breathing returns to normal. Then he puts his crimson face against Trance’s nose.

“I had orders to send her out,” Miller croaks. “She had orders to go.”

“She was quitting the CIA. You knew that.”

Miller shrugs. “She was ours until the orders came through. You know the drill.”

“She was two months pregnant. Asshole.”

Miller closes his eyes. “I’m sorry, Jack. I didn’t know. I had my orders.” Miller walks to his desk and reaches into the second drawer on the right. He withdraws a Beretta nine millimeter pistol and points it at Trance. He smiles and places the gun upon the desk. He reaches back into the drawer. He withdraws a large bottle of pink Pepto Bismol. He unscrews the cap and takes several large swallows. Without looking at Trance he screws the cap back on the bottle and returns it to the drawer, smacking his lips like it was his last meal. Miller looks up from the desk toward Trance. Trance hasn’t moved from the chair, except to raise his chin.

“I could kill you now,” says Miller.

“Fine with me. Do it.”

Miller lifts the pistol off the top of the desk. He holds it with familiar, practiced fingers and walks toward Trance. He stops three feet from the chair and aims the gun between Trance’s eyes. He holds it there for several long seconds. Trance doesn’t move. Then Miller flips the gun into the air, catches it by the barrel, and offers it to Trance.

“It’s unmarked,” he says. “You can kill me and walk out of here a free man. If you’re going to do it, do it now. Because I can’t tell you who gave those orders. And we’re never going to talk about this again.”

Miller holds out the gun for more than a minute before letting it drop to the floor.

“We all do our duty,” Miller says.

“Duty,” whispered Trance.

“Duty?” said Lauren. “Did I hear you say ‘duty’?”

Trance’s head snapped toward Lauren. It took him a moment to return through the years. He shook his head slowly, as he cleared the cobwebs.

“Miller’s behind our invitation to this party. He wants to torture me.”

“I’m sure the president just wants to meet you.” Lauren’s tears had stopped. She ventured a glance in the mirror. Her makeup had smudged on her cheeks but she ignored it. She looped Trance’s tie a final time and pulled it snugly against his collar.

“Any new president would need to meet with you, Jack. Tilson is getting it done early.”

Trance thought of Miller again. A CIA lifer, he had been Trance’s liaison for the secret, covert operations team known as T-Force. T-Force had been created to diffuse international events before they occurred. Their prime objective was to keep the world free and in peace—a tall order in an ever-more-complicated world. T-Force had made its mark, although no one outside a small group of patriots ever knew. Like all efforts involving the government, things grew out of hand. Their orders grew blacker and wetter. Operations began to include the assassination of foreign government officials and in-

ternational blackmail, behaviors that mimicked the very acts they were pledged to terminate. Trance tried to quit, but they wouldn't let him. When Janice became pregnant, Trance had made his decision to terminate. This time for good. Regardless of the cost, even if it meant his life.

One day, as Miller was briefing him on a mission to Central America, Trance reached the tipping point. "I can't do this anymore, Jacob."

Miller sighed. "Lost your nerve, Trance?"

"Screw you."

"It's her, isn't it? Your new little wifey?"

"No, Miller. I don't like what you stand for, what *we* stand for, not anymore."

"You'll do this one for us? We're counting on you, Jack. You can quit after this one. I'll even help you get out. I'll cover your ass so they won't kill you."

"Awfully nice of you, Jake."

When Trance had returned, his wife was dead. They'd had him on a string ever since.

Trance turned his head toward Lauren. "Miller's an ass."

Lauren laughed and pointed in the mirror. "How do you like your tie?"

"Almost as good as a clip-on."

Lauren lightly slapped the side of Trance's head. "Go to hell."

Trance stood and kissed Lauren gently on the forehead. "Already been there. I'll wear this tie, just for you."

"Undt you vill like it," replied Lauren, with her best fake German accent.

CHAPTER 4



The wind swirled plumes of crystallized snow high into the air, making Washington's Massachusetts Avenue look more like the arctic tundra than a busy city street. Sammantha Starodubov bent her head against the sting and marched like a soldier along the salted, but slippery sidewalk. Sammantha wore a short, thin coat over her Embassy uniform. It was barely long enough to cover her knees. She felt strangely warm, knowing that each step brought her closer to the revenge she had been planning for most of her life. She could almost feel its sweetness on her tongue.

Sammantha blinked against the icy air as it stabbed at her contact lenses. Unwanted tears swelled in her eyes. She dabbed at them lightly, trying not to disturb the carefully created aura of darkness around them. The eyes were brown, not green and blue. The contacts made Sandra Smith myopic, not Sammantha's hawk-like 20/15 vision. The awkward lenses made it easier for Sammantha to maintain Sandra's clumsy, blind-dog demeanor, but they made it far more challenging to walk on this unholy night.

Sammantha gazed upward and wondered how long she'd been walking. The night was deathly dark, brightened only by the snowy glow of streetlamps and the occasional headlights of the sparse Washington traffic. She squinted and caught her bearings. Only six more blocks. Embassy Row. Land of gold. Six more blocks to the money, power and privilege—people far too insulated against the kind of pain she had been forced to endure. Technocrats and bureaucrats, Perrier and caviar, sailboats and Sunday brunches—Alice in Washingtonland. People thinking backwards, kings and queens and mad hatters, all of them living an illusion.

"They'll pay," she murmured in Russian. "Tonight they will begin to pay."

CHAPTER 5



The mood was holiday festive inside the British Embassy. A stringed quartet played Mozart from a square wooden stage erected in a secluded corner. Light sparkled off the radiant chandeliers, the freshly cleaned silver, the Baccarat crystal, and the polished teeth of the arriving guests. To Sammantha, the men looked like manicured penguins in their pressed tuxedos, all squawking about the stock market and the upcoming Super Bowl. The women looked like stiff mannequins, adorned in long silk evening gowns that seemed to hold both their controlled emotions and liposuctioned thighs in check.

The British Ambassador held court off to the side of the room near the entryway. A semi-circle of early arrivals had gathered around him to pay respect and score political points.

Sammantha's Sandra carried an oval Reed and Barton silver tray, propped with champagne flutes sitting on top of dainty white napkins. She milled about, keeping the guests well quenched. Now and then an annoyed-looking penguin would motion to her from across the room and she would deftly negotiate the crowd until, smiling, she offered her tray. *Here you go, piggy, piggy.* Then she would curtsy and move on. Sammantha went about her job efficiently. When her tray emptied she began grabbing empty glasses off of end tables, coffee tables and high boys. She lifted three glasses off the black Steinway grand piano. *Slobs.* She rubbed the wet circles dry with a towel that she'd stuck into a pocket in her apron. She carried the tray back into the kitchen and refilled it with a new set of sparkling glasses and a fresh stack of napkins. A few minutes later she repeated the process. Then again. Six months of living like this she thought, all so that she could kill the American government. A small price to pay for the glory, the revenge and the righteous retribution.

Sammantha noticed one of the penguins brazenly waving his watch like a holiday flag. She glanced at it as she headed back toward the kitchen. It was a Patek-Phillipe. A forty thousand dollar waste, she thought, on a boor like that. Then she smiled. That watch would melt someday soon, along with its owner. But first things first.

It was only minutes before the president and first lady were scheduled to arrive. Sammantha's Sandra walked nervously into the kitchen. Baxter Whitley gave her a smile. Whitley had been the chef for the Embassy for over twenty years. He was a heavysset man with round rosy cheeks and downy tufts of hair that made him look like a cherub in a Renaissance painting, despite his fifty plus years. He was busily pouring champagne.

"Thirsty crowd tonight," he said with his clipped, but robust British voice.

"Must be the weather," said Sandra. She met Whitley's gaze with a glazed, hollow stare.

Poor girl, thought Whitley. *So nice, but so dull.* "I hear you're leaving us? Somebody told me, after this evening?"

Sandra shrugged and smiled shyly. She looked like a schoolgirl begging for acceptance by the class prima donna. "I am, sir. Thank you for noticing."

"Well, it's been bloody nice having you here, miss. You've been a diligent worker, kept to yourself, always on time. And dependable, always dependable. I suppose I never told you that?"

"Thank you very much, sir."

"Who will have you're services now?"

Sandra seemed to blush, with color on her face almost seeping through her dark shadow makeup. She scraped a shoe against the floor and blinked, doe-eyed at the chef.

“Speak up, girl,” said Whitley with a friendly smile. “Did somebody say Australia? You came to us out of their embassy, didn’t you?”

Sandra nodded. “I... I’m not very pretty, Mr. Whitley. And I don’t got... don’t... have much schooling. But I... there’s a man...he’s asked me to marry him. I’ll be leaving tomorrow. God willing.”

“You?” asked Whitley. “Getting married?” He never would have guessed it. Whitley laughed heartily. “Well bloody me bloomers...Sandra Smith getting married...” Whitley drained the champagne bottle. He dropped it into a recycling bin and ran a set of stubby fingers through his feathery white hair. “Why that’s bloody wonderful.” Whitley pressed a glass of champagne into Sandra’s hand and took another for himself. “We must have a toast!” He lifted his glass into the air. The other workers in the embassy kitchen were too busy to pay attention, so the two of them drank alone. Whitley bellowed, “To Sandra Smith, may she live happily ever after!” Whitley downed the contents of his glass in three quick gulps. He held the glass upside down in front of his eyes until a single drop of champagne could be seen clinging to the rim. He slurped it with a satisfied grin. “The best part,” he said. His face turned serious. “What’s this chap’s name?”

“Jones, sir.”

“Is he good to you, child?”

“Yes, sir.”

“To the future Mrs. Jones, then!” Whitley reached a meaty hand around Sandra’s shoulder and peered at her with his bloodshot eyes. His voice cracked as he said, “I’ll miss you, Sandra. You make this place seem normal. Please, leave us a forwarding address, will you?”

“I will, Mr. Whitley.”

Sammantha’s Sandra headed back to work. Whitley returned to his pouring, muttering, “I wish people would tell me these things...”

Before she reached the door, Sammantha stopped. She turned back to face the rotund chef. “Thank you,” she said. “You’ve been nicer to me than any man I’ve known...” She walked back and gave Whitley a quick, nervous hug. Then she kissed his cheek. “I’ll never forget you.” Sammantha broke out of Whitley’s embrace. “I must get ready. President Tilson should be arriving soon.”

“Talley ho for the president.” Whitley emptied another glass of champagne and burped with half-inebriated satisfaction. He adjusted his ample belt and returned to his pouring, humming as he worked.

Sammantha glided into the reception hall and glanced about the room. Still no president. Her eyes were drawn to a man ushering a woman toward the British Ambassador. Sammantha froze, feeling a tingle run along her neck. She felt an involuntary shiver and began flitting like a hummingbird for empty glasses. She maneuvered closer to the Ambassador, who was speaking to this man, the man she hated above all others.

“Ah, Mr. Trance,” she heard the Ambassador say. “So good of you to join us again...This must be Miss Lauren Haverford...” The Ambassador took Lauren’s proffered hand and gave it an exaggerated, but perfunctory kiss.

“Your name is spoken of highly in international banking circles,” he said to her softly.

Lauren blushed with obvious surprise. “Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.”

Deford Brighton had been a diplomat with the British Foreign Service for nearly thirty-five years. He was the second son of a Duke, schooled at Eton and Oxford. He was marvelously well-bred and he looked it. Unfortunately for Brighton, he’d been left no money and no title, a deadly combination for a man of his stature and breeding. His salary couldn’t quite match his expensive tastes, or those of his third wife, even with his MI6 stipend. To make ends meet, he’d made a slight concession to his country’s honor and joined the CIA payroll. A hundred grand a year for verifying information the Yanks already knew. Plus, of course, his job of facilitating meetings like this. They were allies, after all. Not enemies.

He was an essential cog in British American cooperation.

Brighton leaned toward Trance as he shook his hand. "Perhaps, when all of this early hubbub is over, we might chat privately. Catch up on old times?"

"Sure," said Trance. There would be a meeting with the president, just as he had feared.

As Trance led Lauren away from the Ambassador, he said, "Didn't I tell you?"

"He just wants to talk, that's all."

Trance and Lauren stood still for a moment, both of them looking out over the crowd. It was an impressive gathering that included the nominees for secretary of state and defense, several Supreme Court justices, a former president and his first lady.

"Is it true that no one can leave here before the president?" asked Lauren.

"No," said Trance, grinning. "One can always leave before the guest of honor. It's just considered bad protocol. A good way to get on the Washington shitlist."

"Even if I had an emergency?"

"Even if you were dying. In Washington protocol, some things are more important than emergencies, more important than life. Did you want to leave? I'm ready."

Lauren saw the amusement in Trance's eyes. She knew he was only half serious. Half.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? A good reason never to be invited to Washington again? 'He can't be invited to the reception, Mr. Ambassador. He left the British embassy last year before the guest of honor...He's a terrible boor...'"

A brief hush spread across the room as the president and first lady glided through the main embassy doors. The room grew silent, like the skip of a heartbeat, the noise stopping for one hesitating instant, before resuming to the incessant drone of subdued voices.

Sammantha's heart began thumping in her chest. Her temples burned and throbbed, especially during that brief, silent acknowledgment of the honored guests. Sammantha actually *felt* Tilson's presence before she saw him. She fought off a wave of nausea. Sweat began to slick up her palms, so much that she was afraid to carry her tray. She heaved a heavy breath. Could she really do this? Sammantha walked back toward the kitchen. She held her tray high as she pushed with her hip against the swinging door. She set the silver tray down and excused herself. She walked to the servants' ladies room and locked the door. She pressed her ear against the door and listened. No one was there. She pulled off her shoe, then tapped the heel against the sink until it came loose. She took off the heel cup and removed the plastic vial. She unscrewed its cap and withdrew an eye dropper from inside. She slipped the dropper into her apron pocket. She screwed the top back onto the vial and returned it to her shoe. She walked back into the kitchen and stood beside Whitley.

"Are you ready, girl?" he said.

"I'm so happy you chose me," said Sammantha's Sandra. Her voice sounded soft and reverent, more like she was speaking to the Dalai Lama than to a drunken cook. "You don't know how much this means to me. This is the most important moment in my life."

Whitley looked like a father watching his daughter walk down the wedding aisle. His eyes were beaming and misting with emotion. He was glad that he had chosen this plain, shy girl to serve the president of the United States. He pulled a fresh bottle of Taittinger from an iced, stainless steel bucket. He popped the cork and poured two glasses. He matched each one with a silk doily before setting them on a silver tray that was adorned with white, monogrammed linen.

"There you go, now," he said. "Don't spill anything."

"Oh, I won't, Mr. Whitley."

"Good girl." Whitley held the tray while Sandra steadied it in her hands. "Some day maybe you'll tell your grandchildren about tonight," he said.

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You poor man, thought Sammantha. *If you only knew*. Sammantha wheeled around and headed toward the door. She appeared to stumble. As she did, her right hand reached out over the glasses and squeezed two drops of liquid into one glass. She righted herself and continued out into the room, while pocketing the eye dropper.

Sammantha positioned herself at a discreet distance behind the president and first lady. She watched for a sign from Brighton, who was chatting with them pleasantly. The ambassador nodded and Sammantha stepped forward.

“May I offer you and the first lady a glass of champagne?” said Brighton.

Sammantha felt a lump form in her throat. It felt like she had swallowed a walnut. This was the moment. The moment of a lifetime.

“I’d love some,” the first lady said. She turned to her husband. “How about you, dear?”

The president nodded. The first lady swiped the two glasses off of Sammantha’s tray before she could react.

“Thank you,” said the first lady. She gave Sammantha a warm, genuine smile.

Bitch, thought Sammantha. *I know what you’re really thinking. You think I’m nothing. You were supposed to wait and take the glass that was offered you. That was the plan. Now you’ve gone and screwed up everything*. Sammantha barely controlled the instinct to slap the first lady across the face. She’d waited a quarter century for this. She’d put up with the pawing and panting, the sour breath, the sweat and the false cries of love. All for this chance, this one chance. *Don’t you blow it for me now*.

“I’m honored,” Sandra said.

Kiki turned and offered a glass to her husband. Sammantha tried to follow her movements, but Brighton stepped in front of her and blocked her way.

“That will be all, my dear.” The ambassador pressed his palm against Sammantha’s back and gently pushed her away.

Which glass had the president taken? Damn that woman! All the years of planning. All of the promises made and the billions invested. *That hick slut could ruin it all*. There would be no second chance.

The first lady raised her glass to toast her husband and the British Ambassador.

“To our two great nations. May they work effectively together to bring a lasting peace to the world.”

“Hear, hear!” said both men.

As the Tilsons raised their glasses to their lips, Sammantha knew that one of them would be dead by morning. She just hoped it was the right one.

The Ambassador found Trance and Lauren seated alone in a quiet corner of the main reception room. Lauren was gulping shrimp and recounting anecdotes from a recent business trip to Japan. Trance was clutching his sides in laughter, his cheeks actually damp from tears.

“I’m not kidding,” cried Lauren. “It really happened that way. What would you expect me to do, eat it?”

“There you are!” shouted the Ambassador above the din. Brighton wore a broad, plastic smile. His eyes were calculating. “I’ve been looking all over for you two.” He tossed his head toward one end of the room. “I thought we might have our chat now.” The Ambassador grabbed Trance by the forearm. “Please, step this way, Jack.”

Brighton turned without waiting for a reply and sped off across the room.

“He’s pleasantly rude,” said Lauren.

Trance winked. “A gentle rebuke. We’re supposed to mingle, not sit in a corner and have fun. Would you like to leave now? It’s your last chance.”

“You really want to go?”

Trance nodded. His eyes looked playful, but also serious. "Absolutely. We're not trapped. C'mon. You want to ski or swim?"

"Not so fast, Trance. You've got to have your meeting with Mr. Big. I didn't fly all the way to Washington to get on some Capitol blacklist." Lauren glanced out over the crowd. "I think I'll do some mingling. Maybe I can pick up some deposits for the bank."

Trance touched Lauren's cheek and smiled. Then he followed the Ambassador's trail through the mass of milling penguins. They stopped at the entrance to a private room on the second floor at the far end of the Embassy.

The Ambassador twisted a skeleton key into the lock of a thick oak door. He turned the brass knob, pressed the door slightly ajar, took a brief look at Trance, winked and walked away. Trance stood alone, staring forward through the half-opened door at the president. Tilson was chatting pleasantly with another man. His feet were propped over a cherry coffee table. An unlit briar pipe dangled loosely from his teeth. There was a delicate tea set on the table. Two partially filled cups held what looked to be black coffee. After several seconds the president looked toward Trance and waived him in.

"Ah, Mr. Trance. Please, join us."

Tilson stood and offered his hand. He gripped Trance's fist and shook it with a firm one, two, three. He held Trance's hand as if measuring him by the feel. Satisfied, he relaxed.

"You've got a good grip," Tilson said. He turned Trance's palm over in his hand and looked along the outer edge. "Is that a callous?"

"Yes, sir."

Tilson's eyes looked surprised and confused. "Goddamn strange place for a callous. It feels more like steer horn."

Trance laughed. "I spent years pounding boards for my Masters. Too many. I don't do it anymore, but some of the scars remain."

Trance looked to the president's other guest. The man was standing with his arms rigidly by his side. His hands were clenched and his face was sickly pale. Their eyes locked.

"We were beginning to think you might not show," said Tilson. The president could almost feel the hate between his two guests, could almost hear sparks crackling in the air. It made him think of the air after a thunderstorm, when its electric charge hung like an invisible mist. "I believe you know Mr. Miller?"

Trance nodded. His lips pressed into a thin, white line. "Unfortunately."

"Ah, yes, well...Mr. Miller has informed me that you and he are 'reluctant allies'."

Trance's lips stretched into a smile. "We were, but not anymore. I'm retired."

From the corner of his eye, Trance could see Miller twitch. He noticed two slight bulges under the lapels of Miller's expensive Tuxedo. The left lapel likely hid Miller's Beretta. He'd lay odds that the other held a hip flask filled with Pepto Bismol.

"Care for a drink?" said Tilson amiably, studying Trance's face through his confident, pale-blue eyes.

Trance ignored him.

"Miller did tell you that I've retired, didn't he?"

The president sat back down on the couch and motioned for Trance to join him. "I wouldn't dream of asking you to do anything against your will, Mr. Trance, particularly for something as meaningless as your country." Tilson saw Trance flinch. *Good*, he thought. *I've got him*. He propped his feet back on the coffee table and leaned back comfortably. "No...I would just like to schedule a few sessions with you. That's all. You can fill me in on some things, particularly your past dealings with my predecessors. Mr. Miller thought you might be a bit...ah...reluctant to do so. So, he offered to be here. To facilitate."

Trance peered at Miller. “Awfully nice of you, Jake.” Then Trance looked squarely at the president. “I can assure you this; it will not help you to have Miller here.”

The president looked from Trance to Miller, and then to his folded hands. “Hmm.” Tilson lifted his feet off the table and reached for a file that was lying on the table’s corner.

“Miller and I have been going over your history.” He thumbed through the contents of the folder. “Quite impressive.”

Trance grimaced. He looked questioningly at Miller. Miller shook his head, almost imperceptibly, in warning.

“That’s what it is, sir, history. Something seen through the bias of someone else. Nothing more.”

“I’m a student of history, Jack. May I call you Jack? I like history, not for the details, but for the big picture.” Tilson laughed. “I’ve got your history boiled down to one page.”

The president opened the folder and pulled out a single sheet of white paper. On top of it was a yellow tab with the letters *SCI* printed on it with bold black type. He stood and offered the paper to Trance.

“It’s only fair you should see it.”

Trance took the paper and glanced through it quickly.

ULTRA SECRET UMBRA

Re: Jack Trance

Considered a national treasure by three presidents. Should be approached with caution.

Parents: His father General John Trance—early member OSS, later CIA. John was son of Japanese mother and American father. His mother Patricia Hopewell. (American Royalty. Sister of Senator Winthrop Hopewell, dec.) Jack Trance only child.

Personal History: Black belt Aikido age nine. Currently ninth degree (highest in the Western hemisphere). World champion: Form, Knives, Sword. Black belts four other disciplines. Victor in competition sponsored by Robert Yang (See Restricted FBI/CIA/Homeland Files). Lived in nine countries as child. Fluent eleven languages, including Russian and Mandarin Chinese. Speaks and writes (at least) six others. Photographic memory. Perfect Navy GTC score. Annapolis, third in class. Reportedly failed final chemistry exam to allow classmate to graduate higher. Instructor, Navy War Games. Genius. Strategic prowess praised by superiors. Weapons expert, all. Sharpshooter. SEAL, Search and Rescue. Captured during mission in Iran. Prisoner, six weeks. Will not divulge or discuss treatment. Possible emotional damage, memory loss. Not confirmed. Severe physical damage. (See Jerome Freeman) Reportedly healed. Highly decorated. Congressional Medal of Honor. Self-funded rogue insurgents in Nepal against Chinese. Court marshal considered but not implemented, as official military discharge (honorable) had been granted. Recruited by Winthrop Hopewell (dec. Senator) to form T-Force, elite secret arm of CIA. (Ultra-classified. See.) Mission Statement—to “diffuse international crises prior to public knowledge.” Successful, numerous occasions. Wife assassinated, by (suspected) Arab jihadists. Not confirmed. Resigned T-Force under psychological duress (death of spouse?). Became paid consultant—primarily to U.S. Govt. (Ultra-classified. See) Payments to date exceed \$30,000,000 to offshore accounts. Refused substantial (\$5-\$10 billion) inheritance at death of parents. Accepted second inheritance. (See Hopewell, von Hoffenburg.) Known accounts in Switzerland, Austria, France, Luxembourg, Grand Cayman and United States total \$11 billion cash and gold bullion. Rumors of far more. Sole owner Hopewell Industries. 65 known subsidiaries, U.S. Large foreign operations & presence. Personal U.S. income taxes, approximately \$2 billion annually, due to distribution from LLCs. Led team to avert world war between U.S., China & Russia. Did not. Repeat. Did not have government authorization. (Files stored in maximum security archives. Available only with approval.) Graduate of Naval Academy, Harvard School of Law. Legal practice in Vermont. Fees donated to charities. Closest known

friends: Lauren Haverford, banker. Res. Boston. Believed to be stable and reliable. “Stick” Granger, mercenary. Res. South Pacific. “Spike” Jackson, auto dealer. Res. New York (Southampton). Jesse Tompkin, T-Force. Res. McLean, VA.

Emotional Profile:

Complex. Considered overly idealistic, unpredictable, and irreplaceable. Answers to self rather than authority. Caution advised. Extreme patriot. Can be manipulated into action.

END SUMMARY

Trance looked up from the paper and let it fall to the table.

“I told you, I’m retired.”

“Humor me, Jack. I can call you Jack?”

Trance laughed. “Call me anything, Mr. President. Just don’t call me.”

The president nodded grimly. “Call me Jock.” The president lit his pipe and drew several deep puffs. “I’m new at this, you know.”

“No shit. It gets easier. That’s your responsibility, sir. You campaigned for the job. I didn’t.”

The president motioned for Miller to leave. Miller stood his ground. “I wouldn’t advise this—”

“You wouldn’t advise what, Mr. Miller?” interrupted Tilson.

“Him...being alone with him.”

“Listen, Miller... From here on out, let’s get one thing straight. I may be new, but I am the president. That means I give the orders, doesn’t it?”

Miller’s face seemed to flatten, his cheeks flushing red. His lips began to tremble. His eyes took on the focused look of a sniper, just as he was about to pull the trigger.

“I suppose you do give the orders, sir.”

“Suppose you get your ass out of here.”

When the door had closed behind Miller, the president sucked on his pipe. He sat in quiet contemplation, before saying, “He is a bit of an asshole, isn’t he?”

When Trance looked at the president, his eyes made Tilson think of a concentration camp survivor. Trance’s eyes looked drained of life, staring at him through something that was not really there, as if his life had been left behind in some far off place. “He killed my wife, my uncle and my fiancée.”

“That sucks.”

Trance’s eyes focused back on the president with a visible, almost audible snap. “It was all *in the line...*” Trance drew a slow breath through his nose, as he pieced his thoughts on Miller. He exhaled softly and said, “In all fairness, Jock, he does his job well. You could do far worse. It takes an imperfect man to head the CIA effectively. He fills the mold. He probably is the best man for the job.”

“That’s what I wanted to know. I’ll tell him you said that.”

“I’ll deny every word.”

The president gazed at Trance for several long moments. He met the younger man’s warning stare with one of his own. The president started to say something but hesitated. Then he said, “You can’t forgive him?”

“I’d kill him if I thought it would do any good.”

The president whistled. “Care to talk about it?”

“Nothing to say. He had my wife killed. I watched him shoot both my uncle and my fiancée.”

“I read about your wife.” Tilson shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Miller was ordered to send her.” Tilson leaned back and propped his feet back up on the table. “You know, Jack, I’ll admit that I am a babe in the woods when it comes to Washington. Spent most of my life in northern Maine. Grew up there, practiced law there. Governed there. That’s a far cry from the world you’ve known. So, all this stuff about

espionage, subterfuge and behind the scenes politics...”

“What are you getting at, sir?”

Tilson reached inside his coat and pulled out a stack of three by five note cards. “Every new president gets lists, dozens of lists. Lists that tell him more crap than he’d ever want or need to know.”

Tilson thumbed through his pile of cards. “I’ve got lists on which members of Congress cheat on their wives, which of them have drinking problems, trans-gender issues, drug addictions.” He began to systematically toss the cards onto the coffee table. “I now know where half the skeletons in this city lie. And who’s getting paid to keep them quiet. Sordid town, this one. Worse than I ever dreamed.”

“Welcome to the land of Oz.”

The president handed one of the cards to Trance.

“I make these cards from the computer printouts they give me. This one’s got the name of New York’s best bagel bakery. Love bagels with freshly ground peanut butter, maybe a banana on top. It’s the best.”

Trance glanced to the company name on top, *Emil Radler Bagels*. He read several other unfamiliar company names below it.

“Bagels?” said Trance.

“Bagels,” said the president. “Emil makes my bagels. The next company makes pastries. There’s bacon from a small farm in Virginia, Polish sausage from Pennsylvania, and flowers for my wife. Commit that card to memory, Trance. Then destroy it. I’ve got a spare.”

“State secrets, sir?”

The president chuckled. His humor was infectious. Trance found himself laughing with him.

“Good to see you lighten up, Trance.” Tilson’s manner sobered quickly. He reached inside his tuxedo and withdrew a black leather, wallet-sized folder. “Then I have the lists that really matter.” He fingered through the folder and pulled out several cards. “When I was first elected I requested lists of potential candidates for every major position in this administration. I had my secretary enter them into my personal database. Then I did some analyzing of my own. I’m a firm believer in doing my own homework, you see.”

Tilson tossed several of the cards onto the table.

“Know what I found?”

Trance appeared uninterested, but the president waited patiently. Finally, Trance said, “Incompetence?”

The president’s lips curled into a grin.

“Yeah, that too. I ran a cross-check of names that surfaced on more than one list. Your name came up a surprising number of times. More than anyone else, in fact.”

“Some of the incompetents work for you, I see.”

Tilson’s eyes searched Trance’s face for several seconds. “Always so modest?” he asked softly.

“You’ll find many people who can do a better job than I can, on just about everything. I’m just a country lawyer.”

Tilson shuffled through the lists. “You came up as a potential candidate for Secretary of the Army, the Navy, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, the head of JAG...”

Trance chuckled softly. “You’d be in deep shit with me on your team, sir.”

The president ignored him. “...Attorney General, Ambassador to wherever, and director of the CIA.”

“What are you asking, sir?”

“I thought you were the underachieving son of wealthy parents.”

Trance laughed. “Money is no measure of a man, sir. And me...I’m just trying not to rock the boat.”

I've got personal issues to deal with before I start helping guys like you."

"My predecessor told me about the kidnapping...that drug dealer in Miami."

"So much for confidentiality. Did he tell you how they tortured me, and then hooked me on just about every drug known to man?"

"He did."

"That was less than a month ago, Jock. That's not my biggest problem, though. I've got other things to worry about."

"So, you won't help me?"

"I'm just a small-town lawyer, sir. Not a very good one at that...There's not much I can do about the problems of this country."

"That's not what I've heard."

"What are you asking, sir?"

"You keep saying that."

"And you keep evading me. I'd like to know where we stand."

"I want your help, that's all."

Trance sighed. "I'm retired, sir. Can't you just leave me alone? All of you?"

Trance gazed at Tilson with pleading eyes. He liked this president. He seemed like a good, moral man. The cynic in Trance wondered how long it would take him to change. The optimist in Trance gave him hope.

The president remained silent, an effective tactic he'd learned as a boy, one he still used often.

Finally, Trance continued, "Do you want some advice, sir?"

"That's why you're here."

"There's going to be a vacancy on the Federal Reserve Board in about a year..."

"I'm already looking—"

Trance held up his hand. Tilson took a breath and let his large frame sink further back into his seat. "I'm listening."

"There's a banker with me at this party who ought to be on that board."

"Lauren Haverford."

Trance grinned. The president *had* done his homework. "She's brilliant. She's dedicated. There is no one on the board from her district. You couldn't make a better choice."

"She's on my short list. You do know that most members of the Federal Reserve Board are economists, not bankers?"

Trance replied, "By definition, the members of the board are supposed to be a *'fair representation of the financial, agricultural, industrial, and commercial interests and geographical divisions of the country,'* sir. She's not Feldstein or Friedman or Laffer. But she knows her stuff cold. She's a global, creative thinker, far more than most of the myopics on that board. Besides, with all your issues, you need another banker on the board. And a woman might go well with the voters. You can do both at once."

"I'll make a deal with you."

"No deals," said Trance. "She deserves this on her own."

Tilson mused for a moment, tapping his right index finger against his teeth. Finally, he stood and reached out his hand. "When the time comes, I'll nominate her. No strings attached."

"You won't regret it."

"I hope not." Tilson gripped Trance's hand, looking slightly down on him from his six-foot-three inch frame. "I hope to hear from you again, soon."

Trance shook his head and laughed. "I can see why they like you, sir." He paused, still not willing to be trapped. "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Pres—"

“Jock.”

“Jock.” Trance let go of Tilson’s hand and said, “I would offer to help you, but I’m not much of a Company man anymore.”

Trance walked to the heavy wooden door and pulled it open. Then he turned back toward Tilson. “Sir?”

“Yes, Jack?”

“For what it’s worth, I did vote for you. I think you might make a damned fine leader. Don’t let them drag you down.”

Tilson looked surprised, then pleased.

“Thank you, Jack. I appreciate that. I will welcome your help... When you’re ready.”

“I’ll think about it, sir.”

“Tell Lauren to call my appointment secretary. For what it’s worth, Jack, I don’t want Company men. I just want *good* men and women.”

Trance leaned against the door, speaking softly, “That’s a good start, sir.”

When Trance returned to the reception he found Lauren cornered by the French Foreign Minister. He had her trapped beneath his outstretched arm. He was whispering to her in a low voice. “Perhaps we should discuss this over dinner sometime...”

Trance hovered within earshot, curious how Lauren would escape. He didn’t venture forward.

Lauren wiggled out from beneath the Frenchman’s arm and smiled. “That’s a most attractive offer, Ambassador Francoise. While I enjoy your esteemed company, I must politely decline dinner. Perhaps you would care to schedule an appointment with me at the bank?” At that moment Lauren caught sight of Trance, laughing at her. She looked like a child who just saw the neighborhood ice cream truck turn the corner onto her own street.

“Oh, there you are!” she cried. Lauren motioned toward Trance.

Trance turned and began to walk away. He stopped slowly, then looked back at Lauren and laughed.

“Darling,” he said. “Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

Lauren grasped Trance’s hand and turned to introduce him to the French minister. But the minister was already gone.

“Men,” she said.

“Any new deposits?”

“A couple nice offers.”

“I heard.”

“How was your chat?”

“Oh, fine,” said Trance. “Turns out he didn’t want to talk about me at all.”

“I told you so.” Lauren listened to her own words and shook her head. “What do you mean?”

“He asked me about you.”

“Right.”

“Nothing important, really.”

“Of course not.”

“Something to do with some board position. I don’t know. Federal something... Didn’t pay much attention.”

Lauren gripped Trance’s shoulders and turned him toward her.

“What board position?”

“I forget. Reserve something, I think.”

“Don’t tease me. Not about this.” Lauren dug her fingernails playfully into Trance’s skin until he

pulled away.

“My, God,” he said. “You’re as bad as the French. Maybe he said *Federal Reserve Board*. Is that a board? They have a vacancy coming up or something? Tilson was reference checking, I think...Don’t worry... I told him you were too busy to be joining any more boards.”

“Not interested? Jack, if you...Not interested? If you’re talking about the Federal Reserve Board...Do you know how many people have been angling for that vacancy?”

“Guess I blew it then.”

“Don’t play with me, Jack. Not about this.”

“You’re to call his appointment secretary.”

Lauren gasped. “No.”

“Yes.”

“Yes? No joke? The president wants to see me?”

“You’ve got the appointment.”

“Don’t kid with me, Jackie. Not about this...Anything but this.” She looked into Trance’s eyes. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Trance nodded. “Yep.”

“You cut some kind of deal, didn’t you?”

“He said you were on his short list. He asked me what I thought about you. I might have said something nice. It was the least I could do.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I’d kill him if he didn’t appoint you. Wasn’t sure if that would go over too well. I guess he took me seriously.”

“The FRB. It’s a fourteen year term, you know. He’ll never do it.”

“It’s a done deal, Lauren. Believe me. Now, can we get out of here? I need some sleep.”

Lauren put her arms around Trance and hugged him. She kissed him on the cheek. Then she hugged him again. “After Tilson leaves, dear. Not a moment before.”

CHAPTER 6



The Ritz-Carlton hotel buzzed with a palpable undercurrent of power. Groups of men had gathered in the lobby, important diplomats returning from the British Embassy reception not far away. A group of women had also clustered. Their jewels sparkled voluptuously in the soft light. Their laughter sounded loud and forced. Half a dozen South American trade ministers stood arguing in a corner. They had not been present at the embassy, but were scheduled to meet with the vice president in the morning. Hands waved everywhere and points were scored on their running mental tote boards.

Silence suddenly snuffed the room, as a solitary woman glided across the lobby. She was dressed in a gown of red silk, with a wrap of flowing black Sable draped across her broad shoulders. The woman calmly made her way to the concierge. She paid no attention to the lustful stares she drew from throughout the room, stares from men bored with mere beauty, naturally drawn to her like moths to light. The woman stood over six feet tall in her red spike heels. Blond hair cascaded beyond the end of her wrap and danced lightly across her bare back. The smooth, almost translucent gown hugged the woman's thighs, molding around her taut muscles like a second skin as she moved. This would have been blatantly sexual, had she shown even a passing interest in her admirers. Instead, the woman oozed class. She didn't give a damn what anyone else thought. She was a world to herself.

"You have a reservation for Sammantha Starodubov," the woman said coolly. A command, not a question. She froze the hotel clerk with a shot from her multi-colored eyes. Then she thawed him with a bright, white smile.

The clerk wiped imaginary dust off his lapel, then nervously curled the thin hairs of his graying mustache.

"Ah...of course..." The clerk glanced at the woman's left hand to see if she wore a ring. No ring. He smiled. "...Ms. Starodubov."

"I want a split of Dom Pérignon delivered to my suite in thirty minutes, along with two ounces of Beluga caviar. Make sure both are chilled appropriately. I want a *Post* brought to me first thing in the morning, please."

"But of course, m...madam. Anything else?"

Sammantha glanced back through the edge of her fur collar, toward the men in the lobby. They had already resumed their animated conversations, speaking as if she didn't exist. *Self-possessed assholes*, she thought.

The concierge coughed nervously. Sammantha jerked her head back toward him and smiled warmly.

"A key card?" she asked.

"Oh, but of course." The man unlocked a drawer and withdrew a plastic room card.

"Any valuables you wish placed in our safe?"

Sammantha shook her head.

"Someone to carry your bags?" The concierge looked out over his desk to the Hermes's luggage sitting on the floor behind Sammantha.

Of course, you dumb shit, she thought. "Yes, thank you." Sammantha gave the man a brief smile, turned, and started walking toward the elevators. Three bellhops scurried forward like roaches to fight for her luggage. There was a brief exchange, an assertion of dominance, before one peeled away and two of them followed Sammantha to the elevator.

The elevator door swung open. Sammantha stepped inside, gazing briefly at her reflection in the shiny elevator wall. That's where she saw him, reflected off the gleaming metal, just before the doors snapped shut.

Jack Trance was walking through the hotel lobby with Lauren Haverford's arm curled around the crook of his elbow. They had just finished a brandy in the 9th floor lounge. Lauren was picking up a FedEx letter, before she and Trance retired to the Residences section of the complex.

"Well," said Trance. "Guess it's back to the real fantasy world."

The concierge scurried forward, smiling obsequiously.

"Good evening, Mr. Trance. And to you, Miss Haverford." The concierge handed Lauren her overnight letter. "Will you be needing anything else?"

"No, thanks. We're fine," said Trance. He shook the man's hand. The concierge turned quickly away.

"He's rather fawning," said Lauren, once the man was out of earshot.

"Might have something to do with my hundred-dollar tips, plus the occasional five hundred."

"You don't?"

"I still do."

"Whatever for?"

Trance ignored Lauren's question. He stared back out across the lobby as if searching for someone he was afraid of finding.

Lauren squeezed Trance's arm. She leaned over and whispered into his ear. "It's spy shit, isn't it?"

Trance nodded. "He helped me once, back when this was just a simple hotel."

Lauren stared at the people in the lobby, imagining that some of them were spies, like in a James Bond film. Trance pulled her by the elbow and led her onward toward the Residence elevators.

When they were out of earshot, Trance said, "He's not a spy. Just observant. That's all."

The elevator doors opened and they walked inside. After the door closed behind them Lauren looked at Trance accusingly.

"You say you're retired, but you still make payoffs."

"That's not a payoff. It's a tip, a reasonable tip."

"Ten bucks is a reasonable tip. You're making payoffs."

Trance shrugged his shoulders. "It's like playing professional football, Lauren. You're out of the game, but old injuries never go away. The scars, the broken bones, the torn up cartilage—"

"What are you saying? That you've got injuries?"

"I'm saying that once you've played in the game of espionage, it never leaves you. It stays with you for life."

"The scars will heal. You'll see."

"They'll never get the chance. Tilson will find a reason to call me. You wait."

"But you told him—"

"He'll find a cause, sweetheart. Some last great cause. They always do."

The elevator stopped on Trance's floor. As they walked toward his suite, Trance put his hand against Lauren's lips to keep her silent. Only once they were inside the suite did Trance continue. "I feel something here, in this hotel."

"You need to relax."

"I felt it at the British Embassy, too. Something's going down. Something bad, something worse than bad."

"You're just uptight." Lauren began to massage Trance's shoulders. "By morning everything will be fine."

“Don’t think so. The president had a shadow of death in his eyes.”

“You and that Eastern, sixth sense crap.”

Trance smiled. “You know I’m right, Lauren.”

“He is going to need you, isn’t he?”

“Yeah.” The life in Trance’s eyes suddenly seemed far away, like its force had sunk back into his brain, leaving nothing but empty glass.

“Tell him to take a flying leap.”

“Sure,” mumbled Trance. “I always do.”

Lauren hung her coat in the closet. Trance threw his jacket onto the bed and trekked toward the toilet. When he returned, Lauren was seated before the suite’s broad picture window overlooking the Washington skyline. She had two champagne flutes in hand.

“Why won’t you marry me?” she said.

“Lauren, let’s not—” Trance tried to look at Lauren, but he couldn’t force his eyes to face her.

“I won’t die,” she said.

“We all die.”

“You know what I mean.” Lauren took Trance’s hand. “I won’t die because of you. That was before, Jack. This is now. You’ve carried your cross. Put it down.”

“I can’t. You know that.”

“Don’t be silly. Life is full of chances. Let *me* take the chance. Let *us* have the chance.”

“You’re better off alone.”

“Don’t give me that crap, Jack Trance. We’re both on the back side of thirty. I’ve never loved anyone but you, and I’m not about to start. And you...you need me.”

Trance slowly looked toward Lauren. He fought the pressure of tears that lurked close to the surface, like wary crocodiles. He tried to speak. All he could do was shake his head. Finally, he murmured, “I would if I could. But I can’t let you die. I love you too much.”

Lauren pulled Trance against her chest.

“It’s all right,” she said. “I’ll take what I can get. How about a warm bath, some tender foreplay, and some good raw sex?”

They both began to laugh.

Trance said, “As much as I might want marriage...I just can’t take the chance...can’t take the chance of losing you...of having you killed...like Janice and Gretel.”

Lauren closed her eyes. “It’s different now, Jack. Someday you’ll see. Lauren took him by the hand. “Come on, I’ll scrub your back.”

It was well after midnight when Kiki Tilson settled into bed. She felt tired and increasingly sick, like the flu was settling into her muscles for a nice long stay. All she wanted was to drift into sleep. Instead, she picked up the phone and dialed Air Force One, for the second time that night.

“Hello, sweetheart,” she said, when Tilson answered the phone. “I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Just catching a nap. You all right?”

“It’s just a flu, I think.”

“I’ll send for a doctor.”

“No,” said Kiki. “I’ll be fine. I’m just tired, that’s all. I’ll feel great by morning.”

“I wish I were there.”

“I’d just keep you awake.” Kiki laughed. “Just as I am now.”

Kiki knew that her husband needed rest for his meetings. But she felt a strong urge, no, a craving *need* to talk with him, like it was her last act on earth.

“Jock?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Have I told you that I love you today?”

“Three times.”

“That was yesterday.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I love you today. Goodnight.”

“You get some sleep.”

After his wife hung up the phone, Tilson turned to his secretary. “Make sure that Kiki isn’t disturbed tomorrow morning, will you?”

“Of course, Mr. President.”

When Jock Tilson, the President of the United States, awoke half way around the world, his wife was dead.

CHAPTER 7



Sammantha Starodubov squirmed as consciousness began to swell around her like a blister. She buried her face into her pillow and groaned. *Another frigging day to get through.* Sammantha rolled over and peered with one eye at the bedside clock. Five thirty A.M. Still dark. The traffic beneath her hotel window was muffled by the rare blanket of fresh Washington snow. She could barely hear it through the thick hotel glass. But it was enough to send her mind wandering back to that day when she was twelve, when her life had been split apart like a fractured coconut. Yes, while other people were embracing the day, Sammantha braced *for* it. Another day to get through. Another day made bearable only by its goal. She began it as she always did. She remembered.

Summer vacation has arrived. Twelve-year-old Sammantha sits in the back seat of an air conditioned Volvo station wagon. Beside her sits Sandra Smith, her neighbor and closest friend. They are whispering excitedly about how Katie, about how she had kissed a boy... *on the lips!* Sandra's mother drives them home from their last day of private day school.

The car swings into the circular driveway of the Starodubov estate. It skids to a stop on a bed of small white stones. Sammantha swings the door open. Then she leans over to hug her friend.

"Have a great time in New Hampshire," she says. "I'll miss you all summer!"

"You should come," says Sandra.

"Yes," says Sandra's mother, turning around from the front seat. "It gets so stifling down here. I'm sure your parents will let you come for a visit, maybe even the summer."

Sammantha smiles. "I would, but this is going to be the best summer ever. Mom and I bought a colt at last week's auction. We'll be training him together. I'm going to ride him in the shows."

"Another horse?" asks Sandra.

"This one's special. He's the best."

"What's his name?"

"Starr. We picked him up yesterday."

The car begins to roll away. Sammantha runs alongside, holding onto Sandra's outstretched hand. Finally, when she can hold on no longer, Sammantha stops and starts waving. "See you! I'll miss you!"

Sammantha runs into the house, leaving the front door ajar; she is so excited.

"Mom. I'm home!" Sammantha wonders what kind of cookies her mother has for her today. Every afternoon they eat them with a glass of milk, in the kitchen alcove looking out over the stables and the pond. Oreos are her favorite. She loves to split them apart and make the double stuff.

Sammantha runs through the dining room, slowing just enough to negotiate the turn into the kitchen. She comes to the doorway laughing, her eyes searching the table where her mother will be waiting. She slips and falls to the floor.

Sammantha's jaw twitches. She struggles to comprehend what she sees. Slowly, she stands up and stares. She stares at the black trails of crusting blood. She looks to the bodies lying motionless on the floor, throats cut, eyes wide open. They look almost alive. She reaches out to touch the face of her mother. "Mama?" She pauses. "You must be tired, Mama."

Sammantha feels a strange calm spread through her, a rising shadow that spills up her neck and over her head like warm foam. She glides to the alcove, her eyes unfocused and staring blankly. There are two

tall stacks of Oreo cookies and two glasses of milk. She sees her cup, her butterfly cup. Sammantha sits down and eats both stacks of cookies. They taste funny, so she drinks the milk. The milk tastes bad, too. Like blood. Sammantha looks to her hands. She has to wash it away. The blood. On her hands, in her mouth. She starts for the sink and her cup falls to the floor. It shatters into a scattering of small, jagged pieces. Sammantha stands over the cup, staring at the remains of her life. She feels her stomach rumble and the cookies pour out of her mouth like chunky soup.

Sammantha sits down between the pieces of her cup and the vomit. She begins to rock. She rocks, back and forth, like the metronome she uses when playing the piano. Her young Bulldog puppy, Boris, comes up and sits beside her. He flops down and licks up the cookies. Then he stands, shaking and whining and licking the blood off her fingers.

Sammantha isn't sure how long she remains that way. She remembers the knocking. It is dark by then. There are knuckles tapping against the back door, gently at first, like a small tree branch in the wind, then with increasing force. She walks dazedly to the door and opens it. She sees the feet first, the pair of heavy black work shoes framed by those brown cuffless pants. She looks up and sees a tall man with a paunchy looking face. He has smoke-stained teeth and sour, vodka tainted breath.

"Excuse me, child," he says in Russian. "I have an appointment with your father." The man glances beyond Sammantha into the kitchen. After a moment his eyes narrow and he bares his yellow teeth. His eyes harden and he looks at her sternly.

"So, they have come," he says. "I'm sorry..." He hesitates. "...my dear."

Sammantha stares at this stranger for several long moments. She follows his eyes to her parents' bodies on the floor.

"Why are they dead?" she asks in Russian.

"They loved you very much."

Sammantha nods and she sinks back to the floor. She feels a tear and then another. She begins to crawl toward her parents' outstretched bodies. "They can't be dead. We're training my new horse today. We have to train him and ride him in the shows—" Sammantha slides through the blood and draws herself beside her mother's face. "Mama?" She touches her mother's cheek. Nothing. Then, as if pinched into a tight emotional fissure, Sammantha begins to feel numb. Her world looks like distorted, filmy pictures taken through a foggy lens.

The man takes her into his arms. She reaches her arms around his neck as he lifts her. She smells that stale mustiness. Somehow, she feels comforted.

"It's the Americans," he says after a long moment. "Your father called me. He was afraid of them. The American government. That is why I am here. You must come with me, my child, or they will kill you, too. We must go, now."

"I need my cup...I can't leave without my cup...And my dog...we can't just leave my dog..."

Sammantha goes with him, the aide to the Soviet Ambassador. She lives with him for a month, crying during the day and lying frozen beside him at night. He touches her in places she has never been touched, doesn't want to be touched. Places that make her feel sick and make her moan with fear and rage. She can't move; he is all she has. She lets it happen. She has to. Night after night, escaping deep within herself, rocking, where no one can find her. There is nowhere else to go.

Then one day, without warning, she is on her way to Russia. Sammantha Starodubov's family becomes a memory, a string of black letters arranged in the obituary section of the *Washington Post*.

Sammantha heard the newspaper drop outside her hotel door. She threw down the bedcovers and let the coldness sweep across her naked body. She tossed on a terrycloth bathrobe and walked across the expansive suite to the door. She held her breath, opened the door and reached for the *Post*. Nothing. The

front page said nothing about the president or his wife. Nothing. "I have not worked this hard to fail," she said. Perhaps she had. She didn't think so. Someone was dead. She could feel it.

Sammantha turned on the television and skipped through the news channels. Nothing. She turned off the television. She hung her head for a moment. Then she walked to a corner of the room, sat down on the floor, and began to rock.

CHAPTER 8



Kiki Tilson's secretary, Darlene Hamilton, paced the floor of her White House office. It was after eight o'clock. The first lady had a full day's schedule, beginning half an hour ago. Hamilton had been advised by the president's own secretary that Kiki wasn't well. No one had told her what appointments to keep, or which ones to break. There were twelve eagle scouts from California waiting in the lobby. They would soon be joined by four nationally honored high school teachers, a marching band from Georgia, the ten year old grower of the world's largest rutabaga, and a Las Vegas juggling duo. Then it would be off to the Watergate Hotel, where the first lady was to speak before a PTO luncheon. And after that—

The phone rang. Hamilton snatched it quickly.

"Yes?"

"Darlene, this is Jock."

"Good morning, Mr. President."

"Could I speak with Kiki, please?"

"She isn't here yet, sir. I was told not to disturb her."

"I understand what you were told, Darlene. She's not answering her wireless." Tilson paused. "Would you do me a favor and check on her?"

"Of course, Mr. President."

"I'll call you back in fifteen minutes."

The phone went dead. Hamilton dropped the receiver back into its cradle. She looked at her watch and started moving. She smiled at the eagle scouts who were seated outside her office, waiting expectantly for their visit with the first lady and their White House tour. "I'm sorry. The first lady is still detained. I've ordered some pastries up from the kitchen, along with sodas, milk and juice. They should be here momentarily. Please be patient. I'll be right back."

At the stairway, Hamilton was joined by a marine escort. They climbed the two flights of stairs to the president's living quarters, where Hamilton knocked upon the bedroom door. There was no answer.

"Shoot," she said. She knocked again. "Kiki?" Hamilton tried the door but it was locked. She motioned to the two guards who were stationed at the top of the stairs. "Has the first lady left her room this morning?"

"No, Miss Hamilton."

"Has anyone been inside?"

"No, ma'am."

"The president has asked me to speak to her. She wasn't feeling well. I'd like you to open her door, please."

The two guards looked at each other, silently processing their conflicting duties.

"You know I have authorization to enter this room at any time," said Darlene sharply. "Open it. Now."

One of the guards pressed a series of numbers into a keypad. He swiped a plastic card and nodded. "It's open, Miss Hamilton."

Hamilton hesitantly opened the first lady's bedroom door. She relaxed when she saw her friend sleeping peacefully. Then she shivered. The room was frigid, well below sixty degrees. She motioned

for the guards to wait by the door and walked inside. “Kiki?” she said. “Kiki, Jock is worried about you. He asked me to—” The first lady didn’t move. “Kiki?” Hamilton stepped beside the bed and shook the first lady’s shoulder. Her skin was cold. “Kiki, for Christ’s sake—” Hamilton pressed her palm against the first lady’s forehead. “Oh, my God.” She turned to the guards. “Get a doctor! Fast!”

CHAPTER 9



Sammantha Starodubov weaved her black BMW through the heavy traffic on the New Jersey Turnpike. As strains of Wagner pulsed through the car's custom speakers, Sammantha jerked her head from side to side with the dramatic thrusts of the music.

This was a spectacular day. A perfect day. News of the first lady's "illness" was everywhere. How many times had she thought of doing something like this? Every waking hour of her life. This was just the first part of her plan, just a detail that had to be dealt with before she put her end game in play. After a quarter century of hating, after decades of plotting revenge, her goal was within her grasp. It would be glorious. The worst disaster the country...no...the worst disaster the *world* had ever seen.

Sammantha reached between her legs and pressed her hands into the throbbing dampness. She had hoped it would be like this. She wished it could go on forever, the revenge so sweet. This was nearly as sweet as love.

Would he be waiting for her? she wondered. The crucial cog in her wheel of salvation? Would Brandon Copley be there?

Sammantha thought back to how she'd lured Copley into her life.

She remembered his picture on that cheap billboard off Broadway. There was something in those sad, mocking eyes, the eyes of an actor long since fallen, the eyes of a man with just enough left inside him to get from one performance to the next. How often had she seen that look in her own sad mirror? It was fitting that he was the one man who could help her.

It is the opening night of *Murders in the Dark*. Brandon Copley, IV is playing the leading role. The theater is barely half filled, but Sammantha sits in the back. She is dressed in a low cut black dress, with high silver pumps. Her makeup is minimal, a touch of eye shadow and faint pink lip gloss. Her jewelry is plain though elegant, a pair of two carat diamond earrings and a three carat drop necklace—gifts from an Arab prince for services rendered. She wears no rings. Her wrists are bare.

After the play, Sammantha goes back stage. She has visions of people running around shouting and screaming after the show, of having to charm protective security guards to get to Copley. Instead, she finds herself unmolested, unnoticed in fact. There is no mob, only a stage crew hurriedly putting away the props. Sammantha steps in front of one of the young men. He stops and smiles, while his eyes grope lewdly along Sammantha's shapely frame.

"Can you tell me where I might find Brandon Copley?"

The young man gives her a final, approving nod and points down a hall. "Should be the second door on your right... When he can't give you what you need, do come back to me, darling."

"Not on your life, pig."

The man grins and walks away, whistling.

When Sammantha enters the dressing room she expects something far different than the whirling free-for-all that she sees. Actors are climbing over each other for space, wielding elbows like blunt swords. Most of the actors are half naked. She feels strangely vulnerable and assaulted by their immodesty.

"I'm looking for Brandon Copley," Sammantha says to a short, dark-haired woman.

"In the back," says the woman. She points over her shoulder toward a half-opened door.

Sammantha walks to the door and inches her head inside the dressing room. The area is small and cluttered. Copley sits before a large mirror, swabbing at his face with a cotton ball. Beside him sits his co-star, doing the same. Both of them are in underwear. The co-star is naked to the waist.

"Excuse me," says Sammantha. She turns away when Copley stands.

"Yes?" says Copley, smiling. "May we help you?"

Sammantha forces herself to look at Copley. She keeps her eyes above his briefs.

"I...I wanted to meet you."

"Me?" he says. Copley glances at his co-star, who rolls her eyes. "You wanted me?"

"I saw your picture...on the billboard."

"The billboard?"

"Yes. I enjoyed the play."

Copley laughs. "The play stinks and we all know it. The picture on the billboard is ten years old. I'm not the man I used to be. I'm not sure I ever was."

"The play was...odd. I thought *you* were quite good. You haven't aged much really, Mr. Copley."

Copley's co-star raises her eyebrows. She mumbles, "Your lucky day, Brandon," and keeps swabbing her face. An amused glow spreads across her lips. She begins to hum the show tune *I'm a Big Girl Now*.

Copley laughs again. "You must be new to New York."

"Well, no. Not really."

"You liked my performance?"

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"And you thought you were over the hill," murmurs Copley's co-star.

"Well, then," Copley says, preening and winking at his co-star. He looks at Sammantha. "That entitles you to a late dinner on the town, wherever you choose. The Copley despotism still has its privileges."

What can she possibly want from me? he wonders. No matter. She is *hot*, and he hasn't known luke-warm in years.

Later that night, Sammantha waited inside a yellow taxi, just outside the entrance to the Tavern on the Green. Copley emerged from the restaurant smiling.

"We're in," he said. Copley paid the taxi fare and gave the driver a twenty dollar tip. He opened the rear cab door. Sammantha slid out of the seat, allowing her dress to ride high along her sensuous thighs. The play wasn't lost on Copley. He licked his lips like a dog seeing a ham bone.

"Good that we're late," he said. "I was able to secure us a table. A fine one at that."

Copley extended an elbow. Sammantha gracefully wrapped her arm within it and allowed him to strut her to a quiet table in the corner of the restaurant.

Sammantha guided the conversation toward Copley's life in the theater. She watched him closely, as he finished his first, then his second bottle of cabernet. His handsome, doughboy face began to sag. His blue eyes grew out of focus. His lips began to twitch, like he was using them for some version of Morse code. Copley's shoulders became progressively hunched, as if he were cowering from some unknown fear. He talked loudly, too volubly, as if the words fortified his confidence. Sammantha could see his self esteem drip to the floor, until it lay in a sad, lonely puddle, like blood.

Sammantha seamlessly moved the conversation from the theater to Copley's personal history. He talked glibly through the wine, as if he were reciting lines he had memorized for life.

“I was supposed to be the family savior,” he said. “I was the one who would restore the family to its historic preeminence in New York business and social circles. My parents died when I was young. By the time I came of age and received my trust, half the money was gone. I failed miserably when I tried to make more. Oh, I made several stabs at business. I found it depressing. Did some time on Wall Street, swimming with the sharks, outside the cage. They taught me the grand game, how to systematically transfer a client’s money into your own pocket with as little loss to the client as possible. While I played that subtle game of craft, I managed to trade away nearly everything I had. I got addicted to options trading. Yeah, I’m a recovering options junkie; can’t go near the stuff without breaking into a cold sweat. I got smart and traded down for an addiction to alcohol. Far safer. On Wall Street, I was a man I didn’t like or respect. I was an actor, showing a fake face to the world, caring little for those around me. I had to act to survive, in that cutthroat world.

“One day, at the age of twenty-five, I realized that, wherever I was, my life would be spent as an actor. It fell around me like parade confetti, the sudden realization that I would get paid according to how well I pulled it off, the acting. I chose the *stage* over the *street*. At least on stage, people *knew* I was acting. Truth be known, I’m quite good, when I stay sober. That’s my problem, you see. I like to drink. Quit options trading cold turkey. But alcohol? Alcohol is the life blood of an actor. The nectar of the muse. At least that’s what we like to tell ourselves.”

Copley grew somber and gulped his glass empty. “Waiter!” he cried loudly, motioning across the room with the empty wine bottle. The waiter nodded. Copley grunted, then burped. He smiled; then he grew somber. “Now, child,” he said. “Tell me a little about you.”

Sammantha stared at the man across the table. Should she tell him how she had been schooled in Russia? That she had graduated Harvard College at age nineteen, how she’d followed that with a quick trip through Harvard Medical School and a residency at Johns Hopkins? That she had spent her childhood immersed in books to escape what they did to her at night? Should she tell him about her work, how she practiced her craft in rogue countries, particularly in Asia, the Middle East and Africa? That her work was most prized by terrorists who prayed daily for the end of America? Should she tell him how she was raped on the day her parents were killed, at the brittle age of twelve, how she had been abused so many times, that if each time were a brick, she would be surrounded by an impregnable tower? Should she tell him how she focused her rage on America—that her greatest goal in life was to see his country in ashes?

“I’m a nurse,” she said. “I care for select private patients when they need me.” She paused, wanting to say more, something that might lead him to the truth. Instead, she lied, “I grew up in the Midwest on a small wheat farm. I studied nursing because my parents wanted me to help others.” She laughed. “They expected a veterinarian.”

“You speak of your parents as if they were dead.”

This time Sammantha didn’t lie. She closed her eyes and nodded. “They are.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah,” she said. “So am I.” She looked into Copley’s increasingly vacant eyes.

Copley gave a half smile. “My parents were older when I was born. They’re long since gone. We’re orphans, you and me.”

We are, thought Sammantha. Like soul mates. You, me, and the rats.

Murders in the Dark was a second-rate play. Its run, if it could be called that, lasted only four days. By the time the sets were broken down and the IOUs were issued to the unpaid actors, Sammantha Starodubov had become the new matriarch of Copley Manor.

The tires on the BMW squealed as Sammantha yanked it off Park Avenue and aimed it toward Gramercy Park. She drove around the small square twice, looking through the iron fence, hoping to find him there. He liked to sit on his wooden bench in the afternoons, reciting Shakespeare, as if he were a king. It was his escape. Brandon Copley was comfortable in this place, this quiet enclave of the city. He was most comfortable playing four-hundred-year-old-roles. He was a fish out of water in any other part of his native city. Here, he ruled.

Copley wasn't in the park, so Sammantha pulled the car into the narrow driveway beside his residence. Copley lived in a square, red brick building with tarnished copper trim. It was old. But it was elegant and stately, like its former owners. Even in its disheveled state, the six-story home would fetch an enormous sum, were it to come on the market.

Sammantha grabbed two suitcases out of the BMW's trunk and hefted them to the front of the building. After climbing the eight stairs to the main door she looked up. The Copley family crest was chiseled deeply into the weathered marble overhang. There was no color to the crest, the paint having long since worn away. But the clean solid lines of the shield and the sword remained, as if the family would endure forever.

Clyde, the doorman, started toward Sammantha as she poked her head through the entrance. Sammantha waved him off. "I've got 'em, Clyde." Sammantha held the heavy door with her hip while dragging her bags over the threshold.

The doorman hobbled toward Sammantha. Clyde's back was rounded like a whale. His shoes made a kind of *swish thump* as he dragged his left leg behind him like a club. His head drifted from side to side as if he were speaking to himself, some sort of nervous degeneration or shell shock from one of the wars. "Are you sure, Miss Sammantha? I could..."

Sammantha shook her head. "Really, Clyde..." Hurt rose in the old man's eyes. Sammantha paused, then held out a bag. "Could you carry this?"

Clyde acknowledged her with a thankful smile. "I know I'm not much good 'round here anymore, Miss Sammantha." Clyde half carried and half dragged Sammantha's bag, huffing as if he were pulling a stalled car.

"Nonsense." Sammantha looked at Clyde's pale skin. It looked like the surface of a mushroom, with rumpled brown age spots sprouting everywhere like coin-sized freckles. His hair was like beach sand, bleached white and silky smooth. His eyebrows were fat and tufted like cheese puffs. "You've worked here for almost fifty years, Clyde. You are part of the family, more than you could ever know." It was true. Clyde had been Mr. Everything to the Copley's for over half a century. At one time he'd been the majordomo to a staff of forty. He'd supervised the properties, the family gardeners, the maids, the secretaries and the cooks. He had seen that Brandon received proper care from his nursemaids, and later from his tutors. He was the one who had taught Copley how to throw a baseball.

Sammantha carried her bag to the elevator and rested it on the worn hall carpet. She waited patiently as Clyde shuffled up behind her with the other. "What women want these days, Clyde, isn't servitude. They want comfort. You bring comfort, honest comfort. Do you understand?"

When Clyde reached Sammantha he was wheezing. He put his hands on his knees and sucked in air like he'd nearly drowned. Sammantha patted his shoulder. "You make us all feel good, sir Clyde."

Clyde bowed his head for a brief moment. Then he peered at Sammantha through his blinking rheumy eyes, watching her closely, like a dog waiting for her to throw a stick or a ball.

"Have you seen Brandon, Clyde?"

"Ain't seen 'im all day, Miss." Clyde looked to his feet.

"Thank you, Clyde. I understand."

Sammantha pretended to search for something in her purse. “How are things with your family, Clyde?” she said, as she fingered through the large leather bag.

“Oh, Miss Sammantha, they’re jus’ fine.”

“And your great grandchildren?” Sammantha still didn’t look at Clyde, avoiding eye contact. Clyde wore pain and pleasure on his sleeve. Sometimes...sometimes, that was just too much for Sammantha to see.

Clyde’s eyes grew animated and he grinned. His back straightened like it had been snapped in place by an invisible chiropractor’s hand. This time Sammantha looked at him and smiled.

“The great grand children, they’re *real* fine.”

“And Howard, our future surgeon?”

Clyde’s eyes grew sad and he shook his head. It was a look Sammantha had seen reflected in her own dark days. It was the sadness of unanswered prayers, of lost hope.

“Aw, he’s fine, Miss. He’s got himself two jobs. Someday he hopes to go back to college.”

“I thought he was doing well at Columbia?”

Sammantha leaned against the wall and waited for Clyde to process the question. It was as if he had to do math in his head before responding to her in his quiet, respectful voice.

“He was, Miss Sammantha. An’ doin’ real well.” Clyde hesitated. “He has to help his momma now, with the bills. She lost her job, you see. Bad economy, they say.” Clyde wheezed again. “God bless that boy.”

Sammantha closed her eyes. She remembered her own helpless struggle. It was like being stranded on a lonely island, watching ships pass by in the distance, without them ever getting close enough to hail. “Don’t worry,” she said. “If he wants it bad enough—” Her words trailed off. Howard couldn’t screw his way to an education like she had. He had a mother to care for. Lucky man.

“I suppose so.” Sparkling liquid brimmed around the deep-set folds of Clyde’s cloudy eyes. “I suppose so.”

Sammantha grasped Clyde’s hands and squeezed them tightly. She looked at him solemnly, silently, as if waiting for wisdom and hope that refused to come. “If I could help you, I would.” She couldn’t help him now, not without giving herself away and jeopardizing everything she’d worked for.

Clyde squeezed back on her fingers. “No matter, Miss Sammantha. The Lord gives us what the Lord gives us. We’re all part of His great plan.”

“Yes...yes. I guess so.” *What kind of God does this? What kind of God would cause what I’ve endured?*

Sammantha picked up her bags and stepped inside the elevator. She closed the outside metal grate and then the brass door. She pressed a handle, which set the ancient elevator into its anguished climb, clicking and creaking as it moved slowly upward.

“Amazed this damn thing still works,” she said quietly. Sammantha kept her hand near the red button labeled “Emergency Stop,” just in case the elevator finally did die. She tapped her foot nervously, as she always did, looking through the glass side door at the greasy insides of the elevator shaft. “I could crawl up this shaft faster than this old crate,” she mumbled.

Sammantha was always in a hurry. She had too many things to do. Everything had a purpose, including the next few minutes, especially the next few minutes.

The elevator shuddered and stopped when it reached the sixth floor. Sammantha pulled the brass lever to one side to open the door. Then she opened the outside grate. She carried her bags down the hallway until she came to the parlor where Copley spent most of his time. “I’m home!” she yelled. “Baby, I’m home!”

Sammantha pushed an ancient black button on the wall. The lights snapped on. “Brandon?” She

dropped her bags and listened for sound—nothing, except the muted noise of the New York streets, seventy feet below.

If he's been out carousing again. “Brandon!”

“Wh... what?” Sammantha heard Copley cry from the far end of the hall. She also heard a muffled *thump*. She walked across the parlor floor to the hallway that she called the “great hall of fame,” the rows of family portraits—Copley’s all. Each picture sported the required Copley sneer, with each portrait framed in gold leaf and set exactly three and a half feet from the next. Between the portraits hung other “family” photographs, each with stilted poses and forced smiles.

Copley was in the library, with his body slung across a purple eighteenth century velvet ottoman. His face had a scraggly, three or four day beard. His white silk shirt was torn. His pants were unzipped but still on. Beside him lay three empty bottles of Jack Daniels. A fourth was on the floor and nearly gone. The cap was unscrewed and the bottle rested next to a half-empty glass.

“H... hello, Samm,” said Copley. His voice was hoarse and unsteady, his eyes bleary and unfocused.

“Hello, Brandon,” Sammantha said curtly. She averted her eyes, looking instead to the fireplace behind Copley. Like many things in the old home, there was a story behind that fireplace. It was a gift of thanks from the government of France. An early Copley had teamed with Junius Morgan to lend fifty million dollars to France in 1870, to help finance the Franco-Prussian war. France had lost, but Copley’s support had not gone forgotten or unrewarded. The Copleys had made many millions trading with the French after that, as had the Morgans. *What a difference the generations can make*, Sammantha thought disdainfully. She thought of her task and wondered if she could accomplish it with this shell of a man.

“Are you all right, Brandon, dear?”

Copley smiled sheepishly. Sammantha winced when she saw his mossy green teeth.

“We had quite the bender, I see.”

“I missed you,” said Copley. “What am I supposed to do when you vanish? For weeks on end, you are gone. What am I supposed to do?”

“Practice your acting. You’re an actor, aren’t you?”

“You could have called.”

“You’re right. I *should* have called.” Sammantha’s voice softened. “I missed you so. And I knew that if I called you, all I would do was cry.”

Copley’s head began to clear. With stiff effort, he sat up and wrung his face with his hands. “What day is it?”

“The twenty-first, dear.”

Copley looked toward the ceiling as he tried to think.

“The twenty-first... the twenty-first... Sunday?”

“Yes, Sunday.”

“Guess I better take a shower.”

“How long have you been like this, Brandon?”

“Since Thursday, I think...Maybe Wednesday.”

Sammantha touched Copley on the cheek like a compassionate, loving wife. “Come along, dear. I’ll help you with a bath. Then I’ve got something to tell you. Something that will make you very, very happy.”

CHAPTER 10



Jacob Miller was holding court in his office. He was sitting with practiced nonchalance behind his elegant, teak sea-captain's desk. His Donald Trump hair was flipped back over his ears and stylishly coiffed on top. His hands cradled the back of his neck, with his elbows stuck out like bat wings. Tortoise shell glasses were drooping down the end of his nose. He held his chin high, peering down at the man standing before him. His prey was Budd Doheny, Director of the Presidential Protection Division of the Secret Service. Doheny was a square jawed man with dark Irish eyes. His nose was broad and flattened, as ex-boxer's noses often are. His body was thick and rounded, as solid as an outdoor postal box. Beside Doheny stood Steve Cramm. Cramm was a chief inspector with the FBI. He was gawky thin and a willowy intellectual, with an ectomorphic frailty that made him look like he could break under a hard exhale of breath. Beside Cramm and Doheny stood two of Cramm's assistants. Each was a mirror of the other—hair closely cropped, cleanly shaven, their bodies hard and trim, their manner precise. They were ex-Marines, gone to the softer side.

Doheny's face crunched into a repugnant scowl, while Miller played with him like a cat with an injured mouse, pawing him from side-to-side with his words.

"We've been ordered to request your help," said Doheny. Doheny looked beyond Miller's fluffy hair, never meeting his eyes, just staring at the wall. He took a deep breath and sighed. "As you know, I'm not in favor of this—"

Miller interrupted. "You've got your ass in a sling because it was your team that was penetrated." Miller grinned like a fortune-telling gypsy stealing a client's money, his eyes glowing with schadenfreude, an almost guilty pleasure at Doheny's misery. Almost. He began to gloat. "I know the story. You screwed up. So Tilson figured you'd have motivation to see this thing through, enough impetus to direct all your worthless cretins to find the truth. So, rather than have the FBI run this thing, as they normally would, and should, he chose you to ride point. That's a big chunk of salt on your wounds." Miller looked from Doheny to Cramm, and then from Cramm to his two assistants. "Right so far?"

Doheny nodded.

Miller continued. "Tilson insisted you work closely with the FBI, so you brought Cramm in to help save your butt." He glanced toward Cramm. "A good choice, I might add. At least he'll give you a fighting chance. The FBI's got resources you could never dream of having." Miller paused. Then his lips widened into a grin. "Oh, that's right, Doheny. You used to do this sort of thing for the FBI, until you got scared and soft and joined the SS."

A thin smile skipped across Doheny's lips, like a brief fleck of sunlight sparkling off water, then vanishing in the clouds. The Secret Service had some of the toughest bastards alive, men ready to step in front of a bullet at any time. Doheny didn't take the bait. He nodded and glanced at Cramm. Then he shrugged. "For what good they've done me so far."

You wimp, thought Miller, *taking it out on your own team rather than me*. "I assume Tilson wants his wife's killer even more than he wants the presidency?" said Miller.

"You could say that."

"If he doesn't find his killer, you'll be the whipping boy?"

Doheny winced, but whispered, "Right, sir."

Miller smiled. "Kinda like having your nuts in a vice, isn't it?" Miller reached into the side drawer

of his desk, removed a large, pink bottle of Pepto Bismol and tipped it into his mouth. "I'd be a fool to get involved."

For the first time, Doheny looked directly at Miller. "I'd be a fool to want you." Doheny spread out his hands in a weary, helpless gesture. "Unfortunately, we both have no choice."

Miller took two more swigs of Pepto and replaced the cap. "Presidential order?"

Doheny nodded. "Yeah."

"Perhaps you'd like to tell me where we stand?"

Doheny looked at Cramm. Cramm looked at Doheny. They locked eyes and subtly signaled each other. Then Doheny continued, "The last thing we wanted was to bring the CIA into this quagmire."

Doheny thought back to his morning meeting with the president's national security advisor, Jeremiah Pincenogle, and grimaced.

Doheny and Pincenogle were seated at the president's cherry conference table in a rounded corner of the Oval Office. The table looked like an old piece of dining room furniture, which it was. Kiki had brought it with them from Maine. It was covered with hundreds of scratch marks and strings of writing indentations. It also had deep pockmarks where things like forks and metal toys had crash landed. Kiki had liked to surround Tilson with things that reminded him of home and his family, to keep him grounded as he ruled the world. Now it just made him feel empty.

The president was still hosting a security briefing below the White House. He was expected back shortly, but he had ordered Pincenogle to brief Doheny on the rules for the investigation into his wife's assassination.

Pincenogle was a big, bulky man with sharp beak of a nose and a fat neck that hung in round rolls over the tight collars of his crisp white dress shirts. He looked like a snapping turtle squeezed into a business suit. His movements seemed deliberately slow and his face was pinched, making him look like he was fighting off the urge to take a big dump.

"The president wanted me to lay the new ground rules."

"Ground rules? That's bullshit," barked Doheny. "What in hell does he know about investigating a murder?"

"He knows what he wants."

"Like shit, he does. He doesn't know diddlysquat about intelligence and you know it. What sort of punk-assed ideas are you feeding him, Jeremiah?"

"He wants you to bring in the CIA."

"Yeah, that's just what we need." Doheny snorted. "We should keep this investigation as tight as a virgin, or every half-assed terrorist group from here to China is going to be taking credit and gunning for the president." Doheny stood up from the table and leaned against it with both hands, pressing his face within inches of the president's chief security advisor.

Pincenogle looked Doheny squarely in the eye and pondered his statement. His head seemed to bob in and out of his turtle shell with each successive breath. Finally, he scratched at the gray, two-day stubble on his chin and stared off across the room.

Pincenogle said, "Well, then. I guess your job is to see that doesn't happen, isn't it Budd? I'll hold you personally accountable for every threat we receive and don't repel."

"Screw you."

Pincenogle chuckled. His body vibrated like jelly and his seat groaned with the motion. "At least you care."

"Look, sir," said Doheny. "Let us see this through, without CIA interference. We're making headway and we don't need infighting."

“You’ve had time, Doheny, and what have you got? Bupkiss.”

Doheny bit his lip. His fists clenched, then opened and clenched again. He seemed to measure his words carefully, but when he spoke, the words came in a rapid, uncontrolled jumble. “We’ve had three frigging days, sir. That’s all! Things take time and you know it. I’ve got to get a court order before I can investigate any suspect or take them in for questioning. I’ve got a goddamn Congressional committee breathing down my frigging neck saying I can’t violate anyone’s civil rights in searching for clues or answers. They want me to tell them everything I do or think. You know what that’s like, Jeremiah? We’ve been so friggin’ emasculated that I can’t do my job. If we open up the investigation...It’s hard enough to keep a lid on this thing...but with others involved, I don’t know what the hell they might say.”

“The first lady is dead, Doheny. You got that? The truth’s coming out soon. She’s got no double. The woman is *dead*.”

Pincenogle let the silence hang for several long moments. Doheny’s eyes narrowed and he finally said, “Then you’re setting yourself up, sir, and the president, too. If someone can come in and knock off the first lady, only weeks after the start of this administration, and not get caught, you’ll have every penny ante terrorist gunning for glory. You’ve got to confirm her death on the day you arrest her killers, Jeremiah. Because, if you don’t, you’re going to look like the Keystone cops.”

“No, Doheny. That will be *you* and *your* boys looking incompetent,” said Pincenogle. “You see, you’ve already screwed up. I’m just an observer here.”

Doheny closed his eyes. He understood it now. Everyone in this administration was new. Each of them was jockeying for power, but there was no *leadership*. No one would take the lead. A long feather would go to the man who solved this mystery. Wasn’t that one of the reasons he wanted to keep the investigation to himself in the first place? Didn’t he see this as his ticket to the career express elevator?

Pincenogle pursed his turtle beak. He raised his turtle head and said, “You need the CIA because they can do things you can’t, Doheny. Your hands are tied. You know that. We know that. Miller doesn’t have to follow those same rules. He can fly under the radar and do the things you can only dream of. He’s got the black and wet ops teams that you need. Let him be your eyes and ears. He can interrogate for information and get a private oo-rah. Or, he can hire a consultant to do it, far outside the glare of politics. If you so much as fart in front of a suspect, you’ll go to jail. You work with Miller, and that’s that.”

So, here he was now, standing across from Jacob Miller, inviting the CIA to hog the glory and kick his ass.

Doheny drew a deep breath. He glanced toward Miller, then to his partner, Cramm. He looked back at Miller and let out air in a low gush. “All right, asshole. There’s not much to go on. The first lady turns up dead in her sleep. The forensics are called in. They carve her six ways to Sunday and call more experts to look at the parts. Blood work gets processed by Washington CSI...the CDC...the EPA and JHU...”

“JHU?” interrupted Miller.

“Johns Hopkins University.”

“Don’t patronize me, Doheny, or I’ll have you sent to Alaska in a New York minute. Or, maybe I’ll have one part sent to Alaska and another brought to Afghanistan.”

Doheny’s face tinged red. He clenched and unclenched his fists but he kept his mouth shut. It would be like Miller to do something extreme. By Alaska, did Miller mean a reassignment? He knew what the two parts meant; two parts meant dead.

“What they came up with is this: She was poisoned. Nerve compounds.” Doheny looked at Cramm. This was his area.

Cramm said, “She ingested toxins that paralyzed her muscles. We found traces of Hemlock and botulism—basic shit, but powerful. That might have killed her, but probably not. We think they were red

herrings, because we also found two other compounds, of which the formulas are, as of yet, unidentified. Some sort of synthetic, designer crap that we haven't seen. We nearly missed them, 'cause they were breaking down in her fast. Hemlock normally begins to take effect after several hours, botulism several hours after that. Either could kill you, but the other stuff, we think that sealed the deal. This is a sophisticated kill. Very professional."

"Poisoned?" asked Miller.

Doheny frowned. "What are you, deaf? It probably happened at the Embassy dinner." Doheny paused. "I believe you were there?"

"Who told you I was there?"

"I know everything that goes on around the president."

Miller returned the grin. "You wish you did. No chance of suicide?"

Doheny clenched his fists again. "I'll forget you mentioned that. Kiki Tilson had the all-American dream. She loved her life."

Miller sucked in through his teeth and took another absentminded sip of his Pepto shake. There was just a smidgeon left, so Miller tipped the bottle to drain the final drops. Then he said, "Lots of people suffocate under the all-American dream, Doheny."

"You must be one constipated dude, Miller...Drinking all that crap."

Miller ignored him. "Seems like a simple matter of tracing the poisons to the killer, Doheny. Shouldn't be more than a few suspects who could produce exotic nerve compounds. What do you need me for?"

"We don't. But we all know it could take months, or years, to track the trail of those compounds."

Miller snickered. "That's why they're making you come to me. Because you can't do the job."

"Personally, I want your butt out of this."

Miller slowly grinned. He looked almost happy as he raised his index finger and ticked it from side to side. "What if I *want* to help?"

"You'll get nothing from us," said Cramm. "You might even get *gone*." Cramm's hand moved imperceptively toward his pistol.

Miller began to laugh. He was enjoying this conversation, like he might a tennis match with a man he hated, one who was nowhere near his equal on the court. "Good one, Cramm."

Doheny said, "We *do* want you to *appear* to take an interest. If you play nice, we'll leave you be."

Miller sucked more air through his teeth and pulled an imaginary hair off his custom Savile Row suit. Without looking up he said, softly, "Boys shouldn't make threats to men, boys."

"So don't make one."

Miller leveled his eyes at Doheny. "You, sir, are one stupid shit. With a simple phone call I could have you neutered before you leave this office and be no worse for wear. You are little piss-ant players in this game. You've got no frigging clue what is going on in the real world."

The two men stared at each other for close to a minute. Ever since 9/11, the U.S. security agencies had been engaging in the new spirit of cooperation brought about by that day. This was about as cordial as it came.

"All right, boys," Miller lied. "I'll stay as clear as I can." He reached into his desk and removed a pocket flask with a new supply of antacid. He took a gulp and said, "Be warned. If you screw up, I'll kick your asses, butt naked, from one side of this town to the other, with your heads stuck up inside them. Understood?"

Doheny looked at Cramm. Cramm looked at Doheny. Then both men looked at Miller. They each made a slight, deferential bow.

"Guess we have a deal, then," said Doheny.

The two men and their assistants walked out of Miller's office.

Miller leaned onto the back legs of his chair. How could he work this to his advantage? What was best for the president, and what was best for the country? He dialed his assistant's extension and barked into his wireless headset.

"Get me the White House."

A few moments later Miller's phone buzzed. He punched the speaker button. "Talk to me."

"The president's chief of staff is on the line, sir."

Miller lifted the corded receiver and spoke to his old friend, "Hey, Geoff. How's he doing?"

"He's lost it, Jake. Kiki was his backbone. Without her he's a goddamned jellyfish. This was a man that would run through walls just a week ago. Now he's afraid of his shadow... Ya gotta help me here."

Miller wiped the sheen off his brow and flicked the sweat onto his pants. It never stopped. He was like a babysitter, and the country was some big blubbering child who couldn't stay out of trouble.

"Tilson's going to forward your nomination as CIA Director, Jake, provided you haven't got nanny problems. And provided he hasn't resigned, or we haven't had to commit him before then."

"It's that bad?"

"All he can think about is payback."

Revenge, thought Miller. Nothing more wasteful than thoughts of revenge. "That's not good, Geoff."

"It's freaking pathetic, if you ask me."

This made Miller think about Jack Trance. Trance had wanted payback, too. He had come up dry. Always dry. His wife's killers had vanished into oblivion, leaving Trance with a hole in him the size of Pennsylvania. He was still effective, all right. He looked good, had all the skills, but the essence that had made him special was getting harder to find. He was like a race car that had trouble shifting into its top gear. Miller couldn't let this happen to the president. It wasn't good for him; it wasn't good for the country. Then, of course, there was his own little issue... Miller flushed that thought from his mind and took another drink of antacid. Fuck them. Fuck them all, he thought.

Miller said, "Give him some slack, Geoff. Losing a wife really sucks. I've seen what it does, felt what it does. It'll take some time before he adjusts. We've just got to bring this thing full circle, and do it fast."

A few moments later, Jock Tilson came on the line.

Miller said, "I was so sorry to hear about your wife, Mr. President. Doheny and Cramm were just here."

"Can you help them?"

"I'll try, sir. But if I may, sir, I would like to offer some words of advice."

Tilson waited while Miller summoned the words, words he, himself, needed to hear.

"We do need to find who did this, for the sake of the country... But for your sake, sir, I hope you can move beyond revenge. Feelings like this work like acid, sir, burning deep into your gut until it consumes your every waking moment."

Miller heard Tilson laugh. "Never thought I'd hear such words from *you*, Miller. Seeing how you wear pain on your chest like a medal. Let's find Kiki's killers. Then we'll deal with the aftermath. Put your best men on it, Jake. Spare no expense. Get this done."

"You've already got good talent, Mr. President. Doheny and Cramm are the best you've got."

"I want Trance."

Oh, shit. Miller inhaled deeply and closed his eyes. He'd known this was coming. "I don't think Trance is right for the job, sir. This same thing happened to him... So, I'm not sure he'll keep the right kind of perspective, the objectivity he'll need. Besides, I can't order him, sir. You know that. He's a free

man.”

“Why don’t you try asking him? As a favor, to me.” Tilson’s voice was pleading, like Geoff had said. He was whining like a child who had lost his binky.

“I will call him, Mr. President. I will. But I make no promises.”

“Tell him I need him.”

CHAPTER 11



Jack Trance was seated in his small Vermont law office, attempting to mitigate a divorce between a local land developer and his vengeful wife. Unwittingly, he had been hired by both, the wife using her maiden name as she paid his retainer. Now, neither would relinquish claim to the services of the local crackerjack lawyer, who also happened to be the only decent lawyer in town.

Trance was trapped behind his desk as the dueling couple stood before him, preparing for combat like gladiators. Behind them, Trance's door lay open, with the edge of his assistant's desk just visible. His assistant was looking back through the doorway, laughing at Trance.

"My wife tells me you're her attorney," said the developer, his eyes darting toward his estranged spouse and back to Trance.

"Yes, Bill. I am."

"But you're *my* lawyer."

"That is true. However, I think it best that I represent only one of you. Unless you two want to compromise."

Bill Moffet thrust back his shoulders and bellowed toward the ceiling, "Larissa may get half of every goddamn thing that I own, but she's sure as hell not going to screw me out of my own goddamn attorney!"

"Screw you out of your attorney?" shouted Larissa. "The only thing you'll ever get screwed out of is this marriage. And it was your own screwing that caused it!"

Moffet held out his hands. There was a pleading in his eyes. They reminded Trance of the eyes of a Basset Hound, his lower lids droopy and moist. "I didn't touch her. I swear I didn't touch her." Moffett looked toward Trance. "Help me here, Jack. Will you?"

"Listen to him," spat Larissa. "He says he didn't touch her. Well, I know better. I read the emails."

"Is that what this thing is about?" asked Trance. "Emails?"

Larissa slammed her purse against Trance's desk. "Yes, that's what it's about. I read the emails."

"*She* sent the emails. Not me. *She* said she loved *me*. I never said that to *her*, and nothing happened."

Trance's phone began to sound, while his clients squared off like they were in a ring, the Pit Bull and the Basset Hound. Trance leaned back in his chair, listening for his assistant's voice to come through the opened door. He frowned, as he watched his clients stand nose against nose, accusation against accusation. What the hell was he doing here? he wondered. Did he really need this? Yes, he did. This was the only place he felt normal, where he didn't have to carry the expectations on his shoulders, the burdens of country and family and mankind. This was where all the problems of the world could become obfuscated by a simple argument between Bill and Larissa Moffett. Trance cocked an ear so he could hear his assistant answer the phone.

"Law office. Judy speaking....Ah, he's in a conference right now...No, I can't disturb him...for president Tilson? A favor for the president? He doesn't like to be disturbed, Mr. Miller..."

"I'll take that, Judy," said Trance, over his clients' screaming. He needed a break, and this could be something important.

"Excuse me," he said to his clients. "I must take a call."

Trance rose from his desk. His clients ignored him and fought on. Trance walked into the reception

area and took the phone from Judy. He touched her on the shoulder. “Would you go get us some donuts from Dot’s, please?”

“Aw,” said Judy. “I was hoping to listen.”

“Please, Judy.”

“Wait ‘til I tell everyone about this... The president—”

“Don’t say a word.”

Judy hunched her shoulders and grinned playfully. “You know I wouldn’t.”

Judy stepped out of Trance’s office and ambled through the hard-packed snow toward Dot’s Diner to get Trance his donuts.

“What’s up, Jake?” said Trance.

“Who’s that bimbo you’ve got working for you, Trance?”

“Easy, Miller. She’s better educated than you or me, and far more efficient. What’s your problem?”

“First, I must advise you that I am taping this conversation.”

“No shit.”

“I’ve got a job for you.”

“Not interested.” Trance looked around his office, making sure no one was listening.

“You may want to hear about this. It’s for—”

Trance spoke firmly into the phone, interrupting Miller with a cool, level voice. “No, Jake. I’ve had enough of your kind of business. I don’t care what kind of guilt trip you lay on me. I’m trying to live my life, not lose it. Let someone else do it. I’m tired of the game. You’ve got a hundred men who can do the job better than I can.”

“You don’t even want to listen?” Trance could almost feel Miller smiling on the other end of the line. He’d been baited but he wouldn’t bite.

“The story always sounds compelling, Jake. Call someone else. Please.”

“Suit yourself.”

Miller hung up the phone and laughed out loud. He’d just driven one *mucho grande* spike between Trance and the president. A true master stroke. This could only strengthen him and weaken Trance with Tilson. Rarely did he get a gift like this. This deserved a special drink. He walked to his small refrigerator and pulled out a tray of ice. He removed a single cube and dropped it into a glass. He poured three fingers of Pepto Bismol into the glass, gave it a splash of lime and gulped it down, smacking his lips when he was done.

Miller called the president. “Trance says he’s not up to it, sir.”

“He won’t help me?” *How could Trance be so insensitive? After the same thing happened to him? He has to know what it’s like.*

“He says we have others who can do a better job. He’s right, you know. We can handle this without him. It’s not like he’s Superman or something.”

“I see. Thank you for trying, Miller.”

The phone went dead.

Tilson called for Mandy Potempkin, his secretary.

“Mandy, cancel my meeting with Lauren Haverford for tomorrow. Don’t reschedule.” *Life’s a two-way street, Trance, and I’m the traffic cop.*

Miller placed his phone back in its receiver. He sat down in his chair and leaned back to enjoy the moment. This had become a very fine day, indeed. Even his stomach settled into a smooth comfortable purr.

When Judy sauntered into Trance's reception area, carrying a brown paper bag, Trance was avoiding the divorce battle by reading an old copy of *Harvard Law Review*. As Judy closed the door behind her, Trance looked to her and smiled. Judy was exceedingly bright but surprisingly uncomplicated. She was well-rounded mentally and physically, with many varied interests. If she had a flaw, one glaring anomaly in her healthy, disciplined life, it was donuts from Dot's. She would run an extra three miles today, just so she could eat them sans guilt. She was already chewing the remains of a cream-filled cruller as the door clicked behind her. A ring of powdered sugar circled her lips.

"Done already?" she said. Her voice almost whined with disappointment. "I was hoping to talk to the president."

Trance looked puzzled. "The president?"

"Mr. Miller said that the president wanted to talk with you. And I was hoping—"

"Miller told you that? He is an evil, conniving little man. I didn't talk to the president." Had Miller offered Trance's services to the president? Was that what the call was about? Goddamned Miller.

Trance grabbed the donut bag and carried it into his office. After two steps he stopped. Bill Moffet and his wife were caught in a love-lock that would make a Vegas dancer blush. Trance stood in mid-stride, gaping as the two of them kissed and groped. He turned away as the developer slipped his hand along his wife's back side and then deep down her skirt."

"Ah hem," interrupted Trance.

"Oh, Jack!" said Larissa.

"I seemed to have missed something?"

Larissa reached around her husband's neck and pulled his head down to give him noogies with her knuckles. "You missed this big lug apologizing for the first time in his life. He did give me the passwords to his email accounts. Not the sign of a guilty man."

"Does this mean you won't need my services?"

"You bet," said Moffet. "Thanks to you. You're as good as they say you are, Trance."

Trance walked to his desk and pulled a manila folder from a wire stand.

"I'll give you back your deposits."

"No, no," said Moffet. "You earned every penny."

Trance laughed. "I did nothing. Take back your three grand."

"Give it to charity. Everybody knows that's what you do." Moffet took his wife by the hand and began to lead her out of the office. Then he stopped and looked at Trance. He held out his hand and the two men shook. "They call you 'The Miracle Worker,' you know. Now I see why."

"I did nothing."

"And you did it just right."

Trance scribbled his signature onto the back of the two checks and carried them to Judy, along with the bag of uneaten donuts. He smiled as the Moffets walked arm in arm out the door of his office.

"Bring these checks to Jimbo at the woman's shelter, will you? Then take the rest of the day off. I'm going skiing."

"Sure," said Judy, with no hint of surprise in her voice. She was used to this. She took the bag and the checks, polished off the last of a jelly donut and walked to a closet against the wall. She pulled a pair of dark blue ski pants, a white turtleneck, and a blue fleece jacket from the shelves and threw them into Trance's open arms.

"Anything else, boss?"

“Go have fun.” Judy would go back home to her husband, a budding architect. He would probably meet her at the door with a kiss. They would grab some lunch, perhaps make love. Then they would be off to Killington for the rest of the day.

“Sure, Jack. You, too.” Judy doubted Trance would have fun. She knew where he was going. He was going to visit his past.

Soon Trance was speeding along the narrow, snow-covered Vermont country roads in his white Porsche 959. The low slung supercar moved like a cruise missile, tightly hugging the rugged ground as Trance wound out the engine. He accelerated into the corners, urging his car to the limits of its lower gears, then easing the throttle as his speed topped a hundred and seventy kilometers per hour along the slim straight-aways.

The air was cold. The sun had broken through the clouds to bathe the snowy mountains to a near blinding whiteness. Trance had the top down on his convertible, and the air ripped at his hair and face like icicle claws. He pulled a pair of Randolph Engineering aviator sunglasses out of his glove box. As he wrapped the glasses around his ears he caught movement in the corner of his eye, a blue splash in his rearview mirror, as another car wound through the tight curves behind him. Trance accelerated and never looked back.

CHAPTER 12



Steam rolled out over the top of the shower door, fogging the mirrors like smoky glass. The air was moist and hot, dripping like a sultry, Georgia summer night. Sammantha struggled to pull Brandon Copley's pants over his uncooperative feet, dragging him halfway across the bedroom before his pants finally tore free. She grabbed Copley by the shoulders and pulled him into the bathroom toward the shower. His underwear slipped down around his ankles and pooled like a lump of spent candle wax. Copley tried to stand, but he caught his toes in the webbing of his jockey shorts and tumbled forward, nearly dumping himself to the floor. Sammantha steadied him as he wobbled, supporting him until the fluttering ceased.

"For God's sakes, Brandon, quit acting like a drunken baby."

Copley stared at Sammantha and blinked. Then he smiled. "Maybe a drink would help me regain my coordination."

"Hold still." Sammantha lifted Copley's feet one at a time and removed his reeking socks. "You're barely awake as it is. You don't need another drink." Sammantha shook her head. "Sometimes," she said softly. She took hold of the bottom of her sweater and pulled it up over her head in one quick motion. She was naked underneath. Copley vaguely followed the bounce of her firm, rounded breasts. He gazed laconically as she unzipped her jeans, his eyes hollow as they followed the descent of her hand. He looked to her face and she slowly drew her tongue across the front of her teeth.

"Are...are you seducing me?" he said. Copley pulled in his bulging stomach and thrust out his chin, making him look like an out-of-shape fighter preparing to enter the ring against a man half his age, like Jack Black taking on *Rocky* in his prime.

"I don't want to get these clothes wet," she said. "That's all."

Copley's eyes began to focus as Sammantha wriggled out of her tight jeans. His eyes darted toward the red silk thong that clung around her hips. With a single finger Sammantha drew it down, slowly, seductively, until she stood naked before him, looking like a Playboy pinup. "I missed you," she said huskily, from the back of her throat. The words came slowly, with feeling. She almost meant it. Almost, but not quite. Not yet.

Brandon felt a tiny twitter between his legs. Through the fog in his brain he recognized the feeling, like an old toy found in the dusty attic of his mind. He began to rise.

"Take me right now," purred Sammantha, her voice soft and low. "Right here. Give it to me. Right here. Everything you have." Sammantha put her hands on her hips and widened her stance. Her body glistened, as the mist settled against her skin like sweet dew.

Copley moved toward her unsteadily.

"I've missed you so," said Sammantha. She tossed her hair and arched her back as Copley began to stroke her nipples with his trembling hands. She closed her eyes, parted her lips, and pushed her hips forward against Copley's growing penis. "Brandon."

Copley felt himself respond. His hands slid down behind her. He cupped her tight bottom and pulled her up against him. "Do you mean that?"

God, he stinks, thought Sammantha. "Please, Brandon, please." Sammantha pushed Copley to the floor and pulled him on top of her. She reached between her legs and pulled slick wetness from inside her. She guided Copley out of his haze, into her body, and within her control. Copley gasped. She felt

him shudder as he slipped inside. She wrapped her arms around his hips, pulled him forward and rocked him, like a baby.

“Oh, I missed you so,” said Copley. “Why do you leave me?”

“Oh, darling,” said Sammantha, looking at her watch. “Don’t think of that now. Just love me. Fill me with your love. Fill me up inside, until I overflow. Give it to me, Brandon, give it to me...”

Moments later it was over. Copley lay above her, panting like an overheated dog. Sammantha stroked his back softly, waiting for the best time to begin. How many years had she been waiting for the next five minutes? “Do you love me, Brandon?”

“More than anything.” Copley’s breath still came in shallow, rapid gasps. His face was pink and dripping with steam and sweat, his hair looking like he had just run through the jungle.

“Those are just words.”

“It’s true.”

“More than anything?”

“Yes, anything.”

“Even your acting?”

“What do you mean, ‘even my acting’? Acting is what I do. It’s who I am.”

“I know,” said Sammantha softly. “I know.”

After a long shower, Sammantha led Copley by the hand into the bedroom. She tossed her towel to the floor and settled down into the bed. She looked up at Copley and smiled. Her eyes drifted behind him to the walls, to the all-too-familiar faces of long deceased Copleys—Copleys that all seemed to look down their noses at her. She smiled toward these dead scions of a long-lost empire, knowing that the last in their steely line was like soft clay in her hands. “I’ve got a present for you,” she said.

“I don’t deserve presents.”

Copley walked to his dresser and rummaged vainly for his hair brush. He frowned and began to scratch the back of his scalp. “I could have sworn...”

“Looking for your brush?” asked Sammantha playfully.

Copley turned. Sammantha was smiling. It made him think of Broadway Klieg lights. *How odd*, he thought, *how the mind can slip off course so quickly*.

“I threw it out,” she said.

“You what? That brush belonged to my great grandfather. You can’t just throw my things out, Samm—”

“You have a new brush...” Sammantha walked to her handbag and withdrew a felt bag. “...with a matching comb.”

“I don’t want a new brush.”

“Ah,” said Sammantha. “But this one is special. It’s just like the president’s brush.”

Copley pouted as Sammantha pressed the soft bag into his hands.

“It’s a very special brush, you know. Made with the finest boar bristles and the smoothest African Ivory. There are only two of these in the world. One is in the White House. The other is here,” she lied. There was only one; it was a one-of-a-kind.

Copley pulled the brush from the bag and turned it over in his hands. He peered at it and grunted. The back of it had a grouping of elaborate hand carvings. It felt balanced in his hands, like an expensive, hand-crafted pistol. “It does look nice.”

“President Tilson received the other as a gift, from the president of Nigeria. Maybe someday your grandson will cherish this, as you did yours.”

Copley laughed. “Grandson? I have no children and probably never will. My one brief marriage ended with my wife speedballing to death while I was working...Never try that again...marriage, I mean.”

He laughed. "Me? Never done drugs. Always preferred stock options or alcohol. Now it's just the booze. It's far more benign."

"I'm not on the pill."

Copley's lips twitched, like they did when he was deep in thought, which was rare these days. He sat silently for nearly a minute, before looking up toward Sammantha through his reddened eyes.

"What do you see in me?" he whispered.

Sammantha stroked Copley's face like she might her Sable fur, running her fingers along it slowly in long, gentle trails.

"I see a very wonderful man, a brilliant actor. I see someone who deserves to be recognized as one of this country's finest individuals."

Copley snorted. "You see a middle-aged drunk who can't keep a job. A washed out actor who has to beg for second rate parts on the outskirts of the outskirts of Broadway. You see the last remaining heir of a once-distinguished family who's lost nearly every dime they had. A man who's brought nothing but shame to his name."

Sammantha took the brush from Copley's palm and began to stroke his hair.

"Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be president?" she asked.

"Be a pain in the royal ass, if you ask me."

"It would certainly restore the grandeur of your family."

"You're dreaming." Copley envisioned himself on the international stage, being the president.

"I think you look like him. Like Tilson."

Copley chuckled. "Maybe if I were forty pounds lighter and spent a few years in the gym."

"There'd be a lot of acting."

Copley looked inward as he imagined himself playing the part. "It's the greatest role in the world. He's always on stage."

"Yes, he is..." Sammantha said quietly, thinking of Tilson.

After she was dressed, Sammantha locked herself in the bathroom. She took a chrome pill box from her purse and shook a tiny white tablet into her palm. She flushed the toilet, ran the sink water for several seconds, unfastened the top button on her blouse and returned to the bedroom. When Copley looked her way, she paused, giving him her best Penthouse pose, leaning against the door jam, fluffing her hair around her pouting lips.

"Can I get you something to drink, Brandon darling?"

"You don't mind?" Copley looked puzzled.

"No." Sammantha smiled. "Not after what you just did for me."

Copley grinned, not with a smile, but with the greedy, aching eyes of an addict about to get his next fix. "A glass of Jack, then? No ice."

Sammantha walked across the room to a battered wooden high boy table that was loaded with liquor bottles, an assortment of glasses, packets of drink mixes, a shaker, and a melted bucket of ice. She cracked a fresh bottle of Jack Daniels and turned her back to Copley as she dropped the white tablet into his glass. She poured two inches of whiskey and swished it around. She dropped three cubes of ice into a second glass, filled it with water and a package of sour mix, then stirred it well, taking her time until the pill had fully dissolved in Copley's drink.

Copley walked to the window overlooking Gramercy Park and stared at the New York skyline. "Nice night," he said.

Without speaking, Sammantha carried the drinks to the window. She handed one to Copley, then raised the other and said, "To the future president."

"Whoever he might be."

Sammantha refused to drink. “To President Brandon Copley.” Sammantha glared at Copley, looking like a nun who’d heard a boy burp loudly in church. There was no forgiveness or understanding in her eyes. Just accusation.

Copley saw her anger and looked to his shaking hand. He had no will to argue. “Sure, babe.” He lifted his glass, watching out of the corner of his eye as Sammantha did the same. “To President Brandon Copley. And to oblivion—may it come early, often, and someday remain eternal.”

“Eternal oblivion. Of course,” said Sammantha, smiling to herself. That was her goal, wasn’t it? Oblivion? No, not oblivion. Destruction. She wanted complete and total destruction.

Copley drained his glass in several quick gulps. Then he looked hopefully at Sammantha for more.

“That will be enough.”

“Sammantha...”

“You promised me before I left, Brandon. No more drinking.”

Copley looked back out the window and laughed. “So I lied. Drunks lie, you must know that.”

“You said you wouldn’t drink anymore. As a gift to me.”

“But you’re letting me have one now.”

The street outside appeared to blur before Copley’s eyes, as if he were looking through gauze into a kaleidoscope. His eyelids began to droop and he smiled crookedly, looking more like a crack house addict than the president of the United States.

“I let you have a drink because I love you.”

“Then love me more. Just one more.”

Sammantha took hold of Copley’s arm. “I need you to do something first.”

Sammantha led Copley to a maroon leather couch and helped him sit. Beside the couch stood a mahogany end table. Sammantha unfolded a paper from her back pocket and placed it on the table. She pressed a pen into Copley’s hand and said, “Sign this while I fix you another drink.” Copley smiled. Without reading the words, he signed his life away.

Moments later, Copley’s eyes slowly closed. He fell sideways onto the couch and began to snore.

“Well Brandon,” Sammantha said. “Our time has come.”

Sammantha Starodubov thought back to that day in Russia, when everything had grown so clear. It was a cloudy, gloomy Moscow morning. Her fiancé was long since dead, and she was living the Moscow estate he’d left her. The television was on, broadcasting a speech by Senator Jason Tilson, as he announced his intention to run for the U.S. presidency.

As the television cameras zoomed in on his face, Sammantha’s house manager, Katarina, said, “I held him, when he was a baby. Tilson. His mother worked with me in America.”

Sammantha ignored Katarina as she focused on the political implications of this man’s candidacy, and what it would mean to her plan.

“He has a twin,” Katarina said. “But that is a secret. A secret that only I know.”

It was then that Sammantha turned her full attention to Katarina. “Really? Tell me.”

That was when she had learned that the future American president had a twin; one that nobody knew was alive. She learned how their young mother had worked as a maid on a Bar Harbor estate. How their father, their real father, that bastard Copley, had raped that sixteen year old servant girl and stolen one of her sons.

Yes. Her plan had come into view then, a sweeping panorama as big as the Virginia sky. All she had to do was wait. That, of course, and help Tilson win the presidency. Using the Obama strategy of small,

non-traceable Internet donations with pre-paid credit cards, she had pumped more than \$200 million into Tilson's campaign, all without his knowledge. She learned everything there was to know about both men, Copley and Tilson, until she knew each of them better than herself. They were so different, yet they were identical, spawned by the same malicious seed and a loving egg.

As Sammantha looked at the drugged-out Copley lying prone on his living room couch, she remembered his washed-out face on the New York City billboard. She thought back to Tilson's clear-eyed, smiling face after he'd won his party's nomination. They looked nothing alike. There was a resemblance to the knowing eye, with one a mere shadow of the other. Their lives had been so different that even genetics could not shape them alike. Copley was smoky rooms and barroom stools. Tilson was country air and five mile runs. Tilson was hard and lean, Copley was soft and wasted. Tilson's eyes were alert and expressive, while Copley's were drunk and unfocused. Tilson had grown up outdoors, playing all kinds of sports. Copley had spent his childhood playing the piano and studying Mozart. Copley's one sport was baseball. Introduced to it by Clyde, his father's butler, it had been nurtured by private coaches. Tilson had played pickup games in the neighborhood schoolyard with groups of friends. Copley had no friends.

Jock Tilson was the son of a poor mother who mucked cows at 4 A.M. Brandon Copley, IV had simply appeared one day, held in the arms of his fifty-year-old mother and sequestered in a mansion overlooking Gramercy Park.

Sammantha looked at Copley as he snored. She could almost see him being served with tea and crumpets while listening to his grandfather tell stories of how his father, Vanderbilt and Morgan had helped to shape America. Brandon Copley had bored her time and again, repeatedly telling how the Copley family had owned vast interests in railroads, steel, and heavy manufacturing. How they had always numbered among Lady Astor's select "four hundred," the ones invited to her balls. Those memories had grooved a pathway so deep into Copley's mind, preaching how it was up to him to continue the great family legacy, that if his brain ever jumped the track there would be no jumping back on.

From what she'd learned, Brandon had been a model child, always doing what he was told, even after his parents had shipped him off to Fessenden and Deerfield, demanding nothing less than an A in every course. He did it because it was expected. He'd found drama during his freshman year at Deerfield. It was here that he finally felt free. It was here that he could remove the expectations of his family and become someone else, if only for a night. That, of course, was why his parents forbid him from ever acting again. Then baseball became his savior.

Copley's father greased his way into Yale, where he was supposed to prepare for law. His life was following its demanded destiny like a trail of crumbs, when, one day, his life finally did leave the tracks. Copley's parents were killed by a rogue lion, while on an African safari. He changed his major from history to drama and a star was almost born. He still played baseball, and helped Yale win the Ivy League title against Harvard, by striking out their most feared hitter, Jock Tilson, with the bases loaded to end the game.

Without his parents to push him, though, Copley's ambition withered like tomatoes on a dry September vine. With no sense of purpose, no rules laid down by parents, no common sense and no sense of restraint, Copley's his life began its slow death spiral, ending where he now lay on a couch, drunk and snoring, after signing away everything he had left.

Sammantha twirled Copley's wet hair with one finger. Then she traced along his cheek with the back of a fingernail. It wasn't all his fault. She knew how destiny could turn in an unexpected moment, how it could take someone's fire and snuff it out with one simple stroke. She had felt that stroke, hadn't she? And so had Copley.

Copley's twin had all the advantages. Jock Tilson had been raised on a simple farm, rolling out of

bed each morning long before the sun rose into the sky. He would feed the chickens and gather the eggs. He would milk the cows and muck the stalls. By the time he walked off to school, Tilson had already put in hours of concentrated labor. Tilson never complained, because his single mother worked even harder. When he walked into the barns, long before daylight, she was already there—her face smudged with dirt or cow dung, her hair askew, her lips smiling, her eyes ablaze with affection and zest for the day.

“Hello, darling,” she would say. “It’s another great day, isn’t it?” She would give her son a big hug. “And you are the best thing about it...I love you so.”

Tilson earned his way to Harvard College, then Harvard Law. After a couple years slaving in a big Boston law firm, he had moved back to Maine and married his childhood sweetheart. The rest was history—a small legal practice, assistant district attorney, district attorney, U.S. senator and finally, the presidency.

Now Kiki was dead, and Jock Tilson was becoming more like his brother every day. In a few more months, no one would be able to tell them apart. It was almost as if some unseen hand were guiding her, clearing the path for her to make things right, to even the score. If she believed in God, she might have felt His hand. But she didn’t believe in God, not anymore. This was something else. This was justice.

CHAPTER 13



President Jock Tilson's fingers drummed loudly against the top of the Resolute desk. *Thump. thump, thump.* The shades were drawn in the Oval Office and no lights were on. The sunlight was fading outside. Inside, the room was beginning to match the president's own dark mood. The men standing before him looked like shadows, waiting motionless for the president to speak. Tilson crossed his legs, leaned back in his chair and ordered his reports.

"Speak."

Doheny was the first to talk. His voice had a tinny, whiny quality making him sound like a fourth grade schoolgirl who'd just been hit by the class bully. "We haven't had enough time. Not yet. We're not totally sure what *caused* her death. We certainly don't know who killed her, Mr. President."

Doheny and Cramm stood at attention in the gloom, waiting for the onslaught they knew would come.

"You men are paid for solutions, not excuses. You were supposed to be the best." said Tilson. "I chose you over the FBI, Doheny, because you've got investigative experience with the FBI, and with the Financial Crimes Division of the Secret Service. The director of Homeland insisted that you were one of the few who might see the whole picture—the criminal trail and the money trail. Obviously, he was wrong."

"We've only had six days, sir."

"Israel won a goddamned war in six days. You've had six frigging days and you still can't say *what* killed my wife. Let alone who."

"Israel didn't have to follow our laws, sir."

"No excuse."

"They still don't know who shot Kennedy, sir," mumbled Doheny.

The moment the words left his mouth, Doheny knew he had made a mistake. A big mistake. As Tilson stared at him, Doheny felt like wax in a lava lamp, his insides turning into a burning, bubbling liquid as he stood. He blurted, "Okay, so most think it was E. Howard Hunt, since he admitted to it on his deathbed. Of course, he fingered Hoover, the mob and the CIA...so no one would believe him...No one could...Of course, I'm sure that Kiki wasn't killed by our people...Okay, I think I better just shut up."

Tilson ignored Doheny. He ran his hands through his hair. It hadn't been washed in days, and his fingers couldn't smooth the errant clumps that stuck out in every direction like matted dog fur. Tilson looked like a disheveled, preoccupied professor who couldn't find his car keys when they were hanging on his belt. His temper was growing increasingly volatile. He was licking his lips between every word, cracking and chapping them like a man stranded in the desert, a man wandering in dazed circles just before he died. He was about to throw a tantrum when Jacob Miller slipped in through the Oval Office door.

"Excuse me, Mr. President," said Miller.

"It's about time," cried Tilson.

Miller stopped in place and stared into Tilson's hollow eyes. He briefly closed his own eyes, then motioned for Cramm and Doheny to leave the room. The two men slunk out gratefully.

"Begging your pardon, Mr. President," said Miller calmly, after the two men had left. "I, too, haven't had much sleep. My secretary is bitching like he's got PMS. Now you're losing it, big time. I suggest

you remember your position. You are the fucking president...just in case you've forgotten."

Tilson looked at Miller for a stunned moment. Then he laughed. He walked over to Miller, towering above him. Then he engulfed him with a big brotherly arm.

"I deserved that, Jacob. Seems like we're all a bit edgy." Tilson guided Miller toward his conference table at the far end of the office. "Is it true..." he asked, "...that you're worth over forty million?"

"Don't know, sir. Something like that, I guess. Who knows, these days?"

Tilson pressed his hands together. "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

Miller blinked. "Does it matter?"

"I want to know why you do it."

"Do it, sir? You mean the job?"

"Yeah. I want to know why men with your wealth gravitate to Washington. Is it the power?"

Miller smiled. "Guess I just got misdirected somewhere along the way, sir."

"And Trance...He's worth a thousand times that, isn't he?"

Miller laughed. "We're a couple of losers, aren't we?"

"It's eating you up inside, isn't it?"

"Sir?"

"You drink Mylanta like its water."

"Pepto Bismol."

The president grew solemn. "Miller..." He laid his palms flat upon his desk. "...The difference between us is that I have always enjoyed what I've done. You do it because of some warped sense of duty, or some sick need that you have to serve." Miller began to protest but Tilson held up his hand. "I'm not criticizing, just observing."

Miller ruffled his shoulders and said, "Well then, you haven't a goddamn clue, Mr. President. Truth is, I find great pleasure in helping our country. Deep pleasure." Miller reached into his coat and withdrew his silver hip flask. "And the rest..." He shrugged. So what if he had a few hang-ups?

Tilson pondered Miller's words and answered softly, "I always had my wife, Kiki. Together we made it fun." Tilson closed his eyes and bit his lower lip. "It's not fun anymore."

"Now you know why I drink the Pepto. I lost my wife, too, you see." Miller's lips tightened into a thin white line. For the briefest of moments, he looked like he was about to cry. "It's not the same without a good woman, is it? A woman you love so much that it makes you ache, a woman that puts this whole crazy world into its rightful place. Believe me, I *know* where you are. You have to go on, sir. That's *all* you can do."

"You punish yourself, don't you?"

Miller said nothing. Tilson waved a hand. "I don't care about your reasons. Not really." He smiled. "Did you know that I first proposed to Kiki when we were eight years old?"

"You used to be very sure of yourself, Mr. President."

Tilson ran the back of his hand across his eyes. He turned away and wiped the wetness on his pants. "When you've been together for that long, it's hard to go on alone."

"It is your duty."

"Yeah." Tilson stood and stretched. "Have you been able to get Trance to help out?"

"He wants no part of government work."

"Government work?" Tilson laughed. "Even when it's a personal favor and of national interest?"

"That's what he tells me, sir." *Well*, thought Miller. *That's not really what he says, but it's close enough. For my purposes.*

"Selfish bastard."

Miller spread out his hands. *Yes, I am.* "It eats *him* up more than it does you or me, sir. Because he

can blame himself. I did all I could to get him, but it isn't going to happen."

Tilson pressed his hands together. He looked closely into Miller's eyes. "I wonder how hard you tried." He drew a resigned breath. "I suppose we ought to get back at it."

Miller retrieved Cramm and Doheny from the hallway. When they entered the Oval Office, Tilson seemed more like his usual self. The men took seats around the conference table, while Tilson remained standing. "Well, boys. Let's roll up our sleeves and dig in. Anybody want a drink?"

They all declined.

"Good. Never trust a man who drinks on the job."

Tilson pressed his knuckles on the table and leaned forward. "Doheny, tell me *everything* you've got."

Doheny fumbled with his notes and spread them across the table.

"Although the first lady's death is still, officially, due to 'natural causes,' we've got slews of terrorist groups taking credit for her assassination. We expected that. We're running down each lead. We're also receiving a marked increase in the number of threats upon your life, sir. There's a lot of chatter—"

"Tell me something worth knowing." Tilson slouched into a chair.

"Well, sir. As you know, your wife's... the first lady's... body showed traces of hemlock, a toxin known to cause paralysis, and in some cases, loss of breathing. We don't think the level found in her blood was enough to kill her. But there may have been enough to keep her immobile."

"You're sure she was poisoned?"

"Definitely, sir." Doheny scratched his head. He pressed his fingers against the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes as if he were in pain. Then he opened his eyes and looked at the president. "The ultimate cause of death might actually have been botulism."

"Botulism?"

"Like what you might get in a bad clam, or tainted soup."

"A clam," said the president softly. "You think my wife was murdered by clam? She didn't even like clams."

Doheny ignored Tilson. "There were also those two other compounds that we have yet to identify. We don't think the poison was binary. We do think it was administered at the British Embassy." He opened a brown, calf-grain leather briefcase and pulled out several photos.

"Not a British plot?" asked Tilson.

"Not a British plot, sir. Their ambassador has answered our questions freely. He is as outraged as we are."

"The prime minister didn't seem contrite when she called with condolences."

Doheny shook his head. "She was not aware that we suspect the embassy."

Tilson nodded. "Go on."

"Well, sir, it's like trying to read Braille with rubber gloves. We don't have much, beyond the disappearance of a member of the embassy staff." Doheny passed around a black and white photo of Sandra Smith. "She said she was getting married."

"Poor guy," said Tilson. The photo looked nothing like Samantha Starodubov. It looked more like some cartoon caricature in a Tim Burton film, like *Nightmare in Washington*.

"Now she has vanished."

"She was reportedly bound for Sidney, Australia," said Cramm.

"There's no record of her having left the country," continued Doheny. "No video anywhere."

"You searched her home?" asked Tilson.

"As if she never existed, sir. Not a fingerprint or a hair in the place."

“Motive?” Tilson began to walk slowly around the table, mumbling to himself. He pinched his eyebrows together with his thumb and forefinger and closed his eyes, as if this was some magic cure to their blindness. “Can’t think of why someone would want to kill my wife...”

“No motive yet, sir,” said Doheny, watching as the president came toward him. “But Ms. Smith did serve champagne to you and your wife.”

Tilson stopped pacing when he reached Doheny’s chair. He placed a hand upon his shoulder. “Were you ever in a fraternity?”

“Sir?”

“Do you know what it’s like to be blackballed?”

“Ah, no. My college didn’t have frats.”

Tilson lowered his voice. “Come up blank on this case and you will know what it’s like. No, you’ll know what it’s like to have a White House blackball. That’s a stain you’ll wear for the rest of your life.”

“There are dead-ends everywhere, Mr. President,” said Miller. “Smith’s trail leads nowhere. Her Social Security number was taken from a woman whose last known address was a cardboard box beneath a bridge in New York City. That was two years ago. It gets worse with her references.”

“That’s not possible,” said Tilson. “You and I both know the scrutiny given to embassy staffs.”

“I haven’t finished, sir.”

Miller drew a folder from a titanium Halliburton case.

“She was referred to the Brits by the attaché to the Australian embassy, a Mr. Robert Fallon. Because of his strong referral, Smith received less than exhaustive scrutiny. A few phone calls, a driver’s license check.” A drop of sweat began trickling down Miller’s forehead. He flicked at it with his right index finger, stopped, and took a centering breath, before continuing. “Fallon is a person of interest to U.S. security. Of course the Brits had no way of knowing this. We knew nothing of the referral.”

“But we’re getting somewhere, right?” Tilson sat back down into his seat. “We talking terrorists?”

“I wouldn’t blame terrorists yet, sir,” said Miller.

Doheny and Cramm exchanged furtive looks. Miller was doing exactly what they had warned him against. He was taking over.

“Fallon disappeared Sunday night.”

The president turned to Cramm. “And your men? Have they done *anything* worthwhile? Anything?”

“We’ve questioned dozens of suspects, sir. It’s kinda hard though, with them having more rights than citizens, and lawyers from the ACLU standing at the ready.”

“You question them, damn it! And do it right.”

“You may recall that we are no longer allowed to interrogate, sir. Technically, that’s a function of your office, sir, although even your hands are tied. We’ve asked for questioning leeway. We even got permission to say ‘please.’ That’s about as far as they let us go, before we have to let them go. No probable cause, you see. I’ve got three hundred agents looking for more. But we’re still shooting ghosts in the dark.”

Tilson pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and blew his nose. He blew it again and then stuffed the handkerchief in his pocket. “Listen,” he said, looking at all three men. “I’ve always considered myself to be a patient man, a reasonable man. So I will be reasonable. I won’t fire your asses right now. But from this moment forward, as long as I am president, you men will do nothing else but look for my wife’s killers. You don’t see your families, you don’t shit, you don’t even sleep. Is that clear?”

The three men exchanged glances, a fact not lost on Tilson. They all spoke, in unison, “Yes, sir.”

“Now, get out of here.”

CHAPTER 14



Dry, hardened snow crunched underneath the down-filled boots of Nikolai Ogarkov as he walked the path toward his expansive woodpile. Behind him rose his decadent dacha, a thirty-thousand square foot monument built with whole trees and huge hunks of rough-cut stone during the “People’s” Communist regime. The home stretched majestically along the edge of a large lake. The lake was frozen solid from the bitter, mountainous Russian air. Tufts of light snow danced across it like pixies. A thin trickle of smoke wafted from one of the six brick chimneys poking through the dacha’s roof. The smoke trail was barely visible as it melted into the slate-gray, predawn sky. There was no sign of animal life—no reindeer, not even a squirrel. There were a few hearty birds fluttering about for food, but that was all. Nor were there any of the Russian president’s guards. They were not allowed within two hundred yards of the retreat, just like the animals.

The air had a biting, bone numbing chill, even though it had already warmed to a balmy five degrees below zero, Fahrenheit. This was the kind of weather Ogarkov enjoyed the most. He had grown up in the seaport city of Tiksi, far above the Arctic Circle by the Laptev Sea. His father had been the leading Party official. It was there that he had learned to cope with the elements, just as he now managed his opposition within the fractious Russian leadership.

As Ogarkov pulled four round logs off the pile, he thought of his unlikely rise to power. He thought of his early days, when communism had reigned. He had accepted communism for what it was—an ill-conceived but well-intentioned attempt at equality. He abhorred the abuses of its power. He had embraced the economic tide of Gorbachev’s Glasnost and Perestroika. He had straddled the divide caused by Putin and his enforcers. He had been as surprised as anyone, when he was anointed by the press and propelled to unprecedented popularity within Russia.

Except for Putin, Ogarkov’s recent predecessors had stumbled politically, with each succumbing to the many warring factions within the government. Capitalism had taken hold, weakly. But it was an unwieldy snake with many dangerous heads. How could he appease them all?

Ogarkov had become a folk hero. He was credited with pulling Russia out of its long economic malaise. Trade with the Americans and Western Europe was rising steadily. Russian exports were even beginning to lose their stigma of being cheaply made replicas of foreign goods.

Yes, thought Ogarkov, we’ve come a long, long way. But I have little to do with it...I am at the mercy of the Oligarchs. I float where they blow me. There is still so far to go and I must try to do my part. I cannot, will not, rest until there is a durable peace. Perhaps that is the one thing I can control.

Ogarkov dropped the wood into the snow. *Peace*, he thought. *But at what price?*

With his black-gloved fingers, Ogarkov reached for a shaft of smooth wood that was peeking up through a blanket of snow. The well-worn, oak axe handle felt good in his hands, with its promise of physical pleasure and pain. He dislodged the axe from its base, a weathered, flattened tree stump nearly four feet across. He brushed the snow off the top of the stump and set one of the logs lengthwise on its level surface. He drew the axe high above his head, grasping the wooden handle with both hands. Then, with a practiced, fluid stroke, he swung unerringly down upon the log and split it in two. Just one single swipe. How he wished it were so easy to govern.

Ogarkov was a strong man with a chest like a workhorse and squat, sturdy legs. His arms bulged

like a weightlifter's, built by his endless childhood hours spent removing stones from his father's poor wheat-growing land. His imposing physical bulk made him look taller than his modest six feet.

Ogarkov had a long, sloping forehead that crested with a dark, bushy unibrow. This single eyebrow framed forceful looking eyes that were known for their intensity. His gaze was so powerful that it could cause an adversary to shrink and stutter. His eyes looked like clear glass balls filled with liquid light, eyes that could channel some inner, mind-bending force against anyone who dared to oppose him. The reality was, his eyes held only truth and fairness, rather powerful poison against most politicians.

Ogarkov swung the axe again and again. With broad powerful strokes, he split each of the remaining three logs with a single slash. He grabbed four more. Sweat began to seep from his brow. It ran down the outside edges of his eyes, where it met the dimpled cleft of his whiskered chin before turning to ice.

Ogarkov continued chopping and his sweat came harder. Icicles formed on his chin, before cracking with his movement and falling into the snow. In an hour he had a solid, neatly stacked pile of fresh firewood for the day.

Ogarkov stopped to catch his breath. His chest heaved. He bent forward, wearily leaning his axe against the stump that he'd used for cutting. *I'm too old for this*, he thought. Perhaps his time *had* passed. He pricked his ears, as he heard the far-off sound of an automobile engine roaring through the virgin woods. Soon he could hear the tinkle of chains clanking against the snow-covered roads. His guests were arriving. In fifteen minutes they would emerge from their treacherous ride along the narrow, ice-covered drive and come shivering into his cozy country home. He was ready for them. He swung his axe into the stump and turned toward the dacha.

They're all decadent, he thought. Decadent and drunk with power. That was the problem. He didn't trust them. Neither should his country.

Ogarkov placed a squat tin coffee pot on the back burner of his stone, wood-powered stove and tossed three fresh logs into its mouth. He plopped a huge iron skillet onto the stone surface. Into it he tossed two pounds of Oscar Mayer bacon, carefully separating the pieces as they began to sizzle. He emptied two dozen eggs into another iron pan. He poured in some milk and scrambled the eggs with a whisk as they began to cook. Ogarkov was laying crisp strips of bacon onto neat rows of paper towels when a black Jeep Cherokee rolled into sight through the kitchen window. There was a knock on the door, just as Ogarkov was spooning immense piles of eggs onto four heated plates.

"Come in!" he yelled in Russian. "The door is open."

His guests entered single file into the kitchen. There were four of them. Three were influential Russian leaders, although only two of them had been expected. The fourth was a woman with stunning beauty. Ogarkov had never met this woman, although her reputation was almost legendary. She was the one who made men grow weak in the knees. She made men loose with their senses and free with their money. She also had the rare power to heal.

The first man in line stopped and the guests crunched into each other like an accordion. Ogarkov smiled inwardly, as he noticed their surprise at his meal. He hoped that his suspicions were not so apparent, as he looked at his uninvited guest.

"Thought you might be hungry," he said cheerfully. "Come. Sit and eat. I'll set one more place."

Ogarkov gestured toward a crude, lopsided farmers table that was neatly set for four. The men walked across the rough pine floor, each stopping behind a wooden chair. They waited as Ogarkov grabbed a fifth chair from across the kitchen and set it down for the woman. Only after she was seated did the other men sit.

Ogarkov dropped a bacon-filled wicker basket onto the center of the table. Beside it he placed a second basket, this one mounded with thick brown toast. He motioned toward several jars of jelly and a pot

of freshly whipped butter.

“Eat,” he said. “Before it gets cold.” He paused and then looked at the woman. “You must be Samantha Starodubov, no?”

Sammantha dipped her head. “I am.”

Ogarkov grunted and sat down. Without another word he began to eat. Ogarkov’s guests looked furtively at one another, and then stared silently, sullenly at their food while their host dug in like a recently-rescued island castaway.

Ogarkov ate in the same manner that he worked. It was an all-out effort, as if he needed to replace, in mere moments, the enormous energy he had consumed cutting wood. After a minute he said, “This is the American president’s favorite breakfast.” He inhaled a bacon strip with two quick bites and then frowned. “Except for the bagels he has delivered daily.” He smiled. “The frozen bagels that I ordered from Emil Radler seem to be lost somewhere in Moscow.” *Probably stolen by one of you*, he thought. After another forkful of eggs he continued. “Good, yes?”

His guests began to eat, looking warily at their president, while waiting for him to begin the meeting he had called on such short notice. Slowly, like a train just leaving the rail yard, their eating began to assume growing speed.

When his guests appeared relaxed, Ogarkov said, “We can never be truly secure until the world is free of nuclear weapons. I think we should disarm.”

Ogarkov’s statement floated through the air like a large soap bubble. His guests all stopped in mid-bite and turned toward him, staring, as if waiting for the bubble to pop.

Ogarkov looked at his guests and smiled.

“Don’t all talk at once... Well? Does anyone disagree?” He turned to one of the men. “Ivan Petrovski, what do you think?”

“Yes...” stammered Petrovski. “...The issue bears thought. But it must be given a great deal of study. A great deal.”

“Come now, Ivan. Tell me that you wouldn’t feel more comfortable if the world were free of nuclear weapons.”

The Russian Prime Minister regained his composure. He thought for a moment, then replied, “Unlike you, Nikolai, I suffered because of the Great War. I was a babe as Hitler began his march on our beloved Leningrad, but I saw death. I saw people kill to keep from being killed.” He paused. “I know the horror of war, Nikolai. My mother nearly starved to death, choosing to give her children food as she wasted into nothing...She never recovered, not really...I heard her cry, as countless others died, including my own father...” He hesitated. “...So I know about war.” Petrovski poured himself a second cup of coffee and took a thoughtful sip. “Now, you ask me if I would want to see the world free of nuclear weapons. Do you take me for a fool? I would like nothing more than to see the world live in lasting peace. But I don’t have such a simplistic view of the world, as you and your followers.”

Petrovski stared into the eyes of Ogarkov, as if waiting for an argument. Ogarkov stared back, with a look of understanding, almost kindness rounding his face. Petrovski took a breath and continued.

“In the Great War, we could have avoided the pain of the Germans if we had simply laid down our arms and surrendered. But we didn’t, did we? And why not? Because we had to preserve our way of life. We didn’t want a world dominated by capitalist pigs and fascist dictators.”

Petrovski sneaked a look at the other guests. Would the others support him? Their faces looked like lifeless sponges, showing no trace of emotion, no register of support or disdain, just absorbing his words like a spill.

Before Petrovski could continue, Ogarkov began to clap his hands. “But now *we* are the capitalist pigs.”

“You doubt my loyalty?”

Ogarkov sobered. “Nobody doubts your loyalties to Russia, Ivan,” he said softly. “You and I would be the last to put into jeopardy the system that has brought us so many fine things.” Ogarkov looked around at the walls of his dacha, then to the men beside him. They were all clad in expensive suits of the finest cloth, with new L.L. Bean boots. Their shirts and ties were made of fine Indian silks. He looked at his own blue Levis and his bright, customized Nike running shoes. He looked to the diamond-studded Rolex President watch he wore on his wrist. Ogarkov motioned toward the other men.

“We agree that the sanctity of the Motherland must come above all else?”

Everyone nodded.

“Suppose that I were to come to an agreement with the Americans that leaves us with an equal hand, but also sets into motion a process that will rid the world of nuclear weapons? To this, what would you say?”

Vasily Nabokov, chief of the Russian Armed Forces, frowned. “We’ve already emasculated ourselves on the European Continent. Our nuclear threat is the only sword that defends us.”

“Come, come,” said Ogarkov. “You and I both know that our reduction treaties with the West were simply cost cutting measures disguised as compromise. How else could we get away with taking billions in foreign aid? We had to show good faith, so we destroyed some old tanks, outdated ships and a few inoperable nuclear missiles. What we gave was meaningless. We are still secure with our offensive threat, just like our neighbors. As always, we remain in a stand-off, where the devastation to the victor would also make him a loser.

“That is the problem. What I am seeking is full-scale nuclear disarmament. This will bring, not a brief respite to the danger, but a true and lasting peace. Then we can devote our energies to such matters as putting bread into the mouths of our people.”

Nabokov grunted noisily. “We maintained the largest free-standing army in the world for good reason,” he said. “It may have weakened our economy, but it kept us safe.”

“It devastated our economy,” said Ogarkov. “Still does. And it has kept us on the ever-present edge of destruction.” He lifted a coffee cup to his lips and looked closely into the eyes of the other three men at the table. He didn’t look at Sammantha. Not yet. “The world is different today. We have less to fear, militarily, at least.”

“We have far more to fear!” cried Nabokov. “They whittle away at our power, slowly, like mice chewing into a cereal box. Then they build nests inside and piss everywhere. Soon, even our advantage in space will be overcome. Then what will we have?”

“The war today, *Comrade*,” replied Ogarkov, sarcastically with a weary sigh, “is being waged economically. Unless we—”

“We should strike while we still can.”

Ogarkov looked stunned.

Nabokov’s eyes suddenly took on the wildness of a hunted man—stabbing from side to side, rounding into two large, owl-like circles. “We can conquer the world and take losses of no more than thirty percent.”

“You would kill fifty million of our own people?” Ogarkov said slowly.

“We could save those who are most important. Then we would have lasting peace...A peace we can *control*, *Comrade*.”

“*Comrade*, my ass.” Ogarkov could not understand the concept of peace through war, despite its effectiveness. But he was used to it. He’d fought it all his life. He knew that he could never change the minds of such men. He could only keep their power in check. “We will have lasting peace...” he said disdainfully, “...but it must be without destruction. When we invest the money that our military wastes,

we will again become one of the world's greatest economic powers." His voice softened. "We can have it all." Ogarkov looked to the other men. "If only we have faith." Again, he didn't look at Sammantha.

Nabokov bit his lip. He knew it was senseless to argue with a man like Ogarkov. So he studied his options, his opportunities. If the West disarmed...fat chance that would happen...But, if it did, and he could accrue his own nuclear arsenal, the West would bow to *his* feet. Orchestrated correctly, Russian hegemony could be almost guaranteed.

Nabokov settled into a more comfortable position. *Yes, this is worth considering*, he thought. "Are you going to make a proposal?"

"Would I have your support?"

Nabokov was the most powerful member of the old guard, still battling Ogarkov for power on an increasingly unlevel playing field. Nabokov had been unable to stop the bloodless, but anemic Russian economic revolution. But he could block such a radical proposal as nuclear disarmament. Peace? There could be no real peace. Not among men. Ever.

After a long silence, Nabokov said, "If you can deliver a guarantee that the rest of the world will disarm, I will support it."

Ogarkov exhaled deeply, with visible relief. He leaned back in his chair and looked to the ceiling, as if counting the hundreds of wooden pegs that held the insides of the great dacha together. He said, "My predecessors did much to advance the motherland. I hope to continue this work. Perhaps one day we may all live in peace, free from the ever-present threat of nuclear annihilation." Ogarkov pressed his palms together in front of his nose. "One last question." He looked to Nabokov. "What is your price?"

"My price?"

"Your price."

"I wish only to help." Nabokov's eyes gave away none of his anger. How dare the president question his loyalty? How dare he accuse him of putting himself above country? "Should you convince the West to destroy their nuclear arsenals, I shall personally oversee the destruction of ours."

Ogarkov thought he understood immediately. If Nabokov could not stop him, he would join him, at the price of being elevated to a national hero. This vain and vile man would share in the glory, maybe even take it all. No matter. Ogarkov didn't care about glory, only the result.

"You shall be given full control then," said the Russian president. Ogarkov extended his hand. As Nabokov grasped it, Ogarkov squeezed down on the military leader's fingers, pressing them together like he might a soft tube of toothpaste. He watched Nabokov's face redden, as if somehow his constricted hand had pumped all his blood into his head. Ogarkov released his grip, then turned toward Sammantha Starodubov.

"I believe this lady has a proposal."

The other men looked at Sammantha. Surprise spread across their faces, their sense of order marred, the lines of their faces flattening and seeming to melt into their skin. They had assumed Sammantha was there for sexual favors, not as an equal, or as a leader. A proposal?

Sammantha cleared her throat. "Thank you, Mr. President." She took a small sip of coffee and looked from face to face. "I can make the American president do anything you wish."

Nabokov's eyes narrowed, but he didn't dispute her. He had heard of her powers, legends really. How she had appeared out of heaven, or was it hell, at the age of twelve. She had been kept by a series of brutal Oligarchs—every one of them meeting death at the hands of a competitor. Each man had left her a small tribute. Until the last, who had left her everything. She had graduated Phys Mat at fifteen. Then it was college and medical school in America. She had returned a doctor, with exceptional skills, and set up shop as "surgeon to the stars." Terrorist stars. Al Qaeda, HAMAS, Hezbollah, the Iranian government. The list was long. She had saved many men. But, oh, she had also broken men. How many

marriages had she ruined? More than a few, he knew. She was a viper with very lethal fangs. Or an angel with a touch as soft as a cloud.

Nabokov shrugged. "How will you do this?"

"President Ogarkov will offer to visit the new American leader in his own country. It will be great for Tilson's face—but it will put him under pressure to perform. Then I will do my part to...to influence him, to relieve his pressure." Sammantha smiled. No one doubted what she meant.

Nabokov drummed his fingers upon the table, while chewing noisily on his last piece of bacon. After several moments he spoke. "Unfortunately, it is not the Americans I fear. It is our neighbors in Northern Africa, and Eastern Asia."

"They pose no threat to us."

"But they do," said Nabokov curtly. "At least four Muslim countries are producing nuclear weapons, albeit on a limited scale. It doesn't take much to destroy a city though, does it? As we've found out with our own nuclear meltdowns. If they gain the capability to deliver their warheads accurately, which they will because we've *sold* them the missiles, we have more to fear from Muslims than we do the Americans."

"They will fall in line, Vasily," said Ogarkov, after a moment of thoughtful silence. He reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a box of Marlboro cigarettes. He tapped the top of the pack against the rough table with several quick snaps of his wrist, then flipped back the top. "You see," he said. "We've already taken measures against that possibility."

Nabokov's ears tinged red. He did his best to appear calm, waiting a few seconds before responding coldly. "Is there something you have not told me?"

The Russian president smiled. "Many things, my friend." He stood from the table and signaled that the meeting was over. Nothing more was said. The men began to collect their coats and gather by the door.

"Miss Starodubov will stay here with me." Ogarkov put a hand on her shoulder and waved the others out into the cold.

When the three men were back in the Jeep, Nabokov turned toward the third man in the group—the one who had not been invited to this encounter with the Russian president.

"And what does our esteemed member of the FSB think of Ogarkov's proposal?"

Boris Trotski pondered his answer, before responding in a soft, reflective voice. "Nuclear disarmament is just a simplistic, idealistic dream of a senile old man. The American president won't waste time on this. His nation is far more concerned with the planet's temperature two hundred years from now than its actual safety. And the rest of the world? There is no chance they will disarm their nukes. I wonder what that bitch has promised to deliver. Her usual favors, perhaps? More importantly, what does our great leader keep hidden from us?"

"Certainly no more than we have hidden from him."

"He is dangerous."

"He won't be in power much longer."

The men remained silent, each thinking much the same about the man beside him.

As the Jeep descended down the snowy mountain road, slowly slipping out of sight, Ogarkov turned toward Sammantha. "Is it true? Is it true that you engineered the first lady's assassination?"

Sammantha's eyes widened in mock surprise. "I have heard the rumors, but I would never do such a thing. I save lives; I don't take them. Now that she is dead, however, I can gain control of the American presidency...provided I have your support."

The Russian president stared at Sammantha, weighing her words. He pondered what sort of woman

could assassinate another in cold blood. What kind of woman could harbor such ambition or rage? “Can you do it, Miss Starodubov? Can you really get Tilson to help me disarm the world?”

Sammantha widened her stance and threw back her hair. Ogarkov couldn’t help but feel aroused. He wanted her, like no woman he had wanted before. He had thought he was well past the age of caring for sex. But Starodubov rekindled something inside him that he’d thought was long-since dead. Perhaps she could do the same with Tilson. “Yes,” he mused. “I suppose you can.” Ogarkov waited for Sammantha to speak. She said nothing. She seemed to be somewhere far away, drifting in some other long-lost world. He waved his hand in front of her face. She didn’t blink. Her eyes weren’t even there.

“Miss Starodubov...What is it you want?”

Sammantha’s eyes came back into focus. She smiled and said, “Nothing for myself, but much for the cause.”

“What are your reasons?”

“My reasons are personal.”

Ogarkov laughed. “Perhaps you just want to screw the American president?”

Sammantha’s eyes widened. Then, with a sudden, almost invisible flash of her fist, she hit Ogarkov in the nose.

“I am not a whore!” she yelled. Sammantha began breathing heavily, like a tired, but wounded bull, with the tip of a matador’s sword hovering just above her heart, and every last fiber of her being ready to fight it. “I know you look at me that way. You all do. What would you have done if someone had murdered your parents when you were a child? What would you have done, if the only men who would protect you were the same men who wanted to climb on top of you and rut with you like a chained lamb...slobber all over your breasts and grunt and groan like some hungry pig?” Sammantha let the question hang in the air. “I am *not* a whore. I am not.”

Suddenly, Ogarkov saw Sammantha as a wounded sparrow, not the preying eagle he had thought she was. “My God,” he said. “How they must have hurt you...”

Sammantha sniffed and sneered. “You have no idea.” She drew a breath and steadied herself. Ogarkov could give her much of what she still needed. The rest she could raise in the Middle and Far East. “I have already spent the billions left to me by my fiancé. I want one billion dollars from you, in U.S. bearer bonds or gold bullion. Within two days. For that you will get your peace.”

Ogarkov studied Sammantha’s face and nodded. He had made his decision. “You will have your money. First, tell me your plan.”

Sammantha relaxed. She had what she wanted. Ogarkov would get more than he paid for. He didn’t need to know that. Not now. He wanted to believe that he could buy peace. So let him.

“Jock Tilson likes to go boating on Moosehead Lake with his mother. I have purchased more than a million acres of land by that lake, as part of a business deal I made with the pitiful heir to a failing fortune. I am building a compound there, from which I will execute my plan. A plan that will not fail. Tragically, the American president will have an accident on Moosehead lake. And when he wakes up...” Sammantha paused. “...he will do anything I wish. That is all you need know.”

Ogarkov nodded slowly. “You demand a great deal of money.”

“I have already spent as much. I may need even more from you. Remember, there were five presidential hopefuls on each side. It narrowed to just four when the primaries kicked in. I had to plan for each one. Fortunately, the right man won his nomination and then the election.” Sammantha paused. “Perhaps, in part to the two hundred million I funneled to his campaign. There is much more left to do. That will take cash, lots of it.”

Ogarkov peered into the eyes of Sammantha Starodubov, trying to look beyond her beauty into her dark, tortured soul. He couldn’t see a thing. The window to that secret place was long-since shuttered,

like an abandoned building. Ogarkov sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "Peace is never cheap. I will have the funds delivered here tomorrow morning."

Sammantha closed her eyes. She knew what was coming, what they always demanded. They demanded *her*. It was a small price to pay for revenge. She would close her eyes and dream of destruction, a great mushroom cloud filling the air, the sudden rush of wind, the great sucking sound and the blow. It would be a glorious end to her life. A release.

Ogarkov touched her lightly. She didn't recoil, but her body was as rigid as a tree trunk. "I am not like the others," he said. "I will ask nothing more from you. I wish only a chance at peace. But if you need someone, Sammantha, someone to talk to, or someone to help you, I can be a good listener, and a good partner."

Sammantha Starodubov looked into the gentle but forceful eyes of the Russian leader. She wanted to cry. She felt the strength flow out of her knees like cracking ice, and she dropped to the wooden floor. She began to rock. Back and forth, like always. "I can do this, I can do this alone," she mumbled. "I always have and I always will." Rock, rock.

Ogarkov placed his hand upon Sammantha's shoulder and patted it softly. "Poor child. Oh, how they must have hurt you."

CHAPTER 15



Chuck Boggs enjoyed many things. But there were two things in life that he truly loved. He loved reading western novels, and he loved smoking Cuban cigars. That's why he liked his job. It allowed him to enjoy both with few complaints or restraints.

There was an odd smell that rose around Boggs. It was the smell of stale smoke mingling with even staler body odor, forming an almost visible cloud around him, following behind him like a faithful puppy. Boggs chewed at the ends of his cigars until they broke apart in his darkly stained teeth. If he stood in one place for long, there was usually a scattered litter of tobacco shreds and spit puddling somewhere around his feet.

At 520 First Avenue though, it wasn't the smell of his body, the half eaten cigars on the floor, or even the forbidden-but-tolerated heavy blue smoke that hung low in his office that was disconcerting. No, it was the smell of death, the faint stench of formaldehyde squirming into every body pore. It was also the clean, ordered neatness of everything else in the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. Everything except for Boggs's personal swirling cloud.

Chuck Boggs owned the dark. He worked at night, only at night. He was better and faster than any other Level II pathologist, so they let him be. Despite his odd quirks, Chuck Boggs was an intensely organized man. No one could cut and bag a body faster than he could, or piece the truth from the divergent data with such quickness and accuracy. He could slice and dice like a Benihana chef, and around the NYPD he was respectfully known as *La Machine*. Despite his speed, he usually found things that most others would surely miss.

Michael Baden might be better known, but at the coroner's office, Boggs's word was gospel. It was the only place he earned such respect. Respect wasn't the reason he worked so fast and so well, though. He raced through his loose quota so he could get back to his books. Sometimes he could read for hours, while the rest of the city slept. That was the best, like a perfect lover.

It was two o'clock in the morning and there was a skin-frosting wind beating down on the city. New York had been enduring a cold snap for over a week. All anyone could talk about was the weather. As usual, Boggs hadn't noticed. He was in Cheyenne, Wyoming a hundred and twenty years ago, just about to shoot the bad guys at the corral, when the phone rang.

Boggs let it ring until he had killed his final hombre. With a bow-legged swagger and a jutting chin, he picked up the phone and answered, using his best John Wayne. "Howdy, pardner. What can I do for ya?"

"That you, Boggs?"

"Yeah, it's me. What is it? I'm busy."

Boggs heard the caller laugh. "We've got a floater with your name on it, Boggsy. It's all pulpy and fresh, like Charlie the Tuna."

Boggs leaned back in his chair and swore. He hated floaters. "Aw, shit. Can't you save it for someone else? I've got a lot of work to catch up on."

"I want you on this one."

Boggs smiled grimly, cursing his skills. "Where'd it surface?"

"Hudson."

Boggs looked forlornly toward his overturned book. "You know how much I hate floaters, Reilly.

Can't this wait 'til morning? You'll want fresh eyes on this one, won't you? Please say yes."

The police detective laughed again. "No can do. Besides, this one's a beaut. I put your name on him the moment I saw him there in the ice. I'm sending him in. Don't do anything to him 'til I get there, okay?"

"Yeah," said Boggs. There was obviously no way out of this one. He'd have to kiss the rescued cow-girl later.

"I'll be an hour. Maybe two."

Then again, maybe he'd get to kiss the girl after all. Boggs lifted his eyebrows in surprise. It was two o'clock in the morning. This one couldn't wait for sleep, but Reilly would still take an hour or two to come in. "Workin' long and late, I see."

"It's been a bad night, Boggsy. We had to bust a prostitution ring. It was some kind of ugly."

"You didn't take down the governor or the mayor, did you?"

"Not tonight."

"I used to think you were a good man, Reilly. Now I think you're just a twisted pervert, upsetting life's balance in any way you can."

Reilly laughed. "Takes a pervert to know one."

"Got that right. You sound tired, Reilly, like you've cracked or something. You crackin' up, Reilly?"

"The day I crack, Boggsy, is the day I die."

"When you do, I'll cut you up good. That'll make my year." Boggs paused. "What are you and your boys really doing down by the river at this time of night? Surely not busting whores and Johns and governors?"

The detective's voice hardened, as if Boggs' words had carved into his flesh and hit his bones. "Just doing our jobs, man. Now it's time you do yours."

The phone went dead. Boggs shrugged. Reilly must be tired, he thought. Fighting New York crime did that to you real fast. Those guys were all either saints or masochists, sometimes both.

CHAPTER 16



Jock Tilson stared at the letter in his hand. It was handwritten with elegant English calligraphy, the letters so well crafted they looked like they had been drawn by an artist. It was the fifth time he'd read the note since morning, yet it still sent goose bumps running down his spine.

It was nearly seven A.M. Tilson was expecting his national security advisor, the secretary of state and his defense secretary at any moment. His eyes moved slowly from word to word again. This was an extraordinary opportunity, if it were real.

... I send you my deep regrets for the death of your wife. I believe I know how you feel, for I lost my own wife three years ago, to cancer. After my wife's death, nothing seemed to matter, not even the pressing problems of my beloved country. In time, I realized that I could never have her back, and that the only sensible thing for me to do was to go on. It will never be the same for you either, no?

I relieved much of the pain by immersing myself into the affairs of my country. Eventually, this became the only thing that mattered—making a better Russia, and a better, safer world.

When I was elected president, I had visions of a world in peace. I wanted a safer planet. I suspect that you shared these same visions when you first took office. Perhaps it doesn't seem as important now, with the loss of your wife. For me, such was the case, especially in the beginning. Time is a great healer. You will see.

Perhaps this is an awkward time for me to raise such a subject, but the affairs of the world do not stop for the tragedies of one man, or even those of a nation. I offer to meet with you in your country, so that we can begin a serious discussion as to how we can eliminate the specter of nuclear war in our time.

I suggest the month of July, if that is convenient for you. I have prepared a proposed agenda, which you will find with this letter. Modify it if you must, but please, let us move forward. I ask you to destroy this letter. It is of a personal nature and meant only for your eyes. The agenda you may keep.

I hope to meet with you soon, so that we may become friends.

Respectfully Yours,

Nikolai Ogarkov.

Tilson's "body man," Josh Stone, knocked on the Oval Office door and announced his visitors.

"Just a moment," Tilson said. For an instant he thought of keeping the letter. What a piece of history it would be—he could see it resting prominently in the Tilson Presidential Library. Tilson fed the letter to his shredder anyway, watching it emerge as jumbled strings of dust particles. He pushed a button underneath his desk that unbolted the Oval Office door and said, "Send them in."

Tilson stood up and walked to greet his four guests. The first to grab his extended hand was Kenneth "Boxer" Henning.

"Boxer," said Tilson.

"Mr. President."

Henning was a veteran of three administrations. A navy pilot during the Vietnam War, he was one kill short of becoming an ace when his craft was downed by a stray frag. He'd endured two days of floating in heavy seas with a severely broken right leg. He still walked with a well-disguised limp. Henning was a hardened man, determined to see that America never had to face war again. As a retired, but

still powerful admiral, he had run against Tilson for the presidential nomination. He'd received enough primary delegates to trade them for his position as secretary of defense. At six-foot-one Henning was nearly as tall as the president, even with rounded shoulders and a slight stoop. His hair was gray and his tanned face appeared leathery and wrinkled, especially when seen up close. Like an ex-ballplayer, he carried around a ceramic coffee cup into which he spit the juice from Skoal Bandits that he sucked nonstop.

Garrett Sloan was the second man to greet the president. Sloan was of average height and exceedingly slim. Now fifty-five, he ran six miles every day and kept himself in top physical condition. He did the same with his mind. He exercised it regularly by reading books on anything and everything. Sloan was never without a crossword puzzle. He filled them in, unerringly, with a gold ink pen. He was a walking encyclopedia and there was no one better qualified for his position as secretary of state. Sloan was also a Washington veteran, having held positions for both the Republican and Democratic parties. Harvard bred, with doctorates in political science and sociology, he had taught graduate studies in Cambridge, before being plucked for government service by a former president. After serving as undersecretary of agriculture, ambassador to Great Britain, and treasury secretary, he'd accepted a stint as CEO of a major brokerage firm, resisting all other offers, until Tilson finally coaxed him back into government service. Sloan shook Tilson's hand, then stood at relaxed attention beside Henning.

Tilson next shook the hand of his Secretary of Commerce, Harry Hatfield. Hatfield had grown up an army brat. The son of a general, he had earned two stars himself before joining the private sector and starting, then selling, one of the world's largest security agencies, based in Atlanta. Hatfield's well publicized affairs with Hollywood starlets had vaulted him into the public eye. His Q rating had remained famously high ever since. He was a burly man with reddish, wavy hair and an ever-present smile showing the whitest, bleached teeth in Washington. As the president's designated golfer, Hatfield spent much of his time on the links entertaining various government leaders. His deeply tanned skin made him look like a young George Hamilton.

The final man into the room, as always, was Jeremiah Pincenogle, the president's turtle-like national security advisor, waddling behind the others with a soft *huffing* noise.

"Sit down, men," said Tilson with a half smile. He motioned toward his conference table. "I've had a summit proposal from Ogarkov."

"It's a bit early to be summiting, don't you think?" said Sloan. "What's the target date?"

"July."

Henning whistled softly. "He's baiting you, sir."

Tilson turned toward Sloan. "What do you think?"

Sloan thought for a moment before speaking. He pressed his thin fingers against the front of his lips and began tapping them softly. "Boxer could be right. He made the proposal directly to you? Not through intermediaries?"

Tilson nodded. "To me."

"Most unusual. You've got a draft?"

Tilson handed Sloan the sheet of paper that had come with the destroyed letter. Sloan took it. When he read its contents, he laughed.

"Yes. He's screwing with you."

Sloan handed the paper to Henning. Henning snorted and handed it to Hatfield who did the same.

"Looks like bullshit to me," said Hatfield. He glanced at his watch. Tilson wondered if he was late for a tee time. None of the men seemed to see Ogarkov's proposal as anything but propaganda.

Tilson retrieved the paper and read the proposed agenda out loud.

"Eliminate all nuclear weapons from every country in the world."

Sloan smiled. "Well, he has certainly simplified what, for the past half century, has been a most com-

plex issue.” He angled his head toward the paper. “You think this is for real?”

Tilson nodded. “Hand-delivered in a sealed pouch by Andropov last night.”

“The Russian Ambassador comes down off his hill and delivers a piece of paper with nine...ten words on it... and we’re supposed to act on it like he means it?” said Henning. “I’d call that suicidal bullshit for any president, sir.”

“I agree,” said Pincenogle, speaking for the first time. He settled down onto his chair, relaxing like a turtle getting ready to sun himself on a rock.

Tilson made no mention of the accompanying letter. To them it never existed. To him, it was already beginning to seem like an old dream.

After a long silence, Henning waved a tanned hand and continued, “Look, Mr. President. I know you’re real green here in Washington, so I’ll help you out. Things sort of follow a certain protocol, know what I mean? Except for the trenches in Congress, Washington is a bunch of photo ops and PR. Say the right things and everyone goes home looking good. We’ve all got a lot of other things to get squared away in this country before we start going global or attempting the impossible with this kind of shit.”

Tilson nodded and said, “How can a meeting with the Russian president be untimely?”

Henning looked at Sloan, then at Pincenogle, then back to the president. “Well, besides the screw-up in protocol, the Russians would want nothing more than to make you look bad. Disarm our nuclear forces? You are one idealistic son-of-a-bitch, I’ll give you that. The Russians’d run roughshod all over our asses if we disarmed our nukes. Do you think, for one single minute, that they’ll disarm? You think Iran’s going to disarm? Or Israel? Pakistan? Or China? Even if they say they will, it will take years to produce any sort of mutual verification program. You want political suicide, this is it on the fast track.”

Tilson turned toward his secretary of state.

“Your thoughts, Garrett?”

Sloan liked to pause before speaking, a habit that annoyed most of his egotistical colleagues. He found it often kept him from setting his foot in his mouth, in a world that loved to make people eat their shoes.

“It’s a big world, Mr. President. The admiral has a point. There is no foolproof way to verify any treaty. Who’s to say that other nations of the world will follow your lead?”

Henning interjected. “Yeah. What about those towel-head terrorists in the Middle East? Who’s going to tell Iran they can’t have nukes? Russia? Give me a friggin’ break.”

Sloan patiently waited until Henning was through. When the defense secretary finished spouting, Sloan continued, “Even today, the Russians could probably make short order of Europe with conventional forces, Mr. President. No matter what anyone else tells you.”

“That’s exactly what I mean!” shouted Henning. “Any elimination of nuclear weapons would leave our allies essentially defenseless. The only thing really keeping the Russians out of Paris is France’s nuclear presence.” Henning paused, then smiled. “This could be a way to get rid of the French, though, once and for all. Is that your plan?”

Tilson laughed. “A united Germany might want a piece of France, too.”

Henning blurted, “You’re wrong, Mr. President. Germany’s got saggy tits for an army. With NATO in shambles and the U.N. just a social organization...”

Sloan gently grabbed Henning’s shoulder, but his eyes delivered a harsh rebuke. Henning drew a breath and whispered, “Sorry.”

Sloan spoke again. “Any significant reduction in nuclear arms would have to be accompanied by a balancing in conventional forces.”

“Exactly what I was saying,” cried Henning. “And don’t forget China!”

“Shut your mouth, Boxer.” Sloan returned his attention to the president. He briefly glanced at Pin-

cenogle, the national security advisor, who had remained strangely silent during Henning's tirade. Pincenogle was looking out the window, as if bored. The reasoned professor in Sloan said, "Both sides will want to keep a few nukes in their arsenals—to be used as a deterrent to a conventional attack, or to counter actions by terrorists..."

Henning slammed his fist upon the table. "We've got to keep our nukes! At least let us keep the neutron warheads. Ten of those are cleaner than any *one* of the coal plants going up in China."

Sloan glanced at Henning but continued speaking. "... We'll need at least twelve months to prepare for a Summit, not three or four. Let's face it, sir. You haven't been exactly on your game lately."

"And you, Admiral?" Tilson turned toward Henning.

"I say we put a real Star Wars defense system in place before we negotiate reductions. We should build some big-assed pulse weapons and laser cannons that we can shoot from space. Ain't nothin' like bein' in the position of strength, the big dog on the block..."

The president's desk clock ticked loudly as Tilson sat quietly in thought. Boxer Henning began chewing on the end of his pen. Sloan appeared to calmly ponder some interesting intellectual problem, maybe a crossword in his head. Hatfield glanced at his watch again.

"Ever play sports, admiral?" said Tilson, suddenly looking at Henning.

"Yeah. What of it?"

"One thing I've learned from sports is that the best physical player or the strongest team does not always win. There are intangibles—exhaustive preparation, mental toughness, physical discipline and heart. The team that is best prepared has a leg up on their foe. The man or team that wants victory the most can often find a way to win, despite any odds. Finesse over strength."

"Or sometimes, just plain dumb luck," mumbled Henning.

Tilson signaled that the debate was over. "Gentlemen, I'm going to host a summit in July. It will be here, at Camp David. And by God, we'll put together a framework that will bring lasting peace...and freedom from nuclear weaponry."

"Make it December, sir," said Sloan. "We've got far too much to do."

Tilson shook his head. "August. That's as long as I'll wait."

Sloan sighed. "Never let it be said that the ol' Sloanster ever stood in the way of peace, even if he thought his president was acting like an idealistic college freshman."

Tilson grinned. "I'll take that as a compliment." He rose from his chair, signaling that the meeting was over. He looked toward Sloan, as if preparing to speak. But Boxer Henning stepped between them.

"Mr. President?" said Henning. "May I say something?"

Tilson looked at the secretary of defense with a patronizing glance. "Yes?"

"The Russians will never hold those meetings here, sir."

"And if they did?"

"I'd say you'd used up your share of miracles," interrupted Sloan. "He's right. They'd never have them here, not with a rookie."

Tilson sighed deeply. "I appreciate your candor, gentlemen, but I am disappointed by your pessimism. Optimism breeds success. I will approach it that way. Good night." Tilson led them all toward the door.

"Blind optimism gets you killed," mumbled Henning.

"Duly noted."

CHAPTER 17



Chuck Boggs was back reading his Louis L'Amour classic when his intercom buzzed.

"Boggs," he heard his someone say. "Your floater's here." Boggs could swear he heard the caller chuckling as he rang off.

Boggs set his book down and reached for his coffee cup. He'd need a hot cup, probably more. A floater. God, how he hated floaters. As he poured the remains of his dead brew into the sink, and filled his cup with a fresh supply, he thought of his first floater. It had been over twenty years since old Marley had drawn him aside during his first week on the job. In all that time, not a single thing about them had changed. Except that he didn't puke when he saw one, at least not often.

"Son," Marley had said. "There's one thing you'll never get used to in this business, and that's a floater. I'm going to tell you why. A floater's a body that's been in the water for too long. The body sinks to the bottom at death, until it begins to decompose. Then the gasses, mostly methane, hydrogen sulfide and carbon dioxide made by the bacteria, cause the body to rise like a balloon and float.

"During the winter, like now, it could take weeks, or even months, before a body floats. The cold water acts like a refrigerator, making the bacteria chew more slowly. Bodies can get trapped under ice and only rise in the spring. Those are the worst. Smell like a sonofabitch.

"They hardly look like people, floaters, 'cause so many things happen to screw 'em up. The worst, maybe, is the swelling. Bodies become bloated, almost unrecognizable, except for prominent body features like a dick or something. I've even seen the gasses make a man look like Johnny Wad."

It was at that moment that Marley had drawn back the sheet to expose him to his first floater. Boggs had barfed on the spot, with big chunks of a Whopper and fries sliding over his shoes. Now he felt the bile rise in his throat as he prepared himself for the one coming in. You just never got used to floaters. Not really.

Ten minutes later, men from Unit Two wheeled in a body that was sloshing inside a zippered black bag.

"This one is fresh, Boggs," said one of men. "Just like you like them."

Boggs sneered at the young kid and said, "Screw you."

Boggs carefully removed the body from the bag and began cutting the clothes off the puffed and bloated limbs. The skin was pale and bleached from its days in the water. The eyes were swollen shut. When the body was finally naked, Boggs covered it with a white sheet and shoved it into a refrigerated compartment.

"You sleep for a while," he said to the corpse. "I've got to go take a leak, drink some more coffee and wait for Reilly, you sorry bastard."

A few minutes later, Boggs's phone rang.

"What?" he said testily.

"Reilly, here."

"Where are you? I want to be done with this."

"I'm tied up."

"That's your problem. Or maybe your pleasure?"

"Wait for me."

"No chance. I've got a schedule to keep, and I've got a frigging floater to slice into."

Boggs heard Reilly cover his end of the phone and swear at something or someone.

Boggs softened. "Hard night, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I'll wait, then. No hurry."

"Thanks, bud."

It was just after nine A.M. when Detective Reilly shuffled into Boggs's office. He found the doctor asleep in his chair, his face drooping against a book that was lying flat upon his desk. Reilly quietly took a seat and motioned to a man who came in behind him. His companion looked old, with long, thin white hair, sad tired eyes, an unshaven face and a clean, starched, faded blue uniform.

"Ahem," said Reilly.

Boggs stirred. "What?" He looked up. "Oh, shit. I was hoping you wouldn't show."

"Doctor Boggs," said Reilly, turning toward the old man. "This is Clyde Davis. He's here to identify our floater."

Boggs reached into his desk, pulled out a fresh cigar, unwrapped it and jammed it into his mouth. "I found no I.D. You got a name for this sorry sucker, Reilly?"

Reilly removed a soggy wallet from a plastic baggie and handed it to Boggs. "This was in his pants pocket. Says his name was Copley. Brandon Copley, IV. This man..." Reilly motioned toward Clyde. "...has worked for the Copleys for over fifty years. Says his boss disappeared about two weeks ago."

"You a relative?" asked Boggs.

"He has no relatives left, sir," replied Clyde

Clyde thought back to the sunny day, forty-six years before, when Henrietta Copley had brought the young baby home. What a surprise it had been, her not being pregnant and all. He had loved that babe like his own. Now, to have to do this? Brandon had asked him to lie in his letter. So he would, not that he wanted to.

"That's verified," said Reilly. "No relatives."

Boggs shrugged. "Follow me, boys." He led the two men through a whitish hallway to the storage lockers. As they walked inside, Clyde caught his breath, as the stiff odor assaulted his lungs and his eyes.

"Sort of gets to you, don't it?" said Boggs. "I don't even smell it anymore." He reached for one of the drawer handles and pulled the body out from the wall. "That Copley?" he said.

Clyde hesitated for the briefest of moments. Then he said, "Yes, sir. That's him, all right." *Lord save me*, he thought. *I do this only because I love you.*

"I want to know what killed him," said Reilly.

"No problem," said Boggs, as he slammed the drawer shut. "Get to it first thing tonight, after a good day's sleep." Boggs spat a piece of tobacco into a waste basket by the wall and walked out of the room. Without turning he said, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Clyde."

Reilly touched Clyde on the shoulder and nudged him toward the door. "This way," he said.

"He's not too friendly like, is he?" said Clyde. His eyes followed Boggs as he vanished down the hall. Then he looked down to his shoes, as if they could give him comfort.

"Boggs?" said Reilly, laughing. "Don't mind him. He's full of crap. But he's a good guy, once you get to know him."

"Somehow," said Clyde slowly. "I don't think mister Boggs likes or trusts nobody."

Reilly frowned, feeling a strange but familiar tweak in his stomach—that piece of gut intuition that sometimes directed his emotions like road signs. "Why in the hell would you think that?"

Clyde shook his head. "No reason, sir." He stopped walking. He looked at Reilly, as if he were about to say something. He blinked several times, his eyes looking oddly pained, then he hobbled onward, silent as a dead bird.

CHAPTER 18



The surface of the Maine Turnpike looked like a jet runway in the night. The reflective highway lane dividers stretched out to the horizon. They clicked by like shooting stars as Sammantha flew north like a goose in the spring, focused forward, wings flapping unerringly toward her goal. There was a single, fuzzy red glow of tail lights far in the distance, blinking in and out of sight as Sammantha's rental car moved up and down the long rolling hills. From behind her, several dim sets of headlights intermittently bounced against her rear view mirror, softly lighting the shadows on her face. Sammantha was alone. She liked it that way.

Sammantha fiddled with the tuner to the car's cheap stereo, as the country station she had been listening to since Boston faded into static. "C'mon," she said, as she impatiently worked to find another. Finally she came upon the clear signal of WXLF, *The Wolf*. A fitting name, she thought. She was about to create a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Sammantha thought of how she both liked and hated country music. Her stomach twisted stupidly with songs of faded love and blue eyes crying in the rain. Her throat, in its overly sentimental weakness, grew taut when they sang of families and love that would always be true. Love could never be true, she thought. There is no love. Love is dead.

The clear strains of a steel guitar and a singer's pure country voice came through the speakers. Here it was again, that stupid song by Jaime Crandall.

*You said that you needed your freedom,
And I let you go willingly,
'Cause a bird that is caged,
Can never be happy,
And a woman possessed,
Never free...*

Damned right, thought Sammantha. No one would possess her again. It wouldn't be long now, before she would fly free from the cage they had trapped her in. Soon, she would be free. She would put America in that cage and trap it there for decades.

"Let's see how you like it," she whispered to the night.

CHAPTER 19



The waiting area looked like almost every other dentist's office across America. There were old copies of *Sports Illustrated*, *Time* and *Golf Digest* tossed carelessly on top of three low wooden tables. Beside each table was a grouping of steel and plastic chairs. There was a glass partition along the far wall, with more chairs along each of the other three sides of the room. Hung along the walls were half a dozen plastic-framed pictures of snow-capped mountains and tree-rimmed lakes. It was enough to make Sammantha gag. They looked like pictures torn out of the *National Geographic* and hung up like worthless trophies announcing prowess and success.

When Sammantha walked into the reception area, she saw a young boy connecting the dots in a *Highlights* magazine, while his mother studied the latest antics of British Royalty in *People*. Neither the boy nor the mother looked up. Sammantha rang a small chrome bell at the glass partition and waited. She was greeted by a plump, middle-aged nurse who looked like a pumpkin squeezed into a dress. Her face was an unnatural, tanning tube orange, with wrinkled ridges carving deep crevasses in her face as she smiled. The woman handed Sammantha a new patient questionnaire, which was clipped to a legal sized backing made of pressed board. "Here you go, dearie. Just fill this in and the doctor will see you, soon."

When Sammantha returned her questionnaire, the receptionist checked the form with a perfunctory glance. Then she opened the door to the inner sanctum. A white-clad hygienist stood waiting. She smiled at Sammantha and motioned for her to follow. "This way, Ms. Smith. The doctor will see you in just a few minutes." Her voice was soft and comforting, an oft-practiced and valuable art in an office like this.

Doctor Keenan was a general practitioner who handled everything from checkups and cleanings to cosmetic oral surgery and root canals. He was seated in his office, struggling with a foot-high mound of paperwork when Sammantha was led inside by the hygienist.

"Good morning," said Keenan. "You called with an emergency last night? What seems to be the problem..." He looked down to her file. "...Miss Smith?"

"I've got this *throbbing* in my gums." Sammantha's voice was gentle but husky. When Sammantha emphasized the word throbbing, she said it with a breathless, almost sexual sigh. She looked straight into Keenan's eyes. "I'm so glad you agreed to see me this morning...my being from out of town and all."

Keenan waved her off. "It's my job, Miss Smith. I love to help people."

Sammantha lowered her eyes. "I suppose I should also have a regular checkup and a cleaning while I'm here. That is, if you can *squeeze* me in."

Keenan's face rounded into a toothy smile. "Doesn't sound too difficult for an old country doc." Keenan stood and walked into the doorway. He pointed toward his hygienist, who was at the end of the hallway. Wearing polyisoprene surgical gloves, the woman was taking fistfuls of dental utensils out of a stainless steel sanitizer and wrapping them with sterilized plastic. "See my hygienist and nurse over there? Her name is Chelsea. She'll see that you're comfortable. I'll be with you shortly."

Dr. Timothy Keenan had a large and successful dental practice. He was proud that he still worked with people, rather than teeth and dollars. Not that he didn't like his money. He lived in a ponderous mansion that had been built by one of Maine's old logging barons. He kept himself tanned by escaping south to the islands whenever he could. He was sixty years old and dyed his hair Asian-girl black. He kept in

condition by running daily and working out in his home gym three times a week. Though he wasn't tall, he was lean and still ruggedly handsome.

As Sammantha followed Chelsea, she marveled at how easy this was. *Try to do this in New York*, she thought, as Keenan's hygienist led her into small operating room and guided her into a leather dentist's chair.

When Sammantha sat down her body remained rigidly in place. It stayed frozen, even as Chelsea wrapped the end of a dentist's bib around her neck and pulled a tray of tools to her side.

"Relax, honey," Chelsea said. "This won't hurt. Doctor Keenan is as gentle as they come. You want heat?"

"Excuse me?"

"Our chairs are heated. Helps some people relax. You want me to warm up your chair?"

"Oh. No, thanks. I'll be okay." Sammantha already felt sweat puddling under her arms and running down her back.

"You know, we normally don't do this for call-ins. Dr. Keenan must like you."

Chelsea began working with unhurried precision and the same thoroughness that her boss had taught her thirty years before. She scraped the tartar between Sammantha's teeth with a series of instruments, dropping each one onto the white padded tray by her side when she was done. Every once in a while she said, "Open," and squirted a stream of water into Sammantha's open mouth

After all the picking and scraping, she pressed a motorized cleaning disk into Sammantha's mouth, gently massaging her teeth and gums. It was then that she finally began talking, in a folksy way that told Sammantha that she'd been waiting to gossip all along. "Name's Chelsea," she said. "In case Dr. Keenan didn't tell you, although he usually does, I'm chief cook and bottle washer around here. I do all the things the doctor won't do. He's so big into the *people* side of the business that he wouldn't get around to doing any actual work unless someone pushed him into the room with all the instruments ready." Chelsea took a deep, concentrated breath, and then began again. "I know that I talk a lot but I just find that I have so much to say, you know how that can be when the words just need to come out and you just don't have the strength or the discipline to shut up, you have wonderful teeth."

"Thank you," mumbled Sammantha. "You have a wonderful chair side manner."

Chelsea brightened and her eyes glowed warmly. Bright, friendly, intelligent, sharp eyes.

"Your dental work is very unusual."

Sammantha frowned. This wasn't good.

"These look like steel fillings. Are you from...like... Eastern Europe or something?"

"I've traveled a lot," Sammantha said after rinsing her mouth. "I've had work done in Europe. Seems I always need dental work when I'm on vacation."

Keenan's hygienist stuck a small mirror inside Sammantha's mouth and peered at her teeth more closely. "Not bad, considering. Your teeth are really quite beautiful."

"Thank you."

After one last perusal, Keenan's hygienist continued with her polishing. When she finished, Chelsea pulled the brush off the polishing wand and leaned across Sammantha to slide the motorized handle back into its resting place. As she let go of the handle she brushed back against Sammantha's hand.

"Ouch!" Chelsea felt a stinging prick in her forearm. She looked around for the cause but saw nothing.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" said Sammantha. "It must be this stupid ring again." She held up her hand, revealing a four pronged ring setting without the center stone. "Second time that diamond has fallen out." She laughed. "The ring's about as reliable as the man who gave it to me. Neither can stay in the same place for long. You're not hurt, are you?"

Chelsea held up her arm. There was a thin line of blood snaking along her skin. "That ring's a damned weapon," she said, but laughed it off. "I'll be fine."

Sure, thought Sammantha. *After a couple days of hell, you will*. "Will you help me look for the stone when we're done? I lost the guy. I'd hate to lose the stone, too. My little revenge, you see."

"Sure, honey. Been there." Chelsea searched the floor and found the two carat diamond. "Now, that's a doozie," she said, as she placed the stone into Sammantha's palm.

After the cleaning and several sets of unneeded X-rays, Dr. Keenan walked cheerfully into the room.

"What brings you to Bangor, Miss Smith?" Keenan pressed the X-rays against a backlit screen and studied them while he talked.

"Escaping the City for a few days. You know, New York. Claustrophobic."

"Most people go south this time of year."

Sammantha chuckled. "That's why I go north." She paused and smiled demurely, with her sparkling teeth at Keenan. "I ski."

"Ah. Of course." Keenan looked over Sammantha's patient report and raised his eyebrows. "I see you're a doctor, too?"

"I am," she sighed. "Sometimes I think I would have been happier working as a hygienist for someone like you." Sammantha lifted her green and blue eyes toward Keenan and fluttered her eyelids. *Gag me*, she thought. But it worked.

Keenan was almost sure that Sammantha was flirting. He felt a tingle between his legs. Oh, yes. Got to be flirting.

"You could be my hygienist any day," he said. Wincing, he turned slightly red. Then he pretended to write notes. This was going to get interesting; he just knew it.

CHAPTER 20



Trance and Lauren were seated in the large, airy Palm Court of the Plaza Hotel in New York. Trance was dressed in a custom-tailored blue pin-stripe suit, with a pink shirt and an open collar. Lauren wore a full-length silk dress, a one-of-a-kind design that Trance had given her before their night at the opera.

It was 6:45 A.M. on Sunday. The city was already gurgling with traffic. Cabbies maneuvered like race car drivers to advance a few yards ahead of the competition. Occasionally, the horn of an irate driver would honk. The hotel walls and the stained glass windows muffled most of the noise. Inside, they just heard the muted conversation of a few other diners, along with the occasional tinkling of silverware. The sidewalk traffic was still sparse, but it was already showing signs of picking up, particularly around the Pulitzer fountain.

"I really don't think I like the opera," said Trance, as he spread a slab of cream cheese over an onion bagel.

"Uh-hmm," said Lauren. She sliced several fresh strawberries onto a stack of waffles and doused it all with maple syrup. *There's another two miles of running*, she thought. "Right."

"They get too emotional."

"Is that why you cried?" Lauren grinned but kept her eyes on her food.

"I didn't cry," said Trance quickly. He flicked a piece of nonexistent dust off his jacket.

"Yeah, you did. I saw you trying to hide your tears. I kept waiting for you to break out sobbing like that lady behind me."

"I—" Trance shut his mouth and grinned sheepishly. "I still don't like opera. I only go to brush up on my German."

"This was in Italian."

"Oh, yeah. Italian, too."

Lauren drove a spoon into half a grapefruit. Juice spurted across the table into Trance's face.

Lauren giggled, "Sorry!"

"Can't take you anywhere, can I?" Trance reached across the table and patted Lauren's hand. Then he took her spoon. "No weapons allowed in here, dear."

"I surrender."

Trance looked closely at the spoon. Then he handed it back to Lauren. "It's okay now. I disarmed the firing mechanism." He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

"You're such a whiz with weapons, Jack." Lauren looked closely at Trance. "You tired?"

"Exhausted."

"Could have fooled me. After the opera, I was ready to call it a night. But you...you had to go to 21 and pig out. Then you dragged me to that jazz club, to listen to that noise until two in the morning."

"How was I to know that we'd run into Jackson?"

"Spike wasn't the problem. After he left, *you* had to spend two hours baring your soul like some condemned convict."

"You're a good listener."

"It was more like a marathon than a date."

"It wasn't me who insisted upon walking through Central Park. It's dangerous out there."

"I wasn't tired."

“Well, neither was I,” said Trance.

Lauren reached out and stroked Trance’s hand. “I had a wonderful time.”

Trance opened his eyes and took a sip of coffee. He took a long, deep breath and then closed his eyes again.

“Something bothering you?” asked Lauren.

Trance put his elbows on the table and let his chin fall into his palms. “Yeah.”

“Don’t be a mime, Trance. Tell me.”

“I’m upset that Tilson yanked your nomination to the FRB.”

Lauren shrugged. “I’m sure he had his reasons. It was a long shot anyway.”

“Long shot, my tail. You’re the best man for the job.”

Lauren smiled. “Thanks. It is pretty much a man’s club. They’ve got Liz. That’s probably all the estrogen they can stand.” Lauren reached across the table and ran her fingers through Trance’s hair. “Would you still love me if I had a sex change?”

“Not quite the same way, darling.”

“Chauvinist.”

“I’d still respect you in the morning, though.”

“That’s very reassuring.”

There was a young boy walking through the lobby, politely selling newspapers while making no eye contact with the well-heeled guests. The boy had the threadbare look of a street kid living on his own. Trance motioned and the boy swooped toward him like a hawk on a field mouse. As the boy approached, Trance continued his conversation. “It’s not a matter of gender, Lauren. You’ve got better qualifications than half the men serving on the board right now. I’m afraid it’s a case of the president sending me a message.”

When the boy reached their table, Trance looked at the boy’s eyes and waited until he looked back.

“What’s your name, son?”

“Who’s asking?” The boy’s eyes flared. Trance could see the boil of free floating anger bubbling just below the surface.

“You on your own?”

The boy’s eyes narrowed. “What’s it to you?”

“How old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

“That means twelve.”

The boy couldn’t help but smile. “Close enough.”

Trance narrowed his own eyes. He looked at the boy from head to foot. “You go to school?”

“You some do-good white boy?”

“Yeah. I want you to grow up to be president.”

The boy smiled again. “Just buy the paper, man.”

Trance reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold money clip. He flipped off five one hundred dollar bills and laid them into the boy’s open palm.

“Thanks.” The boy turned to leave.

“Hold it,” said Trance. “You don’t get five C notes without answering some questions. What’s your name?”

The boy laid the paper in front of Trance and said, “Jabar. And yeah. My mom died, and my dad...well...”

“Ever know your dad?”

Jabar shook his head. “I’m not sure.”

“Tough break.” Trance reached into his pocket and pulled out a card. He scribbled a phone number on the back and said, “This is my wireless number. I’ve got a foundation that sends kids like you to the finest schools. You want that?”

“You are some kinda stupid, mister.”

Trance held out the card. “Take it, Jabar. You’ll have to work like hell, but it will be worth it.”

The boy wiped his hands on his pants. He looked like he wanted to reach for the card. “No shit?”

“Word.” Trance wiggled the card. “Ever heard of Spike Jackson?”

“Action Jackson Auto Man? The car guy?”

“Yeah. He’s the biggest car dealer on the east coast.”

“So what?”

“I gave him *his* start. Maybe I can do the same for you one day. You call me. Or call Jackson at his office in Hauppauge. Tell him Trance sent you. Where you go from there is up to you. I like your style. You’re working before seven on a Sunday. I’m offering you a chance at a reward.” Trance paused. “One thing, though. You should look people in the eye, Jabar. That way people know that you’re somebody. You want to be somebody, believe me.”

The boy stared at Trance for a long moment. He took the card and walked slowly away.

“You think he’ll call?” said Lauren.

“Maybe. I hope so.” Trance watched as Jabar made his way slowly out of the hotel, staring at the card.

“Bleeding heart,” said Lauren.

Trance grinned. “People deserve opportunity, Lauren. Second chances. We all screw up. Sometimes, things screw up on us. God gave me money; I recirculate it. Where were we?”

“The Federal Reserve.”

“Right. I think it’s my fault that the president withdrew his offer.”

“I thought you had nothing to do with it?”

“I didn’t, really. But Tilson did ask a favor, which I think I later refused.”

“You think?”

“Miller.”

“I see.”

“I don’t think you do.”

Lauren’s lower lip quivered, ever-so-slightly. Heat seemed to rise around the top edges of her cheeks until she looked like she was ready to melt.

“I’m sorry,” said Trance.

Lauren tossed her head to the side and laughed. “I thought Tilson was a bigger man than that—putting on the squeeze.”

“He lost his wife. That does something to you.” Trance picked at a loose cuticle on his left hand. Without looking up, he said, “Maybe I’ll call him.”

“Not on your life!” Lauren’s shouting broke the quiet calm of the opulent dining area. A few heads turned, but the quiet quickly regained control. She whispered, “You’ll not do a damn thing for my sake.”

“Why not?”

Light began to sparkle around the edges of Lauren’s dampening eyes. She hid her face by looking out across the restaurant. She sniffed, then reached over and touched Trance on the hand. “I really didn’t want it anyway. Not really.”

“And I don’t like ice cream.”

Beneath the table Lauren twisted her napkin. She squeezed it until her fingers began to burn. She forced a smile and looked at the newspaper, “Give me the business section, will you?”

Trance reached for the paper, his eye caught the headline.

LAST COPLEY HEIR DEAD. FOUND IN RIVER.

Trance sifted through the *Times* until he found the business section. He handed it across the table, then peeled off the front section and began reading the article about Brandon Copley. "Let's learn why a rich man might end up in a river." Trance skimmed through the article.

Brandon Copley IV, the son of Brandon and Henrietta Copley, was found dead on Friday in the Hudson River. He was the last heir to a once-powerful family that helped to shape the growth of America, with its once-vast family fortune.

Copley reportedly signed a typed suicide note, and left it in his opulent residence in Gramercy Park. He has no living relatives. The fate of his estate is unknown. Copley was best known as the play-boy actor who reportedly squandered half a billion dollars after the death of his parents. In recent years, he has reportedly been living off a trust set up for him by his paternal grandfather.

Copley was widely regarded as an actor with much talent and training, with little ambition. Once considered a rising star on Broadway, he has been all but invisible in New York theater since his acclaimed portrayal of Hamlet nearly fifteen years ago.

The body was identified by a long-time employee of the family, a Mr. Clyde Davis. In an interview with this reporter, Mr. Davis said, "He's dead, all right. He's all bloated up and dead."

Trance set the paper aside. "What makes someone do such a thing?"

Lauren lifted her head out of the paper. "What, dear?"

Trance tossed the front section to Lauren and she read it quickly.

Shrugging her shoulders, Lauren said, "Beats me."

"Doesn't sound right to me. Does it sound right to you?"

"Nothing surprises me anymore, Jack. You, of all people, should know that."

CHAPTER 21



Dr. Timothy Keenan pressed the tips of his fingers against Sammantha's gums. "Does that hurt?" Sammantha shook her head.

Keenan moved his fingers farther back in her mouth and pressed again. "How about that?" "It throbs."

Keenan's eyebrows creased to form a single line meeting at the bridge of his nose. He moved his fingers along the outside bone of Sammantha's jaw, almost as if he were giving a massage. After several moments he stood straight, peeled off his latex gloves, and pulled a pen out of his pocket. After making several marks on a diagram of the human mouth, he began to explain.

Pointing toward the diagram he said, "I don't think you've got anything to worry about, Ms. Smith." "Please, call me Sadie."

Keenan's eyes flicked toward Sammantha, then back to the diagram. "Sadie, you've got some god-awful old dental work in there. Steel fillings. Probably the source of your pain. Where'd you have this work done, Russia?"

"Romania. I lived there when I was a girl," Sammantha lied.

"Those fillings ought to be replaced with some composite resins." Keenan bent over his diagram and inked dots on several teeth. "These are the ones. Shouldn't be a problem. See your dentist when you get the chance." He handed her the paper.

Sammantha frowned. "Couldn't you do it?"

Keenan shook his head. "It's better that you see your regular dentist. I'm booked weeks in advance. I saw you today because I thought you might have an emergency." He held up Sammantha's folder and tapped it against his free hand. "All you need right now is a little aspirin or Advil. You'll be fine."

Disappointment seemed to spread across Sammantha's face. "I see." She stood up from her chair, adjusted her tight-fitting skirt, and laughed. "Wouldn't you know it? I find the only dentist I feel comfortable with and he lives five hundred miles away."

Keenan studied Sammantha closely, looking into those multi-colored eyes, as if he could find a blueprint or roadmap into her thoughts. Why did he have the feeling that he was being manipulated? "Is this some sort of mental blackmail?"

Purple blotches erupted across Sammantha's cheeks, spreading rapidly, like grape juice spilled on a napkin. "Blackmail? Heavens no."

Keenan's eyes seemed to be laughing. "It's emotional blackmail, all right. If I don't fix your fillings, I'll feel guilty all week, at least until I forget you."

"Forget me?" Sammantha playfully touched Keenan's arm. "I would never let you do that, doctor."

Keenan stiffened, in several places. He ran a hand through his dyed black hair and began fiddling with some operating tools so Sammantha wouldn't see the bulge forming in his pants. "I think, maybe, I could fit in you...I'm sorry...fit you in tomorrow, if you come in early. And then..." He hesitated, licking his rapidly drying lips. "...then, perhaps you might join me for dinner?"

Sammantha leaned back against the wall of Keenan's office. She angled her face slightly to the side, so the outside light would fall softly across her skin. She lifted her chin and gave Keenan her best *you can screw me* look. "I think we understand each other well, doctor."

Keenan led Sammantha back to the reception area. He dropped her file into the lap of a middle-

aged woman with flabby skin, frizzy blond hair, darkened roots and perfect teeth. “Will you process this, Karen? Ms. Smith will be back tomorrow for some urgent care.”

Keenan hovered over his appointment secretary’s shoulder and glanced at the following day’s schedule. Sammantha trailed behind him like a shadow.

“Reschedule tomorrow’s seven thirty appointment with Mrs. Daley,” Keenan said. “She won’t mind. Ms. Smith needs immediate attention.”

“Yes, doctor.”

Keenan bowed slightly toward Sammantha, then walked back into his office out of sight. As the receptionist began to move Mrs. Daley in her computer calendar, Sammantha took a quick glance around to make sure that Chelsea, Keenan, or anyone else on Keenan’s staff wasn’t watching. Then, while the secretary was typing, she dropped a small white pill into her coffee cup.

“We will see you tomorrow, then,” said Keenan’s secretary, with a wide, toothy smile.

“I’m sure you will.” *Fat chance.*

Sammantha walked cheerfully out of Keenan’s office. As she closed the door behind her, she began to laugh. There would be no need to break into the doctor’s office tonight. Tomorrow, she would be able to calmly copy everything she came for.

Sammantha glanced at her watch as she pulled open the door to Keenan’s office. She was ten minutes early, as planned. If everything else was on schedule, she should find bedlam on the inside. She wasn’t disappointed. Keenan’s face seemed to have aged a decade overnight. He looked more like a hung over carnival worker than a relaxed and respected oral surgeon. If he were a cartoon character there might have been a rain cloud hovering over his head.

“Doctor Keenan,” said Sammantha, showing a look of deep concern and surprise. “Is something the matter?”

Keenan was pacing across the reception area, mumbling to himself. “Huh? Oh, yeah, well... First my receptionist calls in sick. Then I get a call from Chelsea, saying her stomach’s in knots and that she can’t get away from the bathroom. My other hygienist is skiing this week, in Banff, Canada.” Keenan paced some more. “I haven’t had anyone miss work in years. Now two in one day? I’ve got a full schedule through eight tonight, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Must be all this cold weather we’re having. Can’t you call a temp agency? That’s what we do in New York. Or, maybe you can get through the day on your own?”

Keenan threw out his hands, looking like an exasperated golfer who had just plunked a ball into the water. “Never had to worry about it,” he said with a sigh. “When I was younger, my wife would fill in.” He paused, his eyes rounded, looking tired and lonely. “She died a couple years back. Since then, I’ve always had at least one hygienist here, usually two. I was hoping to have my office manager handle the front desk, but I can’t get her on the phone. I can reschedule today’s cleanings and get by without Chelsea, but I can’t handle the appointments and the phones too.” Keenan began walking toward his suite of rooms. With a swing of his arm he said, “We better get started, Sadie. This is going to be a day from hell.”

Sammantha reclined hesitantly into the heated leather chair. As Keenan began to place the bib around her neck, Sammantha sat upright and said, “Why don’t you let me help?”

“What? Oh, I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not? You think I can’t do this? When I went solo I had to do it all, just like you and your wife. Show me where you keep your files. I’ll take care of those. I can work the phones, too. Your Nortel sys-

tem looks much like mine. And, if you need an assistant for surgery...” Sammantha shrugged. “...you’ve got a board certified surgeon at your side. Although I’ll admit, I’m far better with brains and spines and hearts than I’d be with a tooth. Teeth scare the devil out of me.”

Keenan thought for a moment. Then he cocked his head. “Why on earth would you do this?”

Sammantha touched Keenan lightly on the hand. “Call it professional courtesy.” She squeezed his fingers and smiled. “Besides, I *like* you.”

Later that morning, a man dressed in a brown UPS uniform delivered a bogus package to Keenan’s office. Sammantha handed him a thick, sealed manila envelope, which he quietly tucked under his arm.

“Have them back in two hours,” she whispered. Then she raised her voice. “Have a nice day!” *What can Brown do for you? she thought. Help you kill off the American government, that’s what.*

Sammantha watched her man walk out the front door, she sat back in her chair, while locking her fingers together and resting her head against them. One more piece of her plan was almost complete. Jock Tilson’s personal dentist for over thirty-five years, Dr. Timothy Keenan, had just given her complete copies of the president’s dental records.

CHAPTER 22



The sun was just threatening to lift over the eclectic skyline, where new office buildings hovered between the ancient, pointed minarets of the city. All movement seemed to stop, as the wailing call for Fajr, the dawn prayer, began drifting down from somewhere above. Inside the palace, all Muslim subjects, Allah's chosen, fell to their knees to face Mecca. The palace grew silent, save for the low hum of the forced air heaters and the mumbles of quiet prayer.

In his office, General Mu'annar Abu Hussein al-Talid pressed his forehead against the floor. His lips moved silently, as he recited a long passage of the Qur'an from memory. His white robe draped gracefully from his shoulders, gathering at his waist where it billowed over a twist of black rope. A black and white head cloth fell over his shoulders, held in place by a band of shiny, silver-colored fabric. Talid's palms and elbows lay flat against his hand-woven prayer rug, his body motionless except for his ever-moving lips. His eyes remained closed for several minutes. He opened them only after his prayers were completed.

The city snapped awake. The palace began to move with a blur of bodies, despite the early hour. Talid stood and absentmindedly brushed at the bottom of his robe, where his knees had rested upon his prayer rug. He turned to Yussef al-Karkhabi, his faithful lieutenant. He touched Karkhabi on the shoulder and Karkhabi bowed toward him.

Karkhabi said, "Who but you, oh Great One, would have had the foresight to prepare a heathen woman for such a plan?"

Talid removed his headdress and replaced it with a military cap. He walked to a gold-framed mirror hanging on the wall, so he could adjust it to the proper angle. As he tipped his cap to the side, Talid fingered the vestige of a scar running down the back of his skull. He tried in vain to feel the smooth, thin line that he knew was underneath his hair, the scar caused by a bullet, and made insignificant by the life-saving surgery that Sammantha Starodubov had performed. It had been five years. Aside from the occasional bout of violent temper, he had recovered fully. Talid smiled.

"It was not my idea, Yussef. It was hers."

"But in your wisdom—"

"I owe her my life."

"But she is a woman—"

"Of many skills," interrupted Talid.

Karkhabi bit his lip. He pressed his palms together, and bowed toward his ruler. "Then you have taught her well."

The lines around Talid's eyes grew deep as he smiled. Leathered by too many years in the sun and sand, thick furrows were dug across his skin like corn rows. Looking at Talid, Karkhabi thought of how his leader's face made him look far older than his fifty-one years. Talid's eyes though...his eyes were as wild and dangerous as they'd been during their all-too-brief childhood.

Talid gripped Karkhabi by the shoulder. "You needn't flatter me, my friend. Your job is secure. Who but you has been with me since the beginning? We were mere boys in rags, stealing garbage to survive, when our bonds were forged."

Karkhabi looked to the ground, humbled by his master's compliments. It was true. They had been together since childhood. This didn't matter. He knew, that although he was Talid's closest friend, per-

haps his only friend, despite the fact that he was the orchestrator of Talid's terrorist network throughout the world, he was just one impulse away from death. Talid ruled with absolute power. To keep that power, to keep his enemies at bay, Talid must show that he was willing to sacrifice anything to keep it. So, occasionally, he did so. What better example than to kill his closest friend? Karkhabi never forgot the time he had watched Talid put a pistol to his youngest son's head and pull the trigger. This image festered in his brain like a boil, how Talid had kicked his son's lifeless body out of his way like a dead dog.

In spite of the compliments, Yussef Karkhabi remained on his guard. He could never understand or predict his leader. Because his leader's core was as solid as the ever-shifting sands blowing in the desert.

"The woman," said Karkhabi, brushing aside Talid's compliment, "You are using her?"

Without looking at Karkhabi, Talid replied. "Do not be fooled by her, my friend. She uses us as we use her. Never think, for one single moment, that Miss Starodubov is under our sandals." Talid plucked a date off a silver tray and bit it in half. Chewing thoughtfully, he continued, "She will do as we ask." He lay the remaining half of the date on his tongue. "So long as it suits her purpose."

"But it is we who supply her money."

"She has others who give her money, my friend."

"But our contacts—"

"Merely a convenience to her." Talid laughed. Then he sighed wearily. "Believe what you will..." As Talid spoke, he turned toward his friend. With an unseen hand he reached under his robe. He lifted the cover off a jewel-encrusted scabbard. With a swift and almost invisible motion, he stepped forward and raised the knife. Before Karkhabi could react, Talid pulled Karkhabi's head against his chest and laid the four-inch dagger blade against his Adam's apple. Talid pressed the steel against his friend's skin until a trickle of blood ran down the blade and onto his fingers. Karkhabi breathed in shallow, short bursts. He fought to remain motionless, knowing any sign of resistance could cause Talid to strike like a startled snake.

"What did I do?" Karkhabi croaked.

Talid let go; then he laughed. Karkhabi's shoulders slumped and he reached for his neck.

"You see, my dear friend," said Talid. "You cannot trust even your closest brother." He began to wash his dagger's blade in a delicately carved wooden bowl of water resting on the edge of his desk. "Sammantha Starodubov cannot be trusted." Without warning, Talid took hold of Karkhabi again. "See!" This time Talid pressed the blade to Karkhabi's tongue. He pressed it back into his open throat until it tickled the skin of his epiglottis. Karkhabi fought off the urge to gag. Any motion forward would cause the razor edge of the dagger to slice through his throat and cut into his neck, bones and all. He could almost hear the dagger tearing through the joints and the gristle. Oh yes, having witnessed this tactic too many times before.

"This is the way *she* will be, if we are not careful." Talid paused. "We must watch her at every moment, my dear friend. Because, some day, she may try to betray us..." Talid withdrew the knife. Then he nicked Karkhabi's neck again for fun. The flow of blood intensified. It began to drip to the floor, puddling into a weaving trail. "If she betrays us, I will use you as an example of what happens to the people who fail me. Do you understand?"

"I will not let her betray you," whispered Karkhabi.

Talid let him go. "Good."

Karkhabi covered the wounds on his neck with both hands. His eyes followed Talid without blinking. They stared fixedly at the dagger, as Talid wiped the blade on his own discarded headdress and then slipped it back into its scabbard. Only when Talid closed the flap and hooked it under his robe, did Karkhabi let his shoulders slump and his hands come down.

Talid pulled a white silk handkerchief from somewhere inside his robe and tossed it toward his

friend. "You do understand me, then?"

"Yes, general. I understand." Karkhabi dabbed at his neck. He was relieved to find that his wounds stopped bleeding quickly, despite all the early flow.

Talid walked to the edge of the room and picked up a pitcher of fresh water. "Good," he said. Talid took the handkerchief from Karkhabi. He dipped it into the water and began wiping his friend's neck with surprisingly gentle strokes. "Tell me," Talid softly said, "Now that the first lady is dead, how goes the rest of our plan?"

Karkhabi winced as Talid suddenly pressed hard into his wound, as if demanding the right answer. "Our...laboratory preparations are progressing well. We have spared no expense. To date we have spent—"

"I care not what we have spent," interrupted Talid. "She has already saved us more than we could ever spend. She has brought us to places we have never dreamed of reaching. The first lady is dead..." Talid shook his head, as if in awe.

"You asked for an update."

Talid waived weakly with one hand and sighed. "Proceed."

"We have invested over five hundred million dollars with Miss Starodubov. More than half our estimated budget, and—"

Talid interrupted. "She gets everything she demands." He stared at Karkhabi, while Karkhabi remained mute, waiting for Talid's great wisdom. "God is great. Our cause is just. And remember, she and Allah saved my life."

Karkhabi grew more animated, now that he knew his bleeding neck wouldn't kill him. "To protect our interests, she should be under surveillance." He hesitated. "I offer to send my son to watch her."

Karkhabi thought of his son, his greatest source of pride. He was graduated with honors from Princeton, with a Masters in engineering from the Cal Poly and a doctorate in nuclear science from MIT. He was a highly sought consultant to Middle Eastern nations, as well as many major U.S. corporations in the region.

"Your son is *not* qualified to do this, my friend. He will only be in the way."

"I offer him as a sign of my commitment." Karkhabi felt a brief flush of hope. Perhaps Talid would not make him sacrifice his son after all.

"As you wish," said Talid. He turned toward his office desk, which was piled high with an unruly hill of papers. "As you see, I am busy. Tell your son that I will call for him shortly. That is all."

Karkhabi left the office. As the door closed, Talid walked toward a side door leading to a small anti-chamber. He opened the chamber door and looked toward its sole occupant, who was seated cross-legged on a fluffed up floor cushion.

"Did you hear what my dear, close friend and advisor has said about you?"

Sammantha Starodubov stood like a graceful, long-legged gazelle. "Tell me."

"Karkhabi says I pay you too much."

Sammantha scoffed. She spread her hands submissively out from her sides. "What do *you* think?"

Talid's eyes grew focused. He stared at Sammantha's cleavage, watching as it slowly rose and fell with her breathing.

"The death of the first lady was payment enough for my small tokens. If you deliver the American president, as you promise, Allah will bless you a thousand times."

"Will I have seventy virgins, Talid, like you promise your jihadists?"

"At least that many, my sweet."

"I prefer a man with experience." She paused. "I will do more than deliver Tilson to you, Talid. Much more. More than you could ever dream."

Talid smiled and he slithered toward Sammantha. “I certainly do know what you can deliver,” he said in a lowered, husky voice.

Sammantha reached her hand into Talid’s robe. She ran her hand up his naked thighs. Talid groaned. He let his head fall back, his face lifting toward the heavens, thanking Allah for all his blessings. Then Sammantha ripped Talid’s dagger from its scabbard, and pressed it hard against his neck.

“I’m not your whore, Talid. And you know what I can do with a knife.”

Talid began to laugh. It was a deep throaty sound that started somewhere far inside his belly. “You do know how to please a man. Oh, Miss Sammantha,” he said. “I am rock hard and await your every command. If you slit my throat, so be it. I will die a happy man.”

“Not today, Talid. You don’t die today. Nor will you enjoy my favors. Not anymore. I am done with that.”

Talid frowned. “Don’t I please you?”

“I...I’ve found someone.”

Talid shrugged. “My, my.” He fluffed his robe back into place and pulled the dagger from Sammantha’s hand. “Very well. Deliver on your promises. Or you die.”

This time Sammantha laughed. “I know what you really want, Talid. Both of us know that. And I *always* deliver.”

“I am going to help you.”

“No. You won’t. I must do this myself.”

Talid ran the sharp edge of his knife against his open palm until a red line of blood began to crawl along his hand like a worm. “You cut me deeply, Sammantha. You started the bloodshed with your assassination. Surely you didn’t think that I would ignore Allah’s sign that it is time to implement my own agenda?”

“You must wait.”

I cannot; I must help. So, tell me, who is *your* greatest enemy? Who is it that could stop your plan? Tell me.”

Sammantha’s face grew pale. She felt a gurgle in her gut, like a shepherd’s lamb stew boiling over a fire, all hot and greasy and dripping with fat. Her skin took on a sickly, paste-like hue. It was so pallid that Talid looked almost concerned, if only for a moment. Sammantha nearly retched. She managed to control her breathing and her stomach. But she couldn’t settle her mind. If Talid began his own crusade against America, it could ruin her plan. Talid wanted to destroy America, just as she did. His idea of destruction was to incite fear, with random suicide bombings on busses and trains, maybe shoot a few planes out of the sky. That was penny ante shit when compared to her grand scheme. She was going to level all of Washington, every last bit of ground. She was going to take down the president and every congressman, senator and supreme court justice in sight, all in one single, glorious ball of fire.

September 11th would be a mere candle when compared to the inferno she would unleash. Of course, Talid did not know this. None of them did. This was her own, secret war. Her war-within-the-war, something she had dreamed of since *The Americans* had stolen her childhood, her family and her life. She couldn’t tell Talid her plan. But she would have to give him something.

“Trust me, Talid. You don’t want to do this.”

Talid’s face reddened, but his teeth eked out an eerie smile. He looked with focused concentration into Sammantha’s eyes. When Sammantha stared back, she saw a razor glint inside Talid’s heart, with a deathly sharp edge that would rip away everything in its way. It already had.

“I trust no one,” he said.

Sammantha closed her eyes. She did not need this, but she knew she couldn’t stop it. Talid was a terrorist of the worst kind, with hundreds of sleeper cells spread across the West. He had thousands of

mind-numbed zealots that would follow his every command. Any one of them would strap on a suicide pack of C4 as calmly as brushing teeth. They were embedded in America like dust mites in an old, woolen rug. Nothing short of ethnic cleansing could remove them all. That would never happen, not in America. Too many of them *were* America now, solid tax-paying citizens generations deep, mixing into the blended melting pot of American life, protected by a Constitution that was as solid as a diamond and as flexible as mercury. There was no way to tell the difference between the outraged or the outrageous. And the U.S. Constitution would protect the rights of the innocent, even if it meant that terrorists killed freely in the streets. Better that a hundred guilty men go free than one innocent man be jailed. America would never be able to fight them. It didn't have the will.

"Believe me when I say this, Talid. You don't want to fuck with me, or my plan."

Talid pondered Sammantha's words. He looked into her eyes and strolled through them, like they were a brick path leading to a park bench in Sammantha's mind. He sat himself there, feeling each beat of her heart like it were his own, sensing, knowing the veracity of her words. Talid smiled. His teeth had the radiant whiteness of polished ivory against his sun-darkened skin. Sammantha could almost feel them biting into her like the fangs of a rabid fox.

"I will try to stop my people until you are through, Miss Starodubov. But my men are like sharks. They smell the blood in the water, they sense the kill, they attack. The death of the first lady, at the hands of someone they know is one of their own? It drives them into frenzy. A feeding frenzy. We must give them more people to kill."

"Then kill some of *them*. Remind them of their lowly place. Have some balls, Talid. Be a *man*."

Talid's hand reached for his dagger. He lunged toward Sammantha with such speed, and such rage that she was caught off guard. She didn't want to, but she had to defend herself. With a calm, practiced hand she forced Talid's strike to go wide with the outside of her hand. With Talid's head exposed, Sammantha knew that she could take him down instantly and kill him on the spot. That would make her a target around the world, for people that would stop at nothing to see her dead. She could take the knife. That would emasculate Talid. He'd call out his dogs, do anything to save face. She could fight *him*, but not his entire palace guard.

"Mercy!" cried Sammantha. She crossed her arms and raised them into the air above her head. She knelt down, pretending to plead for her life. "You are my master. I meant no disrespect. I just have passion for our cause. There is one...one man that needs to be killed. His name is Trance. Jack Trance. You can kill *him*. You *must* kill him." *He killed my fiancé. I killed his wife. You kill him and the circle is complete.*

Talid straightened. He looked down his nose at Sammantha and smirked. No woman could attack him like this and live. Then again, no other woman had ever pulled a bullet out of his skull. "So, you want me to be a man?" Talid slashed at Sammantha's slacks with his dagger. He caught them at the waist and ripped them clear to the knee of one leg. Sammantha's pants flapped open like a banana peel. Talid stood there, staring at the tiny red thong that Sammantha wore like a flower. Sammantha subtly turned toward him to give him a better look, spreading her legs as if to invite him. After a long while, Talid snorted and walked away.

"You are still a whore," he said, without looking back toward her. "I know this Trance. He is not easy to kill. But he *will* die, even if I have to do it myself. Then I will take you to my bed and you will not resist."

Talid picked up his phone and said, "Send in the boy."

A few moments later, Karkhabi's son hesitantly knocked on the office door.

Talid looked at Sammantha. She was standing half naked in her tiny red thong. He grinned. "Come in, Omar."

Omar Karkhabi stopped in mid stride as he entered the office. He looked at Sammantha Starodubov, gaping like a teenage boy who has just seen his first female breast. He bowed his head quickly and looked to Sammantha's feet. His eyes tried to wander up her legs, to that pulsing red thong. Instead, he shifted them sideways to Talid's bleeding hand. Slowly, he looked up into Talid's eyes.

Sammantha smiled, showing no sign that anything was unusual. She was to work with this boy, so she studied him closely. He was a shade over six feet tall, with a face of smooth olive skin. He was lean, but not muscular, like someone who had grown up too quickly and hadn't quite filled into his frame. His hair was oil black. It was combed straight back over his head. He had a small tuft of black fuzz on his chin. It had the makings of a beard, but it still looked more like darkened chick down than real whiskers. His eyes were alert, but they looked clueless and bewildered.

"I don't believe you two have met," said Talid. He gestured toward Sammantha and then to Omar. "Omar, this is Sammantha Starodubov. Your father has told you about her, no?"

Omar nodded. "She is a doctor...a surgeon. I am to return with her to America."

Talid looked at Sammantha. "This is Omar Karkhabi. He is the son of my closest friend and advisor. You are to take him with you. Feel free to use his talents. He has a doctorate from MIT."

"He doesn't look more than eighteen."

"I am twenty-one," interrupted Omar.

Talid slapped Omar across the face. "Show respect, Omar. Do not interrupt your elders, even a woman."

Sammantha laughed out loud. She thought of what it must look like to Omar. With her torn slacks draped around her ankles, her lacy red thong and the dried blood from Talid's hand spread across her thighs. *A doctorate at twenty-one. Perhaps I will find a good use for his talents.*

Talid continued. "Omar has studied math, mechanical engineering and the nuclear sciences. I have been trying to convince him to work with his people, to help process the spent fuel from our two nuclear reactors, to build weapons to help us protect ourselves. So far, he has refused me." Talid shrugged. "If he were not my friend's son, he would be an example, perhaps a dead one." He smiled. "Instead of death, I am sending him with you." Talid motioned for them both to leave. "There will be a time when I *tell* him what to do. Until then, Miss Starodubov, do what you do best."

Omar's eyes narrowed. He looked from Sammantha to Talid and back. Sammantha looked at Omar with growing respect. Omar was making a statement against his nation's absolute leader, a statement that Sammantha already surmised might one day cost him his life.

"Now leave my home. Do not fail. Either of you."

CHAPTER 23



It was late afternoon and a hazy sun was beginning to wander into the clouds out over the horizon. The light seemed filtered, giving the surrounding countryside the tint of unpolished silver. Jack Trance mused his way through thick clusters of bare branches, breaking a fresh trail in the woods with his cross country skis. His arms and legs flailed rapidly as he pushed through the crusted snow for every ounce of speed and power. Sweat dripped down his forehead and steam rose out of his windbreaker, surrounding him with a kind of opaque mist in the cold, still air.

Trance had been skiing hard for over two hours, ignoring his aching lungs and the bloodied slashes made by tree branches along his cheeks. Though not skiing there directly, he knew where he would stop—at a place surrounded by two hundred acres of wilderness. He had bought the land years before, far away from the beat of traffic, miles along a dirt logging road that was unreachable by car. In the winter time, only a truck with special tires, an ATV, a snowmobile, skis, or a foolish man with snowshoes could get anywhere near this place.

Trance came here when he had to make peace with his world, when he'd been letting problems attack his subconscious like a nest of fire ants. It was always painful—as cleansing often is. He was glad he was alone.

For a brief moment, Trance stopped to catch his breath. He wiped the slick moisture off his brow and looked slowly around. He wasn't sure just where he was, but he knew he was close.

An hour later he neared the small cabin on top of the knoll overlooking his land. He had built this place himself, from logs he'd hewn by hand with a woodsman's axe. When he saw the shelter through the trees he stopped. He took several deep breaths, closed his eyes and moved on.

She was still here—Janice. Not just her body, but her spirit, too. Trance could feel her, spreading within him like sunshine as he snapped off his skis. He could feel the warmth of her touch as he set the skis just inside the cabin door.

"I've missed you," he said softly.

Trance stepped into a pair of snowshoes and walked back outside. He made his way through the heavy snow toward the chapel he had built in a sheltered grove of pines. Thirty yards from the cabin, it was a twelve foot high structure of carved, hand smoothed oak. Two heavy bronze doors guarded the entrance. Trance dug down into the snow to clear a space so he could pry them open. Then he walked inside.

Trance shuffled toward the lone headstone. It was made of rough gray granite, with a shiny, rounded top. There was space on the front center of the stone where the rock was polished and flat. Beneath this there was a ledge, six inches deep, also polished smooth. Trance fell to his knees and pulled a bouquet of sweetheart roses from inside his coat. He set them upon the ledge; then he recited the words carved into the stone.

"JANICE TRANCE

WHO WILL ALWAYS BE REMEMBERED AND LOVED"

Trance clasped his hands together and raised his head toward the sky. His eyes brimmed with tears but he fought them away.

"God, I wish you were here," he whispered. He drew a halting, labored breath. Man, how this hurt. "But we all must bear our burdens, hey?" Trance fumbled with the roses to spread them evenly. "Lau-

ren and I went down to Washington a couple weeks back. There was an invitation I couldn't refuse. Then we went to New York." Trance rearranged the roses, until they lay in a neat row along the headstone.

"I know how you liked her. It's been over six years, you know. Time flies so fast." Trance closed his eyes. "I still see your face as if it were yesterday."

Trance removed a glove and gently stroked the gravestone. "I love her, you know. Besides you, she's always been my closest friend. Maybe she and I could be happy, like *we* were. You'd want that for me, I know. But could I stand the pain? What if I lost her, too?"

Trance could still see Janice as the young CIA recruit that had been sent to him for training. Within days he had known they would marry. It was destiny. When Janice became pregnant they'd bought this land in Vermont, so they could get away from everything—the people, the missions, the life. The CIA was no place to raise a family. The Company had no children and it left no survivors.

Trance's mind veered to that final killing conversation with Jacob Miller. He could feel it, as if it had grown roots in his brain. He was pacing in front of Miller's desk, saying, "You're not going to let me quit?"

"That's not what I said, Jack." Miller calmly cleans his nails with the tip of a letter opener. "But you and I both know the secrets you hold. And if you're out..." Miller shrugs. "...I can't protect you."

Trance smiles. "I know. I become a liability and I'm better off dead." Trance shuts his eyes and jumps into the cold. "That's okay, Jake. I'll take my chances."

"I think you'd better not."

"Consider me gone."

"Jack..."

Miller walks to the window.

"You'd kill me yourself, wouldn't you, Jake?" says Trance, knowing what is going through Miller's head—protect the country at all costs.

"I wouldn't want it; none of us would."

"What are you afraid of? Afraid I'll deal with terrorists? Afraid I'll blow the whistle on you and your boys? Tell me, Jacob. Why is it so important that I stay?"

"Don't be irrational."

"Screw you."

Miller sighs. "You know we're both pawns in this game."

Trance walks around the edge of Miller's desk. He stops only two feet away. Miller watches him, smiling nervously. Trance reaches forward with one hand and lifts Miller off his feet by the back of his neck. He pulls Miller's face against his own. "You better hope they kill me on their first try, Jake. Because if they don't, I'm coming after you."

It wasn't Trance who died; it was his wife. Terrorists, they said. Supposed assassins avenging the loss of their own at the hands of Trance. Identities buried beneath a labyrinth of obscured layers, each more mystifying than the last. At the top of the suspect list sat General Mu'annar Abu Hussein al-Talid. But this wasn't Talid's style. He liked things big. Big explosions, planes going down in flames, dozens

or hundreds dead. They could find no direct evidence against Talid on this. Nothing clear. They could tie him to other things, yes, but not this. And Miller? Trance was never sure if Miller himself was involved, all in a plot to keep him with T-Force.

Trance stroked his wife's gravestone as he might her soft brown hair. "I turned Miller down, again. He wanted my help with something and I refused him. You see? I'm getting stronger."

Trance got off his knees and left the chapel, shutting the doors behind him.

"God, I miss you," he said, as the doors closed shut. "But I have to go on. Life goes *on*."

CHAPTER 24



Brandon Copley's right hand twitched and he knew he was awake. His throat felt like he had swallowed a cocktail made with bleach and cigarette butts. His eyes, though still closed, could feel the caustic, glaring light. It was too harsh to look into, too powerful. That light would blind him; he was sure.

Then there was the pain.

Copley tried to reach for his head but his arms wouldn't move. He had to stop it, the pain. His head felt swollen, like a water-filled basketball. He had to touch it, to make sure it wasn't about to blow open and pop like a balloon. He lifted his head upward only to have it fall back against his pillow. He tried again, then again.

"Arrgghh!"

Insects danced along his skin. Hairy spiders, he could feel them. Tarantulas with thick furry legs. Scorpions, with great curved tails and stingers twitching with every step as they tried to stick him. He wriggled on his wet sheets like a slippery eel. He felt naked and cold and slimy.

He tried to slap at them, the insects in the sheets. But his arms splayed about in a spastic, uncontrolled frenzy. He couldn't stop—the pain, the bugs, and the sweat. He knew he was going to die.

It was only then that he thought about death. *Was* he dead? Maybe he *was* dead already. He couldn't remember. The last thing he remembered was Sammantha, dragging him down to the floor in a wet dream.

"Where am I?" he said. His voice was thin and scratchy, like an old Al Jolson 78 RPM record. His throat was parched. It was hot and dry, feeling like an empty pan left on a hot stove, almost ready to melt. Every swallow burned with that dry hot pain. A scorpion stung his arm. "Get them off of me! I'm going to die... I'm going to die..."

Copley pulled at the elastic strap that held his head to the bed. But he couldn't grip it with the heavy canvas balls that were now his fingers. He began beating his head against his pillow, with a slow rhythmic *thump, thump, thump*, until finally, he opened his eyes to the white, sterile ceiling and that blinding light.

"Our patient is awake," said a muffled voice, a foreign voice somewhere in the distance.

The sound came from outside the room. Copley turned his head. There was a large, rectangular window. Beyond it was a man dressed in a too-white coat with a clipboard in his hand. The man's eyes stared dispassionately at Copley through the glass. He lifted the clipboard in a mock salute and smiled.

Copley noticed another man standing beside the first. This man's coat was equally white, so white that Copley had to blink. Was he in heaven? Was this Saint Peter? Yes, it had to be heaven. Was his name on that clipboard, with a pass that let him through the pearly gates? No. The man's hands fiddled with something in front of him. Dials, thought Copley, like a pilot preflighting a plane. *Or is he controlling me?*

"Assholes," muttered Copley.

Copley heard his words echo around him. The second man leaned forward and spoke into a microphone. "Very good," Mr. President.

The man looked downward again and his fingers seemed to type at something, perhaps a keyboard of some sort. A moment later he turned to his companion. "He's in the final stages. Tomorrow we shall eliminate all alcohol from his IV. I'll sedate him now, gently. His mentor will be here soon."

“Who gives you the goddamn right—” began Copley. In mid sentence his head fell slowly back toward his pillow. He felt like he was falling into a bed of cotton balls.

“He’s relaxing,” said the technician.

Copley’s jaw grew slack. His eyes became unfocused. His eyelids fluttered briefly, then closed.

Dr. Alexei Karov relaxed. He had been through this many times with patients from all parts of the world, mostly in Moscow, where millions of people every year were arrested by the police for public drunkenness. Most of these were released after a day or two. But some, some were forced to undergo “treatments” by men like Karov. Treatments to test new theories on how to make them well. The lucky ones recovered, some enough to return to productive society. The others? Karov didn’t know what became of them, nor did he care.

Karov stepped back from the console and allowed his assistant to take over the controls. He watched Copley, like he might gaze at an interesting cloud formation, staring, then tilting his head for a better angle. He smiled. *Good*, he thought. Three weeks and he is almost weaned. Kept on the edge of consciousness with sedatives while the effects of alcohol were slowly removed from his system. Not much longer, he thought. His patient’s new drug dependence would be relatively minor after this, and easily correctable. He would need far more treatment, but they wouldn’t have to strap him down.

Karov sighed. He looked through the glass at the catheter stuck into Copley’s right arm. *How easy it is to control and manipulate a man*. He felt a twinge of regret, a small one, just for a moment. He preferred what the Americans called “cold turkey.” He liked to strap a man down and let him scream until he quit. It was easier that way. Dr. Starodubov had insisted that this patient be treated a milder way, with drugs and time. This subject would never again be in control of his life; Karov knew that. He wondered just who the poor sucker was. He had been told to call him “Mr. President.” This wasn’t a president, far from it. Besides, Tilson was in Washington. He’d just seen him on CNN. He looked at Copley and wondered, *Who is this man, really?*

“You will ease him into his new world gently,” Starodubov had ordered. He had done that. He had done it well, just as he always did. His years of practice had brought this subject back into the world, to whatever fate Starodubov and her team of mind-benders had planned for his sorry soul.

CHAPTER 25



The edges of Jock Tilson's cheeks began to flush with pink before he was halfway through the first page of Doheny's report. "I can't believe this," he mumbled, without looking up. He scowled, looking more like a fighter preparing to step into the ring than the nation's top executive at his desk reading...eyes focused, jaw set, muscles twitching.

"This is all you've got?" Tilson crumpled the page, then set it on his desk. He began to read the next. A minute later he crumpled that page and set it beside the other. As he came to the report's concluding statements he crumpled the final page and added it to the group of others that lay strewn across the top of his desk.

Agent Doheny, standing motionless before the president, looked down at the discarded papers and grimaced. He had already figured out the purpose of the paper balls; he could read the word *BULL* spelled out clearly across the president's desk. He swallowed hard and waited for the usual harangue to begin. He chewed holes into both sides of his tongue, wishing for a stick of gum, anything so he could stop the damned biting and the blood.

Beside Doheny, agent Cramm appeared strangely calm. He stood comfortably at attention, staring off at something deep inside his mind. Doheny wondered why Cramm looked so peaceful. Then he knew, it was the kind of look men had when they had resigned themselves to failure or death, the thousand-yard stare.

Finally, Tilson spoke. His voice was soft and controlled. "With the hundreds...no...the thousands of men you have working on this case, all you come up with is this? One big fat zero?"

"It's not really a zero, sir," said Doheny. "We've eliminated most possibilities."

With a sweep of his arm Tilson knocked the paper balls to the floor. He rose to his full height and towered above his men like an angry genie. He said nothing; he just stared.

Doheny shifted his weight from leg to leg, wringing his fleshy fingers, trying to think of something positive to say. He sucked at the blood trickling along his tongue and he swallowed. Then he looked at Cramm, as if pleading for help.

Cramm stepped forward and saved him. "We actually know quite a bit, Mr. President. We think that Fallon, the Australian attaché, has fled to Costa Rica. We suspect that he was paid a sizeable—"

"Don't tell me what you suspect, Cramm. Tell me what you know." Tilson grasped a handful of hair and pulled at it. Perhaps he could relieve the tension. He counted to ten and let go. "It baffles the shit out of me that the combined forces of the CIA, the FBI, the NSA, Homeland Security, including you, plus a whole bunch of other agencies with names that look to me like alphabet soup can only draw blanks."

"Not all blanks, Mr. President," said Doheny. "As you read, there were two champagne flutes missing from the British Embassy. We surmise that one belonged to your wife."

"Two champagne flutes? That's it?" said Tilson quickly. "Do you know how many pieces of china are stolen from dinners at the White House? It's a rite of passage."

"Your new ivory hair brush and comb are missing."

"Don't give a frigging inventory list of my personal items, Doheny. That's not what I want from you and you know it." Tilson sat heavily into his chair. "I want the murderer of my wife."

"We're working on it, sir."

Doheny and Cramm exchanged worried looks. Doheny stiffened. “We’re trying diplomatic channels through Costa Rica—”

“Get real,” said Tilson. “I may be new at this game, but I’m not dumb.”

“We could send someone in to get him,” said Cramm softly.

Tilson’s ears pricked and he turned slowly toward Cramm. “And break international law?”

Cramm shrugged. “How bad do you want him?”

“Bad.”

“Then we’ll get him, sir.”

What they didn’t know, at least not then, was that Fallon was already dead.