



EVOCATUS INCEPTION

STEVEN J. DANIELS

Evocatus Inception

Steven J. Daniels

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evocatus *n. Latin* - A veteran Roman legionnaire called again to service

Novels by Steven J. Daniels

Evocatus Series

Evocatus Inception
Evocatus II Bloodline
Evocatus III Stratagem

Standalone

Weeds in The Garden of Love

Evocatus Inception

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This is a work of fiction. Businesses, locations, and organizations, while real, are used in a purely fictional manner. Names, characters, characterizations, and dialogue are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This book is dedicated to those who perished on that day and...
on the days that followed.

*“It’s easier to fool the people than to
convince them they have been fooled.”*
Mark Twain

Inspired by actual events

ONE

Woodrow

September 1995

Usually, a few tranquil hours trolling off the Panhandle would distract Woody from thinking about his past—especially the people he had killed. Usually, but not today. Today he had a gut feeling—an intangible foreboding he could not ignore.

Off the starboard bow, black skimmers dabbing their wingtips in the mirrored ocean. A distant rumble of thunder heralded the arrival of afternoon thunderstorms. He pulled up the trolling motor, climbed to the flying bridge, and started the engines. He eased the throttles forward, and soon the *Cathleen* was planing along. The muted rumble of the inboard engines was his favorite music. Woody loved his boat. She provided him freedom, joy, and a place to call home.

Behind the boat, bottlenose dolphins were breaching and playing in the wake like rambunctious kids at a water park. Woody smiled. *Look at those beautiful creatures*, he thought. *I'll be swimming with you guys someday.*

He motored past Fort Pickens and Naval Air Station Pensacola before entering Pensacola Bay. A brown pelican circled overhead before piercing the glassy turquoise sea like a feathered arrow. Woody changed his heading to set up the approach to his marina. He rounded the piled-rock breakwater. A lone figure was standing by his berth. Woody throttled back the engines and approached the pier. *Holy s**t*, he thought, *it's Mick Taylor.*

Mick was Woody's trainer at his first CIA Field Officer posting in Washington, D.C. He took Woody under his wing and became his mentor and trusted confidant. When Woody's wife Cathleen was in the final stages of bone cancer, it was Mick who was there beside him when Woody ended her suffering. Woody hadn't seen him since a Clandestine Service reunion three years ago.

Woody cut the engines and maneuvered his boat alongside the pier. He threw a line to Mick. "Well, if it isn't Mick Taylor. The guy who taught me everything he didn't know."

"Woodrow Travis—the worst rookie I ever trained," Mick said and secured the line to a cleat.

Woody fastened the rear line and jumped onto the pier. He grabbed Mick's hand, and they hugged. "Mick, you old son-of-a-bee. How ya been?"

"Good, Woodrow. How 'bout you?"

“Retirement’s a pressure cooker,” Woody replied. “Boating, fishing, handling death threats, drinking beer—you know, the usual s**t.”

“Who’s threatening to kill you, Woodrow?”

“No idea, Mick. Sam Saunders gave me a heads-up. Some of his old friends in faraway places got a hold of him.”

“Sam Saunders?” Mick said. “I’m trying to get in touch with that old cowboy. Do you know where he’s living?”

“He didn’t say. You know Sam—he stays under the radar.”

“Always has,” Mick said.

“So you want to talk to Sam—and me? What’s it about?”

“Not here,” Mick said. “Are we going for a drink?”

Woody grinned. “If you’re buyin’.”

“You should buy. You’re junior man.”

Woody chuckled. “Okay. First, I gotta stow some gear and batten everything down.”

“Boy do I love that sailor talk, Woodrow.”

Pensacola Bay Marina was on the inner harbor waterway and close to downtown. Besides mooring and berths, there was a cozy bar and grill on the ocean side of the clubhouse. Mick and Woody sat at a table on the upstairs patio overlooking the harbor.

A willowy brunette waitress delivered a glass of draft for Woody and bourbon for Mick. She walked away from the table and Woody couldn’t resist catching a glimpse.

Mick raised his glass. “Cheers, Woodrow. It’s really good to see you again.”

Woody clinked his glass with Mick’s. “Cheers to you too, my old friend.”

Mick squinted up at the sky above the harbor. “Have you seen the Blue Angels here, Woodrow?”

“Yeah, if they’re not on the road doin’ a show.”

“I caught them once during fleet week in San Francisco.”

Woody shook his head. “Okay, Mick, enough of the bulls**t. You didn’t just show up here from Brownsville to drink bourbon and talk about the f**kin’ Blue Angels. What’s on your mind?”

“Way not to beat around the bush, Woodrow. Aren’t you going to ask me if I’m having fun in Brownsville? If I’m getting lucky once in a while? Or even if I suffer from irregularity, for goodness’ sake?”

Woody laughed. “You can have fun anywhere, Mick, including Brownsville. You suffer from irregularity like most of us old b*****s, and I hate to ask, but—are you getting any?”

Mick smiled. “About as much as an old queen like me can handle.”

“Maybe old, but always classy, Mick.”

Mick leaned in towards Woody and lowered his voice. “Okay, Woodrow, here it is. I’ve come out of retirement to assemble a team for something more secret than a black op.”

“What the f**k is more secret than a black op?”

“This one. It’s a black op wrapped inside a special op. Only a select few will know all the details.”

“And you’re recruitin’ me and Sam?” Woody asked.

“Yup. I want you to head it up, and Sam will be part of your team.”

“Tell me you’re kidding, Mick.”

“I’m not, Woodrow. You’re the best there is at running covert ops. We need you, and we need you now.”

“Okay. Tell me what you can about this ultra-secret black op, Mick.”

“Can’t say anything until you’re in.”

Woody thought for a moment before shaking his head. “What am I doing? You had me actually considering it.”

“And now?”

“There’s no way, Mick. I ain’t the least bit f**kin’ interested. I’m done with runnin’ missions and all the s**t that comes with it. I’d have to be out of my ever-lovin’—”

Mick raised his hand. “Hang on a sec, okay?”

Woody exhaled. “Alright.”

“I’ve known you for a long time, Woodrow. You say you’re not interested, but I don’t believe you. Truth is you’re probably bored to death here. Oh, you love your boat and drinking and fishing with your buddies, but this is not where you belong. The Clandestine Service was a perfect fit for you. You loved the adrenaline rush. Fed off the challenge. Loved the camaraderie of other officers. I know because you and I are the same. We need missions. Missions make us whole. And it’s more than our training—it’s who we are.” Mick stared at Woody and waved his finger at the moored sailboats and yachts. “This stuff. This is not the Robert Woodrow Travis I know. No—that guy would jump at this in a second.”

Woody stared at Mick. *He knows me so well.*

“Don’t answer now, Woodrow. Come to New York and we’ll talk.”

Woody shook his head. “I don’t—”

“We’ll talk about it, Woodrow. That’s all. If you don’t want in—nobody will force you.”

Woody thought for a moment. “You’re gonna waste your money, Mick.”

“We’ve got lots. I’ll send you a ticket.”

“Business class.”

“Of course, Woodrow.”

“What time’s your flight back to Brownsville, Mick?”

Mick checked his watch. “I got about three hours.”

“Wanna order something to eat?”

“Sure,” Mick replied. “It’s mystery meatloaf night at the home.”

“I thought you owned a condo, Mick.”

“I do,” Mick said. “Lighten up would ya?”

Woody laughed. He loved Mick, but he had no desire to take a backward step into that old life—full of operations, deception, and death. Woody loved his life and was excited about his future in Pensacola. But the lure of a mission had awakened something in him. Something he thought was long gone—the absolute thrill experienced from devising and executing an operational plan to perfection. *I’m curious about what this mission is all about, he thought, but I ain’t givin’ up my life here for anything or anyone—including Mick.*

“You okay, Woodrow? You’re a million miles away.”

“Yeah, I’m good, Mick. You know—I had the rest of my life all set until you showed up today.”

“Didn’t you tell me God laughs when we make plans?”

Woody smiled and held up his glass. “Here’s to God’s weird friggin’ sense of humor.”

TWO

Opal

October 1995

Woody exited the baggage area at La Guardia and spotted a man in a dark suit holding a sign with “W. Travis” written on it. Woody stopped in front of him. “Who is W. Travis?”

“You him, guv?”

Woody smiled at the English accent. “I asked first.”

“I’m looking for Woodrow Travis.”

“Who told you to pick him up?”

“Mick Taylor.”

“I’m Woody Travis.”

During the ride to Manhattan, Woody found out his driver Walter Furness served with the SAS*, and he had met Mick in Iraq during Desert Storm. (*Special Air Service - British Army Special Forces).

“How’d you two happen to cross paths, Walter?”

“Mick saved our arses in a firefight,” Walter replied. “I owe him my life.”

“The CIA cavalry to the rescue, huh?”

Walter peered at Woody in the rearview mirror. “Know what Mick said when I thanked him? He says: ‘You won’t be thankin’ us when you get our bill’.”

“Sounds like Mick.”

Walter stopped at the front door of the Plaza. “Pleasure meeting you, Mr. Travis.”

Woody reached over the front seat and shook Walter’s hand. “It’s Woody—Walter, and nice meeting you, too.”

After he registered, Woody dropped his suitcase in his room. The message light on the telephone was flashing. *Mick*, he thought. It was.

On the fifteenth floor, the door to Mick’s suite was held open by the deadbolt. Woody knocked. “C’mon in,” Mick said.

Mick stood. “Hi, Woodrow. This is Griff. Lock the door would ya?”

A large well-built man stood up and shook Woody’s hand. “Hey, Woodrow,” Griff said. “Grab a beer, and make yourself comfortable.”

“Hi, Griff,” Woody said. He took a beer from a silver bucket on the room service cart and sat beside Griff on the couch. “Oh, and it’s—Woody, Griff. Mick and my mother call me Woodrow.”

Woody figured Griff was in his early forties. His dark hair was peppered with gray, and he had a five o'clock shadow. Griff was about six feet tall and built like an NFL linebacker. His Patek Philippe watch and high-end Armani suit were clear signals of wealth.

"So, Woody," Griff said, "Mick tells me you were one of the best case officers* in the CIA's Clandestine Service." (*CIA officer who manages agents and operations)

"Mick exaggerates," Woody said. "People do that kind of stuff when they get older."

Mick snickered. "You were, Woodrow. Completing the mission was always your first priority. I could always count on you to run a good show."

Griff cleared his throat. "Okay, Woody. You know why you're here. We need you for this op."

"Tell me about it," Woody said.

"You gotta be on board first," Griff said. "One thing I can tell you is Mick has done all the recruiting. There's a bunch of your old buddies who are with us."

"Griff's right, Woody," Mick said. "Jimmy Connolly will be your number two."

"Holy s**t, Mick," Woody said. "I haven't seen Jimmy in years! How's he doin'?"

"Hasn't changed, Woodrow."

"How's Janet doing?" Woody asked.

"Her cancer's in remission."

Woody smiled. "Good to hear. Jimmy's lucky to have a lady like her."

"Enough of the memory lane s**t," Griff said. "Did Mick tell you how much you'd make for this op?"

Woody shook his head. "No."

"One hundred million—offshore bank of your choice," Griff said. "Deposited as soon as you sign up."

Woody whistled. "Now that you have my complete attention. Is there anything you *can* tell me about the op?"

Griff turned to Mick. "Go ahead, and fill him in a bit."

"Okay," Mick said. "Woodrow, this mission requires absolute secrecy, precise planning, and seamless delivery. There are many co-dependent pieces, so timing is crucial. For security reasons we can't divulge the what, when, or where, but I can tell you there'll be a lot of victims."

"How many?" Woody asked.

"Lots," Mick replied.

Woody whistled. “Collateral or targeted?”

“Collateral only. We’re not targeting anyone.”

“No way to avoid the high number of fatalities?”

“Unfortunately there isn’t. Listen, Woodrow, this is a huge op. Once I’m finished recruiting, we’ll have embedded personnel with all levels of government including civilian contractors, law enforcement, and the military. I have some of our best people occupying key positions and have recruited others we can trust.”

“When is kick-off?” Woody asked.

“You will have over five years to plan it.”

“It must be huge! Land, sea, or air?”

“Land and air elements,” Mick replied.

“One tango* or multiple?” Woody asked. (*target)

“Multiple.” Mick paused. “Well—you in?”

Woody shook his head in disbelief. “That’s it? That’s all you can tell me?”

“Yeah, old buddy,” Mick replied. “It’s the old ‘need-to-know’ protocol.”

“You want me to leap before I look?” Woody asked. “That’s not gonna happen. I gotta know more before—”

Griff interrupted Woody. “That’s all Mick can say. You’re just gonna have to trust us.”

Woody stood up. “Can I talk to you, Mick—alone?”

“Okay, Griff?” Mick asked.

“Yeah, but remember the rules, Mick.”

Woody and Mick went into the adjacent bedroom and closed the French doors. “I trust you, Mick, but I don’t like this Griff guy. Who the f**k is he? More importantly, is he CIA?”

“No, he’s not Agency*,” Mick replied. (*nickname for the CIA)

“What the f**k do you know about him?”

“The one thing I know about him for certain is that he’s our liaison,” Mick replied.

“Who with?”

“Don’t know, Woodrow. Listen—Griff contacted me. Said his bosses wanted me to recruit for this op. I checked him out with a former CIA Director I trust. Told me not to worry about Griff. That was good enough for me.”

“Well, I don’t trust him, Mick.”

“Your gut again, Woodrow?”

“Yeah. I understand the need for secrecy, but can you at least tell me where the op will take place?”

Mick paused. "Okay, but let's move into the washroom and keep our voices down." Mick turned the sink faucet on and left the door ajar to be sure no one entered the bedroom. "Woodrow, what I'm about to tell you stays between us. Both our lives depend on it."

"Understood."

"The op is domestic."

"What? Here in America, Mick?"

"Yeah."

"You said lots of casualties. How many do you estimate?"

"Several thousand, Woodrow."

"S**t, Mick. Killing overseas is one thing, but thousands of Americans? Right here in the US? That's not who we were in the CIA."

"Those days are long gone, Woodrow. The world has changed."

"Well, I haven't. I'm gonna pass on this one."

"Because it's domestic, Woodrow?"

"Yeah," Woody replied. "Plus the risk factor is too high. What you've described is a complex land and air operation with numerous tangos and a zillion partners. Too many moving parts. Easy for something to f**k up."

"I've recruited the best people, and we have plenty of time to plan it. Also, you'll have all the funding you need."

"That all sounds good, Mick, but to be honest, I killed a lot of people in the line of duty. Now, I'm done. Over thirty years of the s**tty end of the stick in the CIA was enough for me."

"A hundred million is not chump change," Mick said.

Woody nodded. "No doubt the money would be great, but I don't need it. I live on my boat, and it's paid for. Got a good pension and a great life with lotsa friends."

"Do you think fishing and drinking beer for the rest of your life is enough for you?"

"Yeah," Woody replied. "Drinking beer, fishing, and not killing anybody sounds good to me."

"You sure?"

"I am, Mick. Sorry."

"So am I," Mick said. "But if you change your mind, let me know."

"You'll be the first."

Mick turned off the faucet and put his arm around Woody's shoulder. "Don't wait too long, Woodrow. I'm getting pressure to put this team together ASAP—with or without you."

Woody and Mick walked out of the bedroom. "Well, is he in?" Griff asked.

“I’ll explain it to you, Griff,” Mick said.

“Explain what?” Griff said. “There’s f**k-all to explain. The son-of-a-b***h doesn’t want a hundred million?”

“I said I’d explain, Griff, and I will,” Mick said. He turned to Woody. “Take care my friend, and let me know if anything changes.”

Woody nodded and went back to his hotel room. For security, Woody always left the television set on with the volume turned up. CNN was reporting on a hurricane heading towards the Florida Panhandle: “... and the National Hurricane Center has just upgraded Hurricane Opal to a category four storm. Sustained winds are currently one hundred and forty-two miles per hour. Landfall near Pensacola is expected in the next twelve hours. We’ll have continuing coverage of this major hurricane after...”

Woody muted the television. The trip to New York had distracted him from keeping a close eye on this hurricane. “S**t,” he said. “That f**kin’ hurricane turned north towards the Panhandle.”

He flipped open his cell phone and called his airline.

* * * * *

During the approach, Woody’s flight circled Pensacola. The damage from Hurricane Opal appeared to be widespread. He feared the worst for his friends—and his boat.

Woody parked his pick-up truck outside the entrance to the marina. What was once the clubhouse roof was strewn across the parking lot like the aftermath of a gas explosion. Some of his fellow boaters were gathered near the fuel pumps on the dock. Woody waved as he approached them. One of his fishing buddies Bob Elliott walked over to him. “Hey, Woody,” he said. “Quite the mess, huh?”

“Anyone hurt, Bob?”

“No, thank goodness,” Bob replied. “We all hunkered down. He pointed to a tangled pile of boats along the shore. “Someone said your *Cathleen* is over there.”

“Thanks, buddy,” Woody said.

The boats were tossed along the shore like discarded kid’s toys. Woody stepped cautiously to avoid the scattered boat parts, fishing rods, and antennas entangled in lines and rigging. A transom wedged under a Grand Banks trawler caught his eye. He crouched low. “*Cathleen*,” he said. “Damn it! She’s a total f**kin’ loss.” Woody covered his mouth with his hand. He stood—transfixed.

My insurance ain't gonna come close to covering this, Woody thought. He flipped open his cell phone and speed-dialed Mick.

Three years later

THREE

Connections

October 1998

The cab turned off Thirty-First Street onto Eighth Avenue. “Here’s good,” Woody said. The driver pulled alongside the curb and stopped. Woody hurried up the steps to Penn Station. Once on the concourse, he slowed down and scanned forward and back. He stopped at a payphone, deposited a quarter, and dialed.

Griff answered on the first ring. Woody shielded the receiver with his hand. “It’s Deadeye*.” (*Woody’s code name)

“You on a payphone?” Griff asked.

“Yeah.” Woody lowered his voice. “Listen, Griff—Jimmy’s dead.”

“I know. We gotta discuss a replacement.”

“Let’s meet at the table near the Alpha dead drop*,” Woody said. (*secret location for information exchanges)

“A meet’s too risky. I don’t want to—”

Woody cut him off. “I wanna meet.”

“And I’ll say it again, a meet’s too risky for both of us.”

“This is not a negotiation, Griff. I’m the f**kin’ ringmaster of this circus—remember? If I want to meet—we meet!”

Griff exhaled. “Okay—what time?”

Woody checked his watch. “I’ll see you there at fourteen thirty.”

“Okay.”

Woody hung up. *How the hell did Griff know before I did?* he thought. *Jimmy’s wife just told me.* On the way down the steps to the subway, Woody arrived at the only logical explanation. *They ordered the hit! Don’t those f**kin’ idiots realize we’re three years in with only three to go for this bang and burn*?* Woody stood on the subway platform. The wind rushing out of the tunnel tussled his hair. The rumble of the train grew louder. *Jimmy must’ve really f**ked up.* (*operation involving demolition and sabotage)

Woody sat at the end of the car with his back against the wall. He checked the car for anything unusual and anyone familiar. Familiar faces were possible surveillance. He rode along thinking about the mission and the importance of replacing Jimmy. *I need someone I can trust. My old Langley neighbor, Sam Saunders would be perfect.*

A subway train whizzing past in the opposite direction caught Woody's attention. *Wonder if Mick was able to drag Sam out of retirement?* Woody grinned. *I'll bet he couldn't find him.*

Sam Saunders was on his way to the White House.

* * * * *

The morning briefing was an important part of the daily routine for the National Security Division of the FBI New York Field Office. Kirk Dolan implemented these squad meetings after he became the special agent-in-charge. The terrorism underworld required constant diligence to keep track of a variety of organizations. And attendance was mandatory. When agents joined the squad, Kirk told them: 'I want you at the briefing every morning—even if you're in slippers and pajamas'.

Before being transferred to New York, Kirk was the FBI's Chief of Counter-Terrorism in Washington. He earned the nickname 'Hound Dog' for his tenacious nature when conducting an investigation. Kirk was instrumental in the conviction of Ramzi Yousef, the perpetrator of the 1993 bombing of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Now, his focus was on preventing another terrorist attack on America.

"Okay, guys," Kirk said and closed his briefing book. "If there's nothing else, show-and-tell is done." As the agents filed out, Kirk's partner, Salah Khouri walked over to him. "Some guy named Rick Garcia's coming in to see you, Boss. Says he's an old friend."

Kirk smiled. "He is an old friend, Sal. We worked together on a JTTF* operation a few years ago." (*Joint Terrorism Task Force)

"And Garcia is with—?"

"The NSA*," Kirk replied. (*National Security Agency)

"Should be an interesting meeting, Kirk."

"Always—when the NSA is involved, Sal."

* * * * *

A White House security guard escorted Sam to the Oval Office reception area. Gwen Worthington, the secretary to the president smiled. "The president will be with you in a moment, Mr. Saunders."

"Thanks, ma'am," Sam replied. *Every POTUS has one of these efficient gatekeepers, he thought. All the same type; like there's a factory somewhere that manufactures 'em.*

Sam sat down on a sofa and checked out the place—an old habit from his CIA and Mossad* training. (*Israeli Intelligence Agency)

Some of the pictures have changed, he thought. The furniture and carpet are new, but everything else is pretty much the same.

Gwen Worthington couldn't help glancing at Sam. She thought he was a dead ringer for Clint Eastwood back in those old spaghetti westerns.

* * * * *

Inside the Oval Office, James Moore, the president's chief of staff was doing what every good chief of staff should do—tell the truth without reservation. He had been President Claire Walker's campaign manager in both her presidential election victories. Moore was also a West Point graduate.

"Yes, Madam President," he continued. "I don't trust Sam Saunders."

"Why?"

"Don't let his easy-going manner and West Texas drawl fool you, ma'am. He's a cold-blooded, old-time, CIA assassin. You know the type. Completing the mission is paramount with no consideration of the CDE*." (*collateral damage estimation)

"Go on," the president said.

Moore paused before he continued. He was weighing the consequences of enraging Sam Saunders versus sharing the truth about him with the president. *She needs to know before she hires him, he thought.* "The first time I met Sam Saunders was in Vietnam during the war. He and his CIA buddies wanted to frag a village, and my platoon got in his way. Sam was not happy, but they left."

"The CIA director advised Saunders is more than qualified to do this job," the president said.

"Yes, ma'am, but there's more to it than just Saunders' qualifications. My sources in the CIA advise he is dangerous. He's a trained killer with no heart. He knows all the hiding places, and who's hiding there. Saunders was deep cover in the Middle East for five years. He has many friends and enemies there—and here. I worry about how he could harm your second term and ruin your legacy. The American people currently perceive you as honest and trustworthy. Sam Saunders has the potential to damage that perception."

The intercom clicked on. "Madam President, Mr. Saunders is here to see you," Gwen said.

"Thanks, Jim. I always appreciate your candor."

"My pleasure and my job, Madam President. Do you want me in?"

“No,” the president replied. “Best I handle this one alone. I’ll call if I need you.”

“Thank you, Madam President.” Moore exited through a side door.

The president switched on the intercom. “Thanks, Gwen. I’ll see Mr. Saunders now.”

Unlike most people, the Oval Office did not intimidate Sam Saunders. He had met many presidents behind these doors and would not be thrown off his game by an impressive desk and a Presidential Seal woven into plush carpeting. He scanned the office. There was a Native American carved wooden mask, a small bronze sculpture of a dog emblazoned with a plaque that read “Patsy Ann”, and several pictures including a “Rosie the Riveter” poster.

President Claire Walker was standing behind her desk with her back to him. Sam recalled her hard-fought re-election campaign and her powerful acceptance speech. She was a crafty politician, super-intelligent, and had escaped unscathed after accusations of a sexual encounter with a staffer. She was wearing a dark blue pantsuit with a crisp white-collared shirt. She was taller and thinner than Sam expected. *Let’s see if she’s as pretty as she looks on TV*, he thought.

“Good morning, Madam President,” Sam said.

“Please sit, Mr. Saunders.”

“I’d prefer to stand if it’s all right with y’all, ma’am.”

The President turned and their eyes met. “My chief of staff told me I shouldn’t hire you.”

Just as pretty, Sam thought. “Then don’t, ma’am.”

The president ignored the remark. “He says he doesn’t trust you.”

“With all due respect, Madam President, your opinion counts—not his.”

“Why doesn’t he trust you?”

She already knows but wants my version. “We had us a little disagreement on a tactical solution during an operation.”

“CIA or military?” the president asked.

“Both,” Sam replied. “We were in Nam. I was CIA and he was USA. Our units arrived at the same LZ* within minutes of each other, and we were both headed for the same area. His mission was recon and mine was to eliminate a village full of VC spies.” (*landing zone)

“What happened?”

“The CIA does its best to co-operate with the military,” Sam replied. “We left then went back later and completed the mission.”

I bet Jim doesn’t know that the president thought. “My advisers tell me you would be a valuable asset here. My only concern is trust. Can I trust you, Mr. Saunders?”

“Trust is like a cowhand breakin’ in a new cutting horse, ma’am. They learn to trust each other over time.”

“And how will I learn to trust you?”

“Like your Mr. Moore, ma’am, I’ll always tell y’all the truth—with one exception.”

“And what is that?”

Sam peered into her piercing blue eyes to study her reaction. “For their protection, there are some things a president shouldn’t know.”

The president maintained eye contact. “Understood. And speaking of my chief of staff, are you two able to work together?”

“I’ve worked with lots of folks I didn’t like, ma’am. Makes no never mind to me.”

“Welcome aboard, Mr. Saunders.”

“Thank you, Madame President, and please call me, Sam.”

“Okay, Sam. We’ll see how this goes. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have another meeting.”

“Thank you, Madam President.” Sam strode towards the door, stopped, and turned. “It’s gonna go well, ma’am. I guarantee.”

After Sam left, President Walker stood and gazed out the windows at a gardener trimming a nearby hedge. *That’s all you need, Claire, she thought, an ex-CIA assassin in the West Wing.*

FOUR

Dead Drop

Woody zipped up his jacket as he strolled through Central Park. Fallen leaves blowing across the path crunched under his shoes. Most of the trees were still adorned in the brilliant reds, yellows, and oranges of autumn. Fall always reminded Woody of his childhood in New Jersey. He and his buddies played in huge piles of leaves before helping their fathers rake the leaves into bigger piles and set them on fire. The late afternoon sun turned the smoke into golden shafts, and the unforgettable aroma of burning leaves wafted throughout the neighborhood. *Wonder what my old buddies would think of me now?* Woody thought. *Let alone, my mom and dad. Thank God, they're both gone.*

Woody arrived at the dead drop shortly after 2:00 p.m. This gave him enough time to assess and scan the area. This was one of many skills he had learned at 'The Farm'* and honed with years of field experience. *No threats or unusual activity*, he thought. *That eastbound walking path provides escape.* (*nickname for Camp Peary - the CIA covert training facility)

The dead drop location was a wooden picnic table in a secluded area of Central Park. The table was concealed behind a red cedar hedge beneath majestic oak trees. Woody cleared some fallen leaves from the top of the table. He removed the chessboard from its wooden container. Chess would be a cover if someone happened by. He set up the pieces in their starting positions. *Griff gets too big for his britches sometimes, and I gotta reel him in. Not gonna let some f**king amateur tell me what to do.*

Woody checked his watch. *Two-twenty*, he thought. *Perfect.*

* * * * *

New York City Mayor Matt Curran lumbered around his large oak desk and clenched Lauren Hunter's outstretched hand. "Hi, Lauren," he said. "Good to see you again."

Lauren was well acquainted with Mayor Curran. As usual, he was wearing a three-piece suit and a custom-made shirt with his initials emblazoned on a French cuff. He always had a twinkle in his eye, loved to kibitz, and possessed a booming laugh. From the first time they met, Lauren pegged him as a blowhard and know-it-all. But he was well connected and a useful asset. On the walls of

the office were photographs of the mayor with famous people he met during his many years in public life—from baseball players and celebrities to the pope. There was also a photograph of the mayor standing in the Oval Office beside President Claire Walker.

Mayor Curran sat down on the edge of his desk and smiled at Lauren. “Mind if my chief of staff sits in on this one?”

Lauren winked at Tony. “If he must, Mr. Mayor.”

“Good seeing you again, Miss Hunter,” Tony said. “Please have a seat. May I take your cloak and dagger?”

“Why, Mr. Manetti,” Lauren replied in her best Southern belle voice, “y’all know I quit all that spy stuff. I’m just a humble public servant doing my best for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.”

When Tony pulled out a chair for her, the butt of a revolver protruded from the shoulder holster under his left arm. *Glad he took my advice and started carrying his three fifty-seven*, Lauren thought.

“So, Lauren,” the mayor said. “How are things at the North Tower? Keeping an eye on that old son-of-a-bee Gil Johnson?”

Lauren grinned. “Best I can, sir.” The mayor paused for a moment like he was choosing the right words. *Here it comes*, Lauren thought. *The reason I’m here.*

“You’ve done a great job over there, Lauren,” the mayor said. “And now, it’s high time you were promoted. You know—an upward move to something important. Something you can sink your teeth into and make a difference.”

“Sounds interesting, sir.”

“It is, Lauren,” the mayor said. “You’ll stay on the roster with the Port Authority, and they’ll continue to pay you. Focus Market Research has requested you. They’re a local company we’ve contracted. I think you’d be great there.”

“I appreciate that Mr. Mayor, but I—”

The mayor ignored her. “The company will do my marketing and polling, Lauren, but their main job is to get me re-elected. We’ve got three years to go before primary day on September the eleventh, two thousand and one. So, what do you think?”

“To be honest, Mayor Curran,” Lauren said, “My training is more appropriate for security or law enforcement. I’m not familiar with marketing and polling, especially when it comes to politics.”

“I trust the people who requested you, Lauren. They say you’re the perfect person for the job.”

“I appreciate that Mr. Mayor, but what about my job with Gil at the Port Authority? I enjoy working with him.”

In reality, Lauren couldn't stand Gil Johnson. She had grown weary of his room-temperature IQ, off-color jokes, and clumsy sexual advances. She used him for the valuable intelligence she gathered for Willie* including floor plans and architectural blueprints of the World Trade Center Complex. She didn't know why he required the information and didn't ask. Lauren understood a "need-to-know" protocol. (*operation's manager of World Trade Center)

"All taken care of," the mayor continued. "Gil said he's sorry to lose you, but he's glad you're being promoted to something special. They tell me this will be a great opportunity for you, Lauren."

"How can I say no to the Mayor of New York City?"

"Good! Tony will fill you in on the details. I have to head out to a funeral for an old bag man—I mean a friend of mine." The mayor slapped his knee and let out a huge guffaw. He stopped and checked to see if Lauren was laughing. She smiled demurely. "Okay," he said. "Thanks a lot, Lauren. You're doing us a huge favor."

"My pleasure, Mr. Mayor."

Lauren and Tony left the mayor's office. "Let's head down to my office," Tony said.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Manetti."

Tony opened his office door for Lauren. Once inside, he spun her around. Their lips met—followed by their tongues. Lauren melted into his arms and her body pressed up against his. He planted his hand on the small of her back and pulled her closer. She was aroused and could feel his.

Lauren pulled back and pointed at the bulge in the front of his slacks. "Why, Mr. Manetti. Are those allowed in the mayor's office?"

"I wouldn't know," Tony replied. "But this is my office, not his." He took her by the hand and seated her in a chair facing his desk. Tony stood beside the desk. Lauren was staring at his crotch, so he moved behind his desk. She giggled. "Listen, Lauren. This is serious. The mayor is counting on you."

Lauren exhaled. "Okay, guess playtime is over."

"You'll be second-in-command with lots of responsibility. I believe you know the boss there. His named is Woody Travis. He requested you."

I get to work with Woody? Love it! "I worked with Woody at the Agency, Tony. He's a good guy."

"Mayor says he's one of the best political pollsters around. You okay meeting him tomorrow morning at ten? He'll let you know what the position entails, your responsibilities, et cetera."

"I'll be there."

“Good.” Tony handed her a business card. “Their office is on the twenty-eighth floor of World Trade Center Two.”

Lauren checked the card. “No office number?”

“No, kinda strange, huh?” Tony said. “Let me know if you need a hand to find it.”

Lauren smiled. “I’ll be fine. But now I have a serious question for you, Mr. Manetti.”

“What?”

“We still on for dinner tonight?”

Tony took Lauren by the hand and guided her out of the chair. He pulled her close and kissed her. “Of course, babe. Now beat it. I’ve got to get back to work.”

Lauren walked away down the hallway from Tony’s office. *Woody requested me, she thought, but why did he use the Mayor of New York to tell me? She stopped in front of the elevator and pushed the down button. According to Willie, Sam Saunders is working at The White House. Hmm. Woody, Sam, and now, me? I smell a black op and a big one. Why else would someone recruit all three of us?*

Lauren Hunter—the perfect choice for Woody.

* * * * *

Griff arrived at the dead drop at exactly two-thirty p.m. “Ready to fake some chess there, Woody?”

“Hey, Griff. Yeah, and I’ll fake losing to you.”

They shook hands and Woody winced. *Handshake like a farmhand*, he thought.

Woody opened with a white pawn. Griff yawned. “Am I boring you, Griff?”

“Nah. They got me runnin’ six ways from f**kin’ Sunday.”

“You know you swear like a drunken sailor on liberty.”

“How do you know I’m not?”

Woody shook his head. “Okay, tell me about Jimmy.”

Griff moved a pawn opposite Woody’s. “Jimmy had booze problems.”

HERE “He quit that s**t years ago,” Woody said. “You’re telling me he fell off the wagon?”

“He did—a few months ago. We found out he quit goin’ to A.A. meetings. I told you we keep track of you f**king spooks to protect our interests.”

Woody moved a knight. “How many times do I have to tell you? Don’t call us spooks. And for the record, I didn’t know Jimmy was drinkin’ again. I never

smelled it on his breath, and he didn't do anything to make me think he was."

Griff moved another pawn. "He was drinking vodka and eating Clorets. Once we found out he was drinkin' again, our guys tailed him everywhere he went. The final straw came in a bar last week. Jimmy was three sheets to the f**kin' wind. He starts bragging to a hooker about how he's in charge of a huge secret operation."

Woody studied the board and moved his knight once more. "The hooker was an asset."

Griff took Woody's knight with his Queen. "Right. We had to test him. I cleared it with Mick."

Woody rolled his eyes. "S**t. You got my knight." Woody moved a bishop. "Imagine that—Jimmy caught in a honey trap*." (*using an asset or a CIA officer in a sexual situation)

Griff laughed. "Dead men tell no f**kin' tales, huh?" He moved his queen. "Check."

Woody stared at the chessboard. "Death is the surest way to stop leaks."

"Even if it's an old friend of yours, Woody? You callous bastard."

Woody glared at him. "Had to be if you're a boss in the Clandestine Service. I lost lots of good people under my command—came with the job. Death of a colleague is not only tough but also a huge inconvenience. Trying to find the right person, and bring them up to speed on an op is a pain in the a**."

"Same in my business."

"Which is what? You've never told me, Griff."

"Right. Because my business is none of your f**kin' business."

Such a prick, Woody thought. He moved his king. "When you think about it, Jimmy did us a huge favor."

Griff moved a bishop. "Check. What makes you say that?"

"We'll be more leakproof. I'll make sure everyone in the op hears about it."

"Good idea," Griff said. "And tell 'em they transferred Jimmy's money out of his off-shore account. Nothing at all for his widow."

"And you call me a callous b*****d?"

Griff grinned. "Now, let's forget about this f**kin' chess game and talk about your number two." Griff picked up his queen from the board and twirled it in his hand.

Woody leaned back. "I want Sam Saunders."

Griff tapped the table with his queen. "Can't have him. He was just hired at the castle*." (*the White House)

"Really, Griff? S**t. I need him here, not babysitting politicians."

“Our bosses say Sam will be a hell of a lot more valuable to this operation there rather than here as your number two. Mick has someone else for you.”

“Don’t tell me he’s gonna stick me with the Rev,” Woody said. “I’ve worked with him before, and I don’t trust him to do the job.”

“Would you shut the f**k up and listen!” Griff said. “Mick doesn’t trust Ross Bishop either. There’s—”

Woody slammed his hand on the table. “Don’t tell me to shut up, Griff!”

Griff tossed his queen on the table and leaned forward. “Oh, yeah. I forgot you’re the f**king ringmaster. Right?”

“F**k you, Griff.”

“Be careful, Woody. You forget who I work for.”

“Yeah, well—you work for me, and you need me to execute the plan.”

*The a**hole’s right. We do need him,* Griff thought. “Alright. Alright. Enough already. Like I was sayin’, Mick’s got someone better and more suited for the role. Someone you’ve worked with before—Lauren Hunter. Mick said she’s great.”

Woody smiled to himself. *He backed off,* he thought. “Lauren is great. She’s tough, aggressive, and knows her stuff. But I wish Mick had talked to me about this. She leaves a big hole at the Port Authority. Their office is in tango one*, and I need someone there I can trust.” (*North Tower - World Trade Center)

“We’re not f**kin’ idiots, Woody. We’ve got that covered already. Willie’s recommended someone, and Mick vetted him.”

“Well, that’s good. Knowing the way our bosses react, blowback* would prove to be fatal for us.” (*repercussions from a failed covert operation)

“What do you mean *us*?” Griff asked. “Like you said, you’re the f**kin’ ringmaster, so your head will roll—not mine.”

“You have no culpability in this, Griff?”

“Correct. We done?”

“Yeah—we’re done.”

Griff stood up. “Lauren is meeting you at ten o’clock tomorrow morning in your office.”

“That’ll be fine.”

“Mick says she’ll take a lot of pressure off you, Woody. And as you know, your number two will run E-Day*.” (*day the operation begins)

“Lauren can handle it,” Woody said. “I just hope she wants in.”

“Trust me. She’ll want in after you tell her how much f**kin’ money she’ll make.”

“Lauren Hunter is not motivated by money. She’s got plenty.”

“What motivates her?”

“Sex, shoes, and fast cars,” Woody replied.

Griff raised his eyebrows. “What?”

Woody grinned. “As much as Lauren likes those things, her true motivation is to prove she’s as good or better than any man.”

Griff shrugged his shoulders. “At what?”

“Everything.”

“Well, she’ll have plenty of chances to prove that with this op. Okay. I gotta go, Woody. Catcha later.”

“For sure,” Woody said. He kept his eyes on Griff until he disappeared around the hedge. He stood and replaced the chess pieces in the box. *Griff is such an arrogant b*****d*, he thought. *My gut keeps telling me he’s not what he appears to be.*

From his first briefing with Mick, Woody understood the importance of this operation. Powerful people had become vulnerable due to their greed. Many lives would need to be sacrificed to protect them. Mick and Griff had been crystal clear about secrecy and the fatal consequences of betrayal. Before Woody recruited anyone, he warned them their life was on the line. This mission must remain covert—forever.

Woody had been in charge of numerous complex and important operations in the CIA, but this one was different. This operation weighed on his conscience. *I wish Mick hadn’t got me involved in this*, he thought. *Not his fault though. If it wasn’t for that f***in’ hurricane, I’d be out fishin’ right now without a care in the world. Course, after this mission, I’ll be able to afford a big brand-new boat.* Woody chuckled. He emerged from the park onto the sidewalk. *A new boat?* he thought. *Planning all this death and destruction and all I can think about is a new boat? Am I really that callous?*

Across the street near the entrance to the subway, a well-dressed man in sunglasses leaned against a brick wall reading a newspaper. *He’s trying way too hard to appear casual and uninterested.* Woody waited until the traffic light changed, and vehicles began to move on Central Park West. He walked to the corner, turned left onto 86th Street, and hailed a cab.

“Where to, my friend?” the driver asked.

“World Trade Center,” Woody replied peering out the rear window. “South Tower.”

FIVE

Introductions

The bartender at Elaine's Bar and Restaurant pointed at the empty glasses on the bar. "Two more, fellas?"

"Sure, Harry," Kirk replied. He picked up his cigar from the ashtray. "Santoro should be here any minute, Rick."

"You say he's with I-49*?" Rick asked. *(FBI and Justice Dept. - bin Laden Task Force)

"Yeah," Kirk replied. "Justice Department type. Transferred in a few months ago from DC. He's a good guy and bin Laden obsessed." The front door swung open. "Here he is."

Jamie Santoro plunked himself onto a barstool and introduced himself to Rick Garcia. "Let's move to my table," Kirk said. "Could you send our drinks back there, Harry?"

Kirk led the way to the back part of the restaurant. "Okay, Rick," he said, "enough of the pleasantries, what the f**k is so important to drag you out of D.C.?"

Jamie tapped Rick on the shoulder. "Notice how Kirk always beats around the bush?"

"Yeah," Rick replied, "he should learn to get to the point. Right, Kirk?" Kirk didn't respond. He tilted his head and moved his eyes in the direction of the approaching bar waitress bringing their drinks.

After the waitress left, Kirk turned to Garcia. "Okay, Rick, why are we here?"

"A friend at the CIA contacted me and advised some of their former employees have hooked up with terrorists," Rick replied.

"To do what?" Kirk asked.

"The suspicion is a terrorist operation here in New York."

"You gotta be f**kin' kidding," Kirk said. "You believe this?"

"Yup," Rick replied. "My source is reliable."

"I take it your source in the Company* told you who they are," Kirk said. (*slang term for the CIA)

"Yup," Rick said. He took a file folder from his briefcase and placed three photos on the table. "These are the most recent photos we have." He tapped them one at a time. "This one is Sam Saunders, then Woody Travis, and last but not

least—this is Lauren Hunter. They're the ringleaders of the operation. Travis is running the show."

Kirk studied the photos like he was memorizing the faces. "Woody Travis—geeky lookin' prick, and he's in charge? And this—is Hunter? She's f**kin' gorgeous—you know, for a CIA type. You familiar with any of them, Jamie?"

"No, not at all."

Rick pointed to the photo of Lauren Hunter. "She's from Savannah, Georgia. Her father was a Marine Corps aviator killed in Nam. Rich family on her mother's side. Hunter graduated summa cum laude from Spelman College. Retired early from the CIA. She's working at the Port Authority for that a**hole, Gil Johnson."

Kirk taps Sam Saunders' picture. "He looks familiar."

"Probably because he kinda looks like Clint Eastwood, doesn't he?" Rick asked,

"Yeah—he does," Kirk replied. "Did you ever cross paths with any of them, Rick?"

"No. They're before my time. My source says they're legends at the CIA."

"Did your source happen to mention who these f**king legends are working for?" Kirk asked.

"No, and we've been unable to find out," Rick replied. "That's why my boss at the NSA wants the FBI involved."

"You have any idea what they're targeting in New York?" Jamie asked.

"Unknown," Rick replied. "I was hoping you would have some thoughts on that, Kirk."

"Terrorism is psychological warfare. They already hit the Trade Center in '93 and failed. If I was a terrorist and wanted to really hurt America, I'd destroy something in New York that would demoralize us like the Empire State Building or the Statue of Liberty."

"True," Rick said. "I wish we had a least some idea what they're planning."

"We'll find out one way or another," Kirk said. "What can you tell us about this Saunders, Rick?"

"My contact at the Agency says Sam Saunders is a cold-blooded assassin who worked in the Clandestine Service. He grew up in Texas and did black ops in Vietnam during the war, then later in South America. Then he went deep cover in the Middle East for several years. He is fluent in Arabic and Hebrew, and he has many friends in the Mossad. And, get this, the White House has hired Saunders as a special assistant to the president."

Kirk smiled. "Now, that's really f**kin' interesting."

“For sure,” Rick replied. “Saunders is tight with Travis who is also a fully-trained killer. They partnered on numerous ops and worked at CIA HQ together. They were neighbors in Langley. Lauren Hunter worked with both Saunders and Travis in South America, Iran, and Lebanon. And don’t let her good looks fool ya. She’s tough, smart, and a killer as well.”

“All killers? Really?” Jamie asked. “Should we be scared, Garcia?”

“No—just cautious,” Rick replied. “The three of them were nicknamed ‘The Awesome Threesome’ for good reason. They were one f**k of an effective team, and someone has lured them out of retirement.”

“And you have no idea who?” Jamie asked.

“No,” Rick replied. “My CIA contact is certain they’re working for someone with deep pockets.”

“You know what they are—don’t you boys?” Jamie asked.

“What?” Kirk asked.

“They’re modern-day Evocatus,” Jamie replied.

Kirk’s brow furrowed. “What the f**k is that?”

“In the Roman Empire,” Jamie replied, “the best and bravest Roman legionnaires would be called back out of retirement for a special mission or war. They were called Evocatus and formed elite units known as the Evocati. They murdered, tortured, and crucified anyone who got in their way.”

Kirk smiled. “Actually, the CIA has changed their policy. They no longer allow crucifixions.”

“How do you know this s**t, Jamie?” Rick asked.

“I’ve always been a history buff,” Jamie replied. “I aced it in college.”

Kirk turned to Garcia. “That’s why I-49 calls him: ‘The Professor’.”

“Well, Professor Jamie,” Rick said, “this particular Evocati unit is planning something big, and I guarantee it isn’t a church social.”

“If the intel’s right, I agree,” Kirk said.

“NSA will give you a hand,” Rick said. “Do you have to clear this with Hoover*, Kirk?” (*slang term for FBI Headquarters in Washington, D.C.)

“No, I have the budget in place and a standing green light for ops with you guys. I’ll let them know what we’re up to.”

Garcia tapped Jamie on the shoulder. “Even if they said no to Kirk, he’d ignore them.”

Kirk smiled. “You’re right. So I-49 will continue to provide us with whatever relevant intel you guys gather, Jamie?”

“Of course. Think these old CIA types are involved with al Qaeda?”

“No,” Rick replied. “What makes you ask?”

“Our focus at I-49,” Jamie replied. “That’s all.”

"I'd be surprised if they were," Rick said.

"Why?" Kirk asked.

"They're spooks and killers," Rick replied, "but all the CIA officers I know are patriots."

"Big f**kin' deal," Kirk said. "We are, too. But patriots or not, if these sons-of-b****s are planning something, and I wanna nail 'em!"

"Hopefully before it happens," Jamie said.

"Your NSA listening posts must be getting a s**t-load of intel on al Qaeda, Rick," Kirk said.

"You bet. Our traffic intercepts keep confirming they're gaining strength and influence. I wish everyone tracking al Qaeda would share their intel. We're all in this together trying to prevent an attack on the homeland."

"F**kin' al Qaeda keeps popping up in our intel too," Kirk replied. "Seems like they're everywhere these days. Just ask Gord McCullough. He runs our bin Laden desk."

"McCullough's awesome, Kirk," Jamie said. "And unlike the others, he shares the intel with our squad."

"Someone should tell f**kin' Alec Station*," Kirk said. (*CIA bin Laden Issue Unit)

"Wouldn't do any good," Jamie said. "Alec is a closed shop. Officer-in-charge is a prick."

"I know Drake, and you're right. He is a prick," Rick said. "But remember, we don't know who hired Travis and his gang. We need to be extra careful during this investigation."

"We're always careful in New York, Rick," Kirk said. He winked at Jamie. "Hell, we don't even trust you."

Rick laughed and waved at the waitress. "Could we get three more here, please?"

* * * * *

During his first weeks in his new role, Sam Saunders established a network within the inner circles of the Executive Branch in Washington. He also cemented relationships with anyone essential to the operation. One exception was President Walker's Chief of Staff James Moore. Woody advised Sam their bosses didn't trust Moore and didn't want him to know anything about the op. Sam complied and planned to utilize Moore and his network for information until the administration changed after the 2000 election. Sam requested a meeting with Moore in the West Wing.

“Good to meet with y’all, James.”

“No choice, there Sam. The president wanted me to meet with you anyway. Let’s get it done. I have another meeting in progress.”

“Why did the president want us to meet?” Sam asked.

“The president asked me to fill you in on the scope of your duties. I have already briefed the West Wing staff.” Moore handed Sam a file folder. “This is your job description and what the president expects from you as far as briefings, etc.”

Sam glanced inside at the document. “I’ll take a look at this later, James.”

“Fair enough. You have also been granted a top-level security clearance, and you have the authority from the president to sit in on any meeting in the West Wing.”

“Understood. We good, y’all?”

“Yeah, for now, Sam. But you know I’ll be watching you. The president is my first concern.”

They shook hands, and Sam headed back to his office. *He’s still a f**king by-the-book boy scout*, Sam thought. He strode past the vice president’s office. *Sure glad they’re keeping Moore away from the op.*

Sam entered his office. A small white box was on the corner of his desk. He picked it up and read the business card taped to the outside: “SAM SAUNDERS Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs”. *Looks good to me*, he thought.

* * * * *

Lauren Hunter walked out of the elevator on the 31st floor of the World Trade Center’s South Tower. She passed two women in the hallway who gave her the once over. Lauren paid no attention to them. Beautiful women like Lauren grow accustomed to people checking them out. Women glance. Men stare.

She entered the fire exit and went down the stairs to the 28th floor. After searching the entire floor, she was stymied. *Dammit, Woody*, she thought, *where the hell are you?* She stopped. *Wait a sec.* She remembered a sign on a door. Backtracking down the hallway, she found the door. The sign read: “IOC Financial Services”. *Gotcha, Woody.*

Lauren entered a small reception area. A young woman wearing horn-rimmed glasses was on the phone at the reception desk. She glanced at Lauren and raised her index finger. Along the wall to Lauren’s right was a leather sofa under a painting of the New York skyline at night. A large square coffee table had newspapers and news magazines strewn on top. The main office beyond was

a maze of cubicles, and Lauren could hear the quiet din of a hundred different voices. *Survey calls*, she thought.

The woman hung up the phone and turned to Lauren. “Miss Hunter I presume?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Travis will be right out, ma’am.”

Lauren peered up at a security camera mounted near the ceiling. *I’ll bet Woody has eyes and ears everywhere*, she thought. *Smart. I’m sure the whole place is motion alarmed as well.*)

Woody entered the reception area through a side door. Lauren hadn’t seen him since his retirement. *That’s good ol’ Woody*, she thought. *Still skinny as a zipper.*

“Hi, Lauren,” Woody said and gave her a gentle hug. “Any trouble finding our office?”

Lauren smiled. “No. When I couldn’t find Focus Market Research’s office, I backtracked and saw IOC Financial Services. Coordinator of Information was the original name of the CIA, and I know all about your little reversal tricks. Why the deception?”

“The mayor asked me to conceal our office’s whereabouts,” Woody said. “He said starting his re-election campaign so early makes him appear worried about the outcome.”

“I suppose that makes sense to him.”

Woody nodded. “C’mon. Let’s head to my office.” Woody held the door open for her, and they made their way down the hallway. “Willie kept me up to speed on your good work, Lauren.”

“Thanks, Woody. I had no idea you were involved in this.”

“Had to be that way. You know, Lauren, you haven’t aged a day since the last time I saw ya. You’re still as pretty as a picture.”

“You Yankees are such smooth talkers,” Lauren said using her Southern belle accent. “But honestly, you haven’t changed much either, Woody.”

“Lost a bit of hair, and what’s left is more snowy than sandy.”

“Still look pretty good to me, Woody.”

“For an old fart, right?”

“No—for you,” Lauren replied.

Woody shook his head. “I see your sense of humor hasn’t changed.”

“Too late for that,” Lauren said. “Listen, I was sorry to hear about Cathleen. That was so sad.”

“Thanks. Cath was a good lady. Put up with my bulls**t for thirty-five years.”

They stopped at a heavy wooden door. Woody swiped a key card in a slot and the door swung open. “Go ahead, Lauren. I left the inner door unlocked.”

Lauren opened the second wooden door. “This is it,” Woody said. “Check it out.”

Lauren glanced around and walked over to check out the view of lower Manhattan. She approached the tall narrow windows but backed away.

“Still don’t like heights, huh Lauren?”

“Can’t seem to shake it no matter what I do.”

“And your father was a Marine Corps aviator?” Woody said. “Guess you didn’t get that from him.”

Lauren glared at him. “No, but he gave me all kinds of other psycho bulls**t.”

Oh, man. I shouldn’t have said that, Woody thought.

Lauren’s father and her three brothers was a touchy subject for her. Her brothers were all in the military and cut from the same cloth as their father. She had only a few vague memories of her mother. Lauren was four when she passed away. Her brothers and her father raised her to be tough, to show no fear or feelings, and most importantly to control her emotions. Lauren had learned her lessons well. She was attending Spelman College in Atlanta when her father’s F-4 Phantom was hit by a Grail missile over North Vietnam. His aircraft exploded on contact. Lauren allowed herself to cry at his funeral.

“Sorry, I mentioned that, Lauren.”

“That’s okay, Woody. One day I’ll put on my big girl panties and move on.”

“So, have a seat. Want a coffee, water—Southern Comfort?”

Lauren laughed and sat down at one end of the couch. “No, I’m good. Nice office, Woody—spartan but functional. Kinda like you.”

“You know me, Lauren. I hate clutter. I get rid of anything that doesn’t serve a purpose.”

“Like that fake carpet salesman in Tehran?”

“Like we wouldn’t figure out he was a double agent working for the ISI*,” Woody replied. “Islamabad station ID’ed him in five minutes.” (*Inter-Services Intelligence - intelligence agency of Pakistan)

“We could have turned him, Woody.”

“He was too dumb to live—let alone spy for anyone.”

“Okay, Woody, what the hell do you know about political polling and market research? You’ve got the mayor convinced you’re an expert.”

“The mayor’s an idiot”, Woody said.

“I know, but why did you use him? You coulda just called me.”

“I didn’t have a choice, Lauren. The mayor has an important role to play and the people I work for wanted to make sure he was committed.”

“Committed to whatever you and Sam are planning.”

Woody smiled. “You know Sam’s involved?”

“Willie told me. So does the mayor know I worked for you all along, and the Port Authority job was a cover?”

“Of course,” Woody replied. “He and the NYPD Commissioner Slade Harris arranged it.”

“Helps to have friends in high places, huh? So, are you gonna tell me what you and Sam are up to? I figure it’s another black op.”

“You’re exactly right. And we want you to join us.”

“Be nice to know what I’m getting myself involved in, Woody.”

Woody didn’t respond. He took a deep breath and locked eyes with her.

“Lauren, first things first. No one is told any operational details of this op until they commit. Myself included.”

“You signed on without knowing?”

“Yup. Mick Taylor brought me in.”

“*The* Mick Taylor?” Lauren said. “Damn! How is good ol’ Honcho*?”

(*Mick’s code name)

“As feisty as ever.”

“If Mick’s involved, this has got to be one big mother of an operation, Woody.”

“It is.”

“Now it makes sense,” Lauren said. “You came in because you trust Mick.”

“Sort of,” Woody said. “At first, I told him no. Then Hurricane Opal destroyed my boat.”

“God works in mysterious ways, huh, Woody?”

“Are you mocking me, Lauren?”

“Absolutely. Now, what *can* you tell me, Woody?”

“This operation is complex, and the aftermath will have worldwide implications.”

“I take it the public will know about it,” Lauren said.

“It will be a part of history.”

“Now that you have piqued my curiosity, Woody. What the hell is it all about?”

“I know you’re anxious to find out,” Woody said, “but before I say anything, I must warn you.”

“About what?”

“How dangerous this operation is.”

“I’ve been in harm’s way before, Woody. You know that.”

“Not like this, Lauren. The people I work for are ruthless and possess enormous power and influence. They demand absolute loyalty and secrecy. If you leak any information to any unauthorized person before, during, or after this operation, they will not hesitate to eliminate you and anyone else close to you. And there will be no place on earth you can hide.”

“Did Mick find Sam or them?”

“They did,” Woody said. “These people have their fingers in every pie in government and big business. And yes, before you joined Willie’s part of the op at the World Trade Center, they did extensive physical and electronic surveillance on you. And they continue to do so. They have accessed your bank accounts, driver’s license, passport, credit cards, and IRS files. They also know all the skeletons in your closet from your CIA days. They know where you went to school, the names of your roommates, your sorority sisters, and all your friends. They know where you live, and where all your family and friends live. They know where you go, who you’re with, and can monitor who you call.”

“So they know about Tony?” Lauren asked.

“Of course.”

“Crap. You know me. I like to keep my personal life out of the workplace.”

“Too late for that,” Woody said, “but I have to tell you something about him before you sign up. Mick said Tony is not to know anything about this operation.”

Lauren raised her eyebrows. “Why?”

“I don’t know, and I didn’t ask.”

“Fair enough,” Lauren said. “But you should know, I don’t want anyone else in the op to know about Tony. It’s my business, and I want to keep it that way. If I join this mission, I may have to end it with him.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary, Lauren—as long as you maintain secrecy.”

“You know romantic relationships complicate missions, Woody.”

Woody smiled. “I do recall you and Sam getting your knuckles rapped by Langley*.” (*CIA Headquarters)

“We did bump into each other a few times in Uruguay.”

Woody winked at her. “Punta del Este is a pretty romantic spot, huh?”

Lauren smiled. “We thought it was far enough away from Montevideo, but apparently it wasn’t.”

“You and Sam okay now, Lauren?”

“Yeah. We talked it out and are still good friends—just closer than most.”

“You and I have never talked about it, so I had to be sure,” Woody said.

“I understand.”

“Good,” Woody said, “So, now you know if I tell you anything about this op, there’s no turning back. You can leave right now, and there will be no repercussions.”

Lauren smiled. “You sound so serious.”

Woody tapped his desk with his index finger. “This is f**king serious, Lauren. They demand complete secrecy. Jimmy slipped, and they terminated him.”

“Sounds like these bosses of yours want everyone to fear them.”

“They believe fear creates loyalty.”

“You keep saying *they*, Woody. Who the hell are *they*?”

“You’ve heard people in our biz talk about The Ring.”

“Yeah. Apparently, they’re a bunch of rich power brokers who work in the shadows. There’s never been any proof they exist, Woody.”

Woody stood up. “I want you to read something.” Woody walked to his desk and returned with a white envelope. “You know I was named after our twenty-eighth president, Woodrow Wilson.”

“Everyone we worked with at the Agency knows that,” Lauren said.

“But what they don’t know is my father was, too—and they don’t know why. You see my grandfather admired Woodrow Wilson and helped get him elected both as Governor of New Jersey and President of the United States. In fact, Wilson put him in charge of the New Jersey Democratic Party machine for the presidential election. Before he died, my grandfather told me about something President Wilson wrote many years ago.”

Woody removed a folded piece of paper from the envelope. “I did some research and found it. Here, I want you to read this.” Woody handed her the paper and Lauren read:

“Since I entered politics, I have chiefly had men’s views confided to me privately. Some of the biggest men in the United States, in the field of commerce and manufacture, are afraid of somebody, are afraid of something. They know that there is a power somewhere so organized, so subtle, so watchful, so interlocked, so complete, so pervasive, that they had better not speak above their breath when they speak in condemnation of it”.

President Woodrow Wilson - 1913

Lauren handed the paper back to Woody. “You sure Wilson wrote this, Woody?”

“It’s in his book: *The New Freedom*.”

“He never said who he was referring to?”

“No, but I believe he’s talking about The Ring, Lauren.”

“And that’s who you think I’ll be working for?”

“Yes.”

Lauren thought for a moment.” What would my function be on this op?”

“I want you in charge of planning and running the show on the day this operation begins,” Woody replied. “It’s code-named: ‘E-Day’.”

“How much is The Ring offering?”

“One hundred million. Offshore deposit. Bank of your choice.”

“Split how many ways?”

“No split. That’s your share, Lauren. Deposited as soon as you sign up.”

“That’s a big chunk of change, Woody. Also kinda weird. Usually, when anyone contracts a hired gun, they hold back half until completion.”

“No need to do that. The Ring could track you down no matter where you tried to hide.”

“Even Sam.”

“Yup,” Woody said.

Lauren shook her head. “Like you said, they believe fear creates loyalty. Appears to me they also believe money buys it.”

“Exactly,” Woody said. “So?”

Lauren didn’t hesitate. “Well, you know me. I can’t resist a challenge. I’m in.”

“Good. Now listen, Lauren—listen carefully to every word I’m about to tell you.”

SIX

Briefings

A cloudless sapphire sky lit up the Virginia countryside magnifying the yellow, red, and orange foliage dotting the rolling hills surrounding The Courses at Andrews. These lush golf courses adjacent to Andrews Air Force Base were close to Washington, D.C. and a favorite of senior government officials. Weather permitting, politicians, lobbyists, and government contractors would be out on any one of the three golf courses discussing politics, issues, and contracts.

Today was no exception. Dave Younger, the vice president of the United States was riding in a golf cart with his old college buddy and CIA Director Carter Johnson. The other twosome paired Secretary of Defense Lennox Clarke with CEO Cliff Brooks of Technical Support Solutions. TSS, as it's known, is a high-tech corporation contracting with numerous departments and agencies of the United States government.

The West Course was Vice President Dave Younger's favorite. His golf buddies believed the lack of water hazards was the reason. Off the first tee, Dave's drive found the right rough. He drove the golf cart with Carter Johnson seated beside him. "I think it landed short of that bunker," the vice president said, "and bounced into the tall stuff off the edge of the fairway."

"You've never hit a ball that far in your life, Dave," Carter said. "I'll jump off and have a look-see back there."

The vice president placed his hand on Johnson's shoulder. "Wait a sec, Carter," he said. He called out to the Secret Service detail in the cart behind and asked them to go up ahead and look for his ball. The vice president turned to Carter. "Let's talk for a moment."

Younger and Johnson were deep in conversation when Cliff and Lennox approached them. Lennox stopped their cart. "Best we hang back here, Cliff."

"I agree, Len. Appears they want some privacy." The two men were deep in conversation. *Anytime the vice president of the United States and the director of the CIA are talking like that, it's gotta be about politics*, Cliff thought. *Can't be about the New York op because the VP's out of the loop.*

Carter Johnson had known Vice President Dave Younger since their college days. After graduation, they worked together in both business and government. "Okay, Mr. Vice President," Carter said. "Fire away."

"Tell me about Saunders, Carter."

“Sam was one of the best Field Officers the CIA ever had, Dave.”

“I’ve read his dossier, Carter, and I’ve met with him. But I need to know the man. Is he trustworthy, or is he the cowboy some at your place think he is?”

“Sam’s a legend, but he has a reputation for stepping on toes,” Carter replied. “He has enemies at my shop and others, but I’d trust him with my grandson’s life.”

“Will he protect the president and her legacy?” the vice president asked. “And not cause me any political damage?”

“He’ll do what we ask, Dave.”

“And he’s loyal?” the vice president asked.

“Like a good ol’ huntin’ dog.”

“Good enough for me, Carter. I can’t afford any screw-ups at this point.”

Carter stepped out of the cart and turned to the vice president. “I know.”

The vice president moved the golf cart forward about twenty yards and stopped to search for his ball. He called back to Johnson. “Found it, Carter. Told you I could hit it this far.” The vice president gave thumbs-up to the Secret Service agent who found his ball. “Thanks, Charlie.”

Lennox Clarke and Cliff Brooks drove up and parked their golf cart beside the vice president. “Would you hurry up and hit, Mr. VP?” Lennox said. “I’ve got a meeting at the Pentagon tomorrow.”

The vice president laughed and removed some fallen leaves near his ball. “That’s strange, Len. Can’t imagine the SECDEF* having a meeting in such a bizarre place.” (*Secretary of Defense)

Cliff Brooks’s cell phone vibrated. He flipped it open and checked the number.

The caller ID read: “Sam Saunders”.

* * * * *

Lauren focused as Woody filled her in on the major aspects of the operation. He explained more in-depth briefings would follow. When Woody finished, he smiled. “Okay, Lauren. Any questions?”

“Yes. Are you out of your mind?”

“No. Next question.”

“How the hell did Mick talk you into this insanity?”

“He didn’t,” Woody replied. “I told you I said no to Mick when he first asked me.”

“Is Mick still involved in the op?”

“Yes, but his role is limited. He’s our talent recruiter and my ‘go-to’ for help. He wants to keep as low a profile as possible.”

“Understood,” Lauren said. “And speaking of low profiles, do you actually believe we can pull this off and keep it secret?”

“We can, and we will.”

“I’m not so sure, Woody. There’s a zillion people involved and, as my Uncle Jesse used to say: ‘more moving parts than Carter’s got Liver Pills’.”

“Everyone will receive the same warning you did, Lauren. And The Ring has the power to enforce secrecy. Also, the timing and delivery of all aspects will be computerized to eliminate snafus.”

“I hope you’re right, Woody. Okay, I want to be sure I understand what this operation is all about. We are being paid by persons unknown to organize and execute a massive covert operation designed to destroy computer rooms, files, and evidence. Correct?”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Lauren continued, “then the government and the corporate media will be complicit in a cover-up by misleading the public and discrediting any dissenters who attempt to discover the truth. Also, this operation will result in major overseas military actions costing the U.S. taxpayer trillions of dollars while making government contractors and suppliers richer than they already are.”

“That’s pretty much it, Lauren.”

“So, Woody. I take it you’re okay with murdering innocent Americans?”

“Of course not. Hell, I’m still haunted by the murders I’ve committed on the job.”

“We all have to live with the crap we did, Woody. It’s just I’ve never seen you so... so... nonchalant about deliberate and premeditated mass murder.”

“More incidental than deliberate, Lauren. We’re not targeting anyone in particular.”

“Who we’re targeting or not targeting doesn’t frickin’ matter! You’re justifying it. And I’m surprised.”

“Why?”

“It’s out of character for you, Woody. Like me, you’re a trained killer, but unlike me, you’ve always had that nagging morality bulls**t. Have you forgotten your own rule number three: ‘Kill only if necessary’? This operation kinda shoots that out of the stinkin’ water.”

Woody stood. “I haven’t forgotten.” He moved around his desk and sat on the front edge. “I don’t blame you for wondering why I accepted this gig, Lauren. Between you and me, I’m still wrestling with it. Like I said, I told Mick

I wasn't interested. Said I had my fill of killing, and I liked my retired life. Then, Hurricane Opal destroyed my boat, and I couldn't afford another one."

"So you joined this wet job* because a hurricane destroyed your boat?"

(*operation where blood is spilled)

"Not entirely, but it was part of my decision."

Lauren raised her eyebrows. "Really, Woody? You sold out your values to replace a frickin' boat?"

"No. I sold out my values a long time ago when I completed my first kill in the Clandestine Service."

"A sanctioned hit by Langley—right?"

"Right. But that didn't make killing any easier for me."

"Okay, you said the boat was part of your decision, Woody. What was the rest?"

"I gave it a lot of thought after Mick asked me to manage this operation. He struck a nerve—no doubt on purpose. Mick knows how much I love running missions."

"That's why I'm sitting here," Lauren said. "Mission adrenaline is addictive."

"True, but there was something else that's been eating at me for a long time."

"What?"

Woody exhaled. "Okay. We all sacrificed a lot to serve in the CIA. Hell, I couldn't tell anyone who I worked for. Even my family thought I was an executive with an international shipping company."

"We all signed on for that, Woody. It was policy."

"I know, but there's more to it," Woody said. "We risked our lives to protect our nation and its people. Meanwhile, defense and government contractors were making billions from the same government we were working for. Those b*****s made a fortune on the backs of us government grunts who do the dirty work and make s**t. I figured it was about time I received payback for all the crap I swallowed, all the s**t holes I worked in, and all the friends I lost."

"But this op requires you to justify murdering innocent people," Lauren said. "I take it you're okay with that."

"Why the hell not?" Woody replied. "Governments, including our good ol' US of A, legalize murder all the time. Except they don't call it murder. They call it war. They wrap it in a flag and glorify it in movies and songs. But homicide is homicide—no matter how you justify it."

"War makes murderers out of innocent people."

"That's right, Lauren. Also, I remembered something my father told me when I was thinking about enlisting in the military. He said: 'It's peacetime now,

Woody, but you may end up going to war. Only two kinds of people participate in wars—those who get rich, and those who get dead’.

“I take it our employers are the former,” Lauren said.

“Absolutely. The rest of us fight the stinkin’ wars, and they make the money. To them, war is nothing more than good business.”

“But right now, the last thing Americans want is a war,” Lauren said.

“They will,” Woody said. “Before World War Two, the American people had no interest in fighting another foreign war.”

“Until December the seventh, nineteen forty-one.”

“Right,” Woody said. “Once Pearl Harbor happened, attitudes changed—helped by a lotta propaganda, of course. The public was bombarded by government slogans, cartoons, and cutesy songs. Then bingo! America goes to war, and once again, guess *who* made lotsa money.”

“Another Pearl Harbor to justify war. *That’s* what this op is all about?”

“Only partly,” Woody replied. “I believe there’s something else. The choice of targets tells me someone is going to a lot of trouble to cover-up a money trail.”

“Wonder where the trail leads?”

“This is one time following the money would be a really, really bad idea,” Woody replied.

“Would be nice to know,” Lauren said. “We could use it as leverage against them.”

“We could never have enough, Lauren. The Ring is cold-blooded and only cares about one thing—eliminating anyone who gets in their way.”

“They sound like us.”

Woody winked at her. “Only worse.”

“Is Mick your contact with them?” Lauren asked.

“No.” Woody walked to his desk and returned with a file folder. He pulled out a photo and placed it on the table. “This is Griff—he’s our go-between. Oh, and Mick has no idea what his real name is.”

Lauren picked up the photograph. “Handsome hunk. Where’d you get the snapshot of him?”

“We were meeting at a dead drop in Central Park. I asked my security guys to get it. Thought it might come in handy one day.”

“Another one of your gut feelings, Woody?”

“I know—me and my hunches, huh?”

“Saved us a couple of times,” Lauren replied. “And let’s not forget your number one rule.”

“Trust no one.”

“I hope I’m still an exception.”

“You are one of the few, Lauren.”

“Okay, there’s you and me in New York, and Sam’s at the White House.”

“Correct,” Woody said.

“Did Mick tell you how they found Sam?”

“No, he didn’t. But apparently, they found him in less than a day.”

“Man,” Lauren said. “If they don’t have any trouble finding Sam Saunders, then—”

“Exactly. Best we stay on their good side, huh?”

“For sure. Who else is on board besides Willie?”

“You’ll meet them tonight at our poker game, Lauren.”

“You know I don’t play poker, Woody.”

Woody shrugged his shoulders. “Neither do we.”

* * * * *

Cliff Brooks flipped open his cell phone. “Cliff Brooks.”

“Cliff, Sam Saunders. Is the modified KC seven sixty-seven* ready?”

(*military version Boeing 767)

“She’s ready, Sam.”

“How soon can you schedule the test flight?” Sam asked.

“I’ll have to check with SECDEF, Sam. He happens to be sitting here in my office. Hang on. I’m going to put you on hold.” Cliff turned to Lennox Clarke seated beside him in the golf cart. “It’s Sam Saunders. How soon can we test fly our sixty-seven with the FTS*?” (*Flight Termination System - anti-hijack program)

Lennox thought for a moment. “We can set it up for the middle of next month here at Andrews.”

Cliff took his phone off hold. “Mid-November out of Andrews, Sam.”

“Thanks, Cliff.”

“Are you coming on this one, Sam?”

“Yeah, and a few friends want to tag along.”

“My office will finalize the date and details with your staff at the White House,” Cliff said.

Sam thanked him and hung up.

“Saunders is an interesting guy, Len. There’s no bulls**t and he tells it like it is.”

Lennox grinned. “He’d never make it as a politician, Cliff.”

* * * * *

Sal Khouri stuck his head into Kirk Dolan's office. Kirk was sitting behind his desk studying a file. "You going home tonight, partner?" Sal asked. "It's eight-thirty."

Kirk checked his watch. "Yeah, pretty soon. I've been checking these surveillance photos from Afghanistan. In a bunch of the shots, there's a guy in white. He looks like he's the leader of the group. Here, take a gander."

Sal moved around Kirk's desk and studied the photo. "No doubt he's the leader," Sal said.

"How the f**k can you be so sure?"

"Leaders have those beady little eyes," Sal replied, "like yours."

Kirk squinted at him. "You're so funny, Sal. But listen, the CIA thinks it's bin Laden."

"They could be right, Boss. Has I-49 seen these?"

"Yeah," Kirk replied. "Santoro doesn't think the guy looks like bin Laden, but Gord does. He says he'd bet half his pension on it. We've got intel indicating bin Laden is running terrorist training camps in the Afghan mountains. I figure it's only a matter of time before al Qaeda infiltrates and hits the U.S. Also, I spoke to our guys in the Midwest. They said there's already a cell in Chicago."

"I got a sneakin' suspicion there are others, Boss."

"I have no doubt," Kirk said. "I wish I could convince those b*****s in Washington."

"Good luck with that."

"Sal, you guys mentioned at show-and-tell this morning you were having a problem tailing Travis. Do you need more manpower?"

"Might not be a bad idea, Kirk. Spooks are slippery, but this guy's unreal. Never seen anyone so surveillance conscious."

"We gotta stick to him like glue, so I'll see if I can recruit some help," Kirk said. "Have you talked to Garcia?"

"Yeah. He says they'll lend us a hand," Sal replied. "Also, we confirmed this afternoon Lauren Hunter has left the PAPD*. Our source says she's now working with Travis." (*Port Authority Police Department)

"Hunter's there? S**t! We gotta keep an eye on both of them. That's the only way we're gonna find out what the f**k these guys are planning."

"Okay."

"Now if you'll excuse me, my Tunisian friend," Kirk said. "I have to get my beady little eyes back on this file." Sal laughed and left.

Kirk thought about what Sal had said about Travis. *If he's not up to anything, why is he so surveillance conscious? And how did they get Sam Saunders into the White House? I gotta find out what these a**holes are up to.*

Kirk studied the array of surveillance photos on his desk. He picked up the picture of the man in white. *Garcia figures the Travis bunch ain't involved with you, Mr. bin Laden. But, I'd bet a box of Cohiba Robustos—you and Travis are connected. I just gotta prove it.*

* * * * *

The poker night was over, and Lauren and Woody were alone in the boardroom of Focus Market Research. The room was located on an adjacent floor away from the main office. Former CIA counter-surveillance experts had soundproofed the room using an acoustic foam barrier to fill the airspace between eight-inch solid concrete walls. They also installed the latest in monitoring and surveillance detection systems inside the room and in the reception lobby and hallways.

Woody took off his sports jacket. "Wine, Lauren?"

"Sure. I see you're carryin', Woody. What is it?"

Woody removed his shoulder holster. "Beretta nine mil. Have a look."

Woody removed the gun and ejected the clip. He handed it to Lauren. "And yes, I have a permit."

"Nice piece. I'm impressed you're legal. Tough to get a concealed carry permit for New York City."

"Griff arranged it," Woody said. "Need one?"

"I'm still on PAPD's payroll. I'm good."

Woody walked to the kitchen at the other end of the room. He checked the array of closed-circuit monitors on the wall before returning to the table with the drinks.

Woody handed a glass of wine to Lauren. "Thanks, Woody."

"I see we have company down the street keeping an eye on us," Woody said.

"Seen them before?"

"Yeah, a couple of times."

"Is it our bosses?"

"No," Woody replied. "Griff said the plate wasn't theirs. Besides, he says we'd never spot their guys."

"He underestimates us—big mistake. Is it FBI?"

"Possibly or NSA," Woody replied. "But not NYPD—we checked."

"That's all we need. Some eager-beaver government suits nosin' around."

"Maybe they're curious why some old CIA types are working for the mayor," Woody said.

"What about the poker buddies?"

“They’re okay. This surveillance doesn’t tail them probably because they don’t know who they are. Seems you and I are the only ones they’re interested in.”

“We can’t risk them tailing us outa here.”

“My thoughts exactly, Lauren. When we’re done, what say we head down to the shopping concourse? If they know what they’re doin’, they’ll have a foot team down there.”

“Let’s confuse ‘em with a starburst*,” Lauren said. “I’ll head uptown on the subway. You head down. We can both change trains at the next station and head in the opposite direction.” (*counter-surveillance measure - targets disperse)

“Sounds, good. We’ll meet up an hour later at echo* and grab a bite to eat.”
(*one of several predetermined meet locations)

Lauren smiled. “Gotta love the good ol’ spy-versus-spy stuff, huh?”

Woody nodded. “So what did you think of the poker buddies?”

“They’re an interesting bunch, but I get the feeling some of those good ol’ boys don’t like each other.”

“Strong personalities clash. They’ll put the job ahead of that.”

“They definitely know what they’re doin’,” Lauren said.

“Absolutely.”

“I’m curious, Woody. How much are the poker buddies making for this op?”

“Same as us. It was Mick’s idea. He lobbied for it.”

“Really smart thing to do,” Lauren said. “Gives us all the same status.”

“Right. Now—I’m sure you have more questions.”

“Oh—I have a few.”

“First,” Woody said, “I have something to share pertinent to your E-Day. Ace asked—”

Lauren interrupted him. “I met him tonight. So his code name is Ace like in ‘ace pilot’? I assume he’s in charge of all things airborne?”

“Exactly,” Woody replied. “These guys never use their real names on an op, so I assigned them code names appropriate to their function in the mission. By the way, I’ve implemented the mandatory requirement for coded language on all cell phone and radio calls. Also, I requested everyone use landlines whenever possible.”

“I assume that includes no real names on calls. Code names only?”

“You bet, Lauren. Just like when we were with the Agency. Best to always assume someone’s listening in.”

“Understood. So Mick is ‘Honcho’. Are you still using ‘Deadeye’ for your code name, Woody?”

“I am.”

Lauren sighed. "I guess I'm stuck with 'Belle' again, huh?"

Woody grinned. "You are what you are, Lauren."

"And Sam is still using 'Slim'?"

"He is. Okay, as I was sayin', Ace asked Sam to arrange a test flight of a modified seven sixty-seven in mid-November. Sam and I will be on board to witness the testing of an anti-hijack Flight Termination System developed for Boeing by Cliff Brooks's company, TSS. Oh, Ace and Teach will be with us as well."

"Teach?"

"He's in charge of the hijack part of the op."

"And TSS is Technical Support Solutions, isn't it?"

"It is, Lauren, and they're crucial to this operation. They designed, installed, and monitor all the computers and databases we require. They also partner with Raytheon and helped develop their JPAL* system for the military." (*joint precision approach and landing system)

"Will this flight termination thing enable us to control the aircraft from the ground?" Lauren asked.

"Yup. When we take total control, the pilots and flight attendants will be unable to do anything including any type of communication. Which means they can't contact ATC or their company."

"So we'll have the capability to take the aircraft wherever we want. That's pretty cool," Lauren said. "What about the agents* we're using as hijack pilots? How are we going to keep them under wraps while we're training them?" (*person unofficially employed by intelligence services)

"Teach and Ace are in charge of the pilots, or 'kids' as we've code-named them," Woody replied, "but we're not keeping them undercover. We want the kids tracked by the FBI. It makes the whole terrorist-hijacking story easier to sell. We've got babysitters* to watch them twenty-four-seven." (*Field Officers acting as agent handlers)

"What if the feds get suspicious and arrest the kids?"

"Won't happen," Woody replied. "We've got people fully entrenched inside the FBI and Justice Department. Also, we have a group of the best cobblers* working on docs for them." (*experts in forging documents)

"Here or overseas?"

"Overseas—Jeddah* and others," Woody replied. (*US Consulate Office - Saudi Arabia)

"How are you controlling the information flow inside the op?"

"Like any op, Lauren, it's a need-to-know protocol. But our master plan takes it a couple of steps further. First, it's classified 'critical'*. Everyone

involved knows what that means. Second, it's compartmented—laterally and vertically. Only the top-level knows the entire plan.” (*high security classification)

“That would be Mick, Sam, you, me, and the poker buddies, right?”

“Correct,” Woody said. “The rest of the op is black-boxed* for the worker bees. They only know their part.” (*no need-to-know)

“How about the information flow to the media and the public?” Lauren asked.

“We're going to manufacture a reality and sell it to the public through a disinformation campaign.”

“Just like any PSYOP*.” (*psychological operation to influence people's thinking)

“Exactly, Lauren.”

“Who's our Joseph Goebbels*?” (*Reich Minister of Propaganda - Nazi Germany)

“Magic. He'll design and implement the plan. His team members are communications and marketing experts. They'll have everyone in the government and the media singing from the same song sheet.”

“And the public will buy it?” Lauren asked

“The general public will believe the story for two reasons, Lauren. First, it will be the first thing they hear. And second, the source is reliable. So, they will refuse to believe anything else.”

“People do believe what they see on TV.”

“For sure,” Woody said. “Especially if it's from news sources they trust like the three major US networks or CNN. Those newsrooms will report the narrative Magic's team provides them, and the public will swallow it.”

“Terrorists flying airliners into buildings.”

“Yup,” Woody said.

“But what about the FBI and law enforcement? Won't they investigate?”

“Not a chance,” Woody replied. “Why waste the time and money investigating when you already know who's responsible? Besides, our guys inside government can put the kibosh on any investigation.”

“The general public will want to know who was responsible for something this horrific.”

“And we'll provide the answer, Lauren. All wrapped up with a neat little bow.”

“You sound so sure they'll buy it.”

“Of course they will,” Woody said. “We'll spread breadcrumbs along the path leading right to al Qaeda and UBL*. Our story will make sense. And we'll repeat it again and again on every newscast. Repeat something often enough, and it becomes the truth. And once you convince people, they stay convinced.”

(*Usama bin Laden)

“That’s true, Woody. Most folks won’t change their mind about something because it’s like admitting they were wrong.”

“Correct. Also, we’re going to escalate the fear factor.”

“How?”

“We’ll bombard the public with expressions like: ‘America attacked’, ‘global war on terror’ and ‘terrorist threats’,” Woody replied. “Also, after E-Day, the government will unveil a threat level chart from low to severe. The media will broadcast updates to keep people on edge.”

“That will help, but there will be people with doubts.”

“Of course, but the majority will accept it because they don’t have to think for themselves. It’s easier to follow the herd. For example, most people believe the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve ate was an apple.”

“Um... wasn’t it?” Lauren asked. “I learned that in Sunday school when I was a kid.”

“I did, too. But the bible doesn’t say what the fruit was. The book of Genesis only mentions the fruit came from a tree in the middle of the Garden of Eden. The belief it was an apple is a popular misconception.”

“That’s amazing, Woody. Guess we’re all guilty of believing the bulls**t we’re taught or told.”

“We are. When the bulls**t makes sense and everybody else believes it, it’s an easy sell.”

Lauren paused for a moment. “I understand only a select few know the entire plan, but I’m still concerned about secrecy in an op this large. How do we control leaks?”

“Loyalty and fear create secrecy. We have both inside this op.”

“You trust that will be enough?” Lauren asked. “A leak won’t happen?”

“I won’t say it’s impossible, but I believe our safeguards will prevent it,” Woody replied. “Also, everyone involved knows about Jimmy.”

“Certainly got everyone’s attention. The penalty for leaking is severe.”

“Between you and I,” Woody said, “I believe The Ring set Jimmy up, so they could use him as an example of what will happen to anyone who breaches secrecy.”

“So this operation will be like the Kennedy assassination. The truth about what happened in Dallas has never come out—no matter how hard anyone digs.”

Woody nodded. “You know it’s funny you should mention that. A couple of weeks ago I had lunch with an old buddy of mine. He told me his theory on the Zapruder film.”

“Zapruder is the guy who filmed the assassination from the grassy knoll.”

“Yeah, and by the way, that was the ideal vantage point to film it.”

Lauren paused. “It was a perfect spot.”

“Now, Abraham Zapruder wasn’t a professional photographer. He was a clothing manufacturer in Dallas. He took his brand new eight-millimeter Bell and Howell camera and stood on a four-foot concrete abutment. He began filming Kennedy’s motorcade before the shooting started and continued until the motorcade passed. He got all the rifle shots on film.”

“I’ve seen the film, Woody. What’s your buddy’s theory?”

“Zapruder didn’t flinch.”

“What?”

“The camera never moved when the shooting began. And remember rifle shots were coming from different directions in the plaza and some from over Zapruder’s right shoulder.”

“Hand-held camera with no tripod?”

“Right, Lauren. And there was no steady cam back in those days.”

“Was he deaf?”

“No, he wasn’t. In fact, the Warren Commission asked him if he could tell where the shots were coming from. Zapruder testified under oath he couldn’t because there was too much reverberation and echo.”

“Zapruder knew what was going to happen.”

“We’ll never know, Lauren, but what other explanation is there? Even experienced combat cameramen shudder when there’s unexpected gunfire or explosions.”

“Holy crap.”

“Worst part is no one will ever investigate it.”

“Wouldn’t matter, Woody. Someone did a great job of hiding the truth.”

“We’ll do the same with this op, Lauren. We’ll create a riddle in a mystery surrounded by an enigma.”

“Churchill, right?”

“Yup,” Woody replied.

“What about the media? How do we convince them?”

“The media report what the politicians and experts tell them. Especially when there’s nothing to the contrary. At first, the media won’t know what to think on E-Day. Then we kick in and give them the story. We’ll bombard them with terrorism experts, politicians, and government talking heads—all saying terrorists were responsible.”

“Okay, the regular media believes UBL and al Qaeda are responsible,” Lauren said. “But what about investigative journalists like Sixty Minutes? What if they don’t buy our story and assign someone like Mike Wallace to investigate?”

“It won’t happen, Lauren. I talked to Griff about that. He told me our bosses own or manage the companies that control over ninety percent of all the media we see, read and hear. Makes it easy to bury a story, or convince a reporter to leave it alone.”

“What about the conspiracy types? We can’t control them.”

“Eventually they’ll come out of the woodwork,” Woody said. “They always do after something major like this. They’ll attack the story we’re trying to sell, but it won’t work with the public. We’ll have already discredited any dissenters with lines like: ‘We won’t condone any conspiracy theories’ and ‘You’re either with us, or you’re with the terrorists’. We’ll tug at the public’s patriotic heartstrings. We Americans like that kinda s**t.”

“I don’t think that will stop the conspiracy theorists,” Lauren said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Woody said. “Once we push the public’s patriotic button, we’ll let the government and media propaganda machine do the rest. We’ll portray the conspiracy theorists as a bunch of tinfoil hat-wearing, middle-aged crazies sitting at computers all day long in their mother’s basement.”

Lauren laughed. “I’m curious, Woody. Are you sure UBL will claim responsibility for this? What if he denies any involvement?”

“Doesn’t matter what bin Laden does,” Woody replied. “No matter what he says nobody will believe him.

“So we’re just using him and al Qaeda as patsies to hide our op.”

“Exactly, Lauren. To help prove it was al Qaeda, a few days after E-Day the FBI will supply the names of the hijackers to the media. We’ll also provide some photos of them in the airports. We’ll remind the media about bin Laden’s fatwa against America, his involvement in the Yemen hotel bombings, and the bombings of the US Embassies in Africa last year. And we’ll make sure they know about bin Laden’s claim al Qaeda would bring the fight to America like World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Yousef.”

“So everyone will believe bin Laden and al Qaeda were responsible,” Lauren said. “Pretty slick.”

“Correct. And America will have a new ‘boogie man’. The politicians will use him to justify a prolonged worldwide war on terror. They will tell the public it is necessary to prevent a future attack. Meanwhile, our bosses and their friends will make a s**tload of money.”

“A cozy little deal,” Lauren said. “What about our Israeli friends?”

“They will be paid handsomely.”

“Does their government know they’re helping us?” Lauren asked

“Unknown. Doesn’t matter anyway. Israel owes us.”

“For Iraq,” Lauren said.

“Yup. We taught Saddam he can’t launch Scud missiles at our friends and allies in the region. The Israelis were grateful, and now—it’s quid quo pro time.”

“You make this whole sell job sound easy, Woody.”

“It is, Lauren if it’s done right and you have the right players onside.”

“People will believe whatever we want them to believe,” Lauren said, “as long as everyone sticks to the story and the truth never comes out?”

“Simple as that.”

“Un—frickin’—believable,” Lauren said.

Woody chuckled. “Okay, let’s head down to the concourse and confuse the s**t outa some Feds.”

SEVEN

Meetings

November 1998

Sam and Woody buttoned their coats as they came out of the hangar at Andrews Air Force Base. Woody glanced back through the closing hangar door at the KC-767. “She’s back under wraps, Sam.”

“Wish I was,” Sam said. “S**t, it’s colder than a well digger’s butt out here.”

“You Texas boys can’t handle the cold.”

“Y’all gonna tell me one of your ‘winter in New Jersey’ stories—again?”

“I just might,” Woody replied.

They walked to the government car that Sam had requested. He had advised the 1st Helicopter Squadron he and Woody would drive back to Washington. The trip along Suitland Parkway afforded them the opportunity for some private time to discuss the operation.

“Nice car, Sam,” Woody said. “Is it clean?”

“Yeah,” Sam replied. “Had it swept by our electronics guys who flew in with us on the Huey.”

Woody put on his seat belt. “Impressive show today, huh? Pilots sitting in front of a computer on the ground took over total control of our aircraft.”

Sam backed out of the parking spot. “That flight termination program was impressive. Hell, them flyboys upfront in our sixty-seven couldn’t even use the intercom—let alone fly the damn thing.”

“Exactly what we need.”

Sam agreed. “Once we actually take over control and crash a commercial seven sixty-seven, we’ll know the system is ready.”

“Is that absolutely necessary?”

Sam tapped the steering wheel in time with the country music on the radio. “You know it is. Y’all got a problem with that?”

Woody paused. He was uncomfortable with that part of the operation but decided to keep that to himself. “Nah, I’m good. You know we got two more sixty-sevens like her being converted to birds*?” (*military drones)

“You sure y’all ain’t got a problem with crashing a commercial jet to test the system, Woody?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Woody leaned forward and turned off the car radio. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“You accepted this mission without question,” Woody said. “Doesn’t slaughtering innocent people cross the line for you?”

Sam glanced at him. “I ain’t got no line.”

“C’mon, you know what I mean, Sam. You don’t have any concerns about this mission at all. How do you do that?”

“It’s easy, y’all,” Sam replied. “This here mission is gonna git done, and them folks will die with or without me. So—I might as well do it.”

“And make the money,” Woody said.

“Better me than some other cowboy. Meanwhile, back at the ranch. We got three seven sixty-seven drones for the two New York targets. I take it one’s a backup.”

“Yeah,” Woody replied. “Airborne on E-Day and ready if we need her.”

“Here’s our exit,” Sam said. He shoulder checked, signaled, and turned into the right lane. “Well those boys better guard them drones twenty-four-seven.”

Woody turned on the radio and tuned in another station. “How are the military tests on the targeting system going?”

Sam exited the highway and merged onto the parkway. “I’ll let y’all know next week. The tests have been good so far. All the missiles hit within ten feet of the bull’s eye.”

“Good,” Woody said. “We have no margin for error. The targeting has to be perfect.”

Sam checked the rearview mirror once again. “Any unfriendlies back there, Sam?”

“Nope. Just makin’ sure no one followed us off the highway.” Sam reached over and turned off the car radio. “I had a meet—”

“Hey,” Woody said. “I was listening to that.”

“What was it?”

“‘Born to Run’,” Woody replied.

“Y’all like that Eurotrash s**t?”

“It’s Springsteen for f**k sake, Sam. He’s from Jersey.”

“Never heard of him,” Sam said.

“Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“I am.”

Woody smiled. “Is ‘Abilene’ still your favorite song, Sam?”

“Of course, y’all. It’s my hometown. But it has to be the Waylon Jennings’ version.”

“Of course, Sam. Anyone who spends any time with you at all has listened to every f**kin’ Waylon Jennings’ song a million times.”

Sam ignored him. “Like I was sayin’, Woody. I had a meetin’ with our CIA contacts last week. They’re trackin’ bin Laden in Afghanistan. The Station Chief in Islamabad said they have a possible location for him. The president’s being pressured to launch a cruise missile strike to blow the b*****d away.”

“That would not be good.”

“No kiddin’. That’s why they talked POTUS out of the raid to kidnap bin Laden last May. Wasn’t a hard sell. She don’t like puttin’ Americans in harm’s way.”

“She doesn’t like putting Americans in harm’s way, Sam? Really? Does this president know about the CIA Clandestine Service? In harm’s way—every day?”

Sam chuckled. “Also, not to mention them Pararescue cowboys, Special Ops guys, oh—and let’s not forget EOD*.” (*explosive ordinance disposal)

“For sure, Sam.”

“I’ll tell you what I’m really worried about, y’all. And that’s if the current VP becomes president.”

“Why?”

“Dave Younger’s hell-bent on eliminating al Qaeda.”

“We just have to hope he doesn’t win.”

Sam nodded. “How’s Lauren doing? Settlin’ in?”

“As usual, she’s a quick study,” Woody replied. “E-Day’s in good hands.”

“Tell her we have a problem. An old friend of mine from the Sayeret Matkal* contacted me. He had listened to a taped conversation between a Hezbollah leader in Lebanon and one of his agents undercover in Syria. Guess the guy in Syria had caught wind of a covert op in New York. Didn’t mention target or dates, but we gotta assume it’s us. Good news is: our guys inside the CIA and FBI in Washington say their agencies haven’t received any intel on it.”
(*Special Forces Unit of the Israeli Defense Forces)

“I’ll let Lauren know,” Woody said. “And speaking of the FBI, Lauren and I had more company the other night at tango two*.” (*South Tower - World Trade Center)

“Same kind of surveillance as last time?”

“Two sets of wheels this time,” Woody replied. “Made the plates. They had foot teams below in the shopping concourse. We lost ‘em.”

“Y’all run the plates?”

“Yeah,” Woody replied. “Not registered anywhere.”

Sam pulled out to pass a semi-trailer. “Our guys inside the FBI figure it’s Kirk Dolan and his guys. He’s the new hotshot National Security Fed in New York. Might have some intel on our op from the NSA.”

“You know this Dolan, Sam?”

“Only his reputation. He’s FBI all the way. He thinks he’s f**kin’ Lewis Erskine.”

“Who’s that?”

“The guy from that old TV show ‘The FBI’,” Sam replied. “Oh, yeah. I forgot. Y’all don’t watch much television.”

“Books, Sam. I read. It’s better.”

“I’ll have to try that one day when I’m as old as y’all, Woody.”

Woody smirked. “So tell me about this Kirk Dolan.”

“Dolan was the FBI’s Chief of Counter-Terrorism in Washington. He is credited with catching Ramzi Yousef, the ninety-three World Trade Center bomber.”

“Sounds like Dolan is someone we don’t need on our a**.”

“Not to worry,” Sam said. “Our guys’ll keep an eye on Dolan.”

“Certainly help to know what he’s up to.”

“Maybe we should get Griff’s boys to pay Dolan a visit,” Sam said. “You know—rough him up a bit and scare the s**t out of him.”

“Good idea.”

“Think Griff’ll do it, Woody?”

“Griff is such an a**hole he’d enjoy it. Also, I’d better brief Smokey*.”

(*operation’s manager of law enforcement)

“With all that surveillance, best y’all find another location for your poker nights, Woody.”

“Already have. Remember the big warehouse in Brooklyn the op purchased a few months ago?”

“The one where you store s**t?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. It’s gonna make a great Op-Center*. I’m up-grading the security and having more offices built inside.” (*ultra-secure operational command location)

With no traffic ahead, Sam set the cruise control. “Speaking of purchases, y’all. We now have all the necessary funding in place. Tell the poker buddies to use our contact at the playground* for anything they need.” (*code name for The Pentagon)

Woody raised his eyebrows. “Unlimited?”

Sam glanced over at him. “I’d say a few trillion dollars is unlimited.”

“Willie will be relieved,” Woody said. “His crews need a whole s**tload of stuff for the Towers during the elevator and fire system upgrades. Also costing a lot to keep them happy and out of sight.”

“Woody, you can tell Willie he’ll have what he needs to keep them boys hidden. The last thing we want is someone discovering our Israeli friends and what they’re doing for us.”

“Don’t even want to think about that,” Woody said. “Oh, just so you know, Magic said he’s up to his a** helping Ace with NORAD*, FAA, and the war games. He’s also working on the E-Day scripts for the cell phone calls and the media. I had to take his part of the tango clean-up in New York away from him.”

(*North American Aerospace Defense Command)

“Who’s got it?” Sam asked.

“I’ve given Willie complete control.”

“Good choice. Anything else, Woody?”

“Yeah. I’ve given a lot of thought to the scrub operation on E-Day. The termination should be quick and easy—if we do it right. The retrieval of evidence and incorporating it at the crash sites is another story. If we screw the timing, we could blow the whole thing.”

“I concerned too, Woody. That part is crucial. Please tell me y’all have someone in mind to take care of that.”

“I do. I got Mick to drag Digger* off his yacht in Martinique.” (*operation’s manager of retrieval and disposal)

“You got Digger?” Sam said. “That old son-of-a-bee is the best sanitizer* in the biz.” (*expert in evidence destruction and removal)

“I’m gonna team him with Ace,” Woody said. “Air is a big part of that. Oh, and Teach, too. The three of them can handle it.”

“Digger, huh? You know y’all are pretty f**kin’ good, ol’ buddy.”

“If I’m that good, how come I’m freezin’ my a** off here instead of sippin’ a Mai Tai on a tropical beach?”

Sam winked. “Soon enough, my friend—soon enough.”

* * * * *

President Claire Walker walked into the President’s Dining Room and Vice President Dave Younger was waiting for her. He pushed back his chair and stood.

“Oh, Dave,” the president said, “You’re always such a gentleman, but this is business, not a date.”

The vice president smiled. “Hi, Claire.”

“I had our White House chef prepare something special for you, Dave.”

“Thanks, Claire. I appreciate that.”

Claire pulled out her chair. Dave didn’t even attempt to assist her. When he first met Claire Walker, he had tried to be polite by pulling out a chair for her. The president stood behind the chair and told him: “I detest that from a colleague, Dave. Alaskan women do for themselves.”

“Shall we eat before business, Claire?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

During the meal, the president and vice president discussed political fund-raising events, the results of the recent mid-term elections, and the party’s 2000 election preparations. Once the meal was finished and coffee was served, the wait staff cleared the table and left.

“How were the ribs, Dave?”

“Excellent, Claire. Where did Chef Philip get this recipe?”

“The Bone Pit in Austin.”

She wants something, the vice president thought. “My favorite place. Philip duplicated the recipe exactly. He’s amazing.”

“So is Sam Saunders, Dave. He’s smarter and more perceptive than I expected.”

Dave appreciated President Walker’s clever segue to business. “Yes, he is, and please don’t worry about him. Carter Johnson at the CIA assured me he’s trustworthy.”

The president paused and pressed her lips with her thumb and forefinger. “I’m not worried about Saunders. What concerns me is appearing weak-kneed when dealing with bin Laden and al Qaeda.”

“I understand, Claire,” the vice president said. “UBL is a threat, and you did cancel the raids that could have stopped him.”

“Stop him? You mean kill don’t you? Why must we always couch it in gentler terms?”

“You’re absolutely right, Claire. It is kill. As politicians, we become too accustomed to softening our language for the media and the public.”

“If we don’t kill bin Laden and slow down al Qaeda, Dave, our intelligence community is convinced they will attack America. If that happens, I’m afraid it will affect my legacy and your chances for the presidency in two-thousand.”

“I agree, we both have a lot to lose.”

“As you know, perception is reality in politics,” the president said. “I believe we must convey the perception we are doing everything possible to identify and stop these terrorists. So, I’d like you to meet with Sam Saunders. The two of you should be able to devise a political strategy to guarantee we have a more favorable public perception.”

“Will do, Claire.”

President Walker placed her napkin on the table. “Thank you, Dave.”

Dave stood. “Thank you, Madam President.”

After the president left, Dave sat down. A waiter carrying a coffee carafe entered the room. “More coffee, Mr. Vice President?”

“Yes, thank you.” After the waiter left, the vice president dialed his Chief of Staff, Greg Misener. “Greg, I want to meet with Sam Saunders—as soon as possible.”

The vice president hung up and took a sip of coffee. He thought about President Claire Walker’s mishandling of the mounting terrorist threat. *Unlike you, Madam President, he thought, if I become president, I’ll utilize the full power of the presidency to eliminate bin Laden and al Qaeda in my first one hundred days.*

EIGHT

Enemies and Allies

Lauren took the express elevator to the 107th floor of the World Trade Center's North Tower. She strolled along admiring the opulent hallway leading to the Windows on the World restaurant. Willie was seated at a window table in the Wild Blue Dining Room. He was drinking a coffee and enjoying the Manhattan skyline.

Lauren tried to get Willie's attention from the waiter station. "Willie! Psst—Willie!" Willie's back was to her. Lauren came closer, stopping a few feet from his table. "Hey, Willie."

Willie turned. "Hi, Lauren. C'mon over and check out this view."

"You're not funny, Willie. Let's go."

"On my way." Willie placed his napkin on the table and approached Lauren with a huge smile on his face. "You're afraid of heights even inside a totally secure structural steel skyscraper?"

"Yes, and it's still not funny," Lauren replied. "Lunch at Windows on The World, huh? Living pretty high off the old hog aren't we, Willie?"

"No one deserves it more than me," Willie replied with a grin.

"Well if you're finished your executive lunch," Lauren said, "can we go?"

"We have plenty of time. How about some Ben and Jerry's?"

"In the shopping concourse, right?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds good to me. Then the elevator mech rooms, okay?"

"For sure, Lauren. Master Elevator has been kind enough to provide us access."

"They're all our people."

"Yeah."

Lauren and Willie walked along the hallway to the elevator. She couldn't resist a jab. "Nice to see you wearing a jacket for a change, Willie. To be honest, I didn't know you owned one."

Willie stopped. "Oh, s**t. This belongs to the restaurant. Be right back."

* * * * *

Sam Saunders slammed down the receiver on his desk phone. “Damn! That’s all we need!” Sam hit his speed dial and tapped a pencil on his desk. “C’mon, Woody answer the damn phone! S**t!” Sam waited while the answering machine message played. When the machine beeped, Sam left a message: “Deadeye, Slim here. Your tail may not be Dolan—repeat—it may not be the FBI or NSA. Big trouble, my friend. Call me ASAP.”

Sam thought for a moment. *If it ain’t the feds, then who the hell is it? And what do they want with Woody? Or Lauren? And how come they’re not tailing my butt? I’ll check with Avi Bitton. Maybe the Mossad knows what’s goin’ on.*

Sam’s secretary’s voice came over the intercom. “Mr. Saunders, the vice-president wants to see you—immediately.”

* * * * *

Lauren and Willie walked along with their ice cream in the Mall of the World Trade Center. Lauren’s cell phone buzzed. She handed her ice cream container to Willie and pulled out her phone. “Hi, Deadeye. I’m here with Wil—”

Woody interrupted her. “Belle, call me from a landline as soon as possible.”

“Okay.” Lauren folded her phone.

“How’s Woody?”

“He sounded rattled. I need a landline.”

“Follow me.” Willie turned and headed towards a bank of payphones.”

* * * * *

Chief of Staff Greg Misener escorted Sam to meet the vice president. Every time he entered VPOTUS’s office, Sam marveled at how spartan and functional it was. There were no signs of work, files, or paper—anywhere. *A reflection of the way the man operates*, Sam thought. *He gets s**t done and outta the way.*

Vice President Dave Younger was seated at his desk. “Thanks, Greg. We’ll meet afterward.”

“Thank you, Mr. Vice President.” Greg nodded at Sam and left.

“Have a seat, Sam,” the vice president said.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’ve just come from a meeting with the president. We’re concerned about the perception that our administration is weak on terrorism. Specifically al Qaeda and bin Laden.”

He’s worried about his own run for president, Sam thought. “You mean the canceled missile strikes, sir?”

“Yes,” the vice president replied. “The best way to change that perception is to be seen to be doing something. I’m going to recommend we plan strategic missile attacks on al Qaeda targets in Afghanistan. Unless you have a better suggestion.”

The vice president was a well-known hawk on bin Laden. Sam had to think fast. *Basic tactic*, he thought. *Create a diversion*. “UBL is a hard target, sir. We can’t find him because the locals are hiding him.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Providing refuge for travelers is part of their culture, sir,” Sam replied. “I think a military action would change the perception of doing nothing, but the president is hesitant to launch any attack without provocation.”

“Yes, she is.”

“Is she willing to change the target, sir?”

“Explain yourself, Sam.”

“Last year, didn’t the president sign a Congressional policy statement authorizing regime change in Iraq, sir?”

“Yes. The Iraqi Liberation Act.”

“Doesn’t that give her the authority to act at her discretion against Saddam?”

“Yes,” the vice president replied. “I see where you’re going. We could flex our airpower in the no-fly zone and be seen as actively pursuing terrorists.”

“Yes, sir,” Sam said. “And destroy some Iraqi military assets on the ground.”

“I’d prefer to go after bin Laden, Sam, but I’ll sell this to the president with your help.”

“Count on it, sir.”

“After I run this by the president, I’ll have my staff co-ordinate the media strategy with the West Wing,” the vice president said.

“Sounds like a plan, sir.”

“Thanks for your advice, Sam. That’s all for now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Vice President,” Sam said. He stood and headed for the door.

“Oh, and Sam?”

Sam stopped and turned around. “Yes, sir?”

“You’ve got good political instincts, Sam. You know, for a CIA type.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sam said. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was. We Texans have to stick together—y’all.”

* * * * *

Willie and Lauren stopped at the payphones on the concourse level. "My phone's buzzing. "I'll be right back, Lauren."

Lauren dialed Woody's private line. The line was busy, so she waited for a moment and redialed. He answered on the first ring.

"Deadeye, here."

Lauren cupped her hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. "Hi. It's Belle. I'm on a payphone. What's going on?"

"Slim thinks the surveillance may not be domestic," Woody said.

"Not the FBI or the NSA? Who the hell is it?"

"Unknown," Woody replied. "We'll talk after you get back here. Just be careful. You know the three of us have lots of enemies."

"More than we need, Deadeye. You be careful as well."

Woody said goodbye and Lauren hung up the phone. Someone behind her placed a hand on her shoulder. Lauren clenched the hand, securing it against her body. She whirled around putting her attacker into a combination wrist-arm lock with her right hand. She moved into a rear stranglehold and increased the pressure to restrict his airflow. "Move and you're dead, pal," Lauren said.

Willie walked around the corner. "I'm back Laur—" He chuckled. "I see you've met Ray Crowther, the president of the Master Elevator Company. You can let him go now. He's on our side."

Lauren released her grip. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Crowther. You startled me."

Ray Crowther caught his breath and rubbed his throat. "Remind me not to do that again. I take it Willie didn't mention I called him from the lobby, and he told me to you meet you guys down here."

Willie shrugged his shoulders at Lauren. "I didn't have a chance."

"Are you okay, Mr. Crowther?" Lauren asked.

"Yes, I'm fine, Lauren... um... I'm sorry, I don't know your last name."

"Hunter, Mr. Crowther. Lauren Hunter. Again, I'm sorry."

Ray rubbed his neck. "Quite alright, Lauren Hunter."

"I'm curious. How did you know it was me, Ray?" Lauren asked.

"Willie described you to a tee and said you were on a payphone down here."

"You sure you're okay, Ray?" Willie asked. "She didn't hurt you, did she?"

"No," Ray replied. "I'm good, and actually I'm quite thankful."

"For what?" Willie asked.

"She let me live."

"If you two are done," Lauren said, "shall we inspect some mechanical rooms and elevator hoistways?"

NINE

Spies and Terrorists

December 1998

The receptionist hung up the phone. "Special Agent Dolan, you may go in now."

Kirk entered the White House Situation Room. President Claire Walker was at the head of the conference table with the mandatory attendees seated close to her. The president smiled at Kirk. "Welcome Special Agent Dolan. You've attended meetings of the National Security Council before, and I have always appreciated your candor."

"Thank you, Madam President," Kirk said.

"You may sit over here, Special Agent," Vice President Younger said. He pointed to an empty chair near the end of the table.

Kirk sat beside Carter Johnson, the director of the CIA. On his left, was Douglas Philips from the CIA Counter-Terrorism Center. Across the table were National Security Adviser Anderson Rogers and Kirk's old friend Art Brown, the president's counter-terrorism expert. Among the staffers present, Kirk recognized White House Chief of Staff James Moore and Sam Saunders.

Art Brown cleared his throat. "I'll continue, Madam President. We have plenty of intel on al Qaeda operations in numerous countries. We know the location of Usama bin Laden's safe houses in Kandahar, and after confirming his presence I strongly suggest we take him out. He's obsessed with attacking the United States by any means possible including hijacking aircraft. I'm going to ask Special Agent Dolan to join the conversation. He investigated the US Embassy bombings in Africa and determined al Qaeda was responsible. He knows more about bin Laden than anyone I know. Special Agent Dolan?"

"Madame President, without wanting to appear immodest, Mr. Brown is correct. I know Usama bin Laden. I know what he's after and the lengths he'll go to get it. He is hell-bent on destroying America."

"What exactly lead you to reach that conclusion, Special Agent Dolan?" Carter Johnson asked.

"Well, sir," Kirk replied, "bin Laden rants about how American troops in Saudi Arabia are a threat to the holy city of Mecca. Also, he is amassing an army of fighters and training them at secret camps in Afghanistan and other locations in the Middle East. I have no doubt he intends to launch some sort of a large-

scale terrorist attack on American soil. His death would be a major disruption for al Qaeda and could prevent, or at least delay, such an attack.”

“Death or capture, Special Agent?” the president asked.

“Capture would be preferable, ma’am, for the intel we could extract.”

The president turned to Johnson. “Does the CIA agree, Carter?”

“Many in the intelligence community believe killing bin Laden would demonstrate to al Qaeda we could hit any one of them, Madam President,” Carter replied. “But Special Agent Dolan is correct. Capture, if possible, for the intel.”

The president paused for a moment. “Do you have any indication when an attack may take place, Special Agent?”

“No, ma’am. Just my gut.”

“And your gut tells you bin Laden will definitely attack the United States, Special Agent?”

“Yes, ma’am. An attack is imminent.”

“It is your recommendation to proceed with this kill mission?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Regardless of the risk to innocent Afghans?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s that critical.”

“Thank you, Special Agent Dolan,” President Walker said. “We appreciate you coming in today and wish you a safe trip home.”

Kirk stood. “Thank you, Madam President.”

Sam Saunders followed Kirk out. “Special Agent Dolan,” he said. “The president asked me to meet with you. Are you staying in Washington overnight?”

Kirk turned. “And you are?”

“Sam Saunders. I’m special assistant to the president for National Security Affairs.”

“So, *you’re* Sam Saunders,” Kirk said. “No, I have to head right back to New York. Why’d you ask?”

“I was kinda hopin’ you and I could have a meeting. Y’all plannin’ to be back here soon?”

Kirk pulled his Day-Timer out of his briefcase. “I’m back here for meetings at FBI Headquarters the morning of the fifteenth.”

“Y’all got time to meet that afternoon? Say around two?”

“Yes. I believe I can fit you into my schedule. See you then.” Kirk turned and sauntered away.

*Cocky b*****d*, Sam thought. *I hate cocky b*****ds.*

Sam couldn't see the smile on Dolan's face. Kirk didn't believe his good fortune. *This meeting is exactly what I wanted. I'm gonna trap that cowboy and link him to Travis's operation.*

* * * * *

Tony Manetti was seated at a table where he could keep an eye on the restaurant's main entrance. A few moments later, Lauren came in and waved. He rose to greet her. "Well, if it isn't the late Miss Hunter."

"Sorry, Tony. You know how it is—still feeling my way in the new job."

Tony kissed her. "No apology necessary, babe. You look great. I ordered you a glass of Chenin Blanc."

"Thanks," Lauren said.

Usually, when Lauren and Tony were out for dinner, they avoided talking about work. They had agreed office talk should remain in the office. Tonight, however, Tony changed the rule during dessert.

"Lauren, is it true you worked with Sam Saunders when you were with the CIA?"

Curious question, Lauren thought. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"He's working at the White House, and I was wondering what kind of a person he is. I mean—is he honest?"

Someone is using Tony to find out about Sam. "Sam Saunders is a great guy, Tony. And he's as honest as the day is long."

"Have you talked to him recently, Lauren?"

"No, I haven't talked to Sam for years. Are you asking for you, Tony, or for someone else—like maybe the mayor?"

"For me, Lauren. I was just curious."

*Bulls**t, Tony.* "Okay," Lauren said. "Now, let's get away from this work talk and discuss something more important."

"Like what?"

"Ask me if I'm busy later, Tony."

Tony chuckled. "Okay, I'll play. You busy later, Lauren?"

"Yes."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Doing what?"

"You," Lauren replied.

"Me?"

"Yes, I have something special planned for you."

Tony grinned. "Will I like it?"

"Did you like your birthday present?"

“Of course.”

Lauren tilted her head to the side. “Then you’ll really like this early Christmas present. I promise.”

“How could I love something more than that, Lauren? It was the best present ever.”

“Until this one.”

“C’mon, Lauren. What the hell is it?”

Lauren parted her lips with the tip of her tongue. “Oh, Tony, you’ll just have to wait ‘til we get back to your place.”

Tony flagged down their waiter. “Check, please.”

* * * * *

Woody walked out of his favorite after-work bar on Beekman St. in Lower Manhattan. Fluffy snowflakes, illuminated by the streetlights, were drifting out of a black sky and melting on contact with the pavement and sidewalks. He crossed the street and headed for the subway. A man behind him also crossed the street. *Surveillance?* Woody thought. He stopped to window shop. The man stopped at a newspaper box and fumbled for change. When Woody started walking, the man followed suit. *That son-of-a-b***h is tailing me.*

Woody stopped and patted his pockets. His tail stopped to look in a store window. Woody turned back towards the bar. The man following him dodged some traffic and crossed the street. Woody ducked into an alley. Light from the streetlamp gleamed on the wet pavement. Woody hid in a darkened doorway. He drew his sidearm and screwed on a silencer. *Is this guy dumb enough to follow me in here?* The sound of the guy’s hard-soled shoes clicking on the pavement grew louder. *He is dumb enough. C’mon, pal. Keep comin’.* The clicking stopped. *He’s listening.* After a moment, the clicking continued. The man was now standing at the entrance to the alley in the glow of a streetlight. *No weapon drawn,* Woody thought. *Best to capture and find out who the hell sent him.*

Woody stepped out of the shadows and raised his weapon. “Show me your hands, pal and don’t make a move.” The man put his arms in the air and froze. “Now, remove your weapon—real slow, and place it on the ground.”

The man removed a semi-automatic handgun from a shoulder holster. He kept his eyes focused on Woody as he laid it on the ground. “Why the f**k are you following me?” Woody asked. The man stared at Woody. “Not talking, huh? Keep your hands in the air, and turn around.” The man turned, and Woody moved in behind him. He frisked him under his arms and located his wallet in an

inside pocket of his suit jacket. “Take out your wallet, and hand it to me,” Woody said.

The man unbuttoned his coat to retrieve his wallet, then spun around, and knocked Woody’s gun hand, sending his sidearm clattering across the alley. The man tried to retrieve his own weapon from the ground, but Woody kicked it across the alley, and it disappeared down a sewer grate. The man jumped Woody and put him into a rear chokehold. Woody caught a glimpse of his own gun glinting in a lighted doorway several feet away. He managed to wrench the man’s index finger back until it dislocated. The pain forced the man to loosen his grasp, and Woody was able to push him back into some garbage cans. He scrambled down the alley, retrieved his gun, and turned. The guy pulled another handgun from a calf holster and fired a shot. Woody ducked behind a dumpster as the round ricocheted off the brick wall above him. He re-emerged from behind the dumpster and dropped to a prone position. The red dot from his laser sight was dead center on the man’s forehead. Woody fired, and the man’s head snapped back from the impact. He fell facedown to the pavement—lifeless.

Woody stopped for a moment to catch his breath. *Dammit!* he thought. *What about witnesses?* He scrambled to his feet and checked the alley and windows in the adjacent buildings for curious onlookers. *Good—not a soul.*

Woody knelt beside the corpse. He pressed his handgun against the back of the corpse’s head and fired another round. He removed the silencer and holstered his weapon. “You idiot,” Woody said. “Surveillance without backup or a wheels team? You really f**ked up this time, cowboy.”

Woody turned the corpse over and unbuttoned the overcoat. He pulled a wallet out of the suit jacket pocket. “S**t! A f**king Russian! Why would the SVR* be tailing me?” (*Russian Federation External Intelligence Agency)

Woody removed all the personal effects and money from the body and bundled them in a discarded newspaper. He opened a part-full trash bag and placed the bundle inside. “I’m keeping the wristwatch, comrade,” Woody said. He pulled the corpse out of sight behind a dumpster. He used his hankie to take the second gun out of the corpse’s hand and returned it to the calf holster. *Cops will wonder why someone would do that.*

As Woody moved towards the exit, a black vehicle with tinted windows stopped on the street across from the alley. Woody ducked out of the light and flattened himself against the wall. *Now, his cover team shows up.* Woody thought. *A little late comrades.*

The car inched away and turned onto a side street. Woody exited the alley with the garbage bag and headed in the opposite direction. *I gotta get rid of this s**t where it will be tough to find.* A garbage truck was parked at a 7-11. The

sanitation workers were inside the store and the truck was empty. Woody walked to the back of the truck and threw the trash bag in.

At the next corner, Woody hailed a cab. He pulled out his cell phone. The screen was cracked, and he couldn't get a dial tone. *S**t*, Woody thought. He asked the driver to drop him at the Millennium Hilton. *I gotta get ahold of Lauren and Sam.*

* * * * *

Sam was in his Georgetown apartment reading Kirk Dolan's FBI file when Woody called.

"Slim, it's Deadeye."

"Didn't recognize the number," Sam said.

"I'm on a payphone," Woody said. "The SVR is on my tail."

"The Russians? How the hell do ya know that?"

"I found some ID in a dead guy's coat pocket."

"Was it Igor The Assassin, Deadeye?"

"Nah. This guy was too young and dumb."

"Dumb is right," Sam said. "Why would he be carrying his ID with him?"

"I dunno. Maybe he thought the hookers would be impressed and charge less."

"Hookers ain't impressed with ID."

"I don't want to know how you know that, Slim."

Sam laughed. "You got any idea why the Ruskies would be after y'all?"

Woody exhaled. "No."

"They could be tailin' you to find me, because of that unfortunate accident in Moscow."

"They never forget that kind of s**t," Slim.

Sam heard something in Woody's voice. "You okay, Deadeye?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just full of f**kin' adrenaline."

"Did you get ahold of Belle?"

"Just called her."

"Okay," Sam said. "You get some rest. I'll be in touch."

Sam hung up and speed-dialed the CIA Director Carter Johnson. He tapped his fingers on the table while he waited for Carter to answer. "The f**kin' SVR is in-country, Carter? And y'all didn't know?"

TEN

Cat and Mouse

Woody walked out of the office kitchen. “Griff’s here, Lauren. A security camera caught him on the stairs.”

“Does he always get off the elevator on another floor, Woody?”

“Yeah, always.”

“You sure he was never with any of our intelligence agencies?” Lauren asked. “You know like the Army, State Department, or even the Coast Guard?”

Woody shook his head. “Mick tried to check, but no one knows Griff’s real name.”

“His fingerprints should tell us who he is.”

“Mick had a buddy lift Griff’s prints off a glass,” Woody said. “His rap sheet* showed no record of his prints—anywhere.” (*FBI criminal and identification record report)

Lauren shook her head. “That in itself is suspicious.”

There was a loud knock on the outer wooden door. Woody checked the security camera and opened the door. “Griff, c’mon in. Lauren’s here. Wanna coffee?”

“Sure, Woody,” Griff replied. “Lauren’ll get me one. Won’t you, Lauren?”

Lauren glared at Griff. “If I was a waitress, I would.”

Griff glared at Lauren. “Who the f**k do you thin—”

Woody interrupted him. “Best be careful there, Griff. Lauren is a horrible waitress, but an even worse enemy.”

“It was a joke, Ms. Hunter.”

Lauren ignored the “Ms.” remark. She stood and shook hands with Griff. “Lauren will do.”

“Okay, Woody,” Griff said. “Now that the f**kin’ formal introductions are out of the way, tell me how you’ve moved this operation forward.”

Lauren glanced at Woody and raised her eyebrows. They spent the next while informing Griff of their progress. They pointed out the many areas of the operation requiring completion and the amount of funding required. Woody also told Griff about his encounter with the SVR agent.

“Did you ditch your gun, Woody?” Griff asked.

“Of course. My Beretta is at the bottom of the Hudson.”

“Does anyone know why the f**kin’ SVR is after you?”

“Nope,” Woody replied.

“Well, someone better f**kin’ find out,” Griff said, “we need you for this op. Okay. Something you didn’t mention, Lauren. How’s the mayor coming along with his cleanup on E-Day plus one? Please tell me he’s on this.”

“He is. Says he’s lined up a bunch of contractors and over a hundred dump trucks and heavy equipment.”

“Clean up and removal has to be immediate,” Griff said.

“You know it’s illegal to do that. Right?” Lauren asked.

“Do what?” Griff asked.

“Destroy evidence at a crime scene.”

“Duh. That’s what this f**king op is all about.”

“Obviously, Griff,” Lauren said. “But what I’m talking about is everything that’s removed from the rubble of the three buildings. It’s evidence and we’re tampering with it. No matter which way you look at it.”

“It’s not evidence tampering, because there will be no investigation, no charges, and no trial. Everyone will know who did it—dead terrorists. The focus will be on rescue and recovery.”

“I just hope no one questions it,” Lauren said.

“No one will,” Griff said. “Trust me. You just keep an eye on the f**kin’ mayor. He’s a loose cannon.”

“I know all about Mayor Curran, thanks,” Lauren said. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t screw up.”

“Alright,” Griff said. “Anything else, Woody?”

“That’s all for me. Lauren?”

Lauren sat back and crossed her arms. “No, I’m done, Woody.”

Griff stood. “Well, it sounds like you’re right on track, Woody.”

“Ahead of track in some spots, Griff—behind in others.”

Griff nodded. “That’s okay. As long as we’re ready for E-Day.”

“We’ll be ready way before that,” Woody said.

“Good,” Griff said. “Listen—with the f***in’ SVR and the FBI nosing around, we need a new spot to meet.”

“Already arranged. Lauren’ll be moving to One Liberty Plaza this week, Griff. Ultra-secure office there. A great place to meet.”

“You should move to the brothers*, Lauren,” Griff said. “The mayor’s got that emergency bunker there.” (*Building Seven - World Trade Center)

Lauren shook her head. “That would be dumb. The largest CIA Field Office outside of DC is in Building Seven. There is no doubt someone would ID me, and they might get curious.”

Griff stood. "Okay, I'm outa here. Woody, I'll let you know when I have your new identities."

Lauren shrugged her shoulders at Woody. "Lauren doesn't know about that, Griff. I'll fill her in."

"You do that," Griff said.

Woody locked the inner door after Griff left. "Alright, Lauren before you ask, you know we have to disappear after the op. So, as part of the deal, I asked Griff for new identities for you, Sam, and me. We'll be getting new birth certificates, passports, driver's licenses, and a complete background history including tax returns. He says they will be ironclad and more extensive than Witness Protection."

"What about the poker buddies?"

"They already have several fake identities," Woody replied.

"Any idea what my new name will be?"

"Don't know yet," Woody replied, "but it will suit you."

"Hope it isn't a stripper name like Candy or Brandy."

Woody winked at her. "Or Pussy Galore."

"That's not the least bit funny, Woody. Now, will you tell me about your encounter with the SVR?"

Woody's desk phone rang. "Hang on, Lauren." Woody listened and then hung up. "That was Rico from our electronic surveillance squad. Apparently, Griff was wearing a wire today."

"That prick," Lauren said. "Did Rico nail the frequency?"

"No, but he said it's not law enforcement, CIA, or NSA."

"So this Griff acts like a trained operative, has no FBI record, and now he wears a wire to meet with us?"

Woody shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know why. I'll run it by Mick."

"Obviously, we gotta be even more careful around this Griff guy," Lauren said. "We should keep the dickhead in the dark as much as possible."

"I never trusted him right from the beginning."

"I take it that's why you didn't mention the Op-Center we're building in that Red Hook warehouse?" Lauren asked.

"Yeah. No need for Griff to know about it until we find out who the hell he is and who trained him. Sam's got people working on it."

"I'd be interested in knowing that."

"Also," Woody said, "I'm gonna use our FBI contacts to pressure Dolan to back off."

"That would be good. Let's see, Woody. We have the CIA, SVR, NSA, and Dolan's FBI squad all trying to nail us. Right?"

“Yup.”

“Looks like we’re surrounded, Kemo Sabe,” Lauren said.

“We’ve been there before, Tonto.”

“Yeah, and we’re the ones still alive and kickin’. Okay, Woody, now will you tell me about your date with the SVR guy?”

“Not much to tell. He tailed me out of the bar and followed me into an alley. I jumped him. Lost my weapon, but managed to retrieve it. Plugged him in the forehead. Got rid of all his ID and ditched my weapon in the river.”

“A headshot, Woody? Risky.”

“Not for me. They don’t call me Deadeye for nothin’.”

Lauren’s brow furrowed. “Why is the stinkin’ SVR after you, Woody?”

“Sam thinks they may be looking for him.”

“Sam must have really pissed off someone important in Russia,” Lauren said. “Is the SVR still in-country?”

“No. CIA spoke to their head spook. He claims they’ve pulled out their agents, but I don’t believe it.”

“Me neither,” Lauren said. “You can never trust the Russians—especially the SVR.”

“Uh-huh. Anything else?”

“Been thinking about the cell phone calls—a lot,” Lauren replied. “Buzz* told me cell phones don’t work above an altitude of ten thousand feet and especially not in an aircraft traveling at over five hundred miles an hour. Someone will question how the hell those calls were made. Also, I’m not sure using passengers and crew to simulate the cell phone calls from the hijacked aircraft is worth the risk. We’re taking a huge chance on a passenger or crewmember not going along with the script and spilling the beans.” (*operation’s manager of technology)

“I agree about the risk of using those folks to make the calls,” Woody said. “But as far as anyone questioning how the calls were made? The public will believe what we tell them to believe.”

“On this one, I’m not convinced, Woody.”

“They will,” Woody said. “By the time anyone questions anything, everyone has heard our message hundreds of times and won’t believe anything else. Besides, the cell phone calls are a necessary risk. They are essential to confirm our story that terrorists hijacked the aircraft and switched off the aircraft transponders. In reality, we’ll remotely switch off the transponders so the radar controller can’t positively identify the flight number. We need that to hide the mid-air swap of the airliners and the drones.”

“How do we guarantee the callers will stay on script?” Lauren asked.

“That’s a good point, Lauren. We can’t.” Woody thought for a moment. “Maybe we could hire voice actors to imitate their voices. They’d stick to the script for sure if we use the national security and patriotism angle. You know tell ‘em stuff like: ‘the president is counting on you’, or ‘your actions today will save lives’. Tell them to use their acting skills to make the training exercise seem like a real terrorist attack. Actors love to act.”

“Might work, Woody. I’ll consider it, but how do we keep them quiet after E-Day?”

“That’s a good question. Maybe the actor thing isn’t such a great idea.”

“Could be a last resort if we don’t come up with anything else.”

“Agreed. Is that all you got for now?”

“Yup.” Lauren stood. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Woody.”

“For sure, Lauren.”

Lauren stopped at the door and turned. “Oh—and Woody?”

“What?”

“Try not to shoot anybody.”

Woody laughed. “I’ll try.”

After Lauren left, Woody walked to the window. He stood—mesmerized by the lights and bustle below him in Lower Manhattan. He was thinking about his first visit to New York with his parents when he was a kid. His folks were devout Christians and taught him to live a moral life. But the CIA transformed him, and he was a willing participant. He loved the CIA—the challenges, the excitement, and, of course, the people he worked with.

That was a world ago, Woody thought. *Now is different. Now—is this world and this mission. A f**kin’ mission that will change this world—forever.* A fully lit ambulance was wending its way through a maze of traffic on the streets below. He thought about how many ambulances there would be on E-Day. How many will be injured? And how many will die? “I should quit this f**kin’ op. Tell Mick it’s too much for me to handle. He’d understand.” Woody smiled. “No, he wouldn’t. Mick would say: ‘The Woody Travis I know never quits’. And he’s right. I don’t quit. I can’t.”

Woody opened his office door and turned out the lights. The glow of the city, separated by the narrow windows of the South Tower, poured across the carpeting and up the walls like a flood of molten silver. Woody sighed. “It’s too late anyway. The die is cast. There’s no turning back.”

* * * * *

Kirk Dolan entered Sam's office in the West Wing. "Special Agent Dolan," Sam said. "Y'all c'mon in." He pointed to a chair opposite his desk.

"Thanks, Mr. Saunders."

"Call me, Sam, Special Agent."

"Okay, Sam. What would you like to chat about? I have a train to catch to New York."

"I understand your squad is targeting Usama bin Laden," Sam said.

"We've done more than just target him. We've charged him with ordering the embassy bombings in Africa."

"I'm aware of that," Sam said. "At the meeting yesterday, y'all said bin Laden was going to attack America, and it was just a matter of time. What do y'all base that on?"

"We've gathered reliable intel."

"No need to be evasive, Special Agent. I have a top-level security clearance, and a mandate to brief the president on anything pertaining to our national security. I want to know why y'all are so damn sure an attack is imminent."

Kirk thought for a moment. "I've submitted a brief through channels on our —"

Sam interrupted him. "I don't give a rat's a** about briefings and channels. I want to hear it from the horse's mouth. I hear y'all are a great investigator, so I need your opinion. Hell, even an educated guess'll do."

Dolan took a deep breath. "Okay. My team has developed an extensive file on bin Laden. We know where he's been, who he's been with, and what he's done. We've tracked his activities, listened to his broadcasts, and read all his statements. We can predict his next move with a great degree of certainty."

"Which is to attack the US," Sam said.

"Correct."

"Why would he target us?" Sam asked. "We helped the son-of-a-b***h in Afghanistan against the Russians."

"True, but after Afghanistan, bin Laden went back to Saudi Arabia and created al Qaeda."

Sam was well aware of bin Laden's history, but he wanted to hear Dolan's version. "Why did he create al Qaeda?"

"Long story short," Kirk replied, "UBL wanted to muster an army to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait. His family was embarrassed by his public outcries and to stop him, they enlisted the aid of both the Saudi and the US government. Siding with an infidel government like ours infuriated bin Laden. His family had betrayed him. To strike back, he created al Qaeda. After that, he organized and carried out the bombings of our embassies in Kenya and Tanzania."

“Now y’all think he wants to bring it here?”

“Without a doubt, but let me ask you this, Sam. You spent many years in the Middle East and know it’s a complicated tribal geopolitical quagmire. Correct?”

“Correct,” Sam replied. *He’s done his homework on me.*

“Do you think my theory is without merit?” Kirk asked. “Do you think bin Laden won’t attack us?”

*Smart little b*****d*, Sam thought. “Before I answer that, Special Agent. How do y’all think bin Laden will attack us? He has no Navy, no Air Force, and his Army is nothing more than a ragtag bunch of unorganized yahoos with AK forty-sevens. Do y’all think he’s a match against the Armed Forces of the United States?”

“Didn’t England with their Navy and Army underestimate our Revolutionary Army? And what happened?”

“You haven’t answered my question, Special Agent. How is bin Laden going to attack us?”

“With any means at his disposal,” Kirk replied. “Terrorists are creative.”

“Y’all really have no idea, do ya.”

“No, I don’t. But what I do know is he will attack us one way or another.”

Sam sat back. “Special Agent Dolan. I appreciate your time today—”

Dolan interrupted him. “You didn’t answer my question, Sam. Do you think bin Laden won’t attack us, and do you think we should leave him alone?”

“Not my call, Special Agent. I leave that kinda stuff to the experts like y’all.”

“Fair enough,” Kirk said.

“Thank you, again, Special Agent Dolan. I’ll pass your thoughts on to the president.”

Dolan stood. “One more thing, Sam.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you know Woody Travis?”

“Of course,” Sam replied. “We worked in the same unit at the CIA. Why’d ya ask?”

Kirk made eye contact with Sam. “I’m wondering if you’ve seen him lately.”

Careful, Sam, he thought. *Lying to the FBI is a felony.* “Woody and I’ve stayed in touch. We’re old friends.”

“You’re saying you haven’t spent any time with him lately?”

“Woody and I went fishing in Florida a while back.”

“Not recently in New York?”

Sam glared at him. “No, Special Agent Dolan. Not in New York. Is that all?”

“Yes,” Kirk replied.

Sam picked up his phone. “Hi. Special Agent Dolan is leaving. Please advise security.”

Dolan stopped at the door. “Open or closed?”

“Closed.”

Sam speed-dialed Woody. *That son-of-a-b***h is gonna do whatever he can to stop us.*

ELEVEN

‘Tis the Season

Lauren and Woody had spent an exhausting morning of briefings with the poker buddies. On the way back to Lauren’s office in One Liberty Plaza, Woody asked her if she had plans for lunch.

“I’ve got lotsa follow-up stuff from the meeting,” Lauren replied. “I was going to order in.”

“I don’t have a lot of time either, but come for quick lunch with me, Lauren. I’m buying.”

“In that case, where we goin’?”

“Second Avenue Deli. Best in New York. Their latkes are artery-cloggin’ good.”

The restaurant was busy with the lunch crowd. Woody and Lauren waited at the door until a small table opened up. When their waiter stopped at the table with their meals, Lauren couldn’t believe the portions. “Look at the pile of pastrami on this, Woody.” She picked up the sandwich and took a small bite.

“So is it good or what, Lauren?”

Lauren held up a finger until she swallowed. “This is so good, Woody.”

“Told ya.”

Lauren took a sip of her Cherry Coke. “That was a good meeting with the poker buddies. Got lots done.”

“You impressed me this morning, Lauren.”

“How?”

“At the meeting, you were reaming off times, dates, names, and locations without referring to your notes.”

“I have pretty good recall—you know that.”

“I know, but your memory is a lot better than I remember. Now, it’s like you’ve got total recall.”

“I work at it, Woody.”

“The poker buddies have told me how you’ve taken control of E-Day. They figure it’s gonna run like a Swiss watch.”

“I’m aiming to make it fool-proof. My goal is to eliminate the screw-up factor as much as possible.”

“The boys say they have total confidence in you, Lauren, and I do, too. And, just so you know, I don’t believe Jimmy was capable of doing as good a job with

E-Day as you are.”

“Nice to know, Woody. Thanks.”

Woody put some applesauce on a piece of latke. “What are you doing for the holidays?”

“Going upstate to Tony’s parents’ place in Syracuse.”

“You ever find out why Tony is so curious about Sam?”

“No,” Lauren replied. “I’m sure someone’s usin’ him. I’m gonna try and find out who it is. What are your holiday plans, Woody?”

“I’m heading to Florida.”

“Family?”

Woody took a sip of his drink. “Tarpon fishin’ in the Keys with a buddy. Also going to check out those flight training schools.”

“You *do* have family in Florida, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re not going to see them at Christmas?”

“No,” Woody replied. “Cathleen’s folks are going on a Caribbean cruise, and my kids don’t talk to me.”

“I didn’t know about your kids, sorry.” *Christmas must be a sad time for Woody.* “Is Sam joining you on your fishing expedition?”

“I asked Sam, but he said he’s busy with a counter-surveillance mission over the holidays. Said he wants to gather some intel on Hound Dog and his guys.”

“Always a good idea to find out as much as you can about anyone who’s trying to track you down.”

“Ya gotta stay ahead of ‘em.” Woody checked his watch. “I better get back. You about done?”

“Yeah.”

Woody caught the waiter’s eye and scribbled in the air with his fingers. “Sam has some free time over the holidays,” Lauren said.

“He does. The castle’s shutting down, and POTUS is heading to Alaska.”

Lauren shook her head. “Alaska in December? She must enjoy freezing in the dark.”

“Sam says she’s used to it,” Woody said. “She grew up there.”

“Probably kill a Savannah girl like me.”

The waiter placed the check folder on the table. Woody put on his reading glasses and checked the bill. “Oh, I doubt that, Lauren. You’re tougher than you look. Shall we go?”

“Okay.”

Woody placed some cash into the folder. “Let’s head out.”

Lauren reached across the table and squeezed Woody's hand. "Thanks for lunch and Merry Christmas, Woody."

Woody sneered. "Bah. Humbug."

Outside the restaurant, Lauren kissed Woody on the cheek. "You take care of yourself, Uncle Woody. We need you back safe and sound."

"We need you more, Savannah girl. See you after the holidays."

Woody rounded the corner. Lauren hailed a cab and climbed into the back seat. "City Hall," she said.

* * * * *

On board Air Force One, President Claire Walker and her husband Darrel were enjoying an after-dinner drink. They were discussing all the friends and family they would visit in Alaska during the holidays.

Darrel leaned across the sofa and took Claire's hand. "You look tired, sweetheart. This break will be good for you."

"Absolutely," she replied. "This past year has been a killer. I have enough on my plate and certainly didn't need the House impeachment because of that stupid sexual harassment lawsuit and those false accusations by that staffer."

Darrel smiled. "I never believed any of it, Claire. It's gone and forgotten."

"Thanks, honey, but I wish the Senate would forget about it."

"You'll get through the impeachment," Darrel said.

"I know, but it's been tough to handle along with all the other crap that's going on. The US Embassy bombings, the rise of bin Laden and al Qaeda, Iran's nuclear program, and good old Saddam Hussein and his craziness. The list goes on."

"You're a strong woman, Claire, and you've proven you can handle the job."

"I know I can, but at what cost?"

"What do you mean?"

"I ordered those cruise missile strikes after our Embassies were bombed, and people died," Claire replied. "It weighed on me at the time, but not now. I've changed. I'm glad I retaliated against those responsible. Killed—actually. And that worries me."

"But don't forget you canceled that mission into Saudi Arabia to nail bin Laden."

"That was a favor for our Saudi allies," Claire said.

"I know, but you made the decision, and it turned out to be the right one."

"Those aren't the decisions that bother me, Darrel. It's the decisions resulting in death that trouble me—especially innocent civilians. I'm surprised I can issue

kill orders. It goes against my grain. I mean—it isn't who I am."

"You're right, Claire, it isn't. But think about this. It wasn't you who issued those orders. Claire Walker would do no such thing. The forty-second president of the United States of America did. She was doing her job on behalf of the people who elected her."

Claire leaned over and kissed him. "Thanks, honey."

"You're welcome, Madam President."

* * * * *

Kirk had spent an early Christmas with his two boys at his apartment in Soho. Today, he was taking them back to their mother in Greenwich, Connecticut. His ex-wife Karen believed children should be at home on Christmas Eve, and Kirk agreed. Karen was taking the boys for Christmas dinner at her parent's home in Stamford.

Kirk turned onto his old street. The queasy feeling in his stomach returned. *Still too soon after the divorce*, he thought. His boys slammed the back door of the car and waved goodbye. The two brothers pushed and shoved each other all the way up to the house—Kirk's old house. A restored Cape Cod in a great location on Lakewood Circle South backing onto Indian Harbor. Kirk loved this house and missed living here. But he didn't miss the screaming matches and stress of a disintegrating marriage.

Kirk drove along the Hutchinson River Parkway content in the knowledge his boys had enjoyed spending time with him before Christmas. He thought about how excited they were tearing open their presents. But now, he was looking forward to a Christmas Day dinner with his new lady, Alexis Britt.

Alexis worked as a financial analyst for Marsh & McLennan in the North Tower of the World Trade Center. She and Kirk met at a fund-raising event at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan. Kirk was standing at the bar when Alexis walked up to order a drink. Their eyes met and the attraction was immediate. After she left, the bartender placed another drink on the bar. "From the lady," the bartender said. "She liked your eyes."

Kirk's phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled over and stopped on the shoulder of the road. "Dolan."

"Kirk—Rick here."

"You working today, Mr. Garcia? Going for the dedication award, are we?"

"Nah, I'm at home. Just had a couple of interesting phone calls. We got some intel on some al Qaeda types heading to Kuala Lumpur for what appears to be a big meeting."

“UBL going?”

“Not confirmed,” Rick replied. “The other call was from one of the guys in my unit. He has an old buddy at the NYPD. The guy told him they’ve identified a John Doe who was found dead in an alley a few weeks ago. He was an SVR agent named Yuri Sokolov.”

“Holy s**t,” Kirk said. “I take it the SVR didn’t admit he was here as a spy.”

“Of course not. The official Russian response was: ‘Comrade Sokolov on vacation in New York’, ” Rick said with a Russian accent.

Kirk laughed. “Okay, Comrade Garcia—how’d he die?”

“Nine mil slug in the forehead. No powder residue, so not at close range.”

“That’ll do it,” Kirk said.

“Right, but get this. Sokolov was in a gunfight. NYPD figures he got off at least one round. Also, his corpse had one insurance round postmortem—hard contact—back of the head.”

“Did Crime Scene recover his weapon?”

“That part of the story is weird,” Rick replied. “His shoulder holster was empty, and whoever plugged him put a Makarov semi-auto into his calf holster. The weapon is standard issue for the SVR, so it’s probably his.”

“That is f**kin’ weird,” Kirk said. “Didn’t the shooter think we’d test the weapon for prints and powder residue?”

“Anybody who watches TV would know that’s the first thing we’d do.”

Kirk grinned. “Any idea what the hell an SVR agent was doing in that alley?”

“We figure he was part of a surveillance team.”

“I wonder who the jackpot* was?” Kirk asked. (*target of an operation)

“We have no idea, and the Ruskies won’t say.”

“Thanks for the call, Rick. I’ll be in touch after the holidays.”

“You’re welcome—and Kirk?”

“What?”

“Merry Christmas.”

“Same to you and your family, Rick.”

Kirk folded his phone. As he pulled back out onto the interstate and accelerated, he began to talk out loud. Vocalizing helped Kirk to think through an investigative puzzle. “The SVR? Now, who the f**k would the Ruskies be after? One of theirs gone rogue or—” Kirk paused. “Wait a sec. Rick said: ‘One hard contact insurance round—back of the head’. That’s standard procedure for old-time spook assassins. I’ll bet Travis and his gang are tangled up in this. Merry Christmas indeed, Mr. Garcia.”

* * * * *

Smokey reached between the car seats and picked up his portable radio. "Slim, this is Smokey."

Sam was parked in Lower Manhattan. He placed his binoculars on the dash. "Go ahead, Smokey."

"We got 'em," Smokey said. "Looks like the scout troop* are gonna party all night up here in Queens." (*code name for Kirk Dolan's FBI Unit)

"Scoutmaster*, there?" Sam asked. (*code name for Kirk Dolan)

"Sure is, Slim."

"On my way," Sam said.

"No need, ol' buddy. Me and Willie got it all. Photos, license plates, and vehicles."

"Roger," Sam said. "I'll see you guys back here at the meet near the campsite*." (*code name for FBI's New York office)

"Wilco."

Sam checked his watch. "Oh, and Happy New Year, y'all."

"You too, Slim," Smokey said.

TWELVE

Targets

February 1999

A tall well-groomed man wearing a gray pinstripe suit entered the boardroom in the headquarters of Technical Support Systems. He approached Woody and Lauren. “Good afternoon, Mr. Travis and welcome to TSS. I’m Bruce Thorne, CFO here. I’m filling in for Cliff Brooks.”

“Hi,” Woody said as they shook hands. “This is Lauren Hunter.”

Lauren shook hands with Bruce and caught a whiff of his elegant cologne. “Hi, Bruce.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Lauren.” Bruce cleared his throat. “Okay—”

Woody interrupted him. “Sorry, Bruce, but we were expecting Cliff today. Why the change?”

“Cliff was called away to the Pentagon.”

Woody wasn’t buying it. “Finding that hard to believe there, Bruce. This operation gets top priority—ahead of everything. Now, what the f**k is really going on?”

Bruce paused for a moment. “Cliff asked for a leave of absence. Family reasons.”

“And you didn’t think this was something you should share with us?”

“I assure you, Mr. Travis, there was no devious motive in my withholding this from you. I simply wanted to keep it in-house out of respect for Cliff.”

“Fair enough,” Woody said. “So you’ll be CEO?”

“As soon as the board approves it.”

Lauren was enjoying this. Woody was a master at extracting information. She listened as he continued to grill Bruce Thorne on his knowledge of the operation, code words, and personnel. Thorne answered all Woody’s questions without hesitation and proved to be up to speed.

“As you can see, Woody, I am briefed and ready to assist you.”

Woody smiled. “Yes, you are. Sorry for the inquisition, but I had to confirm you’d obtained a proper briefing. At this stage of the operation, we don’t have time to waste.”

“I understand and concur,” Bruce said. “Alright, I believe we’re ready to proceed?”

Woody and Lauren nodded. “Now,” Bruce continued, “you’ve had a tour of our computer facilities. Your electrical and computer techie... um... Buzzie is it?”

Lauren smiled. “Buzz.”

“Okay—Buzz it is,” Bruce said. “He’s spent the last few weeks here with our best people. Our guys say he’s a wiz. He’s helped them fine-tune some of the GPS targeting programs for the birds. Also, as you are aware, we installed and currently maintain the security program for the FAA radar system. We have a back door that provides us full access. Their computer system is ancient, so we can easily manipulate the radar returns. It will allow us to hide or move any radar target without a problem. Works like a charm. Even the most experienced ATC controller wouldn’t catch it.”

“Lauren and I met with Buzz this morning,” Woody said. “He told us you’ve got people working at FAA Headquarters.”

“Yes. We’re performing a security check and upgrading some of their systems. We’ll also be installing our own backup computers. Don’t want any technical glitches on E-Day.”

Lauren leaned forward in her chair. “Speaking of backups, do you have a redundancy plan if the targeting fails on the birds?”

Smart lady, Bruce thought. “Already working on that, Lauren. We’ll have backup targeting computers on board all the drones.”

“What about the tangos?” Lauren asked.

“That’s something I wanted to discuss with you today,” Bruce said. “Our techies advise targeting transmitters should be embedded in the target area.”

“If you provide us with the transmitters, we’ll take care of that,” Lauren said. “This is the most critical part of this operation, and it can’t go sideways.”

“That’s the reason I brought it up,” Bruce said.

“What about the closed-circuit surveillance at the airports where the flights will originate?” Woody asked. “We have to control what those cameras record.”

“That will not pose a problem,” Bruce replied. “We installed those systems and maintain them. We can remotely pause the cameras anytime we want. If we miss one, or if a camera happens to record something we don’t want, we can either erase it, or our friends inside the FBI will seize the tapes—you know, in the interests of the investigation or national security—or whatever.”

Lauren nodded. “What about the Pentagon? They have over eighty external security cameras.”

“They do,” Bruce replied. “Also, not a problem. That system is controlled and maintained by us.”

Woody stood. “Okay, if we’re done, Lauren has to get back to New York, and I have another meeting here. Oh, and by the way, Buzz is going to stay with

you as long as you need him, Bruce. But remember, we want him bac—”
Woody’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He checked the number. “I gotta take this.”

Woody stepped out into the hallway. “Deadeye here.”

“Hey, Deadeye,” Franco* said. “You headin’ back?” (*operation’s manager of security)

“Yeah, later this week. I’m spending some time with Slim. Belle’s headin’ back to New York today. Why what’s up?”

“Nothing too serious,” Franco replied, “but we’ve sealed your office.”

“Not serious, but my office is sealed?”

“We’re fumigating it,” Franco said. “Didn’t want you to go in there for a while.”

My office is bugged, Woody thought. “Okay, amigo. See ya when I get back.” Woody folded his phone and walked back into the boardroom. “Sorry about that,” he said. “Let’s head out, Lauren.”

Bruce accompanied Lauren and Woody to the main entrance. “We’ll be testing the drones this week,” Bruce said. “I’ll make sure Buzz is there.”

Woody shook his hand. “Thanks, Bruce.”

In the cab on the way to Union Station, Woody filled Lauren in on the phone call from Franco. “Dolan probably planted that bug in your office, Woody.”

“I agree. I’ll deal with that when I get back to New York. So what did you think of Thorne?”

“I wasn’t sure at first, but I think he’s okay. How about you?”

“I’m not convinced,” Woody replied. “He held back telling us about Brooks.”

“Yeah, wonder why?”

“Don’t know, but I don’t like anyone holding back vital information on this operation—for any reason.”

Lauren nodded. “I agree, and we’d better make sure Bruce Thorne is capable. TSS is essential.”

“It is.” Woody paused for a moment. “Let’s make sure we’re covered. I’m going to ask Buzz to transfer some of his top guys to keep an eye on TSS. I’ll tell Thorne The Ring wanted it to happen.”

“Does he know who you’re referring to, Woody?”

“Of course, he does, Lauren. Mick told me The Ring owns TSS.”

* * * * *

Kirk Dolan was sitting at the bar in Elaine’s nursing an after-work scotch. Alexis walked up and tapped him on the shoulder. “Just in town for the convention, big

fella?”

Kirk stood and put his arm around her waist, pulling her close. “Hey, Allie. You look great.”

“Smooth talker. I could use a drink. Helluva day.”

“Mine was no picnic either.” Kirk signaled the bartender. “A Beefeater martini, please, Brenda. Oh—and could you make it dirty with extra olives?”

Alexis slipped onto the barstool beside him. “You first. What can you tell me?”

“Washington has told me to lay off a group we’re investigating,” Kirk said. “And I don’t understand why.”

“They didn’t give you a reason?”

“Nope,” Kirk replied. “My NSA friend, Rick Garcia was warned as well.”

“What are you going to do?”

“You know me, Allie. It made me even more curious to find out what they’re up to.”

“You’re going to ignore your bosses?” Alexis asked.

“I’ve done it before. I’ll make sure my squad stays under the radar. Enough about my day, tell me about yours.”

Alexis explained how her whole floor and several others in the North Tower had been undergoing extensive renovations for the past few years to upgrade the fire and sprinkler systems. She had to relocate three times during the construction and several client files were lost. “They are client files for some powerful people, Kirk. Marsh & McLennan will be in big trouble if we can’t locate them.”

“Don’t you have computer back-ups?”

“For most of the data, but not all,” Alexis replied. “If they lay the blame on me, it won’t enhance my upward mobility—if you know what I mean.”

Kirk smiled. “I know what you mean. My upward mobility got up and left.”

Alexis took a breath and exhaled. “I’m not sure how to handle this one.”

“You’ve talked to your boss and told him about the missing files?”

“As soon as I discovered they were missing.”

“Then don’t sweat it,” Kirk said. “Keep servicing your clients. If the files turn up, great, and if they don’t—not your fault. It’s not like you ordered the renovations.”

Alexis squeezed Kirk’s thigh. “You’re right. It isn’t my fault. You always give me a different way to look at things.”

“That’s what any good investigator does,” Kirk said.

She moved her hand up the inside of his thigh. “Well, I think I like this investigator. And you know what else I think?”

“What?” Kirk asked with a wide grin.

Alexis downed her martini and planted the glass on the bar. “I’m not interested in eating.”

“Now that you mention it,” Kirk said, “I’m not either.”

They walked out of Elaine’s and embraced on the sidewalk. Alexis pulled away and their eyes met. “We should hail a cab,” she said. “Like—now.”

Kirk checked up the street for an approaching cab. *I really like this lady.*

* * * * *

Lauren took an express elevator to the sky-lobby on the 78th floor of the World Trade Center’s North Tower. She switched to a local elevator and stepped out on the 94th floor. Willie was talking to a construction worker and spotted her. “Hey, Lauren.” Willie shook the worker’s hand and walked over to her. “Ready to see our handy work?”

“Absolutely.”

Lauren followed Willie down the hallway. He stopped and unlocked a door. The office was vacant except for office furnishings and filing cabinets covered with drop cloths. Willie walked to a large tarp hanging from the ceiling braces. “Have a look at this.” He pulled back the tarp and pointed to the ceiling. “See where the sprinklers and the fireproofing have been upgraded?”

“Yeah.”

Willie pointed. “If you look here, you’ll see where our guys have wired the load-bearing walls.”

Lauren moved closer. “I see. This is required for the explosives to simulate the free fall, right?”

“Right. Now, look behind the cross-member.”

Lauren pointed to a tiny circuit board. “This will detonate the charges?”

“Yeah, it’s totally cool. After they finish the upgrade to the fire system, fire retardant spray insulation is applied. Finally, the drywall is replaced, totally concealing the install. There are hundreds in the refurbished areas in both tango one and two.”

“We have a diagram of where they’re located?” Lauren asked.

“No need,” Willie replied. “Detonation is remote by a radio signal controlled by a computer program. The charges will go off when we want—down to the microsecond.”

“No chance of a premature detonation from a power surge or heat or whatever?”

“No. These explosive charges are dead until we wake them. They also maintain stability with a protective coating designed to prevent any type of discharge. The holes for the shaped charges and squibs are drilled and concealed. Our teams will do the install in the weeks before E-Day.”

“What about the bomb-sniffing dogs used by building security?” Lauren asked.

“Charges are sealed and inside drywall. But to be sure they’re not detected, we’ll have the dogs removed from the buildings before the final install of the explosives.”

“That’s a good idea, Willie.”

“Anything, else, Lauren?”

“No,” Lauren replied. “Looks like you guys got it covered. Man, I’m super impressed with our Israeli friends.”

“The boom boss is code-named, ‘Gabby,’” Willie said. “When you meet him, don’t let his broken English fool you. He’s brilliant. He and his team are demolition experts trained by the Israeli military. After they left military service, they started a demolition company. They’ve performed hundreds of controlled demolitions all over the world—from bridges to buildings and anything else someone needs blown up. He and his team are the best I’ve worked with.”

“How much more time do they need?”

“Still lots to do,” Willie said. “Preliminary install will be finished early in the New Year. After that, we’ll complete the brothers.”

“Ahead of schedule?” Lauren asked.

“I’m pretty sure we will be,” Willie replied, “but we still got all the core s**t, and it takes time. And we gotta make it look like part of the elevator refurb in tango one and two, and a fire upgrade and reno over at Building Seven. Pretty much the same deal as the first charges—all by remote detonation. As I said, Gabby’s teams will bring in and set the charges closer to E-Day.”

“You mentioned they would need to cut the power to the buildings?”

“Yeah. Gabby says if we don’t, we run the risk of an accidental discharge when they’re arming the charges. We’ll give the tenants plenty of notice of the power downs.”

“And at Building Seven, we’re targeting the floors containing the computers and files our bosses want destroyed?”

“Yeah. The IRS and SEC records will be totally obliterated.”

“How much time do they need before E-Day to do the final install in all three buildings?”

“Gabby said his crew works fast, so he needs about two weeks tops,” Willie replied. “But I’m thinking about giving them at least a three-week window.”

Lauren nodded. "Extra time is always good."

Willie's cell phone buzzed. "Okay", he said and folded his phone. "The WTC Security Chief Walter Sheldon is ready to meet with us."

"Let's go," Lauren said.

* * * * *

A cold winter wind was whipping light snow flurries across Langley, Virginia. Sam and Woody were driving across town on a mission to visit an old friend. "There's a seven-eleven," Sam said. "I need some antifreeze. Y'all wanna coffee, Woody?"

"Sounds good."

The store was across the street from the entrance to the cemetery. They hustled back to the car with their coffee. "Cold day to visit a grave," Sam said.

Woody removed the plastic lid from his coffee and blew across the top. "It's not Whitey's fault he croaked in February, Sam. I'm glad we always visit him on the day of his memorial service."

Sam backed out of the parking spot at the 7-11. "We're the guys that should. You and I put what was left of him into a body bag and smuggled it out of Lebanon."

"You mean all we could find of him, Sam. Poor Whitey. He didn't know they'd wired in a second detonator."

Sam checked both lanes of traffic and sped across the road into the cemetery. "He was a good guy and a great bomb tech, Woody. He only f**ked up once."

"They shoulda put *that* on his tombstone."

They drove through the cemetery to Whitey's grave. Sam pulled to the side of the roadway and parked. "Time to make sure they're taking care of our old buddy."

Woody and Sam stopped at the grave marked "Clarence Ford". "Never thought of Whitey as a 'Clarence'," Woody said.

"Me neither."

After checking the grave, they hurried back to the car. Sam started the engine and cranked up the heat. "This is a good spot to talk, Woody. I don't believe there's anyone alive enough to hear us."

"You have a macabre sense of humor, Sam."

"I do. So, what's the latest on the op?"

"Lauren and Willie have the buildings on schedule," Woody replied. "Buzz is spending some time at TSS to keep their feet to the fire. And I want Buzz to

keep some of his people there until E-Day. Oh, and speaking of TSS tell me about this Bruce Thorne. He says Cliff Brooks is out, and he's taking over."

Sam took a sip of coffee. "What? S**t, I didn't know that."

"I didn't either, Sam. After Lauren and I met with Thorne, I called Mick. He told me Brooks was a Nervous Nellie and wanted out. Mick cleared the move with Griff."

"Woulda been nice if Mick hadda told us about it."

"He assumed Griff would contact me and Griff thought Mick would," Woody said. "A communication f**k-up. Mick apologized, but I told him not to worry. No harm done."

"I really hope they're keepin' an eye on Cliff Brooks," Sam said. "The b*****d knows way too much about the op."

"Mick said Griff's guys are watching Brooks like a hawk."

"I'll bet The Ring will do more than that. He's high risk and no benefit now."

"I agree, Sam. They'll hit him to make sure he stays quiet."

"We've done the same thing out in the field, y'all. More than once."

"That we have, Sam."

So, what about the drone tests? Did Thorne give you a time frame when they'll be done?"

"Next few weeks. Buzz will make sure they stay on schedule."

"Good," Sam said. "Are the cell phone and media scripts ready to go for E-Day?"

"Magic and his crew are still working on them," Woody replied. "The phone bank is operational, and in case we need them, we're considering hiring voice actors. We'll tell 'em they're needed to add authenticity to some war games and simulated hijackings. They'll take oaths of secrecy and sign papers for national security—all official looking. Once we get all the personal information we need, we'll cut and paste to create the scripts for the actors. We'll also gather extra contact info for each airline's frequent fliers and crew, just in case."

"The voice actor thing is risky, Woody. Is there another way?"

"Right now—no, but Lauren says her guys are looking for another solution."

"What about the kids?" Sam asked. "You told me the cobblers have their visas and ID ready. When do they arrive for their flight training?"

"First ones will be in-country early next year."

Sam checked his watch. "Good. Now, I'm due back at the White House. You ready to go?"

"Yeah, but there's something that's been bothering me," Woody said.

"What's that?"

“Something Lauren said. She mentioned her estimate of the number of innocent civilians that will be killed on E-Day. I think it’s way too many.”

“Can’t be helped,” Sam said. “The nature of this beast.”

“I’m not convinced, Sam.”

“We try to f**k around and save lives, the op could be compromised. Y’all know that, Woody.”

“I know, but we’ve already reduced the numbers by setting E-Day on primary election day. We’re also timing the aircraft impacts before most people arrive for work in the Towers. Wouldn’t hurt to also make sure there are fewer people on the flights.”

“Y’all want to screw around with the number of passengers on the flights?”

“Why not? It would be easy for us to manipulate the airline computers and book up some of the seats on each aircraft.”

“Too f**kin’ risky, pardner. If the numbers are too far out of whack, someone’s gonna get suspicious.”

“It’s a Tuesday morning in September,” Woody said. “Hardly peak season. Also, with all the confusion and carnage we’re causing on E-Day, the lower than normal numbers could be missed or at least easily explained. Besides, we’re selling terrorist hijackers, not a conspiracy.”

“Y’all just defeated your own argument, Woody. If the numbers are already low at that time of the year, why bother?”

“It’s worth the risk to save a few more lives. Besides, it means there will be fewer people for Digger’s crew to deal with. Also, there will be no proof of any jiggery-pokery in the airline booking system.”

“Y’all are in charge of the op, and therefore it’s your call, pardner.”

“It’ll be fine, Sam. Trust me.”

“I do. Now can we go, Woody?”

“I have one more question before we head out.”

“What’s that?”

“We never found it, Sam.”

“Never found what?”

“Whitey’s right arm. I wonder how far away it landed.”

Sam winked at him. “Probably set one of them Guinness World Records.”

Woody chuckled. “Especially if the wire cutters were still in his hand.”

THIRTEEN

Warning Signs

Kirk called Mark Pennington into his office. Sal Khouri was already there. “Shut the door, Mark,” Kirk said.

“Hey, Sal,” Mark said. “What’s up, Boss?”

“As I just told Sal, this morning I was heading to my car in my parking garage. Two guys wearing ski masks came out of nowhere, grabbed me, put a knife to my throat, and took my weapon.”

“Holy s**t, Boss,” Mark said. “A mugging?”

“No,” Kirk replied. “They tossed me into the back of a cargo van. A sliding window behind the front seat opened, and a man with a gruff voice told me I should back off my investigation of the Travis gang. Said I didn’t know who I was f**kin’ with. Told me I could have an unfortunate accident. Then, before I had a chance to say anything, they threw me out the back of the van. Yelled out: ‘they’d be watching me’. Then they f**ked off.”

“You make the plate?” Mark asked.

“No. New York tag though,” Kirk replied. “White Ford Econoline. No company logos or markings.”

“Security cameras in your garage pick up anything?” Mark asked.

“Haven’t worked for months.”

“Did they toss out your weapon?” Sal asked.

“No. It’s probably at the bottom of the f**kin’ East River by now.”

“Don’t you usually pick up Kirk, Sal?” Mark asked.

“Not on Tuesday mornings. My turn to drop off the kids.”

“I’ll bet they were doing f**kin’ surveillance,” Kirk said.

“What do you guys suggest we do?” Sal asked. “These mooks are organized and dangerous.”

“I think we have to reconsider our tactics on the Travis gang,” Kirk said. “For now, anyway.”

“Well,” Mark said. “I was going to brief you on this at show-and-tell this morning, Kirk. We hung wire in Travis’s office this past weekend. We can lay off the physical surveillance for a while.”

“I agree,” Kirk said. “Get anything juicy from the wire so far?”

“Nah. Travis has been away,” Mark said. “We did learn the janitor likes to sing along with Elton John.”

“Who doesn’t?” Sal said.

Kirk gave Sal a blank stare. “Let’s hope the wire will tell us what these a**holes are up to.”

“If Travis is dumb enough to say something we can use,” Mark said.

“We can only hope,” Sal said.

“Now,” Kirk said, “I going to be looking for a new place, so if either of you hear of a good rental apartment with twenty-four-seven, armed-to-the-f**kin’-teeth security—let me know.”

* * * * *

Lauren came into the bedroom carrying two mugs of coffee. She was wearing a white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Tony lowered his Sunday New York Times. She placed one mug on Tony’s bedside table.

“Thanks, babe,” he said. “Hey, I have a shirt just like that.”

Lauren twirled. “I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Looks better on you.”

“Thanks. Anything worth reading in the paper?”

“Those three dumb-f**k white supremacists were found guilty. You know the ones who dragged that poor guy to death behind their truck?”

“The court should order the same for them.”

“Now *that* would be justice, Lauren.”

“And a deterrent if they televised it in primetime.”

Tony paused. “I know our rule about shop talk, but how’s it going at Focus?”

“Good. Lots to do to get the mayor re-elected.” Lauren wanted to change the subject. “You found a new media liaison yet?”

“Yeah. Pretty sharp guy.” He tapped the newspaper. “Worked for these guys.”

“Have you tried your coffee?”

Tony took a sip. “Hey, this is good.”

“Told you I can be domesticated.”

Tony set his cup down. “Lauren—I received a call about your boss.”

That’s why we’re talking about work. “About Woody?”

“Yeah. They said he’s ex-CIA.”

First Sam, now Woody. His source is working him for info on the op. “He is, but he’s old school—retired years ago.”

“Also, the FBI is interested in him.”

An FBI source. Interesting. “Really, Tony? Who told you that?”

“Can’t say, but the information is reliable.”

Lauren shrugged her shoulders. “Can’t imagine why they’d be interested in Woody. He’s a sweet old guy and certainly no threat. I’m sure your source is mistaken.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“I’m a good judge of character, am I not? I mean—I like you.”

“And I trust you, babe.”

Lauren put her coffee on the bedside table, slid out of the shirt, and climbed in beside him. “You’re wise, Tony. Remember, I’m one of the good guys.”

Tony lifted the covers. “Good yes, but hardly a guy.”

Lauren rolled over and straddled him. “You bet, big fella.”

“You’re wrinkling my paper.”

“Yeah, but I’m straightening out other things.”

Tony Manetti—Chief of Staff to the Mayor of New York City. No match for Lauren Hunter.

* * * * *

As usual, Woody stopped the elevator on a random floor near his 28th-floor office in the South Tower of the World Trade Center. Today, he stepped off on the 25th and walked up the fire stairs. Two of Franco’s security guys met him when he exited onto the 28th floor. “Security cameras are working fine, huh, fellas?” Woody asked.

“Yes, sir. Please come with us, Mr. Travis. Franco’s waiting for you.”

The security detail escorted him to Franco’s office. Franco was standing at an open filing cabinet when Woody walked in. “Hey, Franco. What’s up?”

“We have a problem, Boss. During our regular sweep last Monday morning, we discovered two listening devices in your office. My guess is they were planted on the weekend. They also tapped your desk phone.”

“No alarm?” Woody asked.

“Nah. These guys were pros—by-passed the alarms. We’re going to upgrade to a more secure system, so it won’t happen again.”

“Anything on the cameras?”

“Just a frozen shot of the stairwells and your office,” Franco said. “They hacked into the system. Security didn’t catch it.”

“They *are* pros. Any idea who the bugs belong to?”

“Type used by our Feds—FBI, NSA, and others.”

“At first, I thought the physical surveillance was the FBI, but then Sam said no,” Woody said. “Guess I was right.”

“Well, whoever it is, they’re getting serious. I recommend new office space, Woody.”

“For sure,” Woody said. “You said you didn’t discover this until Monday. Don’t you guys do sweeps on Saturday and Sunday?”

“Usually, we do, but you guys were out of town, and the poker buddies took a few days off. Also, your schedule showed you wouldn’t be back until mid-week. I wanted to give my guys a few days off.”

“Not a problem,” Woody said. “Can I see one, Franco?”

“They’re still planted in your office. I told the sweepers not to touch them.”

Woody thought for a moment. “I’m gonna assume this is Dolan and his guys. Who else has access to my office, Franco?”

“Right now—only me and my guys.”

“You changed the code already?” Woody asked.

“Right away. There are only two cards keyed to the lock. Here’s yours.”

Woody slipped the card into his pocket. “No one has been in my office?”

“Only the janitor. We let him in.”

“Good.”

“Yeah. You know me, Woody—secure first, ask questions later.”

“You’ve always been like that Franco—on every op. But I’m curious about one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Why didn’t you remove the bugs after you found them?” Woody asked. “Isn’t that SOP?”

“Yeah, it is, but I thought you might wanna have some fun with whoever’s listening.”

Woody laughed. “You’re the best, my friend.”

“That’s why I get the big money, Woody.”

* * * * *

When Sam Saunders entered the Oval Office, President Claire Walker was seated at her desk. “Please have a seat, Sam.”

“Thank you, Madam President.”

“I have some great news,” the president said.

“The Senate is going to acquit y’all, ma’am.”

“You already know the numbers, Sam.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You know the numbers because you were responsible for the numbers. Right, Sam?”

“Not totally, ma’am. I had help.”

“I know, but my staff has received complaints from several Senators who claim you threatened them into voting not guilty.”

“Threatened is such an ugly word, Madam President.”

“Okay. How about coerced?”

“Can we agree on influenced, ma’am?”

“Okay. So how did you manage to *influence* these powerful United States Senators, Sam?”

“I pointed out the error of their ways, ma’am.”

“You had something on them,” the president said.

“Knowledge is power, ma’am.”

“Knowing when to use it is wisdom, Sam. Didn’t take you long to figure out Washington politics.”

“Thanks, ma’am, but with all due respect, this ain’t my first rodeo. Experience has taught me once someone gits clout, they tend to wanna hang on to it.”

“Best be careful. The White House is an easy target, and we have many enemies. I want my last year in office to go smoothly.”

“I’m always careful, Madam President.”

“Especially with the FBI, Sam. I read your briefing notes on your meeting with Special Agent Dolan, but I’m curious about what you thought of him. Do you think he’s as good as some people here in the West Wing believe he is?”

“He is, ma’am. From what I know about Dolan, he’s like a bloodhound that’s found the scent. Doesn’t quit ‘til he’s tracked down whatever he’s huntin’.”

“You heard what he said at the meeting. He’s convinced a terrorist attack is coming. And soon.”

“He is, ma’am.”

“Do you agree with him?”

“He has no idea when or how, Madam President. We need better intel before we act.”

“Do you recommend we stay the course, and not take out bin Laden?”

“Yes, ma’am. Until we have positive confirmation an attack is coming, it’s not worth stickin’ a stick in a hornet’s nest.”

“You think we’d make him a martyr.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Sam. That’s all for today.”

“Thank you, Madam President.”

Sam walked out of the Oval Office confident he had swayed the president into delaying any action against bin Laden. *Kinda sad though*, he thought, *one*

day she'll regret she didn't kill UBL when she had the chance.

FOURTEEN

Diversions

The Gulfstream III was cruising high above a solid cloud deck at 42,000 feet. Kirk Dolan sipped on a club soda while he waited for FBI Director Tanner Knox to return from the restroom. He and the director had traveled together many times across the globe on assignments, and they had become close friends. Kirk admired Tanner's intelligence and dedication. President Claire Walker had appointed Knox in 1993, but a few months ago she had called him a 'boy scout' in a media interview. She had taken a dislike to him because of his dogged determination to investigate the allegations of impropriety against her. Tanner told Kirk he believed President Walker had no moral compass.

Director Knox stopped at the bulkhead screen to check their progress. "Looks like we've got a twenty-knot tailwind and are heading to Chicago MDW present position direct," Tanner said. "We'll be in ahead of sched."

"Did you learn all that pilot talk in the boy scouts, sir?"

Tanner smiled. "Very funny, Kirk. And you know better than to call me *sir* when we're alone."

"I was just messin' with ya, Tanner."

"I've been thinking about your parking garage encounter. Have you been able to figure out who it was?"

"I've racked my brain, and honestly, I have no idea. What I do know is they were pros."

"Who has a vested interest in Travis 'et al' succeeding?"

"That's the million-dollar question," Kirk replied. "All I know is, Woody Travis and Lauren Hunter are in New York for a reason, and it ain't for the bagels or the pastrami."

"Chances are those clowns who grabbed you at your apartment building work for the people behind the Travis operation," Tanner said. "I'd be extra careful if I were you."

"Everyone keeps telling me to be careful, but no one will tell me why."

"I don't know why everyone else is telling you to be careful," Tanner said, "but anyone who kidnaps and threatens an FBI agent is dangerous because they're reckless and have no respect for the law."

"Speaking of dangerous, I suspect Sam Saunders at the White House is a major player in this op. He's a colleague and a close friend of Travis and

Hunter.”

“Whoa, big fella. If you have any direct evidence that the White House is involved indirectly or otherwise—”

Kirk interrupted him. “No. Not yet, but I’m going to prove he’s involved.”

“You have a contact in the castle you trust, Kirk?”

“Yeah—Art Brown.”

“Art’s a good man,” Tanner said. “And as the national security guru, he is certainly in a position to help. In spite of the fact he’s a friend, always move cautiously when the castle is involved.”

“Always do, Tanner.”

“Also, we’re asking all the field offices to focus their attention on millennium threats,” Tanner said. “Now is a great time for UBL to pull something.”

“Our al Qaeda desk is already on it. Now—if that’s everything, I have a more urgent matter.”

“What’s that?” Tanner asked.

“I’m sure this FBI director’s aircraft has a cribbage board—if I know this director, and I do.”

Tanner opened a side panel and brought out a cribbage board and a deck of playing cards. “You mean like this one?”

“Yes, that will do,” Kirk said. “And I believe you still owe me a hundred and twelve dollars from our last Saudi trip.”

Tanner handed the cards to Kirk. “Shuffle ‘em.”

* * * * *

Lauren and Woody carried their coffee to a table in a Starbucks on West Broadway. “Are you comfortable with the script for our FBI performance, Lauren?”

“Yeah. Got it down pat.”

“Me, too,” Woody said. “As soon as we’re done having fun with the Feds, Franco’s guys will pretend to discover the bugs, and then they’ll pack up my office. The mayor’s campaign phone bank will remain there until E-Day.”

“It’s on the twenty-eighth floor so they should get out okay.”

“I hope so, Lauren.”

“Is your new office close to mine in Liberty Plaza?” Lauren asked.

“Couldn’t get much closer. We signed the deal yesterday. I’m moving next door to you. Poker buddies have space there, too. Then once Red Hook is ready, we’ll all move over there.”

“Cool, but I’d like to run E-Day from my office in Liberty Plaza.”

“Sounds good.”

“So Griff didn’t object to your move?”

“I didn’t give him the opportunity, Lauren. Told him that’s where I was going. Did I mention Griff gave me a new sidearm?”

“No. What is it?”

“Sig-Sauer P two twenty-six,” Woody replied.

“That’s FBI standard issue, Woody. Did numbnuts happen to mention where he got it?”

“I asked, and Griff told me not to worry about it because the serial number is filed off. I’ve got Franco’s guys trying to raise it.”

Lauren’s brow furrowed. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this. Griff is closely connected to The Ring, wears a wire when he meets with us, and now he gives you an FBI issue piece?”

“I’m not going to carry it. I’ve got another Beretta. Hopefully, we’ll find out who it’s registered to. Might come in handy one day.”

“Griff is one of those sneaky pricks—always up to no good,” Lauren said. “I don’t trust him as far as I can throw him.”

“You know I never have.” Woody paused. “There was something else I wanted to tell you.”

“What?”

“I’m trying to think what it was.” Woody paused once again. “Oh, yeah. Willie called me yesterday. He told me you guys met with Walter Sheldon last week.”

“Yeah. Sheldon’s totally onside.”

“As security chief for the World Trade Center, he’d bloody well better be. And by the way, he was given no choice by his boss.”

“Sheldon has issued our whole team with all-access WTC security cards,” Lauren said. “He’s been told Gabby and his guys are Master Elevator sub-contractors for the elevator upgrades, so they received the cards as well.”

“Means they can come and go as they please,” Woody said. “That’s excellent.” He gulped the rest of his coffee. “You ready?”

Lauren turned to him “Showtime!”

* * * * *

Ace stuck his head into the electronics lab at TSS. “Is there some clown here named Buzz?”

Buzz shook his head. “Over here, knucklehead.”

Ace held up a VHS tape. "Hey, Buzzy. You got time to see a movie?"

"More of your porn, Ace?"

"No, you idiot. It's a true-to-life thriller about a drone making the ultimate sacrifice."

"Let's go," Buzz said.

They walked down the hall to a boardroom. Ace plugged the tape into a VHS tape player and hit the play button. "Kill the lights would ya, Buzz?"

Ace stood beside a monitor showing the view from the drone's nose camera. The drone taxied into position on a runway and began its takeoff roll. "This little lady is a Predator drone loaded with contact explosives," Ace said. "She has the same targeting system as her big sisters the KC seven sixty-seven drone conversions. Watch her climb!" Buzz stared at the screen. The altitude numbers on the right side of the screen increased until they indicated the drone was at 2,000 feet above the ground.

Ace pointed at the monitor. "The target is a ten-foot white circle on a fifty-foot brick wall about five miles ahead. Cameras on the ground will show us the impact from several angles."

"So the guys on the ground are guiding the drone, right?"

"Yup. Pilot and two sensor operators monitoring a computer screen. They see what we're seeing. The targeting is assisted by a homing signal embedded in the brick wall."

A number on the right side of the screen was increasing. "I take it that speed is in knots?" Buzz asked.

"Yup. She's in a steep descent now doin' two hundred and sixty." Ace raised his voice. "Look! The drone is hugging the terrain to avoid radar and closing fast. Impact in about five seconds."

The drone banked several times to make minor heading corrections before hitting the center of the target. "Wow! Right on!" Buzz said.

"This is the fourth test, and the targeting is totally accurate."

"Does Woody know?"

"Briefing him at tomorrow's poker game," Ace replied. "You comin'?"

"Next time. I've got simulated ATC radar control tests tomorrow. Me and my team gotta be here."

Buzz and Ace walked towards the door. Ace put his arm around Buzz's shoulder. "Well, that won't stop you from buying me a beer right now, will it, ol' Buzzy?"

Buzz stopped. "Wait a sec. I seem to remember you owe me a couple from Kota Kinabalu airport in Borneo."

"Oh, yeah," Ace said. "Guess I do, but where am I going to find Angkor?"

Buzz tapped Ace's arm. "No need, ol' buddy. Ice-cold Coors will do just fine."

* * * * *

Kirk Dolan couldn't believe what he was hearing from John Fletcher of DITU*. "Dammit, Fletch. They found our bug?" (*FBI Data Intercept Technology Unit)

"Yeah," Fletcher replied. "I assume they know the phone was tapped as well."

"F**k."

"My feelings exactly. But at least, we recorded a lot before they found it. Sounds to me like Woody Travis and Lauren Hunter are legit."

"You've got to be f**kin' kidding."

"I'm not, Kirk. All they talked about was political stuff like polling, advertising, and crap like that."

"You're convinced they actually work for the mayor?"

"Sure sounds like it," Fletcher replied. "Here have a listen." He turned on the recording. "Now listen to these two discuss all the political bulls**t."

There was a man's voice on the tape: "The mayor wants these numbers for the West Side districts by this Friday, Lauren. Is your phone bank able to obtain a sample large enough for a three percent plus or minus?"

Fletcher paused the recording. "That's Travis. Now Hunter answers him." Fletcher hit play, and Lauren spoke: "We can do it, Woody, but it may take some time. It's hard to find people at home, let alone get them to answer survey questions. Oh, before I forget, we should be shooting some stock footage for our TV spots as—"

"Is there anything else even remotely f**kin' interesting, Fletch?"

Fletcher paused the recording. "The only other thing worth mentioning is Travis said they're moving out of that office in the South Tower, but he didn't say where. Said the mayor wants them closer."

"No need to hear anymore. This doesn't change my mind. I still think they're up to something."

"Really, Kirk? They didn't mention anything else."

"What if they discovered the bugs and were play-acting?"

"That's possible," Fletch replied. "But CIA standard procedure is to remove them when found."

"These guys ain't standard spooks. I wouldn't put anything past them."

"You're always looking at s**t from another angle, Kirk. I like that."

"Thanks, Fletch. Anything else?"

“Yeah. Are we gonna do another install on Travis’s new office once we locate it?”

“I’ll let you know.”

After John Fletcher left, Kirk walked to his office window facing south towards City Hall and the World Trade Center. He took a deep breath and exhaled. “The ‘93 bombing of the North Tower, the Embassy bombings in Kenya, and the rise of Usama bin Laden were only the beginning,” he said. “Now there’s something big coming. I feel it in my bones. And f**kin’ Travis, Hunter, and Saunders are in it up to their eyeballs. Why else would I have received that warning to leave them alone? Tanner’s right. If I can find out who grabbed me in the garage, I’ll find out who’s behind this operation. Then—I’ll nail the b*****s.”

Kirk Dolan had no idea the price he would pay.

FIFTEEN

Risky business

April 1999

Lauren's E-Day plan was in jeopardy. The cell phone calls from the airline flights were proving to be difficult to coordinate. The calls had to appear like the passengers and crew on the targeted flights had made them. The problems were many. Cell phone calls were impossible from a speeding jet at cruising altitude. Also, the callers' list could not be finalized because of the variables: passengers who missed flights or changed their plans, last-minute crew changes, and anyone on the list who obtained a new phone number. The callers were also a concern. Could passengers or crew be trusted to follow the script or would one of them blow the whistle? Lauren couldn't chance it. The voice actor idea was also too risky. Sam backed her up, and Woody agreed. If they couldn't find a solution, the E-Day cell phone calls would have to be removed from the master plan. Lauren asked Magic and his staff to explore every possibility.

Lauren had another big problem. Digger was concerned there was insufficient time after the disposal operation to plant the forensic evidence at the scene of each crash site. He was confident, however, his team of professionals would come up with a workable plan.

* * * * *

Sam Saunders was nearing the end of his briefing with the president. He informed her of Usama bin Laden's suspected but unconfirmed location in Afghanistan. He also advised her the FBI was certain al Qaeda cells were operating at unknown locations inside the US. Sam closed his briefing book signaling he was finished.

"If that's all you have today, Sam," the president said, "I have something to discuss with you."

"I have one more item, ma'am, but yours first."

"Fair enough," the president said. "I'm considering firing FBI Director Knox. He is hell-bent on digging up dirt to discredit me."

"I wouldn't advise it, ma'am."

"I assume you have a good reason, Sam."

“I do, Madam President. I agree, in the past, Director Knox was obsessed with investigating y’all, but his attention has been diverted away to millennium security threats. He has placed everything else on the back burner, including you. Also, you know Knox and how to deal with him.”

“Better the devil I know, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Sam. I appreciate your candor. I’ll take it under advisement. Now, I believe I’m scheduled for a photo op. What’s your last item?”

“The CIA Director informed me the SVR was tailing an old colleague of mine in an attempt to locate me.”

“Director Johnson has made me aware of this as well,” the president said. “He claims the threat has been eliminated.”

“I’m not convinced, ma’am. The SVR doesn’t give up until their mission is done.”

“I agree and that’s why I asked Director Johnson to stay on top of it. I’m curious, Sam. Why would the SVR be targeting you?”

“They believe I killed one of their agents in the Middle East.”

“Did you?”

“Of course not, ma’am. We were having a discussion on a rooftop. He tripped and fell twenty floors down to a parking lot.”

“And you claim you didn’t kill him?”

“I didn’t, ma’am. Gravity did.”

The president smirked. “Do the Russians know you work at the White House?”

“No, ma’am. I was deep cover over there. No one knew my real name. They followed my colleague because they got his name from an agent who went double.”

“In any event,” the president said, “I hope you’ve alerted the Secret Service.”

“I have, ma’am.”

“Good,” the president said. “Now, I’m scheduled for photos with the Hog Farmer of the Year.”

Sam winked at her. “Your job does have its perks, ma’am.”

“Yes, I—”

There was a knock on the door, and James Moore burst into the Oval Office. “Excuse me, Madam President. We have an urgent matter that requires your immediate attention. Sam, I must ask you to leave.”

“Thank you, Madam President,” Sam said. He strode through the outer office past a man with a deeply tanned face and a snow-white forehead. *Must be the Hog Farmer of The Year*, he thought. *Looks more like a pro golfer.*

Back in the Oval Office, Moore picked up the remote and turned on the television.

“What’s up?” the president asked.

“The photo-op will have to wait, Madam President. Big news today.” James turned up the volume on the television. A CNN special report was showing students leaving a school with their arms in the air.

“What’s going on, Jim?”

“Somebody shot up a high school in Colorado, ma’am.”

President Walker stared at the screen. “Oh, my God. How many casualties?”

“Early reports say at least ten and possibly more, ma’am.”

“Do they suspect a terrorist group? Has anyone taken responsibility?”

“No. Nothing is certain at this point, Madame President.”

“Those poor kids—and their parents.” The president held up a finger and turned away. She paused for a moment before moving across the office to stand beside her desk. “Terrorists or not, we have to remain calm and reassure the American people.”

“I’m having remarks prepared for you, ma’am. I suggest you address the nation this evening. We’ll inject words like shocked and saddened. I also believe a biblical quote would be appropriate.”

“Okay,” the president said. “I’d like to concentrate on the families and the community. You know, offer comfort and assistance.”

Moore was writing in his binder. “Yes, ma’am. Director Knox has agents on the scene coordinating with the local authorities. I suggest we set up some phone calls to the Governor, the County Commissioner, and the appropriate school board types in Colorado.”

“Good. And don’t forget my AG and Secretary of Education. I want them involved.”

“Yes, ma’am. We should also prepare for the political fallout. There’ll be a backlash against the NRA, the Second Amendment, etc., etc.”

“I agree,” the president said. “We must handle this in the best way possible.”

“Absolutely, Madam President. But as horrible as this tragedy is, there is a political upside for you.”

“What could that possibly be, Jim?”

“Last week’s contempt of court citation and the whole sexual harassment lawsuit will be out of the news cycle for a while.”

The president took a deep breath and exhaled. “Well—there is that I suppose.”

“I have one item I was going to discuss with you today—until this happened,” Moore said. “It can wait.”

“No,” the president said. “Business as usual. Except for the hog farmer.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ve received a report from a reliable source in the FBI. They have intel indicating there’s a covert terrorist operation underway in New York—target unknown. They suspect bin Laden is in cahoots with some former CIA types. Sam Saunders has been implicated.”

“Sam conspiring with al Qaeda? I find that hard to believe, Jim.” The president paused for a moment. “But it would be prudent to verify this before we do or say anything. What time am I meeting with Director Knox today?”

Moore checked his binder. “You’re scheduled for three forty-five this afternoon, ma’am.”

“Perfect. That’s all for now, Jim.”

“Thank you, Madam President.”

President Claire Walker remained standing after her chief of staff left the Oval Office. She thought about the images she had seen from Colorado and how devastated she would be if it were one of her own children. Her thoughts then turned to what James Moore had said about Sam Saunders. She dismissed the idea. *Sam risked his life many times for his country. I doubt he would sympathize with anyone bent on destroying it.*

The president was more concerned about her FBI director, Tanner Knox. She had appointed him during her first term in office, but now she didn’t trust him. His agenda was not hers, and Knox had spearheaded the investigation into her personal and business affairs. He was out to discredit her by any means possible. Under normal circumstances, she would fire him to protect her legacy. But these were not normal circumstances. *The last thing we need right now is a gung-ho FBI director*, she thought. *Sam’s right. Knox stays right where he is.*

* * * * *

Woody was sitting alone at McSorley’s in his East Village neighborhood. A woman was sitting at a table with two couples. She was younger than him, slim, and attractive. Woody caught her glancing at him several times. She turned away, flush-faced the first time.

The bartender stopped at his table and tapped Woody’s empty beer mug. “Another, Woody?”

“Sure, Reg. Thanks.”

Woody went up to the bar to save Reg a trip to his table. Reg placed another mug of ale on the bar. “You were checkin’ out that nice lookin’ lady over there, huh, Woody?”

“I’m old, Reg—not dead. Who is she?”

“Her name is Roxanne. Lives in the neighborhood. Someone said she’s a lawyer. Downtown somewhere.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

At his table, Woody was unsure if he should get involved with anyone right now. *Probably not a good idea*, he thought. *Besides, I haven’t dated since Cath died. I have no idea how it’s done these days.*

Roxanne was standing at his table. “Hi,” she said. “You appear to be alone, and our friendly neighborhood bartender over there says you’re not a serial killer.”

Woody stood. “If I was, the last person I’d tell would be a bartender.”

Roxanne chuckled. *He stood, so it seems he’s a gentleman*, she thought. “I think I’ll take a chance. Would you care to join me and my friends?”

“I’d love to... uh, Roxanne, is it?”

“I had no idea I was famous here.” she extended her hand. “Yes. I’m Roxanne—Roxanne Holmes. And you are?”

Woody shook her hand. “Woody Travis.”

“Follow me, Woody.”

Roxanne introduced Woody to her friends. He learned a great deal about Roxanne that evening. She grew up outside Buffalo and graduated from Columbia Law School. She was a partner at the Holmes, Kinney, and McLeod law firm on Chambers Street in the Tribeca. She was also smart, articulate, and kind. And, best of all, she giggled at Woody’s silly jokes.

For Woody, this was the happiest happy hour he’d had in a long time.

* * * * *

Liz Hopkins and Forbes Miller strolled along the Maumee River Pathway in Ft. Wayne. Hopkins and Miller were old allies in the GOP. When Liz was a Massachusetts state senator, Forbes was her chief of staff. When Forbes was secretary of defense, he helped Liz save a military base and hundreds of jobs in her riding. Politics being a game of quid quo pro, the time had come for payback.

“It’s a perfect spring day for a stroll, Forbes. I had no idea Ft. Wayne had such a beautiful pathway system.”

“You know I love Ft. Wayne, Liz, but I don’t believe you flew out here to discuss the weather or our walking paths.”

“No—no, I didn’t, Forbes. As you know, I’m seeking our party’s nomination for President.”

“And you know you have my complete support, Liz.”

“And I appreciate that, Forbes. Now, I need a favor.”

Campaign manager? Secretary of State? Forbes thought. “How can I help you, Liz?”

“Find me a running mate, Forbes. I trusted you enough to be my chief of staff, and I still do. Plus you’re a Washington insider with great connections in government.”

“I’ll do whatever I can to find you the best person, Liz. Do you have anyone in mind?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to influence you. Give me your top three choices.”

I’m my first choice, Forbes thought. “I’ll send you my recommendations.”

“Thank you, Forbes. I can always count on you.”

“Of course, Liz, but do you know what I’d like to do right now?”

“What?”

“I’d like to finish our stroll along Ft. Wayne’s beautiful pathway system on this perfect spring day.”

They ambled along talking and laughing—arm in arm. Two old political friends—each with an agenda: Liz looking for the best choice for her vice-presidential running mate, and Forbes scheming to become that choice.

SIXTEEN

Threats and Promises

June 1999

Woody exited the jetway into the central terminal at Miami International Airport. In the E concourse, he walked into the Airport Hotel and took the elevator to the seventh-floor restaurant. Mick Taylor was sitting at the bar.

Mick slid off the barstool, and they shook hands. "Mick, good to see ya again."

"Hey, Woodrow. Let's find someplace we can be alone."

"Can you at least buy me a drink first?"

Mick laughed. "Of course, Woodrow."

Mick and Woody moved to a table and ordered drinks. "Ah, nothing like June in Miami, Mick. Are you here for the heat or the humidity?"

"I'm visiting an old friend in South Beach."

"You gonna get a chance to see the dolphins?"

"This isn't football season, Woodrow."

"I'm not talking about the Miami Dolphins, Mick. I'm talking about the dolphin dolphins. You can see them here at the Seaquarium."

"Just pullin' your leg. I know how much you love dolphins," Mick said. "So, how's it going? Any snags?"

"FBI and NSA are still on our tails. Griff's aware, and Smokey's guys inside are working on it."

"Griff would be the best choice for that, Woodrow. They have the right people in the right places."

"I can trust Griff with this?"

"Yeah, why do you ask?"

"One of my security guys said Griff was wearing a wire the last time we met."

"Most likely, he had no choice, Woodrow. Maybe The Ring wants to keep track of what you and Lauren had to say, and didn't trust Griff's memory."

"Speaking of trust, Mick, why did they trust you to recruit for this op?"

"They know I keep secrets—secret."

"Dallas, right?"

"Yup," Mick replied. "I know what went down, and who was involved."

"Do you think the same people are involved here, Mick?"

“Unofficially—I’d bet half my pension they are.”

“I’d sure like to know who the hell The Ring is.”

“No, you don’t, Woodrow. You really don’t. Besides, that will never happen.”

“So, good ol’ Woodrow Wilson was right, huh?”

“He was.”

“What is it you couldn’t discuss on the phone, Mick?”

Mick leaned forward. “I have reliable info you and everyone else managing this op are in grave danger.”

“Where is this *grave* danger coming from?”

“The Ring. Listen and listen carefully. They—” Mick paused. The waitress stopped at the table, and they ordered another round. When she left, he continued. “They are planning to eliminate you, Sam, Lauren, and the poker buddies.”

Woody’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“It’s true, Woodrow. Griff and his goons have been ordered to hit our team right after E-Day.”

“S**t. What is it? They don’t trust us, or are they afraid we know too much?”

“Both,” Mick replied. “Plus there’s too much at stake, and that’s the only way they can guarantee absolute secrecy.”

“What about you, Mick?”

“They trust me, but I’m going to assume I’m on the list as well.”

Mick has a source he trusts, Woody thought. “How did your source find out, Mick?”

“Let’s just say a private conversation wasn’t private.”

“You’re absolutely sure about this, Mick?”

“Positive.”

“Dammit. What about the contractors and government people involved? They can’t eliminate everyone.”

“Don’t have to hit all of them,” Mick said. “Some will die in the buildings or on the flights. The more powerful ones have too much to lose, so they won’t say anything. The Ring has compiled enough evidence on them to guarantee silence.”

“We’re totally screwed,” Woody said. “If we quit, they’ll kill us, and if we stay—”

“We’re dead either way.”

“We gotta figure a way out of this.”

“That’s why I told you, Woodrow.”

“Ain’t gonna be easy,” Woody said. “They know everything about us, and can track everything we do.”

“Yes, but we have the advantage.”

“How the hell do you figure that, Mick?”

“First, The Ring has no idea we know they’re planning to hit us. Secondly, you and I alone have over sixty-plus years in The Craft* and have lots of worldwide contacts. And finally, we’ve hidden people before, and no one has ever found them.” (*nickname for the Intelligence Service)

Woody paused. “Gimme some time. I’ll figure this out.”

“Okay, but I needn’t remind you we have only two years to go—so time is of the essence.”

“I’m on it, Mick. I ain’t ready to go to the big CIA station in the sky.”

“I’m not either.”

“And speaking of the big station,” Woody said. “Sam and I visited Whitey’s grave a few months back.”

“How is Whitey? Still dead?”

Woody nodded. “I’m pretty sure he is.”

“Poor son-of-a-gun.” Mick raised his glass. “Here’s to good ol’ Whitey.”

Woody tapped his glass with Mick’s. “And all the other brave souls we lost.”

“Let’s hope we don’t see them too soon, Woodrow.”

* * * * *

Forbes Miller checked the wall clock—again. *This f**king board meeting is taking forever*, he thought. The financial analysts were droning on about second-quarter profits, and Forbes was thinking about politics. He always thought about politics. *Wonder how Liz feels about the VP choices I gave her today? She needs someone strong to back her up and keep her on course. I’d be perfect, but it would be inappropriate to recommend myself.* Forbes hoped she would pick him as her running mate, and they would win both the nomination and the 2000 election. He would love the opportunity to make the vice president’s role more powerful. He also longed to escape the corporate world. He enjoyed being the C.E.O. of Wirthmanne Communications Corp, but he disliked the constraints of corporate structure and adherence to company policy. He craved the authority to initiate real change in the world and not be confined or accountable to anyone—especially a group of mind-numbing old men like his board of directors.

When the meeting adjourned for lunch, Forbes walked past pictures of both current and past company executives on the way to his office. He stopped at his picture. *Handsome devil*, he thought and laughed to himself.

In the outer office, his executive secretary Yvonne handed him a stack of phone messages. “The top one is from Alvin Hawkins, sir. He said it was urgent.”

“Thanks.” Forbes opened his office door. “I don’t want to be disturbed, Yvonne.”

Forbes thumbed through the phone messages. His intercom buzzed. *Must be important*, he thought. “Yes, Yvonne.”

“Sorry to interrupt, sir,” Yvonne said, “but Senator Liz Hopkins is on line one.”

Forbes thanked Yvonne and picked up his phone. “Liz, so nice of you to call. How did you like the candidates I sent you?” Forbes paused to listen for a moment. “Of course, I accept,” he said. “I’m honored—and thank you.” Forbes hung up the phone. *You’re a lucky man, Forbes*, he thought.

Forbes dialed his old friend Alvin Hawkins. “Forbsie,” Alvin said. “How are y’all?”

“Good, Alvin. You called? Are you buckin’ for a job? Cattle ranchin’ isn’t your thing anymore?”

“Is this line secure, Forbes?”

“Yes. Totally encrypted.”

“Mine is too. A job, Forbes? Now, y’all know me. I’m always an Oklahoma boy at heart. But yeah, Secretary of Defense would do just fine. Hell, you did the job, so I’m gol dang sure I can.”

“Gotta lot of bridges to cross before the election.”

“Speaking of the election, Forbes, remember when I recommended you to replace me in the chief of staff position for Senator Liz Hopkins who, by the way, will soon be a presidential candidate?”

“How could I forget, Alvin? You remind me all the time.”

“Well, ol’ buddy, I recommended y’all to Liz for her VP running mate. And know what she said?”

“No—I don’t, and it doesn’t matter, Alvin. She just called me, and I accepted.”

“Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit! Congrats, ol’ buddy!”

“Let’s not get too excited, Alvin. She still has to win the nomination.”

“Of course, Forbsie, but I’m happy for y’all.”

“To be honest and without sounding pompous, I think I’m the best person for the job.”

“At this point in our history, there’s no one better.”

“I appreciate your confidence in me, Alvin—always have. I’d better go. I have a luncheon with my board of directors.”

“Okay, Forbes. But before I let you go, I got a call from an old buddy in the Defense Department. Apparently, the Joint Chiefs requested the military planners come up with a classified operations plan aimed at transnational terrorists. My friend said they’re going to call it: ‘Operation Able Danger’. They got both SOCOM* and the DIA** involved. (*Special Operations Command **Defense Intelligence Agency)

“S**t,” Forbes said.

“My thoughts exactly.”

“We have to keep tabs on them.”

“I agree, Forbes. Who do you trust in government right now?”

“Sam Saunders. I’ll give him a call.”

“Okay. Oh, and by the way, some folks are unsure Liz has the right stuff to lead our nation.”

“She doesn’t have to,” Forbes said.

“Why not?”

“Because I do.”

* * * * *

Sam had spent the last twenty minutes on the phone with Forbes Miller discussing Operation Able Danger. Sam told him he would find out what he could. After he hung up the phone, Sam thought, *He’s still a ruthless son-of-a-b***h. Sure hope he’s the next VP.*

Forbes Miller was the White House Chief of Staff when he and Sam met in 1976. At that time, Sam was stationed at CIA HQ in Langley, Virginia. He was in the White House Situation Room providing a briefing on the intervention by Syria into Lebanon’s civil war against the PLO. Miller asked him a pertinent question. “Why would Syria intervene in Lebanon against the PLO, Sam?”

“Analysts have a lot of theories, sir. First—”

Forbes interrupted him. “With all due respect, Sam, I want *your* opinion not some damn analyst. You lived there for goodness’ sake.”

Sam paused. “This is just my theory, y’all. Syria has always been envious of Lebanon’s access to the Med. But now I believe it’s more than that. This here situation is tribal, not visceral.”

“Shia versus Sunni?” Forbes asked.

“Yes, sir. Them roots run deep.”

He recalled Forbes winking at him as he left the meeting. Now, Forbes needed his help. Sam relished the idea of a future Vice President of the United States owing him a favor.

Forbes Miller never forgets a friend—or forgives an enemy.

SEVENTEEN

Snags

July 1999

Woody met Ace at the operation's warehouse in the Red Hook area of Brooklyn. The poker buddies had nicknamed it: "the hangar". The renovations and security upgrades were completed. The large glass windows had been sealed with bricks, and all the entryways were alarmed. The facility had around-the-clock security personnel and video surveillance inside and out. There were offices for all the poker buddies and a large meeting room. Along the back wall, there was a full-flight simulator cockpit on hydraulic actuators.

"Woody," Ace said, "this is the seven sixty-seven simulator we bought. State of the art with super-cool computer graphics. We have the capability to land and take off from any airport in the world, day or night, and in any kind of weather. I got checked out in sixty-sevens years ago, so I've been flying the drone's flight paths."

"What is this big problem you mentioned?" Woody asked.

"Best if I show ya'," Ace replied. "I've got the sim ready to go. Let's go flyin'."

Woody climbed into the co-pilot's seat. Ace settled into the pilot's seat and performed the pre-start checks. Once he had the engines up to speed, Ace taxied to position on the runway. "We're going to take off from runway twenty-two left at Newark. We'll circle back to Lower Manhattan, Woody."

Ace pushed the thrust levers forward, and the aircraft began to pick up speed. At take-off velocity, Ace pulled back on the yoke, and the 767 was airborne.

"Positive rate of climb," he said and moved the gear lever to the 'up' position.

"We'll level off at about one thousand feet, Woody, and head north."

Once the turn was complete, Ace moved the thrust levers forward and the aircraft began to build up airspeed. The airspeed indicator showed four hundred and fifty knots. A few seconds later, Ace pulled back the thrust levers. "Okay. We're at five hundred knots. I'm going to switch on the autopilot."

"What's with that f**king racket?" Woody asked.

"Over-speed warning. We've exceeded the red line top airspeed."

"Really irritating."

"It's supposed to be irritating," Ace said. "Tells the pilots to reduce speed to prevent over-stressing the airframe."

“Can’t you shut the f**king thing off?”

“Yeah, I can override it on this simulator.” Ace reached up and pulled a circuit breaker. “You can’t silence this alarm on an actual seven sixty-seven. The only way to stop it is to reduce your speed below the red line.”

“Why do you have to fly so fast?”

“Engineers have calculated we need that much speed to make sure the drones penetrate the buildings.”

Ace flipped up a cover revealing a toggle switch. “Alright, now I’m going to engage the auto-targeting. This simulates the system we installed in the sixty-seven drones. Okay, she’s locked on target. Ten seconds to go.”

The target building in Lower Manhattan came into view. “Looks good so far, Ace.”

“Watch what happens, Woody.” The simulator was making small heading corrections to stay on course. The corrections became more pronounced as the aircraft approached the target. The aircraft banked sharply several times and missed hitting the building by a wide margin. Ace paused the simulator.

Woody raised his eyebrows. “What the hell happened?”

“Too large an aircraft to hit such a precise target at that speed,” Ace replied. “Couldn’t make course corrections quick enough. A Tomahawk cruise missile would be perfect for this. Way more maneuverable and would hit the target every time.”

“You know that’s out of the question for the Towers,” Woody said.

“Yeah.”

“We’ve got a big problem, Ace. We have to use KC seven sixty-seven drones and hit precise areas of these buildings.”

“Right,” Ace said. “And flying at over five hundred knots at sea level. You know that speed is impossible for this aircraft, right?”

“What? How come?”

“Air is too thick at sea level and creates too much drag,” Ace replied. “The engines on a regular seven sixty-seven can’t generate enough power to fly that fast. And like I said, the overspeed warning was telling us we exceeded the aircraft’s maximum airspeed. I had to disable the realism on the simulator because we would have experienced structural failure—you know like the wings falling off and s**t which can wreck your whole day.”

“Can the sixty-seven drones handle that kind of speed?”

“We’ll modify them and make sure they can,” Ace replied. “But here’s something else to consider. At that speed airline pilots with thousands of hours on seven sixty-sevens would have trouble hitting the target exactly where we want—hell, even Chuck Yeager would. And we’re trying to sell the fact the

Towers were hit by inexperienced student pilots hand-flying heavy commercial jets at a super high rate of speed.”

“We’re gonna sell the s**t outta that story, Ace, so I’m not overly concerned. But what I am worried about is the seven sixty-seven drones only have one shot to hit the target.”

“And a twenty-five-foot margin of error.”

“The width of the buildings minus the wingspan.”

“Right,” Ace said. “It’s so easy to miss the building altogether, let alone hit the precise target area.”

“Damn.” Woody paused for a moment. “Would a homing device in the center of the target help?”

“Not much,” Ace replied. “The problem is a seven sixty-seven is a big f**kin’ airplane. She weighs in at over one hundred and fifty tons. The aircraft is designed to be a stable platform during straight and level flight at cruising altitude. But if you try any high-speed crazy maneuvers at low altitude? It would be like trying to fly a school gymnasium half full of water through the godd**n Grand Canyon.”

“Options?”

“We’re workin’ on it, Woody.”

They stepped out of the simulator and stood on the scaffolding. “We gotta find a solution to this, Ace. I’m open to anything.”

“We’ll come up with something.”

Woody’s phone vibrated. “Hang on a sec, Ace.” Woody flipped open his phone and checked the call display. “Hey, Slim,” he said. “What’s up?”

After a moment, Woody said, “Thanks, Slim. I’ll call ya later.”

“Gotta head out, Ace. Let me know what you guys come up with.”

“You’ll be the first, Woody.”

“Okay, my friend. See you at poker night.”

Woody crossed the Brooklyn Bridge back into Manhattan. He couldn’t believe the call from Sam. *Hezbollah wants to kill me? What the f**k did I ever do to them?*

* * * * *

Sam hung up the phone after his call to Woody. He was seated at his favorite booth in the Old Ebbitt Grill. *My friend Woody sure ain’t no panic button*, he thought. *I gotta find out why Hezbollah’s after him.*

From his vantage point, Sam could watch the bar area and front entrance while he waited for his lunchtime favorite: Maryland Day Boat Scallops. Two

White House Secret Service agents entered and approached his table. “Sorry to bother you, sir.”

“What is it, Dave?” Sam asked.

The Agent handed Sam a plain brown envelope. “This was delivered to the White House detail. Cleared the security scan and our boss said to deliver ASAP.”

Sam tore open the envelope. “Thanks, guys.”

Inside, there was an aerial photograph of CIA Headquarters in Langley. *Dolan’s CIA rat is dust. My boys do good work*, Sam thought. *Now, whatcha gonna do, Mr. Hound Dog? Huh?*

* * * * *

Gabby stopped at the security desk in the South Tower. The guard checked his security pass, handed him a clipboard, and asked him to sign in. Gabby handed it back. The guard checked the signature. “You sure work some crazy hours, Mr. Johnson.”

“Have to,” Gabby said. “They say must finish elevator upgrade soon.”

“Don’t work too hard, sir.”

Gabby headed for the elevator. He stopped and walked back to the desk. “Oh, I forget. I have shipment of boxes coming tonight. Can I book freight elevator?”

“No need, sir. It’s not busy tonight. C’mon down when you’re ready, and I’ll put one on service for ya.”

“Good. Thank you.”

Gabby pushed the up button for the elevator. He dialed his cell phone. “Joe? Gabby. Packages come tonight. Security give freight elevator. Meet here usual spot—eight o’clock.” He paused. “Okay, good.”

On the way up in the elevator, Gabby thought, *Good when plan working. All three buildings ahead of schedule.*

* * * * *

Rick Garcia entered Thomas Paine Park and spotted Kirk seated on a park bench. Rick plopped down beside him. “Irony you wanted to meet here, Kirk.”

“You mean meeting a pain in the a** in a place named after one?”

“Exactly.”

Kirk re-lit his cigar stub. “Tell me why you pulled me out of my meeting, Rick.”

“Our CIA contact is missing, Kirk.”

“Missing how?”

“He left Langley last Friday after work and disappeared,” Rick replied. “He was heading to his cottage on Lake Thoreau near Dulles. He never showed up.”

“State Troopers on it?”

“Yeah. No trace so far, and they haven’t located his car. Plus there’s been no bank or credit card activity.”

“He’s dead, Rick.”

“Sure looks like it.”

“Damn,” Kirk said. “He was giving us some good intel. You got anybody else you trust inside Langely?”

“No, and the CIA is clamping down on unauthorized assistance to outside agencies.”

Kirk stood and stepped on his cigar. “Those b*****s.” He checked his watch. “Okay, I gotta get back. Keep working on a contact for us at the CIA. We gotta have help.”

“You got that right, but you know what, Kirk?”

“What?”

“I’ve been thinkin’ about this. We both have way too f**kin’ much on our plates. On top of bin Laden, al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Russians, we’re also trying to identify moles inside the FBI, the CIA, your shop, and mine. There are probably others scattered across government, as well. And let’s not forget the mystery thugs who kidnapped and threatened you in your garage.”

Kirk twirled his key fob in his fingers. “You might as well add Travis and his gang to the list. They’re planning something, and it’s gonna happen soon.”

“Both our squads are swamped, Kirk.”

“I agree. Neither one of us can give any file the time it needs.”

“You watch,” Rick said. “After the terrorists strike the US, there’ll be lotsa money and manpower.”

Kirk put his keys away. “These are the times that try men’s souls.”

“What?”

Kirk pointed at the ground. “It’s a Thomas Paine quote.”

“I think you actually enjoy relentless pressure, Kirk.”

“You know me too well.”

They shook hands. “Oh, Rick—I’ll be out of town on vacation for a few days. I’ll have my phone, so call me if you need me, but need me if you call.”

“Will do, Kirk. Have some fun, will ya?”

“I plan to.”

Rick hailed a cab, and Kirk walked back to Federal Plaza along Worth St. *I'd be willing to bet Woody Travis and his operation were involved in that CIA officer's disappearance. And I'll bet they're involved in way more s**t than we can ever imagine.*

Kirk had no idea how right he was.

EIGHTEEN

Road Trips

August 1999

Lauren and Woody used precautionary measures to prevent anyone from following them to Camp Faraway*. They took a train from Penn Station to Newark and rented a car. They backtracked several times along the way to expose any surveillance vehicles. Lauren kept a watch on the sky and monitored a multi-band police scanner. As they rode along, they discussed the operation.
(*operation's explosives assembly and testing site)

"You guys any closer to solving the problem of the seven sixty-seven drones hitting the targets in the Towers, Lauren?"

"Ace says he has a couple of possible solutions to test."

"What are they?"

"First, Sam checked with his military contacts," Lauren replied. "They have the technology available for one hundred percent accuracy. It requires embedding a state-of-the-art targeting transmitter where we want the drones to hit."

"I assume you'll be testing that."

"We will," Lauren said. "Second. Ace is going to lighten the drones. He'll reduce the fuel load and strip the drones of anything extraneous. Makes them a lot lighter and more maneuverable."

"What about those outer walls and the box beams? Ace told me the sixty-seven drones would penetrate if they fly fast enough."

"They will, Woody. Our scientists have double-checked the numbers. At five hundred plus miles per hour, the drones will cut through the exterior shell like a hot knife through butter."

"Still wouldn't hurt to soften up the target areas on the Towers, Lauren."

"I'll mention that to Gabby. He should be able to plant something along with the targeting transmitters during the fire system upgrade on those floors."

"Did you ask our scientists about Ace's suggestions to rig the drones with explosives set to detonate on contact?"

"Yeah," Lauren replied. "They advised against it. Said it wasn't necessary to enhance the penetration by the drones, and we also could run the risk of a premature explosion in flight."

"They're right. It's not worth the risk."

“Ace said he’s got the tests planned for next week.”

“Good. Keep me up to speed, Lauren. The drones have to perform flawlessly.”

“Will do. You come up with a way to save our butts?”

“Yup,” Woody replied. “I have a few more details to iron out.”

“Your confidence is high? The Ring can find us—anywhere we hide.”

“We’ll be fine.”

They crossed Highway 202 and continued up Route 31 through rural New Jersey. At first, they drove through small towns and farm country. Now, they were passing heavily forested woodlots with no traffic or any buildings in sight. “This Camp frickin’ Faraway is well named,” Lauren said. “You sure you know where we are?”

“Absolutely. Gabby said to keep going north. He said after we pass two-oh-two, we’ll see a paint can on a fence post by a crossroads. We turn right and continue along until we see a strip of high-vis tape stapled to a gate. Shouldn’t be much further.”

“I sure as hell hope so,” Lauren said. “There was an albino back there playing a banjo.”

Woody winked at her. “Sure hope I’m playin’ the Burt Reynolds character.”

“I do, too—for your sake.” A few seconds later Lauren leaned forward in her seat. “There’s the paint can!”

“Got it.” Woody turned onto the gravel side road. The road passed through a forested area with no signs of civilization—anywhere.

They continued on for a few more miles until Lauren leaned forward again. She pointed towards the front of the car. “There’s a piece of high vis tape on that gate post.”

“I see it.” Woody turned off the road and stopped at the gate. Lauren opened her car door. “You got the code for the keypad?” Woody asked.

“Yup.”

Lauren keyed in the code and, as the gate swung open, she screamed. Three large Doberman Pinschers with bared teeth stormed out of the forest and were making a beeline for her. She scrambled back into the car and slammed the door. “Holy crap, Woody.”

Woody laughed. “Haven’t seen you move that quick since you encountered that snake in Goa.”

“The bloody thing flew out of a tree. Who knew snakes could fly?”

Woody grinned and drove the car through the open gate. He stopped inside until the gate swung closed behind them. Woody put the car in gear and they bounced along the road with the dogs running alongside, barking at the tires.

“Gabby said this dirt road ends at his test area.” A moment later, the dogs stopped dead in their tracks. Woody checked the rearview mirror. “Looks like Gabby called them off.”

Lauren glanced back. “Must be feeding time. They looked really hungry.”

The dirt road became a trail through the forest. Trees and underbrush scraped the sides and bottom of the car. Woody did his best to avoid the potholes, but the car bottomed out several times. “Hang on. When he said remote, he meant it.” The trail continued to a clearing containing a camouflaged Quonset hut. Gabby and two men were standing beside several steel beams suspended by concrete blocks. Gabby waved at them and walked over.

Woody put his window down. “Hi, Gabby.”

“Hi, you two. No trouble finding Faraway, Woody?”

“Nah. I grew up in Trenton. Been up this way a few times. Where do you want us to park?”

“Beside Quonset under trees,” Gabby said. “Sometimes airplanes fly over.”

Woody pointed to the sky. “Helicopters, too?”

“Yes. New Jersey Police and others. Smokey contact us and tell when they are in the area. After you park, meet me over at beams.”

Woody parked the car, and they walked back to Gabby. “Okay,” he said. “Here I show you how we do this.”

“Sounds good. But first, Gabby,” Woody said. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. How the hell did you find this place?”

“Old friend of mine owned for long time. He is now dying in hospital. Has no family and needed to sell for hospital bills. You told me to find place. I pay him enough to cover his medical and some extra. We built Quonset for workshop to fabricate what we need.”

“Any nosy neighbors who might want to snoop?” Lauren asked.

“Big property and no one live near. We have electric fence, cameras, and seismic alarms.”

“We also met your welcoming committee,” Lauren said.

Gabby grinned. “My security patrol. I call them off.”

Woody tilted his head towards Lauren. “No one was more thankful than our friend here, Gabby.”

“Okay,” Gabby said. “First, we use nano-thermite to do job on steel beams. You familiar with thermite?”

“Didn’t Whitey demo that stuff for us, Woody?” Lauren asked.

“Yeah, he did. But he called it super-thermite.”

“Same,” Gabby said.

“Thermite is powerful stuff, Gabby,” Lauren said. “Is it safe to use in the buildings? I mean—it won’t go off prematurely?”

“The type we use is stable. But for sure, we coat metal oxide particles with nano-carbon. Make it safer and better handle.”

“But why not use regular explosives like other building demolitions?” Woody asked.

“We need to do what explosives can’t,” Gabby replied. “Have to look like building collapse from fire, so first we must cut support columns.”

“Won’t the fires from the aircraft do that?” Lauren asked.

“No,” Gabby replied. “Even with jet fuel, normal fire in building only reach temperature up to eighteen hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Steel need two-thousand eight hundred degrees to melt. That’s why electric arc furnaces used in steel mill—not jet fuel.” Gabby grinned. “Also why fire code says steel must be used in high-rise buildings. Fire never cause collapse of steel-beam building.”

“Never?” Lauren asked.

“No,” Gabby replied. “Never happen even when building burn for long time. Twenty-five years ago, six floors of North Tower burn for three hours. Steel not melt and not replaced after.”

“So, how *are* we going to bring them down?” Woody asked.

“Controlled demolition only way. First, we must cut and melt steel support beams and bolts with nano-thermite. It burns at over four thousand degrees. More than enough to melt steel.”

“Won’t the fires from the jet fuel and building contents ignite the planted thermite?” Lauren asked.

“No”, Gabby replied. “Nano-thermite need three thousand degrees to ignite. We use magnesium ribbon. We trigger ribbon with low voltage microchip ignition—simultaneous or sequential radio signal. Totally undetectable before and after.”

“Speaking of that, what about the residue?” Woody asked. “I read somewhere thermite may be detected in the ashes.”

“Not if the mayor’s clean-up begins right away, Woody,” Lauren said. “There shouldn’t be any thermite to detect.”

Gabby agreed. “She’s right, Woody, but one problem. The explosives will spread dust over big area. Much remain on streets.”

“I’ll mention that to Willie,” Lauren said. “But I’m not sure he can do anything about it.”

Gabby nodded. “I will mention other problem. Nano-thermite burn without oxygen. Means it burn underwater. The fires below ground will burn for many weeks—maybe months. Someone will wonder why.”

Woody thought for a moment. “We have to use thermite, right? I mean is there any other way to do this? You know like with different explosives?”

“No. Thermite is best way to cut steel and make it look like collapse.”

“All we can do then is offer a logical explanation the public will buy,” Woody said. “You agree, Lauren?”

“Yeah. Looks like we have no other option. I’m more concerned about the noise from the explosions. Hard to conceal that.”

“You will see here nano-thermites more like high-intensity burn,” Gabby said. “Much heat and smoke.”

“The explosions happen after?” Lauren asked.

“Yes. Thermite first phase. Explosives—second. Noise and debris from collapse will disguise controlled demolition. If no more questions, we demonstrate.”

Lauren and Woody glanced at one another and nodded. “We’re good,” Woody said.

“Now, I show you how we set up.” Gabby pointed to the construction bolts joining two beams. “These beams identical to buildings and joined same. Here, we attach bolt blasters with nano-thermite to sever bolt tops.” Gabby motioned them to follow, and he moved further down one of the I-beams. “Here, attached to back thermite cutter charge,” he said. Lauren and Woody checked out the backside of the beam. Gabby continued. “This will make linear cut through beam in few seconds.” He pointed towards the Quonset. “We go there and detonate.”

Once they were at a safe distance, Gabby opened his cell phone. “I will use signal from phone. Ready?”

Woody and Lauren nodded. Gabby entered a number and hit the call button on his phone. The smoke and heat were intense for a moment before subsiding. “Safe to look now,” Gabby said.

Woody couldn’t believe his eyes. “Oh, my God. It cut right through the steel.”

“Impressive, Gabby,” Lauren said.

Gabby was beaming. “The bolt heads melt, too. This why thermite used to weld steel train tracks on railroad. Works good.”

Woody shook Gabby’s hand. “Sure as f**k does, Gabby. How much more work do you have to do out here?”

“We fabricate many cutter charges, fill with nano-thermite and seal. We install during elevator and fire system work. Containers of nano-thermite totally hidden in buildings. Some concealed inside I-beams and others look like elevator upgrades.”

“And the explosives?” Woody asked.

“Some in hoistway and some in crawlspace between ceiling and floor above. Concealed with fire retardant foam.”

“We need to plant targeting transmitters at the entry point of the drones and soften it up,” Lauren said. “Can your guys do the install without anyone noticing?”

“Easy. My team starting fire system upgrade next week on those floors. Let me know exact location.”

“Will do,” Lauren said. She tapped Woody on the shoulder. “We’re in business, pardner.”

* * * * *

Alexis closed her book and put it down beside her beach chair. She squeezed Kirk’s arm. “I see you’re enjoying the *Sword of Sheehan*. I had a feeling you would.”

Kirk removed his reading glasses. “Cool story. The Russians and Americans joining forces to thwart Arab terrorists from nuking the US.”

“It’s not too much like work?”

“Of course it is—that’s why I love it. Trouble is, in the book everyone is sharing info with the FBI.”

“It is fiction, Kirk.”

Kirk exhaled. “Yeah. Which is too bad. We might actually prevent an attack on the US.”

“What are our supper plans for tonight, Mr. Dolan?”

“We could order in and eat in bed again.”

“Um, that would be nice,” Alexis said, “but my brother and his wife are arriving from the city today. Remember?”

“Oh, yeah. That would be awkward. Four of us in a queen-size bed.”

Alexis tapped his shoulder. “It would be crowded for sure. Maybe they’d prefer to stay in the guest room.”

“Why don’t we take them to our favorite restaurant for dinner, Allie?”

“I suppose that would be okay. We do allow other people to eat there.”

“And that’s mighty nice of us,” Kirk said.

Alexis was having the time of her life vacationing on Long Island with Kirk. Lazy days on the beach or by the pool, followed by dining and dancing until they returned to their resort for nightcaps and bed. She cherished every moment and had fallen in love with Kirk.

During the first few days, Kirk decompressed and was enjoying his time with Alexis. He told her he didn't want this vacation to end, but it wasn't true.

Kirk longed for his mistress—the FBI.

* * * * *

Woody stopped around the corner from Lauren's apartment building in the Upper West Side. "What are you up to tonight, Lauren?"

"Long day today out to see Gabby. I'm hitting the hay early. You?"

"I'm heading home to change and then out for a drink."

"Why, Woody Travis. You're grinning like a Cheshire cat. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you've got a date."

"Keep it quiet," Woody said, "but you're right. I do."

"You're kidding! Who is she? Where'd you meet? Oh—I'm so happy for you."

"Settle down, Lauren. Her name is Roxanne. We met at McSorely's."

"Well, hush my mouth and call me Sally," Lauren said in her southern belle voice. "If that don't beat all, y'all."

"Not a big deal. Totally platonic."

Lauren opened the car door. "We'll see, Mr. Travis. We'll see."

Woody drove home to his apartment with a schoolboy grin on his face. He hadn't experienced the excitement of a new relationship since he dated Cathleen in college. He didn't want the feeling to end.

He parked his car in his parking garage near his apartment building. His thoughts raced as he strolled along the sidewalk heading for home. *How can a date with Roxanne make me feel so happy? Am I infatuated or is it? Love? S**t. I hope I'm not falling for her. That's the last thing I need right now.*

Woody didn't notice the black SUV parked down the street from his building.

* * * * *

"They're here, Kirk!" Alexis said. She threw open the front door and raced down the steps. "Hey, bro! 'Bout time you guys got here!"

Kirk came to the door. Alexis was already in the driveway hugging her brother. A beautiful slim brunette was standing beside him. *Must be Becky*, Kirk thought.

Kirk walked up to their car. "Hi. I'm, Kirk."

Alexis's brother shook Kirk's hand. "Hi, Kirk. I'm Rob, and this is my wife, Becky. Allie told us good things about you."

"Don't believe a word of it," Kirk said and shook Becky's hand.

"C'mon inside you two, and we'll get you settled," Alexis said.

Later, the four of them walked to a seaside restaurant. Their table was outside and offered a wonderful view of the ocean. After supper, they went for a barefoot stroll along the beach to watch the sunset. Alexis and Becky stopped to pick up shells while Kirk and Rob ambled ahead. "So, Rob," Kirk said, "You always wanted to be a firefighter?"

"Yeah, ever since I was a kid. It's a dream come true for me."

"How long you been with 'New York's Bravest'?"

"Ten years with, what I think is, the best fire department in the world."

"No argument from me. Where's your station?"

"Just transferred into Midtown at forty-eighth street and eighth—Engine 54 Ladder 4," Rob replied. "Alexis said you're with some Washington-based company?"

Kirk laughed. *I like this guy.* "I am, and it's my dream job, too."

Kirk and Rob were acting like they'd known each other for years. Becky and Alexis couldn't help notice the interaction. "Looks like the boys are getting along, huh?" Alexis asked.

Becky smiled. "They seem more like brothers than two guys who just met."

Alexis was glad. *These two guys mean the world to me,* she thought.

NINETEEN

Dead Reckoning

October 1999

Woody unbuckled his seat belt. “Lightning like crazy out there, Lauren. Gonna ask the boys about the weather.”

Woody stuck his head into the cockpit of the Citation jet. The captain turned and removed his headset. “Need something, Mr. Travis?”

“How’s the weather’s lookin’ at Close By*, Jack?” (*operation’s secret airbase)

“Latest weather shows a line of thunderstorms has moved east of them, Woody, but they’ve still got some heavy rain showers. Vis is well within limits. Plus your guys have installed an airport lighting system and a VASIS*, so should be no problem getting in.” (*visual approach slope indicator system)

“Thanks, guys.” *I wish it was a f**kin’ problem*, he thought.

Woody returned to his seat across from Lauren. “Weather okay, Woody?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t sound excited. What’s going on? You haven’t said more than two words this whole trip.”

Woody had to think fast. “I... uh... well... to be honest, Lauren, I’m worried about my relationship with Roxanne. She’s a super lady and I’m—”

“Falling in love with her? And you’re worried about what happens after E-Day? Right?”

Woody was relieved. “Right. Don’t you have the same problem with Tony?”

“No.”

“You guys have been pretty hot and heavy for a while now.”

“It’s totally different, Woody. Tony’s nothing but a fling.”

“You don’t care about him?”

“Sure I do,” Lauren replied. “A long as he scratches where I itch.”

Woody blushed. “I care about Roxanne, so I don’t think I can be like that.”

“You’ll have to before E-Day, Woody. Accept that and enjoy the time you have together.”

“I’ll try, Lauren.”

Something’s eating at him, she thought. *And it isn’t Roxanne.*

Woody changed the subject. “Have you and Digger found a solution to the disposal of the remains at Close By, Lauren?”

“Not yet, Woody. I’ll let you know.” *In the mood he’s in tonight, that’s the last thing I wanna discuss.*

“Okay,” Woody said. “You know it’s a priority and I need an answer. Real soon.”

“Understood.”

* * * * *

Their Citation jet stopped in front of a row of aircraft hangars. Despite the pelting rain, the ramp lighting was bright enough for Woody to see Digger walking out towards them. “Digger’s here, Lauren.”

“Is he in a boat?”

Woody didn’t respond. He and Lauren thanked the flight crew as they walked past the cockpit. They stepped off the airstairs onto the ramp, and Digger handed them umbrellas. “Welcome to Camp Close By you two.”

“Thanks, Digger,” Lauren said. “Nice night, huh?”

“Oh, I love it—way nicer here than all those sun-drenched beaches in Martinique.”

“Yeah, right,” Lauren said.

“Okay,” Digger said, “the flight we’re using to test the FTS is not departing JFK for another hour. Gives us time to tour of one of the hangars. C’mon.”

They stopped in front of the first hangar in the row. “All the main doors on the four hangars are hydraulic bi-folds like this one,” Digger said. He opened a side entrance door, and once inside, unlocked the door to the control panel.

“These hangar doors fold up in about twenty seconds,” Digger said. “The center door is larger because it must fold into the cut-out up there. We need that extra height for the aircraft’s tail section.”

“These are huge doors to fold that quickly,” Lauren said.

“It’s really cool,” Digger said. “Just watch.” He pushed a green button marked “open”, and a klaxon horn blared out a warning. The doors folded upwards and locked into position. Digger pressed a red “close” button, and the horn sounded again. The doors unfolded and were soon down and locked. “We’ll have the aircraft inside safe and sound and away from any eyes in the sky. Even though this is a restricted area and has been classified as ‘off limits’ to surveillance satellites, we don’t want to take any chances. Also, our guys in government will make sure there are no photos taken, particularly on E-Day.”

“Who built this base?” Lauren asked.

“Originally, it was built during World War Two. Our addition to it was built by one of our military contractors,” Digger replied. “The contractor was told this

facility was top secret. All the construction crews were security-cleared. The company is totally reliable and builds all kinds of secret s**t for the Defense Department.”

“It is temporary, right?” Woody asked.

“Absolutely,” Digger replied. “The original runways, taxiways, and ramp areas are in rough shape and unusable, so we installed ours on top of them. What you’re standing on is AM2 matting made out of perforated aluminum planking. Our runways are ten thousand feet and plenty long enough for the incoming airline flights even with a heavy fuel load. Once we’re done, it’ll be removed and trucked out of here. The hangars are metal spans covered with fabric. We’ve installed the same matting on the hangar floor over a waterproof membrane. The entire facility can be dismantled in a few weeks.”

“We didn’t see any farmyard or house lights on our way in,” Woody said, “So, nobody lives nearby?”

“Correct,” Digger replied. “The government originally used this base as an air weapons range and research facility. We’re using some of their underground ammo bunkers for storage and office space. Also, we’re going to dig into the hillside directly outback of the hangars. Will be perfect for—”

Lauren interrupted him. She tilted her head towards Woody who was looking the other way and placed her right index finger up to her lips. “Sounds good, Digger. Tell us about security here,” she said.

Digger didn’t understand, but he took the hint. “Right. Well, it’s been fenced and posted with military warning signs. After we leave, the government will build a top-secret weapons research center on the other side of the property. The military will remain in place to provide perimeter and access security. Right now, no one gets in, other than our people.”

“What about the area around the base?” Woody asked.

“The surrounding area is a government forest preserve,” Digger replied.

“Won’t people in the area be suspicious if they see commercial flights coming in?” Lauren asked.

“As I said, this top-secret military base has been here since World War Two,” Digger replied. “People around here are used to seeing military aircraft of all types fly in and out.” Plus, we’ve been running practice KC seven sixty-seven drone flights here for the past year. They won’t pay any attention to the aircraft on E-Day. Even if they do, they’ll assume they’re military plus they’re too far away to see any airline markings.”

“Great secluded location,” Woody said.

“Yeah, but close enough to get all the flights here quickly,” Digger said. “We don’t have a lot of time on E-Day.”

“Lauren tells me you two are still working on the disposal problem here,” Woody said.

Lauren raised her eyebrows at Digger. “Yeah,” Digger said. “We’ll let you know, Woody. C’mon, I’ll show you the rest.”

At the back of the hangar was a series of temporary walls for offices, ready rooms, and a lunchroom. “We will have all our equipment set up here in the next month or so. My team is in position, and we’ve begun classroom training and mock exercises in preparation for E-Day. There will be no screw-ups.”

“Let’s hope, Digger,” Lauren said. “Your operation is crucial.”

“Always is, Lauren.” Digger checked his watch. “Sounds like the rain has stopped. We’d better head to the control room.”

They walked across the tarmac. Woody was a few feet ahead of Lauren and Digger. Lauren stopped. “Oh, damn.”

Woody turned towards her. “What is it, Lauren?”

“Think I damaged the heel on my shoe. Digger will help me, Woody. You go ahead.”

Lauren put her hand on Digger’s shoulder, and they stopped. Once she was sure Woody was out of earshot, she moved closer to Digger. “I don’t want Woody to hear the details of your E-Day disposal plan right now.”

“That’s not like Woody. What the f**k’s up with him?”

“Let’s just say he’s got a lot on his mind and doesn’t need that—especially tonight.”

“Say no more.”

“Thanks, Digger.”

“Woody’s lucky to have a friend like you, Lauren.”

“Let’s catch up to him.”

On the far side of the tarmac, they approached a concrete structure with a half-round roof. The rear portion was buried under a grass-covered mound. “This is one of those old ammo storage bunkers I mentioned,” Digger said. He pushed a silent call button on the wall and showed his face to a security camera. The door buzzed, and they entered. The bunker contained numerous airport fire and maintenance trucks plus a variety of military vehicles. “This equipment is ours. After all, we’re running an airport.”

At the back of the bunker were steel elevator doors. “We did a bit of an upgrade back here,” Digger said. “It’s really cool.” Digger used his security card to unlock a compartment concealing the elevator buttons. Inside the elevator, he inserted a key and turned the lock to ‘down’. “This elevator will take us down forty feet to a steel-reinforced concrete blockhouse. We call it the ‘bat cave’.”

Ace was standing outside the elevator when the doors opened. “Welcome, you guys. Buzz is inside with the operators.”

They walked down a narrow concrete hallway with overhead light bulbs protected by metal cages. After a ninety-degree turn, they stopped at a large steel door with a digital lock. “Is this where you keep your money, Ace?” Lauren asked.

“Yeah, me and Jack Benny,” Ace replied. He entered a code, and the steel door glided open. “We used this same type of security setup in our missile silos. Except there’s a s**tload more square footage inside here.”

Inside the control room, Buzz shook hands with Lauren and Woody. “The Flight Termination System was installed on this seven sixty-seven during its last overhaul,” Buzz said. “These guys will operate it.” Three men in navy blue flight suits stood and shook hands with Woody and Lauren. *TSS patches*, Lauren thought.

They returned to their chairs, and Buzz continued. “The guy in the center is the FTS pilot and the other guys are his sensor operators. They’ll monitor the flight by a simulated cockpit instrument display and computer-generated radar images on those screens. Ace will talk you guys through the flight.”

“How much time ‘til take-off, Ace?” Lauren asked.

“Any minute now. Push-back was at oh-one-twelve, and the aircraft is now taxiing out to the active runway at JFK.”

Lauren and Woody sat in front of the monitors. “She’s airborne, at oh-one-twenty,” the FTS pilot said. “When she hits cruising altitude, we’ll assume command on your mark, Mr. Travis.”

The air traffic control radio communications with the aircraft crackled in the speakers. The Boeing 767 was climbing to its assigned altitude. At 1:44 a.m., the airline pilots radioed New York air traffic control they were level at 33,000 feet. An air traffic controller said: “Egypt Air nine-ninety change to frequency one-two-five-point niner.”

The crew acknowledged, changed to the new frequency, and called air traffic control. “New York Egypt Air nine-nine-zero heavy, good morning.”

The controller answered. “Egypt Air nine-ninety, roger.”

The FTS pilot turned to Woody. “Flight’s at cruising altitude, sir.”

Woody didn’t respond. He stared straight ahead. “Sir, the time is now,” the FTS pilot said.

Lauren turned to Woody. “Woody, you have to give the command.”

Woody glared at Lauren. “I know, Lauren. I’m not f**king deaf.” Woody turned away from the monitor. He paused for a moment.

“If you don’t give the order, Woody—I will,” Lauren said.

“No need.” Woody sat up straight in his chair. He turned and gazed at Lauren. “Go ahead, boys,” he said. “Bring the f**kin’ thing down.” Woody turned back to watch the monitor.

Ace raised his eyebrows at Lauren. She shrugged her shoulders. “Now, we cut off all communication inside and outside the aircraft except for the CVR*,” Ace said. “We’ll allow it to record, and edit it later if necessary. Our pilot has total control of the aircraft from this point.” (*cockpit voice recorder)

“We’re disengaging the autopilot and bringing the engines back to idle. Now we’ll adjust the elevator trim to full nose down,” the FTS pilot said.

“They’ve idled the engines to prevent too much speed buildup,” Ace said. “Although, it may not help to prevent the aircraft from tearing apart before impact.”

“Okay,” the FTS pilot said. “The aircraft is in a steep descent. The crew won’t be able to recover from the dive.”

“She’s gaining too much speed,” Ace said. “Best we shut down both engines completely, and deploy the speed brakes.”

“Roger, that, sir,” the FTS pilot said. “Okay. Engines are now dead, and the speed brakes are deployed to one hundred percent.”

The aircraft continued its near-vertical dive. Each sweep of the radar revealed a lower altitude. A few minutes later, the target disappeared. The radio crackled with the voice of the controller trying to re-establish radio contact with the flight.

“Please turn off the sound, Ace,” Woody said. “How many souls on board?”

“Two hundred and seventeen, Woody.”

Woody stared at the blank radar screen. Lauren leaned over and touched his arm. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “We gotta talk.”

Woody turned to her. “On the plane.”

* * * * *

The Citation jet was cruising along at 43,000 feet en route to La Guardia. Woody hadn’t said a word. He was quietly sipping on a bourbon and water. Lauren placed her wine glass on the table with a thud. “Okay, Woody. What the f**k is going on?”

Woody turned to her. “Before I say anything, Lauren, I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“Already forgotten. Now—talk to me.”

“Okay,” Woody said. “I froze tonight. Couldn’t give the order, and it scared the s**t out of me.”

“On the way here, I suspected you had something buggin’ you.”

“Over the past few weeks, even thinking about tonight made my palms sweat.”

“You’ve ordered kills before, Woody.”

“Those were easy. They deserved it. They were traitors, double agents, or killers like us. All were necessary and part of the job.”

“Tonight was necessary.”

“It’s not only tonight, Lauren. I’ve had misgivings from the get-go about all the deaths we’re going to cause. Joining this operation forced me to put my morality on hold to lead this team and get the job done.”

Lauren paused. *Say the right thing, Lauren*, she thought. “You know as well as I do in these types of operations we can’t afford the luxury of human feelings.”

“I know, but easy to say and hard to do.”

“It is. But you always say mission comes first, Woody—above all else. This one is no different. As I said, testing the FTS tonight was necessary. There was no other way to make sure it worked. Also, we couldn’t anticipate or simulate the reaction of the crew, passengers, or ATC. Now, we know. As far as I’m concerned, it was mission accomplished.”

“I know all that. But when the time came to give the order, I was terrified.”

“Of what, Woody?”

“I was afraid I couldn’t go through with it.”

“Why this one? This is not your first wet job.”

“I know,” Woody said. “But I’ve never killed innocent people before and especially not in America. For the first time in my career, I doubted my ability to complete a mission.”

“But you found the courage to give the order.”

“It wasn’t courage, Lauren. Before I gave the order, I had to find a way to go through with it. Find something I could use to complete tonight’s mission. And I did.”

“What was it?”

“This stays between us. It was ego.”

“You, Woody? I find that hard to believe.”

“Tough for me to admit, but it’s true. My ego is more important to me than I ever imagined. It became clear to me tonight. Did I want to be remembered as the legend who commanded and accomplished the most historic mission ever, or a spineless weasel who didn’t have the guts to complete that mission? My f**king ego answered the question. It gave me the courage to give the order, and kill all those people.”

“Sadly, you’ll be a legend no one will ever know about.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll know, and the people who matter to me will know.”

“You’ve always been a humble type guy, Woody. I never thought ego was important to you.”

“I didn’t either—until tonight.”

“Well, you have every right to have an inflated ego. You were the mastermind who designed this plan. That’s why everyone in our biz knows you’re the best.”

“Thanks, but I have to give Mick a lot of credit. He recruited a great team, provided me with unlimited resources, and gave me free rein to execute a simple agenda,” Woody said. “Destroy the incriminating evidence at all costs.”

“Yeah, but you made it happen.”

“Our team made it happen, Lauren. You and the rest of those crazy yahoos overcame the obstacles standing in our way, unraveled and solved every puzzle, and maintained absolute secrecy. And now, if we’re successful—the ultimate awaits.” Woody picked up his glass and sipped his bourbon.

“For this crazy yahoo, the ultimate is making E-Day work,” Lauren said.

Woody nodded and put his drink down on his tray table. He picked up his swizzle stick and twirled it in his fingers. “For me, the ultimate will be pulling off the f**kin’ crime of all time, takin’ my money, and runnin’ like hell.”

“Now, *that’s* the Woody Travis I know.”

Woody raised his glass. “Thanks, Lauren.”

“You know I have to live out my days with the memory of this mission, too, Woody.”

“I’m sure you won’t have a problem, Lauren.”

“I won’t, but this is still a tough one to live with. We’re going to commit undeniable evil against guiltless people.”

“How will *you* deal with that?”

“Easy. It’s their own fault, Woody.”

“How the hell is it their fault?”

“For being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“That works for you?”

“Absolutely,” Lauren replied. “I believe fate plays a role and controls when and where anyone dies.”

“So you’ll be able to forgive yourself for this one?”

“Of course. How about you?”

Woody set down his swizzle stick and took a sip. “Oh—I can forgive myself. I’m not sure God will.”

Lauren winked. “She will, Woody.”

Woody smiled and lifted his glass. “Here’s to E-Day, my friend.”

“I’ll drink to that—makin’ it happen and forgettin’ all about it.”

“Speaking of making it happen, Lauren, have you guys concluded the simulator tests on the targeting system for the sixty-seven drones?”

“A few more to go,” Lauren replied.

“And so far?”

“They’re hitting their targets within ten feet of dead center.”

Woody sighed. “For this op, dead center is well-named.”

TWENTY

Perceptions

November 1999

Light snow was falling from a gray November sky as Woody and Sam strolled the length of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial. They stopped at the end, turned, and stood silently for a moment. "No better day to be here than November the eleventh," Sam said.

"Lotta names, Sam."

"Too many, Woody. Glad we're not there."

"Dumb-a** luck. Let's head out."

Back at his hotel room, Woody ordered room service. Sam took a beer out of the minibar and sat down in a club chair. "Okay, Woody. What did y'all do to upset Hezbollah?"

Woody grinned. "They have no sense of humor, Sam."

"This is serious, Woody. Hezbollah doesn't screw around. And they're aligned with al Qaeda."

"Are you sure it's Hezbollah, Sam?"

"Not a hundred percent, but who else would it be? Y'all got involved in a bunch of s**t in Lebanon."

"That I did," Woody said. "But I don't think I killed anyone from Hezbollah. At least, not on purpose."

"It's best y'all be careful, ol' buddy."

There was a knock at the door, and Woody stood up. "I will, Sam."

Woody checked the peephole before opening the door. The room service waiter was wearing a white jacket and hotel name badge. "C'mon in. Could you leave it right there, please?"

Woody tipped the waiter, and he left. "I've seen him before, Sam."

"Where'd y'all see him?"

"Not sure where," Woody replied. "But I've seen him a couple of times lately."

Sam jumped up. "Grab your gear, and let's go, Woody. We'll go down the stairs a couple of floors and take an elevator."

They exited the hotel through a side door off the lobby and hailed a cab. "Drive," Sam said from the back seat. The cab driver pulled away from the curb.

"Thanks, Sam."

Sam was looking out the back window of the cab. “Y’all are welcome. If they’re who I think they are, they’ll be comin’ back.”

Woody sighed. “For sure.”

The cab driver glanced at them in the rearview mirror. “Hate to interrupt you two gentlemen, but could you provide me with a little a hint on where you’d like to go?”

“Eisenhower Building,” Sam replied.

“Where?” Woody asked.

“Castle just assigned me an office there,” Sam said. “Want me to be part of the transition team for whoever forms the new administration.”

Woody and Sam didn’t talk for the rest of the trip to the Eisenhower Executive Office Building. Woody didn’t relax until they were safe inside Sam’s office. “This is a nice office,” Woody said.

“A lot of history in this building, Woody. They told me this used to be Nixon’s private office.”

“If the walls could talk.”

Sam grinned. “Or record.”

Woody laughed. “Nixon jokes never get old.” Woody cleared his throat. “Speaking of which, if anything happens to me—I want Lauren in charge of the op.”

“Nothing’s gonna happen to y’all, Woody. I’ll make sure.”

“What—are you gonna loan me some Secret Service guys, Sam?”

“I’ll do better than that. I’ll get in touch with Avi Bitton.”

“Your Mossad buddy?”

Sam nodded. “He’ll loan us a couple of guys who would love to spend some time in New York.”

“I feel safer already.”

“Alright, Woody. Tell me what’s going on with the op.”

“No bugs in here? You know how Tricky Dick loved to record s**t.”

“It’s swept every morning, but to be sure—” Sam walked over to his desk and pulled out a small radio receiver. “Buzz gave me this. Shows no devices within range.”

“Lauren and I just got one from him, too. Handy to have.”

“So, Woody. Fill me in.”

“You’ll love how it’s all comin’ together, Sam.”

* * * * *

The limousine stopped outside City Hall. Tony Manetti leaned over and kissed Lauren. "That was a great lunch, babe." He squeezed her thigh. "See you tonight."

Lauren blew him a kiss. The limo pulled away from the curb. *I think he's falling for me*, Lauren thought. *He's just a boy toy, Lauren. Remember that.*

Lauren's cell phone buzzed in her pocket. She answered the call and was shocked to hear the president of the United States telling her someone was waiting for her in her office. "Who is this?" Lauren asked.

"This is President Walker," the voice said.

"No—really, who is this?"

"This is the president, Miss Hunter. Please be on time for your meeting."

The line went dead. *No friggin' way that was the president*, Lauren thought. *But sure as hell sounded like her.*

Magic was sitting in the reception area of Lauren's office. He put down his magazine when Lauren entered. "You just missed her."

"Who?"

"The president," Magic replied.

"I don't think so. C'mon. Let's go into my office."

Lauren sat down behind her desk. "There is no way the president called me."

"You're right. She didn't."

"Who the hell was it?"

"Me," Magic replied.

Lauren shook her head. "You couldn't do such a bang-on impression of her. Who did it?"

"I did."

"Quit sh***in' me, Magic. I don't believe it was you."

Magic grinned. "I was using voice morphing technology developed at Los Alamos. Works pretty good, huh?"

"Amazing! You've got to show me how it works."

"I will."

"You sounded just like the president." Lauren slapped her desk with her hand. "Man, you've solved a huge problem for us."

"Do I get a raise?"

"No." Lauren pushed a speed-dial button on her desk phone. "I'm calling Woody."

"Gonna ask him about my raise?"

Lauren shooed him away with her hand. "See you later, Magic."

* * * * *

Woody and Sam were wrapping up their meeting in the Eisenhower Building when Woody's phone buzzed. He checked the caller ID. "It's Lauren, Sam."

"I'll be right back, Woody." Sam headed for the private washroom at the back of his office.

When he returned, Woody was smiling. "Lauren says Magic and his team have solved the cell phone calls. We're going to use a combination of recordings and voice morphing technology."

"Voice morphing? Where the hell did they get their hands on that?"

"Los Alamos," Woody replied. "Lauren said it's amazing. All they need is about ten minutes of a person's voice and the computer software program makes anyone's voice sound identical. Magic will use his people to make the calls."

"Another problem solved," Sam said. "Still planning the 'hero call' from one of the flights?"

"Yeah," Woody replied. "Lauren says the logical choice would be making it appear to come from the reserve airline flight. She thinks a 'storm-the-cockpit' type scenario will work. She'll incorporate it into the cell phone calls."

"I think some sorta Texas war cry like 'Remember the Alamo' would work for that."

"That's a great idea, Sam. I'll ask Lauren to get Magic and his folks working on a catchy phrase they could use."

"America loves heroes, y'all."

"Right, Sam, and Griff said our bosses wanted us to find a way to rally public support for the 'war on terror'. This should keep them happy."

"So, y'all still plannin' to simulate the crash of the fourth flight way out in the boonies somewhere?"

"Yup. It will appear to be as a result of the cockpit intrusion."

"Appears things are moving right along, Woody. The targeting of the sixty-seven drones is taken care of, and at the right speed, they'll penetrate the buildings. Also, the thermite will work."

"Yup, and I've got a plan to save us after the op, Sam. Foolproof, but we have to find cobblers we can trust."

Sam paused for a moment. "There's one of the cobblers who did great stuff for the kids. His code name is Button. I've known him for years and totally trust him."

"I remember him, Sam. He's one of the best."

"We'll need that because everything has to be foolproof, Woody. We have to have school records, IRS returns, family history—you know—everything."

"I checked with Buzz," Woody said. "He says his guys can back door into all the government computers with help from TSS. They can create and input all the

info we need.”

“Good,” Sam said. “Can we trust Thorne?”

“Sure,” Woody replied. “He’ll need new ID, too. So he’ll owe us.”

“He’s on Griff’s hit list, y’all?”

Woody smiled. “If he isn’t, he’ll believe he is.”

TWENTY-ONE

Millennium

December 1999

Woody sat down at the head of the conference table. “Okay, you clowns. Let’s get this poker night started.” He paused until everyone was quiet. “We’ve got a big agenda, and this is our last one until after New Year’s—barring anything unforeseen, of course. Get her started, Smokey.”

“First, Woody,” Smokey said and pointed at two gentlemen in suits standing near the door. “Who the f**k are those two guys?”

“Sorry,” Woody replied. “I should have introduced my new personal security guys. This is Yosef and David. Friends of Sam’s from Israel.”

“Ahh, the Hezbollah Prevention Team,” Lauren said.

Woody grinned. “Proceed, Smokey.”

“Okay,” Smokey said. “I’ve got all my team members embedded with the FBI, CIA, NSA, and FEMA. Thanks to our friends in New York, both the NYPD and the Port Authority are now up to speed as well. Nothing happens in any of those agencies without our knowledge. The law enforcement plan for E-Day is finalized, and we’re fine-tuning the timing and logistics. We anticipate full compliance with the master plan early in the New Year. I have one last item. If any of you guys or your people need anything pertaining to law enforcement, you know like intel or surveillance, go through us. Let’s stick to the chain. Will avoid f**k ups. That’s all I got, Woody.”

“I agree with Smokey,” Woody said. “The chain is there for a reason, so use it. Magic? You’re next.”

“Thanks, Woody,” Magic said. “We’ll utilize the voice morphing technology and actual voice recordings for the passenger and crew cell phone calls from the aircraft. To facilitate that, we’ve begun recording phone calls from frequent fliers, crew, and ground staff for both airlines. We will also record any passengers who make reservations. We’ll cut and paste them into usable dialogue. Our guys say they will sound exactly like the person was making the call. We’ll have them ready to go for E-Day if we need them. We’re also be compiling the phone numbers of their family and friends. Obviously, we won’t know what passengers or crew members will be on each flight until we check the various manifests on E-Day, so we’re creating a huge database of recordings.”

“Magic,” Ace said. “If you think you’ll have time on E-Day to find a particular recording from a particular passenger or crew member, you’re crazier than I thought.”

“You don’t know what the f**k you’re talking about, Ace,” Magic said. “Our computer geeks say they have the program set up to provide immediate access to the database. In a manner of seconds, they can extract what they need. The calls will be made right on time to coincide with the aircraft flight paths.”

“I hope so,” Ace said. “Remember your f**k-up in Buenos Aires?”

“That was ten years ago, and it was a computer glitch,” Magic said. “Not sure if you’re aware of this, Ace, but computers have advanced a tiny bit since the f**kin’ Stone Age.”

“Okay, you two,” Woody said. “Enough already. You done, Magic?”

“I got a few more things,” Magic replied. “We’ve finalized all the scripts and talking points for the media and spokespeople on E-Day. We’ll begin feeding the media right after the first drone strike on the North Tower. One thing that concerns me is the second drone strike on the South Tower.”

“What about it?” Lauren asked.

“The first impact on the North Tower will probably have little or no media coverage unless, of course, somebody gets a lucky video or photo. The second drone strike on the South Tower will have coverage everywhere from CNN to Aunt Bessie’s camcorder from Jersey. I’m concerned the strike will be analyzed to death and may compromise the mission.”

“How so, Magic?” Lauren asked.

“There’s lots that’s impossible to hide and even more impossible to explain. Like, for example, the speed of the second drone.”

“If I may,” Ace said, “Magic’s exactly right. Even an idiot could calculate the speed of the drone from a video. You plot the distance across Manhattan and how long it took the drone to fly it. Also, there will be FAA radar plots someone could use. Don’t forget, the drone will be traveling at over five hundred knots which is impossible for a regular airline seven sixty-seven near sea level.”

“Maybe you could explain it for all of us, Ace,” Lauren said.

“I told Woody this during a simulator run,” Ace replied. “Regular seven sixty-seven’s engines can’t generate enough power to fly that fast. It’s also aerodynamically impossible because the air at sea level is too thick. Think of an Olympic sprinter who can run the hundred-yard dash in under ten seconds. Now put that same runner underwater on the bottom of a pool and see how fast they can run.”

“Excellent point, Ace,” Magic said. “But I think by the time anyone questions that, our storyline will already be perceived as the truth by the public,

and any dissension will be dismissed as a conspiracy theory.”

“I hope that works, Magic,” Ace said.

“It will,” Magic said. “But there’s another problem. It’s the inevitable videos of the buildings coming down. Impossible to hide the squibs, the explosions, and the fact they’re free-falling in about ten seconds into their own footprint. Any architect or engineer worth their salt will call bulls**t and could easily prove the collapse was caused by controlled demolition.”

“Magic’s right,” Gabby said. “Structural steel building don’t come down without explosives removing steel support beams.”

“A seven sixty-seven drone slamming into it, and the resulting fires won’t cause it?” Ace asked.

“No,” Gabby replied. “These Towers designed to absorb impact from airplanes—even seven sixty-seven. Buildings have outside mesh of structural steel. Think of pencil going through screen door. Make hole, but screen not collapse. Also, center core has forty-seven steel columns coming from bedrock to top of tower. Easy withstand impact especially from aluminum airplane. Like I told Woody and Lauren, no structural steel high-rise building in history ever collapse from ordinary fire—even with jet fuel. Steel needs much higher temperature. That’s why we use thermite.”

“What do you suggest we do, Magic?” Woody asked.

“We sell it,” Magic said. “Shouldn’t be a problem if we discredit any dissenting voices and everyone stays on the same page. People will see a continuous stream of news coverage showing how crazed terrorists flew airliners into the Towers. We’re also planning on fake witnesses at all the scenes to mislead and confirm the story. Finally, our talking heads and government experts will flood the media explaining how the resulting fires weakened the steel and caused the buildings to collapse.”

“What about Building Seven?” Lauren asked. “No aircraft impact, so how do we explain its collapse?”

“Same explanation, Lauren,” Magic said. “We’ll have experts report Seven was damaged by debris from the collapse of the North Tower and the resulting fires fueled by office furnishings weakened the structure to the point of collapse.”

“It’s coming down a lot later than the others,” Lauren said.

“That gives more credence to the explanation,” Magic said. “The fires burned out of control for hours.”

“Sounds okay, Magic,” Lauren said.

“What about the thermite?” Gabby asked. “It burn in rubble for many weeks—maybe months.”

“We’ll downplay it as fires deep underground from the jet fuel,” Magic replied. “People believe what they’re told on TV news.”

“Thermite makes molten metal. May pour out of buildings,” Gabby said. “Someone will see.”

“If they do,” Magic said, “we’ll explain high-intensity fires from jet fuel do strange things. Our experts will diffuse and confuse any reports that do not fit the story. I don’t believe selling any part of our story will be a problem. That’s all I got tonight, Woody.”

“Thanks, Magic,” Woody said. “Ace?”

Ace cleared his throat. “The kids will commence their flight training here in the New Year. Some of them have already had some elementary flight school training, which will help. I’m concerned the FBI will receive reports from the flight schools. Middle Eastern men taking flying training in the US will be investigated. My question is: should we be concerned?”

Smokey raised a finger. “I’ll take this one, Woody. I’m aware of this, Ace. Our guys inside the FBI don’t think it will be a big deal. They said the kids will be in the US on legal visas and the Saudi government pays for students to attend school all over the world. Besides, we want this to come out. It’s part of the hijack story we’re selling.”

“Smokey’s right, Ace,” Magic said. “This is part of the plan, remember?”

“Yeah, Magic, I remember,” Ace replied. “I’m not an idiot. All I wanted to do is flag it. Okay?”

Woody interjected. “Anything else, Ace?”

Ace glared at Magic and turned back to address the group. “Yeah. I got plenty more concerns on the airside. First, we must control any video recorded by exterior security cameras— especially at the Pentagon and businesses in the surrounding area.”

“Taken care of, Ace,” Smokey replied. “Our guys in law enforcement and security will make sure any videos never see the light of day.”

“Also, let’s not forget, we control the computers for all those cameras,” Woody said. “TSS can freeze or disable the cameras when required.”

“Sounds good,” Ace said. “I’m also concerned about a fighter intercept and a shootdown of the drones before they hit their targets. I know the war games will disperse the fighters all over hell’s half-acre, and we’re going to confound and confuse the radar on E-Day. I mean those f**kin’ radar controllers won’t know what’s a simulation and what’s real-world. But what if some cowboy at NEADS* decides to be a hero and give the shoot-down order?” (*North East Air Defense Sector of NORAD)

“First,” Woody replied, “Our air defense is designed to protect the US from outside threats over water, not from this type of internal attack.”

“I’m aware of that, Woody,” Ace said. “Fighter interceptors have standardized scramble procedures which take them out over the ocean. But with no clear-cut orders, someone could still take matters into his own hands.”

“That’s true, Ace,” Woody said. “That’s why there’s changes coming to the shootdown order. Authority will rest solely with the National Command Authority.”

“POTUS and SECDEF,” Ace said.

“Right,” Woody said. “POTUS will be out of DC on E-Day, and we will disrupt communications to and from the castle. Therefore, SECDEF will have sole authority. Field Commanders will have to wait for orders from the Pentagon.”

“And if I may, Woody,” Lauren said. “We’ll make sure the shootdown order is given well after all the flights are down and the birds and missiles have hit their targets.”

“Good,” Ace said. “I’m also worried about the fact no flight data and cockpit voice recorders will be found in the debris at the targets. It’s a red flag. The public expects the NTSB to recover the black boxes and share the contents publicly.”

“My guys are workin’ on that with Buzz,” Smokey said. “We’re considering providing black boxes that will satisfy the public. Buzz’s computer geeks can fill the recorders with data to coincide with the story. The black boxes will be part of Digger’s plant on E-Day.”

“The FDR* data has to be dead-on,” Ace said. “It has to coincide exactly with the flight paths of the original airline flights from push back at their assigned gate to impact in New York. Also, the information has to completely match the type of aircraft, its electronic components, avionics, and installed options. If any aviation data recorder experts get their hands on it, they’ll analyze the data down to the smallest detail.” (*flight data recorder)

“Buzz’s guys do magic,” Smokey said. “Besides, any data recorders we don’t want released will be buried. We’ll claim national security or some other bulls**t.”

“Okay,” Ace said. “I’m also concerned about the extremely light passenger loads we’re planning for the flights. And, yes, I understand the human side of it and all that, but I think it’s a definite f**kin’ red flag. We’re killing thousands, and we’re worried about a few less people on the flights? May bring attention for no reason. I say, let the flights book normally.”

“Ace,” Woody said. “Your point is well taken. We’ve wrestled with this for a while, and it may not be worth the risk. We’ll continue to restrict the bookings until about three months before E-Day. At that point, we’ll open it up for normal reservations.”

“I can go along with that, Woody,” Ace said. “Historically, aircraft loads are light on a Tuesday morning in September anyway.”

“That was my argument too, Ace,” Woody said. “What else you got?”

“I don’t like the minimal amount of aircraft parts at the crash sites,” Ace replied. “We’re lessening the fuel load and stripping down the sixty-seven drones for speed and maneuverability. Therefore, there won’t be the usual s**t you find at a crash—like drink trolleys, seats, insulation, and plastic paneling. Also, let’s not forget luggage, personal effects, crew uniforms, and ID like: passports, driver’s licenses, and crew name tags and wings. A crash site is always strewn with that kind of s**t.”

“Easy to rectify,” Lauren said. “Digger?”

“We could load the drones with some of that stuff,” Digger said. “But it would be better if we plant it at the crash sites.”

“What about debris we don’t want to be found?” Lauren asked. “You know like what if a drone engine survives the crash? Are they the same as the ones on the actual airliner?”

“No,” Ace said. “And that’s a good point, Lauren. Got a thought on this Magic?”

Magic thought for a second. “Shouldn’t be a problem,” he said. “Our sell job will have already convinced people it was regular jetliners.”

“I hope so,” Ace said. “Plus you have to be an expert to know one jet engine from another. I will also issue orders to our ground crews at the targets. They’ll be told to remove anything that survives from the drones.”

“Good, Ace,” Lauren said.

Ace checked his notes. “Oh, this is my last item. Are you still gonna keep the spare seven sixty-seven drone in a holding pattern up north unless required, Lauren?”

“Yes,” Lauren replied. “If both sixty-seven drones hit the Towers in New York, the spare drone won’t be needed.”

“Is that before or after we hit the Pentagon?” Ace asked.

“After,” Lauren replied. “Once the Pentagon is hit, our FTS pilots will turn the drone south and fly it towards Washington to coincide with the hero scenario. Once it’s near the crash site out in the boonies, we’ll hide its primary signal on WTC radar and fly it to Close By for disposal. At that point, we’ll simulate its crash at the site.”

“Hate to interrupt,” Teach said, “but is the hit on the Pentagon still a seven fifty-seven drone to match the airline flight?”

“If I may Ace,” Lauren replied. “I was gonna brief you guys on this tonight. Wedge One at the playground requires a precision strike, so we’re going to launch a BROACH bomb from a B-1 bomber modified to resemble a jetliner. The ordinance has a sensor to detect the target, a precursor charge to soften the impact area, and an FTB* to detonate inside. Those friggin’ things don’t miss.”
(*follow through bomb)

“So you guys are absolutely sure no security cameras at the Pentagon or in the area will record this thing?” Teach asked. “I know we discussed this earlier, but I’m still not convinced a videotape won’t surface.”

“We’re confident it won’t,” Woody said. “Worst-case scenario, if any tape does exist, law enforcement will seize it.”

“Woody’s right,” Smokey said. “Won’t be a problem.”

“We should mention we’re also using a cruise missile to simulate that crash out in the boonies, Lauren,” Woody said.

“I was just about to, Woody,” Lauren said. “After the spare drone is diverted to Close By, we’re going to simulate the crash of the fourth airliner. Ace’s guys recommend a conventional air-launched AGM-eighty-six cruise missile with a ground-penetrating conventional warhead. We can launch the missile from a B fifty-two on a training flight hundreds of miles away from the target area.”

Ace cleared his throat. “Something I’d like to add, Lauren. This cruise missile will hit exactly where we want her to. But as I said to Lauren, this rural crash site concerns me. We’re trying to sell the fact a Boeing seven fifty-seven nose-dived into the ground at high speed. There’s a huge difference, debris-wise, between a straight into the ground crash of an airliner and a cruise missile. I can show you photos of straight-in crashes by both. No f**kin’ comparison.”

“Excuse me, everyone,” Digger said. “Ace is correct about the debris. I didn’t realize the rural crash site would be a cruise missile. Like all the other crash sites, we must plant items appropriate to an airliner crash including personal items. That means we must collect them at Close By and transport them. This is a problem. We’ve solved the timing for planting the items at the other crash sites in New York and Washington. We have made the run several times with high-speed helicopters from Close By, and there’s enough time to transport the necessary items to our plant teams near the crash sites. But we know the exact location of these strikes. This rural location is unknown. My teams need plenty of lead-time to plan their drop there. The lat and long would help.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem to provide the location ahead of E-Day, Digger,” Lauren said. “How much lead time do you need?”

“A couple of days before E-Day would work,” Digger replied.

“We’ll give you an exact location way before that,” Lauren said. “Woody and I will pick a spot and let you know as soon as possible.”

“That would be great, Lauren,” Digger said. “It will help sell the fact it was an airplane.”

“I agree, Digger,” Ace said.

Digger gave Ace a thumbs-up and turned towards Woody. “That’s all I have tonight.”

“Thanks, Digger,” Woody said. “Teach? You’re last, but certainly not least.”

Teach grinned. “All the kids have their papers and, as Ace said, the pilots will randomly enter the US beginning early next year. Some will need to learn more English before any flight training. The babysitters are all fully trained and in place. They will stay in contact with Smokey’s team to keep law enforcement up to speed on their activity. We want to be sure the kids leave a trail, albeit not a blatantly obvious one. The flight schools are all selected, and training will take place during the next year. That’s all I got.”

“Okay, gang,” Woody said. “Before I let you go—gotta say you’ve all done a great job on this plan. Also, we’ve avoided surveillance, and there have been no leaks. Let’s keep it that way. As you know, our encrypted cell phones are not one hundred percent secure, so use your code words and landlines whenever possible. Appears Dolan and his FBI team are off our tail and busy with other s**t, but don’t let your guard down. If you see anything or anyone suspicious, let us know. Also, you know The Ring has targeted all of us for termination. Sam and I have come up with a plan. We’ll let you know when it’s finalized.”

“What about everybody in our departments, Woody?” Magic asked. “They targeted too?”

“No indication they are,” Woody said. “Probably because they only know their part, not the whole thing. Killing them would serve no purpose and could draw unnecessary attention.”

“What they don’t know will save them?” Magic asked.

“I believe so,” Woody replied. “Also, they were given the same warning as you. The Ring knows everything about them and their friends and family. Enough to scare anyone silent.”

“Sure worked on me,” Willie said.

Woody smiled. “Me, too, Willie. So listen, you guys. We’ll all get out of this alive and disappear after E-Day. Before long, we’ll be on a beach in the

Caribbean ordering drinks with little paper umbrellas, and wondering why the f**k we were so worried.”

Everyone around the table laughed. “Sounds great, Woody,” Teach said.

“Okay,” Woody said. “Keep Lauren and I up to speed on your progress, and let us help you with any snags. Oh, and have a great Christmas, everyone.”

Woody stood in a corner near the back of the room. No one was leaving. The poker buddies were gathered at the bar kibitzing and toasting one another. As usual, Magic and Ace had set aside their professional disagreements and were talking and laughing. Lauren walked over to Woody. “Great bunch, huh, Woody?”

“They sure are.” Woody spotted Digger sitting at a table near the bar. “Hang on a sec, Lauren.”

Woody tapped Digger on the shoulder. “Can we talk, Digger—in private?” They walked to the back of the room.

“What’s up, Woody?”

“Didn’t want to mention this in the meeting,” Woody said, “but Mick told me The Ring is concerned about leaks from your crew at Close By—especially the ones involved in the disposal on E-Day. They want them eliminated.”

“Tell Mick I’ll take care of that, Woody,” Digger said. “Quick and clean with no trace.”

Woody thanked Digger and walked back to Lauren. “You told Digger about that E-Day thing Mick mentioned, Woody?”

“Yeah. He didn’t even ask why. That’s our Digger. Does whatever’s necessary without question.”

“Did Mick tell you why The Ring is concerned Digger’s crew might breach security?”

“He said it’s because of the grisly nature of the work. Some folks may have trouble keeping it to themselves and may have to talk to someone about it.”

“I believe they have a point, Woody.” Lauren tapped him on the arm. “So, you’re back to normal now, huh?”

“You bet I am.”

“I was worried about you.”

“I know you were, but I’m okay now.”

“You’re still the best person to run this.”

“Anyone is replaceable. You know that.”

“Hard to replace you, Woody.”

“You could—in a heartbeat.”

Lauren smiled. “Yeah—I could, and I will on E-Day.”

Woody checked his watch. “Holy s**t! I’d better go. I’m meeting Mick. He wants an update.”

Woody waved at the poker buddies. “Merry Christmas, you lowlifes! See you next year.”

The poker buddies responded with a group ‘Merry Christmas, Uncle Woody!’

Lauren kissed Woody on the cheek. “Want you to have a great Christmas and a Happy New Year, Woody. And don’t you fret. We’ll get this done. No way I’m gonna let anyone or anything screw with my E-Day.”

“Wish I was half as tough as you, Lauren.”

“You are, Woody.”

* * * * *

Kirk and Alexis hailed a cab outside the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Kirk told the driver the address. Alexis snuggled closer to him. “Thanks for coming tonight, Kirk. Office Christmas parties are not always fun for spouses or friends.”

“This one was, Allie. You work with some awfully nice folks.”

“I know,” Alexis said. “Marsh & McLennan is like family to me. Makes it a joy to go to work.”

They arrived at Alexis’s apartment, and Kirk paid the cab driver. Upstairs, they poured nightcaps and settled onto an overstuffed sofa. Kirk confided some of his job frustrations with Alexis. “What I don’t understand, Allie, is they’re finding any excuse to overlook me for promotions. It’s like they have something against me. That’s two I’ve missed.”

“Eventually, you’ll be promoted, Kirk. Don’t give up. People move on or retire.”

“You know me,” Kirk said. “I’m too stubborn to give up. Chief of the New York Bureau is gonna be available soon. I won’t get it, but I’m gonna lobby for it.”

“You never know what can happen, Kirk.”

“That’s true, but it’s like they forget about all the good s**t I’ve done and concentrate on the little mistakes I’ve made.”

“Taking me into an FBI safe house and borrowing a government vehicle is not a little mistake,” Alexis said. “Remember I wasn’t sure we should? You told me it was no big deal.”

“It wasn’t.” Kirk smiled. “Not to me anyway.”

“Your time will come,” Alexis said. “I know you’re super busy and working hard.”

“We passed super busy months ago, Allie. We’re now approaching impossible. We’ve got the ongoing terrorist threat from al Qaeda and others, follow-up investigations on the LAX bomber, and the Brooklyn Al Qaeda cell. Plus we’re all ramped up for security on the millennium. There’s just too much s**t goin’ on. To top it off, the NTSB has turned the investigation of the Egypt Air 990 crash over to the FBI. My boss asked me to help with the investigation.”

“Was that the one last fall?”

“Yeah,” Kirk replied. “Took off from Kennedy and nose-dived into the Atlantic off Nantucket. They’ve recovered some of the wreckage and the black boxes. The NTSB and the FAA figure the co-pilot crashed the aircraft on purpose. On the cockpit voice recorder, he was saying: ‘I rely on God’ in Arabic over and over while the aircraft was going down. The Egyptian government is blaming Boeing. They claim it was a control system failure and have launched their own investigation.”

“What do you think, Kirk?”

“I dunno, Allie. I keep thinking it might be terrorist-related, but I got terrorism on the brain these days. There’s just something that feels weird about this accident, and I gotta find out what happened.”

“You should follow your instincts.”

“Always do, Allie.” Kirk patted her on the thigh. “Right now my instincts tell me it’s bedtime.”

* * * * *

Times Square in New York on New Year’s Eve was always a mob scene, but with the new millennium approaching, a record number of revelers were gathered to witness the ball drop. Woody and Roxanne entered the square from Seventh Avenue. “How much time do we have, Woody?”

Woody checked his watch. “It’s eleven forty-five.”

Roxanne took Woody by the hand. “C’mon. Let’s get closer.”

“Okay,” Woody said. “But we’re gonna need sharp elbows.”

They managed to squirm their way closer to the ball. Someone said it was close to midnight. People of all ages were kissing, drinking, and laughing. Woody pulled Roxanne closer and kissed her. “I wouldn’t want to bring in the millennium with anyone else,” he said above the din.

Roxanne’s eyes sparkled. “I wouldn’t either, Woody.”

I gotta spend more time with this lady, Woody thought. She's a joy to be around.

* * * * *

Kirk Dolan and Alexis made their way through a tangle of partygoers to where the ball would drop over Times Square. Alexis pointed across the square. "Look, Kirk. There's room over there."

Kirk followed her. "Right here is good," she said.

Kirk pulled out his cell phone. "I gotta check-in and make sure all is well. I'll just be a sec."

Alexis listened as Kirk made several calls. She could hear the elation in his voice. *He sounds so happy*, she thought.

The crowd gasped, and someone yelled: "The ball is moving!"

Kirk folded his phone and put it in his coat pocket. He and Alexis stood arm in arm watching the ball descend. "This is so cool, Allie. Lots of guys in the Bureau believed something was going to happen tonight. Said I'd be crazy to be out here in the crowd. Truth is, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

Alexis snuggled closer. "Me neither."

* * * * *

Like most of the crowd, Woody and Roxanne were transfixed by the spectacle of New Year's Eve in Times Square. They couldn't take their eyes off the ball as it worked its way down the flagpole.

"I don't even feel the cold, Woody," Roxanne said.

"I don't either. It's like magic being here tonight."

* * * * *

Everyone gathered believed this ball drop was extra special, signaling the dawning of a new year, century, and millennium. All eyes were on the sphere as it slid further down. When it approached the bottom, the crowd began a countdown: "... Three. Two. One." The ball stopped at the bottom, and people screamed: "Happy New Year!" Horns blew, and everyone cheered. Woody, Roxanne, Kirk, and Alexis were oblivious to it all. Both couples were locked in a passionate kiss.

Kirk Dolan and Woody Travis—normally worlds apart. Tonight—separated by a few feet. Two adversaries in close proximity because of a unique turn of the

clock. Both men with the women they love. Both dedicated to their profession and willing to risk all to complete their mission.

Both on a collision course with E-Day.

TWENTY-TWO

Weapons and Tactics

January 2000

Lauren and Woody waited for Sam in the lobby of the Roosevelt Hotel. Woody checked the clock behind the front desk. "Sam said he'd be here by six-thirty, but you know what traffic's like in the city."

"Sometimes walking is quicker," Lauren said. "When did you find out he was comin' in today?"

"He left me a voice message this morning."

Sam entered the lobby. "Hey, y'all. Sorry, I'm late."

"Hey, Sam," Woody said. "Good to see ya, cowboy."

The three of them headed to the elevators. "Good to see y'all, too. Bin too long," Sam said.

"Come in on the train, Sam?" Woody asked.

"No. I hitched a ride with the First Husband. He was on Letterman's show."

"Was Darrel doing a stand-up set?" Lauren asked.

Sam pushed the elevator button. "Naw. Way funnier than that, y'all. He's from upstate New York and gonna run for a Senate seat here."

"Did you meet Letterman?" Woody asked.

"Naw," Sam replied and entered the elevator. He pushed the mezzanine floor button. "Coulda after the show, but I left early. Besides, celebrities are a pain in the butt."

"More than politicians?" Lauren asked.

Sam nodded. "Sometimes." The elevator stopped, and Sam held the door open. Lauren exited and walked ahead. "It's The Hudson Suite, Lauren," Sam said.

Lauren opened the door. Inside, two men were packing electronic gear into carry-on suitcases. "Who do you guys work for?" Lauren asked.

"Franco, ma'am," the dark-haired one replied and showed Lauren his ID.

Sam walked in. "Room clean, guys?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Saunders."

"Good. Thanks, guys," Sam said. He closed the door after they left.

"Good idea getting the room swept, Sam," Lauren said.

"Can't be too careful. These boys can detect devices our little radio scanners can't."

“What does a guy have to do to get a drink around here?” Woody asked.

“Y’all belly up to the bar and help yourselves,” Sam said. “Oh, and the hooch is on me—and the taxpayers, of course.”

“Bless them,” Woody said. He poured himself some bourbon and held up his glass. “Cheers, you two. Good to see you here in Gotham, Sam.”

“I agree, Woody,” Lauren said. “Nice to get outside the beltway, Sam?”

“You bet. Sorry I missed the poker club today. Did you invite the poker buddies to join us later on tonight, Woody?”

“Yeah,” Woody replied.

“Now it makes sense,” Lauren said. “I thought this room was a little big for just the three of us.”

“So did you come up with some questions, Sam?” Woody asked.

Sam took out a binder and patted it. “I did.”

Woody turned to Lauren. “I asked Sam to play the devil’s advocate and quiz us to make sure we haven’t missed anything.”

“Super idea, Woody,” Lauren said.

Sam opened his binder. “First, Woody. How close are we to ready?”

“A few things to finalize and the overall plan will be locked and loaded,” Woody replied. “I’ll let Lauren tell you about E-Day.”

“Well, Sam,” Lauren said. “Buzz has the E-Day sequence all computerized, and he’s got plenty of backups in case anything goes south. He says it’s basically push ‘enter’ and away she goes.”

“What’s the sequence for the demolition of the buildings, Lauren?” Sam asked. “The North Tower is hit first, so I assume it will be the first one to come down?”

“No,” Lauren replied. “Our engineers advise if we’re going to simulate a building collapse, the South Tower should be first. The reason is: the target area for the drone is lower than in the North Tower. Therefore, there are more floors and thus more weight above the impact zone.”

“Interesting,” Sam said. “But what if one of them drones hits above or below the target area of the Towers? Won’t that screw up the timing for the demolition?”

“We have factored in enough time between the impact of the drones and demolition to allow for that,” Lauren said. “Buzz and his guys will have no problem readjusting the computer program for the detonators.”

“Sounds good,” Sam said. “Okay, so even though Buzz hits that enter thing and the program locks in, you can make changes if necessary?”

“Yeah,” Lauren replied. “We must have the flexibility to make minor adjustments because there are too many variables.”

“Too many to build into the program,” Sam said.

“Yup,” Lauren said. “We’ve allowed for as many as we can, but there’s always the unexpected. There are parts of the plan, however, that must be adhered to without variation—like our choice of flights. We need lotsa fuel on board, so we’ll choose trans-continental ones. And we must use Boeing seven fifty-seven and seven sixty-seven two hundred series from American and United Airlines.”

“Why?” Sam asked.

“Because those airlines fly that particular type of aircraft, and they don’t have fuel dump capability,” Lauren replied. “Ace says if a pilot suspects a hijacking is about to take place, the first action they take is to hit the fuel dump switch to limit the aircraft’s range. And we need lotsa fuel for Digger’s crew at Close By or for extra flight time if required.”

“So I take it those aircraft can handle a heavy landing?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Lauren replied. “Ace says they’re built like a Mac truck. All Boeing recommends is the line maintenance mechanics perform a heavy landing check.”

“Good,” Sam said. “When will you decide on the flights?”

“As soon as the airline fall scheds for two thousand and one are announced,” Lauren replied.

“What about s**t like people missing flights or crew who switch assignments or call in sick? And how about weather, ATC, or mechanical delays?” Sam asked. “You know—if Murphy’s Law shows up?”

“If I may, Lauren,” Woody replied. “The plan allows for that, Sam. All those various scenarios are built into the program. Buzz assured us, he and his team have explored every possibility. For example, there are plenty of flights using the type of aircraft we require. So, if a flight’s delayed or canceled for a mechanical, we can switch aircraft in time to have the kids on board. The one thing beyond our control is the weather. If nobody’s flying, we scrub and do it another day.”

“What if something happens y’all didn’t predict?” Sam asked.

“Buzz says his computer guys can adjust,” Woody replied.

“He’d better be right, Woody,” Sam said.

“I trust Buzz and his guys, Sam. There’s nobody I trust more for a job like this.”

Sam checked his notes. “My next question is the green light. When do you find out everyone is ready to go, Lauren?”

“Night before E-Day. I’ll send out an encrypted email on our secure server to all the poker buddies asking the same question: ‘Have all your people voted at the advance polls?’ If they all answer ‘yes’, we’re ready to go. If they’re not

ready, they'll answer: 'we have several who haven't. Will advise'. Then I'll call them and find out what's going on."

"Okay, let's assume everyone is ready. Now y'all push that 'enter' thing and it starts?" Sam asked.

"No," Lauren replied. "That doesn't happen until E-Day morning when the first flight is airborne, and I receive confirmation from our babysitters that the kids are on board. Once our FTS pilots take over control of the aircraft, I call Buzz and give him the mission launch code which is: 'let's get out the vote'."

"So the babysitters just escort the kids to the gate, watch them board the flight, and make sure they stay on board?" Sam asked.

"Yeah."

"If you have to, can you communicate with the kids on board the flights?" Sam asked.

"Yes," Lauren replied. "The team leader on each flight has a small radio receiver. We told them this is how they'll receive the signal to hijack the aircraft. Buzz's guys disguised it as a Walkman with headphones."

Sam checked his notes. "How much do the kids know about the mission?"

"The only thing they know is they are supposed to hijack their flights and fly them to their respective targets," Lauren said. "In reality, they will never take over the aircraft because they won't receive the 'go' signal from me."

"That could be a problem," Sam said. "Those boys have bought into the whole radical Islamic bulls**t and have been trained at terrorist camps. Their mission is to kill Americans. They also believe they're martyrs prepared to die in a holy jihad and get themselves a free ticket to paradise. They're just itchin' to hijack the aircraft and die for al Qaeda. So, my question is: what if the muscle hijackers take matters into their own hands and take over the aircraft before our FTS pilots have control?"

"Doesn't matter," Lauren replied. "The FTS pilots can override anything they try to do. But, in any event, it won't happen. The kids've been warned not to do anything until they receive the signal. They also know the intel we have on them."

"Scared them?" Sam asked.

"Terrified them," Lauren replied. "They were shown pictures we took of their houses, immediate family, friends, and relatives along with all their addresses. Don't forget we also know their true identities and have reminded them of that fact. They'll toe the line."

"Okay," Sam said. "Sounds good."

"Speaking of the kids, Lauren," Woody said. "Are you still planning on the fake radio calls from the kids while the flights are in the air?"

“Yup,” Lauren replied. “They’re set to go. Buzz’s guys recorded the kid’s voices and edited them into simulated radio calls. We’ll broadcast the calls on E-Day via VHF airband radios to ATC. They sound like the hijack pilots were talking to the passengers on their flights, but they selected ‘transmit’ instead of ‘intercom’ on their radio. Ace suggested we also add a simulated cockpit intrusion call to ATC from one of the flights. He thought it would help sell the terrorist hijacker scenario.”

“That’s excellent, Lauren,” Woody said. “What else ya got, Sam?”

Sam checked his notes. “What is the sequence of events on board the flights after our pilots on the ground take control?”

“Once our FTS pilots have control of the aircraft,” Lauren said, “the aircraft will be flooded with isoflurane—a powerful inhalant anesthetic. Everyone on board will be unconscious in a matter of seconds.”

“How is y’all gonna get that stuff on board the aircraft?” Sam asked

“Security at the airports is slack,” Lauren replied. “We’ve come up with several possibilities. We’re considering disguising the containers as duty-free, and then the kids could carry it aboard. But more likely, we’ll plant remotely activated containers in the commissary for the aircraft galleys and in the ongoing luggage and air cargo that’s loaded into the baggage compartments. Our FTS pilots can trigger the containers and release the gas. Ace’s guys are working on the logistics.”

“Then after the mid-air swap with drones, those boys at the computers will fly all them seven-fifty and seven sixty-sevens directly to Close By?” Sam asked.

“Yup,” Lauren replied. “The four airline flights will be tucked into their respective hangars at Close By as soon as possible. Then Digger’s team takes over.”

“Okay, answer me this,” Sam said. “Is there anything that can stop the mission after it starts?”

“I’ll take this one, Lauren,” Woody replied. “Once it starts, Sam, that’s it. The timing is too complex, and all the parts are inter-connected. Lauren and Buzz can only make minor adjustments.”

“Gotta be that way, Sam,” Lauren said.

“How does everyone know when to shut down the operation?” Sam asked.

“They know we’re done when I bring down Building Seven on E-Day afternoon,” Lauren replied. “Then everyone skedaddles.”

“I’m concerned about Building Seven, y’all,” Sam said. “No airplane impact on that building, so how y’all gonna justify why it came down?”

“We discussed this at our poker game back in December. Magic has it covered. His explanation is when the North Tower fell, debris damaged Building Seven and the resulting office furniture fires weakened the structure causing it to collapse. He says it will be an easy sell along with the rest of the scenario and won’t be a problem.”

“Sounds like y’all got it covered,” Sam said. His cell phone vibrated in his pocket. “Hang on, y’all.” After the call, Sam folded his phone. “Damn. The Secret Service says Darrel wants to leave early, so they’re gettin’ his private jet ready. I gotta high-tail it out to La Guardia. Tell the poker buddies I’m sorry I missed them.”

“I will, Sam,” Woody said. “Ridin’ on a private jet? Pretty highfalutin for a Texas boy.”

Sam winked. “Yeah, sure ‘nuff is, but I’m learnin’ to adjust.”

“You also get to fly on Air Force One,” Lauren said.

“Only when I have to,” Sam said. “This President works hard, especially on the plane. Expects her staff to do the same. I’d sooner be back at the White House.”

“Not surprised,” Lauren said. “Working as hard as a woman could kill a man.”

Woody and Sam both smirked. “Speaking of Presidents, Sam,” Woody said. “Who do they think will be the presidential candidates for the election this fall?”

“Folks at the castle kinda figure Liz Hopkins for the GOP and Dave Younger for the Democrats,” Sam replied.

“Who’s best for us?” Woody asked.

“Hopkins for two reasons,” Sam replied. “One is her choice for VP—rumored to be Forbes Miller. He’s an old friend of mine. The other reason is: Younger is hell-bent on taking out UBL and al Qaeda.”

“I’m voting for Liz Hopkins,” Lauren said.

“Why, Lauren, a southern Democrat voting for a Republican?” Woody asked.

“Some things are more important than politics, Woody,” Lauren replied.

“Like what?”

Lauren grinned at them. “Like two female Presidents in a row.”

* * * * *

Ron Jenkins opened the door to his room. “Hey, Kirk, what’s up?”

“Sorry to bother you, Ron. Can I come in?” Kirk held up two bottles. “I’ve got beer.”

Ron smiled. “Sure, buddy. C’mon in.”

Kirk plunked himself down on a small sofa. “These rooms ain’t too bad for Quantico, huh?”

“Yeah, they’re okay,” Ron replied. He opened his beer and handed the bottle opener to Kirk. “So, what’s on your mind, Kirk? Something from class today?” Ron sensed it wasn’t. *Probably has to do with me getting the promotion he wanted.*

“Wanted to congratulate you on being appointed the Assistant Director of the New York Office, Ron. You know I lobbied for it, but I’m glad a friend got it.”

Ron grinned. “Thanks, Kirk. I appreciate that. So you still gonna gun for a promotion?”

“Absolutely, Ron. You know me: ‘Mr. Ambitious’.”

“If I can help you get your own Field Office or a promotion back to Washington, let me know,” Ron said.

“Thanks, but I’m happy in New York,” Kirk said. “Love the city and the work. Gotta great squad and lotsa solid contacts and informants. Best of all, my kids are close-by in Connecticut.”

“Okay, but I feel kinda bad, Kirk. You were just as qualified as me. In fact, I thought you would get it.”

“I will—once you retire.”

Ron laughed. “Oh yeah, you still got seven to go ‘til mandatory.”

“Right,” Kirk said. “You’ll be out of here in two.”

“Exactly. You’re smarter than you look, Kirk.”

Kirk crossed his eyes at Ron. “Thank goodness, huh?” He stood. “I’d better go, Ron. Just wanted to let you know there’s no hard feelings.”

Ron stood, and they shook hands. “Glad to hear you’re okay with this, Kirk.”

“Hey. I’ll be your biggest supporter,” Kirk said. “All I ask is you support me in what I’m trying to do.”

“Within reason, right?”

Kirk laughed. “Alright—if I don’t f**k up again.”

“Deal,” Ron said.

Kirk moved towards the door, and Ron followed. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, Kirk. Are you still looking at those old CIA spooks?”

“I got the f**kin’ memo, Ron. Hoover wants me to back off.”

“Yeah,” Ron said. “But I know you. Off the record, any idea what they’re up to?”

“Nah,” Kirk replied, “but I do know it ain’t helping the f**kin’ mayor get re-elected. Right now our office has too much other s**t to handle. We ain’t got enough time or manpower.” Kirk paused. “Hey, Ron, do you think you could shake loose some guys from CID*? You know—on the QT? I could use their

help to track down some of the leads we have on Travis.” (*FBI Criminal Investigative Division)

“Absolutely, Kirk. I’ll ask Linda to loan you some guys. As you said, off the record.”

“You’re a good man, Ron. See you in class tomorrow.”

Ron rolled his eyes. “Can hardly wait. Tactical training from those Neanderthals from FBI SWAT.”

“Careful, Ron.” Kirk opened the door. “They eat their young.”

Ron closed the door. *Can’t help but like Hound Dog*, he thought. *But he’s such a f**kin’ maverick. The knives are out for him in the Bureau.*

* * * * *

Charles Drake disliked having his lunch interrupted with business. Upon his appointment as the Station Chief at Alec Station, he anticipated the immense burden of managing the CIA unit responsible for tracking Usama bin Laden and his associates. What he hadn’t foreseen was the relentless demands placed on his time. Charles insisted his lunchtime was his—unless it was urgent. Today, it was.

Richard Dobbins was the CIA Deputy Director for Intelligence and was granted immediate access to Drake’s office. Charles didn’t object. He and Dobbins were old friends, and if he wanted to meet without delay, it had to be important.

“Hi, Dick,” Charles said. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Charlie,” Richard replied. “Sorry to interrupt your lunch, but I thought you should hear about this right away. A while back, an NSA phone tracker was listening to a Yemeni line that had been used by UBL. Two of our al Qaeda targets are planning a trip to KL*.” (*Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia)

“I know about the call. I suspected they’re part of the Hamburg group.”

Richard checked his notes. “I don’t think so, Charlie. This group is out of Karachi. Targets are Khalid al Mihdhar and Nawaf al Hazmi.”

“S**t! Weren’t they some of those guys trained by KSM*?” (*Khalid Sheikh Mohammed - alleged mastermind of 9/11)

“Yup,” Richard replied. “The latest report says our guys air-tailed them to KL and then on the ground with the help of our KL Station guys. There were two more of our al Qaeda targets there as well.” Richard checked his notes again. “Khalid and Abu Bara. They flew in from Karachi with Hazmi. Mihdhar arrived from Yemen.”

“Why the sudden trip to KL?” Charles asked.

“Unknown, Charlie. Best guess is an al Qaeda summit. They were met at the airport by Hambali.”

Charles whistled. “That’s significant. He’s al Qaeda’s guy in charge of SE Asia.”

“Right,” Richard said. “Our guys tailed them to Hambali’s condo.”

“This is big. Do our guys still have eyes on them?”

“Unfortunately, they lost them, Charlie. Then the targets took off for Thailand a week later.”

“So they didn’t tail them?”

“No. They didn’t even know they’d left. By the time our guys in KL found out and contacted Thailand, the targets had already disappeared onto the streets of Bangkok.”

“S**t,” Charles said. “And still no sign of them?”

“No,” Richard replied. “Bangkok Station is looking for ‘em.”

Charles stood behind his desk. “So these guys have been on our watch list for years. We track them to KL and lose them. And now they’re somewhere in f**kin’ Thailand?”

“Correct,” Richard replied.

“This is really embarrassing, Dick. Let’s stay on this and find those b*****s.”

“We are, Charlie. We’ve alerted the Thai authorities, and they’ll keep an eye on the exit ports.”

“Good,” Charles said, “but let’s keep this incident in-house for now. The community here doesn’t need to know.”

“What about The Fort*, Charlie? They shared the info with us.” (*nickname for NSA HQ - Ft. Meade, MD)

“No need,” Charles replied. “They’ll be listening for these guys anyway. They’re on the watch list.”

“To be clear, Charlie. You don’t want us to pass this on to anyone including the FBI?”

“That’s correct, Dick—for now. Gives us a chance to find them.”

“You must have a better reason than that, Charlie.”

Charles smiled. “I do. If we tell the FBI, no doubt it will end up on Dolan’s desk. The last thing we need is that son-of-a-b*****h bad-mouthing us to anyone who’ll listen.”

“Ah, right,” Richard said. “I assume we’ll also keep it away from Dolan’s agents in our shop on the hostage exchange program*?” (*slang term for FBI agents assigned to CIA’s Alec Station)

“You got it, Dick. Let’s wait and see if Bangkok Station can pick up their trail.”

“Shouldn’t be hard, Charlie. Dave Johnson was in charge of the KL ground team. He told me the targets were easy to follow. He said if he didn’t know any better, they acted like they wanted us to know they were there.”

Charles thought for a second. “That’s exactly what they wanted, Dick. That would explain those two planning the trip on a non-secure line bin Laden used. They had to know we’d be listening.”

Richard thought for a moment. “You think they were pinging the system*, Charlie?” (*leaking intelligence designed to be intercepted)

“I do.”

“Then my question is: why in the world would they want us to know they were heading to KL?”

“Best guess? A diversion to turn our attention away from something else.”

“I wonder what that something else is.”

“That’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question, Dick.”

“You know, you’re pretty smart for a Yalie.”

“Easy to impress an Aggie,” Charles said.

“I resemble that remark, Charlie. I’d better go.”

Charles came around his desk, and they shook hands. “Thanks for the briefing, Dick. Good to see you. Oh, before I let you go. Is the NSA still trying to get a bead on that Travis bunch? I hear Dolan has dropped the ball. He’s been sidetracked rounding up al Qaeda cells and chasing UBL. Also, Knox had him, and the rest of the Bureau investigating Y-two-K s**t.”

“We got nothing new about Travis and his crew,” Richard said. “They’re not a priority right now—UBL is.”

“Okay. See you later, Dick.”

After Dobbins left his office, Charles returned to his desk to finish his lunch. *Dobbins is a good man, but naive, he thought. If the NSA and FBI found out we lost al Qaeda terrorists on our own watch list, they’d think we’re a bunch of incompetent boobs.*

TWENTY-THREE

Pilots and Angels

March 2000

Woody stopped outside Lauren's office. She was on the phone and held up a finger. "Okay, Teach, I gotta go. Talk soon."

"C'mon in, Woody," Lauren said. "Have a seat. Teach filled me on what our first two kids have been up to."

"How are good old Hazmi and Mihdhar?"

"They've been busy since they arrived at LAX in January," Lauren replied.

"NSA knew they were in KL?"

"They had to know, Woody. The kids gave them enough clues. We're sure the NSA will believe it was a high-level al Qaeda meeting to plan an attack."

"Exactly what we wanted to help sell the scenario. I'm still amazed they got out of Thailand undetected and entered the US without a problem."

"Proof Button does excellent work, Woody. It was a good first test."

"That it was," Woody said. "So what did Teach have to say?"

"He said Hazmi and Mihdhar spent some time at a mosque in the LA area and took English-language training. They needed that before flight school."

"How they doin'?" Woody asked.

"Teach figures they learned enough English to get by. We moved them to Arizona in February, so they could begin their elementary flight training."

"Are they requesting flight training on Boeing jets like we told them to?"

"Yeah," Lauren replied. "Teach said they've been getting some funny looks because seven sixty-seven flight time is expensive. Oh, and speaking of money, Woody, I had one of the kids send emails to several US flight schools on the pretext he was inquiring for some Arab students studying in Hamburg. He requested info on training costs, accommodation, and available financing."

"Good. Hopefully, the NSA will track that," Woody said.

"The babysitters told me Mihdhar wants more money for the flight training and a computer flight simulator," Lauren said.

"You authorized it?"

"Of course," Lauren replied.

"When are the rest of the pilots coming in?"

"Hopefully, all will be in the US by this summer," Lauren replied. "The Hamburg guys first. We'll spread them around to different flying schools."

“Good.”

“What if any of these flight schools get suspicious and call the FBI?”

“Smokey’s guys in the Bureau will slow walk any investigation. As Smokey said back in December, they’re just students here on valid visas to attend university. All they have to say is the flying training is for fun.”

“True.”

“What about the muscle*?” Woody asked. (*aircraft hijackers)

“We haven’t finalized the list, but they’ll all be trained and in-country by the summer of two thousand and one.”

“Let’s make sure the babysitters keep a tight rein on all these guys. The last thing we need is a media story about an arrest.”

“Our babysitters are old hands at this. Nothing to worry about, Woody.”

“Anything else, Lauren?”

“Yeah. We’re filling in the gaps in the kids’ story. You know, who they are, where they’re from, and how they entered the US. We’re going to cover every detail down to where they’ll park their cars at the airports on E-Day, and what we’ll plant inside. The FBI is sure to search them. Those little details will help to prove these guys are the terrorists who hijacked and flew the aircraft.”

“Don’t overdo it, Lauren. It has to be believable.”

“Will do. So Hopkins won the primaries, huh?”

“Yeah,” Woody replied. “Sure hope she wins the Presidency. With Liz Hopkins and Forbes Miller in office, chances are better our op will have a happy ending.”

“What about our happy ending?”

“Almost ready,” Woody replied.

“I can hardly wait to hear about it.”

Woody stood. “You and Sam will be the first.”

* * * * *

“Glad I caught you on your office phone, Slim,” Woody said.

“You’re lucky you did, Deadeye,” Sam said. “I was just about to head out to Andrews and hop on board angel*. So, what’s up?” (*Air Force One)

“David and Yosef talked to their head office. Said they did some digging and neither Hezbollah nor Hamas are after me.”

“Who else would it be?”

“No idea, Slim.”

“Well, if Mossad can’t nail it down, it ain’t no one in the Middle East. Could be the Russians. Maybe they’re still trying to find me or—”

“What, Slim?” Woody asked.

“The SVR guy, Deadeye.”

“You think they found out about that?”

“Could be, pardner.”

“They’d have to have a mole inside the Company,” Woody said.

“Or someone overseas who went double.”

“I hope you’re wrong, and they’re looking for you,” Woody said.

Sam laughed. “I’ll keep an eye out for ‘em.”

“So where you off to?” Woody asked.

“India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.”

“Why the hell is she going to Pakistan?” Woody asked. “Dangerous place for a Pakistani let alone a US President.”

“Apparently, POTUS wants to be the first president to go there since the sixties,” Sam said. “Everyone, including the Secret Service, was against it, but she insisted. She’s also meeting Assad in Geneva.”

“The Syrian prick?” Woody asked. “S**t. You gonna get to meet him?”

“Naw. I’m heading to Israel to visit some old friends,” Sam replied. “After all, I’m in the neighborhood.”

“Safe journeys, my friend.”

“You take care and watch for the unusual, Deadeye.”

“Always, Slim. See you soon.”

* * * * *

The next morning, Woody met his Israeli security guys, David and Yuri, in the lobby of his apartment building. “Hey, guys,” he said. “What’s up? No car today?”

“Someone stole from street outside our apartment,” David replied. “Police say lately many in neighborhood taken.”

“Serves you right for renting an Accord. Their street-life in New York is like half an hour,” Woody said. “C’mon. We’ll take my car.”

The three of them headed down the block to Woody’s parking garage. Along the way, Yuri and David subtly checked out people, doorways, rooftops, and vehicles. Woody smiled. *No wonder Mossad is the best*, he thought.

At his garage, the attendant stopped Woody. “Do you know anything about security cameras, Mr. Woody? Ours ain’t working right.”

“Wouldn’t know what to look for, Eddie, but these two guys are whizzes. I’ll go get the car.”

“Not good, Woody,” David said. “One of us go with you.”

“I’ll be fine, boys,” Woody said. “Only one floor up. Besides, security has this place locked down tight. Right, Eddie?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Woody,” Eddie replied. “We got guys here twenty-four-seven.”

“See?” Woody said. “You guys check out those cameras, and I’ll be right back to pick you up.”

Woody walked up the ramp to the second level. He was about two vehicles away from his car when he pushed the unlock button on his remote. The explosion sent Woody hurtling across the garage and bouncing off a parked van.

“S**t”, Yuri said. “Call nine-one-one, David!” he said on the dead run. Yuri sprinted across the garage and up the ramp to the second level. Woody was lying unconscious on the cold concrete floor—a crimson pool of blood forming under his head. Yuri made a beeline across the garage to him. He removed his suit jacket and fastened it around Woody’s head. He checked Woody’s torso and legs. The upper right thigh area of Woody’s slacks was soaked in blood. Yuri suspected the femoral artery had been severed. He secured his belt around Woody’s thigh to control the hemorrhage. He monitored Woody’s pulse with one hand and his breathing with the other.

The wailing of sirens grew louder. “Hang on, Woody,” Yuri said. “Ambulance coming.”

TWENTY-FOUR

Change of Command

Magic burst into Lauren's office. "Have you seen the news, Lauren?" He grabbed the remote from her desk. "There's been a car bombing here in Midtown. Look, it's on CNN."

The video was from the location of the explosion. "S**t," Lauren said. "That looks like the parking garage where—" She stopped. Her face betrayed her.

"What?" Magic asked.

"That looks like Woody's garage. I'm calling him."

Magic's cell phone chirped. "Magic, here. What? Are you sure, Buzz?" He hung up his phone. "Lauren?"

Lauren wasn't listening. "Damn!" she said. "All I get is his friggin' voice mail!"

"Lauren?" Magic said. "Lauren, listen to me."

"What?"

"Buzz's guys picked up some NYPD radio traffic. Buzz says Woody was in that explosion."

Lauren froze. Thoughts of her father's death flashed through her mind. "Oh, my God! Is he... he—?"

"Dead? They don't know."

"Where're they taking him?" Lauren grabbed her coat.

"Buzz said Bellevue. Hang on. I'll drive ya."

On the way up to the hospital, Lauren was on her phone. She called the other poker buddies and told them what had happened to Woody. She also called Sam on Air Force One.

Lauren folded her cell phone and stared out the side window. "Was that last call to Sam?" Magic asked.

"Yeah."

"What'd he say?"

Lauren turned to him. "He said I'm in charge."

* * * * *

Kirk parked his unmarked squad car across the street from the scene of the bombing in midtown Manhattan. Numerous NYPD white police vehicles, crime

scene vans, and police personnel were gathered outside the parking garage. Kirk fastened his FBI badge to the pocket of his suit jacket and approached an NYPD officer guarding access to the garage. The officer lifted the yellow crime scene tape fastened across the entrance.

On the second parking level, Kirk walked up to a uniformed NYPD officer who checked his badge. “Who’s in charge of the scene, officer?” Kirk asked.

“Detective Sergeant Brooker, sir. The big guy over there.”

“I see him. Thanks.”

Brooker spotted Kirk. “Can’t keep your nose out of anything can you, Dolan.”

“Figured you NYPD guys need all the help you can get. Especially, if you’re in charge, Dave.” They shook hands. “How are ya, buddy?”

“Good, Kirk. Where’s your partner? What’s his name? Sal?”

“Yeah. He’s in the Middle East. We got some intel on some terrorists with ties back here to the States.”

“Guess you assume this is terror-related, right?”

“Always, Dave. Whatcha got?”

“Looks like a pro job.”

“Why?”

“They came in and out undetected,” Dave replied. “They f**ked up the security cameras, so no footage. Explosives were precisely enough to get the job done and most importantly—the f**kin’ device worked.”

“Okay if I take a look at the scene?”

Kirk and Brooker walked to the remains of the bombed-out car. Several other cars in parking spots nearby were severely damaged. “See the frag pattern on the walls and the other vehicles?” Dave asked.

“Yeah.”

“Our bomb techs figure the device exploded under the vehicle,” Dave said. “The perps probably planted it here last night.”

“How was it detonated?”

“No idea yet,” Dave replied. “Forensics has picked up some fragments. We’ll get our lab to work on the signature of the bomb maker. We’ll send samples to your lab as well.”

“Any idea on who or what they were after?” Kirk asked.

“No, and so far, no one has claimed responsibility.”

“You said they screwed the cameras, Dave?”

“Yeah. The security guard ran the footage from last night. Timestamp is right, but the footage is from three nights ago. So there is no record of anything past eight o’clock last night. The b*****s covered all the bases.”

“Who was the poor slob in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

Dave flipped open his notebook. “His ID said: ‘Robert Travis’.”

“What?” Kirk asked. “Was his middle name Woodrow?”

“Yup.”

“No f**kin’ way. Where’d they take him?”

“Bellevue,” Dave replied. “You know him?”

“Yeah. A case we’re working on. Is he gonna make it?”

“The EMTs said they didn’t think so.”

“S**t!” Kirk shook Dave’s hand. “Thanks, buddy. I gotta go. Wanna see him before he croaks.”

Kirk hurried towards the down ramp. He stopped and turned. “Hey, Dave—the car they put the bomb under. Who was it registered to?”

“Company car,” Brooker yelled back.

“What company?”

Dave cupped his hands around his mouth. “Focus Market Research.”

* * * * *

Magic stopped outside Bellevue Emergency. “You head in, Lauren. I’ll find a place to park.”

Lauren approached the triage desk. Two nurses were busy writing. Lauren held up her badge. “Excuse me. I’m Port Authority Police. We’re assisting NYPD with the mid-town bombing investigation. I’m looking for the victim—a Mr. Woodrow Travis.”

“Mr. Travis came in DOA,” the nurse said.

Lauren wrote in her notebook as she swallowed the lump in her throat. “Is he down in the morgue?”

“No,” the nurse said. “Chief Medical Examiner’s guys took him for autopsy.”

Lauren’s voice didn’t waver. “Thanks, ma’am. I appreciate your help.”

Lauren walked outside the ER and leaned against the wall. Her eyes welled up with tears. Magic hurried across the street. “How is he, Lauren?”

“He’s gone.”

“What?” Magic asked.

“Came in DOA.” Lauren moved towards Magic. He pulled her in and held her. After a few moments, Lauren pulled away and wiped the tears from her cheeks. “Enough,” she said, “We don’t have time for this bulls**t. Let’s get outa here.”

* * * * *

An hour later, Kirk Dolan arrived at the same triage desk in Bellevue Hospital Center. He held up his badge. "Special Agent Dolan, FBI. I'm inquiring about a Woody Travis, ma'am."

"I already told a lady police detective he came in DOA," the nurse said. "Didn't she tell you?"

"Not yet, ma'am, but I'm sure she will. Is he downstairs in the morgue?"

"No," the nurse said. "Like I told the other detective, the Medical Examiner's Office has him."

Why not the morgue here? Kirk thought. "Who pronounced him, ma'am?"

"A surgeon who said he was Mr. Travis's personal physician."

"Do you have his name, ma'am?"

"Should be on the log. Let me check." The nurse opened a clipboard file. "Here it is—a Doctor Cutler."

Kirk wrote in his notebook. "Did your ER call Doctor Cutler, ma'am?"

"No," she replied. "Not us. Coulda been Mr. Travis's security guys. They were with him in the ambulance."

"Did you get their names, ma'am?"

"One was named David. I remember because that's my son's name," the nurse replied. "Don't know the other guy's name. They both had strange accents."

"Do you know if the security guys or this Doctor Cutler called the ME's Office, ma'am?"

The nurse stood up behind the desk. "No idea, detective. To be honest, it was Bedlam in here. If we're done, I have a call light on, so I gotta go."

"One more thing," Kirk said. "Do you recall the lady detective's name?"

"No, sir. She never said."

"Can you describe her?"

"Pretty redhead. Slim build."

Lauren Hunter, Kirk thought. "Thanks, ma'am. You've been a big help."

Kirk left the ER and walked along East 28th Street. He called Mark Pennington. "Hey, Mark. Woody Travis was the vic in that bombing this morning."

"S**t. Did he survive?"

"No," Kirk replied. "He came in DOA to Bellevue. The ME has him. Will you confirm with them? Tell them I'm at Bellevue and ask if I can ID the body."

"Okay," Mark said. "I'll get right back to ya."

“Thanks, buddy. Oh and Mark, will you contact Bellevue security guys and request a copy of the security tape from the ER? Travis had two security guys and a doctor there this morning.”

“Will do, Boss.”

“Thanks.” Kirk folded his cell phone. *Something ain’t right*, Kirk thought as he walked along towards the Medical Examiner’s office. *No one croaks and gets picked up by the ME’s Office that quickly.*

Kirk’s phone vibrated. “Dolan.”

“Kirk, it’s Mark. No need to go. ME doesn’t have him.”

“What? Who the f**k picked him up?”

“Wasn’t the ME’s guys, Boss.”

“This whole thing smells f**kin’ weird, Mark. Doesn’t make any sense at all. S**t. We didn’t know what Travis was up to, and now, not only do we have no idea who the f**k blew him away—we don’t even know where his f**kin’ body is!”

“We’ll work it, Boss. Something will shake out.”

“See you downtown, Mark.”

Kirk turned around and walked back to his car across the street from Bellevue Emergency. He stopped and stared at the entrance. He pictured Woody Travis’s ambulance arriving. The EMT’s opening the back doors, and Travis’s security guys helping them remove the gurney. The mystery surgeon showing up and pronouncing Travis before going inside the ER to do the paperwork. Meanwhile outside, an ME wagon appearing out of nowhere and loading Travis’s remains.

Kirk shook his head. *Now the ME’s Office says they never received Travis’s remains*, he thought. *And they were the ones who transported him? What the f**k is going on?*

TWENTY-FIVE

Trickery

On the way downtown, Lauren's phone vibrated in her pocket. It was Mick. "Hang on," Lauren said. She took out her notebook and a pen from her courier bag. "Go ahead," she said and began to write. "Okay, got it. Thanks. Call you right back."

Lauren hung up. "Please drop me at a payphone, Magic. I need a landline."

Magic pulled to the curb at a phone booth outside a drug store on Second Avenue. Lauren opened the passenger door. "Thanks, buddy. I'll cab it back to the office."

"See you later, Lauren."

Lauren hopped out of the car. She entered the booth and dialed the number Mick had given her. "That you, Belle?" Mick asked.

"It's me, Honcho."

"Alone?"

"Yeah. What's going on?"

"Listen, Belle," Mick said. "Deadeye's alive."

"Holy crap! He's alive?"

"Yup," Mick replied. "I gotta tell ya he's in really bad shape, Belle."

"Where the hell is he?"

"We evac'd him to a secure location," Mick replied. "He's in surgery as we speak."

"Do they think he's gonna make it, Honcho?"

"The hospital doesn't know or won't say, but we both know what Deadeye's like. He's a tough old bird and too friggin' ornery to die."

Lauren managed a smile. "Who the hell did this?"

"No idea."

"You think it might be Hezbollah or Griff and his goons?" Lauren asked.

"Not Griff. I spoke to him, Belle. He said they had no reason to, and besides, they need Deadeye."

"Well, whoever it was," Lauren said, "I want to slow-kill the b*****s."

"Gonna have to get in line behind Slim and me. But know this, Belle. Slim has his trusted guy in the CIA on it and our FBI guys are bustin' their butts to find out who did it. Best to let them track 'em down. We gotta concentrate on our business."

“Of course, Honcho. It’s just that it’s... it’s—”

“I know, Belle, but until we find out who’s responsible we’re gonna keep him dead. That means we keep this between Slim, you, and me. No one else needs to know. That includes the poker buddies. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Meanwhile, I want you to take charge and meet with the team as soon as possible,” Mick said. “Reassure them everything is on track and nothing changes.”

“The poker buddies may wonder why we’re not having a funeral. What do I tell them?”

“Tell ‘em Deadeye didn’t want a funeral,” Mick replied. “You can say he wanted his ashes tossed into the ocean which is the truth.”

“They’ll believe that. Deadeye talked about that dolphin swimming thing all the time,” Lauren said.

“Exactly,” Mick said. “If they press you, tell ‘em he’s already cremated and thrown into the Hudson. We’ll have a memorial service for him one day.”

“They’ll understand that, Honcho. Deadeye put business ahead of everything else.”

“Always,” Mick said.

“You know if Deadeye makes it,” Lauren said, “the poker buddies will be pissed we kept it from them.”

“That’s the way it has to be,” Mick said. “I have to go.”

“One more thing,” Lauren said.

“What’s that, Belle?”

“What about Roxanne?”

* * * * *

Kirk Dolan was sitting on his regular barstool in Elaine’s. He lit his cigar and placed the cutter and lighter back into his briefcase. He leaned back and took a sip of scotch. The front door opened, and the sunlight caught Kirk’s attention. Rick Garcia walked in. “Hey, sailor,” Rick said as he sat down. “Buy me a drink?”

Kirk stared at his drink. “Sure, whatever you want.”

Rick smiled. “Great to see you, too.”

“Sorry, man. The mid-town bombing has me going in f**kin’ circles. Let’s move back to my table.”

Rick sat across from Kirk. “What’s the problem, Kirk? Travis got blown up in his parking garage. NYPD is handling that investigation, and there’s no

connection to any terrorist groups. Best part is, your case is closed. No more—what'd the professor call them? Oh, yeah, Evocatitties."

Kirk rolled his eyes. "Evocati. And no, that's not the problem. It's what happened to Travis after he arrived at Bellevue."

"You mean the ME wagon showing up? Hell, their office is right around the corner. Lotsa possibilities."

"I know, but where the hell are Travis's remains?" Kirk asked.

"On average, four hundred people die every day in New York," Rick replied. "Wouldn't be the first time City Morgue has misplaced a stiff."

"Yeah, but his personal surgeon just happens to show up and pronounce him? You gotta admit that's f**kin' strange."

"Strange, but possible," Rick replied. "Lotsa people have personal surgeons."

"That's true, but how come I can't locate this surgeon, Dr. Cutler—anywhere?"

"Anywhere, anywhere? Or are you talking New York State?"

"Anywhere," Kirk replied. "No surgeons named Cutler. Closest one was an OB/GYN in Omaha."

"No way Travis would fly to Nebraska to see a gynecologist. There's lots of them here in the city."

"Seriously, Rick, I think someone sent this so-called Dr. Cutler to Bellevue to pronounce Travis."

"Which means whoever sent the doctor found out about the bombing before the FBI? How in the hell did they manage that?"

"I have no f**kin' idea. But I sure want to find out," Kirk replied.

"Wait. The security cameras at Bellevue ER should help identify this Dr. Cutler."

"They would have," Kirk said. "But for some unexplained reason, the cameras went down and didn't record. Same thing happened at the bomb scene. Quite the coincidence, huh?"

"Like you, I don't believe in coincidences. Do you believe Travis is still alive?"

"Who the f**k knows?" Kirk replied. "But think about it. What if somebody wanted him to kill him and missed? And now another somebody wants to keep him that way?"

"You mean ice him until they find out who the bombers were? Hmm. That makes sense. But if it's true, how did they manage to get him out of Manhattan undetected?"

"If it was me," Kirk replied, "I would have done a quick extraction with a chopper."

“Wouldn’t the FAA track them? They must keep tabs on every aircraft that goes in and out of the city.”

“No. There’s no low-level air traffic control on the Hudson and East River,” Kirk replied. “Too much traffic for them to handle. Every chopper pilot who flies in or out of Manhattan knows that.”

“Remind me to never to take a sightseeing flight, Kirk.” He paused for a moment. “I think we should give you guys an unofficial hand with this.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Kirk said. “Also, CID has unofficially loaned us some agents to help us get back on track with these guys. If Travis is alive and hidden somewhere, it could lead us to whoever is behind their operation.”

“And if he’s dead?”

“They’ll replace him. My guess is Lauren Hunter,” Kirk said. “Fortunately, we’ve got a snitch who’s close to her.”

Rick stood. “I gotta go.”

“Where you off to in such a hurry?”

“To get a drink,” Rick replied. “Obviously, you’ve got them trained not to disturb you back here when you have company.”

* * * * *

Lauren and Sam headed back down the hallway from Woody’s hospital room.

“He seems to be doing okay, huh, Sam?”

Sam nodded. “Pretty dang good for a dead guy.”

“Do you think he’ll make it, Sam?”

“I don’t know, Lauren, but we all did the best we could for him. I even played the White House card with the base commander when Woody was on his way here by chopper. He assured me they’d do whatever they could.”

As they approached the nurse’s station, a nurse waved at them. “I called Mr. Travis’s trauma surgeon. Major Paige is waiting to meet with you.” The nurse pointed. “Visitor’s lounge at the end of the hall.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant,” Sam said.

Lauren and Sam entered the lounge and were greeted by a woman wearing green surgical scrubs. “You are the friends of Mr. Travis?” she said.

“Yes,” Sam replied. “I’m Sam Saunders, and this is Lauren Hunter. You’re Major Paige?”

“Yes. Please have a seat. I’m sure you have a lot of questions.”

“How’s he doing, Major?” Lauren asked. “Is he going to make it?”

“He’s still critical, but we’ve stabilized him.”

“That’s not what I asked, Major. Will he be okay?”

“Too early to say,” Major Paige replied. “And please call me Beth. I—”

Lauren interrupted her. “Okay, Beth. Our friend is lying in there unconscious, full of tubes, and s**t which can’t be good. So what the hell’s going on?”

Sam put his hand up to Lauren. “Hold on, Lauren.”

“That’s alright, Mr. Saunders. I understand,” Beth said. “I’d be the same if it was a friend of mine.”

“Sorry, Major,” Lauren said. “Woody Travis is way more than just a friend. He’s family. What can you tell us?”

“First of all, Mr. Travis is lucky to be alive. He lost a lot of blood, but first aid measures at the scene saved his life. It appears the bomber used a shaped charge placed under the vehicle. As a result, he didn’t suffer any injuries to his vital organs, neck, or throat. He did receive several lacerations to his legs and a severed femoral artery, which we have repaired. Unfortunately, he suffered severe head trauma when the force of the explosion tossed him across the garage. That’s why he’s comatose.”

“What’s the prognosis, Doc?” Sam asked. “I mean is Woody gonna come out of this?”

“No way to tell, Mr. Saunders. We’ll keep him on life support, monitor his progress, and hope he wakes up.”

“*Hope* he wakes up?” Lauren asked. “There’s nothing more you can do?”

“No. We’ll continue to monitor him and will let you know if anything changes.”

“If he—I mean—when he wakes up,” Lauren said. “Will he be back to normal?”

“CT scan appeared normal, but we won’t know the extent of the brain damage until he regains consciousness.”

“Best guess, Major,” Lauren said. “What are his chances for a full recovery?”

“It depends on the patient. Patients with the same degree of head trauma react differently. Some fully recover, some are permanently disabled, and some never wake up. Time will tell.”

Beth’s beeper sounded. She checked the message. “So, if you don’t have any more questions, duty calls.”

“Thanks, Doc,” Sam said. He shook her hand. “Appreciate what y’all did for Woody.”

“Thank you, sir,” Beth said.

Lauren shook hands with her as well. “Ditto for me, Major.”

Beth stopped at the door and turned. “There’s something both of you should know. During surgery, Mr. Travis went vital signs absent for about ten minutes,

and it appeared we were going to lose him. We shocked his heart several times before he came back. He has a strong will to live. Thought you'd like to know that."

"Appreciate it, Major," Lauren said. "Thanks."

Lauren and Sam stopped at the nurse's station and thanked her for arranging the briefing from Woody's surgeon. "My pleasure, sir," the nurse said. "And be assured we'll do our best for Mr. Travis."

"Appears your Major Paige already has, Lieutenant," Sam said.

"No surprise to us, sir."

"She's the best on the base?" Lauren asked.

"This base or any other, ma'am. Our Major Paige is a top-notch combat surgeon. I scrubbed in with her at the Fifth MASH during Desert Storm in Kuwait and Iraq."

"Y'all were with the Fifth?" Sam said. "I was in the sandbox, too." He turned to Lauren. "They were heroes over there. Worked up on the front lines and saved a hell of a lot of lives."

"Yes, sir, we did, and Major Paige was the best surgeon we had," the nurse said. "Her reputation spread all the way back to the Pentagon. The brass wanted to transfer her to safer duty in a military hospital at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. She fought the transfer. Said she wanted to be where she could do the most good for the wounded."

"Amazing lady," Lauren said.

"She would never tell you this, but she won the Distinguished Service Cross and a whole bunch of other commendations," the nurse said. "Mr. Travis was lucky he was on her table."

* * * * *

Lauren and Sam drove off the base and headed back to their hotel. On the way, they discussed the op and how it might function without Woody. Sam told Lauren he and Woody always had every confidence in her.

"Thanks," Lauren said. "How did you find out about Woody before any of us? Call from Yuri or David?"

Sam entered the on-ramp to the freeway. "David called me from the garage."

"Why didn't he call me?" Lauren asked.

"Woody put me first on the emergency call list for Yuri and David," Sam said. "Guess 'cause I arranged for the security detail." He checked his side mirror, shoulder checked, and pulled into the fast lane. "They were following orders."

“Okay,” Lauren said, “but why didn’t you call me?”

“I didn’t have a chance,” Sam replied. “Once David called me in Afghanistan, I was setting the wheels in motion for Woody. When I talked to Buzz, I told him to call you guys.”

“He did,” Lauren said. “So how did you fake Woody’s death and smuggle him out of Manhattan?”

“First, I told David to call Mick ASAP. He’s got the contacts to make it happen. Meanwhile, I told ol’ Buzz to monitor police and cell calls. When Woody’s ambulance left the scene, Buzz picked up the radio traffic of the ambulance talking to the hospital. I told Buzz to deploy a wheels team and get his guys to hack into the security cameras at the hospital. I didn’t want them recording anything.”

“That was quick thinkin’, Sam.”

“Thanks, y’all. Anyway, the wheels team tailed the EMTs to Bellevue and kept everyone up to speed. Mick arranged a chopper ride for Woody. He also had our New York surgical team in place to meet the EMTs outside Bellevue. They flashed IDs, said it was a national security matter, and transferred Woody to our ambulance. The trauma team on board started a plasma transfusion, and our surgeon determined Woody was stable enough for transport. The ambulance left for the chopper pad, and the surgeon went in to the ER and informed the nurses he had pronounced Woody as DOA. He also told them the ME showed up and transported Woody for autopsy.”

“You said *our* ambulance, Sam?”

“It was Woody’s idea. He arranged it with the mayor a while back. Thought we may need one someday. Dang if that ain’t strange, huh?”

“No kidding,” Lauren replied. “Must have been a wild ride to the heliport.”

“Sure ‘nuff was. Team said they made it in about five minutes. Buzz’s computer geeks took care of all the traffic lights. Then the low-level chopper ride to this base.”

“Buzz and his guys are amazing.”

“You know it, Lauren. But it’s funny. Woody was unconscious and didn’t get a chance to see how our team reacted so quickly and extracted him without a hitch. He woulda been impressed.”

“For sure,” Lauren said. “How did you keep track of what was going on?”

“Along with Buzz and his team, Smokey’s guys at the NYPD kept us up to speed,” Sam said. “Also, our Dolan surveillance team. They followed the weasel to the bombing scene in the garage and then to Bellevue.”

“Dolan was at Bellevue?” Lauren said. “S**t! I could have run into him there.”

“He was there about an hour after y’all.”

“Wait a minute. You’re still doing surveillance on Dolan?” Lauren asked. “Didn’t the FBI lose interest in us?”

“The FBI did, but not Dolan,” Sam replied. “He’s too gung-ho to quit. We’re watchin’ Griff as well.”

“You got eyes on Griff?”

“Yup,” Sam replied. “Woody’s idea. He never trusted the b*****d.”

“I know.”

“So, now we know where Griff lives, where he goes, and who he goes with,” Sam said. “And—this stays here—Griff is not a liaison between us and The Ring.”

“No? What is he?”

“He’s one of them.”

“You gotta be frickin’ kidding,” Lauren said. “Who told you—Mick?”

“Yeah,” Sam replied. “Also, Griff has no idea we know about their plan to hit us after E-Day. Gives us the advantage.”

“Sure as hell does.”

“Did Mick tell y’all he wants me to use my CIA contact to help us track down the bombers?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, he did. Sullivan is in Ops, right?”

“He’s the associate deputy director,” Sam replied. “Sully’s a good guy and I trust him.”

“So do you think Hezbollah finally got to Woody?”

“Mossad says no,” Sam replied. “But I ain’t so sure. Woody and I had a visit from a haji* at my hotel in Washington last February. Guy was posing as a room service waiter. We hightailed it outa there.” (*military slang for enemy combatant in the Middle East)

“You’re kidding. Woody never said a word about it.”

“Our exit’s comin’ up.” Sam moved into the right-hand lane. “You know Woody. He probably didn’t think it was a big deal.”

“So what told you to get the hell out of that hotel room? Your gut?”

“No,” Sam replied. “It was Woody. He recognized the guy.”

“Woody never forgets a face,” Lauren said. “Right now, my gut is telling me I’m hungry.”

“Me, too. Y’all may be in charge, Miss Hunter, but I’m buyin’ dinner.”

“Okay, Sam, but this time—it’s only dinner, right?”

Sam glared at her with his gray-blue eyes. Lauren glared right back.

They burst out laughing.

TWENTY-SIX

Revelations

April 2000

CIA Associate Deputy Director James Sullivan entered the White House basketball court. Sam was shooting baskets wearing a Texas A&M sweatsuit. “Hey, Sully,” Sam said. “Y’all got time for a little one-on-one?”

“Love to, Sam, but I’ve got that pesky little National Security Council thingy in a few minutes.”

“I’m gettin’ tired of y’all beating me anyway,” Sam said, “C’mon, let’s sit.”

They sat at a table under an umbrella. “Nice place for a private meeting, Sam.”

“Yup. This POTUS doesn’t play hoops. So, what’s up, y’all?”

James tilted his head up at the security cameras. “No need to say it, but I will anyway. I am only here today unofficially to invite you to a Wizards’ game.” Sully took two tickets out of his suit coat pocket and handed them to Sam.

Sam checked out the tickets. “Courtside seats. Thanks, y’all.”

“You’re welcome. Okay, Sam, as I said on the phone, initial intel from our guys at Ukraine Station indicated Woody’s bombers were Russian. Well, it turns out they were right on. Our forensic lab confirmed the signature of the device was GRU*.” (*Russian Military Intelligence Service)

“Holy, s**t, Sully. Probably payback for Woody taking out that SVR agent.”

“Appears so.”

“How the hell did the Russians find out Woody did it?”

“No idea, Sam, but we’ll find out. Now get this. The GRU sent in one of their Spetsnaz* units to do the job.” (*Russian Special Forces)

“A Spetsnaz unit, y’all? That’s a big f**kin’ risk for the Ruskies. Orders must have come from high up.”

“Can’t get any higher, Sam.”

“Putin? Really, y’all?”

“Confidence is high,” Sully replied. “Vlad has a lot of old KGB friends in the SVR, and to him, it’s like a death in his family. Also, killing an SVR agent is a federal crime in Russia punishable by death. I contacted Moscow Station. They say the Russian courts found Woody guilty in absentia.”

“Good thing Woody’s dead, huh?”

“And I’d keep him that way, Sam. Need help with a new identity for him?”

“Thanks, pardner, but we got that covered.”

Sully stood. “Let me know if you need anything.”

Sam stood and shook his hand. “Could use some help to improve my jump shot, Sully.”

“We can do a lot of things in the CIA, Sam, but the impossible isn’t one of them.”

* * * * *

Lauren adjourned the poker game and headed to the bar area. Smokey intercepted her. “Got a minute, Lauren?”

“Sure, Smokey. What’s up?”

“Like you to look at some surveillance photos from our team that’s tailing Dolan. Appears his office has reinforcements from FBI CID.”

“Let’s see.”

Smokey handed the file to Lauren. She perused the photos that showed numerous vans and cars leaving the FBI’s New York Headquarters. There were also photos of some of the agents. “Interesting,” she said. “Did you make the plates?”

“Yeah,” Smokey replied. “I passed on the info including photos of the vehicles to our wheel teams plus Franco and his guys.”

Lauren couldn’t believe the last photo. She handed the file back to him. “Thanks, Smokey. Tell your guys they do good work.”

Lauren stood at the bar. Several of the poker buddies thanked Lauren for her tribute to Woody at the beginning of the meeting. They were all shocked Woody was gone. Several had misty eyes as they talked about him. Lauren did her best to pay attention, but she couldn’t get the last photograph out of her mind.

Tony Manetti walking out the front door of 26 Federal Plaza with Kirk Dolan.

* * * * *

Woody was finishing his lunch when Mick entered his hospital room. “Woodrow Travis,” Mick said, “You look horrible. You sure you’re alive?”

“Hey, Mick. I still look better than you.”

Mick tapped Woody’s leg. “So, how you doin’ my old friend? Enjoying your sponge baths from the nurses?”

“I’m on the mend. Will you get me the f**k outa here?”

“Doc says soon, Woodrow.”

“Who was it, Mick? Hezbollah?”

“No. It was the GRU. The friggin’ Ruskies sent in a Spetsnaz unit.”

“And you thought I wasn’t important.”

“Probably payback for you dusting one of their SVR agents.”

“No doubt,” Woody said. “So the Russians just assumed it was me?”

“Yeah, probably because you were the jackpot for their surveillance team trying to track down Sam. They figured it had to be you.”

“I hope they also found out I’m dead.”

“They have, and we’re going to keep you that way.”

“You can’t keep me dead forever, Mick.”

“Best we do. No need to put another target on your back.”

“Don’t care how you arrange it, but I *will* be running my op.”

“Understood, Woodrow.”

“So who’s gonna know I’m alive besides Sam and Lauren?”

“Only the poker buddies and Sully at the CIA,” Mick replied. “We’ll keep it strictly need-to-know. Once we shift gears into E-Day mode, your role will diminish until Lauren takes over.”

“Does Roxanne know I’m dead?”

“Yeah. Lauren had the NYPD notify her.”

“She’s gonna wonder why there was no funeral.”

“That’s a good point,” Mick said. He paused for a moment. “How about we have one of those law firm letters delivered to her? You know, the ones people want to be sent to someone after they croak? You could explain to her if you died you didn’t want a funeral and requested the CIA dispose of your ashes.”

“That works,” Woody said. “What will the CIA supposedly do with my ashes?”

Mick paused once again. “What about the wall, Woodrow?”

“The Memorial Wall? Isn’t that strictly for officers killed on active duty?”

“Also those killed as a result of their service—like you.”

“A star on the wall. I like it. We can even leak the wall story to the Ruskies. May help get them off my back. Thanks, Mick.”

“Least I can do for a dead friend.”

“How’s Lauren doing? Everything running okay?”

“Actually, it’s running better than ever,” Mick said. “That’s the other reason we want to keep you dead.”

Woody chuckled. “Yuri and David okay?”

“Yeah. You know they saved your life, Woodrow. You would have bled to death if it wasn’t for Yuri. Neither of them left your side until you arrived here.”

“Thank God the Israeli’s over-trained them.” Woody paused. “When I was in recovery, my surgeon told me I croaked for a few minutes on the table. But I already knew.”

“How?”

“I had the whole near-death thing happen,” Woody replied. “I was above the operating table watching them work on me. Next, I was in a tunnel heading for a bright light. I’ve never felt so warm and loved. I was happy, but something wasn’t right. Like I wasn’t supposed to be there, and I had to get my a** back. I was given a strong feeling I had a mission to complete. Problem was, I didn’t know which f**kin’ mission they meant. My life mission or this one? Before I could ask, I woke up here.”

“I’m glad, Woodrow. You still owe me forty bucks from that poker game in Istanbul.”

“What poker game?”

“In my hotel on Taksim Square,” Mick replied. “Remember? The Golden Horn Motel?”

“There’s no such place.”

“I know. Just makin’ sure you’re okay.”

Woody shook his head. “I’m fine and still smarter than you’ll ever be.”

Mick chuckled. “Right. That’s why you’re lying in a hospital bed and I’m not.”

“Did you get a copy of my final plan for us to disappear after E-Day, Mick? I couriered it to you a few days before I got blown up.”

“Yeah, I got it. Looks good, but you sure the IDs are foolproof?”

“Absolutely solid, Mick. They cover everything from primary school report cards and dental records to marriage certificates and IRS returns.”

“Appears everyone will have some memorizing to do. What about fingerprint records?”

“A tough one,” Woody replied. “TSS and Buzz are working on hacking into the NCIC* database.” (*FBI National Crime Information Center)

“Good luck with that.”

“TSS says they can do it, but we’ll see. You’re not gonna stash me here on this base are you?”

“No,” Mick replied. “As soon as you’re ready, we’re sending you to camp.”

“Close By? How long?”

“Until the op is done. You’ll be safe there. We can trust Digger’s folks.”

“No f**kin’ way, Mick! I’m not hiding like a coward. I told you I’m gonna run my op until E-Day.”

“You said you didn’t care how I arranged it. Close By is where I think you should stay.”

“I can’t fine-tune and direct the op from Close By. New York, Mick. No argument.”

“It’s not safe for you there.”

“Oh, like Lebanon was safe? I’ll be fine. End of discussion. Close By for now and then New York. I’ll hunker down in Red Hook at the hangar.”

“The Russians may find you, Woodrow. And you know Putin and his thugs. If they find out you’re alive, they won’t give up until you’re not. And let’s not forget Dolan. Knowing him, he won’t believe you’re dead until he has proof. You had best be careful, my friend.”

“I’ll be careful. Besides, they’ll be looking for Woody Travis, not Tom Lindsay.”

“I take it that’s your new identity from Button?”

“Yup,” Woody replied. “Good test to see if it’s foolproof.”

“That’s one test you don’t want to fail.”

“I’m going to change my appearance.”

“What if it doesn’t work and they find you?”

Woody smiled. “Well, in that case, I’ll take one for the team.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Don’t worry, Mick. I’m dead, and I’m still gonna outlive you.”

* * * * *

Mayor Matt Curran came out of his office. “Lauren, so good to see you. C’mon in. Let’s talk.” She followed the mayor back into his office. “Have a seat, Lauren.” The mayor paused for a moment. “We were all shocked to hear about Woody Travis. I know he was a dear friend of yours, and he was doing good work for us.”

Which ‘us’ is that? Lauren thought. “Thank you, Mayor. Woody was a good man. And thanks for having faith in me. We’ll get you re-elected.”

“I know you’ll do your best, and I have full confidence in you, Lauren. I want us both to succeed in this, and I will help you in any way possible. I have the full resources of the city at my disposal and many friends in the private sector.”

Is he talking about the election or the op? Lauren thought.

The mayor took out a business card and wrote on the back. “This is my private number. I want you to call me and let me know if you need anything.”

“Mr. Mayor, I want to be sure. Are we talking about the election?”

“Yes, Lauren.” He winked. “And anything else you may need help with.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The mayor stood. “Oh, almost forgot. As you know, I’ve moved Tony over to my campaign headquarters. Right now, he’s more valuable as my campaign manager. I have told Tony to give you total access to our phone bank for anything you need.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.” Lauren held up the business card. “And thanks for this, sir.”

“Call me anytime.”

“I will, Mr. Mayor.”

Lauren waited for the elevator. *It’s obvious, she thought. The mayor is clearly onside with us. But I wonder why he moved Tony out of City Hall. His connection to the Dolan? Or something else? There is no doubt someone wanted Tony out of the picture.*

TWENTY-SEVEN

Misdirection

May 2000

"I f**kin' knew it, Billy Rae!" Kirk said. "Hunter's in charge!"

Billy Rae Mack liked Kirk. He admired his dedication, intelligence, and style. He hoped one day to be transferred out of CID to Kirk's squad. "That's not all, Kirk. Talk on the street is these spooks are tied to some sort of a terrorist thing that's going to happen soon."

"What I suspected all along," Kirk said. "No details?"

"No, but word is—it's big."

"What about Travis?" Kirk asked. "Any word on him?"

"Deader than a nit. A source close to Hunter confirmed it."

"You mean Tony, the mayor's chief weasel?" Kirk said. "He told me the same thing."

"He says Hunter is still upset about Travis."

"Hunter may be playin' him," Kirk said.

"You think she is?"

"Wouldn't put it past her. She's a smart cookie."

"I gotta talk to you about something that's been bothering me, Kirk."

"What is it?"

"When Linda assigned us to help you track the Hunter group, we were told Hoover wanted you to back off this case. She said comin' here was against orders, and we were on our own if Hoover found out. We'd get a reprimand, but I'm more concerned about you. They could terminate you."

"I appreciate that, Billy Rae, but let me worry about Hoover. What they don't know won't hurt us. My rule on our squad is: anything we do here—stays here. It's the same for you and the rest of the CID guys who are helping us."

"Fair enough," Billy Rae said. "You got any idea who blew up Travis?"

Kirk stood behind his desk. "Got a report yesterday from our lab. The signature was Russian. Our explosives database points to the GRU."

Billy Rae whistled. "Had to be high-level authorization for a GRU kill op on US soil. Travis must have really pissed somebody off."

"Putin is the only one who could authorize it," Kirk said.

"Makes sense. He's ex-KGB with lots of old buddies in the SVR."

“Correct,” Kirk said. “And I believe Travis was the one who plugged that SVR agent here in New York. I suspected a CIA hit right away.”

“Why?”

“Hard contact insurance round to the back of the Ruskie’s head.”

Billy Rae smiled. “Old-time assassin training one-oh-one.”

“Also, TSS may have helped the Ruskies,” Kirk said. “Bruce Thorne and his predecessor Cliff Brooks have close friends within the Russian government. For years, TSS has requested visas for Russian business people and scientists. CIA believed some were spies.”

“What did Thorne and Brooks have against Travis?”

“Probably nothing. The Ruskies wanted Travis and could have put the screws to them.”

“TSS also has close ties to our government including the current administration,” Billy Rae said.

“Also with Forbes Miller, the GOP candidate for VP. And let’s not forget Miller’s old buddies Dave Borland and Alvin Hawkins. They’re part of this f**kin’ group. Borland is rumored to be the next CIA Director and Hawkins the next SECDEF.”

“S**t. Lotsa clout.”

“And we suspect there are plenty of others involved with this bunch,” Kirk said.

“Like who?”

“The Mayor of New York for one and his slime-ball Police Commissioner Slade Harris,” Kirk replied. “They’re tied into a whole nest of others in government that includes Sam Saunders, the resident CIA assassin in the White House. Word is he and Miller have been buddies for years.”

“If we keep diggin’ we’ll find more.”

“Of course, but it may be futile.” Kirk shook his head. “I don’t think I’ll ever convince anyone these spooks are planning an op. S**t, I’m still trying to find anyone, other than Art Brown, who believes al Qaeda is planning to attack the USA.”

“What about I-49? Can’t they confirm it?”

“No, but they’re working on it,” Kirk replied. “And my guys at Alec Station are unable to provide confirmation as well. Which, by the way, doesn’t surprise me one bit.”

“Why?”

“Drake’s in charge of Alec, and he won’t share f**k all with us, Billy Rae. It’s like they’re playin’ ‘I’ve Got a Secret’ for f**k sake.”

“Are we the only ones worried about the s**t storm headin’ our way?”

“Yeah,” Kirk replied. “Us, Art Brown and I-49. Everyone else has their head up their a**.”

* * * * *

Flight Instructor John Sanchez entered the main hangar of California Flight College on Gillespie Field in El Cajon. This flying school was one of the largest in the San Diego area. The Chief Flight Instructor Don Maraschuk was speaking to a mechanic working on a Cessna 152.

John slipped his Ray-Bans into the leather case on his belt. Maraschuk patted the mechanic on the shoulder and turned to walk away. “Hey, Boss,” John said. “You got a minute?”

Don stopped. “Sure, John. What’s up?”

“We gotta talk about our two Saudi students, Don.”

“Let’s go to my office.” The chief flight instructor’s office was in the front corner of the hangar. A picture window filled one wall offering a view of the hangar floor. The rest of the walls were panel board strewn with calendars, schedules, and pictures of people and aircraft. The office shelves were filled with books, flight manuals, and aircraft models. An ancient wooden propeller hung above the door. Don’s desk was covered with files and paper. He ambled in behind it and plunked himself into a black leather swivel chair. John pulled up a chair and picked up a model of a Cessna Skylane from the desk.

“So what’s up with them? Are they’re still having trouble with English?” Don asked.

“That’s the least of their problems.” John held up the model aircraft. “Neither Hazmi nor Mihdhar can execute a simple coordinated turn in a f**king one seventy-two.”

Don smiled. “And these are the same two clowns who wanted to fly Boeing jets?”

“Yeah,” John replied. “And they can’t even control an inherently stable light aircraft.”

“So no hope at all? You know times are tight, and we could use the cash.”

“I could train a monkey to fly easier than these guys,” John said. “I’m more afraid they’re gonna roll one of your airplanes up into a ball.”

“Your call. I trust your judgment.”

“Thanks, Don. I’m trying to save lives.”

“Saving lives is important.”

John set the aircraft back onto the desk. “Yeah—especially when it’s mine.”

* * * * *

“Deadeye,” Lauren said when she answered her phone. “So good to hear your voice. How’s camp? Are the other kids picking on you? Gonna write me a letter?”

Woody chuckled. “Did you tell the poker buddies I’m alive and moving into the hangar?”

“Yeah. To say they were happy is an understatement.”

“They weren’t upset we kept them in the dark?”

“Naw,” Lauren replied. “They understood.”

“Nice to hear. I’m staying here at Close By for a while. Digger got me an office in the bat cave. Nicer than my office at Liberty.”

“Okay,” Lauren said. “I have lots of news—some good—some bad. The good news is, Gabby’s crew will finish rigging both tangos on time. The elevator refurb has helped them to hide the shaped charges and wiring. The charges in the target zones will also be undetectable.”

“Good,” Woody said. “How about the brothers?”

“Be completed this summer,” Lauren replied.

“Have Gabby and his guys completed all their tests at Faraway?”

“Yeah, they moved to the hangar. We still have access to Faraway, and I asked him to leave the Quonset intact. There if we need it for meets or drops.”

“Okay,” Woody said.

“Also, the scripts and recordings for the cell calls are all ready. All we have to do is fill in the names and phone numbers when we receive the flight manifests and crew assignments. Buzz has the voice morphing computer programs all set.”

“Can always count on Buzz. I suppose you know the drones came into Close By yesterday. I assume all the flight tests are done?”

“Yeah,” Lauren replied. “I was going to call you today. There were no glitches. They’re good to go.”

“Ace told me they will fly them regularly to keep them flight-ready and the operators current.”

“Now the bad news,” Lauren said. “The California kids flunked out of flight school. And Mihdhar has hightailed it back to Yemen.”

“S**t,” Woody said. “What about Hazmi? He still in San Diego?”

“Yeah. For now, he is. We really need to recruit some guys with flight experience to make this story more plausible.”

“Agreed,” Woody said. “Give that to Ace and Teach. They have the contacts to make that happen.”

“Has Digger briefed you on his E-Day operation at Close By?”

“Yeah,” Woody replied. “He showed me the entire plan. Looks like it will work okay.”

“I thought so, too. One more thing, Deadeye.”

“What?”

“You sure you’ll be safe in New York?”

“I’ll be as safe as everyone else in New York,” Woody replied.

“Not funny.”

“I’ll be fine, Belle. I’ll manage the campaign ‘til you take over. You have enough on your plate prepping for E-Day.”

“I could handle it.”

“I know you could,” Woody said. “But you know how anal I am. Before I hand it over to you, I have to make sure everything is ready and there are no snags.”

“It’s your *modus operandi*, Deadeye.”

“It is. I’d better go, Belle. Slim’s on the other line.”

“Okay. Let me know when you’re coming home from camp, and I’ll meet the bus.”

Woody smiled. “For sure, Belle.”

Lauren was relieved Woody approved Digger’s plan. That part of the operation was grisly but essential to the success of E-Day. The plan was two-fold: first to dispose of any and all evidence at Close By, and second to provide proof at the crash sites that commercial airline flights hit the targets and terrorist hijackers were responsible. The media and government narrative depended on it.

Lauren was confident the overall operation would proceed without a hitch and secrecy would be maintained. The operational plan was finalized, and all the necessary personnel and finances were in place. The GRU’s attempt on Woody’s life was a blessing in disguise. The idea to keep him “dead” and temporarily embedded at Close By had an unforeseen benefit.

Camp Close By was the hub for all the E-Day activity and the most essential component of the operation. All command and control for computer programs, communications, radar, commercial flights, and their replacement drones emanated from there. And all the incoming airline flights would terminate there. But most importantly, the op’s most highly skilled personnel: the computer, medical, engineering, and scientific staff work and live at the base. Digger continually reminded them of their importance to the operation.

Woody’s presence confirmed it.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Games

July 2000

The hotel banquet room was filled with FBI agents attending a national pre-retirement conference. The speakers in the ceiling buzzed. "Sorry for the interruption," a male voice said. "Would Special Agent Dolan please come to the front desk?"

Kirk stood and shrugged his shoulders at the guest lecturer. He took the staircase from the mezzanine down to the lobby and approached the front desk. A young clerk was helping another guest with directions. "I'll be with you in a moment, sir," she said.

Kirk waited at the other end of the counter. After a few minutes, the clerk walked over. "How may I help you, sir?"

"I'm Special Agent Dolan, ma'am. I was paged to the desk."

"Just a moment, sir," the clerk said. "I'll have to check in the office. I'll be right back."

The clock on the wall behind the desk showed 12:05. *Lunchtime*, Kirk thought.

A few moments later, an older gentleman in a dark blue suit emerged from a door behind the counter and walked up to Kirk. His name badge read: "Bert Granger—Front Desk Manager"

"Special Agent Dolan?" Granger asked.

"Yes."

"I apologize, sir. There was a call for you. The party said it was urgent. Unfortunately, they hung up."

"Do you have any idea who it was?"

"Our receptionist said there was no caller ID, sir. But the caller said they were with the FBI in Washington. Once again, we're sorry for paging you here for nothing."

Kirk shook his head. "Not your fault."

The meeting room was empty when Kirk returned. The other agents and guest lecturers were down the hallway in an adjacent conference room where lunch was being served. Kirk made his way through the row of chairs to pick up his briefcase. "F**k," he said.

His briefcase was gone.

* * * * *

Ace was meeting at the hangar with his agents who were embedded in the FAA in Washington. Mick had recruited them years ago to assist on ops and trusted them implicitly. He placed Vivian Fowler in the office of the Hijack Coordinator and Dean Boyd in the Director's Office.

"You mean to tell me," Ace said, "NORAD is refusing to conduct all the war games we want on E-Day, Viv?"

"Our office can exert only so much pressure on them," Vivian replied. "The order for the war games has to come from Mulholland*, and he's refusing to authorize them." (*General R. Mulholland - Commander-in-Chief NORAD)

"S**t," Ace said. "We need those f**kin' games! The majority of the fighters have to be diverted out of range or otherwise engaged. We can't risk an intercept."

"I suggest if Mulholland continues to drag his heels, we wait for the new administration," Dean said. "If Hopkins and Miller win in November, rumor has it Alvin Hawkins is in line to be the new SECDEF. There is no doubt he will ensure the war games happen and will implement the new shutdown orders as well."

"You've seen the draft, Dean?" Ace asked.

"Yeah. It works."

"I agree that we should let the new SECDEF deal with all that s**t," Ace said.

"Also, it wouldn't hurt to have someone we trust in the FAA Command Center," Dean said. "They could slow down the response and prevent an intercept on E-Day."

"I have the perfect guy for the job," Ace said. "Once I clear him, I'll have him transferred in."

"Tell him to get in touch with me," Dean said.

"Will do," Ace said. "What else ya got?"

"No doubt you are aware airline pilots may legally possess handguns in the cockpit," Vivian said.

"Yup," Ace replied. "FAA implemented that in the sixties to prevent the 'take this plane to Cuba' s**t. Funny part is, their airlines have instituted a policy prohibiting the pilots to carry."

"Yes," Vivian said, "but some pilots do carry, and they have the rule to back them up. It would be a good idea to change that. We don't need pilots with guns in the cockpit on E-Day."

"Changing the rule could be a red flag," Ace said. "How could we justify it?"

“Viv mentioned this to me the other day,” Dean said. “Why not say the airlines haven’t used the rule, and they don’t want their pilots to carry? All we did was comply with their wishes.”

Ace made a note in his binder. “Sounds good. We’ll make sure the rule is changed. Anything else?”

Dean smiled. “Yeah, one more thing. Is it okay if we campaign for Hopkins and Miller?”

* * * * *

Kirk’s first phone call was to the local police in Orlando. The desk sergeant said they would send a patrol car by right away. Kirk notified the Orlando FBI Field Office, and finally, he called his friend Ron Jenkins, the Assistant Director of the New York Office. Ron asked about the contents of the briefcase. Kirk told him there were some copies of some classified emails and the Annual Field Office Report. Ron said he would have to report the incident to the Assistant Director in Charge of National Security. He asked Kirk to let him know if his briefcase was located.

Kirk attended the afternoon sessions of the conference. After they adjourned for the day, he sat alone at a small table in the hotel bar. He was troubled by the repercussions should the contents of his briefcase fall into the wrong hands. Two men dressed in suits entered the bar and stopped to talk to the bartender. The bartender pointed to Kirk’s table, and they walked over.

The older of the two showed his badge. “Special Agent Dolan?”

Kirk showed him his badge. “The one and only.”

“Detective Johnson, Orlando PD,” he said. “We’ve located your briefcase, sir.”

“You’re kidding. Where?”

“One of our uniforms found it in a dumpster out behind a hotel,” Johnson said. “Our Crime Scene Unit is dusting it for prints. We’d like you to be there when we open it.”

Kirk downed his scotch and signed his bill. “Let’s go, boys.”

Kirk rode in the back of the unmarked car. He was curious about how the police had found his briefcase so quickly. “Is a hotel dumpster the usual place stolen briefcases end up in Orlando?” Kirk asked.

Johnson turned from the front seat. “First place we look. We’ve had a few thefts from hotels lately, and that’s the usual MO.”

“Does the hotel have security cameras back there?” Kirk asked.

“Yeah, but our guys checked with hotel security. They showed them the video from the rear area of the hotel,” Johnson said. “The cameras had a problem and didn’t pick up anything.”

The Travis garage cameras didn’t either, Kirk thought. “Did they show the correct timestamp, but the footage was from a previous time?”

“No,” Johnson replied. “The cameras didn’t record. It was like they quit working. Our guys re-booted the system, and now they work just fine. Why’d you ask?”

“Cameras were screwed in another case I’m working on.”

They arrived at the scene, and Johnson talked to the Crime Scene Unit. He returned with Kirk’s briefcase. He placed it on the trunk of his car. “Our boys say they found one set of prints,” he said. “We’ll run them and send a copy to your lab.”

“Probably mine,” Kirk said.

“Time to open it up, Special Agent,” Johnson said.

Kirk opened the briefcase. He separated the file folders and papers with a ballpoint pen. “Looks like the only items missing are my f**kin’ Montblanc pen, sterling silver cigar cutter, and lighter. All the documents seem to be here.”

“You know we’ll need a description of the stolen items.”

“Will do,” Kirk said. “I have one favor to ask.”

“What’s that?”

“I’d like our FBI lab to dust the papers. My butt’s on the line, and I want to make sure no one touched them.”

Johnson nodded. “I understand. My butt has a permanent line drawn on it.”

* * * * *

Woody was at his desk in Camp Close By when his phone rang. “Hi, Slim.”

“Got the briefcase, Deadeye,” Sam said. “Intel we received was right on. The scoutmaster had all kinds of classified docs in it. We got photos of ‘em all.”

“Great,” Woody said. “Buzz took care of the security cameras?”

“Yup. Worked perfectly,” Sam said.

“And they made it look like a robbery?”

“You wanna cigar cutter?”

Woody chuckled. “Let’s hope this gets him off our a**. The guy doesn’t know when to quit.”

“He will,” Sam said. “One day—he will.”

* * * * *

The 2000 GOP convention was nearing an end, and the convention floor was packed with cheering delegates, many waving Hopkins-Miller signs. Hundreds of red, white, and blue balloons and a blizzard of confetti floated down from the ceiling. Forbes leaned towards Liz and cupped his hand to his mouth. "Great acceptance speech, Liz," he yelled. "We're gonna give Younger a shellacking."

Liz smiled. "This election will be a dog fight, Forbes, but we'll kick their butts!"

TWENTY-NINE

Lone Wolves

September 2000

Kirk was in the outer office when Arthur Brown, the president's counter-terrorism expert walked in. "Well... well," Kirk said. "If it isn't my only friend in Washington. Welcome to Twenty-Six Federal, Art."

Art shook Kirk's hand. "Good to see you again, Kirk." He gestured to the flurry of activity in the room. "I see you guys are busy."

"Always," Kirk said. "Terrorism never sleeps."

"Your unit is a key part of this fight, Kirk. No one else has successfully prosecuted any of these lowlifes."

"I give a lot of credit to Alyssa Stewart. The Southern District couldn't have a better prosecutor."

"Any more on the Travis bombing?" Art asked. "You still believe it was the Russians, or do you suspect al Qaeda?"

"We've confirmed beyond a doubt it was the Russians. To be more specific, a Spetsnaz unit of the SVR."

Art shook his head. "Holy s**t. Why would the Russians want to kill Travis, and more importantly, why in hell they would risk sending a Special Forces unit onto US soil?"

"Probably payback," Kirk replied. "I figure Travis killed that SVR agent in New York a couple of years ago."

"Still doesn't explain why the Russians were targeting Travis in the first place."

"True, but I have more to worry about than that. Still trying to determine what Travis's gang and al Qaeda are up to. I suspect terrorist attacks on US soil."

"You still call them the Travis group, Kirk. You don't believe he's dead?"

"No," Kirk replied. "I believe they would like us to think he is."

"Interesting. Does Alec Station know about the Travis group and their connection to al Qaeda?"

"I briefed them on it and asked them for help, Art. Haven't heard a peep from them on this—or anything else."

"Those CIA pricks," Art said. "I don't understand why they're not passing on the intel they gather. Don't they realize we're all on the same team?"

“F**kin’ turf is more important,” Kirk replied. “You caught Saunders doing anything in the castle?”

“Nah. He’s too smart to do anything dumb.”

“Wish we could tap his phone,” Kirk said.

“In the castle? Don’t even think about it. Besides, Sam has ingratiated himself with the president. She thinks he’s great.”

“What about after the election?” Kirk asked. “You gonna be there? And what about Saunders?”

“Sam and I have both been asked to stay on with the new administration.”

“You’re stayin’ because you’re good,” Kirk said. “I suppose Saunders is because of Forbes Miller.”

“I appreciate that, Kirk. And you’re right on about Saunders and Miller.”

“They’re as thick as thieves.”

“They are. Not sure if you know, but we have a new National Security Advisor comin’ on board—Professor Mary Hughes.”

“Didn’t know that. She good?” Kirk asked.

“She knows her s**t and super smart. Also, you’re the first to know this, Kirk. I’m going to lobby her for a different job in the new administration.”

“What kind of job?”

“I’m going to tell Mary I would be better utilized in a position concentrating on cyber-security,” Art replied. “I believe it’s the next tool for the terrorists. If she agrees—you interested in my job at the White House?”

“I’m only interested in one job,” Kirk replied. “FBI Director.”

“Is Tanner Knox quitting?”

“Don’t know,” Kirk replied, “but one day he will, and I’ll take over.”

“Well, in case that doesn’t happen, consider my offer. There’s more money and benefits in the Executive Branch.”

“More headaches, too,” Kirk said. “But—I’ll consider it.”

“Good. So who will be at this shindig tonight?”

“The Who’s Who of American anti-terrorism,” Kirk replied. “Guys from my office and our I-49 squad, CIA, NYPD, Port Authority, and US Marshals. Oh, and the Secret Service will be there as well.”

“Hard to believe the New York Joint Terrorism Task Force has been at it twenty years.”

“Probably be at it for another twenty,” Kirk said.

“God I hope not,” Art said. “You ready to head out?”

“Yeah.” Kirk put on his suit jacket, and they headed for the door. Kirk tapped Art on the shoulder. “You ever been to Windows on the World, Art?”

“It’s funny. I’ve been to New York lotsa times and never been up there.”

Kirk opened the door to the hallway. "You're in for a treat, my friend. Great view of Jersey and the Burroughs, but the best part is what you can't see."

"What's that?"

Kirk pushed the elevator button. "Washington, DC."

* * * * *

Lauren was standing in a clearing when Woody's chopper landed at Camp Faraway. She crouched down as she approached the helicopter and opened the passenger door. "Welcome back to New Jersey, Mr. Tom Lindsay. How y'all feeling?"

"Good, but I'm still dealing with some nasty headaches, Lauren. Or should I be correct and say, Miss Joy Wellner?"

"I like my new ID, Woody. Thanks."

Woody smiled. "You're welcome. Funny how some names feel so natural, huh?"

"Yeah," Lauren replied. "I've reminded all the poker buddies that Woody Travis is dead, and they should get in the habit of calling you Tom. I also told them after E-Day, we'll all have to use our new names all the time."

"That's true, Lauren. Gonna take us all some time to get used to our new life stories."

They strolled along the path to the Quonset chatting and laughing like two old friends do when they meet again. Woody opened the door to the Quonset. There was a small table with folding camp chairs around it. "Not the Ritz," Lauren said. "But more secure." She placed her briefcase on the table and opened it.

"Can I see our IDs that Griff gave you, Lauren?"

"Here's yours." Lauren handed Woody a large craft paper envelope.

Woody pulled out a passport and opened it to the ID page. "Percy Johnson? Do I look like a f**kin' Percy?"

Lauren put her hand on her chin. "Yeah, I can see it."

"What about Sam?" Woody asked.

"He's James Cole."

"I'd like to trade him," Woody said. "But it doesn't matter. We won't be using these after E-Day."

"Thanks to Button, we have our 'untraceable-by- The Ring' IDs."

"Yeah, he and Buzz did a great job on them."

"So what's on the agenda for today, Woody?"

Woody smiled. "Um... I believe you forgot to mention the name Griff came up with for you, Lauren."

"Like you said, it doesn't matter now. I'm going to be Joy Wellner after E-Day."

Woody furrowed his brow. "Lauren."

"Okay, but don't laugh." Lauren handed a US passport to Woody.

Woody opened it and laughed. "This is so you, Lauren."

Lauren snatched the passport out of Woody's hand "It is not! And it's not funny!"

"Tiffany Goodhead isn't funny?"

"Not at all. That frickin' Griff."

Woody grinned. "I think the name Griff chose for you is right on the money."

Lauren glared at him. "What did you tell him, Woody?"

"Nothing."

"C'mon, Woody. You must have said something."

"Oh, I may have mentioned to Griff you always wanted to be a Bond girl."

"I owe you one," Lauren said.

"You certainly do. Did you bring my stuff from Technical Services?"

"Yeah. Right over there." Lauren took a small suitcase out of a nearby storage closet and placed it on the table.

Woody opened the suitcase. "Good. Everything I need to change my appearance." He took out a full face mask and held it up. "I think Tom Lindsay will be better lookin' than I ever was."

"Those people are wizards of disguise."

"Remember when I wore one of their advanced masks for that op, Lauren? Even up close, no one knew who I was."

"I remember, Woody. So, we'll all need new passports and driver's license photos, huh?"

"Yeah. Oh, and Buzz says he needs any childhood photos you have for him to Photoshop. He's going to construct new life profiles for all of us, so get them to him as soon as possible."

"What about Mick?" Lauren asked. "He must need a new ID, too."

"No. Mick already has several untraceable ones."

"What about our offshore accounts, Woody? Remember what they did to Jimmy? We should switch banks and use our new IDs."

Woody shook his head. "S**t. I shoulda thought of that, Lauren. You're absolutely right. New accounts in another bank are a must for everyone."

"How about this, Woody? We ask Buzz to set up the transfers for E-Day? No one will notice during the chaos."

“Good idea. The money will never be traced once those computer rooms in the Towers are destroyed.”

“Okay, if we’re never going to use these IDs Griff gave us,” Lauren said, “are we going to destroy them after the op?”

“No,” Woody said. “I have a better idea.”

“What?”

“Sadly, Percy Johnson, James Cole, and Tiffany Goodhead will all perish on E-Day,” Woody said. “Will throw them off our trail. I’d also like you to arrange the same for you, Sam, and Mick. You will all be listed among the casualties.”

“I’ll make sure we are.” Lauren grinned. “So no more Goodhead, Percy?”

Woody laughed. “Tell me how we’re going to avoid Dolan, Lauren. You said his newly-acquired CID bunch are sniffing around.”

“I’ve moving everyone to Red Hook,” Lauren said. “Myself included.”

“I’ll be moving there as well.”

“I know—against my better judgment,” Lauren said. “I want you to be safe, so I’ve had our guys build you a secure office and implemented a strict security protocol for you.”

“Good. So tell me—how’s Tony?”

“Don’t ask,” Lauren said. “I found out Tony is screwing around with a campaign worker.”

“Sorry to hear that, Lauren. How’d you find out?”

“Our guys were tailing him,” Lauren said. “Followed him to a hotel.”

Woody raised his eyebrows. “What? Wait a sec—why were we doing surveillance on Tony?”

“I discovered good ol’ Tony is a stinkin’ FBI rat,” Lauren replied. “We were doing surveillance on the FBI CID bunch, and a photo caught him walking out of Twenty-Six Federal with Dolan.”

“That sounds like an unholy alliance. Wonder why Tony is working with the FBI?”

Lauren smiled. “No idea, but the weasel was stupid enough to believe I wouldn’t find out.”

Woody smiled. “He underestimated you. Did you break up with him?”

“Of course not,” Lauren said. “I’m going to use him.”

“To pass along bulls**t to Dolan.”

“Exactly,” Lauren said. “I’ll make it believable. Dolan’s no idiot.”

“Sorry, this happened to you, Lauren. You two were pretty hot and heavy there for a while.”

“Were is the operative word,” Lauren replied.

Woody smiled. “Mission comes first, huh?”

“You know us Bond girls, Woody. We’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Obviously, with a name like Goodhead.”

Lauren giggled. “Know what the best part is, Woody?”

“What?”

“I don’t have to feel bad about dumping the b*****d.”

Woody thought about Roxanne. “You said it yourself, Lauren. Romantic relationships f**k-up missions. We’re better off without ‘em.”

THIRTY

Actors

October 2000

Lauren walked into Mayor Curran's campaign headquarters and approached the front desk. "May I help you, ma'am?" a young man asked.

"You must be a new here, huh?"

"Yes, ma'am. This is my first week."

Good-lookin' young guy, Lauren thought. "Well, I'm Lauren Hunter from Focus Market Research. I have an appointment with Tony Manetti."

The young man picked up the phone. "I'll buzz him, ma'am."

The open office space was typical for a campaign headquarters. Posters of the candidate, city maps, and charts were plastered on the walls. The office was buzzing with activity as volunteers made phone calls, sorted material for the door-to-door canvass, or prepared campaign signs. Everyone was sporting buttons showing Mayor Curran's smiling face.

"He's expecting you, ma'am. I assume you know his office is the first one on the right?"

"Yes, I do. Thanks." Lauren walked down the hallway and spotted Tony in his office.

"Lauren," Tony said and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Have a seat."

Lauren was thankful the glass walls of Tony's office afforded everyone a view inside. Physical contact with Tony had become a chore. Lauren was now milking a source—nothing more. She pointed to the outer office. "Looks like you got lotsa new volunteers out there, Tony."

"Yeah. People keep coming through the door and asking to help. It's a good sign. Means we're gaining momentum, but I gotta rein 'em in."

"Because you've still got a year to go 'til primary day next September, right?"

Yeah," Tony said. "So, you got those polling numbers?"

Lauren reached into her briefcase and pulled out a file. "Hot off the press this morning. The mayor has a twelve-point lead."

Tony studied the documents. "He's doing well with under-thirties and women. That's what we needed."

"The TV and radio spots are working," Lauren said. "We've got some new ones coming next month."

“May I ask you something, Lauren? It has nothing to do with the campaign.”

Here it comes, Lauren thought. “Sure, Tony. What is it?”

“You remember we talked about Sam Saunders from the White House?”

“Of course,” Lauren replied.

Tony leaned back in his chair. “Do you still talk to him?”

Careful Lauren, she thought. “I haven’t for a while. Why do you ask?”

“A buddy of mine in the Police Commissioner’s Office called me this morning,” Tony said. “Word is Saunders is connected to some sort of a covert operation here in New York.”

“I doubt that, Tony. Sam quit all that s**t when he retired. Besides, he has a high-level security clearance to work at the White House.”

“I know, but are you sure he’s not involved?” Tony asked. “He’s been implicated along with Travis.”

Tony must know I am too, Lauren thought. “Well, Woody Travis is dead, and I’d know if Sam was involved in anything like that. We’re old friends, remember?”

“I remember. One more thing: have you spoken to the mayor recently?”

Interesting, Lauren thought. “Every once in a while. He’s always asking me about voter reaction on the phones. Why what’s up?”

“Every time I call, I’m re-directed to his admin assistant. And he doesn’t return my calls anymore.”

“I’m sure he’s just busy, Tony. He trusted his campaign to you, so he must think you’re okay.”

“You’re probably right.”

Idiot, Lauren thought. “We still on for dinner tonight, Tony?”

“Sorry, Lauren. Gotta cancel. Campaign meeting.”

Lauren stood. “Okay. I’ll take a rain check.”

Lauren hailed a cab. *Meeting your little trollop tonight, Tony?* she thought. *What an a**hole you are. One day, Tony, one day—I’ll get even. You wait and see.*

* * * * *

Woody was carrying a cardboard box when he walked into the morning coffee meeting at the hangar. He was in his Tom Lindsay mask and was wearing a UPS uniform. Smokey stood. “Sorry, sir. This area is off-limits. Deliveries are—”

“I have your new IDs,” Woody said.

Ace’s brow furrowed. “Is that you, Woody?”

“Sure is, Ace. Pretty good, huh?”

Ace moved in closer and examined Woody's face. "F**kin' amazing."

"I can give you some voice lessons," Magic said. "If you can alter your speech pattern enough, even your best friend wouldn't know who you are."

"We should do that for everyone, Magic," Woody said. He opened the cardboard box and took out a stack of manila envelopes. "These are your new lives, boys. Destroy your old fake IDs."

"They can hunt us down with our old ones?" Teach asked.

"Without a doubt," Woody replied. "But these IDs can't be tracked by anyone. Memorize all the details, and if you need a disguise, Tech Services will help you. Then it's photo ID time."

Magic took his envelope and Buzz's. "I'll make sure he gets this, Woody... um... sorry, I mean Tom."

"I'm trying to get used to it too, Magic," Woody said. "Oh, and I'm working on a dispersal plan for each one of us after E-Day. Your bank accounts with your new identities are all ready to go. Money will be transferred from your old accounts on E-Day morning from computers in the Towers. After the dust settles, no one will ever find any record of the transfer."

"Hopefully, that includes our wives," Magic said.

Everyone laughed. Woody glanced around the room. *Good group these guys, he thought. Sure wish Sam was here. Boy, I'd love to be a fly on the wall today when he meets Griff.*

* * * * *

"You must be Sam Saunders," Griff said.

Sam stood up from the table. "I must be, y'all. You're Griff?"

"I am. Great table, Sam." Griff had asked Sam to reserve a private table in the back part of The Pershing Restaurant at The Willard. The lunch rush was over, so there were only a few occupied tables in the restaurant.

"So why are we here at this high falootin' hotel, Griff?"

*This f**kin' cowboy is all business,* Griff thought. "First. Is there anything else you can tell me about Woody's death?"

"No. We haven't found out anything more."

"That's bulls**t, Sam."

"What?"

"You heard me," Griff said. "Woody's alive."

Sam shook his head. "Y'all are wrong."

"Don't s**t the troops, Sam. He's alive. You had him choppered out of New York to a military hospital. And now you have him stashed at Close By."

“Whoever told y’all that is mistaken.”

“Enough, Sam. You don’t have to protect him from me. What were you and Lauren thinking?”

*Woody was right not to trust this a**hole*, Sam thought. “Okay. We wanted to keep him safe, Griff. That’s all.”

“You old-school-CIA types think you’re so f**kin’ smart, and you know everything that’s goin’ on. Do you remember Cliff Brooks from TSS?”

“Yup.”

“Talked to him lately, Sam?”

“Nope. Not since Thorne took over.”

“Brooks has disappeared. No one knows where.”

“S**t. I never heard nothin’ about that, y’all.”

“Never f**kin’ underestimate our power and reach, Sam. Remember we tracked you down in a day.”

Sam gave him an indignant gaze. “Y’all wanted to meet, so let’s git to it.”

Griff leaned in and lowered his voice. “Tell me about the playground renovations and the war games.”

“The refurb of the tango wedge* is underway,” Sam said. “To limit the damage, we’ll be installing steel reinforcements and upgraded fire doors and sprinkler systems. Also, blast-resistant windows. And the targeting transmitter will be installed.” (*Wedge One – Pentagon)

“Good. We want a surgical strike. We only need to eliminate those f**kin’ accountants and budget analysts looking for the trillions of missing DOD* money. We don’t want to weaken our military capability.” (*Department of Defense)

“We’re following orders, Griff. We only want to destroy the evidence and the files, and limit the casualties. That’s why we’re doin’ renovations to keep people out of the target zone. Normally, there are at least four thousand employees in that wedge.”

“But you’re still gonna kill a few folks, huh?”

Sam glared at him. “I suppose we will.”

“How long will the rest of the renovations take?”

“They’ll continue until E-Day.”

“What about the security cameras, Sam? The playground has a f**kin’ zillion of ‘em.”

“Taken care of,” Sam said. “Our computer guys will control them. If a camera happens to pick up anything, our guys in the feds will seize any video footage.”

“And the war games?”

Sam gestured Griff to lean in closer. “All set to go from our end. We’ve designed four exercises that will engage most of our interceptor fighters. We’ll send a bunch of ‘em out to Alaska and Northern Canada. We’re simulating airline hijackings and Russian escalation in the Bering Sea. There will be only a handful of fighters left in NEADS capable of interception.”

“When will you confirm the games with Defense?” Griff asked.

“After the new administration takes office. If the GOP wins, word is Hawkins will be the new SECDEF. But if the Democrats win, it’ll be tougher. We’ll have to bypass the Pentagon and have NORAD take the lead.”

Griff smiled. “I have a feeling that won’t be necessary. Hopkins and Miller will win.”

“There’s a dang good chance you’re right,” Sam said.

Griff stared at him. “We leave nothing to chance. Let’s eat.”

Sam sat back and picked up the menu from the table. *I’m gonna get this dickhead to buy me lunch.* He whistled. “Pretty pricey, y’all.”

Griff grinned. He signaled the waiter who scurried to the table. “What’ll you have, Sam? I’m buyin’.”

Sam folded his menu and placed it on the table. He fixed his eyes on the waiter. “Steak Cafe du Parc, cowboy. And fries.”

“And how would monsieur like his steak prepared?” the waiter asked.

“Pittsburgh sunny and cold, y’all.”

The waiter shrugged his shoulders. “I do not understand, monsieur.”

Sam smiled. “That’d be charred outside and raw inside with a sunny-side fried egg on top.”

* * * * *

Kirk was sitting at the bar in Elaine’s when a CNN special report caught his eye. There was a video of a navy ship on fire. “Hey, Harry,” he said. “Could you turn up the TV?”

The caption across the bottom of the TV screen read: “USS Cole on fire off the coast of Yemen”. A CNN reporter was saying two or three people in a small boat full of explosives rammed into the side of the ship and exploded on impact. There were reports of numerous deaths and injuries.

“Gotta be al Qaeda,” Kirk said. He shook his head. “How the f**k did they get so close to a US Navy destroyer in broad daylight?” He put twenty dollars on the bar. “Thanks, Harry. Gotta go.”

THIRTY-ONE

Agendas

December 2000

Sam showed his ID to the secret service agent at the stage door entrance of the convention center. He entered the backstage area and stood in the wings. Out on stage, President-Elect Liz Hopkins was speaking to an enthusiastic crowd. Forbes Miller was in the wings on the other side speaking with Alvin Hawkins. Forbes spotted Sam and motioned for him to come over. Sam walked over to a stagehand wearing a headset. "Howdy, pardner. Could y'all show me the way to git to the other side?"

"Yes, sir," the stagehand said. "Follow me." He led Sam down a flight of stairs. He pointed to a hallway. "This will take you over there, sir."

Sam thanked him and crossed over to the stage-left wings. Forbes Miller was still speaking with Alvin Hawkins. Sam stood a distance away until Forbes waved at him to come over. "Sam," Forbes said. "This is Alvin Hawkins."

"Nice to meet y'all, sir," Sam said.

"Same here, Sam," Alvin said.

"What brings you up to Massachusetts, Sam?" Forbes asked.

"Figured y'all be havin' an election night victory party, sir."

"That we are," Forbes said. "If you'll excuse us, Alvin, Sam and I have some things to discuss."

"Not a problem, Forbes. See you later at the hotel," Alvin said. "Hope to see you again, Sam."

After Alvin was out of earshot, Forbes placed his hand on Sam's shoulder. "He's buckin' for SECDEF, Sam."

"He'd be a great choice, sir."

Smart man, Forbes thought. *Always knows the right thing to say*. "We've got time before Liz is done. Let's head to my green room." He led Sam out of the wings and down a backstage hallway. There were Secret Service agents stationed along the way. Forbes stopped at a dressing room door with a piece of foolscap taped to it. He pointed to his name written in black marker. "Pretty classy, huh? C'mon in and have a seat." Forbes gestured towards a bridge chair. He walked to a table with an array of food, snacks, and liquor and picked up a bottle.

"Bourbon good, Sam?"

"For any occasion, sir."

Forbes handed Sam his drink. "Cheers, Sam."

Sam raised his glass. "Cheers, and congratulations, sir."

Forbes put down his drink and leaned back in his chair. "Thanks, Sam. We finally got it won. Tough to wait for a month with all the vote recount bulls**t, but I've always believed hard battles produce the sweetest victories. Now, I hear you're staying with the new administration."

"Yes, sir, if it's all right with y'all."

"Of course," Forbes said. "We need someone like you in the West Wing."

"An Aggie, sir?"

Forbes smiled. "No—an old friend. Someone who thinks the way I do. More importantly, someone I can trust."

"I look forward to working together, sir."

"It's more than that, Sam. I want your help to change the agenda. The US needs to place more emphasis on our intelligence capabilities—especially in the military. Also, I want to enhance the military use of drones."

"I'd like to get involved in that, sir."

"Thought you might." Forbes leaned in towards Sam. "There are difficult times ahead, Sam. We need people around us who understand where we want to position America in this new century. There are those who will oppose increased spending on the military, special ops, and American intervention anywhere in the world."

"I believe if something major happens, it will change their minds, sir."

"True enough, Sam. And I'm pleased you'll be here to help."

"Wouldn't want to be anywhere else, sir."

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," Forbes said.

"Sorry to interrupt, sir," a young man said. "The president-elect is glad-handing on the way to her vehicle. ETD is ten minutes."

"Thank you," Forbes said. After he closed the door, Forbes stood. "Best I get saddled up, Sam."

Sam stood. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Vice President-elect."

"Cut that crap, Sam. I'm big on action—not titles."

Sam smiled. "You always have been, sir."

Forbes placed his arm around Sam's shoulder and walked him to the door. "I'm counting on you, Sam. My office door will always be open to you. Merely tell me what you need."

"I will, sir."

Two Secret Service agents escorted Forbes down the hallway. He stopped after a few feet and turned to face Sam. Forbes gave him a thumbs up. "Gig 'em, Sam."

Sam smiled. “That’s pretty gol dang good, sir. You know—for a Boilermaker that is.”

Forbes laughed and headed down the hallway.

* * * * *

Woody’s office in the Red Hook warehouse was secluded and secure with a secret passage to a safe room. Lauren had implemented a strict set of rules for his security. Woody was to be called “Tom Lindsay”, and she required Woody to wear his disguise every day. He went to and from his new condominium on Staten Island by high-speed jet boat. Yuri and David provided close personal security twenty-four-seven.”

Smokey knocked on the door frame of Woody’s office. “Busy, Boss?”

“What’s up, Smokey?”

“Our friend Dolan is back from Yemen,” Smokey said.

“He’s done with the Cole investigation?”

“No. Our guys say Knox forced him to come home,” Smokey replied.

“Dolan stirred up a lot of s**t during the investigation. Rumor has it the president got involved. Apparently, the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen can’t stand him.”

“S**t,” Woody said. “This is not good. Sam says rumors abound the CIA is planning a covert action against UBL in retaliation for the USS Cole. The last thing we need is Dolan sniffin’ around again. Any chance we can have him sent back to Yemen?”

“No,” Smokey replied. “Unless something changes, it’s not possible.”

“Damn it.” Woody stood. “Come with me, Smokey. Let’s get everyone together. Dolan has been a pain in our butt long enough. We gotta get rid of the son-of-a-b***h one way or another.”

* * * * *

Kirk called Alexis from the baggage claim area at Kennedy International. Her answering machine message made him smile. “Hi babe,” he said. “I’m at Kennedy waiting for my luggage. I should be at Elaine’s in about an hour. Love you.”

Mark Pennington stopped at the carousel with a baggage cart full of luggage. “Got mine, Boss. Still waiting I see.”

“As usual,” Kirk said. “Good to be back in civilization, huh?”

“If you can call Kennedy civilized,” Mark said. “Were you on the phone with Sal?”

“No, I called Alexis. You worried about Sal, Mark?”

“Yeah,” Mark replied. “He speaks the lingo, but Yemen is a dangerous s**thole. I didn’t like leavin’ him there.”

“I didn’t either, but Sal was getting close to nailing the al Qaeda b*****s who were behind it. Hopefully, I can finagle a way to get back there and help him.”

“I think UBL planned the hit on the Cole.”

“I’m convinced he did,” Kirk said. “He wanted to show us he’s capable of hitting us anywhere—anytime.”

“Scary thought, huh?”

“Sure as f**k is, Mark. But you know that ambassador did us a favor by kickin’ me out. We’ve got plenty to do here.”

“You’re talkin’ about Lauren Hunter and her tribe.”

“Yeah,” Kirk said. “And al Qaeda. Art Brown and I are both convinced they’re gonna hit the U.S. homeland really soon.”

“How does the Hunter gang fit into this?”

“I don’t know,” Kirk replied. “But I’m damn sure they do, and Travis is the mastermind behind the whole enchilada.”

“Don’t you mean *was*?”

“I still think Travis is alive. And I’m gonna bust my a** to confirm it.”

“You know you’re a stubborn b*****d, Boss.”

Kirk smiled. “Thank you, Mark.”

THIRTY-TWO

Plots and Plans

January 2001

Mary Hughes entered the Atrium Lounge at the Hyatt Regency Washington. The hotel was near Capitol Hill and the Inauguration Day events. Art Brown waved at her and she walked over to his table.

“Hi, Art,” Mary said. “Please sit.”

“Congratulations on your appointment, Professor Hughes. You’ll be a great National Security Advisor.”

A waitress stopped at the table. “Would you like something to drink, ma’am?”

“Irish coffee, please,” Mary replied. After the waitress left the table, she turned to Art. “Cut the professor s**t.”

Art smiled. “Will do.” He pointed to a large TV on the wall. “The swearing-in is coming up. Surprised you’re not out there.”

“Really, Art? Let’s see. Where would I like to be? Out there in the cold dreary rain or inside where it’s comfy and warm enjoying an Irish coffee? Not a tough choice.”

“Did you have a chance to wade through the briefing notes I sent?”

“Yes,” Mary replied. “You seem convinced an attack by UBL is imminent.”

“That’s why I have requested a meeting with President Hopkins as soon as possible.”

“We’ll make that happen, Art. There’s one thing you failed to mention, however. Is there any concrete evidence showing how UBL will attack? I presume you have something other than mere conjecture.”

“Nothing solid,” Art replied. “We have bits and pieces of intelligence indicating several possible methods of attack including a dirty nuke and car or truck bombs. We also have intel about suicide pilots flying hijacked airplanes into buildings.”

“A World War Two kamikaze attack sounds a bit far-fetched,” Mary said, “but possible, I suppose. In the briefing note, you mentioned a group of al Qaeda sympathizers in New York. Former CIA types who you suspect are in cahoots with al Qaeda. Where did this intel originate?”

“FBI Field Office in New York,” Art replied. “Their National Security Desk.”

“Reliable?” Art didn’t answer. The waitress stopped at their table and delivered Mary’s Irish coffee. “Thank you,” Mary said.

Art waited until the waitress was out of earshot. “Yes,” he said, “the source is reliable. It’s Kirk Dolan, the special agent-in-charge. Super dedicated and knows more about al Qaeda than anyone. He solved the embassy bombings, charged UBL, and nailed Ramzi Yousef.”

“From the ninety-three World Trade Center bombing,” Mary said.

“Right. Dolan was also close to connecting UBL with the Cole until he was called back.”

“I’ve been briefed about Special Agent Dolan and the Ambassador,” Mary said. “Why does he think these ex-CIA Officers are working with al Qaeda?”

Art lowered his voice. “Kirk is convinced they’re planning an attack on US soil, and al Qaeda is helping them.”

Mary paused for a moment. “A couple of thoughts, Art: First, does Dolan know why these Americans who risked their lives for their country in the CIA would now side with terrorists bound and determined to strike against the US? And second—does he have any proof?”

“No on both.”

“I would suggest Special Agent Dolan do some more digging.”

“He and his squad are working hard on it,” Art said.

“I take it this Dolan is a friend of yours.”

“Yes,” Art said. “One of the few I have. And a rare commodity in Washington, I might add.”

Mary blew on her coffee and took a sip. “I already have a friend here I trust.”

“Really?” Art asked. “Mind if I ask who it is?”

“My dog.”

* * * * *

Lauren and Woody were standing beside a scale model of Lower Manhattan in the back corner of the conference room of the hangar. The area near the World Trade Center showed each building, park, and street in intricate detail. The target areas for the drones were clearly marked on the North and South Tower.

“Hi,” Gabby said as he walked in. “I have pictures for you. Ace will be here in few minutes.”

“Let’s see,” Lauren said.

Gabby spread the photo array on the scale model south of The Battery. He pointed to a photo. “This is wiring in North Tower elevator hoistway near impact zone.”

Woody put on his reading glasses and picked up the photo. "I don't see any wiring on the support columns."

Gabby smiled. "Hidden by insulation we install. Same for all three buildings."

"Seven is done?" Lauren asked.

"Yes," Gabby replied.

There was a knock on the door, and Ace walked in. "Hey, you guys."

"Have a seat, Ace," Woody said. "Anything else, Gabby?"

"Where will you be E-Day, Lauren?" Gabby asked.

"I'm planning on running the day from my office in Liberty Plaza," Lauren replied.

"Suggest further way," Gabby said. "There be hundreds of tons of structural steel in Towers, plus acres of marble, millions of square feet drywall, and over three thousand toilets." Gabby grinned. "I am saying explosives we use are powerful and debris will carry out far from buildings."

"Where do you suggest, Gabby?" Lauren asked.

"New Jersey."

Lauren thought for a moment. "That's a super idea, Gabby. After the Towers come down, it will be difficult if not impossible to get out of Manhattan. I'll set up my E-Day Op Center in Jersey City. It's directly across the river from the World Trade Center. Great view of E-Day and makes my skedaddle easier."

"Good, but what mean skedaddle?" Gabby asked.

"It means to leave in a friggin' hurry," Lauren replied.

"I like that word skedaddle." Gabby turned to Woody. "All I got for now."

"What's goin' on, Ace?" Woody asked.

"Good news," Ace replied. "Atta* has the pilots towin' the line and doin' good in their training. Some of them're gettin' seven sixty-seven time in our old simulator TSS donated to that flight school in Florida. They'll all be ready to go by early summer." (*Mohamed Atta – chief hijack pilot)

"That is good news," Woody said. "Have any flight schools tipped off the FBI?"

"Yeah," Ace replied, "but as expected, no one is taking it seriously."

"Doesn't matter," Woody said. "As long as the media finds out about all their training. It's an important part of the story we'll be selling."

"Did you approve the timing for the hijackings and proposed flight paths for E-Day, Lauren?" Ace asked.

"Woody and I approved that this morning," Lauren replied. "Like you suggested, Ace, our FTS pilots will remotely switch off the transponders as soon as we take control of the aircraft. We'll coordinate fake phone and radio traffic,

so ATC will figure this is when the aircraft were hijacked. We'll determine the coordinates where the drones will intercept and take over for the real flights. The flight paths for the airline flights to Close By will be programmed in once we finalize the flight numbers."

"That all sounds good," Ace said. "Are the airports confirmed? I mean subject to change for weather and other s**t."

"Yes," Lauren replied. "Boston, Newark, and Dulles."

"Perfect," Ace said. "Still the same plan for the Pentagon?"

"Yeah," Woody replied. "We have no room for error at that target."

"For sure," Ace said. "To make sure, I'll do some test runs on a mock-up at Close By."

"Good idea," Woody said. "If there isn't anything else, I'm heading home to the island."

"Smokey called me this morning from Washington," Ace said. "He wanted me to ask how you were doing with Dolan."

"Tell him Dolan will be out of our hair before E-Day."

"Are you sure?" Ace asked.

"Yeah," Woody replied. "It was confirmed by a tall Texan who works at the castle."

* * * * *

Kirk stood outside the open door to Ron Jenkin's office. "You wanted to see me, Boss?"

"Yeah. Close the door and have a seat."

Kirk plopped down on a chair opposite Ron's desk. "What's up?"

"You can't go back to Yemen, Kirk."

"Who says?"

"The US Ambassador won't allow you into the country."

"S**t, and here I thought she liked me."

Ron smiled. "I need you here anyway. I-49 needs your help. Intel says an attack is coming—and soon."

"Intel is right," Kirk said. "And the Travis gang is tangled up in it."

"You're unbelievable, Kirk. You still think Travis is still alive and planning some big operation. Hoover has told you to lay off. They say there's no connection between that group and any attack."

"Until I prove there is."

"I know you, Kirk. You're gonna hang onto this investigation like a dog with a goddamn bone."

“That’s why they call me ‘Hound Dog’.”

“So—Mr. Hound Dog, if Washington asks, I told you to let it go. Okay?”

“Fair enough,” Kirk replied.

Ron shook his head. “I don’t think you understand how many bridges you’ve burned in Washington.”

“I haven’t done anything that bad.”

“I’d say losing your Palm Pilot and your briefcase isn’t good, Kirk. Both of which contained sensitive material or have you forgotten? Also, there’s the whole safe house incident with your girlfriend. Washington is keeping a close watch on you.”

“I can handle the a**holes in Washington, Ron. Besides, Tanner Knox won’t throw me under the bus.”

“A little bird told me Director Knox is resigning this spring. Then what will you do?”

Kirk grinned. “I’ll be the new FBI Director.”

THIRTY-THREE

Disposal

March 2001

The new Secretary of Defense Alvin Hawkins's face turned red, and he slammed his fist on his desk. "Dammit, Bob! We need major war games, not a few piddly gol dang exercises. The VP wants them after Labor Day. He says he wants our fighters ready for any contingency—from hijackings to Russian intrusions. We want the fog of war created. That means false hijackings and multiple phantom radar targets to confuse the s**t out of the FAA. We want to scare the crap out of them, so they're ready. Now, can y'all do that or not?"

General Mulholland shifted in his chair. "Yes, sir. As the head of NORAD, I have the authority to utilize our air defenses in any way I deem necessary. My concern is the media attention this will generate. We've never conducted such a large number of war games in the same week."

"Y'all leave the damn media to me, Bob. We'll justify these games by using al Qaeda. Hell, we had two U.S. embassies bombed, and bin Laden took the credit. He also planned and financed the attack on the Cole. That alone is enough."

"We could also emphasize the importance of pilot training to sell this," Mulholland said. "We both have credibility on that. I believe we have close to the same number of combat hours strapped into a jet."

"Glad we're on the same page, Bob."

"I'll have my staff plan the exercises and prepare a proposed schedule for the second week of September, Mr. Secretary. Do you have a specific date in mind?"

Alvin tapped his desk blotter calendar. "Tuesday, September the eleventh."

"Okay, Mr. Secretary. I do suggest we keep the exercises under wraps until this summer. That's SOP."

"Agreed, General. Send me a briefing note. That's all for today."

After General Mulholland left, Alvin took a model of a jet fighter from his desk and held it up. "Same number of combat air hours, General Bobby? My F-4 Phantom would eat your little A-4 Skyhawk for breakfast."

* * * * *

Chief of Staff Bruce Porter emerged from the vice president's office. "He'll see you now, Sam."

Sam walked in, and the cold air hit his face. Vice President Forbes Miller's office was always cold—winter and summer. He insisted a temperature of sixty-five degrees be maintained at all times. His staff joked it was the same temperature as his blood.

Forbes was seated at his desk. He pointed to a chair in front. "Have a seat, Sam. I'll get right to the point."

*He's never one for bulls**t*, Sam thought.

"We're telling the FBI and the CIA to lay off the Saudi Royal Family," Forbes said. "They are friends of this administration."

"Understood, sir, but didn't the Saudi's kill US military personnel in Kobar Towers?"

"That was the Saudi Hezbollah, Sam. The Royal Family had no role. Besides, this is what the president wants."

"Understood," Sam said. "What about UBL, sir? The CIA is planning an airstrike to take him out."

"I'm aware of that. You know they are not alone in pressuring the president to act."

"But the CIA does not have an exact location on him, sir."

Forbes paused. "Let's make sure they don't get one, Sam. Talk to Dave Borland at the CIA, and tell him bin Laden should be escorted back up into the f**kin' Afghan mountains where even CNN can't find him."

Sam suppressed a smile. "Does Director Borland know where to take him, sir?"

"Absolutely," Forbes replied. "Years ago they hid the son-of-a-b***h from the Russians. No one will find bin Laden if he shuts the f**k up and hides. The president can't authorize a kill mission if his location is unconfirmed."

"Understood, Mr. Vice President. What about her chief of staff?"

"I'll handle Cassie Lowe," Forbes replied. "You and Borland just make damn sure you get bin Laden's a** hidden. Understood?"

"Absolutely," Sam replied. "Is that all, sir?"

"One more thing, Sam. The president and I trust you. I have assured her you will protect her and keep her away from this s**t."

"Count on it, sir."

Forbes leaned on his elbows and clasped his hands together. "Sam, what we're embarking on is important. We are going to witness the end of an era and the launch of a new world order."

"Never thought of it that way, sir. Y'all make it sound patriotic."

“It is, Sam. America will regain its rightful place as a world leader in the new century.” Forbes picked up a document and tossed it onto the desk in front of Sam. “It’s all in here.”

Sam picked up the document. “Interesting title, sir: ‘Rebuilding America’s Defenses’.”

“Something we must do, Sam, if we wish to maintain our position of military preeminence.”

“Sounds expensive, Mr. Vice President.”

“Global leadership is, Sam.”

“Will Congress approve the funding, sir?”

“I guarantee they will,” Forbes replied. “Without question.”

* * * * *

Ace was standing on the observation deck outside the control tower. His radio crackled. “Ace,” the voice said. “She’s lined up for long final. ETA Close By in five.” The faint sound of jet engines prompted Ace to check the approach path through his binoculars. He stuck his head inside the tower. “She’s on final approach, you guys. C’mon outside.”

Lauren and Woody joined Ace. The 767 drone came into view on the horizon. “So cool there is no one on board, huh, Woody?” Lauren asked.

“Yeah,” Woody replied. “Total control by our guys on the ground sitting in front of a computer screen.”

The aircraft descended and flared over the runway threshold to a soft landing. The wing spoilers deployed, and the thrust reversers roared slowing the aircraft for the turn onto the taxiway. “Perfect,” Ace said. “On E-Day our FTS pilots will handle all four airline flights like this drone. They’ll land them and taxi them to their respective hangars. We’ll hook on a tow tractor and pull them inside. We want them out of sight as soon as possible. The passengers and crew will still be unconscious from the anesthetic. At this point, Lauren, your cell phone calls will have already begun.”

“Right,” Lauren said.

“So this is when you flood the aircraft with the Zyklon B*?” Woody asked.
(*hydrogen cyanide gas)

“Yes,” Ace replied. “We’ll use portable ground heating units. We will attach remotely activated Zyklon B canisters inside the air intake for each unit and attach the hose to the heating and air conditioning port connector on each aircraft. Once all four aircraft are buttoned up and sealed, the FTS pilots will manually adjust the aircraft pressurization system, so we can trick it to close all

the outflow valves for the aircraft's air system. Then we activate the canisters and release the gas."

"How can you be sure the gas will be dispersed throughout the cabin?" Woody asked.

"Along with the ground heating unit, the FTS pilot will keep the APU* running on the aircraft," Ace replied. "This will make sure the temperature stays above seventy-seven degrees, and the air circulation system will continue to function. Both are necessary for the gas." (*aircraft auxiliary power unit)

"How quickly will it work?" Woody asked.

"The gas takes a second to vaporize once it's exposed to air," Ace replied. "In that kind of confined space with no air escaping, we'll achieve an extremely high concentration. Death will be pretty well instantaneous and definitely painless because, as I said, everyone on board will still be comatose."

"Painless is good," Woody said. "Then what?"

"After about twenty minutes the FTS pilots for each aircraft will shut down the APU, and my guys will disconnect the heating unit and hook up ground power. At this point, Digger and his ghouls kick in. He's waiting for you in number two hangar. There's a jeep waiting to take you over."

"Thanks, Ace," Lauren said.

Lauren and Woody's driver dropped them at the hangar. Digger met them outside. "Hi again you two," he said. "Ready for the five-dollar tour?"

"Ready as we'll ever be," Woody said.

"Okay," Digger said. "I've assigned my best people to this phase of the operation. They will be totally protected from the gas by wearing full HAZMAT suits. Before they enter the aircraft the FTS pilot will open the outflow valves and keep the air circulation system functioning to flush out the Zyklon B from the aircraft. We have air exhaust fans in the hangars to remove the gas as quickly as possible. Once the gas is down to a safe level my teams will enter the aircraft and collect what we need for the plant at the impact sites. Others will remove any air freight and the passenger's baggage from the cargo hold."

"How will you dispose of all that stuff?" Lauren asked.

"It will be trucked to incinerators on the base," Digger replied. "We'll use jet fuel extracted from the aircraft for the fire. Everything will be reduced to ashes."

"Now I know what happened to my luggage," Lauren said.

Digger and Woody both chuckled. "Now for the disposal," Digger said. "We're gonna use a process called resomation."

"Reso what?" Woody asked.

"Resomation," Digger replied. "Some places call it 'water cremation'. For our purposes, it's better than regular cremation because there's no smoke or odor

for anyone to report. Also, there is no DNA to trace back to a person. It is, by far, the most efficient way to completely dispose of a corpse—especially when you got a bunch of ‘em. All you need is an alkaline solution and a sealed container capable of pressurization. The aircraft are perfect for the process.”

“So how does it work, Digger?” Woody asked.

“Once again the FTS pilots will close all the outflow vales. My guys will seal all the passenger and cargo doors. Then we’ll fill the aircraft fuselage with a mixture of hot water and lye.”

“How can you do that if the aircraft doors are sealed?” Lauren asked.

“Great question, Lauren,” Digger replied. “We’ll use the exterior service access panels on the fuselage. That’s how they fill the potable water and the lavs.”

“The washrooms? Really?” Lauren asked.

“Yeah,” Digger replied. “That blue liquid stuff they use for the toilets. My crews will disconnect the lines inside the aircraft so the water tanks and lav reservoirs will overflow and fill the fuselage.”

“Ingenious,” Lauren said.

“Once the aircraft is filled with the lye mixture,” Digger said, “We’ll keep the fuselage as warm as possible from the outside with heaters. After about twenty-four hours, the corpses will break down to a liquid state—except for some bone fragments and ash. Works like a charm.”

“Then you drain the aircraft?” Woody asked.

“Yup,” Digger said. “Shut everything down and open the outflow valves. We’ll also open up the service access panels, the water and lav drains, and all the passenger and cargo compartment doors.”

Woody walked to a large drain grate. “Explains why the hangars have these huge floor drains. Where does the water go?”

“The drains are connected to sewer piping which outflows into a river system and eventually to the ocean,” Digger replied.

“Digger,” Lauren said, “Time to show Woody what’s outback.”

“Follow me,” Digger said.

“All four hangars have the same doors back here as out front,” Digger said. He hit a button on the wall and a huge cantilevered door opened. “Each hangar has a large camouflaged awning same as this one. They extend from the roof of the hangar and are fastened to the adjacent hillside. C’mon inside.”

Woody stopped. “What the f**k is that, Digger?”

“This is what Bertha did,” Digger replied. “Slant-drilled tunnels like this into the hillside.”

“Bertha?” Woody asked.

“That’s the name they call a tunnel boring machine our contractors leased, Woody,” Digger said. “They had her trucked in here.”

Woody turned to Lauren. “You didn’t tell me about this?”

“Digger mentioned this to you on our first tour here,” Lauren replied.

“Oh yeah, the Egypt Air night,” Woody said. “You mentioned you were gonna dig into the hillside outback of the hangars, Digger, but you didn’t say how. This is totally amazing. How big is that f**kin’ hole?”

“Fifty-eight feet in diameter and two hundred feet deep,” Digger replied.

Woody whistled. “How long did it take this Bertha to dig the tunnels?”

“Only took a few months to dig all four,” Digger replied. “Bertha’s amazing. Digs about fifty feet a day and places concrete lining segments as she goes.”

“What’s the cover story for the crew operating her?” Woody asked.

“They were told this is an ultra-secure nuclear weapon storage facility,” Digger said. “The company and its crews have a top-secret security clearance.”

Woody walked to the entrance and peered inside. “This is where you’ll put the aircraft?”

“Yeah,” Digger replied. “While we wait for the resomation to complete, my crew will drain the jet fuel into trucks for use in the base incinerators. We’ll use pneumatic shears to trim the wings and the rudder.”

“So they’ll fit, right?” Woody asked.

“Right,” Digger replied. “About fifty feet off each wingtip of all the aircraft. And we’ll trim ten feet off the rudders. My team will tow the aircraft into the tunnels and pack the wing and rudder trimmings beside them. We’ll install and weld a solid steel and concrete door six feet down from the entrance. The door has an inlet valve, so we can fill each tunnel with an acid solution that will dissolve the contents over time. Then—”

Lauren cut him off. “Sorry to interrupt, Digger, but why go to the trouble of draining the aircraft after the resomation thing is complete? If you’re going to fill the tunnel with acid, wouldn’t that accomplish the same thing?”

“A couple of reasons, Lauren,” Digger replied. “First is the bone fragments and ash. We have to harvest some for the plant at the crash sites. The rest will be pulverized. Second is weight. We estimate a seven sixty-seven can hold about fifteen thousand cubic feet of water. That’s over nine hundred thousand pounds. A big load to tow and we’d be taking a chance on the undercarriage collapsing.”

“Aha,” Lauren said. “Now that makes sense.”

Digger smiled. “Okay.” He paused. “Where was I?”

“You just filled the tunnels with the acid solution,” Woody said.

“Oh, yeah,” Digger said. “Next, we’ll weld the steel doors shut and fill the remaining six feet with concrete. We’ll leave some space to pack with dirt once

the concrete hardens.”

“How long will it take the aircraft to disintegrate from the acid solution?” Woody asked.

“In a few months, there’ll be nothing left,” Digger replied.

“What about if someone uses ground penetration radar?” Lauren asked.

“We anticipated that, Lauren,” Digger replied. “The entire hillside will be sealed with a heavy lead layer several feet below the surface. Then we’ll add a deep layer of topsoil and plant grass and shrubs. Once the hangars are dismantled and the matting for our ramp and runways is removed, we’ll replant them, too. Give it a year or so, and the place will go back to looking like the old World War Two facility it was before we were here.”

Woody shook his head. “Well, if that don’t beat all. Amazing, Digger.”

“Thanks, Woody,” Digger said.

“I agree,” Lauren said. “It will be like everything vanished into thin air.”

“Exactly what we wanted,” Woody said.

“And the passengers and crew—” Lauren paused.

Woody looked into her eyes. “They’ll be swimming with the dolphins, Lauren.”

THIRTY-FOUR

Best Laid Plans

May 2001

Sally was sitting at her desk in the kitchen when the garage door opened. Jeff walked in a few minutes later. “How was your game, hon?” she asked.

Jeff kissed her on the cheek. “The usual. I don’t have a problem until I get on the green. Can’t sink a putt to save my soul.” He walked to the fridge. “May I offer madam some sort of libation?”

“A glass of wine, please,” Sally replied. “I booked the Baltic cruise today. And get this—Princess has upgraded us to a mini-suite with a huge balcony. Those are the Aloha Deck cabins we wanted to book one day.”

Jeff placed Sally’s wine glass on the desk and pulled out a kitchen barstool from the island. “Appears us Edwards are climbing up the social ladder, lovey,” he quipped using his best Thurston Howell impression. “Living here in Vista Las Palmas in Palm Springs and hobnobbing on the upper decks of a luxury cruise liner.”

Sally shook her head. “Don’t be silly. You know the *Crown Princess* isn’t a luxury ship. There are lotsa cruise lines that charge a hell of a lot more.”

“It’s still upper-crust cruising to me.”

“If we’re upper-crust, the Baker’s are too,” Sally said. “Ed and Jackie will be a couple of cabins away on the same deck.”

“Always suspected Ed was a social climber. So where are we headed on this one?”

“It’s called the Voyage of the Vikings.”

“Sounds good,” Jeff said. “Do we get to pillage and plunder?”

Sally rolled her eyes. “We board the ship in Copenhagen. Then we—hang on a sec.” She opened a file folder on her desk and pulled out a piece of paper.

“Okay. Here’s our itinerary: First port of call is Stockholm, then on to Helsinki, St. Petersburg, Russia, then—”

Jeff interrupted her. “St. Petersburg? You’re kidding! We’ll get to see the Hermitage Museum?”

“Yes, Jeff. I thought you’d be excited about that.”

“Who wouldn’t be excited about seeing the most incredible collection of paintings in the world? I can finally scratch that off my bucket list. That’s so cool, Sal. Where else?”

“After St. Petersburg, we sail to Tallinn which is in Estonia, then to Gdansk in Poland, Oslo, and back to Copenhagen. We remain on board and sail to Southampton and Dublin before crossing the Atlantic to Boston. Then we fly home to LA.”

“Sounds like a long cruise. When’re we back home?”

“September the ninth,” Sally replied. “We arrive in Boston on September the eighth and spend the night. Why?”

“There’s an old farts golf tournament on Labor Day weekend. I was gonna play in it.”

“Sorry,” Sally said. “This was too good a deal to pass up. Our travel agent said it’s a repositioning cruise, so it’s cheaper.”

“Not a problem,” Jeff said. “There’ll be other golf tournaments.”

“Best get changed. Remember we have dinner tonight with Ed and Jackie.”

“Oh, yeah.” Jeff slipped off the barstool. He put his hand on her shoulder. “This cruise will be a super way to celebrate our fortieth wedding anniversary, huh?”

Sally beamed. She placed her hand on his. “We’ll be with our best friends visiting places we’ve always wanted to see. What could be better?”

“Nothing,” Jeff replied. “Should be a blast.”

* * * * *

A secret service agent opened the front door for Vice President Forbes. “The president is waiting for you in her study, sir.”

“Forbes,” President Liz Hopkins said, “Welcome to Tail Hook. I think you know everyone here.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Forbes glanced around the room. National Coordinator for Security Art Brown was seated on a sofa beside National Security Advisor Mary Hughes. Seated across from them on an identical sofa were the president’s Chief of Staff Cassie Lowe and CIA Director Dave Borland. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Dave Tudor was sitting in a winged-back chair. “Good morning everyone,” Forbes said. “No place like Cape Cod in May is there?”

“Forbes,” President Hopkins said, “we’ve been discussing the speech to the European Parliament by Ahmed Massoud of the Afghan Northern Alliance and his warning concerning an impending large-scale attack on the US.”

“I am aware of his speech last month, Madam President,” Forbes said. “Is there any further intel confirming the attack?”

“If I may, Madam President,” Dave Borland said. “Yes, Mr. Vice President. We have gathered new evidence and believe al Qaeda cells operating inside the

US are actively engaged in planning an attack.”

“Target and timing?” Forbes asked.

“We have no intel on that,” Dave replied.

“I assume the NSA is listening for anything that could provide confirmation,” Forbes said.

“Yes, sir,” Dave said. “They have assured us they have it covered.”

The president turned to Admiral Tudor. “What are your thoughts on taking out bin Laden, Admiral?”

“We should, Madam President, as a top priority. The Joint Chiefs have developed several scenarios for airstrikes, but his location is currently unknown. We are liaising with other agencies and endeavoring to track him down.”

“He’s a slippery devil,” Forbes said.

“Yes, sir,” Admiral Tudor replied, “but we’ll find him.”

“Pardon me, Madam President,” Cassie Lowe said, “With your permission, ma’am, we have another meeting.”

“Yes,” President Hopkins said. “Thank you, everyone. I believe we’re scheduled for another session this afternoon. Right, Cassie?” Cassie nodded.

Once everyone left, President Hopkins closed her briefing book. “Good to see you again, Forbes. What do you think of our Cape Cod White House?”

“This is a fantastic property, Liz. No wonder you spend so much time here. Chatham is a pretty little town.”

“Thanks. It’s our little piece of heaven.”

“I take it you call the place ‘Tail Hook’ because Larry was a naval jet jock?”

“You know they’re called ‘aviators’, Forbes. So, what’s on your agenda for our lunch today? Are you going to explain to me once again why we need a drone command?”

Forbes smiled. “Absolutely, Liz. And let’s not forget the increased funding for covert military operations, the CIA, and private security contractors.”

“We would have all that funding if your friend Alvin could find the trillions missing from the Pentagon’s budget,” Liz said.

“He’s working on it, Liz. He’s hired a whole army of accountants at the Pentagon. Oh, before I forget, I’m glad Doyle Jordan accepted his appointment as AG. He’s a good choice.”

“He’s totally qualified, and it was the least I could do,” Liz said. “The poor guy lost a Senate race to a dead person.”

“Obviously the voters preferred a ‘do-nothing’ Senator.”

“Oh, Forbes.”

“I hear Tanner Knox resigned. Who are you considering for FBI Director?”

“There are a few good candidates,” Liz replied, “but I’m leaning towards the DAG Jack Loreto.”

“Loreto’s a good man, Liz, and a Republican. Therefore an excellent choice.”

“Speaking of appointments, Forbes, tell me about Sam Saunders. I’ve met with him several times and like him. But can I trust him?”

“Without question, Liz. I do.”

“Knox advised me the FBI New York Office believes Saunders is tied to a group of al Qaeda sympathizers in New York.”

“That office in New York sees terrorist conspiracies everywhere. Sam’s loyalty is to you, Liz. You have nothing to worry about.”

“I hope so, Forbes. I trust you to handle this kind of stuff.”

“I will, Liz. You worry about being President. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“The rest is what concerns me, Forbes.”

“You needn’t be, Liz. It’s in good hands.”

* * * * *

Woody and Willie walked out of the North Tower, “Let’s head across the plaza to the Marriott,” Woody said. “Yuri’s gonna pick us up out front.”

They had only walked a few yards when Roxanne walked past them. Woody stopped and turned around. She entered the North Tower.

“You know her?” Willie asked.

“She looks like someone I used to know,” Woody replied.

On the way back to Red Hook, Willie and Woody discussed their tour of the Towers. Gabby had given them an inside look at the elevator hoistways and the mechanical rooms. He also explained in detail his plan for the final weeks before E-Day: the maintenance and delivery trucks schedule, the security staff arrangements, and the demolition teams arming the charges.

“Gabby has everything under control, huh, Woody?”

“For sure,” Woody replied. “I never had a doubt he and his crew would get it done.”

Woody and Willie entered the back door of the hangar in Red Hook. “Thanks for the tour, Willie,” Woody said. “Do you happen to know if Lauren has an up-to-date tenant list for the Towers?”

“Gave her one yesterday.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you later.”

Woody stuck his head into Lauren’s office. “You busy, Lauren?”

“Hi, Woody. C’mon in. What’s up?”

“A couple of things. Did you know there’s a daycare center in Trade Center Five?”

“Yes.”

“And you didn’t f**kin’ tell me?” Woody asked.

“I didn’t think it was important.”

“It isn’t, Lauren, but I hope you didn’t withhold it because you thought I couldn’t handle it.”

“Before you brought down that Egypt Air flight, I might have. But now—no way.”

“Okay,” Woody said. “It’s imperative you and I trust each other implicitly, Lauren. Especially at this point in the mission.”

“I know, Woody, and I do. You said there were a couple of things?”

“Yes. I’d like to see your list of current tenants for the North Tower.”

“Sure.” Lauren opened the bottom drawer of her desk. She handed Woody a file folder. “Here you go.”

Woody ran his finger down each page. “Are you going to keep me in suspense,” Lauren asked, “or are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

Woody held up his hand. “Hang on a sec.” He continued to scan the pages. He stopped and tapped his finger. “S**t.”

“What?”

“Holmes, Kinney, and McLeod,” Woody replied. “Roxanne’s firm has moved into the North Tower.”

“You and Willie saw her today?”

“She walked across the Trade Center Plaza and entered the building.”

“Did she see you?”

“I’m sure she did,” Woody replied. “But she walked right past me and didn’t pay any attention.”

Lauren walked around the desk to see the file. “What floor are they on?”

“Hundred and first.”

“Above impact,” Lauren said. “Sorry, Woody.”

“Don’t be. Seeing her today confirmed something for me.”

“What?”

“My disguise works, Lauren.”

THIRTY-FIVE

Knock Knock

June 2001

Kirk stormed through the squad room to his office and slammed the door. Mark Pennington stopped Sal Kouri as he walked past. "So I take it the meeting with the CIA didn't go well," Mark said.

"What was your first clue?" Sal asked. "They wouldn't share anything with us. Kirk ended up yelling at them. Called them a bunch of a**holes, and we left."

Mark stood up from his desk. "I've got something that will cheer him up." Mark knocked on Dolan's office door.

"C'mon in," Kirk said.

Kirk was sitting at his desk with his back to Mark. He was twirling a letter opener in his fingers and staring out the window. "Welcome back to New York, Boss. Did you have fun in Washington?" Kirk turned his chair and raised his eyebrows. "Sal told me," Mark said. "I don't blame you for getting mad."

"Those f**kin' idiots," Kirk said. "They act like we're the enemy."

"Well, I've got some good news," Mark said. "Remember that warehouse I told you about last week. The one we thought might be the Hunter team headquarters?"

"In Red Hook, right?"

"Yeah," Mark replied. "We confirmed it yesterday."

"Holy s**t! How the hell did you do that?"

"Good old-fashioned police work," Mark replied. "One of Billy Rae's snitches is a cabbie. He was in Billy Rae's office and recognized Hunter from her photo on the wall. Said he picked her up at the mayor's office and dropped her on a street corner in Red Hook. I had our CID guys do some diggin' and showin' her picture around the area. And bingo! Guy in an office across the street from the warehouse identified Hunter from a photo. Says she goes in and out of there all the time. Also, the guy and his buddy are the property managers."

"Did he confirm Hunter rented it?" Kirk asked.

"Nah," Mark replied. "He said some guy came in and paid three years rent—upfront—in cash. And get this, the guy asked if it was okay if they upgraded all the locks, installed alarms, and bricked the windows for privacy."

“Guy who rented it musta signed a lease,” Kirk said. “Did the property manager give us a name?”

“Yeah,” Mark replied. “The guy signed the lease as ‘Dan Cooper’.”

Kirk tossed the photograph back to Mark. “Let’s get a f**kin’ search warrant!”

* * * * *

Woody, Lauren, and Sam were preparing for a meeting with the poker buddies. “We set?” Woody asked. “The meeting is scheduled to start in ten minutes.”

Lauren ran her finger down the page of the meeting agenda. “Yeah. We got it covered. You good, Sam?”

“One more thing I want to discuss before the meeting,” Sam said. “As you requested, Woody, my surveillance teams have been tailing Griff for a few months. We know where he lives, eats, and goes—every day.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Woody said.

“Information is power, y’all.”

“And what are you two going to do with this information?” Lauren asked.

“That has yet to be determined,” Woody said.

“Something sinister, I hope.”

Woody smiled. “Count on it, Lauren. Okay, let’s head to the conference room and get this meeting done.”

* * * * *

Kirk stopped on a side street in Red Hook and parked in front of numerous FBI and NYPD vehicles. Mark Pennington walked over to his car. “Hey, Boss,” he said. “Like I said on the phone, the search warrant was issued, and we’re good to go. Right now, we’re two blocks away from the warehouse. Everyone is maintaining radio silence. Our eye teams say there’s people inside. Lots have come and gone. They haven’t seen Hunter.”

“I hope the whole gang is in there with her,” Kirk said. “Who’s in charge of the NYPD guys?”

“Captain Harrison,” Mark replied. He pointed to a group of officers standing outside a vehicle parked down the street. “He says his SWAT guys are ready. They’ll use an armored personnel carrier to breach the front doors.”

“Good,” Kirk said. “Our guys in position?”

“Yeah,” Mark replied. “We got teams ‘round back covering the loading dock. Rooftop snipers are in position. An NYPD chopper will be overhead after we go

in.”

“What the f**k are we waiting for?” Kirk asked. “Let’s get SWAT into position and hit these b*****s!”

* * * * *

Woody tinkled his coffee cup with a spoon. “Let’s get this poker game underway, guys.” Woody waited until he had everyone’s attention. “Okay. First, the E-Day plan is finalized, and Buzz has it programmed into the computers. The handout in front of you is your individual itinerary for post-E-Day. Memorize and destroy it. Your transportation and hotel rooms for the first month have been booked. After that, you’re on your own. As you can see, we’ll scatter to the four winds. You all have your new identities. Study your background info until you’re sick of reading it. Then read it again.”

“Will we ever be together again, Woody?” Teach asked.

Woody winked at him. “That part of our relationship is over, Teach.”

Teach waited for the laughter to subside. “C’mon, Woody. You know what I mean.”

“Three years minimum,” Woody said. “You know the procedure.”

“Yeah,” Teach said. “I know the rules, but it’s not gonna be easy. I like some of these idiots.”

“Only some?” Smokey asked.

“Okay. Let’s go through this agenda,” Woody said. “Like I said off the top, there’s not much left to do. A bit of fine-tuning and we’ll be ready to give it the green light. Then the computer programming engages, and we adjust for any last-minute snafus.”

“Best to be prepared for those,” Magic said.

“Item one,” Woody said.

* * * * *

The NYPD SWAT team was inside the armored personnel carrier. Kirk stood by his car. He flipped open his phone and called Mark. “Ready, Mark?”

“Yeah,” Mark replied.

“Let’s do it!” Kirk folded his cell phone. He raised his arm and signaled Captain Harrison to go. The SWAT team armored vehicle gained speed as it barreled down the street. It crashed through the wire security fence in front of the warehouse, proceeded across the front parking lot, demolished the large front doors, and screeched to a stop inside. The NYPD SWAT team burst from the

vehicle with automatic assault rifles at the ready. FBI tactical team members followed through the broken doors into the warehouse.

Kirk drew his weapon and raced across the parking lot. His heart was pounding. *Look out you a**holes*, he thought. *The FBI is comin’*.

* * * * *

The meeting was finished, and the poker buddies headed out to their offices. “Want a tour of our new place, Sam?” Woody asked.

“Yeah, Sam,” Lauren said. “I want to show you the view of the World Trade Center from my office.”

“Sure,” Sam said. “It’s a lot better to have everyone here across the river in Jersey. I never thought the Red Hook location was safe.”

Lauren smiled. “Especially after Franco tipped us off the FBI was nosing around the area. Then Jamie Santoro confirmed it was Dolan’s guys.”

“Pays to have someone on the inside,” Woody said.

“Because of Jamie, we had time to move everything out and dismantle the scale model of the World Trade Center,” Lauren said.

“Also, enough time to give the place a complete scrub,” Woody said. “No trace of us left there.”

“The toy warehouse was a nice touch,” Sam said.

“Our property managers mentioned the owner of the toy company had been interested in the warehouse, but we beat him to it,” Lauren said. “They called him and he didn’t hesitate to take the place.”

“Didn’t he question why we wanted him to move into the building so quickly?” Sam asked.

“No,” Lauren replied. “He was happy, and why not? He’s sub-letting a warehouse in Red Hook with over a year of free rent. All he said was: ‘when do you want me there?’”

“I know one person who isn’t happy,” Woody said. “I’d pay money to have seen the look on Dolan’s face.”

* * * * *

Kirk and Sal were standing in the front parking lot outside the warehouse. Kirk’s cell phone buzzed. The caller ID indicated it was his boss, Ron Jenkins. “Hi, Ron. Thanks for getting back to me.” Kirk raised his eyebrows at Mark. “No, it was a f**kin’ false alarm. They weren’t there.” Kirk paused. “Boxes of kid’s

toys and guys with forklifts. I'll give you a full report when I get back to the office." Kirk hung up. "F**k," he said.

"My feelings exactly," Sal said. "We were so sure we had 'em."

"Somebody tipped them off," Kirk said. "Gave them enough time to move out, and the new tenant to move in. F**kin' unbelievable."

"Had to be NYPD," Sal said. "No one else knew besides us."

"Do some diggin', Sal," Kirk said. "Let's find out who the rat is."

"Okay, Boss."

"I'd like to know how the switch from the Hunter gang happened so quickly," Kirk said. Mark Pennington was walking over from the warehouse. "Whatcha got Mark?"

"I just talked to the manager of the toy warehouse, Kirk. He told me he got a year's free rent if he moved in within forty-eight hours. Of course, he complied."

"That explains it," Kirk replied. "Let's get Crime Scene to go through the place from top to bottom, Mark. Tell 'em to look for anything that links it to Travis or Hunter."

"Will do," Mark said. "The manager has shut down the place anyway while they repair the damage to the big doors. Man, SWAT musta scared the s**t out of everyone when that armored car crashed through. Manager figures some of his employees are still running."

"They probably thought it was an immigration raid," Sal said.

Kirk didn't react. He had already moved past his disappointment and was planning his next move. "Boys," he said. "We've got work to do. I'm not going to rest until I stop those b*****s."

"Which b*****s would that be?" Mark asked, "al Qaeda or the Hunter gang?"

Kirk fixed a steely-eyed gaze at Mark. "Both."

THIRTY-SIX

Chatter

August 2001

President Liz Hopkins was standing on the path in the White House's Kennedy Garden. "Madam President," Vice President Forbes Miller said as he approached her. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes," Liz replied. "Have you had a chance to read today's PDB*, Forbes?"
(*president's daily briefing)

"No, I haven't."

She handed him the document. "Catchy title, Liz. 'Bin Laden Determined to Strike in US'."

"I want your opinion, Forbes."

Forbes read the document. "Appears our intelligence community is concerned with bin Laden," he said.

"To say the least."

"They cite previous attacks in which bin Laden has claimed responsibility but offer no proof. Appears to be nothing more than the usual conjecture."

"Art Brown is convinced an attack is imminent," Liz said. "And the CIA has warned me their intel indicates UBL is planning to hijack airliners."

"Do they have conclusive proof?"

"No one has anything concrete."

"We should never act militarily on speculation," Forbes said. "We need actionable intelligence."

"What do you suggest is our best course?"

"Let the intelligence community do their job, Liz. The briefing note said the FBI is conducting some seventy-odd field investigations involving bin Laden. If there's an attack coming, they'll provide verification."

"I'm concerned with the amount of intel we're receiving," Liz said. "Everyone from the Germans to the Russians seems to think a major attack is going to happen."

Forbes thought for a moment. "Liz, there is no doubt bin Laden is a danger, but the threat is not compelling enough to warrant action."

"I hope you're right, Forbes. I'm comforted by the fact the FBI is investigating all those reports about UBL."

"I am as well."

“Do you believe we are headed for a war on terrorism, Forbes?”

“I believe we are.”

“Is it true wartime presidents are always more popular?”

“You will be, Liz.”

“Thank you.”

“Is there anything else, Liz?”

“No. You’re a big help to me, Forbes.”

“My pleasure, Madam President.”

* * * * *

Kirk and Alexis were lingering with coffee and liqueurs after dinner. “I have something to tell you, Allie.”

“You love me? I already know that.”

Kirk smiled. “I’ve decided to leave the Bureau.”

“Really? I know how much you love the FBI, Kirk. You said it was all you ever wanted to do.”

“There’s no future for me there, Allie. I’ve stepped on too many toes, and now I have no friends left at Hoover. To top it all off, the president has appointed a Justice Department guy as director. That’s when I started looking for something else.”

“Are you considering Art Brown’s offer?”

“There’s no way they’ll hire me at the White House,” Kirk replied.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive, Allie. Got a call from a reporter friend at the Times. Said there’s an article coming out about me losing my f**kin’ briefcase in Florida.”

“S**t,” Alexis said. “How’d they find out?”

“My guess is it was leaked by some backstabbing Hoover a**hole.”

“So now what?”

“All is not lost,” Kirk replied. “Been offered a job at the World Trade Center.”

Alexis smiled. “Financial planner?”

“Yeah, right,” Kirk replied. “Actually, it’s Chief of Security.”

“You gonna take it?”

“I will if the money’s right,” Kirk replied. “I’m meeting with them this week.”

“You gonna miss tracking down bad guys?”

“Of course,” Kirk said, “but this job is too good to pass up.”

“I bet you’ll miss the FBI, Kirk.”

“I will, Allie, but to be honest, I’m tired of no one listening or caring about our warnings of a terrorist attack. Plus, we don’t have the manpower or the resources to investigate all the s**t that’s going on. A good example is the Hunter gang. Pretty tough to thwart whatever it is they’re planning when we haven’t even got a f**kin’ clue where they are. Now, all that s**t will be someone else’s problem.”

“This is great for me,” Alexis said. “I’ll see more of you.”

“If I have time. They tell me there are thirteen million square feet of office space in the seven buildings, and you’re one of fifty thousand people who work there.”

“I think you can handle it.”

“I’m going to make the World Trade Center the safest place to work in New York,” Kirk said.

“So how is former Special Agent Dolan going to accomplish that?”

“I don’t want a repeat of ninety-three,” Kirk replied. “I’m gonna do a complete security review. Then, I’ll go over every inch of those buildings with a fine-toothed comb.”

* * * * *

Jeff Edwards was enjoying an after-breakfast coffee with Ed and Jackie on the Lido Deck of the *Crown Princess*. The weather had been kind to them on this crossing from Europe. Gentle seas and warm sunny days were not the norm on the North Atlantic in late summer. Sally walked across the deck past the pool. “Here she comes,” Jeff said. “And she looks happy.”

Sally marched up to the table. “We’re good!”

Jeff stood and pulled out a chair for her. “Well done, Sal! Would you like a coffee?”

“In a minute,” Sally replied. “First—I only have one copy of our new itinerary. I’ll ask the pursers’ office to make you guys a copy, Jackie.”

“Thanks, Sal.”

“Scoot in beside me, Jeff, while I read it to these guys,” Sally said.

“So are we good for the Yankees’ game in New York?” Ed asked.

“Yes,” Sally replied. “As you know, we dock in Boston on Saturday, September the eighth. But instead of flying out of Boston to LA, we’re flying to New York that afternoon. We’ll overnight in a hotel, and on Sunday afternoon we’ll catch the Red Sox at Yankee Stadium. We spend that night in New York. Then on Monday, September the tenth, we fly back to Boston and check into a hotel near the airport.”

“That’s super,” Ed said. “I’m so glad my old client came through with those tickets for us.”

“Me too,” Jeff said. “You know what a huge Yankee fan I am. And by the way, they’re going all the way—again this year.”

“Hate to break it to you, amigo,” Ed said. “But your Yankees will not win the Series this year.”

“Who’s going to beat them?”

“My Diamondbacks for one,” Ed replied. “We’ve got the pitching.”

Jackie tilted her head towards their husbands. “I feel a bet coming on, Sal.”

“Twenty says if the Yanks are in the Series,” Jeff said. “They’ll win it.”

“I’ll take that bet,” Ed said.

“Meanwhile back to our itinerary,” Jackie said. “When do we fly out of Boston, Sal?”

Sally flipped to the last page. “September the eleventh on American Airlines flight eleven.”

“What time?”

Sally checked the itinerary. “Seven forty-five a.m.”

“Perfect,” Jackie said. “We’ll be home in time for lunch.”

“Are we sitting close to these two, Sal?” Jeff asked.

“Yup. We’re right across the aisle,” Sally replied. “It wasn’t a problem. Our travel agent said there’s not many people on the flight.”

Jeff squeezed Sally’s knee. “Thanks for taking care of booking this, babe. You know how much I love American Airlines’ breakfast pretzels.”

Sally smiled and gave him a love tap on the arm. “Oh, you,” she said. “Now you can get me a coffee.”

* * * * *

Woody was on his phone when Lauren arrived at his office. He waved at her to come in. Lauren came in and took in the view from the office window. “Okay, Sam,” Woody said. “She’s here now. I’ll let her know.”

After Woody hung up, Lauren turned away from the window. “We have the same view, Woody. Lower Manhattan looks impressive from here, huh?”

“Kinda surprised you’re so close to the window, Lauren. Trying to overcome your acrophobia?”

“Working at it, Woody. They say facing your fear helps you conquer it.”

“I’m glad you’re going to be on this side of the river, Lauren. It’s going to be chaos over there.”

“Close enough to see but far enough away to be safe. What did Sam want?”

“Dolan took the bait. He’s leavin’ the FBI.”

“Where’s he headed?” Lauren asked.

“Mr. Dolan is gonna be the new Head of Security at the World Trade Center.”

“Sam was right. Leaking that briefcase story to the Times did it.”

Woody sighed. “I hope he doesn’t cause us any last-minute headaches at the Towers.”

“Everything will be locked and loaded long before Dolan gets there,” Lauren said. “I spoke to Gabby this morning. His guys are working in the buildings every night after the cleaning staff leaves. They’re almost finished planting the core charges in the targeted elevator hoistways. All that’s left after that is to arm them.”

“Those elevators will remain out of service until E-Day?”

“Yes. And never in service again.”

Woody took a deep breath. “Day-after thoughts still bother me, but I’m working it.”

“I know.” Lauren turned and gazed across the Hudson River towards Lower Manhattan. “Do you think we’ll get away with this?”

“I have no doubt.”

“How can you be so sure, Woody?”

“No one will believe monsters like us exist.”

THIRTY-SEVEN

Countdown

September 10, 2001 - 8:13 a.m.

The NSA listening post in Virginia was abnormally busy. Telephone traffic from the Middle East was heavy, and intercepts requiring translation were piling up. Intelligence Collector Amy Ward had worked for the Agency for several years and had recently transferred into the Asia Section. She had intercepted a call from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia and recorded the conversation of two men speaking in Arabic. Her supervisor Gwen Navarro walked up to her desk. Amy removed her headset. “You need something, Gwen?”

“Interesting one?” Gwen asked. “You had an intense look on your face.”

“Had a few weird ones today. Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia. Have a look at this.”

Gwen turned a scratch pad around to read it. “What’s this?”

“Something they said on many of the calls,” Amy said. “I highlighted it for the translators.”

“Always a good idea,” Gwen said. “Interesting. I wonder what ‘tabda almubarat ghadaan*’ means?” (*‘tomorrow is zero-day’ in Arabic)

“It’s Arabic, and there’s a bunch of different dialects. I don’t want to guess,” Amy said. “We need an accurate translation.”

Gwen turned the pad back to Amy. “As usual, Amy, we’ll have to wait for a few days until the Puzzle Palace* clears the official translation.” (*slang term for NSA Headquarters)

* * * * *

September 10, 2001 - 11:35 a.m.

Jim Larken was the tower controller handling arrivals. He had his binoculars trained on a Boeing 747 eight miles out on final approach for runway 33 right. The approach controller’s voice in his headset provided confirmation. “Jim,” the controller said. “Approach here. Air Force One is on final for three-three right. She’s all yours.”

Jim put down his binoculars and pushed his mic button. “Thanks, Dave. I have visual.” Jim had been on the lookout for Air Force One since the flight made its first contact with Houston Center. His workload was lighter than usual

today. According to government protocol, Houston airspace was under a Temporary Flight Restriction pending the president's arrival. No aircraft were permitted in the area without permission.

"Houston Tower this is Air Force One with you on one-two-seven-point-three."

Jim keyed his mic button. "Good morning, Air Force One, this is Houston Tower. You are number one on approach. Wind is currently zero-four-zero degrees at seven. You are cleared to land runway three three right "

"Cleared to land runway three three right. Air Force One."

* * * * *

The captain announced Air Force One was on final approach to George Bush Intercontinental. The president's Chief of Staff Cassie Lowe and several other staff members were ending a briefing session with President Hopkins. "So it's a tour of a refinery today," the president said. "A fundraiser tonight then a noon luncheon speech in Dallas tomorrow at the Petroleum Club."

"That's correct, ma'am," Cassie replied. "After the lunch in Dallas, a quick meeting with some big donors and back to DC late afternoon."

"Have you confirmed the vice president is in Washington tomorrow?" the president asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Cassie replied. "Do you want to meet with him?"

"I'll let you know," the president said. "Thank you, everyone."

* * * * *

September 10, 2001 - 1:35 p.m.

Woody dropped his suitcases in his office and headed to Lauren's office.

"Ready to go, Lauren? It's handover time."

"Sure am, Woody."

Lauren and Woody strolled along the Hudson Riverfront Walkway in Jersey City. "Here's a good spot," Woody said. They sat on a bench with a view of the Manhattan skyline. "Sure hot today, huh, Lauren?"

"Yeah. There's a good chance of a thunderstorm tonight from a cold front moving through."

"Have you got the latest weather for tomorrow?"

"They're forecasting perfect flying conditions," Lauren replied.

"Appears the weatherman's on our side."

Lauren pointed across the river. "Is that your ship, Woody?"

“Yup. The *Royal Princess*. She docked early this morning.”

“What time do you sail tonight?” Lauren asked.

“Seven o’clock.”

“Lucky ship. She’s getting out of New York the night before it happens.”

“I imagine the ports here will be closed for quite a while,” Woody said.

“You’re going to miss it all, Woody.”

“That’s okay. I know what’s gonna happen. Your escape is all set?”

Lauren smiled. “On E-Day, Joy Wellner is taking an evening train out of Newark to Florida. She’ll hunker down on a beach for a few weeks.”

“Don’t wait too long to get outta Dodge, Lauren.”

“I won’t.”

“Buzz ready to shut down all the offices here in Jersey City?”

“Yeah,” Lauren said. “They’ll start after the cruise missile hits out in the sticks. Buzz says his guys will have plenty of time to dispose of everything.”

“Did you end it with Tony?”

“Not yet. I’m breaking up with him on E-Day.”

Woody raised his eyebrows. “You won’t have time for personal s**t, Lauren.”

“Tony has a Primary Day breakfast for the big-money donors to the mayor’s campaign. It’s scheduled to begin at eight o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s at Windows on the World,” Lauren said.

Woody shook his head. “Boy, when you break up with someone, you don’t f**k around.”

“It’s not me. Fate controls everything, and I’m not going to interfere.”

Woody pulled a small notebook out of his pocket. He put on his reading glasses. “You know me and my lists.”

“Shoot,” Lauren said.

“Everyone is communication-capable on our secure channel?” Woody asked.

“Yeah. Buzz and his guys have us all hooked up on scrambled portable VHF radios. He’s also provided us with brand-new encrypted satellite phones.”

Lauren pointed to her desk by a window overlooking the Hudson River. “Over there is a combination air-band VHF and military UHF base radio. It has a fast-scan capability, so I can monitor multiple ATC and military frequencies at the same time. There is also a police and fire radio scanner for all the emergency response channels.”

“And a bunch of TV monitors on that wall over there.”

“Yup. For all the news channels.”

“Buzz all set to disrupt cell phone calls on E-Day?”

“Yeah. He says it will be easy to disguise because there will be lots of cell phone traffic during the chaos.”

“What about Buzz’s computer gurus? Are they embedded in Building Seven?” Woody asked. “And are they ready to download those computer files?”

“Yeah,” Lauren replied. “They’re camping out in some office space I rented. We’ll evacuate the building in the morning, and the boys say they can wrap it up by early afternoon. When they’re done—she’s comin’ down, y’all.”

“Those files might turn out to be our insurance policy,” Woody said. He ran his finger down his list. “Our extra security guys still in place in both Towers?”

“Yeah,” Lauren replied. “They’re making sure Gabby’s handiwork remains undetected. They’re done at the end of the graveyard shift tomorrow morning at eight a.m.”

“Bomb-sniffing dogs removed from the Towers?”

“Last week, Woody.”

Woody checked his list. “CIRG* booked out of town?” (*FBI Critical Incident Response Group)

“As we speak, they’re heading to sunny California for a training seminar.”

“Good. The last thing we need is a team of demolition experts snooping around the scene after the drones hit and before we bring the Towers down,” Woody said. “Okay. Clean-up ready to go after demolition?”

“Yes. Dump trucks and loaders will be in position today.”

Woody moved his finger down the list. “Is the disposal of Digger’s crew at Close By all set?”

“Yes,” Lauren replied. “Digger and his inner circle are the only ones getting out alive.”

Woody sighed. “That’s the way it’s gotta be. Okay. Any changes to the flights?”

“No,” Lauren replied. She handed a clipboard to Woody. “They’re finalized and locked down into the master program. The list is on page two.”

Woody studied the document. “Let’s see—out of Boston Logan we have American eleven and United one seventy-five. American seventy-seven from Dulles and our reserve flight, United ninety-three out of Newark. All Boeing seven-fifty and seven sixty-sevens. All scheduled for LAX?”

“Yeah,” Lauren said. “The flights will be diverted to Close By after interception by their replacement drones.”

“Good. You’ve assigned code names for the drones?”

“Yeah. ‘George’ which will replace American eleven and impact the North Tower, ‘Thomas’ for United one seventy-five impacting the South Tower, and ‘Teddy’ our modified B one bomber for American seventy-seven which will hit

that targeted wedge at the Pentagon with the modified BROACH bomb. United ninety-three's drone, 'Abe' will be our spare seven sixty-seven drone. Airborne north of the city until 'Thomas' impacts the South Tower, then our FTS pilots will fly her to Close By for burial."

"You named them after the presidents on Mount Rushmore, huh?" Woody asked.

"Yeah—visited my aunt in Rapid City when I was a kid. She took me out there. Never forgot how cool it was to actually see it."

"And the cruise missile to simulate the crash of United ninety-three out in the boonies?"

"'Earl' is all set to go for an air-launch."

"I hate to mention this, Lauren, but there's no President Earl on Mount Rushmore."

"Earl was my uncle from South Dakota."

Woody chuckled. "Okay. Are the lat and long for the intercept points of the sixty-seven drones all programmed in?"

"Yup," Lauren replied.

Woody checked his list. "The kids all ready to go?"

"All set," Lauren replied. "As you know, over the past few months, the kids took a bunch of surveillance flights as passengers on the same type of Boeing aircraft they believe they'll be hijacking tomorrow."

"And they made it out to Vegas, right?"

"Yeah," Lauren replied. "They wanted to go, and I thought why not? Also, Ace had them renting light aircraft over the past while. Told them he wanted to keep their flying skills sharp. For the past few weeks, the kids've been safely stashed in motels. They're moving into their final positions today."

"Close to their respective airports?" Woody asked.

"Yeah. We don't want them to miss their flights."

"Babysitters keeping a close eye on them?"

"On them like white on rice—twenty-four-seven," Lauren replied. "And they'll accompany the kids to their respective airports tomorrow morning."

"And they'll make sure they get on their flights?"

"Yeah. Then the babysitters leave on different flights leaving a while later. They needed boarding passes to escort the kids through security. They'll follow the kids to their departure gates and watch them board their flights. Then they'll confirm with me."

"The kids have made those last-minute easy-to-track purchases we wanted?"

"Yeah," Lauren replied, "including Mace, pepper spray, and the box cutters."

"Will they pass through airport security without a problem?"

“Yup. As you know it’s pretty slack, but we’ve made sure the kids will have no difficulty getting through.”

“Great.” Woody checked his list. “Oh, yeah, how will you dispose of the identities Griff provided to you, me, and Sam?”

“They will be listed as victims in the Towers,” Lauren replied. “Digger’s team will also plant their IDs in the rubble on E-Day.”

“Let’s hope some are found,” Woody said. “Now—”

“Sorry to interrupt, Woody, but while we’re on the subject, does Griff concern you? He’s such a fricking weasel. I’d feel better if—”

Woody peered up from his list. “You don’t have to worry about him, Lauren.”

“You guys are gonna hit him. That’s why Sam was tracking him.”

“Yes,” Woody said. “Like I said, don’t worry. Griff won’t interfere with your E-Day.”

“Nice to know, Woody.”

Woody moved his finger down the page. “So Woody Travis is already dead. How are Lauren Hunter, Sam Saunders, and Mick Taylor going to die?”

“Sam Saunders is on the passenger list for American seventy-seven out of Dulles tomorrow,” Lauren replied. “The White House believes he’s going on a much-needed vacation to LA. Lauren Hunter will be one of the Port Authority officers who died in the Towers. Mick is on the manifest for United one seventy-five out of Boston. So we will all be *killed* on E-Day.”

“Good. You told me about your escape, Lauren, but what about Sam’s new identity?”

“You mean that good ol’ boy, Cody Eaton? He’ll be on the red-eye tonight out of La Guardia to LAX connecting to Acapulco. After that, it’s anybody’s guess where he’s goin’.”

“You know what Sam’s like. He hates crowds.”

“Gonna miss him.” Lauren turned to Woody. “And I’m really gonna miss you, Woody.”

“We’ll see each other again, Lauren. Our meet is all set. In three years, we’ll be sitting together in that beach bar sippin’ cocktails.”

“Promise me you’ll be there.”

“I promise,” Woody said. “If I’m alive, I’ll be there.”

“Okay, Woody, I’m holdin’ you to that.”

Woody peered out across the Hudson River. “Every time I look at the Towers, I can’t help thinkin’ about all the devastation we’re going to cause over there. All the lives we’re going to end. And all the others we’re going to change

forever. I know I can't, but sometimes I wish I could warn them. Call them and tell them to stay home tomorrow."

"A total surprise means we did our job," Lauren said.

Woody turned to face her. "We did." Woody patted Lauren's hand. "That's it, my friend. She's all yours now. Good luck tomorrow."

"I hope Murphy and his law take the day off," Lauren said.

"He will, Lauren. We've checked and re-checked this operation and prepared for every contingency. I have no doubt you and your team will pull it off. I wish I could see you guys in action tomorrow."

"You can," Lauren said. "Watch the news."

* * * * *

September 10, 2001 - 7:46 p.m.

Woody finished his bourbon at the bar in the Royal Lounge on the top deck of the M.S. *Royal Princess*. The famed New York skyline, illuminated by countless lights, slipped silently past the windows. The Financial District was ahead off the port bow. Woody walked out to the deck and joined his fellow passengers enjoying the sail away out of New York harbor. He found a spot along the portside rail. "Cruised out of New York before?" a man standing beside him asked.

"No."

"Impressive sight, huh?"

"Sure is," Woody replied.

"New York at night is one of the prettiest sail-a-ways in the world."

A man with a camera was taking pictures of people with the New York skyline in the background. Finally, he made his way to Woody. "Ship's photog," he said with a strong British accent. "Like a keepsake of your sail-a-way, sir?"

"You bet," Woody replied. "Could you take one with the World Trade Center in the background?"

"Sure can," the photographer said. "You been there, sir?"

"Yes."

The photographer raised his camera. "This picture will be a great memory for you," he said. "Could you move a bit to your left, sir?"

Woody took a sideways step. "How's this?"

"That's perfect," the photographer replied. He clicked the shutter. "Great shot, sir. Copies will be available for purchase in the photo area outside the casino on Deck Five."

"Thanks," Woody said.

The photographer moved down the line of passengers. Woody turned to face the World Trade Center. The offices on many of the floors of the Twin Towers were aglow with lights. Some floors were lit up entirely like fancy illuminated belts wrapped around the building. Others had black gaps between the lights. The result was a patchwork quilt of twinkling gold. The lights on the antenna mast on top of the North Tower stabbed the sky like a rapier ready to defend. A cold shiver went down Woody's spine, and he turned away.

Woody moved to the starboard side of the ship. The Statue of Liberty was majestically holding her lit torch out towards the Verrazano Bridge to welcome ships into the harbor. Woody turned back to face lower Manhattan. *Holy s**t*, he thought. *She's looking the wrong way.* Woody shook his head. *Who woulda thought? Me and Lady Liberty havin' something in common. We're both gonna miss watchin' it happen.*

THIRTY-EIGHT

9/11

September 11, 2001 - 6:42 a.m.

Jeff and Sally cleared the security check at Boston Logan Airport. "Could you watch for Ed and Jackie, Sal? I'll find a board and make sure our gate hasn't changed."

"Sure, sweetie," Sally replied. Passengers were exiting the security area. *There they are*, she thought. Sally waved, and Ed and Jackie walked over. "Any trouble at security?" Sally asked.

"Nah," Ed replied. "Easy as pie. Where's Jeff?"

"He's looking for a departures board," Sally replied. "Let's head towards our gate. We'll find him."

They entered the concourse and Jeff was walking towards them. "American eleven is still leaving from Gate B thirty-two at seven forty-five," Jeff said.

"We've got time for a coffee."

"An extra-large one," Ed said.

The four friends walked along the B concourse and found a coffee shop. Sally and Jackie sat at a metal café bistro table outside, while Jeff and Ed went inside to purchase the coffee. "Fun to watch people at the airport isn't it, Sal?" Jackie asked.

"Yeah. I like to make up stories about what they do for a living or where they're flying today and why."

"That sounds like fun."

"It is. Give it a try."

"Okay." Jackie surveyed the people passing by. "See that couple sitting over there at that restaurant across the way? She's wearing a Harvard sweatshirt."

"Yeah," Sally said. "They look like they're discussing something serious."

"Looks to me like he's afraid of flying and she's trying to reassure him. Now, she's telling him not to be such a big baby about it."

Sally chuckled. "That's so funny. You catch on fast."

"Thanks, Sal. You know Ed and I don't understand why anyone would be afraid of flying these days."

"Me neither," Sally said. "Jeff says the ride to the airport is the most dangerous part of flying."

"Especially if you're driving with Ed," Jackie said. They both laughed.

“I’m so glad you and Ed joined us on this vacation, Jackie. We had such a wonderful time, didn’t we?”

“Loved every minute of it, Sal. More than enough memories to last a lifetime.”

After they finished their coffee, the two couples walked to their gate. As they approached Gate 32, a passenger agent was announcing row numbers for American Airlines flight 11. “Our flight’s boarding,” Jeff said.

Jeff and Sally got into the line of passengers waiting to board. Two men who appeared to be Middle Eastern hurried past them to the priority lane for first and business class passengers. Jeff nudged Sally. “Must be nice, huh?”

She smiled. “If you can afford it.”

They inched their way closer to the entrance to the jetway. Jeff handed their boarding passes to the passenger agent. “She’s with me,” he said.

The agent smiled and handed the boarding passes back to Jeff. “Have a nice flight.”

“Thanks, we will,” Jeff said. “We’re goin’ home.”

* * * * *

September 11, 2001 - 8:09 a.m.

Lauren was in her Op Center in Jersey City. Last night all the poker buddies had advised they were ready to go. This morning, she was poised to give the go-ahead to commence the operation. Lauren had switched on the television monitors and tuned them to the three major US networks plus CNN, Fox News, and the BBC. Lauren also turned on all the VHF and UHF radio receivers and scanners. She tuned in the ATC frequency for Boston Center to listen for American Airlines 11 out of Boston Logan to make radio contact with the radar controllers. It was the first targeted flight, and she had received confirmation from the handlers that the flight was airborne with the kids on board.

Lauren hit the mic button on her E-Day channel radio. “Buzz, this is Belle. How do you copy?”

“You’re five-by-five*, Belle.” (*good signal strength and clarity)

“Standby, Buzz.” After a few moments of regular air traffic calls, a radio call came in from American Airlines flight 11.

“Boston Center, good morning,” the American Airlines pilot said. “American eleven with you passing through one-niner-zero for two-three-zero.”

“American eleven, Boston Center,” the controller said. “Roger, climb, maintain level two-eight-zero.”

“Maintain two-eight-zero, American eleven,” the pilot said.

“American eleven,” the Boston controller said, “turn twenty degrees right.”

“Turning right, American eleven.”

That’s it, Lauren thought. Our FTS pilots should take over any second.

“American eleven,” the Boston controller said, “climb, maintain flight level three-five-zero.”

Should be no answer from the flight. There wasn’t. Lauren pushed her radio mic button once again. “Let’s get out the vote, Buzz.”

“Okay, Belle. We’re gonna win this one.”

“American eleven,” the Boston controller said. “Climb, maintain flight level three-five-zero.”

Again, there was no answer from American Airlines flight 11. The controller’s voice became more forceful. “American—eleven—Boston,” he said. Still no response. The controller made several more unsuccessful attempts to establish radio contact with the flight.

Lauren’s E-Day radio crackled. “Belle, this is Ace.”

Lauren pushed the mic button. “Go ahead.”

“George* is coming to see you and Thomas** will be on his way soon,” Ace said. (*American Airlines flight 11 replacement drone **United Airlines flight 175 replacement drone)

“What time did George say he’d be in New York?”

“Around eight forty-five,” Ace replied.

“Roger,” Lauren said. “Let me know when Thomas is headed this way. I could use him at a couple of polling places, too.”

“Will do.”

“Is the phone bank operational?” Lauren asked.

“Yup. Hummin’ right along. We’ll get those voters to the polls for ya.”

“Thanks,” Lauren said.

The wall clock above the television monitors read 8:26. Lauren gazed across the river at the World Trade Center complex. The cloudless sky was a beautiful azure. The Twin Towers appeared taller and more majestic—bathed in such brilliant sunshine.

Lauren gazed at the top of the North Tower. *I hope you’re enjoying your last breakfast, Mr. Manetti.*

* * * * *

September 11, 2001 - 8:27 a.m.

Kirk exited the elevator on the thirty-fourth floor of the North Tower and headed for his office in Levinson Property Management. His boss, Bert Levinson

was the new leaseholder of the World Trade Center complex. Kirk had known Bert for many years, and they had become friends.

“Good morning, Mr. Dolan,” the receptionist said.

“Mornin’, Tracy. Anything for me?”

Tracy handed Kirk a pink telephone message. “Alexis Britt from Marsh and McLennan called.”

Kirk speed-dialed Alexis on his office phone. She answered on the first ring. “Hi babe,” he said. “You called?”

“Hi, handsome. I thought it’s such a beautiful day out there, we should head to a patio for lunch.”

“Sounds good. I got a ton of paper to plow through this morning, so is one o’clock good?”

“Perfect,” Alexis said. “I’ll come down and get you.”

“How’s the weather way up there on ninety-six?” Kirk asked. “Bet you can see all the way to Jersey City.”

Alexis giggled. “At least. Gotta go, love. See you at one o’clock.”

Kirk hung up. *I’m a lucky guy*, he thought. *Super cool lady. Great new job. What could be better than this?*

* * * * *

September 11, 2001 - 8:35 a.m.

Woody spent a restless night aboard the MS *Royal Princess*. At 6:30 a.m., he got out of bed, showered, and headed out to explore the ship. He stopped in the Lido Restaurant for a buffet breakfast and then took a stroll around the decks. He discovered the gym, the spa, and the main showroom before heading forward on the Promenade Deck. He leaned against the mahogany rail watching the ship’s bow slice through the Atlantic. Woody checked his watch and went back inside. He walked up to a bar equipped with an impressive espresso coffee machine. He sat down and ordered a cappuccino. CNN was barely audible on the television set mounted on the wall behind the bar. The time on the television read 8:46 a.m.

The bartender was steaming the milk for Woody’s coffee. “Cruised with *Princess* before, sir?” he asked in a British accent.

“No,” Woody replied.

“Everything good so far?”

“Yeah,” Woody replied. “I like this ship.”

“The *Royal Princess* is a special ship, sir,” the bartender said.

“Please call me, Tom,” Woody said.

“Okay, Tom,” the bartender said. “I’m Nigel. This bar is where you’ll find me most days.”

“Nice to meet you, Nigel,” Woody said. “What did you mean when you said this ship was special?”

“Did you see the picture of Princess Diana, Tom?”

“I walked past it last night.”

Nigel placed Woody’s cappuccino on the bar. “She christened this ship. Everyone who has served on board thinks she gave it something magical.”

Woody tore open a sugar pack and dumped it into his cappuccino. “How come?”

“This is my eighth contract on this ship,” Nigel said. “She has never had any major problems. No engine failures, fires, collisions—nothing. I don’t think she’s even had a generator problem for goodness’ sake. The *Royal Princess* has lived a charmed life.”

“When did Diana christen this ship?”

“Nineteen eighty-four,” Nigel replied.

“Sad to think she died only a short time later,” Woody said.

“Sad indeed. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“Funny you should say that,” Woody said. “A friend of mine said that same thing about anyone who dies in an accident or—” Woody paused. His eyes were drawn to the television. CNN had interrupted their broadcast with a picture of smoke billowing from the World Trade Center. Under the banner “BREAKING NEWS” the subtitle read: “WORLD TRADE CENTER DISASTER”.

The expression on Woody’s face tipped off the bartender. He turned to look at the television. “Bloody ‘ell,” Nigel said. “Me and my mates were there yesterday. Went up to the observation deck to check out the view.”

“Could you turn it up, please?” Woody asked. Nigel picked up the remote and turned up the volume.

“... a very disturbing live shot there,” a female reporter was saying in a voice-over. “That is the World Trade Center, and we have unconfirmed reports this morning that a plane has crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center. CNN is right now just beginning to work on this story, obviously calling our sources and trying to figure exactly what happened, but clearly, something relatively devastating happening this morning on the south end of the island of Manhattan. That is once again, a picture of...”

The bartender turned to Woody. “We were bloody lucky to sail out of there last night.”

Woody nodded. Smoke continued to pour from the North Tower and float across Manhattan. *This is only the beginning*, he thought. Woody was nauseous,

his heart was pounding in his chest, and his breathing was labored.

“I wonder how many were killed?” Nigel asked.

Woody didn’t answer. His eyes were transfixed on the television. *I’m responsible for those images on the news, he thought. I designed this f**kin’ operation to execute thousands of innocent people—whose only crime was to show up for work or get on an airplane.*

Woody turned away and closed his eyes.

Three years later

THIRTY-NINE

Rendezvous

September 2004

Lauren strolled down the path from her hotel room to the thatch-roofed seaside restaurant—her favorite spot at the Hotel Atlantis. This quaint boutique hotel on Playa Bonita Beach oozed Old World charm and featured some of the best French cuisine on the North Shore of the Dominican Republic.

The restaurant was empty, and one of Lauren's favorite waiters greeted her at the door. "Your usual table, Miss Wellner?"

"I see it's available, Andre," Lauren replied.

Andre grinned. He escorted her to a table overlooking the ocean. "And your usual glass of Chenin Blanc, madam?"

"Yes, thank you." A cool sea breeze brushed across Lauren's face, and gentle turquoise waves lapped against the pearl-white sand. *Wonder where Sam and Woody are? The meet is today.*

Andre placed Lauren's glass of wine on the table. "Will you be ordering lunch, Ms. Wellner?"

"I'm not sure," Lauren replied. "There will be two more joining me, so we'll let you know."

She could hardly wait to see Sam and Woody. After E-Day and her train ride from Newark, Lauren stayed in Florida for a few weeks before flying to the Seychelles where she had rented a private seaside villa for a month. Afterward, she flew to the Caribbean and spent a glorious winter island hopping before heading off to explore the world for the next couple of years. Her travels took her on a canoe trip in Patagonia, followed by a safari in Kenya, Loy Krathong in Thailand, and a torrid love affair in the Greek Islands. Joy Wellner was having a lot more fun than Lauren Hunter ever did.

Sam walked up to her table. "Is that y'all, Joy?"

Lauren whirled around in her chair. "Why sure 'nuff is, honey," she said in her southern belle accent. She stood and gave Sam a huge hug. "So good to see you, Cody."

"Good to see y'all, too," Sam said. "A brunette with brown eyes? Great look for you."

"I like your beard, Cody."

"Has Tom shown up yet?"

“No,” Lauren said. “I’ll catch Andre’s eye and order you a drink.”

“Don’t bother. Ordered a bourbon on the way in. How y’all bin, Joy?”

Andre stopped at the table with Sam’s drink. “Good,” Lauren replied.

“Enjoyin’ life. I presume you are as well.”

“Yup. You know me. Keepin’ a low profile.” Sam raised his glass. “Here’s to y’all, Joy. Your E-Day went slicker than a handshake on an oil rig.”

Lauren smiled. “I’ll have to take your word for it, Cody, but I agree. No major glitches and everyone on our team is safe.”

“Gotta ask, Joy. Why did Building Seven come down so late on E-Day?”

“Download of the computer files took longer than we thought,” Lauren replied.

“The disposal at Close By went okay?”

“Quick and easy like Digger said it would.”

“Digger knows his s**t, Joy.”

“Know what the best part is, Cody? No one has a clue it was us.”

“That’s for gol dang sure. Did y’all read the nine-eleven report?”

Lauren nodded. “Yeah. Interesting to see how much bulls**t they put in there.”

“Not their fault,” Sam said. “They were just reporting the bulls**t Magic’s team fed everyone.”

“I still can’t believe they didn’t mention Building Seven coming down that afternoon.”

“I don’t understand that, y’all. Hell, I’ve seen lotsa videos showin’ it.”

“The weird part is no one seems to care,” Lauren said. “They bought our story like Woody said they would.”

“They did. But the victim’s friends and family care about what happened. And a lot of ‘em don’t believe the government version.”

“And there’s lotsa other folks who don’t buy it either, Cody. Professional people like architects, engineers, and scientists. And their movement seems to be growing.”

“That don’t matter. Them folks have been labeled as conspiracy theorists by the media. No one’s listenin’ to ‘em.”

“I’m surprised the US hasn’t tracked down UBL,” Lauren said.

“I’m not, Joy. They’re desert folks in the Middle East. Their ancient customs oblige them to shelter and protect anyone who comes to their door. No one’s gonna turn him in.”

“What if they find bin Laden, Cody? And they interrogate him? Wouldn’t be good if he talks.”

“Won’t happen. If our government gits lucky and locates him, they’ll send in a SOF* team of Green Berets or SEALs. Word is they’ll have orders to kill him and dispose of the body.” (*special operations force)

Lauren looked down the path to the hotel. “Look, Cody. Here comes Mick.”

Sam turned around in his chair. “I don’t like this.”

Mick was carrying a courier bag. He spotted them and walked to their table. “Hi, you two.”

“Is Tom with you, Mick?” Lauren asked.

“No need to use Woodrow’s new identity, Joy,” Mick said. “He’s passed away.” Lauren covered her mouth with her hand.

“When?” Sam asked.

“A few weeks ago on September the tenth.”

“What did he die of?” Lauren asked.

“No easy way to say this,” Mick replied. “L-pill*.” (*cyanide pill used by operatives to commit suicide)

Lauren shook her head. “F**k. How’d you find out, Mick?”

“Courier delivered a package to me from Woodrow’s lawyers. Inside, there were letters for all three of us.” Mick pulled two manila envelopes from his courier bag. “These are for you guys.” Lauren and Sam took their envelopes and opened them. “In my letter,” Mick continued, “Woodrow said he put in his will that he wanted the remaining portion of his share divided between the three of us and his kids. I’ve already been in touch with his estate lawyers and made the arrangements.”

Sam and Lauren read in silence. Mick ordered a drink from the waiter.

Lauren placed her letter on the table. Her eyes glistened. She took a tissue from her pocket and dabbed her eyes. “Poor Woody,” she said. “The demons he was wrestling finally won.”

Sam finished reading his letter and stared at his drink. “That son-of-a-b***h,” he grumbled.

Lauren turned to him. “What did you say, Cody?”

“I’m pissed,” Sam replied. “Woody was selfish to do this. He didn’t give a rat’s a** about the people who cared about him.”

“Cody, you big jerk,” Lauren said. “Don’t you get it? It’s not about us. It’s about Woody—his battle between his morals and his dedication to duty. He believed killing innocent people was a sin against God.”

“But why kill himself? I woulda helped him. Hell, we all woulda. If we had any idea he was—”

“Wouldn’t have helped, Cody,” Lauren said. “Some folks are bound and determined no matter what we do or say.”

“She’s right, Cody,” Mick said. “Woodrow broke protocol when he reached out to me. He said each nine-eleven anniversary brought back the hell he created. Guess he couldn’t face another one because he took his life the night before the third anniversary.”

“Not surprised he turned to you, Mick,” Lauren said. “You were his mentor and one of his best friends.”

Sam sighed. “I’m sorry, y’all. Woody was one of my best friends, too. Also, suicide hits too close to home for me. My father—” Sam paused.

“I know, Cody,” Lauren said. “Woody told me.”

Sam turned to Lauren. “Did Woody also tell y’all I came home from school and found my dad?”

“Yeah,” Lauren replied. “Listen, Sam, I can’t imagine how awful that was for you. Nobody could. But I understand Woody coming to his decision. I think he was haunted day and night by his guilt. He had to find peace.”

“Joy’s right, Cody,” Mick said. “Woodrow had strong morals that he had to suppress in order to complete the mission.”

“Did he talk about suicide, Mick?” Sam asked.

“No,” Mick replied. “Never mentioned it. I never thought Woodrow was capable of suicide because of his religious beliefs.”

“It’s funny,” Lauren said. “Woody’s dilemma came to a head the night we tested the FTS on that Egypt Air flight. He hesitated to give the order. On the flight home, Woody told me his sense of duty and ego overcame his fear. He was bound and determined to complete the mission. He assured me he could live with it and—” Lauren’s voice cracked.

“The last time we talked,” Mick said, “Woodrow told me the operation forced him to bury his emotions. You know that doesn’t work forever.”

“Suppose he couldn’t go and get help anywhere,” Sam said.

“We talked about it,” Mick said, “but Woodrow refused. Said he would never risk breaching secrecy. Said he would deal with it in his own way.”

“Looks like he did, y’all,” Sam said. He held up a photograph to Lauren. “Did you get one of these with your stuff, Lauren?”

Lauren checked her envelope and pulled out a duplicate photograph. “Man oh, man! This must have been taken on Woody’s ship the night before E-Day when he sailed out of New York. The World Trade Center’s in the background.”

“You’ll notice he signed the back,” Mick said.

Lauren turned the photo over. She read the inscription:

To: “The Awesome Threesome”

Love you guys,

Deadeye 9/10/2001

Lauren clutched the photo to her chest and closed her eyes. She took a deep breath and exhaled.

“You gonna be okay there, Joy?” Sam asked.

Lauren opened her eyes. “Yeah—I’m fine, Cody.”

“Looks like Woody has made me part of ‘The Awesome Threesome’,” Mick said. “Not sure if I want to be. There are some awful rumors about you guys.”

“You’re a welcome addition, Mick,” Lauren said.

“I agree, y’all,” Sam said. “So, where’s Woody buried, Mick?”

“Glad you asked, Sam.” Mick reached into his courier bag and removed what appeared to be a small cardboard pillow secured with a string.

“Woody?” Sam asked.

“Sure is,” Mick replied. “It’s a biodegradable urn. In the note Woody gave me, he apologized for his suicide and said he wanted to be with his Cathleen. He said they vacationed here in the DR several times, and this little hotel was their favorite place.”

“That’s why Woody picked this for the meet,” Lauren said.

“Exactly,” Mick said. “Woodrow wrote he wanted me to meet you guys here and have the three of us send his ashes out to sea.”

“Did he say where?” Lauren asked.

“Yes,” Mick replied. “He was quite specific. It’s the same place where he put Cathleen’s ashes into the ocean. It’s a point of land near here—a place called Punta Bonita.”

“That’s down the beach,” Lauren said. “It’s a beautiful spot.”

“Let’s go, y’all,” Sam said.

“Before we do, I’ll order a bucket of Bohemias to take with us,” Lauren said.

* * * * *

They walked along the beachfront path leading to Punta Bonita. “This is off-season, so there aren’t many guests at the hotel,” Lauren said. “Most days, there’s no one out here.”

Lauren was right. The beach at the point was deserted. She found a spot to sit under the palm trees. Sam opened a beer for each of them.

“Do you know if they found Tony Manetti, Mick?” Lauren asked. “He was in Windows on The World in the North Tower when the first drone hit.”

“No, they haven’t,” Mick said. “Woody told me you two had a falling out.”

Lauren smiled. “Long story, but yes—we certainly did.”

“I take it you found out he was an FBI asset for Dolan.”

“Yes,” Lauren said.

“But did you know Tony was actually working for The Ring?” Mick asked. Lauren raised her eyebrows. “I had no idea.”

“It’s true,” Mick said. “Apparently, they had leverage. Tony lost a bundle betting on sports and owed a chunk of change. Griff paid off his bookies, and in exchange, Tony was told to keep tabs on the mayor and Dolan for them. Tony didn’t know why.”

“I know why. They didn’t trust him,” Lauren said. “No wonder they didn’t want the b*****d to know anything about our op.”

“I also learned,” Mick said, “The Ring arranged that campaign breakfast in the North Tower to dispose of Tony and a bunch of other folks.”

“So they tipped off the mayor?” Lauren asked.

“Of course,” Mick replied. “The pompous a** scheduled himself to be at the Windows on The World breakfast at nine thirty a.m. When the first drone hit the North Tower at eight forty-five, he was uptown about forty blocks away having breakfast with his buddies.”

“A wise move for an idiot like him,” Lauren said. “Oh, and do you know what happened to Griff?”

“I have no idea,” Mick said.

Sam smiled. “I do, y’all.”

“Woody said you guys were gonna hit him,” Lauren said. “No details. He just told me not to worry about Griff.”

“With E-Day comin’ up, Woody figured y’all had enough on your mind,” Sam said.

“He’s right. I did. So what did you guys do to him, Sam?”

“As we speak, that good ol’ boy Griff is resting, like real comfortable, in Central Park.”

“Don’t tell me you guys buried him there,” Lauren said.

“The night before E-Day,” Sam said. “My boys buried him under the picnic table at the dead drop. Woody thought Griff would like it there.”

Lauren’s face broadened into a grin. “Know what your boys actually accomplished?”

“What?” Sam asked.

“You turned a dead drop into an actual dead drop.”

Sam laughed. “Here’s the best part, y’all. My boys shot Griff with Dolan’s gun.”

Lauren raised her eyebrows. “I knew Woody’s Sig-Sauer was FBI issue, but it was Dolan’s? Really?”

“Sure ‘nuff was,” Sam said. “Griff and his goons took Dolan’s gun when they grabbed him in the parking garage. They filed down the serial number, and

Griff gave the weapon to Woody. Our security guys raised the numbers and tracked it down. Woody thought it would be a nice touch for my guys to use it on Griff."

"Especially if someone digs him up," Mick said.

"Woody was hoping someone would," Sam said. "That's why we didn't cremate Griff and ditched Dolan's gun in a dumpster."

"Guess Griff isn't having as much fun bein' dead as we are," Lauren said.

"I'll drink to that," Sam said.

"You two hear what happened to Dolan?" Mick asked.

"Yeah," Lauren replied. "They found his body in the rubble of the South Tower. Someone said he went in there to help about twenty minutes before we brought it down."

"They never found his girlfriend," Mick said.

"The one from Marsh & McLennan?" Sam asked.

"Yeah."

"I know Dolan was trying to nail us," Lauren said, "but I respected him. He was damn good at what he did."

"He had great cop instincts," Mick said. "He suspected right from the beginning we were planning something. He just never found out what it was."

"Hound Dog lived up to his nickname, y'all," Sam said. "He just wouldn't give up." Sam lifted his beer bottle. "Here's to Dolan. He died like a true cowboy."

"How's that, Sam?" Mick asked.

"With his boots on, y'all."

Mick took the cardboard urn from his courier bag. "Let's do this. It's kinda like a funeral, so we should give Woody a proper send-off. You want to go first, Cody?"

"Sure. So long, Woody. We had some damn good times together, pardner."

Lauren's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. She lifted her head and peered into the sky. "I hope I see you again one day, Woody. Until that happens, you will always be in my heart."

"Well, Woodrow," Mick said. "Guess you're headed to that big CIA Station in the sky after all. When you get there, say hi to Cathleen for me. I loved you like a brother. Take care until we meet again." Mick sent the urn flying up into the air, and it landed far out from shore.

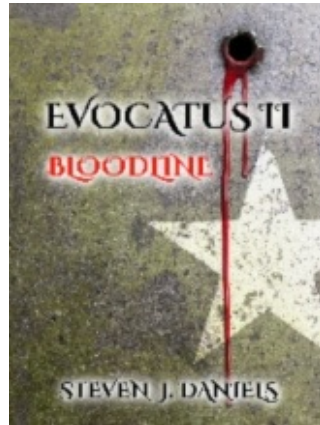
The cardboard container bobbed for a few moments before finally disappearing beneath the waves. Lauren wiped the tears from her cheeks with her fingers. "Woody's at peace," she said, "He's finally home."

"He is," Sam said. "Woody loved the ocean."

“He did,” Lauren said. “But it’s better than that, Sam. Woody’s swimming with the dolphins.”

THE END

The story continues in...



CHARACTERS

Woody Travis Deceased 3/15/00 Manhattan, NYC
Lauren Hunter PAPD Deceased 9/11/01 North Tower
Samuel Saunders Deceased 9/11/01 American Airlines 77
Kirk Dolan Deceased 9/11/01 South Tower
Michael Taylor Deceased 9/11/01 United Airlines 175
Griff Deceased 9/09/01 NYC
Thomas Lindsay Deceased 9/10/04 Suicide
Joy Wellner Unknown
Cody Eaton Unknown
Antonio Manetti Deceased 9/11/01 North Tower
Roxanne Holmes Deceased 9/11/01 North Tower
Alexis Britt Deceased 9/11/01 North Tower
Robert Britt FDNY Deceased 9/11/01 South Tower
Jeffery Edwards Deceased 9/11/01 Camp Close By
Sally Edwards Deceased 9/11/01 Camp Close By
Edward Baker Deceased 9/11/01 Camp Close By
Jacqueline Baker Deceased 9/11/01 Camp Close By
The Poker Buddies Unknown

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is a fictional tale, but the story and its characters are inspired by historical events including 9/11. I would be remiss if I did not thank the diligent researchers who identified inconsistencies and have attempted to determine what really happened that day.

Many professionals have dedicated an enormous amount of time and effort to unravel the mystery and discover the truth: architects, engineers, lawyers, scientists, university professors, commercial pilots, and many others. I thank all of you for your dedication and steadfast resolve. Making your research available to the public helped me immensely.

I also thank the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States for their 9/11 Commission Report. Your report contained a great deal of useful historical material and was a great resource.

As well, I offer a heartfelt thank you to the ‘tin foil hat’ crowd. You know who you are. You’ve been labeled as crazy conspiracy types. Well, this author thanks you for not listening to the dissenters and carrying on with your extensive research into 9/11. You are a true example of the indomitable human spirit, and I sincerely hope you continue your crusade.

Last and certainly not least, I wish to extend my sincere condolences to the families and friends who lost loved ones on 9/11, and in the global war on terrorism that followed. I wrote this book with you in mind. I pray I did not offend you in any way, nor sully the memory of your loved ones. That was not my intention. My purpose in writing this novel was to offer a fictional account of what might have happened on that horrific day, and hopefully add voices to the chorus of those seeking the truth.

I hope, dear reader, *Evocatus Inception* will open your mind to the possibility of a different narrative of the events of 9/11. Furthermore, if you are curious enough to join the investigation, you may discover your own truth.

s.j.d.

FOOTNOTES

Ace operation's manager of the air component
Agency nickname for the CIA
agent person unofficially employed by intelligence services
Alec Station CIA bin Laden Issue Unit
angel code name for Air Force One
APU aircraft auxiliary power unit
Atta Mohamed Atta – chief hijack pilot
babysitters Field Officers acting as agent handlers
bang and burn operation involving demolition and sabotage
birds military drones
brothers Building Seven - World Trade Center
Belle Lauren's code name
black-boxed no need-to-know
blowback repercussions from a failed covert operation
Buzz operation's manager of technology
Camp Close By operation's secret air base
Camp Faraway operation's explosives testing site
campsite code name for FBI's New York office
case officer CIA officer who manages agents and operations
castle code name for the White House
CDE collateral damage estimation
CID FBI Criminal Investigative Division
CIRG FBI Critical Incident Response Group
cobblers experts in forging documents
Company slang term for the CIA
critical high security classification
CVR cockpit voice recorder
dead drop secret location for information exchanges
Deadeye Woody's code name
DIA Defense Intelligence Agency
Digger operation's manager of retrieval and disposal
DITU FBI Data Intercept Technology Unit
DOD Department of Defense
E-Day day the operation begins
echo one of several predetermined meet locations
five-by-five good signal strength and clarity
EOD explosive ordinance disposal
FDR flight data recorder
Franco operation's manager of security
FTS flight termination system - anti-hijack program
Joseph Goebbels Reich Minister of Propaganda - Nazi Germany
George American Airlines flight 11 replacement drone
GRU Russian Military Intelligence Service
haji military slang for enemy combatant in the Middle East
honey trap using an asset or a CIA officer in a sexual situation
Honcho Mick's code name
Hoover slang term for FBI Headquarters in Washington, DC
hostage exchange program slang term for FBI agents assigned to Alec Station

I-49 FBI and Justice Dept. - bin Laden Task Force
ISI Inter-Services Intelligence – Pakistani intelligence agency
jackpot target of an operation
Jeddah US Consulate Office - Saudi Arabia
JPAL joint precision approach and landing system
JTTF Joint Terrorism Task Force
KC-767 military version Boeing 767
KL Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
KSM Khalid Sheikh Mohammed – alleged mastermind of 9/11
Langley CIA Headquarters
L-pill cyanide pill used by operatives to commit suicide
LZ landing zone
Mossad Israeli Intelligence Agency
Mulholland General. R. Mulholland - Commander-in-Chief NORAD
muscle aircraft hijackers
NEADS North East Air Defense Sector of NORAD
NCIC FBI National Crime Information Center
NORAD North American Aerospace Defense Command
NSA National Security Agency
Op Center ultra-secure operational command location
PAPD Port Authority Police Department
PDB president's daily briefing
pinging the system leaking intelligence designed to be intercepted
playground code name for The Pentagon
PSYOP psychological operation to influence people's thinking
Puzzle Palace slang term for NSA Headquarters
rap sheet FBI criminal and identification record report
sanitizer expert in evidence destruction and removal
SAS Special Air Service - British Army Special Forces
Sayeret Matkal Special Forces Unit of the Israeli Defense Forces
Scoutmaster code name for Kirk Dolan
scout troop code name for Kirk Dolan's FBI Unit
SECDEF Secretary of Defense
Slim Sam's code name
Smokey operation's manager of law enforcement
SOCOM Special Operations Command
SOF special operations force
Spetsnaz Russian Special Forces
starburst counter surveillance measure - targets disperse
SVR Russian Federation External Intelligence Agency
'tabda almubarat ghadaan' 'tomorrow is zero-day' in Arabic
tango target
tango one North Tower - World Trade Center
tango two South Tower - World Trade Center
tango wedge Wedge One – Pentagon
Teach operation's manager of hijackers and handlers
The Craft nickname for the Intelligence Service
The Farm nickname for Camp Peary - CIA covert training facility
The Fort nickname for NSA HQ - Ft. Meade, MD
Thomas United Airlines flight 175 replacement drone
UBL Usama bin Laden
VASIS visual approach slope indicator system

wet job operation where blood is spilled
Willie operation's manager of World Trade Center
Zyklon B hydrogen cyanide gas

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven J. Daniels transitioned from a comedy writer/performer to an author of Mystery, Thriller and Suspense novels.

He has worked in the entertainment industry, professional sports, law enforcement, commercial aviation, and politics providing him a unique perspective on life.

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