

Chapter 1

State Department, Washington DC

For the sake of humanity, all she ever wanted was for history to record that she changed the world for the better.

Children would be fed. The elderly would receive the care they needed. The indigent would have the money they needed. People in the poor countries of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and all around the world would live with dignity – secure homes, access to healthcare, economic stability. She envisioned a world where prosperity was not limited to the privileged few

The UN could never make this happen; Helen believed that with every fiber of her being. A room full of old men making speeches about the best way to care for the world's population, they may have had their moments, but they're powerless to enact real change. They didn't have the resources.

The West had succeeded for one reason: its ability to intervene. Governments stepped in where markets failed. The so-called free market enthusiasts would never admit it, but every economic boom had been carefully steered by government intervention. She knew it. The data was irrefutable.

Now, finally, as Secretary of State, she was in a position to make it happen.

Even the President—that idiot who had beaten her in the primaries—was starting to see it her way. It's a marathon, not a sprint, she reminded herself.

Her husband, Thomas, had been instrumental. His suggestion to break the fund into targeted initiatives had been brilliant. Why hadn't I thought of it sooner? Fear was the greatest motivator. Climate change, economic instability, terrorism—control the narrative, and you control the funding.

Global warming had been the perfect vehicle. People were terrified. Every

storm, every heatwave, every disaster was attributed to it. The media took the bait, fueling the hysteria. Books, news programs, even films—the industry thrived on it. And now, so did she.

The Agnes Foundation, once scraping by with minor donations, was now worth four billion dollars. And that was just the beginning. Trillions were needed.

Looking at her monitor, the Secretary of State was checking the foundation's bank balance to make sure the Russians had deposited their money as they said they would.

A meeting notification popped up. Jad Anderton—Director of Technology—URGENT.

Sitting at her desk, Helen checked the foundation's bank balance. The latest transfer from the Russians had just cleared. A slow, satisfied smile crossed her face. One billion dollars. The plutonium shortage had rattled them. Access to US markets was worth every cent.

Within seconds of accepting the meeting, Jad, the tall, black, skinny IT director was standing at her door. He was the most knowledgeable technology specialist she had ever known.

"Come in. What's so Urgent?" Jad entered the Secretary's enormous office, decorated in the highest quality Chippendale furniture. The rich dark hardwood tables, matched with robust sofas and chairs, a deep cherry amour with rounded woodwork and master carving all perfectly placed on a gigantic Afghan rug.

Her incredibly large desk sat at the far end, and next to the living room setting was a large French style fireplace. The entire office appeared warm and inviting, but as he walked across the room, a chill raised goosebumps on his neck.

"Last week while in Libya, we uploaded the Trojan horse recorder on Ambassador Smith's blackberry." Jad picked up the Secretary's Blackberry from her desk. She watched him start pressing buttons, moving between screens.

"Male arrogance," she thought, but then she remembered, this was Jad. Boundaries didn't exist. She reached up and took her phone from him.

"I was just going to explain how the Trojan horse was queued up," Jad said, confused that she took her phone from him.

"I really don't have time for a technical description. Just tell me what the heck is so important."

"Well, like I was explaining, the recorder booted. It recognized Ambassador Smith's voice and booted up."

"So, the big news is that the algorithm worked as advertised. Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"Not only did it work, but it recorded a conversation between Smith and his IT Stevens."

"I hope there's more to this."

"Let me just play it for you." Secretary Agnes gave her phone back to him.

Jad pushed an icon on her Blackberry and Ambassador Chris Smith's voice could be heard. He smiled at her, holding the phone out so she could hear.

"How much money did the Agnes Foundation get on the last transfer to al-Zahawi," Ambassador Smith asked.

Jeff Stevens, the Libyan Ambassador's technical expert, answered, "15%."

Smith let out a low whistle. "So, she made \$7.5 million on the last one and will make another \$10 million on the next? No wonder that fund is growing."

Helen's eyes darkened.

"It gets better," Jad whispered.

She leaned forward, jaw tightening.

Stevens continued, "Does all of the foundation's money go toward climate initiatives?"

Smith chuckled. "Please. It can go anywhere. Global warming is just the umbrella."

Helen's blood ran cold. How dare they?

The recording continued, but she had heard enough. Her fingers drummed against her desk.

Ambassador Smith had just become an example.

Secretary Agnes listened as Ambassador Smith excused his IT support. "Is that it?" Secretary Agnes asked.

Excited, but with trepidation, Jad replied, "He calls his Ethiopian counter-

part.”

Livid with her Libyan Ambassador, she could barely contain herself.

A new call came up. The Libyan Ambassador was speaking with the Ethiopian Ambassador, John Gebrselassie.

“I can get the money for your water project.” Ambassador Stevens replied.

“You realize that project could cost upwards of \$100 million. It would sure do a lot of good. Is there a new Government Grant that I’m not aware of?” John said.

They were talking as if they could do whatever they pleased. This was disappointing. She thought her people respected her more than that.

“How much is available? Are there enough funds to cover this?” John asked.

“Oh yeah, the water project and then some,” Ambassador Steven replied.

Her eyebrows raised. She had heard enough. No one should think lightly of messing with her.

Agnes tapped her manicured nails against the polished wood of her desk, eyes flicking over the transaction logs. Billions moved through her hands, money shifting with purpose, directed with precision. She wasn’t just funding projects—she was building an empire.

Control was an illusion, one Agnes wielded with terrifying precision. But illusions had cracks. And Fred Palmer was about to find one.

* * *

Brooklyn New York

Fred smirked as he scanned the numbers on his screen. He had spent months studying their patterns, tracking the flows of cash that no one was supposed to notice. And now, he had found a way in.

With a sense of pride and cautious optimism, Matt adjusted his glasses while sitting at his computer watching Fred use the software Matt had developed for him. Matt’s monitoring software was giving them all the information they needed.

“Ambassador Samuel Smith is online,” Fred announced.

Matt’s friend, Fred, was dead serious and in a no non-sense mood. “The

ambassador is providing instructions for the Bitcoin transfer,” Fred announced, finding it interesting that while much of the country was still trying to understand the need for a crypto currency, many of the world governments and nearly all of the drug cartels were making full use of Bitcoin’s unique ability to hide money.

Matt’s slight build and red hair made him an unimposing figure.

Smirking while shaking his head, Fred looked over at Matt, “You look like an unmade bed.”

Staring at his monitor, Matt rolled his eyes and continued pressing keyboard buttons. “I’m a minimalist, why comb my hair if I’m just going to do this?” Matt pointed at his computer screen.

They were making use of an abandoned bar in the Bronx. Fred’s logistics expert got a great deal on renting the place for one week. Dust and cobwebs were everywhere, and in there, a musty odor. It was perfect!

Holding his earphones tight against his head, he listened to Secretary of State Agnes. When there was a break in her conversation with Ansar al-Zahawi. Fred looked over at Matt’s hair and the shoes he was wearing. Shaking his head in disbelief, he asked, “What if we have to run? Can you run in those flip flops? Also, with your hair all messed up and that scruffy beard, don’t you think it would be rather easy to identify you?”

Fred had been getting worried that Matt was finding the con game too easy. Small change targets bored Matt. Matt had too much talent to lose his passion. Targeting Government officials was proving to be much more exciting.

Mimicking potential witnesses, Fred went on, “Yeah, I saw this skinny red headed guy wearing glasses. He looked like a red mop with a beard and glasses, running down Sheridan Avenue.” Fred started mimicking a stiff broom trying to run.

“First of all, I have my bike, so I won’t be running anywhere, and with my helmet on, they won’t have a clue about my hair. Second, my uncombed hair and awesome beard, makes it much easier to change my profile than it will be for you to change yours. That pretty face will be your undoing. In this game, you don’t want to be noticed.” Matt’s attention turned back to his computer monitor.

With a surprised look, Fred grabbed his earphones once again. “They’re on!” He ran back to his station, motioning for Matt to get ready. “Ambassador Smith is pulling up Ansar al-Zahawi’s crypto account now. Get ready. And al-Zahawi is now pulling up what they think is Secretary Agnes’s account.”

Matt’s fake crypto site was a perfect replica of Secretary Agnes’s crypto wallet. By making the transfer, Ansar al-Zahawi would unknowingly transfer crypto into Fred’s wallet. “How long will it take them to figure out the money isn’t going where they think it’s going?” Matt asked.

“Last time I don’t know if they ever found out. Just listen to Secretary Agnes. She’ll announce she’s not seeing her cut. We’ll have about 15 seconds after that announcement, and then everything needs to be shut down,” Fred replied.

“How long before the feds start storming us?” Matt was ready to start hitting buttons as soon as he got the signal.

“We should have about 15 minutes, then you’ll hear the sirens. We should be in Manhattan by then. Oops, I was wrong, UNPLUG! Secretary Agnes is telling her people to arrest us. Oh crap, they know where we’re at. Abort!

“They know where we’re at?” Matt yelled, as he started unplugging and putting his laptop into his backpack.

“We’ve got to get out of here.” Fred said while looking at his watch. He was mentally measuring the distance to the exits, the one on his left versus the one on his right. “How much money did we get?” Fred started pulling cords and packaging up his laptop. He then threw papers on top of everything. He turned to see if Matt was ready to make a run for it.

Matt, heading for the nearest exit, “It looks like they cut the transfer into \$700K increments.”

Fred, motioning for Matt to get out, “So, we only got \$700K?”

Matt, pulling his backpack, “Better than nothing,” he yelled as he stopped halfway out the door.

Running to the wall so he could stuff the LAN line down behind the electrical outlet, Fred said, “That’s a heck of a lot of risk for \$700K.”

Fred paused.

His fingers hovered over the terminal one more time.

Not for the money.

Not for the operation.

For the insurance.

He reached into his bag and pulled out a small USB drive. Plugged it in. Clicked twice.

The screen blinked. Hidden folders. Transaction history. Names. Shell companies. Deep rot.

They'll never trace this without a blueprint.

He copied everything. Compressed it.

Thirty seconds.

Every second louder than the last.

Matt was already gone.

Fred didn't even look at the progress bar. He just whispered:

"You don't get to keep secrets, Trapper."

The download finished.

He yanked the drive.

Smashed the keyboard.

And ran.

While screwing on the outlet cover, Fred heard screeching tires coming to a stop outside.

Matt came running back, breathing heavily, "They're here?" Matt shouted standing in the door. "What about the communication lines outside?"

Fred, making hand gestures to get moving, "We'll have to take our chances. Go, I'll take off in the other direction."

"I hope you can run fast." Matt shouted, as he ran down the hall.

Fred threw his backpack over his shoulder, mumbling "I'll be fine."

The red head ran down the stairs to the basement, where he had stowed his bike. Because the building was used as a speak easy in the 1920s, an old alley way allowed him to come out in a parking lot located two buildings down on west 162nd. After pulling his helmet on and repositioning his backpack, he started peddling. Luckily, no cars or police were anywhere in sight. He started sprinting towards the Hudson River.

Fred's exit wasn't so timely. After watching Matt get out the door, Fred started for his exit on the opposite side of the old bar. Just as he was about