

MERCENARY

A Derrick Olin Novel



Deny. Distract. Counterattack!

STELLEN QXZ

Mercenary

XVIII of *Derrick Olin*

Stellen Qxz

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Rating: *****

Tags: action, bodyguard, spies, intrigue,
thriller, sex, violence

For the world's most dangerous bad guys and bad gals, Gabin Endre Rocc is a good man to have on their side. Ruthless, efficient, cold-blooded, and lethal, but always available... for the right price. Rocc is a highly skilled freelance gun-for-hire with only one specialty: keeping criminals safe from the consequences of the lives they lead. No one knows where he came from, no one knows who trained him, no one is even sure what he looks like, but about him one thing is certain, he has never failed on an assignment. And considering Rocc's client list, this says a lot. However, there is one more thing that most people don't know about Gabin Rocc, the man does not exist, never has. Rocc is the secret creation of a select group of American intelligence officials, a convenient fiction used as a cover for various off-the-books and totally unsanctioned clandestine operations over the past twenty years. But now Rocc's creators need him to come to life for a very dangerous mission with far-reaching implications.

Democracy is under siege in every corner of the globe, countries once seen to be moving toward freedom and stability have suddenly found themselves marred by violence and unrest, prompting the rise of autocratic demagogues who promise *a return to better times...* in exchange for absolute loyalty and total obedience to The Leader. Meanwhile in the United States, many in the intelligence community have begun to

see disturbingly familiar patterns emerge, a deliberate and coordinated strategy at work. As Shakespeare might have put it, "*Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.*" But with little direct evidence to point to and an increasingly dysfunctional administration in the White House, the career professionals realize that they will have to take matters into their own hands in order to stop this threat before it spreads to America, and it might already be too late. They have the perfect asset groomed and ready to infiltrate into the heart of the conspiracy, however, given the level of danger, The Asset isn't too keen on going in alone, and then someone in the know makes a joke: "*Gabin Rocc would be the perfect man for this job. Or would be if he existed...*"

A few days later, an old friend calls in every marker in the book in order to transform Derrick Olin from Birmingham's best bodyguard into the world's most dangerous *MERCENARY!*

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Also by Stellen Qxz:

Robert Chandler & Alex Wells Series:

Principal Target Cloak & Stagger

Extreme Prejudice ChanWell

Hired Guns

Derrick Olin Series:

Compulsive

Criminal

Inactive?

Vicious

Deadline

Extraction

Purity

Reciprocity

Blackball

Retrograde

Fearless

Rogue

The Undercover Groomsman

Glock Smoke: A Derrick Olin Anthology

Traffic(k)

Faithful

Dangerous Liaison Mercenary

Other Works:

Lethal [\[a\]](#).

Critical Action [\[b\]](#).

Blood Debts

ABI Monk [\[c\]](#).

Pushback [\[d\]](#).

About the author: Since the age of 13 Stellen has written hundreds of short stories, novelettes, novellas, and novels. He is an avid reader of fiction and a lover of movies from the 1970s. When not writing, he works as a private security consultant.

For those who *know* and those who *do*...

And for Luis “Lou” Marrero, a funny guy who made me laugh.

Deny, Distract, Counterattack!

Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the old Soviet KGB; maybe not so *old*...

MERCENARY

Chapter 1

It was late on a Sunday afternoon in January when I came home after being away for a week. It was already dark and cold and despite the fact that it wasn't even six p.m., I could feel my bed calling to me. After I made something to eat, or more likely ordered in because I probably didn't have much in the kitchen, I might decide to make it an early night. The universe knows I could use the rest.

I backed into my assigned parking space, shut off the jeep's engine, and sat back with my eyes closed for a few moments, taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly. Damn was I tired. Curious thing though, I hadn't been away on a job. A personal matter. Comforting a friend, sort of.

CeCe Hopewell, who until recently had been the head of the Alabama Republican Party, AL-GOP, lost her husband to cancer a little over two weeks ago following a two-year battle that they initially thought he had a decent chance of winning, given that it was caught in the early stages. In the end, however, the *Big C* was just too much for Bill Hopewell and he shuffled off to the great unknown with his present wife and the children from his first marriage surrounding him at the family home in Montgomery.

CeCe had taken a leave of absence from her duties as party chair early last year, but six months ago, as Bill's condition deteriorated, she decided that politics was the last thing she should be concerned

about and permanently handed the reins off to the man who had been running the shop pretty much on his own for the last year anyway, her deputy, so she could focus all of her energies on Bill. She was also co-owner and a full partner at a CPA firm in Montgomery and her partners there all pitched in to take up the slack so she could look after Bill.

When he died, CeCe became the caretaker for everyone else, his children, his siblings, even his nearly ninety year old bedridden and barely lucid mother. She kept them together, got them through the roughest parts, made sure all arrangements were taken care of, and then stood holding their hands as everyone wept at the graveside while Bill's ornately decorated metal coffin was lowered into the ground.

I was in the far background that day, watching everyone mourn, seeing the fifty-five year old widow dressed in black from head to toe, stoic in the numbness that enveloped her. She watched until the coffin came to its final resting spot, watched as the rest of the family dropped single yellow roses into the grave, then stood alone with her head bowed, praying in silence for several minutes. She was holding a single red rose in her left hand. She kissed it, then dropped it into the grave.

And that was that.

I was staying at the Hilton Garden Inn on Interstate Park Road, approximately seven miles northeast of Gunster Road where CeCe and Bill Hopewell had lived since they were married a little less than eleven years ago. Two days after the funeral, at about one in the afternoon, I was eating a slice of veggie pizza when a knock sounded at the door. Wiping my hands on a paper towel, I went to answer it.

CeCe stood there wearing a plaid overcoat unbuttoned over a white turtleneck sweater and blue jeans. She wasn't wearing a hat despite the cold and the light rain that had been falling all morning, but the coat did have a hood attached. Her short cut blonde hair was a little mussed, as if the hood had been up before she got inside. And she was wearing water splashed brown Timberlands. We stared at one another for several long moments before I reached out a hand and led her inside.

For the rest of that day, and the two days following, CeCe did not leave my hotel room, barely left the bed, and never put on one stitch of clothing after I undressed her about ninety minutes later. First she cried, then she talked, and cried some more. I listened, I held, I comforted, and said very little. From long experience I learned that it was hard to say the wrong thing if you didn't say much, or anything at all. Kind of made me think of that Keith Whitley song (later remade by Alison Krauss) from my college days, *You Say it Best When You Say Nothing At All*.

Then, with all her words and tears exhausted, CeCe climbed into my lap and started kissing me. Within minutes we were both struggling to lift her sweater over her head. Finally she relented and let me do it. Her jeans and everything else quickly followed, as did my clothes. No more talking from either of us after that for the rest of the afternoon and night. And there was not one sexual thing that she did not want me to do to her that day, everything we had ever done together and a few more she had fantasized about but had never had the courage to mention. This was not a day for inhibition. This was not a time for holding back.

In the beginning, CeCe was docile, like I had never known or experienced her before, less of an equal participant, more like a sub-

ject for my exploration, experimentation, even exploitation. She was there in body, but her mind was far away, perhaps in a happy place with her recently deceased husband. Yet if ever I stopped or even slowed down what I was doing to her, she would turn and look directly at me, tell me to keep going, and to go further. She wanted to *feel* everything, she needed to, and knew she could trust me to give her what she wanted, what she needed. So I did, not finding this nearly as much fun as some might, but completely understanding her reasons, and what she truly required of me right now.

CeCe cried herself to sleep in my arms that first night, woke early the following morning and wanted me to take her again, even rougher, almost to the point of humiliation. This pattern continued into the next morning before she finally seemed to come back to herself, and the tears were gone. We sat in bed eating room service and talked about her future, although she was not sure what that would hold. In time she knew she would move on, Bill would want her to, but for right now she just found it so hard to imagine her life without the man she had loved since the day she met him at one of the lowest points of her life. In many ways he had saved her life, helped to restore her battered reputation. But now her beloved was gone.

That last night together, CeCe took charge, her old self returning with a renewed intensity, but there was still great sadness and sorrow in her, much of which would probably always be there, even if she did move on. And no matter how pleased she was with the things my tongue and fingers did to her clitoris and G-spot.

We said goodbye in the early afternoon and she said she'd call me in a few weeks or so. I told her that would be fine, then watched her silver Lexus drive away from the hotel. I checked out, stopped for

lunch at a Chinese place a few blocks east, then made my way back to Birmingham after a quick stop in Clanton to check out a gun store that a friend of mine had mentioned some time ago. Should have skipped it because now I had a few other items to add to my *I really want this shit* list.

Now I was home, and exhausted and hungry again.

I had one wheeled suitcase and my laptop backpack, the former dragging behind me, the latter over my left shoulder as I climbed off the elevator on the fourth floor and turned left toward my unit at the end of the hallway. I couldn't hear any sounds coming from the other three units on the floor and didn't expect to. Of the many features I liked about this building, the extra thick walls were at the top of the list.

I opened my front door, stepped into the darkness of the long corridor that led into the front room. Once the door was closed and locked, I stepped over to the lighted alarm panel and tapped in my personal code, and right before I reached for the light switch a foot away, something flared in my nostrils, a scent that should not have been there.

Despite my fatigue, I dropped to the floor, reaching into the right side waistband of my jeans and extracting a subcompact Glock pistol from the MIC ^[v] holster I wore there. Flat on my belly now, holding the weapon in a two-handed grip and pointing toward the front room beyond the corridor. Shadows in the darkness. The curtains on the large windows overlooking 1st Avenue were always open because the view was only one-way, from the inside out, so there was light coming in from street lamps and other nearby buildings. The dull green light from the microwave clock could also be seen from the kitchen, but there were still a lot of dark spaces between me and

the rest of my condo where someone could be hiding, waiting, for what purpose I did not know, but could guess it probably wasn't good. And since my security alarm appeared not to have been disturbed, whoever had entered my living space, my home, had been quite a skilled operator. It was a very good alarm and was monitored around the clock by Master-Plan Security just a few blocks away. Whenever I was going to be out of town I made sure to let them know to keep an extra eye out. If they noticed a problem, they would call me, and since they hadn't called...

I lay in the darkness not moving for ten full minutes, listening as best I could, barely breathing, trying to hear anything that should not be there, any hint of the remaining presence of the intruder beyond that out of place scent. Nothing. So I waited ten more minutes.

I really had to go to the bathroom right about now, but that would have to wait. First things first. Meaning I had to clear my entire condo inch by inch, the old fashion way. A smarter man might have called the police and invite them in to do it for him, or at least call Master-Plan and have them send over one of their field supervisors, but no one ever accused Derrick Olin of being a smarter man.

Forty-five minutes later I had cleared the entire place, and then relieved my bladder just before my eyeballs began to float. No one was there and nothing appeared to have been disturbed, also, no nasty surprises left behind, like, say, an IED or something else just as unpleasant. So far as I could determine at the moment.

However, on the kitchen counter to the right of the sink was a slim model iPhone with a matte black finish. I suppose it could have been an IED, but probably not, too obvious. When I picked it up and turned it over the first thing I saw was a blatantly familiar emblem affixed to the phone's case.

“Son of a bitch!” I muttered, shaking my head.

I filled a glass with water from the tap, put my Glock away, then leaned against the counter while powering up the phone, half wishing that it was an IED, but no such luck.

Apparently this phone had been programmed to self-dial once it was activated because that’s what it was doing as I sipped from the glass. And apparently the number it was dialing was a secret because it did not come up on the display screen.

Four rings, then I was greeted by a most familiar voice.

“Ah, Derrick, it’s about time you got back home. I see you got my message.”

It was a long time before I responded, deciding on whether or not I should hang up and toss the phone out the window. I took a couple deep breaths, sighed.

“Yes, I got your message, Will. Now suppose you tell me just why the hell you had someone break into my place to leave it? It’s not like you don’t have my phone number and email.”

Surprisingly, this conversation was very short, and light on specifics, but long enough to remind me that I still owed some people some pretty big favors. It would appear that they were all being called in at the same time. Right now.

I sighed again, paused, shaking my head.

“Okay. Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll do it. Yeah. Bye.”

I ended the call, took the phone apart and smashed it to pieces, then put the pieces into the toilet in the guest bathroom, flushing them. Back in the kitchen, I went over to the silverware drawer next to the sink, pulled it open, removed the tray, took the drawer out, flipped it over. There was a blue envelope taped on the underside. For now I didn’t bother opening it, simply put the drawer and silver-

ware back, got another glass of water, and then walked wearily into my bedroom.

Chapter 2

My whole reason for going to college thirty-four years ago was so that I could become a United States Air Force officer, spent the entire four years as a member of the AFROTC cadet corps, rising from the lowly rank of cadet airman basic during my freshman year, to cadet first sergeant and senior enlisted advisor in my sophomore year, and eventually to cadet lieutenant colonel and Cadet Corps Inspector General in the final semester of my senior year at Samford University.

I was commissioned on the day that I graduated, a rainy Saturday in late May 1989. Two weeks later I was in San Antonio, Texas for the start of the nine and a half week training course for officers who were interested in becoming members of the Office of Security Police. Today it's called the Security Forces Center, and while the headquarters for the command is still located at Lackland AFB in Texas, today the officers' course is taught at Maxwell AFB down in Montgomery. In fact, I drove past it on my way back home Sunday afternoon.

I excelled in the training, had always had an interest in law enforcement, had considered in my early years becoming either a Birmingham Police officer or Jefferson County Sheriff's deputy, but the military life started to appeal to me more as I got older, the

world travel in particular, and when I learned that I could join the service and be a cop too, I knew it was the path for me.

For the first eighteen months of my career I worked in missile base security, meaning I had the pleasure of helping to protect America's land-based nuclear weapons arsenal both at home and abroad, serving on a total of four bases from Whiteman, Missouri to Wiesbaden, [West] Germany. As an officer I started out in a supervisory role, usually as the assistant duty officer on the night shift, but I made sure to learn everything I could from the enlisted personnel assigned to my commands, especially the ones with greater knowledge and experience than I had. And despite the fact that everyone knew that *Lieutenant Olin* was a one hundred percent *by the book* and squared away officer who never put even a little toe out of place (translation, a bit of a tight ass), he was well-respected by the noncoms because, unlike a lot of other young officers, he actually listened to them. Or so my squadron first sergeant at Whiteman told me shortly before I left the command to pursue the next chapter of my Air Force career, that of special agent in the Office of Special Investigations, what some refer to as the Air Force's version of the FBI. Only *way* cooler!

This time the training was eleven weeks and took place at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center in Glynco, Georgia. It was during this period that I would receive my first instruction in the techniques that would eventually become my life's work. OSI Special Agents are foremost criminal investigators, handling every kind of felony crime that can be committed in civilian life, plus a few others unique to the armed services, such as espionage and other violations of the national security statutes. However, in addition to the criminal side, there are the antiterrorism and protective security

sides of the occupation. Here I particularly excelled and would eventually gravitate in this direction for most of the eight and a half years that I had left in the service.

During my time at Glynco I met a lot of fellow trainees, some I couldn't stand, but a few I liked, and even felt a camaraderie with, one in particular, a short but muscular little guy from West Memphis, Arkansas with a quick wit and knack for problem solving that came in very handy during joint training assignments. William Edwin Jordon III, the same age and rank as me, and a fellow Security Police officer as well. Will and I partnered a lot and played off one another's strengths to come out at the top of our class as number one and number two. Depending on which one you asked, who occupied what slot varied.

Our paths crossed a good bit when we went active, collaborating on criminal and counterespionage investigations on several occasions, and after the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996, Will and I were among the first volunteers to sign up for training with the newly formed Antiterrorism Specialty Teams. Created at the direction of the Secretary of the Air Force, the ASTs initial mission was to provide enhanced tactical force protection of all USAF property and personnel overseas. However, within a very short time this mission expanded to include more proactive measures, and the unit was renamed the Antiterrorism Security Branch. I spent the remainder of my career in OSI/ASB, ultimately becoming a team leader in the High-Risk Protection Unit, meaning I spent a lot of time looking after senior Air Force personnel as they traveled in hostile overseas environments where it was very likely someone would either want to kidnap or kill them, probably both. I really enjoyed the work, as odd as that might sound to some, began to feel

as if I had found what it was that I was meant to do, or at least what I was very good at doing.

There were a few close calls, some very close. I racked up my share of infirmary time, not to mention mandatory counseling following every violent incident I was a part of. At least the ones that were not highly classified; those couldn't be discussed with anyone not directly involved or cleared for access. I found that kind of curious. They made me see the shrinks because they wanted to make sure I was mentally fit to stay in the field, but when the job I had been on was deemed too sensitive to be talked about even with a vetted therapist, they seemed to say *to hell with it*. No matter really, as I said before, I had found what I was good at and liked it. After a while, the violence and the danger were just another day at the office to me.

What I did not like, however, was bureaucracy and bullshit, which I often found were one in the same. This explains why my career came to an end after ten years, on the eve of a promotion to major that would have put me in line to command my own field detachment. That didn't bother me, though, leaving was the right thing to do and I never regretted it.

Returning to Birmingham long-term had never been in the cards, and sometimes I still find it hard to believe, but it had been nearly twenty years now, longer than my entire Air Force service. I was comfortable with it, happy even. Set myself up as a professional bodyguard for-hire, made a name for myself (mostly good), and made a decent living. Then a couple years ago some folks I'd been working with on a part time basis convinced me (more like coerced at the time) to expand from a solo operation with occasional sub-

contracting help, to an actual organization, still small, but capable of doing more. It is called *DDD Countermeasures, Triple-D* for short.

I had not been sure how we would fare in the beginning, considering all the other more established firms in the city, especially the largest, Master-Plan Security, but I was pleasantly surprised to discover that there was an under served niche available that we could fill, and well. Within a year *Triple-D* was doing sufficient business that the five of us worked steadily enough to keep home and hearth intact. Sometimes there was even more work than we could handle, but there were the slow times, too. One of those was in play right now, which is why I had the time available to take the week off and go visit CeCe Hopewell.

It also explained why I had the time to fly out of Birmingham the next morning for a secret rendezvous with my erstwhile OSI pal, Will Jordon.

Chapter 3

RICHMOND, INDIANA

Will stayed in the Air Force after I resigned my commission, and spent his entire career in OSI. By the time he retired a couple years ago with twenty-eight years service, Will was a full bird colonel and the Vice Commander of OSI. He was married, the father of three healthy kids, all grown and out on their own now, none having chosen a military career. Something that both Will and his wife were secretly pleased about, given the current state of seemingly endless American military actions across the globe. Oh, and just because he retired from active duty, that didn't mean Will retired from OSI.

After my time, the agency began to open up slots for civilians, as the Navy's NCIS had done some time ago, and the Army's CID was beginning to experiment with, too. And there seemed to be a trend toward putting civilians in the upper leadership rungs of military organizations such as OSI, NSA, and others, most often in the number two slot. Prior to this decision, the Vice Commander of OSI had been second-in-command under the commanding general, a career OSI one-star. However, with the reorganization, a civilian Executive Director (ExDir or XD) was installed as the number two and the VC became more of a chief of staff, although if the commander was away on extended leave or the top post unexpectedly became vacant, the XD could not assume the position because they were a civilian and the billet was military, so the job went to the Vice Commander.

Anyway, I said all this to say that Will Jordon had stepped into the Executive Director's post at OSI when he retired, so now he really was the second-in-command and effectively the day-to-day overseer of all the agency's operations. And bully for him, really, Will's a great guy and a hell of an OSI agent. Probably better than I ever would have been if I'd stayed. But that still didn't give him the right to send somebody into my place to leave that phone. It was a violation of my personal space that I didn't like. Not to mention an illegal government intrusion that the ACLU would just love to sink their teeth into. Even so, I was not stupid enough to have thought that my security system or any security system would have defeated a really determined and trained operator, no doubt what Will had sent, but when directly confronted with the result, it is unnerving. And it pisses me off! Something Will had to know, but he had done it anyway. We'd be talking about that real soon, too.

I had never been to Richmond, Indiana, had never even heard of it before. Once I read the contents of the envelope taped under my silverware drawer I was about to take out my phone and look it up on the map program, then thought better of that idea, went to the bedroom closet and rummaged around until I found an old Atlas. Found Richmond close to the Ohio border. Okay, now I knew where it was, but still had no idea why I was going there, other than the fact that Will Jordon wanted me to. There was a ticket in the envelope, along with an itinerary and alias documentation, including credit cards, that matched the name on the itinerary and ticket.

My plane left Birmingham at seven the next morning, stopped in Charlotte, North Carolina where I waited for two hours for a connecting flight, then continued on to Indianapolis, landing just after one-thirty in the middle of a rain storm. I collected my single suit-

case at baggage claim, stopped by the airport burger king for a veggie burger and fries before heading down to the Avis counter to pick up the car that had been reserved for me.

The drive from Indianapolis to Richmond would take approximately two hours going by the speed limit, however, I had been instructed not to arrive at my destination before 2300 hours, which meant I had some time to kill. If only it wasn't raining and cold.

The airport bookstore came to my rescue, providing a paperback copy of a book I had been meaning to read, *Woman Left Behind*, by Alabama writer Linda Howard. I bought it, a bag of trail mix, and two bottles of water, then went out and found my rental car in the lot. I drove out of the airport and found a small park nearby, pulled in. The rain continued to fall very hard after that.

For the next three hours that followed I was lost in the adventures of Jina Modell, pleasantly surprised by the refreshing amount of humor that was mixed in with the action and romantic elements. Also found myself somewhat aroused by the sassiness and spice of the main character. *Wouldn't mind putting Jina over my knee*, I thought, closing the book after marking the page with the receipt. *Or on her stomach in the middle of a nice comfy bed...*

I took a nap, waking up two and a half hours later with the windows on the rental fogged up. On the plus side, it had stopped raining by then. Once the defrost took care of the windows, I found a gas station, relieved my bladder, bought more water, then began the nearly straight trek from Indianapolis to Richmond on I-70 East, with a few detours here and there just to make sure that I hadn't *grown a tail*. It was unlikely. I was clean when I left Birmingham, the same in Charlotte, and when I arrived in Indiana there did not appear to be anyone waiting for me who was pretending not to be.

However, given the clandestine nature of my travel and the cryptic manner by which Will had gotten in touch, extra caution was prudent. Along my journey I traversed through both more rain and mild snow storms, but neither too severe to significantly impede my progress, and I arrived in Richmond with a half hour to spare. Twenty minutes of touring the city told me all I needed to know about it, especially why I had never heard of it before, not much to see. I pulled into the Comfort Inn's lot at five till the appointed hour, climbed out and had a quick look around, then walked to the south side entrance of the hotel. At night all side doors were locked and could only be accessed with a guest key. Luckily I had one of those, also furnished in the envelope taped under my silverware drawer. Colonel-now-Mr. Jordon thought of everything.

I walked up the stairs to the fifth floor, found myself in the wrong section, had to walk around a bit before I found what I was looking for. Room 571.

The time was precisely 2300.

I stood outside the room and waited for exactly sixty seconds, being a bit rebellious I suppose, then I knocked. A few seconds later I could feel eyes on me through the peephole, resisted the temptation to stick out my tongue. The latch was released, then the deadbolt. I was all set to give Will a very disapproving scowl when the door opened, and would have, too, if it had been Will Jordon who opened the door.

Chapter 4

I suppose it could have been Will if he had gone trans since last I saw him. And if he had, I wish he'd done it twenty-five years ago because *he* was a knockout. But I knew he hadn't because I also knew the person who was standing in the doorway smiling at me now. Knew her to have been born a woman, although I wasn't sure if I ever knew what name she had been born with because the woman was a *spook* of the highest order.

"You deliberately stood out here until 2301 before knocking," the woman said, still smiling. "Growing defiant in your old age, James."

James was the name on the identity papers I was currently carrying and the woman was using good tradecraft, just in case someone who shouldn't be was close by listening. I stood staring at her in mild disbelief, but when I considered everything else that had happened since I returned home from Montgomery Sunday night, I should not have been all that surprised. Suddenly I was pretty sure I knew who had entered my condo undetected to leave the phone, and suspected that it had not been Will's idea to do it that way either.

Before I could say anything, the woman stepped back and silently ushered me into the room. I made a show of glancing around the empty corridor before sighing and doing so, the door closing and being secured at my back seconds later.

“YES, DERRICK, AS I HAVE TOLD YOU repeatedly, my real name is Nicola Calavici. Actually, it’s Nicola Anna Calavici. When we first met I was using a work name, but once we reconnected in Orlando when you were stirring up trouble for the American Defense Brigade^[f], before we shut them down, I told you I wouldn’t lie to you anymore. Well at least as it pertained to my name.”

That last bit was said with a clever grin.

When I had first met the woman who now called herself Nicola Calavici (and probably was Nicola Calavici) she had been using the name Francesca “Fran” Ciocchi and was a field operations officer with the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center. A joint OSI-CIA taskforce created to go after narcoterrorists in Latin America who had been targeting U.S. interests with alarmingly increasing frequency. Two more times while I was still with OSI I worked with her, and both those times she was using other names, but *hinted* that Fran Ciocchi was her real name. As I was to learn years later, during the aforementioned action in Orlando, she had not been truthful about that back then. Maybe she was now, I had no way of knowing, and I suppose it didn’t really matter.

When last we had spoken some years ago she was with the Department of Homeland Security in an undersecretary’s posting, but I had always suspected she still had her hand in the covert intelligence game. Had I bet money, which I never do, I would not have lost a cent.

“I transferred back over early in 2017,” she explained. “Things got kind of stupid in Homeland after the change in administrations, so much talk about *building a wall* at the southern border to nearly the exclusion of everything else that actually mattered. They offered me a deputy chief’s position in Homeland Security Investigations if I

wanted to stay on, but I declined. Then a couple months before the end of last year, the DCI calls me in and tells me she's convinced the National Security Advisor to support my nomination for the vacant deputy director's post. Could have knocked me over with a feather. And I never thought they'd go for having the Agency run by two women, especially not the misogynists in this administration, but the right people got behind it and I sailed through the confirmation hearings. Surprised you didn't know. I mean, I know nominations for deputy positions aren't as well covered as those for the top jobs, but still..."

I shook my head, settling onto the sofa against the closed curtained window on the east side of the modest hotel suite. "Don't keep up with the news that much these days," I admitted. "Even my local scene most of the time. Missed it. But congratulations, Madam Deputy Director. Hubby and kids must be proud, that is, if you have any."

Nicola Calavici—*Nic*—sat down beside me on the sofa and crossed her still wonderfully muscled legs, the short green skirt riding up sufficiently enough for me to admire her shapely thighs. Some things never changed, thank the universe. Fifty-five and still in great shape. Her once long blonde hair was cut shorter today, her once brown eyes were now green, probably contacts, either then or now, probably now, and her smile was just as easy and inviting as I remembered. And the woman was still more dangerous than a rattlesnake.

"I've been married for twenty-four years and have two children, one in college, the other graduated a year ago and is already toiling in the workforce. My husband, Vincent, works in the aerospace in-

dustry. They are all perfect and I am proud of them. I believe the feeling is reciprocated. Now you know all about me.”

“Oh I really doubt that,” I said, glancing over to my right where Will Jordon was sitting in an armchair. He was wearing tan slacks, a blue long sleeve button-down shirt, the cuffs rolled up on his forearms, and shiny black loafers. His once jet black hair was showing signs of gray but was as thick as ever, and now he wore rimless black bifocals. Inwardly I snickered a bit. As I alluded to earlier, we’re the same age, but as of yet I didn’t need glasses. Knock on wood. My old friend seemed pensive, and now that I knew the CIA was involved in this cloak and dagger exercise, I understood why. Still didn’t know why I had been summoned here, but the Agency’s involvement told me it was something really special, in a manner of speaking. The number two person in both the OSI and CIA secretly meeting me in a hotel suite in a city that most people have never heard of, yeah something interesting indeed.

After a brief silence, in which everyone looked at everyone else several times, I spoke first.

“Whose idea was it to penetrate my condo and leave the phone?”

My gaze settled on Nic and she grinned.

“Yeah, that was me, a little melodramatic, yes, and Will said we shouldn’t, in case you’re wondering.”

“Figured,” I said, glancing briefly at Will. “And you should have known better. Let me guess, you sent your favorite *pet* to do it?”

Nic frowned then, sighed.

“She isn’t my pet, Derrick, she is a highly skilled and very effective covert operator. But no, I didn’t send her. She’s working another assignment at the moment, but the Agency does have some very good covert entry specialists on the payroll.”

“Yeah,” I said dryly. “And if you ever send another one into my place again, Nic, I’m gonna break both your legs. And in your case that would be a real shame, considering they’re about two of the finest *gams* I’ve ever had the pleasure of leering at. That aside, I meant what I just said.”

The CIA deputy director wasn’t sure if she should smile or frown, having received both a threat and backhanded compliment in the span of seconds. She opted to hold up placating hands and nod.

“Got it, won’t happen again. And thanks, too. Nice to know you noticed after all this time.”

“If I were blind, I’d notice those, luv.”

She snickered, glanced over at the OSI Executive Director, who was being unusually quiet. “Not sure Will has,” she said.

I looked over at him, saw no trace of humor in his dark eyes. “His wife would murder him if he did,” I said. “But then she’s got great legs, too. So why don’t you two tell me just why the hell I’m here and why did I have to travel under the name of James Rushing for the occasion.”

The two government executives glanced at one another again, and Nic uncrossed and recrossed those fantastic legs of hers in the process.

Finally, Will leaned forward, rested his hands on his knees, looking directly into my eyes. There was an electronic sound masking device on the coffee table between us, as well as another in sight on the counter in the little kitchen area. No doubt there were other anti-eavesdropping mechanisms in close proximity. And likely a physical countersurveillance/security team nearby. The DDCI^[g] was assigned a small security staff as a matter of routine, and whenever XD/OSI traveled away from headquarters, a two-agent detail

was supposed to go with him. But who knew if that was the case this time, given the nature of the situation. Even so, I suspected there was someone somewhere keeping an eye out, perhaps even the person that Nic and I had been sparring over earlier. After all, she had let slip that that other woman was attending to another assignment at the moment. Perhaps...

Will interrupted my musings when he began to speak.

Chapter 5

“Derrick, Nic and I have something we want to talk to you about and we need you to listen all the way through before you say anything. And we need you to keep an open mind throughout.”

“We also need you to know that everything we say in this room is highly classified and should not be repeated to anyone who is not cleared,” added the woman from CIA, somewhat to the annoyance of the man from OSI.

“Does this mean I have security clearance again?” I said with a mocking smile.

“It means that under certain clauses of the secrecy agreements you signed with both our agencies years ago, we can always swear you to silence under penalty of federal prosecution on the grounds of national security,” again from the CIA quarter.

“Which we all know would never be necessary,” Will hastened to conciliate, sensing that my playful mood was not as playful as it had initially appeared. Good to know my old Air Force buddy still knew how to read me. “Just need to tell you some things, Derrick, and have you listen. There is a proposal that will come at the end, but first you need to hear the background. So please be patient, okay?”

I stared at him for a few moments, then looked to my left and glanced into Nicola Calavici’s suddenly humorless eyes. Guess play-time was over.

“Will, I am a civilian now and enjoy it very much. On a few occasions in years past, I have briefly stepped back into the government fold to help out—Orlando for Nic, Las Vegas for you [\[h\]](#)—but those were special situations and not intended to be a regular thing. By virtue of the fact that both of you are here together for this meeting, and it is taking place in the middle of nowhere, so to speak, and we’re probably all using false identities, that tells me this is seriously dark, or black, or whatever the term in vogue for covert operations is these days. But I’m a simple bodyguard, folks, and I like that. Occasionally some cloak, and unfortunately, quite a bit of dagger from time to time, more firearm than dagger though, but that’s okay. It’s what I do, and as I said before, I like it that way. I especially like not having to do the bidding of a fickle government with convenient plausible deniability, least of all the one currently in power in this country. So...”

Will held up his right hand.

“Derrick, we just need you to listen, please.” There was a hint of desperation in my old friend’s voice, something very unusual for him. I stared hard for a few moments. When I turned to Nic, she wore a similar expression. After another minute, I sighed, sat back and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Okay, Will, tell me. No promises other than I’ll listen.”

“That’s all we want,” Nic said, patting my left thigh and smiling. She leaned back, propping her elbow on the backrest of the sofa, her skirt hiking up just a bit more with this movement. If Will wasn’t here right now I might have enjoyed this a whole lot more.

Or if I wasn’t here.

Chapter 6

MONTREAL, 1994

Marco Languor, 51, a Canadian national with a long criminal history, as recorded by most of the law enforcement agencies in Canada, as well as Interpol, the FBI, MI-5, just to name a few. Primary illicit activity regards the sale of large quantities of munitions to people who really shouldn't have them, principally criminals and warlords who liked to butcher people for sport. In 1994 he was brokering deals for the Iraqis, the Iranians, and the Libyans, and a few non-state sponsored outfits operating out of the Middle East and Africa, providing them with the latest armaments that they were supposed to be banned from acquiring. Many in the international intelligence community knew about Languor's activities and did their best to put pressure on him to stop what he was doing through official channels. However, Languor was deemed *politically untouchable* at the time because he also conducted under-the-table business on behalf of the Canadian government, moving arms through back channels to people the Canadians didn't want to be seen as officially supporting. Therefore, when the direct route proved to be inadequate, some networks took more drastic measures, the Israelis in particular. A *kidon* team came to within a hair's breadth of taking him out at his penthouse condo in Montreal, but they were stopped cold by the new security operator that Mr. Languor had recently acquired. A new player in the game that no one at that point had heard of. Believed to be Canadian, but no one was re-

ally sure of that either. No name given, or much information really, other than the fact that he was a *he*, and very dangerous. Had to be, given that he took out four Mossad assassins and wounded three others before they could withdraw. Word was that after this Mossad put a price on this guy's head, too. Only problem was, they didn't know who he was, and neither did anybody else. At least not then.

PARIS, 1995

Genessa Montblanc, 47, born in Belgium but with dual French citizenship. Suspected by half the international law enforcement community of brokering the majority of the black market sales of priceless stolen art throughout Europe in the 1990s. In April of '95 word reached the French authorities that Montblanc was in Paris to personally oversee the sale of a stolen Matisse and a van Gogh to a wealthy Arab buyer who already had an inestimable collection of stolen art in his private vault back home in the UAE. Tipped off ahead of time, the French were set to move in and arrest everyone involved at the point of exchange, twenty million in uncut diamonds for the two paintings. But something went wrong at the last minute, the cops moved in too soon, the Arab's bodyguards started shooting, and by the time the dust settled, Montblanc had escaped, the diamonds and the paintings never recovered. Later it was discovered that about a month prior to this Mademoiselle Montblanc had acquired the services of a new bodyguard. Name unknown, but his work first-rate, much to the vexation of French law enforcement.

GENEVA, 1998

Max Kliner, 63, native of the Fatherland (Germany). He spent his formative years as an unremarkable thug in the East German Stasi,

and following the crumbling of the Wall, found his way into petty crime. By the mid-1990s he had stumbled into the neo-Nazi movement and became a rising star. With the reunification of the two Germanys, a lot of the old hatreds that had been simmering beneath the surface since the end of WWII began to bubble upward. By the late 90s a lot of it was spilling onto the streets around the country, and spreading across national borders. Kliner was point-man for expanding operations into Switzerland, his mother was born there and he had some family living in the country. Through some of them he made acquaintance with several small underground groups that the Swiss had been monitoring and trying to put out of business for years, without much success. Kliner motivated these groups to become more active, and to do more than just make a nuisance of themselves. They started with petty vandalism of Jewish owned businesses, but quickly moved up to setting fire to synagogues, injuring several, but thankfully no one was killed. That's when the Swiss decided that enough was enough. They had already identified Kliner with the assistance of their colleagues in Berlin and kept watch on him when he was in their country. There was a big gathering of neo-Nazis planned for the fall of 1998 in Geneva. The Swiss National Police planned on being there in force to make as many arrests as possible, Max Kliner among them. The raid happened as planned, but Kliner's security was fast and efficient, managing to spirit the aging Nazi-wannabe away before the police could lay hands on him, several members of their force were injured in the process, thankfully none too serious. It was at this point that a name first surfaced. *Rock*. Nothing else, not even a physical description, a nationality, nothing. Just *Rock*. It was filed away.

MOSCOW, 2000

Yevgeni Belov, 54, Volgograd-born and bred, conscripted into the Russian Army at 17, didn't last a year. Fell into petty crime, many arrests and stints in the gulag followed. But at age 27 his life turned around when he met a man of influence within the Party. Belov became that man's personal assistant, in more ways than one. By the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 90s, Belov was quite a wealthy man, thanks to the death of his benefactor in an accident that was not an accident. These were the lean and mean times in Russia, with relations between east and west beginning to chill as Putin was making moves to replace Yeltsin. It was the beginning of the rise of the oligarchs, and Yevgeni Belov was angling to be one of them, the only problem was that he was too openly associated with the Mafya and the oligarchs wanted at least the appearance of respectability within their ranks. They moved to shut him out, permanently, nearly got him with a car bomb in St. Petersburg, but Belov was a survivor, and had hired a very expensive and most excellent new security chief to look after him. A non-Russian specialist with a reputation for honoring his word once a contract had been accepted and a price agreed upon. A mercenary who worked only for money, had no loyalty beyond that, but bound by his word as long as a client did not lie to him. It was said that he could protect Satan from God if he was paid enough. His name was Rocc, with two Cs. That was all anyone ever called him. *Rocc*, first, middle, last name? No other information was known. Again, this was filed away.

TANGIER, 2001

Mohammed al-bin Sha, 39, born in the Beqaa Valley of Lebanon, grew up fast and hard, initiated into one of the militias at the age of

twelve. By 18 he was working as an enforcer for one of Beirut's top arms brokers. By 23 he had knocked off that arms broker and taken his place. By the turn of the century he was supplying arms to African pirates and extremist groups throughout the Third World. Numerous governments put a price on his head, including the Americans. In the summer of 2001, a four-operator Delta ^[i] team was dispatched to Tangier to *dispatch* the death broker once and for all after several covertly contracted mercenary units had failed to deliver. The Delta team had no better luck when they came up against al-bin Sha's security force, by this time led by the best that dirty money could buy, *Gabin Rocc*, and the Deltas, operationally compromised from the start, only just managed to extract by chopper before being *dispatched* themselves.

TEL AVIV, 2004

Moshe Nathanson, 55, born the son of a wealthy diamond dealer with deep ties to the Jewish mafia in Israel and the United States. Lived for several years in New York until he ran afoul of multiple state and federal law enforcement and regulatory agencies and had to flee to Europe, eventually returning to the land of his birth to take over as head of the family business when his father died suddenly. It was rumored that Mossad had something to do with the death of the elder Nathanson because he was becoming reckless in his business dealings. Previously, the Israeli government had largely turned a blind eye to his illicit activities because on occasion they had need of his services themselves. However, when Mossad learned that the Nathanson syndicate was doing business with people not friendly to the Jewish state, Hezbollah and the Iranian Quds Force among them, more drastic measures had to be employed. Fearing the same

fate for himself, Moshe Nathanson sought to hire the best security that he could afford, and given his wealth at the time, he could afford the very best in the world. That was Gabin Rocc, a man, it was rumored, who had once taken on and defeated Mossad *kidoni* in Montreal.

MADRID, 2007

Enrique Madrano, 29, Harvard-educated MBA from a wealthy Spanish family with close ties to the ruling political and business classes in Spain. Smart, focused, and very ambitious. Unfortunately for his family, his idea of growing their business included the international drug trade, which by his late twenties he was a major player in throughout Europe and Latin America. As a side business he also brokered information to other criminal networks, chiefly the identities of police informants working inside their organizations, some with ties to national intelligence services. No one knew how he was acquiring this sensitive information and strong efforts were engaged to find out. When this could not be accomplished externally, the decision was made by the British to *render* the man and ask him themselves. Unfortunately for the SIS rendition team who went to Madrid in May of 2007, Madrano was already under the protection of Gabin Endre Rocc, the underworld's top bodyguard. The Brits didn't come out of the encounter with all their bits and pieces intact, and Enrique Madrano's business and reputation soared as a result.

TOKYO, 2010

Keshi Nakamura, 35, founder of a major tech company by age 27, a billionaire by thirty, and on the top of a lot of hit lists shortly thereafter. She sought to break down the barriers for women in Japan,

but soon found herself targeted for destruction, her reputation and business wrecked by powerful forces from the old school who still believed that a woman's place was anywhere a man said it was. Too bad for them they didn't realize until it was too late just what kind of woman they were truly dealing with, or her connections to the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia. When they did, the government officially stepped in, moving against every known Yakuza gang in the country in an effort to put pressure on them to stop Nakamura. They did try, but her new bodyguard stopped them, and then assisted her as she moved to first wreck, and then to take over their operations one by one and build a super criminal empire that would let her take the ultimate revenge against those who had tried to take everything from her. It was also rumored that she had taken Gabin Endre Rocc as her lover during this time, but that might have just been hyperbole. The personal aside, Nakamura and Rocc made a formidable team, and soon had every major player in the Yakuza, and the separate terrorist networks they controlled, answering to them. At that point, the government decided it would probably be best if they just let Keshi Nakamura be. And hoped she would do the same regarding them.

STOCKHOLM, 2013

Aud Morrell, 46, far-right politician with ties to half the extremist groups throughout the whole of Europe, a frequent speaker at rallies and demonstrations, and a star of the alt-right internet media. Her party was gaining prominence in some of the more economically depressed areas of Sweden, particularly those with burgeoning immigrant populations. She was a rabble rouser, an instigator, and a driving force behind the increasing terror campaign against leftist

politicians in Sweden, including two high-profile assassinations that remained unsolved. Swedish police and security forces worked diligently to come up with evidence tying her to the crimes they knew she was guilty of, but had no luck. It seemed that every time a credible informant was located, they would suffer an accident or a sudden loss of memory when questioned a second time. There was an attempt on Morrell's life late one winter's night in 2013, but the assassin failed, and a subsequent investigation by a journalist friendly to Morrell's cause revealed that Swedish officials had been behind that attempt. The would-be assassin was later identified as a former Stockholm police sergeant, and he was soon found dead at his home just outside the city. Victim of an apparent self-inflicted gunshot to the head. Curiously, during the autopsy a second gunshot wound was discovered in his right shoulder, a few weeks old, healing. It was theorized that he had received this wound the night he tried to assassinate Morrell and her bodyguard intervened with several gunshots of his own. Not satisfactorily confirmed, and the timing was somewhat off, but once again believed to be the work of the mysterious and lethal Mr. Rocc.

PALERMO, 2014

Luigi Fiscoti, 72, born and bred into the mafia in Sicily, working his way from gofer to enforcer to hitter before moving into the management ranks of the organization in his early thirties. He'd spent two decades in the United States, one of them behind bars for racketeering. Upon his return to his native land after deportation, he took over the arms and narcotics smuggling operations for the organization, focusing special attention on the United States, making sure that as much of their illicit products as was feasible ended up on the

streets of the land of the free, home of the brave, causing several critical epidemics when bad product was *accidentally* introduced into the pipeline and thousands eventually died. So it is not too difficult to fathom the reason for which he would need the services of Gabin Rocc. At least four of the attempts on his life in one year could be laid at the feet of the United States government, in theory at least.

JOHANNESBURG, 2016

Tom Anders, 60, a medical doctor and researcher at one time employed by the World Health Organization. This was before it was discovered that he had been conducting unauthorized experiments on human subjects, several of whom died under horrible circumstances. Stripped of his credentials and banned from the profession for life, not to mention barely escaping prosecution by international authorities, but his brain as sharp and devious as ever, Anders soon found a new life in the world of crime, helping terrorist groups engineer toxins that could be used to wipe out their enemies while creating vaccines that would protect their own people against the deadly plagues. A lot of countries wanted his head, but with the money he made from his work, the former WHO scientist had the means to buy the best security in the world, and by this time, no one doubted who that would be. The man called Rocc.

KHARTOUM, 2017

Sheik Fawid Bendrizi, 51, former intelligence chief for Al-Qaeda, went underground when the organization began to collapse subsequent to the death of bin-Laden in 2010. Two years later he emerged as an entrepreneur in the information brokering business,

using his old contacts in the terrorist intelligence community to assist a wide variety of criminal and fringe political elements throughout the Middle East, providing them with critical data that was eventually traced to a least half a dozen major assassinations between 2013 and 2015. And with Gabin Rocc watching his back, every attempt made to stop Bendrizi was foiled. Spectacularly.

AS PROMISED, I HAD LISTENED TO EVERYTHING Will had to say without interrupting, but it had not been an effortless feat. I bore easily. Luckily I had Ms. Calavici's short skirt to consider from time to time, and her thighs. When it appeared that Will was finished, at least for now, I took the opportunity to stand and stretch, walk around the front room of the suite a bit. After a couple of minutes, I turned and glanced at the two people seated on the other side of the room.

"What the fuck does any of that shit have to do with me? I was out of OSI and government service by the end of May 1999. I never heard of this guy Rocc, or any of the people he's supposed to have worked for. And I'll tell you right now, I have no intention of helping you track him down. Not unless he's back in Birmingham and working for some bad guy who's going after one of my clients. Otherwise..."

I paused because the two of them had exchanged a very curious look when I mentioned Birmingham. Now I was looking at both of them and both of them were looking at me. Another sixty seconds went by and finally I asked the question.

"What?"

They said nothing and this was starting to annoy me.

Finally Will sighed, looked first at Nic, then at me again.

“What if I told you that Gabin Endre Rocc had been in Birmingham up until this morning?” he said.

I frowned, not liking the direction in which this conversation was headed. Well, not liking it even less because I had never actually liked it in the first place. And the looks that the two of them were giving me right now really gave me the creeps.

“What’s going on, folks?” I said deliberately. “And one of you had better start giving me some straight answers in the next few minutes or I’m on my way out that door. And if I trip over this Rocc fella along the way, I’ll be sure to let him know you’re looking for him.”

Again that curious exchange of expressions, and this time the woman from CIA spoke.

“Derrick, *Gabin Endre Rocc* doesn’t exist, he never has existed. About twenty-five years ago he was created by the Agency’s Covert Action Staff in conjunction with the Special Activities Division, then still called *Special Operations*. Please sit down. We have a lot more to discuss with you and some of it’s a bit complicated. And you may have already begun to suspect some of it.”

She wasn’t wrong about that, suspected and really hated it. I really should have turned around right then and gotten the hell out of there. Would have saved so much trouble later on. Not to mention pain.

And blood.

Always the blood.

But I went back over and sat down next to Nic as she recrossed those perfect legs of hers, and once again patted my knee. Wonder if it would be bad form if I did the same to her right about now? And didn’t stop at her knee.

Ah well...

Chapter 7

“Each of those people that Will mentioned as clients of Mr. Rocc’s were in fact real, all of them criminals or terrorists. In other words, people the Agency needed to keep tabs on. Derrick, we know you bore easily but some of this background is necessary. I’ll skip as much as possible, starting now. Okay, Gabin Endre Rocc was not a real person, we created him. *We* as in the Agency. I was there twenty-five years ago, but far too junior to be involved in something this sensitive. Apparently this idea was thought up as early as 1988 and they kept working on it for more than three years to perfect it. My understanding is that they were never actually certain the cover would be used, but they wanted to make it bullet-proof, so to speak. They never had a specific operative in mind, other than a male, probably young, mid-twenties at the time, military experience, just not known whose military, likely Western though. A lot was deliberately left vague. Not even the race was specified. In fact, from time to time Rocc was actually of different races, depending on the assignment, but the control team managed to keep him out of the line of a lot of cameras over the years. He worked a lot at night, too.

“The development team from CAS worked with other agencies establishing the cover, although most didn’t have the whole picture, and still don’t, but they had their own reasons for going along with us. The Mossad especially. That first job Rocc was deployed on in

Montreal, the *kidon* team they sent... You know what *kidon* means, right?”

I nodded.

“Hebrew for bayonet. Kidoni being the plural. A highly specialized unit of what used to be Mossad’s *Metsada* Department, Special Operations; renamed something that I can’t pronounce several years ago when somebody lost a Mossad code book.”

Nic smiled.

“*Komemiute*,” she said in flawless Hebrew. “Yes, their Special Operations section, and the organization that controls the hit teams, their bayonets. By the way, they’ve gone back to Metsada now. Anyway, we, The Agency, worked with them to help establish Rocc’s cover in the early days. Figuring it would impress the bad guys, especially those of Middle Eastern backgrounds, to learn of someone who could best a Mossad kill team. And over the years we worked with a lot of others. The Brits, the French, the Germans, and the Italians, to name a few. Can you guess why they would cooperate with us in this endeavor?”

“Nic, this is not high school,” I said, letting a little of my impatience show. “And I am not the slow pupil kept after class for special tutoring. The Agency was using Rocc to infiltrate criminal and terrorist networks around the world, organizations that these other outfits had probably been trying to penetrate for years with little success. You were offering to do the work for them, risk your own asset, spend your own capital, and if they played along, they stood to gain a lot in return. And my suspicion is that all of those people Will listed eventually came to unpleasant ends. Especially the ones on Mossad’s list.”

Will and Nic glanced at one another.

“Always were a quick study, Derrick,” Will said. “And yes, most of them are now out of circulation, although one or two are currently working as our direct assets, part of a deal to keep them out of prison, or worse. OSI was not privy to this operation until recently, but there was peripheral involvement over the years, although we didn’t know what was really going on. Langley is not always eager to share.”

Nic smirked, but said nothing.

“Still,” the man from OSI continued. “It was a good operation, and one that they were able to keep running for a good long time without any serious exposure. Only a couple of the operators pretending to be Rocc were seriously injured during its run, but because multiple people played the role, they were able to make it seem as though Rocc was never badly hurt. He was seen as invincible, unkillable.”

I turned to Nic.

“How many of them died?”

She paused for a moment, then answered.

“Two in the field, one later, due to complications from injuries sustained in the field.”

I nodded.

“And they all got stars on the *Wall* right?” I said.

“Afraid not,” Nic responded ruefully. “Operation was too sensitive to risk that. Even though a lot of stars on that wall don’t have corresponding names listed in the Book of Honor, the fact that there is a new star up there acknowledges the existence of an operation, likely covert. A lot of eyes have seen that wall, and not all of them friendly. So for really sensitive clandestine operations, no stars. We honor them in another fashion, though. Rest assured.”

I thought about that for a few seconds, then decided it didn't matter to me.

“Okay, let's skip to the part about the cloak and dagger and my speedy travel up here to meet with the two of you. Why am I here and why are you telling me about Gabin Endre Rocc, a man who does not exist and never has? Oh, and before you do that, don't for a second think I haven't figured out that right about now, if he were real, Mr. Rocc and I would be approximately the same age. Yeah, but do go on, please.”

Air Force and CIA exchanged another brief glance at one another, then Will took over the briefing.

Chapter 8

I'll just run through the gist of it because bureaucrats get long-winded after a while, trying to put everything into the proper context should any of it be repeated later in front of a congressional investigative committee, or worse, a special prosecutor and a grand jury. I had to threaten to get up and walk out twice, but eventually, between the two of them, Will and Nic told me what was going on and what they wanted me to do about it. At the end I had asked the simplest of questions: *Why should I give a fuck?* Their response was not quite what I would have expected, but I'll get into that later.

So here goes, starting with what Will Jordon had to say first.

"Derrick, as I said at the outset, I know you don't pay much attention to the news these days outside of Birmingham, and probably not much there either, unless it concerns you directly. A little strange given that when we used to work together you were up on everything across the globe, even when it didn't directly affect your sector." This was the first foray off topic and it only took a brief annoyed look to pull the ex-colonel back on topic.

"You no doubt know what went on in the 2016 presidential election, even if you don't watch the news much, you have to know about that. What the Russians are suspected of doing?"

At that point, the CIA deputy chimed in.

“Suspected, my ass. Will, they did it. We know it, they know we know it, and they don’t give a fuck that we know it, especially given the results.”

Will looked at her, nodded slowly before returning to me.

“Yeah, as far as we’re all concerned on the intelligence and national security side, the evidence is pretty cut and dried regarding what went on, a fairly extensive and sophisticated foreign influence operation against the heart of American democracy. And it wasn’t the first such action. Here at home, pretty much, but this had been going on in smaller elections around the world for years, building, becoming bolder, and with each success, the Russians became more confident and cockier. That’s part of the reason why they went after us in 2016, they spotted several vulnerabilities they could exploit, and to be honest, we just weren’t prepared to deal with them. No political will in Congress or the White House, especially Congress, the lack of a cohesive national strategy for dealing with the Russians, and worst of all, believing that if we just let the Russians know that we knew what they were up to, they’d back down. They didn’t. In fact, they deliberately thumbed their noses at us. Putin pretty much gave Obama the middle finger because he was sure there would be no direct reprisals, and he was right. Sure, some economic sanctions here and there, but nothing that would really do long lasting damage to them, Putin and his cronies. And if you had caught the national news lately, you’d know that the current administration has been busy getting those sanctions lifted against the oligarchs that support Putin and that U.S. Intelligence had specified as being either directly or at least peripherally involved in the attack on our democracy.”

By the expression on my face, Will could tell I was becoming impatient, he nodded and continued.

“This activity has continued unabated since 2016, and the Russians aren’t even trying to disguise what they’re doing anymore. They’ve even gotten so bold as to be seen openly consorting with other hostile powers such as Iran, Syria, North Korea, and China, and evidence strongly suggests that they have been sharing the secrets of their successful *Fuck You* operations with these regimes. As if the Russians alone weren’t bad enough, just imagine all of them acting independently but with the same goal, to bring down the U.S. in the next major election cycle. Who knows who the hell they might get elected to high office next time?”

I yawned and checked my watch.

Will looked at Nic in frustration and she nodded, taking over.

“Okay, let’s get off the boring political stuff,” she said. “Seeing as how you can barely keep your eyes open. Let’s talk about the other side, the more immediate and dangerous side.”

She spoke for thirty-five minutes straight with barely a pause, and I have to admit to being impressed because she wasn’t using notes, but then I remembered Nic had always possessed a really good memory for details. A useful trait for a CIA field officer who specialized in infiltrating and exploiting terrorist cells way back when. And she laid out a pretty convincing set of facts to support her argument. I found no flaws in any of it, but I was a bit sleep deprived, having had a really long day and was still recovering from my trip down to Montgomery last week.

When she stopped talking, I closed my eyes for a few moments, running things through my mind. I might have dropped off there for

a few seconds, too. When I opened my eyes, both government officials were staring at me intently.

“And I take it you are absolutely convinced that the two events are connected?”

“As absolute as anything can be in the intelligence business, Derrick,” Will told me. “You know how that is. It’s what the facts currently tell us, but something could change down the line.”

I looked at Nic.

“But you don’t think it will?”

She was pensive for a few moments, then shook her head.

“I trust my analysts, they’ve been on this for a long time, ever since 2016 they’ve been trying to redeem themselves for not catching on sooner and warning the White House with more actionable intelligence. They’ve worked nonstop on this. And as we indicated before, the Russians aren’t even trying to hide what they’re doing these days. At least on the political front. This other thing is somewhat more covert. Totally off their regular books. Several key Kremlin allies are former KGB, FSB, SVR, or GRU. Many with ties to Spetsnaz, in particular Spetsgruppa-A, or Alpha Group. Putin has enriched them as he has enriched himself, mostly by theft of state funds meant for other uses. Some of them are little more than extensions of the government, in particular the intelligence services. Some even have their own paramilitary armies conducting operations in other countries under corporate cover. We have good evidence of this and the Director has shared it with the White House, but no one over there seems willing to listen to facts and evidence anymore, least of all when it comes to the Russians. Anyway, the second part of this two tier operation is what we’re most concerned

about at the moment, and what we can probably do something about without needing direct *guidance* from the White House.”

I looked at Nic for a few moments, weighing something in my mind.

“You’re the Deputy Director of the CIA, my suspicion is that normally someone so high up would not be involved so directly in a rogue operation. Same goes for the number two at OSI. But something tells me that neither of you is acting with the knowledge of the people in the top slots above you, knowing full well that if anything you’re planning goes south, you’ll both swing. Figuratively, and maybe literally. I know both of you fairly well, know why you’ve done the work you have for so long, but I need to know why. Why this option? You’ve got plenty of political contacts in D.C. and other places outside the White House, and connections throughout the international intelligence and security communities. You could go another way. Why this way?”

They both glanced at one another for several long moments, and I fought a yawn, but failed. After all, it was after two, nearly three in the morning.

“Because if we don’t do it, Derrick,” Will said. “And do it now, it might be too late. And I mean that to sound as dire as it does.”

“I concur one hundred percent, Derrick,” Nic put in, touching my arm this time. “Putin and his people have been coming for us for a long time. The end of the Cold War was a bitter pill for them to swallow, especially the *way* it ended, with them as the apparent losers, and the way our side kept gloating about it. Over the years we took our eyes off the Russian ball to focus on other things. Well the Russians did not take their eyes off of us, never got over their humiliation, and now we’re paying the price. Democracy is paying the

price, the world is. That may sound kind of grandiose, and maybe it is, but that doesn't make it any less true. So to answer your question again, we don't believe we have any choice if we're going to keep our oaths of service and protect our way of life."

The reason I left the Air Force after ten years was that I no longer believed in that mission. Patriotism quickly lost favor with me after a few years in service, the things I saw, the things I was ordered to do in the name of *national security*. Pretty soon I didn't see much of a difference between the United States and many of its so-called enemies. They all committed atrocities and excused them in the name of national security. Russia, America, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, South Korea, didn't really make much difference. Democracy, autocracy, socialism, communism, all just words made up to mean whatever whomever wanted them to mean at any given time. Right and wrong in the eye of the beholder. Sure, there were some surface differences, mostly cosmetic, but deep down, the similarities were more common than any would admit.

Pretty much still felt that way.

"And you want me to do what?" I asked after a long, contemplative silence.

Will and Nic glanced at each other yet again, this time with a greater sense of unease. I could have let them off the hook because I was pretty sure I already knew, but it was their party. They should get the pleasure of dispensing all the surprises. Then cleaning up afterwards.

Chapter 9

HARVEY POINT DEFENSE TESTING ACTIVITY HERTFORD, NORTH CAROLINA

Everybody who's ever read a spy thriller or watched a TV show or movie about spies has probably heard of *The Farm*, the *secret* CIA training facility located in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, about three hours or so south of Washington, D.C. Formally listed on maps as Camp Peary and was at one time strictly a U.S. military base. Although officially the CIA does not confirm or deny the association, everyone *knows* it is so, and a wide variety of intelligence officer training does take place there, along with other things that CIA and the United States government at-large would never admit to.

However, far less well known, but becoming more so in recent years, is the facility known as *The Point*, which is located in Hertford, North Carolina, approximately ninety minutes southwest of Virginia Beach, Virginia. Publicly listed as the Harvey Point Defense Testing Activity and officially an entity of the United States Department of Defense. In actuality, however, it is the CIA's specialized supplemental training base for deep cover and paramilitary operations officers preparing for missions of covert derring-do in hostile foreign lands. If one recalls the outset of combat operations in Afghanistan in the early 2000s, a CIA officer from Alabama, Johnny Michael Spann, was killed during an uprising at an insurgent detention facility over there. During the press conference outside his par-

ents' home that for some unfathomable reason the CIA let take place, and even had Agency personnel in attendance, Spann's father let slip that his son and family were living up in North Carolina where the younger Spann was based. To many this probably slipped by unnoticed, but some intrepid ears, particularly in the press, probably wondered why a CIA paramilitary operations officer was based in North Carolina, but before some awkward questions could be asked, the CIA PR officer shut down the press conference, *out of respect for the family's grief*. Of course Spann was based at *The Point*, being an officer with the Special Operations Group of the Agency's Special Activities Division, as were most former military Special Forces personnel who came to work at the Agency after their time in uniformed service ended.

I have known about The Point since the 1990s because, as mentioned earlier, I had some pretty extensive dealings with the Agency when I was with OSI, and not all of them through Nicola Calavici, aka Francesca Ciocchi. In fact, when OSI formed their Antiterrorism Security teams back in the mid-90s, much of the tactical training took place at The Point under the tutelage of veteran CIA counterterrorism specialists. So in some ways returning was like coming home again. Well if your home was a highly secured secret government training facility that no one officially acknowledged the existence of.

At seven in the morning Will, Nic, and I reached an agreement. Surprised the hell out of me, too, but I took the assignment. There were several reasons for me doing it, none of them had to do with patriotism, and most were selfish. I was a little bored back home with the routine of the work that Triple-D had been doing lately, and as I had indicated before, work was a little slow right now any-

way, usually the case this time of year, right after the holidays. This meant less money coming in, and while Ollie and I were a bit more set in our financial futures, him more so given his business partnership with Earl Ashley Dexter and EAD Enterprises, the three younger team members were more dependent on steadier incomes. So any work that came in was going to go to them first.

This led to the more central reason for me agreeing to the job. Black operations have black budgets, and they usually have deep pockets. Meaning I could probably name my own price and get paid off the books, tax-free. OSI was not in the habit of running this kind of operation, but CIA was well versed. When I told them what I wanted, Will was somewhat unsure, but not Nic. She stood and excused herself, walking into what I assumed was a bedroom a little ways down the hallway from where we were sitting. I looked at Will and he shrugged.

A few moments later Nic returned with a medium sized black duffel. As she retook her seat next to me, she dropped the bag in my lap. I looked at her, then Will, and then unzipped the bag.

“Half now and half on completion of the assignment,” she said casually, almost as if she hadn’t just dropped a bag full of cash in my lap.

“You walk around with a million bucks in cash all the time?” I said with some incredulity.

“I find it saves time,” Nic said, recrossing her legs, smiling and not bothering to smooth her short skirt down on her scrumptious thighs.

“How’d you know how much I’d ask for?” I said.

“I didn’t,” she said.

“Should I wonder if I asked for too little?” I said. “And maybe you’ve got another ten or fifty mil in the other room somewhere?”

She did not respond beyond another smile.

Then it was time to get into details...

I flew back to Birmingham that night on the same alias, went home. The cash was being sent overnight by a secure Agency courier. Nic assured me that it would arrive at my place by no later than eight in the morning. I told her that it had better, or the deal was off. See, I was already becoming a mercenary.

The cash did arrive as promised, and after breakfast, I called Ollie to my place for a conversation. He knew a bit about my background after high school and college, prior to my return to Birmingham, but not as much as he suspected. From time to time work had necessitated that I use my contacts with Will Jordon and others in the national security stratum and Ollie had been privy to some of the communications, but had never pried for specifics. I did not go into details now, didn’t even mention Will’s name, but Ollie is no dummy, despite having to take biology twice when we were in high school.

I told him that I would likely be away for approximately three months, maybe a little longer, and during that time there would be no contact between us. As far as *DDD* Countermeasures was concerned, he was the top dog for the time being and I had every confidence that he would not run it into the ground in my absence. Ollie didn’t seem as confident as I, but I pressed on without delay. After all, the man had already run a successful business before and didn’t need lessons from me about management, least of all regarding the three other operators on our team. The last thing I covered was operational finances, during which time I handed him a brown leather messenger bag with three hundred thousand in cash inside.

“Any shortfalls the team has, payroll, equipment, whatever,” I said. “Take it out of that. You already have access to the business account. Right now it has enough to keep the operation running for the next month without new business, but I know you and the others will take care of that in short order.”

We discussed some upcoming client meetings that he would have to take in my place, one with Ashley Milner, and some recurring maintenance jobs that were due in the next couple of months, special situations that required us to pay particular attention to past clients for whom we had previously worked where problems might spark up again as an anniversary came about. Ollie knew all about those and said he’d take care of them.

After two hours we had covered everything I needed to say, but as I sat across from Ollie in my living room watching while he stared at the glass coffee table between us, I knew that he had a lot he wanted to say.

“Three months and I’ll be back,” I told him. “And when I do, there are some things we need to talk about regarding the possible expansion of Triple-D’s operations, to better prepare our team for the future. Since apparently this thing we’ve created is going to be around for a while.”

Ollie had looked at me then, his gaze hard. After a couple minutes he nodded, stood up. I stood as well. We shook hands and I walked him to the front door. He paused in the entryway, looked at me again.

“And while you out runnin’ around doing god know what for god know who, make sure you don’t get your fool ass killed. Contrary to popular belief on your part, you ain’t as young as you used to be, nor are you bulletproof.”

Ollie really knew how to give a guy a goodbye pep talk.

Two days later, people stopped seeing Derrick Olin around Birmingham, but at first not too many noticed. I would be curious, strictly from an ego standpoint, to find out later just how much anyone actually cared.

Two days after that, Ed Howell was being passed through security at the main gates of Harvey Point, *The Point*.

And let the fun begin.

Chapter 10

I should not have been surprised at all. Considering that Nicola Calavici was now in the number two slot at CIA, of course that meant that her favorite *pet* would have come over from Homeland with her. And who better to run the Agency's SAD/Special Operations Group than a former military operator? In this case, a one-time Chief Warrant Officer and Senior Lead Special Agent in the Army's Criminal Investigations Command (CID), and later a senior field agent with U.S. Army Counterintelligence (USACI), before leaving to join Homeland Security at the side of then Undersecretary Calavici.

Shelbee Roberts is my age, but despite all the shit I knew she had gone through in her life, none of it seemed to have affected her very much, at least not to look at her. We'd first met many years ago back in Birmingham when she was still with CID and I was protecting a graduate student who was being harassed by her ex^[j], a very troubled, very dangerous former Ranger that the Army had some concerns about themselves. Concerns I was never able to fully understand, but knew Shelbee Roberts did, and was there to make sure none of them caused problems or public embarrassment for Uncle Sam. Our parting after that assignment ended was not cordial in the least, and I might have threatened to kill her if she ever returned to the Magic City. But since that time we have buried the hatchet, so to

speak, and have worked together quite well on a few occasions under the auspices of her boss. So I should not have been surprised to find her here.

But I was, just a little.

“Now I know what level of trouble I’m in,” I said by way of greeting.

Shelbee Roberts is about my height with shoulder length straight blonde hair that had yet to begin to show signs of gray, which made me a little suspicious. Her eyes were as black as ever, at one point I would have said as black as her heart, but there was a shine to them that seemed to indicate she was happy to see me. Maybe she was wearing new contacts.

“Hello, Eddie,” she said as she extended her right hand, a small smile at the corners of her pink lips. Guess we were going with the cover all the way then.

“Ed or Edward,” I said as we shook. “Never Eddie. Mr. Howell, if you like.”

Shelbee grinned again, at least what passed for a grin from her. “How about Thurston?”

“No,” I said.

The Point was a large facility way back when, and seemed to have expanded in the twenty years since I had last been here. The building I was in now had not been there before, if I recalled correctly. Then Shelbee confirmed my supposition.

“No, it’s only been here just under ten years,” she said as we made our way from the heavily guarded (as in black-clad Security Forces types with the latest assault weapons) reception area through a thick, vault-like door that opened on a retinal scan, in this case provided by Group Chief Roberts. Once inside the austere corridor on

the other side, there were more armed guards. Guess they took security very seriously around here.

“We do,” she confirmed as we walked away from the entrance. “This part of The Point is exclusively the Agency’s. More specifically, Special Activities. Even more specific than that, SOG’s—Special Operations Group. In other words, it belongs to *me*.”

There was something very proprietary in her voice when she said that, and I didn’t doubt her words one bit, despite all the taxpayer dollars that went into building this place and paying all the salaries of the people who worked there. Then I thought better of that. Knowing the way CIA operated, it was entirely possible that this facility was completely funded by monies that didn’t come from the U.S. treasury or any other entity directly connected to Uncle Sam, but rather from one of the scores, perhaps hundreds of proprietary companies that the Agency operated for cover purposes, some of which were extremely profitable, thus ensuring a near unlimited source of funds for covert operations should Congress turn off the money taps on a whim, as they had been known to do in the past. I also thought about that duffle full of cash that the Deputy Director had passed to me a few days ago in Indiana. Down the *Black Brick Road* I go, I thought whimsically. It would appear that I was having far more fun than I should have been.

We stopped at a small security station a few feet away from the vault door after it sealed shut behind us. Shelbee was handed a plastic ID badge by the black-clad young woman sitting there. She examined it, then took an electronic pen from below the screen on the front edge of the desk facing outward, scrawled her signature. She turned to me and handed me the badge. I noticed that there was no picture, and like every other ID badge I had seen during my dealings

with the Agency, there was no name, just letters and numbers. We walked on, turning left at the first corridor, heading down an equally austere one, but this time there were more people moving about, and not all of them were in security garb.

“I should give you the official security briefing about the badge, but I know you aren’t an amateur. Have it with you at all times. You’ll have nearly full run of this facility, only a few restricted areas that you aren’t cleared for. I’ll have you briefed on that later. By the way, your access code is two zeros and the caliber of the weapon you stuck into my mouth that time back in Birmingham, followed by a three.”

She glanced sideways as we walked and I detected a hint of a sly smile.

“”You do remember that, don’t you?” she teased.

“Never gonna let that go are you, Shel?” I whispered, attaching the badge to my jacket.

“Not likely in the near future,” she replied, stopping just before we were about to come to another intersection. The door of the room to our right had a black panel to its right about shoulder high, the designation A-342/B displayed in white characters. There was a card reader below it. Shelbee stepped aside and indicated I should try it out.

I took my badge off my jacket and slid it through the reader, then typed in the access code on the key panel under it. A second later a green light came on and there was an audible click. Shelbee smiled and stepped past me, pushing the door open. She paused with the door at her back.

“Come in won’t you, please, Mr. Howell, there are a couple of people that I would like you to meet. Although I believe one of them is

already familiar to you.”

Shelbee Roberts smiling sweetly was likely not a good thing, although I couldn't be sure because I had not witnessed her doing it before now. Suddenly I was a little apprehensive about being unarmed, but I stiffened my spine and stepped into the room to begin my new life as a *Secret Agent Man*.

Funny thought occurred to me right then as the 60s TV show *The Beverly Hillbillies* came to mind. *Jethro Bodine, Double Naught Spy!*

At least now I had a smile on my face when the door to that room locked behind me.

Chapter 11

“Good to see you again, sir,” said the late thirties blonde who had been a redhead the last time I had seen her. Redhead and in her mid-twenties. Her hair was longer now and she wore gold wire rimmed glasses that made her eyes seem a bit larger than I remembered, and they were a little sadder than I remembered, too, but considering the business she was in, had been in when we met, I wasn’t all that surprised.

First Lieutenant and Special Agent Amy Stovall, United States Air Force Office of Special Investigations, had been assigned to a small protective security team I led for Will Jordon in Nevada about a dozen years ago after a mutual friend of ours (Will’s and mine) had been targeted by a terrorist group out of Southwest Asia. ^[k] It was the first time Will had had me reinstated into the service to give him a hand because OSI was stretched so thin due to overseas commitments at the time. Maybe if I hadn’t taken that assignment I might not be here now. But then our mutual friend, now a retired Air Force Colonel herself, would most likely be dead.

Amy had continued her career in OSI after that, rising to the rank of major and head of her own field investigative unit. She spent a good bit of time working in Region 7 (Counterintelligence and Special Access Programs Management) and when OSI created the Office of Special Projects, designated *PJ*, to combine resources and

better manage the most sensitive operations, she was assigned to it. A better career opportunity presented itself about a year later, still within OSI, but in a civilian slot. She liked being an Air Force officer, even if she almost never wore the uniform, it had been the only job she'd ever had as an adult, but she and her husband both agreed that it was a good opportunity that she just couldn't pass up. So she hadn't, and resigned her commission to become—and this is a mouthful—Deputy Program Manager, Covert Priorities Section, Office of Special Projects (PJ), United States Air Force Office of Special Investigations. Her business cards must be the size of index cards.

“I'm OSI's liaison to CIA's SAD/SOG,” she explained as I glanced around the room, obviously a SCIF—Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility. “At least for this project. Executive Director Jordan thought it might be good if you had another familiar face around for a while.”

“Well it is good to see you again, Amy,” I said as we shook hands. “You've come a long way. Your old partner retire?”

She smiled, nodding.

“Yeah. Ernesto's been out about eight years now, although he does a bit of contract work for us when he isn't busy fishing. His kids are grown and out on their own, he and his wife travel a lot. He's good.”

I nodded, then glanced over at the only other person in the room, besides Shelbee Roberts and myself, of course, the only one I did not know. Black, long, wavy hair of the same color, very dark skin, probably late forties, dressed in khaki cargo pants and a white button-down blouse with the sleeves rolled up to the forearms, standing on the opposite side of the oval table, looking at me appraisingly.

Shelbee Roberts walked to the table.

“Derrick, this is Melva Kingsley,” she said. “And before I go any further, I should mention that this is the only time you will hear your real name mentioned at this facility. The only people who know who you really are, besides Executive Director Jordon and Deputy Director Calavici, are in this room. To everyone else you are Edward Howell for the time being. When you leave you will be someone else, we all hope. Okay?”

I nodded, looking now at Kingsley.

“Melva is the Operations Support Coordinator for this mission, essentially your lifeline in the field. She’ll be the one sweating bullets to make sure you have everything you need every step of the way, including all the necessary backstops. She and Amy will be working very closely together.”

I walked around to the other side of the table and extended my hand. “Good to meet you.”

“And you as well, Mr. Olin,” said Melva Kingsley with a very powerful grip. She was taller than me, lean but muscled. And had been born a man, not that I cared in the least. We stared into one another’s eyes for a few moments as we shook, and then I nodded.

“Which branch?” I asked.

She looked at me for a few moments, making a decision.

“Army,” she said finally. Special Forces thirteen years, then Delta for the rest of my time. Retired after twenty-five. Master Sergeant.”

“And then Shelbee got a hold of you,” I said with a grin, glancing across the table at the woman in question.

Melva smiled, too.

“Actually she knew me before,” she said. I wasn’t quite sure if she meant before she left the Army or before she was a she. Probably

both.

“Couple ops overlapped when I was still with Delta and she was with who the hell knows. Never could get a straight answer out of her.”

Shelbee smirked.

“Well now that we’re all acquainted, or reacquainted, why don’t we sit and begin to discuss what’s about to happen? We have a lot to do and not very much time to do it. Relatively speaking, of course.”

Everyone nodded, and then took seats. Amy and I on one side, Shelbee and Melva on the other. Everyone had a laptop or iPad in front of them except me. I didn’t feel left out, felt kind of special in fact.

Shelbee looked up from her laptop and stared at me intently for a few seconds, then she sighed and leaned back in her chair.

“Tell me exactly what they told you during your meeting, Derrick. How they laid it out for you.”

I frowned.

“Don’t you know?” I said.

“I do,” she said. “But I need to hear it from you. There are a couple of things I need to clarify and one I need to add, but first I need you to tell me all, please.”

I glanced around for a few moments, then nodded, taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly before leaning forward, folding my hands on the table in front of me.

“Well, my understanding is that you folks want to turn humble ole me into the dastardly and dashing rogue, Gabin Endre Rocc, the international criminal underworld’s unstoppable guardian angel of bad guys and gals. The purpose for this is that you have an asset you’ve been grooming and maneuvering to infiltrate a group of in-

ternational arms brokers that are suspected, among several other things, of being major players in a plot to destabilize western and other America-friendly governments around the world. The ultimate goal on their side being the destabilization of the United States itself. And god does that sound corny when I say it out loud.”

“Perhaps,” Shelbee Roberts said, no trace of humor in her tone, her eyes dead serious. Or maybe just dead. “But no less true. Please continue, Derrick.”

After a brief pause, and a quick glance at the other two women in the room, I did.

Chapter 1 2

“According to *reliably sourced* intelligence, an organization called the Gemini Syndicate, sometimes the Gemini Consortium, has been linked to arms that have turned up on both sides of racial, cultural, and ethnic conflicts throughout the Third World in recent years, and even more recently in Eastern and now Western Europe. Gemini is headed by a forty-eight year old Israeli national by the name of Boaz Baumgartner, a former paratrooper and member of the elite Sayert Matkal, Israel’s top commando unit. His wife, Kavala Baumgartner, age forty-three, a former Mossad *katsa* ^[1], is his operations manager and chief of intelligence. They have been in business for five years, but Gemini is believed to be about twenty years old, and was possibly founded by the late Saul Nathanson, a member of the Jewish mafia, rumored to have been knocked off by Mossad some time around 2002. His son Moshe took over the business after his death and expanded operations. But he went dormant around 2011, thanks to your agency and the Gabin Rocc Profile, and Gemini fell into disarray before the Baumgartners came onto the scene.

“Anyway, according to this same reliably sourced intelligence, Gemini is in league with certain Russian oligarchs, one in particular, Vadim Voloton, age fifty, former FSB-Spetsnaz and pupil of former FSB Director Vladimir Putin. A lot of the weapons that are turning

up in these conflicts are of Russian origin, or from sources that the Russians are known to frequent.”

Shelbee Roberts held up her hand and I stopped.

“Okay, so you didn’t fall asleep when they were giving you the background,” she said with a tepid grin. “Let’s skip to your specific role in this.”

I smiled, nodded.

“SAD has been prepping their asset to infiltrate the Gemini Syndicate in order to gather information on its activities, hoping to gain enough evidence to shut them down, and possibly expose any Russian involvement in the scheme, preferably a direct connection to *Uncle Vlad* himself. In a nutshell. And to lend a bit of credibility to your asset’s criminal credentials, some clever wit in either the Political Action Group or your Special Operations Group got the brilliant idea in their head that reviving Gabin Endre Rocc was the perfect way to achieve that. And somehow my name became attached to the project. Could that have been your doing, Chief Roberts?”

Shelbee grinned again, this time with a bit more authenticity and shook her head.

“Not guilty, Derrick. I promise. But you were a good choice, and once it was mentioned to me, I wholeheartedly agreed.”

“I’m sure,” I said. “Guess getting tortured for a week down in Orlando to help you folks out wasn’t enough, huh?”

“*Ask not what your country can do for you...*” she mimicked JFK, then became serious again. “There’s more to this than you know, Derrick, and I can tell you now, you won’t like some of it one bit. The job of telling you the rest is on me. I volunteered, Nic did not order it. In fact, Mr. Jordon wanted to be the one to tell you before it went this far.”

Okay, my *Spidey Senses* were really tingling now. I had always known there was more that I wasn't being told, simply the nature of the beast, and why I didn't do this kind of work more often. Probably wouldn't be doing it ever again either, if I survived this. I pushed back in the chair.

"Tell me."

Shelbee Roberts stared at me for several long moments, then nodded.

"The asset's name is Brenda Gray," she told me. "But that's not always been her name. She's had a few over the years, but was born Melissa Jane Browner. However, I believe you, too, once knew her by another name."

"Fuck me!" I blurted. "You've gotta be kidding me?"

But she wasn't.

Absolute Fuck!

Chapter 13

Nearly three years ago back in Birmingham I and my team had been hired by a DOJ federal taskforce to protect a special advisor of theirs while she was in town assisting them [\[m\]](#). Turns out the advisor had been a client of mine from ten years before and had specifically requested my services instead of relying upon the U.S. Marshals, which, of course, did not sit well with them.

The taskforce was seeking to take down one of the largest interstate human trafficking and sexual slavery rings in the country, spanning all across the southeast from Texas to the Carolinas. Ultimately the taskforce was successful in its task, with just a smidge of assistance from yours truly, not to mention the wounding of two of my people, luckily now fully recovered.

The center of power for this network turned out to be in Georgia and its head was revealed to be a well-known and respected Atlanta businesswoman, married, mother of two grown children, one in his final year at the University of Alabama at the time. This exposure sent shockwaves through the Atlanta business community, and a quick distancing of the powerful and influential from the woman in question, and her family. However, before law enforcement could move in and arrest her, Myrna Blessing-Walcott disappeared, as did every member of her immediate family. An exhaustive search failed to yield any clues as to what happened to them, but speculation was

rife, including rumors that perhaps she had pulled a *Keyser Soze* and then fled overseas to a preplanned escape destination. No actual evidence of this ever came to light, however, and as far as I knew, the case was still officially open and on somebody's desk at the Department of Justice.

The key word being *officially*.

I had never really cared because my only concern had been protecting my client, and once I had eliminated (permanently) the direct threat to her, my job was done. Blessing-Walcott and the remnants of her organization were the purview of the DOJ's Taskforce on Human Trafficking and Sexual Slavery, at the time under the immediate direction of Deputy Chief Holly Ann Vale, then an assistant U.S. Attorney out of Memphis, now an assistant United States Attorney General in D.C.

Shelbee Roberts now explained what had really happened regarding Myrna, aka Melissa, aka *Brenda*.

She'd been right, I didn't like it much at all.

Least of all the part that now involved me.

Note to self: Take Will Jordon and Nic Calavici off the Christmas card list!

Chapter 14

“Following the collapse of her organization, knowing that public exposure was imminent, Blessing-Walcott told her husband everything. Apparently he really was in the dark regarding all of her criminal activities. Word is he wasn’t all that bright, and despite being chairman of the company that oversaw all their holdings, he didn’t really do much, leaving management of everything to his wife as the CEO. To say he was shocked is quite the understatement. And her kids, that must have been a really fun conversation for a mom to have with them, telling them that not only was she the head of a major prostitution ring, but that at one time she had made her living that way, too. Then, I’m not sure how much she did tell them about that part of her life, may have left it out. I would have.

“Anyway, the part about the family disappearing without a trace is fiction. In fact, Blessing-Walcott contacted DOJ herself, asked to meet with Holly Vale after her surrender, without an attorney present. Of course DOJ and Vale agreed. I’ll skip a lot of the details because they aren’t really relevant now. The short version is that the family was moved into protective custody. None of them wanted anything to do with Myrna after this, by the way. Her husband even asked for a divorce. Understandable, given the circumstances. Anyway, with the evidence against her fairly damning, the only out for Blessing-Walcott was to cooperate with DOJ, and she did, gave up

her entire network, all the players, including clients, some of whom were very powerful public figures that she had extensive blackmail on. We're talking, governors, congressmen, senators, media personalities, even a couple of cabinet members from past administrations. DOJ struck gold with her. And now you probably understand more about why Holly Vale was elevated to an assistant AG's job so quickly, even with Blessing-Walcott apparently still on the loose.

"And the information she was able to provide extended to other organizations with criminal affiliations that she had done business with in the past. It seems that not all of her criminal dealings were about prostitution, her trafficking operation smuggled other human cargo as well, and sometimes other things."

I frowned at that last statement, then something clicked in my brain.

"Shit!" I swore.

"Yeah," Shelbee Roberts said. "Mrs. Blessing-Walcott was also involved in moving Mexican gang enforcers as well as drugs and weapons across the southern border into the United States, and helping to move a lot of cash back down to Mexico, for a significant fee, of course. Turns out that she was a lot wealthier than anyone first realized. In fact, she made a lot more money from that operation than she did from the prostitution ring."

"Of course she did," I said. "And it is kind of ingenious, too. Think about it, using the prostitution/sexual slavery *thing* to cover the much more extensive and lucrative drugs and guns and enforcers *thing*. And it also explains why she knew someone like the late Margarita Petal-Flores."

Shelbee nodded.

“Yeah, the female assassin who attacked your safehouse and wounded two of your men. The same one you eventually put in the ground when she walked into your trap. She was a Mexican national and loaned out to Blessing-Walcott by one of the cartels. A top sicario of theirs down south, a lot of bodies on her ticket, even though she was so young.”

I sat back and shook my head.

“Jesus Christ. I had no idea about any of this. Didn’t really care either. Just wanted to protect my client.”

“And you did,” Shelbee said. “Very efficiently, too. This other stuff you probably never would have known because you never would have needed to. But now you do.”

“Shelbee, in addition to the fact that my profile somewhat matches up with Gabin Rocc’s, what else was a motivating factor in my being selected for this assignment?”

The CIA group chief smiled and drummed her long fingers across the tabletop. The other two women in the room with us sat silently, not making eye contact with me when I looked at them, so I refocused my attention on the woman in charge.

“Primarily you were selected because you are the best fit for the job,” she said. “Age, background, training and experience, and the right mindset. However, there was one more key factor in the consideration of your selection.”

I waited.

Eventually Shelbee told me what I already knew.

“That factor being the request of *The Asset* herself for the best possible bodyguard in existence to watch her back as she undertook her assignment to infiltrate a very dangerous group of people. And

to her mind the best was the man who was ultimately behind her undoing in Atlanta. You, my friend.”

Oh shit, I thought. It just keeps getting worse. Just great. I knew I should’ve shot her the one and only time we came face-to-face that night a few years ago at the Grand Hyatt in Atlanta. Hindsight, and proof positive that one should always go with their first instincts.

Shit!

Chapter 15

“When DOJ realized the significance of some of her connections to several foreign groups that came under the terrorist classification, they had to notify us. CTC^[n] had been monitoring some of these groups and had Blessing-Walcott peripherally on their radar, or at least one of her liaison people because the lady herself was good at keeping to the background for the most part. When people in CTC read Vale’s summaries it became quite clear that Blessing-Walcott could be of great use to the Agency. So a deal was struck between the two bureaucracies and we took custody of her.”

“And turned her into Brenda Gray,” I said.

“Among a few others,” Shelbee told me, but did not elaborate.

“Deputy Director Calavici was the NIO^[o] for Counterterrorism at the time and was intimately involved with the details. Right away she saw the potential for several exploitation operations, but felt CTC was not the right vessel to make this happen. She lobbied to get the case transferred to SAD.”

“And to you,” I said. “Because she already knew about this Gemini thing. You and your team were already working on it, right?”

Again, that same little smile that reminded me of a circling shark.

“None of the people in the other criminal organizations that she dealt with ever met or spoke with her directly. As I alluded to earlier, she was very careful to keep her distance, using cutouts, inter-

mediaries, and other means to conceal her identity. Which is why we feel confident that she can be used to infiltrate Gemini now.”

“Did her network ever do business with them?” I asked.

“Not directly,” Amy Stovall spoke for the first time in a while, swiping the screen on her iPad. “But some of the weapons that a couple of the Mexican cartels she did business with were supplied by Gemini.”

“And there is Baumgartner’s personal fetishes,” Melva Kingsley put in, looking a little uncomfortable.

I stared at her, waiting for more. When it did not come, I inquired directly.

Shelbee Roberts fielded my request.

“We’ll get into it later, Derrick,” she told me. “As part of your overall operational briefing, nothing really essential, and something we probably won’t exploit anyway. For now I wanted to let you know about Gray. Make sure this wouldn’t be a problem for you. I know you don’t like her...”

“That’s an understatement, Shel. The woman tried to murder my client and damn near succeeded in killing my people in the process. Leaving aside the fact that she’s a criminal of the worst order who essentially got away with all the bad shit she’s done, like has nothing to do with it. I don’t trust her. You said it yourself, I’m the guy largely responsible for taking her down, for ruining her life, destroying her family. Who’s to say she doesn’t want me in this so she can set me up to be murdered?”

Amy and Melva turned their attention on Shelbee and I noticed that both seemed to have accusation in their eyes. Shelbee ignored them and focused on me.

“A distinct possibility, Derrick,” she said smoothly. “And one that has been considered, specifically voiced by my colleagues here. But when all is said and done, even pretending to be Gabin Rocc, you are still Derrick Olin at the end of the day. And I have every confidence that if *The Asset* does have a secret hostile agenda regarding you, you will be the last one standing in the end.”

I actually laughed out loud. No one else joined me, though.

When I had myself under control I shook my head and stood up.

“Is she here right now?” I said.

Shelbee glanced at the other two women for a moment, then nodded.

“Yes. She’s here. She hasn’t left this building since she arrived two months ago.”

“Good,” I said. “Then it’s time *Ms. Gray* and *Mr. Rocc* have a face-to-face. Right here, right now, please.”

Shelbee knew that despite my overt politeness, I wasn’t actually asking. She sat still staring up at me for some time, then turned to Melva Kingsley and touched the other woman’s arm. Kingsley nodded warily and stood up, glancing briefly at me, and then headed for the door.

Well, I thought to myself, stretching my arms above my head and groaning, this ought to be a whole lot of fun!

Chapter 16

Melva Kingsley returned fifteen minutes later. During the intervening time, Amy caught me up on her personal life, the aforementioned husband and two kids, both girls, one eleven, the other nine. I learned that *Mr. Stovall*, actually Mr. Baxter (Evan), was a construction engineering contractor for the Department of the Air Force and it was through their mutual work that they had met. She was conducting a fraud investigation into the company he worked for at the time. As luck had it, Evan Baxter was not one of the guilty parties, but something in the way she smiled while telling me the story strongly suggested that he just might have ended up in handcuffs at some point afterwards. Likely with a bed involved.

Anyway, as I said, Melva returned within fifteen minutes. Accompanying her were two of the tactically clad security specialists, each armed with the same submachine gun that all the others were carrying, but I was only now able to classify as the Heckler & Koch MP-7. A 4.6x30 mm little box of death that could shred soft body armor as well as soft tissue in the blink of an eye. I'd been considering getting a few for the team back home. Perhaps before leaving *The Point* I might inquire as to their reliability and handling.

Also in tow was Myrna Blessing-Walcott, now the illustrious *Brenda Gray*. She was still the same as I remembered her, only now instead of the expensive and stylish evening gown encasing her

sleek figure, she wore a red sweater that hung halfway down her thighs, faded blue jeans, and gray high top sneakers. Five-seven, one hundred-ten pounds, shoulder length brown hair with just a hint of gray in it now. Gray again, I was beginning to wonder if there was a special significance to the reason she had been given that name. Oh and the eyes. Still brown, still displaying a keen intelligence with just a hint of coldness. And I suppose I should mention the lips, still full, slightly pouty, but today not adorned with the red lipstick that had been so arousing at our last meeting. In fact, she wasn't wearing makeup at all. Not that she needed it.

She paused in the doorway upon seeing me, and there was a smile, but I wasn't completely sure what was behind it. Shelbee thanked the guards and told them to wait outside the door, which Melva then closed and resecured. Gray stood looking at me and I did the same to her. No one else moved or said a thing.

The same thought occurred to me today as it had back when we met that night in Atlanta. *Such a gorgeous creature, for a scumbag criminal who got rich off the misery and suffering of others.*

"Good to see you again, Derrick," she said, now smiling a bit more. Her voice was confident, strong. She took a couple of steps toward me and extended her right hand. I stood still and stared into her eyes for a bit longer, then looked down at the outstretched hand. Fingernails well manicured, clear polish applied. I shook her hand, the skin smooth and dry, kind of cool, but maybe that had more to do with the temperature in the room, somewhere around sixty-five or so would be my guess.

"I won't lie and say the same of you, *Brenda*," I told her with no trace of irony in my voice. Her smile deepened, and she placed her left hand on the outside of my right, holding on just a bit longer

than was necessary. In other circumstances, having a beautiful fifty-two year old caressing my hand would have been nice. But not now. And not *this* fifty-two year old.

“Well now that the two of you have become reacquainted,” Shelbee Roberts interceded after clearing her throat. “Perhaps we could all sit and continue.”

Not really a request, and I noticed a sharpness in her eyes that had not been there before our new arrival had arrived. I couldn't be one hundred percent sure, but I suspect that Shelbee was not a fan of the former human trafficker herself. If so, there may be hope for her yet.

Shelbee indicated that her asset should sit on the same side of the table as she and Melva, in between them. Amy and I returned to our seats on the opposite side of the table. Out of the corner of my right eye I noticed the former Air Force major staring at me, turned and smiled at her, then turned back.

“Cutting straight to it, Gray,” the CIA group chief said. “The man who would be your protector is not exactly thrilled with the assignment, as you can no doubt understand, given your history. He has raised valid concerns and I had you brought in here, at his insistence, so that you can allay his suspicions. You should consider this a prime test of your ability to convince an unwilling subject that you are sincere. I dare say that failure to do so will most likely result in him refusing the assignment. So be on your game.”

During this speech both Gray and I stared across at one another, neither blinking, at first anyway, but then she did, of course. When Shelbee finished speaking, we continued sitting and staring. I could wait forever if I had to, had nearly done so on numerous occasions

in the past, but I suspected that *The Asset* did not have that long, nor did the other people in the room.

Finally, Gray took a deep breath, nodded, and then the Cheshire Cat smile dropped for the first time since she walked into the SCIF. She rested both hands on the table and interlaced her fingers.

“Derrick, yes, I have every reason to dislike you, even hate you. You did a lot of damage to my life, wrecked in it fact. But the truth is, it was going to happen sooner or later anyway. Just a matter of time. That federal taskforce or another one would have eventually pieced enough of the puzzle together to get someone close enough to me to crack, and then the whole house of cards would have caved in. I had always known it would happen, thought I would be better prepared when it did, but in the end...

“And to be honest, I actually liked you from the start, from the first time I read that background report I had compiled when you started to become a problem in Birmingham. Even going back further than your assignment to protect Nina Neetor.” She paused here, looking pointedly into my eyes. This was so that she could let me know that the secret I thought only a couple of other people knew about was not so secret after all. [\[p\]](#)

“Anyway,” she continued. “I knew that even if I took off, with all the loose ends still out there, it wouldn’t be long before DOJ, the U.S. Marshals, or some other agency caught up with me. Or worse, some of the criminal elements I was doing business with. That concerned me even more, especially given my family. I had to do something to make sure they were protected, and the only people I was sure I could trust worked for the American government. So I agreed to turn myself over to them in exchange for protection and relocation of my husband and children. None of them were speaking to me

by this time anyway, but that didn't matter, I needed them safe. And they are now, somewhere that I will never be able to find them, and neither will the people who might want to do them harm. I guess what I'm saying here is that I'm the sole reason for the situation that I find myself in today. I don't blame you, and I am not using this opportunity to set you up. First, I think you're too quick witted for that. And second, if I were to do something like that I would be breaking my deal with the CIA and they would have the Marshals remove the protection from my family."

She glanced over at Shelbee Roberts who was staring at her with a blank expression, in essence confirming her statement.

"Again, I bear no ill will toward you, Derrick. To be even franker, it is because I know of your abilities that I requested you to be my bodyguard during this operation. You've never lost a client in your professional life. Not in government service and not in the private sector, and you've gone up against some pretty serious baddies over the years. Including a group that I sent and you lethally dealt with. By the way, how are the two men who were wounded at that safe-house?"

A chilliness moved through my guts then and I felt my eyes growing colder, but with effort I kept my voice even.

"They're fine, fully recovered. Just a few minor scars for souvenirs. Lucky for you." That last part had slipped out, but Gray didn't seem to mind, simply nodded.

"Anyway, I told my handler here that given the situation they were sending me in to, the inherent dangers I was likely to face, I wanted someone with me who could keep me safe. You see, although I have spent most of my adult life in the crime business, consorting with criminals of all types, I have never been good at the rough stuff.

Outside the bedroom anyway. I expect this assignment could get very rough at times, especially if things do not go according to plan. Therefore, *you*, the best bodyguard I know. And as luck had it, they already had the perfect cover available for you.”

I glanced over at Shelbee but she was still staring at her asset. After another minute, when it was apparent that Gray was done talking, Shelbee turned her attention to me. She didn’t say anything, but her dark eyes were inquisitive. I sat back and glanced up at the ceiling for several minutes as the silence deepened.

Eventually, Melva Kingsley cleared her throat and asked if I had drifted off to sleep. I smiled, glanced over at her. Then the smile faded as I looked at Brenda Gray.

I sat up and focused on the woman in charge.

“I have no idea if she’s telling the truth or not,” I said. “She is quite an accomplished liar, fooled a lot of people, her own family included, for years. So her word is nothing to me. I’ll continue with the assignment as planned, although I will eventually *thank* a couple of old friends for not laying it all out straight for me at our earlier meeting. That aside, the only thing that I require in addition to what has already been agreed upon, is Level Nine Operational Clearance before the mission kicks off.”

The only person in the room unfamiliar with that term was The Asset herself, and she frowned, looking around at everyone else for several moments, finally coming to rest her eyes on her handler, Shelbee Roberts.

“What’s that?” she asked.

Shelbee took her time before responding, then turned and looked the other woman straight in the eyes, a touch of smug satisfaction blazing across her countenance.

“To put it succinctly, Brenda, your would-be bodyguard has just asked for permission to kill you if at any point he believes you are working against the goals of the mission. And he is requesting pre-approval of that sanction before the mission starts, that way he won’t have to make a call later.”

Brenda Gray’s mouth dropped open and her attention shifted back to me. There was nothing to say, so I didn’t say it.

Shelbee Roberts drummed her fingers on the tabletop for a few seconds and then pushed up from her chair, looking down at me.

She nodded.

“Level Nine Clearance is authorized,” she said. “At your discretion. I’ll have it entered into the file before you deploy.” She turned to Melva Kingsley. “We’re done with Ms. Gray. Please have the guards come and remove her now. We have a lot more that we need to discuss with Mr. Rocc at the moment.”

Melva nodded, standing. It seemed that she was smiling a bit, too. When I glanced down at Amy Stovall to my right, I noticed that she was not.

Ah well, as the song goes, *you can’t please everyone.*

Chapter 17

I was informed that I would be at The Point for five weeks of accelerated training that would cover everything I needed to know about the operation itself, tradecraft in the field (because it had been a decade or two—nearly three—since I had contemplated doing something like this), cover background (known as a *legend*), weapons (they were serious about that), unarmed combat (that, too), and languages. According to my previous operational file, I had taken Spanish in high school and German in college and had barely passed either of them. During my time in the service I had also taken a few immersion courses that hadn't seemed to stick all that well either so the operational planners felt it necessary to include some quick-learn language modules along with my training. My operational legend would be Canadian, but since I was supposed to have spent the last thirty years protecting bad actors all over the world, it was only logical that I should have picked up a few foreign tongues.

Melva Kingsley was explaining this to me about twenty minutes after Brenda Gray had been removed from the SCIF and returned to wherever she was being billeted. I let her finish, nodding absently, then told her I understood completely.

The three women in the room with me froze when I said it, all staring at me with some surprise. Then Shelbee Roberts started ask-

ing me several questions, all of which I answered effortlessly in flawless French. Then I switched to Spanish. Finally German.

“Over the last couple of years I have made a determined effort to do what I should have done all those years ago, actually learn a foreign language. Then went further and learned three. In addition to French, German, and Spanish, I know some Hebrew, a little Arabic, and Russian, mostly swear words there I’m afraid. Come to think of it, I know a lot of swear words in Hebrew, too.”

Shelbee continued to quiz me in the three languages I purported to speak, apparently she spoke all of those fluently as well, plus Russian and Arabic. Hebrew was Melva’s department. It seems that Amy only spoke Spanish, besides English, of course. I reached over and patted her hand, telling her it was nothing to be ashamed of. She responded with a smirk, and for a moment there I thought I was in for a *middle finger salute*, but she opted for more dignity than the crowd I usually hung out with back home.

“So the language section can be skipped, I guess,” Melva said, making a note on her iPad. “Good, gives us more time for operational immersion and tradecraft skill building.”

“You’ll have quarters here in this building,” Amy told me. “Actually we all do, but Melva and Shelbee have off-base accommodations as well because they live here year-round. I’m just TDY^[q]. All of your training will be conducted by the best people in the business, each with a very specific area of expertise. They will do what they have to in order to make sure you’re ready for the field, Gabin.”

I glanced over at her when she called me that.

“That’s right,” Shelbee Roberts said to me. “From this point forward you aren’t Derrick Olin or Eddie Howell. You’re Gabin Endre

Rocc, that's how everyone here will refer to you. That's how we will all refer to you. Is that understood?"

I nodded.

"Gotcha, Chief," I said, not quite as sardonically as I might have.

She stared at me for several long moments before nodding and turning to her operational support coordinator. Or perhaps I should have said *my* operational support coordinator.

"Okay, Melva, the show is yours for now. Amy and I will step out for a while to take care of other stuff. Meal break in two hours."

Melva Kingsley nodded as the other two women stood up, gathering their things and making for the door. Once we were alone, the former Delta master sergeant stared at me for quite some time without saying anything. I sat back and waited, considering just what the heck I had gotten myself into.

There was probably an easier way to make two million bucks off the books, but truth be told, I was looking forward to this. Which leads me to the conclusion that early onset Alzheimer's must be afoot somewhere in *me* noggin.

That or just rank stupidity.

Definitely a distinct possibility, too.

Chapter 18

I was up at 0500 the next morning. I usually woke up between five and six anyway, unless work required something else, so this was no big deal. Nor was morning exercise, only I was used to doing that alone. But not today.

Barry and Larry, those were the names they gave me and I suppose they could have been legitimate, although given the nature of their work, it was entirely possible that they were cover names, too. Anyway...

Barry is in his late twenties, about my height, thick, muscled, close-cropped hair of the high and tight variety, with deep ebony skin. He sounded as if he had been raised in the Bronx.

Larry is a little older, not as thick, a couple inches taller, his complexion fair but healthy. His brown hair was much longer, kind of shaggy, and where Barry was clean shaven, Larry was sporting a few days worth of beard growth. He was from Texas, probably some place on the western side, the drawl was hard to miss.

Both were dressed in gym clothes, although we weren't in the gym just yet. Actually we were out near the wooded area just behind the building where I had spent my first night in my new quarters, not much to write home about, but more comfortable than some places I've slept in my time. And now I had on blue sweats and brown

high-top running shoes, standing and listening as two people nearly half my age explained what they planned on accomplishing today.

“You look like you’re in pretty decent shape,” Barry was saying. “That’s good. The cover you’re assuming is of a guy your age that has kept himself in shape, was a top operator in his youth, and is still a bad ass. Chief assures us that’s you, so it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Larry grinned, then took over.

“But we are gonna have to test you, push you some, make sure, because you’re gonna be thrown in the shit once you leave here and we gotta make sure you can handle yourself in tight spots when you ain’t got nobody to watch your ass ‘cept yourself. Okay?”

I said it was okay, yawned.

Larry and Barry exchanged glances, then nodded, and we got down to some basic stretching. Ten minutes later we went for a little jog in the woods.

On any given day I run between two and five miles, depending on time constraints and my mood. When I was in the Air Force, and for a while afterwards when I still lived over in Homewood, I used to do a lot of off-road, off-track running, up and down hills and such. However, since I moved downtown, I’ve been doing mostly flat ground running, while dodging early morning traffic. At least once a week I ran up and down the back stairs of my building, twenty up and twenty down, but it wasn’t enough, and after a couple of miles this morning I quickly realized that I had let myself go a little in recent years, maybe more than a little. When I got back home after this was over, I was going to have to reorganize my exercise regiment. I mean sure, for most guys my age I was in phenomenal shape, but most guys my age didn’t do what I did for a living. Luck-

ily most of the jackasses I went up against were in piss poor shape, even those half my age, but that might not always be the case.

At four miles I was breathing a little raggedly, but did my best to hide it. Larry and Barry didn't appear to have even broken a sweat yet. I was soaked. Even more so at eight miles, but by this time I noticed that we had changed directions, moving back toward where we had begun as the sun started to rise higher and higher, but the morning chill was still with us, and felt kind of nice right about now.

Ten miles, been a while since I had run that far, and it showed. I managed to stay upright as I took deep breaths, profuse sweat running down my forehead and into my eyes. Barry and Larry stood a few feet away stretching, snickering, joking with one another, and watching me the whole time.

"You okay over there, Mr. Rocc?" said Barry.

I nodded, took in some more air, feeling a tremble throughout my body.

"Just fine," I lied.

Both younger men smiled again, didn't believe me for a second.

Larry went inside and came back a few minutes later with three liter bottles of water. I could have kissed him on the mouth for that. Well he'd have to shave first.

I downed the first half of the bottle in three quick gulps, then took in some more air and carefully sipped the rest. The mistake I made was a rookie one and I should have known better. Actually I did know better. True, I was in training in a technically friendly environment, but I was in training for a dangerous overseas assignment and it was the job of everyone based here to make sure that I was ready for that assignment.

I had turned my back on the PT instructors for about ten seconds when I felt powerful hands grab me from behind in a bear hug. Barry. His grip was like a boa constrictor pinning my arms to my sides. And before I could react, he lifted me off my feet and spun me around toward where Larry stood, a Ka-Bar held low in his left hand.

The good thing for me is that this isn't my first rodeo, in training like this or in real life. Just as Larry struck with the knife, my left leg rotated in a near perfect outside crescent kick, the outer edge catching his left wrist just as he thrust, knocking it and the knife to the side. He groaned in pain, dropped the knife and grabbed his injured wrist with his right hand.

And before Barry could react, I became deadweight in his arms, pulling him off balance and halfway down to the ground with me before springing back up, head-butting him and breaking his grip on me. I then spun around and delivered a vicious knee to his midsection, doubling him over and shoving him to the ground.

Larry was still massaging his injured wrist, but took several steps back, sinking into what I immediately recognized as an Israeli combat fighting stance. Mistake on his part. Never reveal your training to your opponent. I kept my stance neutral, not a stance really, my hands at my sides, circling to his left. Being young, and his pride smarting somewhat, Larry came at me aggressively, as I had hoped, and it was only a couple of seconds before he came too close and I was able to go to work on his vulnerable points, just had to remember to take it easy and not kill him. He didn't make it simple work for me, but he still went down.

I was winded again, but exhilarated. Then I heard clapping from behind me and spun around. Shelbee Roberts was standing ten feet

away wearing dark gray sweats and a blue ball cap.

“Not bad for somebody our age,” she grinned. She removed her ball cap and bowed slightly. I smiled, too, then realized I shouldn’t have.

The ball cap came flying at my face and I was barely able to avoid it’s weighted front end before I found myself under assault by all three of them.

And like an idiot, I was actually grinning. Breathing heavily, sweating buckets, but grinning nonetheless.

Chapter 19

His name was Trout. Probably his last, but he never said, so I didn't ask. Late fifties, maybe early sixties, short and round, full head of gray hair, Marine Corps tattoo on the back of his left forearm, faded but distinctive. He introduced himself to me as *Firearms*, so I guess we all knew what he did for a living.

I survived the three-way physical assault, but would be sore for some time to come. And so would my attackers. One bit of satisfaction came from the fact that after all these years I finally got to sock Shelbee Roberts in the jaw for all the shit she tried to pull when we'd first met. On the plus side for her, she got to do the same to me, and she was an expert when it came to kidney punches and short, quick jabs. I made a mental note to wear my protective cup for tomorrow's jog, and if I could manage it, some additional padding for my other points of vulnerability.

A shower, breakfast, an hour long briefing with Melva Kingsley, and now I was in a small five lane shooting chamber in the basement of SOG's facility at The Point.

"They tell me you can shoot already," Trout was saying as he opened several hard side cases on two tables in back of the chamber. "But I heard that before. Don't mean nothin' to me. Before you leave me, though, you will know how, and then some." He paused, glanced over at me, his eyes gray steel.

“Anybody ever shoot at you?” he said. “You don’t gotta give me specifics, just a yes or no.”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“You shoot back?”

“Yes.”

Another pause, this time more thoughtful.

“Yeah,” he mused. “You might just be a gunslinger after all. Let me show you what we got here...”

AFTER LUNCH MELVA AND AMY TOOK ME into the SCIF and started briefing me on the specifics of the Gemini Syndicate, including every scrap of information available on the known key personnel. The Baumgartners figured heavily into this briefing, but there was another who received nearly as much attention.

“Avi Schulman, forty-five.”

They were using PowerPoint, the visuals up on a large flat screen across the room from where we all sat on the same side of the conference table. A photo of Schulman appeared on that screen now.

“Not the most handsome guy in the world,” Melva was saying. “Even before that car bomb nearly ended him ten years back. He was Mossad, a *kidon* team leader. That’s where he met Mrs. Baumgartner, by the way, when she was a case officer. Also there is some unconfirmed speculation that the two of them might have been more than just colleagues. Maybe still the case. Possible point of exploitation if necessary later. Then with the Israelis, who the hell knows. Lot of fucking going on with those people. And I’m not being catty, just if you know anything about their intelligence people, all of them, regardless of age, are horny as fuck.” Neither Amy nor I commented, although I’d had dealings with the Israelis before so...

“Schulman also has his own connections to the Russians. Did extensive work in the former republics when he was with Mossad. Unconfirmed as of this moment, but he might know that oligarch we mentioned before, Vadim Voloton, however we’ll get to that later. For now let’s stick to Gemini...”

I STARTED SHAVING MY HEAD WHEN I WAS twenty-four, shortly after I joined OSI. There were a lot of reasons for the decision, some of which I probably don’t even remember now, but it was a look I quickly came to like and have been pleased with ever since. Unfortunately, since coming to The Point, I had had to stop shaving. Orders.

“We want to change your appearance somewhat,” Shelbee Roberts told me. “That shiny bald head of yours is kind of a trademark of your other persona. I remember when we met you used to have a goatee, kind of miss it, too. But Gabin Rocc needs hair, on his head and on his face. While you’re here you will not shave, no matter how ragged you start looking. Right before deployment, we’ll get you fixed up, trimmed and all, make you look pretty.”

I was going to hate this, the itching most of all, but the unkempt look, too. I have to say that in this respect my military background is most pronounced, I like a neat appearance. Nonetheless, I’d just have to live with it for a few weeks. But then there was that other matter...

“You’re kidding?” Shelbee said when I told her.

“No,” I responded. “It wasn’t the central reason for my decision, but it did play a factor, so it will have to be addressed. And the traditional stuff won’t work. We’re talking industrial strength.”

She laughed and shook her head. Then said she’d take care of it.

Yes, when I had hair I had really bad dandruff. No matter what I tried, most of the over-the-counter hair care products just didn't work on me, even if I used them twice a day. So if I was going to have hair again, the CIA was going to have to come up with something that worked really well.

Sounds like a job for *Q-Branch*!

"Really, 007, do grow up!"

TWO WEEKS IN AND I HAD GOTTEN OVER my reservations about the assignment, resigned to it, even looking forward to it. I wasn't as sore from my daily exercises with Barry and Larry, despite their increased aggression since realizing that I was not the feeble pushover they had initially thought. With luck I wouldn't have to seriously hurt or kill one of them before training was over.

Trout and I were getting along swimmingly during our two hours of togetherness every day. After verifying that I knew my ass from my elbow and which end the bullets came out of with firearms, we moved from the real thing to simulations. I hadn't done FATS ^[r] training in years and it took me a little while to get comfortable with it again. Some of the scenarios were less than realistic, a couple downright idiotic, but after a week I was in the right frame of mind and was able to breeze through the first two levels. After that, things became much more difficult, and I fucked up a lot. But Trout was not discouraged; in fact he was rather encouraging of me. Fatherly even.

I hadn't seen much of The Asset during the first few weeks, but by the end of week three she and I were brought into the SCIF together after breakfast for our first joint briefing. It was mostly about her mission and I sat back and listened, absorbing everything as I

watched the woman two chairs away, sitting in a blue sweater and khaki trousers, her elegant fingers interlaced in front of her on the table.

I had no idea what was going through her mind, and had no idea how much, if at all, I could trust her. She might be planning to stab me in the back, literally, the first chance she got, or she might be sincere about completing the mission as described. She probably did care about her family, otherwise why go to the trouble of turning herself in in the first place? Still, there was something behind those eyes that just bothered me, made me suspicious, so while in the field, in addition to watching out for hostile external threats, I was going to have to keep one eye on the woman I was supposed to be protecting, just to make sure that a *cloaked dagger* wasn't about to slice into my ribs from her direction.

Without warning, she turned and glanced at me, smiled briefly, then turned back to stare at the screen where the PowerPoint was advancing as Amy Stovall briefed.

I don't know if it was just the itching or a warning, but the shaggy hair on the back of my neck was suddenly tingling. The shampoo that Shelbee had given me seemed to be keeping the dandruff at bay for now, but the itching was still a problem. Or maybe it was just apprehension.

Either way, it annoyed me.

As did the feeling I got every time *Brenda Gray* looked at me.

Chapter 20

“Since you said you was a Forty-Five guy, I had this made special for you.” Trout was becoming alarmingly friendly, but the gift he was presenting to me now nearly made me weep. “They comin’ out with Forty calcs soon, and this is on the drawin’ board, too, but SOG got a little sneaky. Technically not illegal, but we’d get sued shitless if they found out about it, and could trace it to us. Or we would if the Agency could get sued over shit like this. Thanks to the Homeland Security Act of 2004, we don’t have to worry about stuff like that now.”

I wasn’t listening anymore, gazing into the brown leather case on the table in front of me. I am not what you would traditionally call a *gun guy*. I use guns, have all of my adult life, pretty much never go anywhere without one, and if I do, usually acquire one as soon as I get to where I’m going. But I’m not fanatical about them, as a lot of people are back from whence I hail.

A company called SilencerCo designed an integrally silenced handgun a few years back with the anticipation of legislation being passed in the U.S. Congress that would make it easier for civilians to own silenced weapons. The bill hit an unexpected snag and had never been passed into law, and with the recent shift in power in the House of Representatives, wasn’t likely any time soon. Too bad for SilencerCo, at least in the United States.

I'd watched some of the product videos online for the Maxim-9 and had been impressed, as were a lot of others, but the one thing I was not a fan of was the caliber. So far, only 9 mm. Anybody knows me knows I'm not much of a fan of that caliber. Don't get me wrong, I know it gets the job done, as does the .40 caliber, but I have always had a preference for the Forty-Five, and have always carried one, with the exception of a few years, first in the Security Police and later at the beginning of my OSI career, but after that it has been strictly the Four-Five caliber. Mainly Glocks since I've been a civilian again.

What I was looking at in the box was a Maxim design (rip-off) chambered for the .45 cartridge. I picked the weapon up, hefted it in my hands, and couldn't resist the rising smile. Kind of looked like a hand blaster from the original Battlestar Galactica series. I have no idea what they looked like in the remake series because I never saw it, speaking of rip-offs.

Trout grinned next to me, too, slapping my shoulder with his huge right paw.

"It is sweet, Rocc, let me tell you." And he did. Then we went over to one of the lanes and I tried it out. No ear protectors needed. Not completely silent, of course, but in a room full of people talking, no one would realize what was happening until several bodies were on the floor. Cheery thought, I know. I fired three ten round magazines and then Trout showed me how to break the weapon down for cleaning. I took it apart and reassembled it three times to make sure I could do it quickly, knowing I'd be spending a lot of time practicing on my own. Then I shot some more.

Later, as I sat down at the back table to clean the weapon, Trout brought out a custom made black shoulder rig with two magazine

holders on the opposite side. It fit me perfectly.

“Got with the tailor who’s making all your clothes for the op,” he told me as I put it on and adjusted the straps for comfort. “Made sure to get the dimensions right. And that’s silk and calfskin, too, plus kydex, of course. Durable and comfortable. Expensive as shit, too, but just the kind of thing a guy like you supposed to be would have. Like the weapon that goes in it. And it’s not traceable. People will wonder where you got it, you can be vague, tell ‘em you had your own private armorer build it for you. Close enough to the truth.”

“Thank you, Trout,” I said, really meaning it. “This is great.”

Suddenly the man who had introduced himself to me four weeks ago as *Firearms* was very serious again, staring at me intently. Then he nodded, punched me in the shoulder. Guess that’s Marine for *you’re welcome*.

I smiled again, then went back to adjusting the straps on the most comfortable shoulder holster I have ever worn in my life.

Chapter 21

“Where were you born?”

“None of your fucking business.”

“Ha, ha. In reality that’s exactly how Gabin Rocc would answer that question, but humor me.”

“Toronto, Canada,” I said, then gave the year and date of my birth as Gabin Endre Rocc.

“What was your mom?”

I resisted the temptation to say *a woman*, or in my case, a pit viper.

“Nothing as far as I know, she died before I was one. Traffic accident. Raised by my dad, he never remarried. He was a mechanic and a janitor, did his best to put food on the table and keep me clothed. Had a drinking problem but hid it well.”

“What about school?”

“I went,” I said. “Because the law required it. Didn’t like it, wanted out as soon as I could. Convinced my dad to sign the papers to let me join the army when I turned seventeen.”

“What kind of soldier were you?”

“Good at fighting, not so good when it came to discipline,” I said. “What they called *authority issues*. Spent some time in the stockade. Kept me from getting promoted much, or got me busted down if I did.”

“Why didn’t they just kick you out?”

“Because like I said, I was good at fighting. And as it turns out, very good at killing.” I then went into the cover story that had been meticulously cobbled together and backstopped at every turn, mixing in a lot of what the Agency had already put together for Rocc at the beginning with the new stuff created specifically for the upcoming mission. In reality, Rocc was a few years older than me, but close enough so it wouldn’t make much difference, which meant his career as a soldier started while I was still early in my college career. It also explained why he was already on the private side of things in ’94, having finally been kicked out of the Royal Canadian Army after they found out he (I) was moonlighting as an enforcer for a Winnipeg drug gang.

“And so with the Army behind me and the only marketable skills I had involved guns, knives, and bombs, added to the fact that I already knew a lot of the wrong kinds of folks from my time with the Winnipeg gangsters, what else was I gonna do?”

Shelbee Roberts, Melva Kingsley, and Amy Stovall all sat on the same side of the table in the SCIF staring at me on the opposite side of them wearing a very expensive tailored black suit, American cut, button-down white silk shirt, no tie, my thinning on top salt and pepper hair and matching beard neatly trimmed and groomed. I sprawled back in the chair, my right arm resting casually on the table, my fingers curled. I felt comfortable, at-ease, totally in control, despite the fact that I couldn’t actually leave this facility if I wanted to. Not yet anyway.

“And you have no problem working for criminals?” Shelbee said in French.

“Their money is as good as anybody else’s,” I responded in kind.

“You’ve killed police and government agents,” Amy said in Spanish.

“Not that you could ever prove,” I answered her in the same language. “But if I had, it was because they were trying to hurt clients of mine who had paid me to keep them safe.”

“How do your clients make contact with you?” said Melva in German.

“Like I’m gonna tell you,” I answered smartly. Before she could say more, I told her what she wanted to know.

This went on for another hour before Shelbee looked at the other two women, both of whom nodded.

“He’s scary ready,” Amy said, smiling. “It’s like he’s always been this guy. This, and pardon me, *asshole* in very nice clothes.”

Melva grinned.

“Yeah, they did a really fine job on the clothes, but he’s done great work on the cover, too.”

“Actually that was everyone,” Shelbee said. “The entire team has done fantastic work.” She paused and leaned forward on the table, staring into my eyes for a few moments. “Gabin, tell me, where are you right now?”

I stared back at her for a few moments, considering my response, then glanced away before giving it.

“Belize,” I said. “Got a bolt hole there, nobody knows about.”

“Why are you there?” Shelbee pressed.

Again, I took my time before responding. When I did there was a lot of bitterness in my tone.

“Job in Venezuela went to shit last week,” I said. “Client got clipped because the dumbass wouldn’t do what I told him. Exposed himself unnecessarily and somebody cut him down. Damn near got

me, too, when I caught up. Got the shooter, though. Planted that fucker with two good headshots.”

“First time you lost a client?” she went on.

“You fucking know it is!” I spat. “And if the motherfucker had listened, he’d still be alive! The dumb shit!”

Shelbee grinned and sat back, again looking at the other two women, both of whom were smiling as well.

“He’s ready,” she said.

“He is,” Melva said.

“Absolutely,” said Amy.

I didn’t smile, or even acknowledge their praise. It wasn’t what Gabin Rocc would do. And as of this moment, Gabin Rocc was the only person sitting in my chair.

Chapter 22

“Brenda Gray is a carefully backstopped alias that is designed to look like an alias but no one should be able to penetrate it, except to the points that we want them to. What we’re going for is a woman who scrubbed her past life in favor of a fresh start. Kind of like reality in this case, considering the background of The Asset. The mystery will add credibility to the cover in the right circles. And if somebody is good enough to peel back the layers of the Gray cover, there is an alternative that The Asset is fully briefed on. Really nasty, too, which would explain why she wanted to bury her old life. But as her protector, you won’t know anything about that so you won’t be briefed at this time. The way you work, it won’t matter to you anyhow, as long as her money is good.”

Melva and I were in the SCIF after dinner the next day. She had spent most of that day with The Asset, going over final preparations for the operation. Now it was my turn. We were sitting on the same side of the table, a laptop between us, and occasionally she would scroll down.

“She operates a legitimate import/export business in Baltimore out of a warehouse on the inner harbor. But it’s largely a front, the real business is smuggling.”

I listened and absorbed all the details of my new client’s professional and personal lives for the past decade, doing my due diligence

the same as with any client, asking questions where something needed clarifying, making mental notes.

“A deal went south last week and now some Chechen *freedom fighters* are upset with her. As a matter of fact, they cut up her middleman and sent him to her warehouse in pieces. So her need for your services is obvious.”

I nodded

“You guys actually have Chechen terrorists on the payroll for that backstop?” I said.

Melva simply smiled and continued with the briefing.

We wrapped up about nine p.m. and I noticed her checking her watch again. She had been doing that a lot during the last couple of hours and I got the impression something else was on her mind, so I inquired.

At first she tried to assure me that it was nothing, saying that we should keep our focus on the upcoming mission, but then she shook her head sadly.

“I should not be thinking about anything else right now but getting the two of you ready for your insertion in the field soon, but you’re right, I am distracted. A part of my mind is somewhere else right now and it’s unprofessional as hell.”

I sat and watched her, the struggle within, then reached over and patted her arm.

“I’m here if you want to talk about it. All I was gonna do is go back to my room and read, then sleep. Another couple of torture sessions with Larry and Barry left before we say our goodbyes. I’m sure there’ll be lots of tears on that day.”

Melva grinned.

“They really have come to loathe you,” she told me. “They thought they’d be able to best you, at least in the beginning, but you showed them that a man in his fifties is still one tough SOB. Kind of hurt their pride, but they’ll get over it. Or they won’t. The reason I’m bummed out is because tonight a group of friends of mine are up in D.C. taking part in a protest march outside the White House and I really ought to be there supporting them.”

I frowned, thought a minute, then a light came on. While it was true that I was not big into the news these days, I was aware that recently the dumbass in the White House had announced a ban on transgender persons serving in the armed forces. And even more recently, the courts had sided with said dumbass.

After a few minutes, when nothing even remotely inspiring came to mind, I reached out and touched her arm again, squeezing.

“Well, Master Sergeant, looks like the war is far from won and this battle might have been lost, but anybody with a brain would never bet against a Delta.”

Melva looked at me, melancholy in her dark eyes. She was close to tears and dared not speak. She nodded, stood up, and exited the room.

After a few minutes I stood up, shook my head.

I had been planning on returning to my quarters to read, as I told Melva earlier, but now another thought came to mind and I decided on a change of plans.

Suddenly I was smiling as I exited the SCIF.

FYI, Gabin Rocc smiling was never a good thing.

Chapter 23

Private quarters at The Point were all on the same floor, sublevel one, one floor above the shooting range and firearms training simulator room. Didn't know if there was some kind of hidden meaning behind that decision.

The first time I set foot on this floor I noticed the two armed tactical security officers, one constantly walking the corridors while the other stood post outside a door down the east hall in back, in the opposite direction of my quarters. And for clarity's sake I should point out that my quarters don't have armed security posted outside, and neither does anyone else's. But *The Asset* gets her own personal guard. Kind of strange, considering all the surveillance cameras around the place, the fact that there are no windows or other outside access points from this sublevel, and given that her ID badge doesn't have any clearances that would allow her to work any of the doors or the elevators. But I guess Shelbee Roberts wasn't taking any chances, sending a direct message to Brenda Gray that she wasn't really trusted, more tolerated because she had value, at least for the moment.

The officer on duty at the door now was one I recognized, although her name escaped me. None of them wore nameplates, and as I had indicated earlier, no CIA badges ever have a person's name printed on them. Her bearing was pure military, and despite her

small stature, the clothing and the armaments she was wearing made her look like a specter of death.

She eyed me as I approached, probably knowing that my quarters were not in this direction. Her partner was down the west corridor now, having been there when I got off the elevator, but paid me no attention as I turned in the wrong direction.

“Officer,” I said as I approached slowly, keeping my hands visible. They all knew who I was, theoretically, and knew I had pretty much free access to the facility, but I was still carefully watched when on my own because they also knew that I wasn’t really one of the gang.

She nodded once. “Sir.”

“If possible, I’d like to speak with Ms. Gray,” I said. “If she’s still awake.” I paused a couple seconds, smiled. “And I’m sorry but I don’t know your name.”

The officer stared at me stoically for a few seconds, glancing past my shoulder, probably seeing her partner returning.

“Name’s Taglio, sir,” she finally answered, stepping away from the door. “And she’s awake. Ms. Stovall just left a few minutes ago.”

“Thank you, Officer Taglio,” I said, then watched as she pressed the buzzer next to the steel door she was guarding.

THE ASSET WAS SITTING AT THE DESK IN the corner with a book when I stepped into the room a few moments later. I noticed right away that her living space was the same as mine, cramped but efficient. One room, besides the bathroom, a bunk bed in one corner, a small kitchenette, and the sitting area with the desk and another chair. There was no television in this room either, guess CIA figured the people who came here for training didn’t need the distraction.

She was wearing dark green sweats and white sneakers, her hair loose around her shoulders. And despite the fact that she still wasn't wearing any makeup, the woman seemed to be more gorgeous every time I saw her. Just goes to prove that natural beauty is far greater than anything that comes out of a bottle, tube, jar, or can.

"This is the first time since you've been here that you've ever come to my quarters," she said, closing the book and setting it on the desk beside her right elbow.

"Well it is such a long walk from the other end of the floor," I quipped, walking over to the second chair. "And I'm not as young as I used to be."

She smiled and nodded that I should sit, which I did.

"None of us are," she said, leaning back and crossing her legs left over right, resting her hands in her lap as she stared at me with those cool brown eyes of hers, her full lips pursed. "But from what I understand from the whispers I've heard here and there, you are far from feeble. A good thing for me, considering I will be relying on you to keep me alive in the near future."

I adjusted my position in the chair, glanced around the room before bringing my focus back to her.

"I hope they didn't break the budget on our quarters," I remarked. "All this opulence and splendor."

She smiled again.

"Nicer than a prison cell," she said. "And I should know. Not as nice as my home in Atlanta, or some of the others, but one makes do. When we go operational, things will be different. Have you seen the layouts?"

"I have," I said. "Impressive, indeed. The Agency has really outdone itself. Are you ready to assume your new role?"

She didn't respond right away, kept her eyes on mine, but I could see deep concentration behind them as the spot between her eyebrows crinkled.

"I suppose," she said. "I want to get out of here, but I'm not so sure I'm gonna make a good spy. I mean, sure, I've been a criminal most of my adult life, led a double life that I kept from my family and close friends for years, built an entire illicit empire and managed to keep it going strong for a long time, but this stuff is not the same. I don't have the kind of control I used to back then, nor the safety nets. You know I almost never dealt directly with anybody outside the upper rungs of my organization, kept a lot of the meaner stuff well away from me. A few times I took a more direct approach, but usually I had cutouts and liaisons between me, layers upon layers. But this time, I'm gonna be out there and exposed. If I fuck it up, I'll be dead, and it might not be an easy death."

I had been watching her the entire time as she spoke, her eyes, her lips, the muscles in her face, the tone of her skin, using all those tools of interrogation and observation that I had been taught so many years ago in OSI to see if I could spot any trace of deception in her. Either I had lost my touch or this woman that I was now calling Brenda Gray was telling the truth. Added to that, she was terrified.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, and she looked away after one. Finally I sighed.

"Brenda, I'm gonna be with you every step of the way, watching out for you. You play it straight, do what they want you to do, and I'll keep you safe. That's what I do, it's why I'm here. It's why you wanted me here. You know what I can do, even before they turned me into *this*."

She looked at me then, a small smile rising at the corners of her lips.

“You were quite handsome bald and clean shaven,” she quipped. “But I must admit that I like the new look. You should think about keeping it after this is all over. Bet the ladies back in the Magic City would love it.”

I chuckled.

“Don’t think so,” I said. “I’ve finally gotten used to it, and having to carry a comb again after twenty-five years, but I like my old look better.”

“Well there is something essentially sexy about a man with a shaved head,” she admitted. “Particularly a black man with your coloring. I’ll bet a lot of women, especially white women, comment on it a lot when they’re flirting with you.”

I didn’t respond, not sure I was happy with the direction in which this conversation had turned. But, of course, she couldn’t help but push the point.

“I don’t mean to embarrass you,” she said. “But when we met that time at the Grand Hyatt, despite the fact that you threatened to kill me—perhaps because of it—I found you to be very attractive. Forceful, manly, even a little savage in a highly intelligent way. Later, as I replayed it in my mind, I fantasized that instead of leaving as you did, you locked the door and forced yourself on me. But you didn’t have to use much *force* because I wanted you to do it.”

I couldn’t help but smile, snickered even.

Then everything in me went absolutely cold as I stood up and looked down at her.

“You’re a very attractive woman,” I told her. “And still a sexy head-turner with a body that women half your age would murder

their families for. That being said, and everything else aside, I know exactly what you are, and more specifically, what you were. Do not ever try to bat your eyes and manipulate me again. It won't work. And lastly, if you betray the mission, or me, don't think for a second that I will hesitate to splatter your brains all over whatever surface happens to be handy at the time."

I turned for the door, opened it, paused to glance back at her.

"Have a good night," I said in a cheery tone. "Pleasant dreams."

I stepped out into the corridor and closed the door behind me. The male officer had replaced Taglio and she was probably out patrolling the corridors now. He said his name was Unger. I said goodnight to him and headed for the opposite corridor where my quarters were located. On the way I ran into Officer Taglio and said goodnight to her.

I was feeling pretty good about where everything stood at the moment. Though I wouldn't be taking bets on just how long that feeling would last. Probably less than the time it would take me to get undressed for bed tonight.

Chapter 24

FROM THE BALTIMORE SUN

GUNFIRE DISRUPTS PRIVATE GATHERING AT THE INNER HARBOR'S HYATT REGENCY-BALTIMORE HOTEL MONDAY NIGHT.

It is reported that a still unidentified number of armed persons invaded *The Sun* Ballroom on the main floor of the Hyatt Regency Hotel located at 300 Light Street on Monday night and opened fire, injuring several. Details are sketchy at this time, and police are not releasing many particulars, however, informed sources have speculated about possible links to organized crime. The ballroom was rented out to a private group for some type of business and meal function, however, as of this reporting, the hotel has not released the name of the person or group who rented it. Some eyewitnesses on the scene reported seeing at least two masked assailants with automatic-type weapons fleeing through the west side entrance on South Charles Street running in the direction of the Convention Center. Others closer to the ballroom reported seeing at least three masked figures down on the floor just outside, weapons still close to their bodies. The exact number of casualties is still unknown, as is much regarding this incident. Calls to law enforcement and the mayor's office have yet to be returned, and it is rumored that the FBI may be involved in the investigation, possibly eyeing a leading role if this

does turn out to be organized crime or even terrorism related. Some members of the City Council have expressed outrage that such violence has touched one of the safest areas of the city, one that is heavily dependent on tourist traffic for sustainability. They have promised a thorough review of the situation and intend to work with law enforcement to ensure that something like this does not happen again.

THE GRAY GROUP, WITH AN OFFICE JUST A FEW blocks away in the World Trade Center on what had once been Pier Two, had rented out the Sun Ballroom at the Hyatt Regency Monday night for a meeting between the group's CEO, Brenda Gray, and several foreign investors with whom she was hoping to strike a business deal. Unfortunately, some former business associates of Ms. Gray's decided to crash the party.

Five heavily armed Chechen gunmen stormed the hotel through the west entrance but never managed to make it into the ballroom because they were met and engaged by the private security team that Brenda Gray had recently hired after her business deal with the Chechen's fell through and they took extreme umbrage to that failure, brutally murdering one of her other associates prior to this to make their point. Three attackers had died on the scene and two had fled, however, reliable informants eventually related that the remaining two had been found within a day and disposed of as well. Quietly and permanently.

Two days following this, bombs detonated in four locations in and around the capital of Chechnya, killing a total of eleven people and injuring more than thirty. Among the dead were several top lieutenants and the favorite mistress of the leader of a Groznyy-based

separatist movement that had been a thorn in the side of the Russian government for nearly a decade. Subsequent to this violence, Russian authorities in the area began a major crackdown on all known local extremist groups. Something they had been looking for an excuse to do for some time anyway.

And Brenda Gray went on extended holiday in Europe...

Chapter 25

MARBELLA, SPAIN

I hadn't been to Spain since I was in the Air Force, and never this far south. Marbella was right on the Mediterranean coast, north of Gibraltar, a place I had always wanted to visit. Maybe I would get the chance while I was here.

By the way, here is the Hotel Fuerte, a Four-Star luxury hotel on Calle El Fuerte and Calle Rafaela Aparicio. My client had taken the Ambassador's Suite on the top floor of the hotel and even though it was against strict security protocol to be on a floor that high (because in the event of a fire, escape options would be limited due to the fact that fire truck ladders did not extend past the sixth floor), but I relented because of the other safety features available in such a luxury accommodation.

It was two levels, with the master bedroom and bath and an office on the second floor, and an additional three bedrooms, a living room, dining room, and full kitchen on the first floor. Furthermore, there was an in-suite security system, equipped with video monitoring of the corridors outside the suite. Enhancing that were four local-hire bodyguards that I had personally vetted through my sources, which was standard practice for Gabin Rocc, assigning two on duty per twelve hour shift, one at the main entrance outside the suite at all times, one roving the interior floors of the hotel, with occasional trips outside. They rotated positions every hour and checked in every fifteen minutes via secure communicators, one of

which I had with me all the time, linked to the wireless receiver in my left ear.

It was ten twenty-three on a cloudy Monday morning. I was standing in the kitchen looking at the security monitor mounted inside a dummy cabinet in the back across from the stove. Everything looked normal, the guard was where he was supposed to be out front and the other one had just left the floor via the east stairs. Sensing movement to my right, I leaned back around the cabinet door and saw Brenda Gray walking in wearing a large fluffy white bathrobe, one that the hotel provided, and matching white slippers. Her hair was disheveled and she looked as if she had not slept well. And maybe she was a little hung over.

She paused in the entryway, sniffed the air, then smiled.

“You actually made coffee this morning,” she said, stepping inside and walking over to the counter where the pot set.

“Actually, Anton made it,” I informed her. “So it might be a little strong. After all, he was in the Spanish Army Rangers for a decade and spent a good deal of that time jumping out of airplanes and fast-roping from helicopters. Meaning that perhaps his culinary skills are not so genteel.”

She paused after getting a mug from the cabinet, then shook her head in a *whatever* dismissive and filled the mug. While she didn’t exactly choke, it was obvious the black liquid was too much for her.

“God, is this battery acid?” she exclaimed, a sour expression on her face.

“All coffee is battery acid, isn’t it?” I said cheerily.

Brenda cast a dark smirk my way, then gave her coffee another try. She was frowning even more, but managed to get it down.

“Well I ought to be awake for days after this,” she quipped, leaning her backside against the counter while she tried a third time. “How you manage to function in the morning without a pick-me-up is beyond me, Gabin. I mean, I know you got less sleep than me.”

“True,” I said, closing the cabinet door and turning to fully face her. “But I wasn’t drinking last night. Plus, I got up and did a little workout earlier this morning. Does wonders for waking up the blood and the rest of the body.”

The smirk became a scowl as she slugged down more of the Spanish Ranger coffee.

“God you’re a masochist,” she said, then paused for a minute, holding her mug just below her chin. “Everything okay out there?”

I nodded, lifted the glass of cranberry juice I had been holding by my side and took a few sips.

“No issues. Anton and Carlos on duty doing their thing. Just checked the surveillance system and everything appears normal.”

She nodded, then glanced over to the wall-mounted clock on the other side of the room. “I’ve got lunch at Mahiki Beach down the street at one,” she said. “And then the trip out to the Marbella Bullring at five. I’m not really looking forward to that one, but it’s necessary because that’s where our man is known to frequent several times a week.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I’ve taken a look at both venues, hate them both from a security standpoint, especially the bullring, but operationally they’re necessary risks. Hopefully we’ll get lucky and he’ll show today so we can advance the operation to the next level.”

“That would be nice,” Gray admitted, finally giving up on the coffee with a distasteful frown, setting the mug on the counter. “How

well do you think the story of what happened in Baltimore has spread by now?”

“Far and wide,” I remarked, emptying my juice glass. “Especially on the criminal side of things. Chechens making a move on somebody inside the United States is something that couldn’t be missed, even if media outlets weren’t able to get a lot of details. And then the news out of Groznyy definitely got some attention. Wouldn’t be too long before a connection was made between events in Chechnya and what is supposed to have taken place in Baltimore last week. And in the underworld it’s the stuff of legends.”

She shook her head, hugged her arms around her chest.

“I didn’t ask before because I really didn’t want to know,” she began, looking down. “And probably still don’t, but...” She paused, exhaled, then looked up at me. “Was anybody actually killed in Chechnya? I mean I know what happened in Baltimore was staged and somehow choreographed with local support, but bombings in Chechnya, and a Russian crackdown...”

“The Russians are always *cracking down* in Chechnya,” I told her sincerely. “Not that it does them much good, and you’d think they’d learn that lesson once and for all. The Chechens want them gone and to be left alone to run their little piece of the world as they see fit. Eventually the Russians will come to understand that, after enough of their sons’ and daughters’ blood has been spilled, more than likely. Coming off the soapbox, the explosions were real, but no one was actually killed. A lot of Agency smoke and mirrors, and a little assistance from an old friend of mine in the Russian Mafya.”

Gray stared at me curiously, brow arched in Spock-like fashion.

“You’ve got friends in the Russian mob?” she said.

“But of course,” I smiled. “Gabin Rocc has friends in every corner of the bad guy/gal world.”

She smirked.

“So this is more make-believe then?” she said. “More Agency smoke and mirrors?”

I thought a minute about how much I wanted to tell her, then decided it wouldn’t hurt to give her a few more details.

“No, not this. When the planning was taking place for this setup, I noticed some holes in their strategy and mentioned them. When they realized I was right they became perplexed, started scrambling for a solution, and I offered a suggestion. They let me contact my Russian friend. Well his successor, because the former KGB general-turned-Russian underworld figure died of cancer two years ago. The woman who had been serving as his hard right hand for the last twenty years, a former Soviet GRU lieutenant herself (and ethnic Ukrainian), took over the reins at his death, per his stated request. I’ve actually known her a little longer than I knew him. Anyway, she likes me and agreed to do me a favor, with very little questions asked.”

“And you aren’t going to tell me her name,” Brenda Gray said. “Or the name of your late friend, the Russian mobster who died of cancer a couple years ago?”

I shook my head, glancing briefly at my watch.

“Nope. No need for you to know. Anyway, why don’t you go and shower and relax a bit more? I’ll send one of the guys over to the restaurant at twelve-fifteen to check the place out. If he gives the all-clear, then you and I will depart here in a car provided by the hotel at a quarter till one. You’ll be dining in a private chamber. Just your guests and you. I and their security will be waiting outside.”

“Seems kind of unfair,” she said, a little hint of the playful in her tone. “Us dining on sinfully delicious food while you guys are hanging out in the hallway with growling tummies.”

I nodded thoughtfully, then rotated my neck from side to side a few times until it popped.

“The fascinating life of a professional bodyguard,” I told her. “On the plus side, it’ll give me a chance to pump the bodyguards for any tidbits of data they may possess on their bosses’ other business dealings, anything that might relate to Gemini. Clients are not always discreet around their bodyguards, especially criminals, often speaking as if they aren’t even there. And a lot of bodyguards for criminals are far less discreet when it comes to keeping confidences than say Secret Service agents on the Presidential Protection Detail, or an officer with the Royalty Protection Group in the UK. Most have very little formal training and no discipline. Not always the case, but very often so.”

“And hunger makes the tongue loosener?” she said.

“Sometimes,” I said. “Especially if you get them bitching about how bad their bosses treat them, as if they aren’t even human, despite being charged with keeping the *fat cats* alive.”

Brenda Gray nodded thoughtfully, then smiled.

“Looks like I’m not the only one who will be flexing their spy muscles today. Okay, I’m off for the shower. See you in a bit.”

I watched her leave the kitchen, a sudden and unwelcome thought entering my mind. Something about joining my client for her shower and doing a lot more than helping to wash her back. Although I could see myself spending a lot of time *behind* her...

And that will be enough of that for the day, Mr. Rocc, I mentally chastised myself. Just then Anton’s voice sounded in my ear, giving

me an all-clear report. Two seconds later, Carlos did the same thing.
Good.

All's well on the Western Front.

I acknowledged both signals and then went into the front room to get my laptop so I could do some work, anything to keep my mind off showers and fifty-three year old brunettes. Yeah, her birthday had come and gone before we left The Point, so now she was technically two years older than me. At least until my birthday came in a few months. Hopefully by then this assignment would be over and I could shave this damn beard off because it was beginning to itch like crazy again.

To the good, the dandruff was under control. I'd have to remember to thank Shelbee Roberts for that, even if I had no plans to keep the hair on my head either, which I did not. As soon as Gabin Rocc went away, so would his hair.

Chapter 26

Two weeks went by without a nibble, and The Asset and I were both becoming a little antsy, but as had been explained during her training, things did not always move quickly in the covert world and you often had to be patient and go along as if you had all the time in the world. I already knew this from my days of working antiterrorism operations back in the 1990s, remembering how much I hated the subterfuge of undercover assignments, preferring the quick decisiveness of a tactical assault instead. But this was not that, and I would just have to find my reserve of patience and soldier on. Of course, being former Air Force, I should say and *airman on*.

Then one afternoon on a sunny, mild day, my client and I were at Funny Beach off of Carreterra Malaga-Cadiz east of our hotel. She had met some people in the import/export business at a club a couple nights ago and they invited her to join them for an afternoon of fun, and what was more fun than a place called *Funny Beach*? I pointed out to her that we were in Europe, and Spain in particular, and that a lot of the beaches there were *clothing optional*. To her credit, Brenda Gray did not flinch, simply smiled and turned to walk away. I admired her hip sway and thought that she didn't really have anything to worry about when it came to her body, and she knew it, too.

As predicted, clothes were not a prerequisite for this beach, but not everyone chose to go natural, thankfully, because there were some horrors I just didn't need right now. The couple Brenda met were in their late forties, natives of Argentina, but had been living in Austria for nearly ten years now, and both were in reasonably good shape, especially the wife. Sadly, she opted to remain clothed, too, but the green two-piece she sported was barely enough to contain her buxom figure. Her dark red hair was cut to just above her shoulders and worn loose, her skin deeply tanned, matching her husband's.

They sat under a large umbrella with Brenda between them wearing a black one-piece that magnificently showcased her slender, agile frame, her skin not as tanned, but becoming more so after our time in Spain. She was relaxed and enjoying the company of her new friends. I was sitting alone under a nearby umbrella wearing gray designer trunks and a light blue polo. Dark shades and a big straw hat completed my ensemble, and a black messenger bag rested in the sand between my feet as I sipped from a large glass of fruit juice.

The beach was crowded for this time of day during the week, but then it was Spain, they did a lot of things differently here, including work schedules. As I leaned back in my chair I felt a sharp dig as the Walther pistol I wore in an inside-the-pants holster at the small of my back pressed into my spine. The Maxim rip-off Trout had made for me was too big to wear when I was this underdressed, so I had opted for one of my backups as primary today. But fear not, the *Trout Special*, or T-1, as I had come to think of it, was safely nestled in the messenger bag at my feet along with spare magazines for it

and the Walther, and a few other goodies should an occasion for tactical action arise.

The juice was really good, an interesting blend of fruits, some of which I wasn't sure I could place. No matter, it was cold and it was delicious. I was satisfied.

A quick scan of the surroundings revealed no apparent threats to my client, unless the two twenty-something blondes on towels a few feet away intended to attack her with their perky nipples when they were done sunbathing topless. I suppose if they did I'd have no choice but to throw myself between them and my client, taking the flak, so to speak. Probably the first time in the history of my profession did that sound appealing to me.

A shadow fell on my left side. There was an empty chair to my left under the umbrella. I casually glanced over and noticed a tall blonde woman standing there in a flowery wrap, dark shades, and large floppy hat of her own. She wore a large shoulder bag across her left shoulder and carried a Smartphone the size of a small laptop in her right hand. She smiled and showed off a mouth full of even white teeth.

"Pardon me, sir," she said in a Central London accent. "It's so crowded out here today. I was wondering if you were waiting for someone, or if this seat was available? I'd be happy to reimburse you for the rental cost."

I stared at the woman for a few seconds, then nodded and indicated that she could sit, told her reimbursement was not necessary. She thanked me and then sat down, extending her hand and introducing herself.

"I'm Kellie Martindale, good to meet you. And thank you for the hospitality." She had an easy smile and engaging green eyes once

she removed the shades and put them on the small table between us.

“Gabin Rocc,” I replied, releasing her hand. “A pleasure, Ms. Martindale.”

She had been digging around in her purse, but glanced up. “Lord, please. I’m on vacation this week. I don’t want to hear anybody call me anything but Kellie. Or *hey you!*”

I smiled, nodding.

“And your accent, are you a yank?”

“Canadian actually, but I have spent a lot of time in the U.S., and other places. You’re from London?”

“Guilty,” she said, continuing to rummage through the handbag. “Accent gives me away wherever I go. I was actually born in Birmingham, spent some time in Paris while in school, traveled a lot once I had my degree, but have been based in London for most of the past ten years.”

Like a lot of people do unconsciously, she had just given me a lot of information about herself that she didn’t need to. Things that an unscrupulous individual—not I, of course—might use to gain unauthorized access to her life for criminal purposes, such as identity fraud. I found the fact that she was from Birmingham amusing, the obvious connection to my hometown, which, of course, was named after the British city, along with several others in the state.

Kellie Martindale was about forty years old, not wearing a wedding ring, or any rings for that matter. She had an athletic build but not too thin, and her shoulder length blonde hair was dark and straight. Quite attractive, obviously not introverted, had no problem walking up to a perfect stranger on a crowded beach and inviting herself to sit down. By my count there were at least four other cov-

ered tables with only single occupants nearby. Granted, some of them were probably waiting for their partners to arrive or return, but she had not stopped at any of them before approaching me. I could have suspected my animal magnetism, but my ego, while quite substantial, did not blind me to other more plausible possibilities.

No, Ms. Martindale had deliberately targeted me, for what purpose I was not sure, but a part of me was looking forward to finding out. The rest of me was even more on alert now because it was quite likely that someone was preparing to make a move on The Asset and needed me out of the way first, which was common practice as protectors were most often deemed expendable. Well Kellie Martindale was certainly a delightful piece of bait, I could think of worse ways to go. But that was the problem, the *going*. First rule of assassination or abduction: *dispose of the bodyguard*.

First rule for preventing assassination or abduction: *watch your own ass!*

Suddenly that became a lot harder to do when Kellie Martindale stood back up a few minutes later and removed the flowery wrap she'd been wearing. *Holy Fuck!* The only thing that came to mind when she dropped the dress on the chair and adjusted her hat. The navy blue two-piece she barely wore was nearly as stunning and exquisite as the finely toned body that stood on display before me now. There was not a hint of self-consciousness as she retook her seat and reached into her bag yet again, pulling out sunscreen.

“Oh the weather here is so perfect compared to back home in London,” she said, opening the tube. “But the sun can be so harmful if you aren’t careful.”

I nodded, watching as she began rubbing the sunscreen on her thighs. It only took me about thirty seconds to realize I hadn't looked over at my client for more than two minutes now. Luckily for her she hadn't been abducted or murdered in the interim and I mentally slapped myself silly for allowing the distraction.

Even so, as I kept an eye on The Asset and her new friends, and the surroundings, I did maintain discreet surveillance on my new table mate as well, just in case she presented a threat. Or if she needed help corralling them when her full breasts burst out of her bathing suit top and went on a rampage at some point in the near future.

Wouldn't that be something?

No, it definitely would not!

Yeah, it kind of would.

And that's *would* not *wood*!

Chapter 27

“They were really cagy but eventually got around to hinting that their business was not as on the up and up as they led everyone else to believe. They have heard of me, too, and are aware of the trouble I was having with the Chechens. They inquired about you, too, the wife in particular. Think she would love to shimmy out of that bathing suit for you, while her husband was watching. And the freak that I believe he is would enjoy that, too. I’m pretty sure he was angling for a three-way with me and his wife, and if you were available...”

We were back in the suite at the Hotel Fuerte later that evening, having a supper that had been specially prepared by one of the chefs who would come to your room to cook anything you desired to your specific tastes. Brenda had the seared Chilean sea bass in wine sauce and I opted for sautéed tofu and steamed vegetables, which turned out to be one of the best meals I’d eaten in a long time that wasn’t prepared by me. We dismissed the chef when he was finished, refused the offer of a server to serve, then sat at the counter in the kitchen and ate as we talked.

“I’m afraid I’m too shy,” I said after washing down my food with a swallow of chilled red wine, a small indulgence on my largely non-alcoholic beverage part.

Brenda grinned, taking another small mouthful of her sea bass, chewing carefully before swallowing. She was very precise when eating, careful. Probably spent a lot of time when she was young learning the proper way for a southern lady to behave at the table, and which silverware to use with what courses. And then her life had led her here.

“There was some talk about a client they were trying to secure but didn’t have the volume capacity he was looking for, nor the connections inside the United States.”

I nodded.

“I hinted that I had a lot of contacts in the U.S. and the capacity to move large quantities of cargo by ship and air in a relatively short period of time, with the proper notice and financing. They told me that this client was not hurting for cash, but that he was very careful about the people he did business with, running extensive background checks on everyone even under consideration for minimal contact and employment, even on a part time basis. And he would have to be assured that the transportation could be guaranteed, all Customs matters dealt with ahead of time, no hang ups, official or otherwise. There was mention of a problem with some shipments to North America in the past, some here in Europe, too. I got the sense that these were of the law enforcement variety. I hinted that I had good liaison with the right people in Customs in many places, particularly in the U.S.”

“Did you get the sense they already knew a good deal about you and were just probing for confirmation?”

Brenda nodded, setting down her knife and fork and dabbing at the corners of her mouth with a linen napkin.

“That’s it exactly,” she confirmed. “I’ll bet if we check with Control we’ll find that our covers have started to show signs of increased investigation from multiple sources. I think we’re getting closer.”

I nodded, having more wine.

“Probably,” I told her, thinking about everything she had just told me, and also thinking about Kellie Martindale, not to mention that bathing suit of hers.

The afternoon had passed pleasantly. We talked, ate lunch, enjoyed the warm weather from the safety of our umbrella, talked and laughed some more, with Kellie telling me stories about her life in London, her job as a private investment banker at a City firm, her travel, even some of her doomed relationships because of the hectic schedule she kept. Which, she said, explained why she was alone on vacation in an exotic location like Marbella.

Right, I thought, not believing a word of it. I had also managed to covertly take her picture with my Smartphone and would send it along with my next coded report back to Operations Control at The Point, see if they could get an ID on her, find out if she was really who she said she was (highly doubtful), and if not, who she really was and who she worked for. I hadn’t yet mentioned my suspicions about her to The Asset, although she had asked about Kellie when we first came back to the hotel a couple hours ago. I simply gave her the cover story Kellie had given me, adding that it was good for my cover to have a beautiful woman sitting with me to provide distraction. I wasn’t sure, because what the hell do I know about women (other than how to make them cum), but I thought I detected just a hint of something vicious behind Brenda’s dark eyes when I said that, but chose to ignore it.

“Okay,” I said, now wiping my mouth with a napkin. “I’ll send all this back to Control and keep them up to date. I already know what they’re going to say, *keep at it, a little progress is better than none*. And they’re right. But we need to get a better break sooner rather than later. According to what we were briefed on before we left, something major is coming down soon and is probably already underway. We need to find out what it is as quickly as possible to give the right people a chance to do something about stopping it.”

After dinner, Brenda said she was going to her room to do some reading before bed. I told her I’d be up for a while, putting together our report before encrypting and sending it. Then I might do some reading, too. The latest John *The Square* (Le Carre is French for *the square*) novel had come out and I picked up a copy at the airport the day we’d arrived, but had yet to crack it. Tonight should be the night, to misquote Phil Collins.

Or so I had thought before my phone rang an hour later and I heard Kellie Martindale’s fake Central London accent.

Chapter 28

The Hotel Lima Marbella is only a couple of miles northwest of the Hotel Fuerte on Avenida Antonio Belon. And about a block away from it is a neighborhood bar called, appropriately, *Home Bar Marbella*, and they stay open late. They also serve food and there is a cozy little area away from the bar and the loud music and dancing where you can sit and eat if you like. Unfortunately, Kellie Martindale had chosen to sit at the bar.

I met her there at a quarter after ten, having informed both my client and the night security team, Hector and Raul, that I was going to be going out for a while. In my absence both men would remain on the floor, one outside the door and the other inside the suite on the first level. I wasn't sure how long I would be gone but would check in every half hour. If I missed a check in, Hector and Raul had their instructions. I could tell The Asset was unhappy with this development, but chose to keep her objections to herself. I hadn't told her the reason for my going out and she assumed it was operationally necessary, but a part of her wasn't sure, and it bothered her. Too bad, I thought unkindly, then remembered that despite her transformation, Brenda Gray was still the woman who had sent people to kill a client of mine and had damn near succeeded in killing some of my people a few years back. So, as always, *fuck her!*

Tonight Kellie had on dark slacks that snugly fit her round bottom and a sheer gray silk top that allowed the natural definition of her upper body to display itself in all its glory, not to mention the black bra beneath it. She stood from the bar when I arrived, smiled when I approached, leaned over and offered her cheek, which I kissed as she clasped my forearm. I have no idea what perfume she was wearing, but damn did she smell good.

We sat and the bartender asked what I would like. In all honesty, I didn't want anything. The glass of wine earlier had been my limit for the year, but when in Rome... or Marbella... I ordered a martini, noticed she was drinking vodka on the rocks.

"Glad you could make it," she said, leaning close and raising her voice over the noise. "I should have called you earlier but thought that might be a bit forward, seeing as how we just met this afternoon. Then I thought what the heck, I'm over forty and on vacation. I got this hot guy's number, why not call and ask him out for a drink?"

I smiled as the bartender set the martini down in front of me. Kellie was already running a tab and told the bartender to put my drinks on it. The small mustached man nodded and went away.

"So when this hot guy turned you down, you thought of me," I said, also leaning close and raising my voice because we were surrounded by people and music and way too much noise. Exactly the reason I hate bars.

Kellie laughed, touched my forearm again.

"Hot guys don't turn me down," she said mischievously, gently digging her nails into my skin through my jacket."

I smiled.

"I'll bet not," I told her.

She ordered a couple more drinks and then suggested we find a table, which we did, near the back where the noise level was a little more tolerable. We sat side by side, our backs to the wall, watching everything around us.

“I really enjoyed talking to you today, Gabin,” she said, leaning in close and again touching my forearm. “It’s rare that I find a guy who can quote Shakespeare and who also knows Gilligan’s first name. Not to mention the Skipper and the Professor.”

I laughed at that.

“All the useless information that occupies my brain would fill a library, I’m afraid,” I said, pretending to take a sip from my second martini. “Watched a lot of television growing up, particularly American. And on that Gilligan note, his first name was never mentioned in the show. Bob Denver asked the creator when the show was over if his character had a first name and that’s when he found out himself.”

Kellie burst out laughing and put a hand to her mouth, shaking her head. I smiled and watched her, enjoying her mirth.

“Gabin, you are just too much. Bet you were great at Trivial Pursuit.”

“Oddly, I never played,” I confessed honestly.

“Really?” she said with a raised brow. “I can’t believe that, not once?”

I shook my head.

“Not once.”

“Well you should have,” she said, then finished her vodka and signaled a passing waitress for a refill. I took a small sip of my martini and told the waitress that I was fine for now.

An hour later I reluctantly let Kellie talk me onto the dance floor. It was a slow number, thankfully, so I wouldn't embarrass myself too much. I was a heck of a square dancer back in the fifth grade, and that's about where my expertise ended. I have had a few lessons since then, and they were not pretty. However, for some reason the Enrique Iglesias ballad that played now was just so easy for me to move to, and having Kellie Martindale in my arms, her head against my shoulder, didn't hurt either.

The third song that came on while we were on the floor was not something I even wanted to attempt to groove to, despite efforts by my partner to the contrary. So with a pouty disapproval, she allowed me to lead her back to our table. The waitress came over with fresh drinks and we leaned back in our chairs watching everyone else shake their booties.

"Yeah," Kellie said after a minute and half of her vodka. "Probably a good idea us old folks decided to sit this one out. Don't think these hips could move like that anymore."

I turned and stared at her, grinning.

"Oh, I don't know," I said, letting some heaviness into my tone. "Something tells me that your hips still move pretty well."

Kellie paused with her glass nearly at her mouth, green eyes serious. Then she grinned, downed the rest of her drink.

"Maybe you'll get to find out one day," she whispered, leaning very close to my face. I should also point out that this time she was not touching my forearm, but rather my left thigh.

I set my glass down on the table, put my left hand on top of her hand, moved my right one to the left side of her face. We sat like that for nearly a minute before she glanced around, suddenly a little self-conscious.

“Why don’t we get out of here?” she said, sitting back a little. “My hotel’s just up the block. Room’s got a nice and comfy king sized bed with enough pillows on it to build a defensive wall around the Tower of London. Or maybe we could come up with some other plan for what to do with them.”

I squeezed the hand that was still on my thigh, pulled her face back toward mine, still staring deeply into her eyes.

“We could build a fort,” I suggested.

She snickered, and pressed her lips to mine.

“We’ll see,” she said, then signaled the waitress for the bill.

We would, I thought, remembering that I was nearly late sending my next check in to the night team at the hotel. I’d excuse myself to go to the bathroom before we left and send the text. Wasn’t sure about the next check in, how’d I’d manage it, but I am quite the resourceful fellow so I’m sure something will come to mind.

Beyond what I planned on doing with Kellie Martindale and a whole bunch of pillows, that is.

Chapter 29

As incredible as it had appeared in those slacks, or even that bathing suit bottom at the beach the previous afternoon, nothing could have prepared me for how it would look in the flesh, so to speak. Actually, in reality.

Holy fuck did Kellie Martindale have the most incredible ass I had ever seen, and believe me, I have seen some really incredible female asses in my time, in all shapes and sizes and colors, but by far—and no disrespect to any of the ones from my past, and you all know who you are—, Kellie’s is, and probably forever shall remain, number one.

How to describe it? Where to begin? What the hell does it matter? It’s just fucking perfect! And right now, I’ve got my tongue buried inside it, moving up and down her splendidly tight crevice, occasionally delving deeply and evoking a shudder of ecstasy from the Lady Martindale. Not to mention a near torrential *outpour*...

We did find many uses for those pillows. A total count of eleven, by the way, in various shapes and sizes. And just who the hell needs eleven pillows on one bed when you know eleven people won’t be using it? Anyway, back to Kellie’s ass, and some of the uses we found for those pillows.

Right now two of the larger and fluffier ones are under her stomach, propping her backside up even more to make access to it much

easier as she lies facedown in the middle of the bed. I'm on my stomach behind her, a smaller pillow beneath me, my left hand resting on her plump left cheek, my right one under her, my middle finger rubbing her clit as my ring finger slips inside her. And then, as I recently indicated, there is my tongue, doing quite the yeoman's job teasing the crease of her buttocks, occasionally going further, causing Kellie to shudder and to squeeze tighter around me. She's got a lot of strong muscles in her butt and thighs, and not the kind that you develop from a Stairmaster either, but right now I didn't really care how she got them, just enjoyed the view, not to mention the feel and the *taste*.

Kellie raised her head off the bed and groaned deeply, mouth open, panting, struggling to breathe as sweat poured off her body onto the sheets. I paused for a second, lifted my head to look at her, seeing the quivers, the little explosions under her skin, realizing that she was just about there again. Time to push her all the way over.

And I did, along with my wicked tongue, naughty middle finger, and hard brown cock.

While she was in the bathroom I sent my next text, then lay back in the middle of the bed, completely naked, uncovered, one hand behind my head. Kellie came out a minute later, her skin still flushed, but her breathing was normal. She, too, was completely naked and stood at the foot of the bed staring at me for a few moments before speaking.

"I have never had my ass eaten like that in my life," she said with a grin that she was unable to suppress, her left index finger resting beneath her lower lip. "And I've had a couple of lesbian lovers in my time, too."

I grinned, reached out a hand to her. She took it as she crawled onto the bed, lying down on top of me, then folding her arms across my chest and propping her chin on top. We were staring into one another's eyes, our bodies comfortably meshed.

"You, too, huh," I said, still grinning.

Kellie raised a brow for a moment, then snickered.

"Oh you've had a lesbian, too?" she said.

"Well they just wanted to make sure, see what the fuss was all about," I said.

She grinned.

"And good *ole* Gabin was there just to help 'em out, right?" she said.

"Dirty job, but somebody's got to do it," I said.

We both laughed, and then Kellie scooted down my body, her wet tongue tracing the way until she reached my already stiff cock. She stayed there for a very long time, and when she was done, I nearly was, too.

I STILL WASN'T SURE WHO SHE WAS OR what her game or endgame might be, but if Kellie Martindale's intent was to get me alone and fuck me to death, I was seriously thinking about letting her succeed. But then again, *Gabin Rocc* is no slouch in the game of bedroom antics either, and could give as good as I got, and boy did he (I) *get* really damn good this night. There was not one thing I suggested that she found objectionable, and was quite enthusiastic to try. She even suggested a few that I was not in to, including something that she referred to as *water sports*. I must admit to being a little ignorant regarding some of the new terminology, the years finally catching up with me. When she defined this particular act I did

my best to hide my distaste by laughing and telling her that in my day we used to call it a *golden shower*.

Jesus Fucking Christ!

Still, I had no objection to *showering* her with another bodily fluid, all over that magnificent chest of hers, following what I am happy to report is still referred to as a *standing tit-fuck*. And Kellie, shall we say, just *ate it up!*

It was four in the morning when I left her hotel room, alive, but exhausted, spent and drained, and would be feeling the effects of this night for days to come, and smiling about them for even longer after that.

It was brisk this time of morning with light traffic on the streets and I decided to walk back to my hotel, after sending another text to the team to let them know that I was on my way back. And adhering to strict countersurveillance protocols, I did not take a direct route.

It took about ten minutes into my circuitous meander to spot the first signs of surveillance. They were good, keeping well back, using the early morning shadows for cover, but I could tell they were there, at least two teams, alternating positions, giving me a long leash, but containing me nonetheless.

I continued my casual stroll, in no apparent hurry, enjoying the early morning tour of the downtown area. While doing this I had time to consider just who they might belong to. It was curious that they picked me up so soon after I left Kellie's hotel, suggesting that perhaps Ms. Martindale had arranged this. Odd if the point was to find out what hotel I was staying at because she already knew. But if this was a snatch, or something more sinister... Then again, she'd had me alone in her hotel room naked for several hours, what could have been a more vulnerable time to make a move against me than

that? If she were behind the surveillance perhaps there was another purpose.

But if she was not, then who was following me and why?

I turned into an alley a few miles in the wrong direction from my hotel, a mile west of Hotel Lima, and that's when I spotted the third team; they were a lot closer than the other two had been thus far. Also, they appeared to be closing in at a rapid rate.

My pulse quickened but my outward appearance remained calm. The Walther at my back gave me some reassurance. I wished I had been carrying something larger, with more capacity, but suspecting that I would not be dressed for most of the evening and not wanting to explain why I was heavily armed—although I'm sure Kellie Martindale was no stranger to firearms—, I went for concealable. A good decision at the time, but now was not then.

It was now, and several armed persons were swiftly closing in on me and no longer pretending otherwise.

Ah well...

Chapter 30

The Walther was in my right hand, held low as I moved through the dark alley to the other side, hearing quick footfalls behind me. I was about three quarters of the way to the mouth of the alley when two dark figures appeared, stopping just inside. Impossible to make out their features with any significance, but stocky, most likely male, and they both appeared to be raising an arm each in my direction.

Without slowing down, I sank low, taking deliberate and careful steps while at the same time raising my right arm straight out, squeezing the Walther's trigger, once, twice, three times, then four. The reports were barely audible because Trout had given me a micro silencer that he had developed specifically for covert work, barely more than an inch long, but an excellent companion for the compact weapon.

The two men went down without firing a shot, and I started running full out. That's when shots were fired from behind me, and they weren't using silencers. I wasn't hit, but a couple rounds struck fairly close as I darted out of the alley, turning south down a street I didn't know. It was much darker in this quarter and I realized that I was entering a residential suburb, moving out of downtown. Probably not the smartest thing to do because there would be fewer people around, and less of a possibility of the cops happening by. Of

course, if my attackers did much more shooting, that was likely to change in a hurry.

As I quickened my pace, I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a fresh magazine, replacing the one in my weapon. Now I had a full seven again, one in the chamber, six in the magazine. Lesser capacity, lesser power, lesser range, but in the right hands, still capable of lethal results. Even so, the other teams were carrying better armament and in a direct confrontation, if they had any skills at all, I was not going to come out too well. Best to keep away from them if I can.

Too bad that didn't happen.

Two blocks later I turned into another alley and too late realized that I had been outflanked. I could tell there were two pursuers on my tail, they were running hard and pushing me, and now I realized that the other remaining team had split up and moved ahead on parallel streets to try to box me in at a chokepoint. Obviously they knew the lay of the land better than I did, a distinct advantage.

The shooter in front of me started blasting the second he saw me enter the alley. Luckily for me the distance was not small and he was not the best of shots. After the first miss I was on the ground, rolling sideways, going over my shoulder and diving back the other way. A plus for me was that because this guy was shooting up the place, the two that had been behind me had to wait outside the alley in order to keep from being shot by mistake, meaning I wasn't in a crossfire yet, and the chances of them being taken out by friendly fire were greatly reduced, a plus for them, regrettably.

On my stomach now, I snap-aimed the Walther with one hand, my eyes locked onto the rapid muzzle flashes, felt something whiz past my left ear, squeezed the trigger twice. The shooting stopped

suddenly and I was on my feet and running hard as I heard rather than saw the shooter fall to the ground. As I reached the opposite end, more shots came from behind, but I was already clear before they came close to connecting.

That's when I ran into the second man from the flanking team, and *ran in to* was the operative phrase. We collided at full speed, me trying to get away, him trying to get in on the kill. He was bigger than me, and had really foul breath, obviously a fan of garlic with every meal. However, he was more surprised to see me than I was to see him, and momentarily startled more. I punched him in the gut, twisting on impact and driving the blow deep into the body. The man doubled up, groaned severely, but managed to reach out and take me in a huge bear hug that instantly squeezed the air out of my lungs, my feet lifting off the ground.

Two things happened at once. I head butted the fuck out of him, and I squeezed the Walther's trigger once. I think the head butt might have done more damage, perhaps to both of us because the fucker sure did have a hard head. Nonetheless, he staggered back and his grip loosened. Enough so that I could take in a little air, but there was no time to dally. I delivered another vicious head crack and this time the man staggered back and let go of me as he tried to regain his balance.

My feet hit the ground and I staggered myself, feeling a bit nauseous. But I was quicker to recover, raising my Walther and shooting him twice in the chest and once in the center of the forehead, was taking a well-earned, but poorly timed breath, when two hard impacts slammed into me from behind, dumping me on the cool, damp concrete of the sidewalk.

I heard the hasty approach of two distinct sets of footwear but had no energy to move, the middle of my back feeling as if I had been kicked by two mules, and Andre *The Giant*. Before he died. Well this definitely was not good. Especially so because I couldn't seem to remember what the hell happened to my Walther.

The running footsteps came to a sudden halt, and I heard the voices of two men speaking in rapid, guttural Spanish, much of which I didn't understand. No matter, I was pretty sure I understood the gist. Probably something like, *I'll kill the motherfucker... No, I'll kill the motherfucker, you got to kill the last one!* Probably that.

The dispute appeared to have been settled because suddenly the talking was over.

Well shit, I thought, about a split-second before the shooting started again.

Chapter 31

Curiously, after this new round of shooting, I was still in considerable pain, and still conscious, and I think still alive. There were two heavy impacts on the ground just behind me but it hurt too much to turn my head to see what they were. Actually, everything hurt too much, but I knew I had to do something, if I stayed here much longer, these guys would kill me.

I heard more running feet.

Shit!

Drawing on every reserve left in me, I struggled to push up, to search around for my lost weapon, or the weapon that the guy I had most recently killed was carrying, it had been in his left hand when we collided earlier and he'd dropped it somewhere before bear hugging me. Just where the hell...

"Come on, I'll help you up," a voice said close to my right ear. A voice that was most familiar but I couldn't place just yet. "We have to get out of here before someone calls the police. Probably have already. I don't think there are any more of them, but there could be. We need to move. I have a car on the next street over. Come on, lean on me. How badly are you hurt?"

Now I could place the voice, mainly because of the scent filling my nostrils, a scent I had become quite familiar with over the course of the night, up close and personally so. And the body.

Kellie Martindale had me around the waist, turning me back toward the alley I had been desperately trying to get out of just minutes earlier, maneuvering me as best she could in my weakened state. As I had learned last night and early this morning, she was a very strong woman, in better than athletic shape, so she was able to support a significant bit of my weight as we moved. Excellent thing, too, because I wasn't.

"Are you shot?" she said, a hint of strain in her voice. "I saw you go down, looked like bullet holes in the back of your jacket. We won't be able to take you to a hospital because explaining this to the police is probably something you don't want to do."

We were on the other side of the alley now, turning east. A purple Corolla was parked at the curb a few feet away. Kellie guided me to the passenger's side, opened the door, and got me in as quick as she could because we both heard the sirens in the distance and they were coming closer every second.

She climbed behind the wheel, started the engine, and pulled away from the curb, doing a quick U-turn and then taking an even quicker right. For the next couple of minutes she made a series of rapid turns at seemingly random intervals, and then we were on a thoroughfare moving in what direction I had no clue, but the sirens were behind us, the sound growing fainter.

I had noticed when she got in the car that the first thing she did was drop a Beretta pistol onto the seat beside her. It was still there now. Appeared to be a compact version of the 92F, matte finish.

"How badly are you hurt, Gabin?" she said again, this time she glanced my way briefly and I thought I could make out the hints of concern at the corners of her eyes.

It hurt to breathe, so talking was really a strain, but it had to be done.

“Just who the hell are you?” I managed. “Because you sure as hell ain’t no investment banker from London. And just in case you didn’t notice, you lost your British accent somewhere along the way.”

She was watching the road now, still making periodic turns, but keeping our speed moderate so as not to attract attention.

“And you’re not Canadian,” she responded matter-of-factly. “Nor is your name Gabin Endre Rocc. Or it was not when you were born, seeing as how Mr. Rocc has never really existed outside the minds of some people in a certain American intelligence agency.”

Her accent was now American, but I could tell it was as fake as the British one had been, but very good. She was highly trained, in a lot of things, which told me she was an intelligence operative herself, and a very good one. Not American though, and just because she had saved my life back there didn’t mean she was actually on my side.

Suddenly I remembered something, then glanced at my watch.

“Shit!” I swore. “I need to make a call.”

She stopped at a traffic light, glancing around carefully at the sparse early morning traffic.

“Ah yes,” she said. “Need to check in with your people back at your hotel, let them know you’re still alive. Although barely by the look of you.”

That made me struggle to sit up, and it hurt like hell, but I made it just as the light changed and she accelerated.

“I’m not shot,” I told her, then groaned from the stinging in my back. “My suit is lined with lightweight Kevlar. Supposed to be guaranteed to stop .45s at pointblank range, and that may be so, but not

sure you'd want to live after that. Those guys were using 9 mms and were at least twenty feet away when I got hit and it still hurts like fuck."

Kellie grinned in the darkness of the front seat, and made another turn, suddenly I realized we were just down the street from the Hotel Lima Marbella, her hotel.

"Returning to the scene of the crime?" I inquired.

She smirked at me, turning into the parking garage. "Well I'm pretty sure some of the things you did to me upstairs earlier are illegal in this country, but if you don't tell, I won't. We'll go in and get you cleaned up, make sure you aren't too badly hurt. You can call your people and we can talk."

Now it was my turn to smirk. She looked over at me, a brow raised.

"Yeah," she said. "Some people talk first then fuck. But people in our business don't always have that luxury."

Something of an admission on her part I guess. Still didn't trust her one bit, but knew I had to see this through. First I'd call the hotel. I'd also be interested in learning if anybody back at Control had ID' Ms. Martindale yet, determined if she was friend or foe.

Once she was parked and the car turned off, the first thing she did after undoing her seatbelt was pick up the Beretta and tuck it into her waistband at her back. Then she glanced at me, smiled warmly, opened her door and climbed out.

I was not so quick on the move, but managed to get out on my own, with Kellie standing close by, ready to lend support if it were needed.

We managed to make it back upstairs with no one shooting at us.
A personal best.

Yea!

Chapter 32

We didn't return to the room where we had been before, a completely different room on a completely different floor, and this one was still made up, no signs of unbridled carnality apparent. When I inquired, Kellie simply shrugged and said it was always a good thing to have a backup handy just in case it was needed.

I had already made my call, just in time, too, because the team was getting ready to bolt with The Asset, but I managed to assure them that I was fine, relatively speaking, and not under duress, giving the necessary coded sequences in the proper order, then using an additional code to extend the check in window to two hours, adding that if I was not back at the hotel in person by then, they were to follow the appropriate protocol.

Now I was lying on my stomach in the middle of the bed, stripped to the waist, while Kellie tended to my back.

"The skin was just bruised but not broken," she said absently while applying a stinging antiseptic. "You'll be sore for a few days, and should probably take it easy, but I think you'll be fine. And you should really send your tailor a *thank you* card. Not to mention a hell of a holiday bonus."

I chuckled, and instantly regretted that.

A few minutes later I was sitting up and buttoning my shirt, watching Kellie sitting in the middle of the bed, her bare feet tucked

under her knees. She had changed into dark clothing before venturing out onto the streets tonight, silk blouse hanging loose over form-fitting yoga pants and soft soled black lace-up boots with zippers up the sides. The boots were now on the floor next to the bed along with her socks.

I took a deep breath, rotated my neck a little, then stared at her some more.

“You’re Israeli,” I said after some time. “I’m just not sure which agency.”

“You’re American,” she said. “Most likely *The Agency*.”

We stared at one another some more, for a long time in fact, and it was getting to the point where I thought I had finally met my match in the game of the stare down, but then Kellie blinked, smiled, rolled off the bed, going over to the dresser where a half bottle of vodka set along with some plastic cups. She asked if I wanted one, I declined.

“Yes, you did not appear to enjoy the alcohol earlier this evening. A nondrinker?”

I didn’t respond. She poured a generous measure of vodka into one of the plastic cups, stood looking at me for a while longer, then turned the cup up and consumed all of the contents.

Definitely an Israeli. Or a Russian. But I still leaned toward the former.

She turned and reached into one of the dresser drawers. My Walther had been recovered and was in my right pocket. I thought about reaching for it, but stilled my hand. Her Beretta remained within easy reach at her back under her blouse, if she meant to do me harm it was the more logical choice. Still, I kept wary eyes on her the entire time.

She pulled out a small black box, worked some switches, then set it on top of the dresser.

“A precaution just in case someone tries to eavesdrop,” she explained, and I had already recognized the electronic masking device.

I nodded. Kellie paced for a few minutes and I watched her, more out of curiosity than suspicion, and to be honest, she looked mighty fine in those yoga pants. Not as fine as she had looked without them earlier, but still...

“I’m with AMAN,” she said suddenly, redirecting my attention from her ass to the business at hand.

And let me tell you, that was no mean trick.

AMAN, the Directorate of Military Intelligence for the state of Israel, akin to the American DIA—Defense Intelligence Agency—but unlike the DIA in relation to the CIA, was in fact larger than Mossad, Israel’s civilian intelligence agency, colloquially referred to as the *Institute*, and officially as the Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations, in English. Don’t ask me to even begin to try to say it in Hebrew.

So Kellie Martindale was a military spy. A lot of questions were suddenly answered, in particular regarding her fitness, however, many others arose. Specifically, why had she targeted me? Part of that was obvious because the Israelis knew or at least suspected that the Rocc legend^[s] was fake because they had been an integral part of helping the Agency set it up in the early days. But that didn’t explain everything. Again, specifically, why six armed men had come after me a little while ago with what appeared to be the single-minded intent to kill. *Me!*

For that answer and many others, I now sat back and stared at the lethal woman in the loose top and clingy yoga pants and waited for

her to continue.

Chapter 33

“As soon as the name Gabin Rocc went active again, people in Tel Aviv took notice. Most of those originally involved with the joint Mossad-CIA project back in the early 90s are either retired or dead. Or both. But there were flags in the computers, and they went up when word of what happened in Venezuela a few weeks ago was linked to his name. That got the hounds on the scent in both Mossad and AMAN. I don’t know if you’re aware, but AMAN had a small role in the original operation as well, mainly support to Mossad, and one of the junior officers assigned back then is today our head of Counterintelligence.

“The next hit on the name was in Baltimore, a run in with some Chechens in a hotel ballroom. Several dead Chechens, supposedly, and a few days later, several bombs detonated in Chechnya supposedly killing several more. By which time the name Rocc was linked to Brenda Gray, an importer/exporter in Baltimore with questionable ties to criminal entities all around the world. So naturally this made us curious about her.”

Kellie Martindale paused to look at me inquiringly, but I said nothing. As far as I was concerned, for right now this conversation was unidirectional, and I still had no way to verify whether or not what she was telling me was the truth. I mean, she was a covert operative (pot, kettle, *black*) and lying was part of the job. She could be

telling the truth about being Israeli, or she could be running a false-flag ^[t] on me. For now, silence was bliss.

Kellie sighed, smiled a little tiredly.

“And of course you have no way to know if I’m telling you the truth, so you will say nothing and let me do all the talking. After I was willing to let you play *water sports* with me, I thought we had developed some trust.”

The coquettish expression in her green eyes, coupled with the mischievous twist of her full lips made me laugh, and I was shaking my head.

“And now that you bring that up, I hope you were just kidding.”

She was laughing, rocking forward on the bed.

“I wanted to see if I could shock you,” she said to me. “Maybe get you to make a slip up. But you held it together pretty well.”

“What if I had said I was in to that?” I said. “Would you have gone along?”

“Gabin, I’ve been a member of IDF ^[u] since I was nineteen,” she told me in a sudden serious tone. “I was AMAN by the time I was twenty-three. I’ll be forty-one later this year, on the 4th of July, by the way. I’ve done a lot in the service of my country in the past twenty-three years, and believe me, letting a guy pee on me would not be the strangest. As long as I could accomplish my mission.”

Yeah, I thought, studying her now hard edged eyes. Almost certainly Israeli. Or Russian. But I didn’t think so on the latter. Russians usually preferred to be the ones doing the pissing.

Then I noticed an ironic smirk replace the hard set of her jaw.

“And you didn’t seem to have a problem ejaculating your sperm onto my tits, either,” she said.

I grinned.

“And who would?” I replied.

We both laughed. Then it was time to return to our main conversation.

“I’m not cleared to tell you any of this,” she said earnestly. “But time is of the essence and I need to accelerate things. In light of the move that was made on you tonight. I’ll get into what I think happened there in a bit. First a little background. I do work in London under the cover of a private investment banker, been in place just over nineteen months. My mission is to identify links between entities that launder funds for certain criminal and terrorist organizations with known hostile intent toward Israel. And as you can imagine, there is no shortage of them. My superiors are particularly interested in any ties to an arms smuggling group called Gemini, with which you are no doubt familiar. I won’t wait for an answer though. It’s run by a former IDF commando and his former Mossad wife. At one time it was run by members of the Jewish mafia with ties to the illicit diamond trade in Israel. The Nathanson family. Once headed by Levi Nathanson, an unscrupulous character who did business with anyone, including Israel’s enemies, and was most probably done away with by Mossad. And good riddance,” she said with obvious contempt.

“My superiors were somewhat vague in the beginning as to why I was looking for links to Gemini, but over time I have learned more. A great deal more, and it is a fantastical story, also quite scary in light of other things that have been going on for the past decade. I take it that since you have been activated as Gabin Rocc and put with another CIA creation, Brenda Gray, the American government shares the same concerns as does Israel. The thing that I find curi-

ous is that they are not once again working on the matter jointly with my government? After all, they know we still have the same mutual interests and security concerns.”

I had no answer to that, and sat considering some of what she was saying, still unable to independently verify any of her story. I needed to talk to Control and get some guidance, but my gut was telling me to trust her. But was it just my gut? Or something a little *lower*?”

“What’s your real name?” I said to her.

“What’s yours?” she said to me.

“I asked you first,” I said.

She sighed.

“You know that is a cardinal sin with Tel Aviv,” she said. “Actually admitting I’m Israeli when working undercover is one, too. A huge one, but giving up my real name could bench me forever, strapped to a desk for the rest of my career. If I’m lucky. I don’t want to think about what would happen if I were not.”

“You are aware that I took your picture yesterday?” I said to her.

She nodded.

“Of course. I took yours, too.”

“So if you’re in a database that the American government has access to, then they will identify you. I’d just like to know I can trust you in some small way.”

Kellie leaned back and thought about that for some time, visibly wrestling with her decision. She sighed again, shaking her head.

“You sure you wouldn’t rather just pee on me?” she said.

I laughed.

She laughed.

Then I told her no, leaving out the fact that there were a lot of other things I wouldn’t mind doing to her. *Again*.

She nodded, took a deep breath, glanced toward the masking device on the dresser.

She turned back to me.

“I am Major Shoshanna Merleman, Department Two, Section Three (Counterintelligence), of the Israeli Directorate of Military Intelligence. And if anyone ever finds out I told you that, I’ll be *Private* Shoshanna Merleman of the Records Office at AMAN Headquarters. Again, if I’m lucky.”

I nodded.

“My lips are sealed,” I assured her.

Suddenly she was smiling.

“Bet I know how to unseal them,” she teased.

Inappropriate much? Didn’t need the erection just now, and then I realized why she had said that. Clever girl, knocking me off track.

“Okay, tell me the rest?” I said. “Along with who those guys were and how you knew to follow me when I left here tonight.”

“What about your real name?” she said, leaning forward and resting the palms of her hands on the bed just forward of her crossed lower legs.

“I never told you I was going to tell you that,” I said. “At least not right now. When I know for sure you are who you say you are and that we are working on the same side, maybe. And who knows, maybe your folks can ID me for you?”

She shook her head.

“They already tried,” she said. “Couldn’t get anything off facial recognition or the copy of your prints I sent with the photo. Nothing from CIA or any other American agency we have access to, and that is quite peculiar. You do come up in every database as Gabin Rocc,

however, and my hat is off to your backstopper. Who knows, maybe you are the real Gabin Endre Rocc after all.”

“Who else would I be?” I said dryly, then adjusted my position on the bed because my leg had gone to sleep. “So now, continue, please.”

Which she did.

Chapter 34

“Helene and Arturo Guzman, the couple your client has been meeting with, the Austrians by way of Argentina. Their initial meeting was not by accident, which I’m sure you know. From your standpoint, it was another level of cementing your client’s cover, of gaining access to the right people. But from the standpoint of the Guzmans it was more of a move of desperation. I take it they fed your Ms. Gray a line about their current limited capacity and contacts in North America?”

I nodded.

“Not entirely true,” Kellie/Shoshanna explained. “I won’t go into all of it now, but the Guzmans have had a bad run lately. A number of their clients have lost cargo on their transports, mainly due to raids by Customs officials, and in a few cases, by some nations’ Coast Guards. One was a Gemini shipment a month ago that was bound for Latin America. They’re on the verge of bankruptcy, and perhaps death if they don’t make good on reimbursements for their clients’ lost merchandise.”

“The briefing we received mentioned problems with their business,” I offered. “But not to this extent.”

“Well they have been good at covering for the most part,” she confirmed. “But it’s mostly sleight of hand, moving the same pieces around hoping nobody notices, using extended credit to make up for

shortfalls, and it's about to come apart. As I said, they are desperate. And your client, in their view, is their ticket to get well again. But they needed to separate her from you, the famed Gabin Endre Rocc."

My radar suddenly went up.

"And just how did they know I was me?" I said.

She smiled, stretching forward to pat my left knee.

"Because I told them, silly," she said.

But of course, I thought. Of course, how silly of me.

"I'm the Guzmans' banker," she explained. "I've been handling their accounts at my firm for most of the past year, know all the ins and outs, and all the problems they're having."

A sudden thought occurred to me.

"And you've been causing them, haven't you?" I said.

She smiled again, but did not answer.

"Anyway, I verified Gray's identity. Her cover is as well back-stopped as yours is, *Gabin*, nothing that I, or more specifically, AMAN, could find to suggest she is anything other than what she appears to be. I fed this information to my clients, along with your background. They were elated regarding Gray because she is precisely what they need to get their business back on track. However, they could not put their plans regarding her into motion until her bodyguard, the world infamous Mr. Rocc, was dealt with first."

"And by dealt with, you mean killed?" I added unnecessarily.

"But of course. Your reputation precedes you. No one can bribe or frighten you off, therefore you had to be killed."

"So you're in Marbella for more than just the sun and fun away from London? You were here doing business with the Guzmans?"

She nodded.

“The vacation, though needed, was just a cover. We were here to plan strategy, but then your client sort of fell into their laps and Arturo came up with another plan. Helene liked it, too, and I decided to sign on. Especially after Colonel Grissom gave me the real story behind Gabin Rocc. He’s the head of our Counterintelligence Department, the officer I mentioned earlier who was originally involved in the joint project back in the 90s.”

I nodded, she continued.

“I sidled up to you yesterday at the beach on purpose, as you no doubt knew immediately. My job was to seduce you, get you away from your client, and create a window for the local talent they had hired to do away with you. I figured they wouldn’t be much of a match for you, because of your training, but decided to follow along nonetheless, just in case I was needed.”

“And you were,” I said, still feeling the stinging in my back. “You know that my client is still being protected as we speak, and her location is secure.”

“I know,” she said. “The Guzmans do not. In fact, I dare say they are beside themselves with anxiety because no one has checked in to tell them that the deed has been done. Regarding you, that is.”

“Won’t they become suspicious of you after a while?” I said.

The AMAN agent glanced away for a moment.

“No, I don’t believe so. The Guzmans have just become irrelevant. And your client will have her window, but she must be ready to move quickly.”

I had no idea what she was talking about, but recognized a kindred devious mind when I was in its presence. She was up to something, obviously, probably several *some things*. And she wouldn’t tell me about any of them until the time was right.

“So what now?” I said.

In response, Kellie/Shoshanna bounded from the bed and stood with her back to me, hands on hips, arching backwards, groaning. Of course I watched her the whole time. She could have been reaching for a weapon or something.

She turned back to me, her face serious again.

“Go back to your hotel and await developments,” she said instructionally. “Probably no longer than twenty-four hours. And stay sharp. Beyond you and me, there are some very dangerous people involved in this thing and we don’t know who all of them are yet.”

Sounded like a dismissal to me so I stood up from the bed and stretched myself. Probably shouldn’t have done that because my back was on fire enough. Grimacing, I picked up my jacket and slipped it back on, headed for the door.

I paused with the door handle in my left hand.

“Thanks, Kellie,” I said.

She smiled, nodded, then walked over to me.

“For setting you up or for saving your life?” she said, putting a hand on my arm.

“Neither,” I told her with a grin. “I was thinking more about that thing you did with the tip of your tongue much earlier.”

She giggled and then kicked me out of her room. As I was walking away I wondered how many rooms in this hotel had she rented, and if she would be having more clandestine meetings in them tonight. No way to know and I suppose it didn’t really matter. Unless she was going to plot my murder again.

No way to know that either, so I guess I’d head back to my hotel and make sure my client was safe. Day shift would be on by now, and fully briefed on tonight’s activities by the night team. All four

would most likely hang around to see if I made it back to the hotel by the two hour deadline. Checking my watch, I saw that I still had twenty minutes. I could walk it in that time, but chose Uber instead, might as well pump some money into the local economy.

And I was dog tired.

Also, the last time I decided to walk from this hotel, six guys tried to kill me. I'd have to check the news later to see if the police had any leads, and let Control know that there might be some cleanup liaison work for them to take care of. Then, as I thought about it, figured this was highly unlikely, given the efficiency of the Israelis and the obvious professionalism of Major Merleman.

Still didn't know if I could trust her, but I will admit that I liked her, and not just because of that *thing* she did with the tip of her tongue.

Of course, that didn't hurt one bit either.

Chapter 35

I really needed sleep when I got back to my hotel, along with some painkillers for my back, and a long, hot shower. I got the painkillers out of my bag, then had to do a lot of talking and typing.

First thing I did was dismiss the night team and thank them for their able assistance in my absence, then I, unnecessarily, told Anton and Carlos to be extra vigilant while they stood and walked post today.

Inside the front room, Brenda Gray was waiting with arms folded across her small chest, long dark hair hanging past her shoulders—she had let it grow out considerably while we were at The Point—, and she wore a long designer sweater in maroon, blue jeans, and black ankle boots, all expensive looking. I held up a finger while I got the painkillers and some water. Then, while I made sure that our sound masking was up and running and took out my secure laptop, I gave her a brief rundown on last night, leaving out certain unnecessary details, such as *water sports* and anything that involved nudity.

She had many questions, none of which I took the time to answer because I had to get everything down in the communiqué I was about to send to Control. When that was done and I checked it twice, I encrypted it using today's crypto-key, then transmitted the message through cyberspace.

I stood after closing the laptop lid, told The Asset I was going to take a quick shower. She did not look happy, but said nothing. I was glad of that, this morning I was not in the mood for superfluous conversation. Being used, set up, and nearly killed as a result generally had that effect on me.

Fifteen minutes later, I came out of the first floor bedroom that I had taken as mine and was surprised by the fresh aroma of food emanating from the kitchen out back. "You've been up all night," Brenda Gray said by way of explanation as she turned off the stove. "You should eat something."

She had made scrambled eggs, oatmeal, and whole wheat toast. My mouth was watering because I was starving. But as I sat down and took a sip of the orange juice she had set out with breakfast, the laptop dinged. Even with the lid closed, it would notify if a message came in. Brenda waved me back to my seat and went into the living room to retrieve it, setting it up on my left side. I raised the lid, typed in my password, pulled up the secure communications window. Another password later and there was the message from Control.

STANDBY TO ACTIVATE YOUR VISUAL ENCRYPTION CARD IN TEN MINUTES AND MAKE SURE YOUR E-MASKING IS FULLY FUNCTIONAL.

Simple, terse, and a clear indication that Control was scrambling madly. I made sure the machine was set to receive a secure visual communication, remembering to remove the black tape that I had covering the built-in camera, then finished my breakfast. Brenda put the dishes in the sink and I was wiping my mouth on a napkin

when the laptop's screen suddenly went from dark to light, and after a few seconds, a tri-screen appeared. Yep, definitely a mad scramble.

Brenda pulled her chair around to my side of the table and sat to my left, a little startled by the trio of people staring back at us.

"Considering the hour back there," I said by way of greeting. "It must be important for the three of you to be making this call jointly. Or at least on the same screen."

Will Jordon, Nicola Calavici, and Shelbee Roberts stared back at us and none of them looked particularly pleased about the situation. The CIA Deputy Director spoke first, and despite the fact that it wasn't yet dawn back where she was calling from, I heard no trace of sleep in her voice. Curious because she was wearing a bathrobe and the background behind her appeared to be an in-home office or study.

"First, Gabin, you're okay? Your report said you were shot in the back."

"I was," I confirmed. "But I was wearing the right clothes. Thank the tailors for me. I can attest to the high quality and functionality of their work."

"I'll do that," she said. "As for the rest, thus far we have not been able to confirm the identity of the woman you know as Kellie Martindale. All of our records on AMAN personnel are not as detailed as we would like. We are concentrating on those we know from the Counterintelligence Department. But you should know that records from the early stages of the Rocc legend do list a junior AMAN officer by the name of Leo Grissom working liaison with Mossad. He is a colonel today and head of AMAN Counterintelligence, so she could be telling the truth on that score."

I'd kept the fact that Major Merleman had given me her real name to myself. If the Agency discovered it on its own, then okay, but I would keep her secret as long as I didn't think she was lying to me about anything significant.

"So are you guys going to start playing ball with the Israelis now that we know they're on to the same trail?"

An uncomfortable pause. The way this thing worked was that everyone could see everyone else, so I saw three people and each of them saw three people. Well four because at least a part of Brenda Gray's face could be seen on my screen I'm sure. I detected eye exchanges between Will and Nic. Then Will took a breath before speaking. He was dressed in a crisp white T-shirt and his hair was definitely showing signs of recent contact with a pillow.

"It's complicated, Gabin," he told me. "We can't involve the Israelis right now because there are too many unresolved questions. After all, some of the main targets of your operation are Israeli nationals with ties to Israeli Intelligence. If we get into bed with them too soon, we could blow the operation. There was discussion early on about going to some members of Mossad that we believed we could trust, but then we nixed that idea because of security concerns."

"Well perhaps somebody should have considered the fact that the Israelis knew about the Rocc cover and might have set alarms out that would alert them if it was ever activated again," I said a little testily. "And considering that Kavala Baumgartner was Mossad, maybe this whole thing is a gigantic waste of time."

"She was Mossad," Shelbee Roberts spoke for the first time. She was dressed in a green sweater, her hair was hanging naturally at her shoulders, and she looked and sounded as she always did. Don't

know if she actually ever went to sleep, or even needed it. “But the part of the operation that involved Mossad was well before her time. There would have been no reason to read her in on their end.”

“Well if there is a Colonel Grissom in AMAN who knows,” I said, “why couldn’t there be one in Mossad, or an ex-one, who keeps in touch with their old pal Kavala?”

“Gabin, your cover, and Brenda’s, is air tight. This Martindale woman confirmed as much,” Nic said, turning her head briefly to stifle a yawn. “Granted, this is somewhat concerning, but if she is on the level and AMAN are working the same operation, it matters little. You are not authorized to read her in on our operation, but any assistance she can provide you should take, with caution, of course. I don’t like the fact that she set you up, even if she was watching your back. But the Israelis were always somewhat reckless. Good, but reckless.”

I glanced over at Ms. Gray before continuing.

“Folks, The Asset and I are kind of hanging out here in the open and a little blind,” I said as evenly as I could, eyeing each of them in turn. “One foreign entity knows we aren’t who we say we are, and if she is not the friendly she’s pretending to be, *we* could be in a world of hurt, and so could *your* whole operation.”

No immediate response, and after a few seconds I realized that Brenda Gray had put her hand on my thigh under the table. I didn’t do anything about it though.

“The operation is proceeding on course, Gabin,” said the CIA’s Chief of Special Operations, her voice confidently assured. For a second there she actually reminded me of Shoshanna Merleman. Just as beautiful, just as deadly, and just as devious. Not to mention just as mission-oriented. And then a highly inappropriate thought en-

tered my mind. Yeah, if necessary, she'd let somebody piss on her for her country, too. And then kill them later.

"Anything else any of you want to relay?" I said after it became clear they didn't.

"Be careful, Gabin," Will said. For a second there I think he almost slipped up and used my real name.

"Yes, Gabin," said Nic. "Please be extra careful, the both of you. We are updating contingency plans for emergency extraction if necessary. You'll be updated as soon as they're complete. But you know the cardinal rule as well as any of us."

Indeed I did.

IF SOMETHING SEEMS WRONG, THEN IT IS WRONG. WHEREVER THERE IS DOUBT, THERE IS NO DOUBT.

"Stay on mission, you two," Shelbee added. "You're doing great, and everybody here is working night and day to cover you. It's in hand."

I'm sure, I thought wearily as I ended the secure transmission and shut the laptop lid. I turned and glanced at Brenda Gray, seeing the doubt rising behind her deep brown eyes. Suddenly she realized her hand was on my thigh, removed it without comment. I was kind of disappointed, it had felt nice, despite the warning I had given her back at The Point, but right now that wasn't a complication I was looking for. There were plenty enough to go around already.

"The three of them all came on before dawn back home to give a pep talk?" Brenda said skeptically, leaning back in her chair, again folding her arms across her chest. "You buy that?"

"Not for one heartbeat," I admitted, drumming my fingers across the lid of the laptop. "They're worried, about what I'm not sure. Of course there are things they aren't telling us. That's always the way

between Headquarters and field personnel; they never share everything with us because of the possibility of compromise or capture. Logical in a purely operational sense, but from a practical standpoint it's annoying. And it pisses me off."

I pushed up and stretched my back carefully. The stinging was duller now, but definitely still there. The painkillers and the shower had helped, but now I needed some rest.

"We're awaiting developments," I told Brenda as a yawn overtook me. "For now we're not leaving the hotel. Hope you still have some books to read. I'm going to bed. If you get a call, wake me immediately. Understood?"

She nodded from her seat at the table, but said nothing. I looked at her for a few moments, yawned again, then took my leave. I didn't like the expression in her dark eyes but right now I was too tired to worry about it.

Or anything else on this side of dreamland at the moment.

Chapter 36

On the evening news, reports from the Marbella Police regarding a recent spate of violence were the main topic on all the local outlets. It seems that six men had been killed in the early morning hours in separate locations within a few blocks of Avenida Antonio Belon. Speculation was that it was gang related, as all the men were known to the police as being members of different criminal gangs at one time or another. It was not yet known if the men had killed each other, or if there were others involved who were still at-large. The police gave no indication that they were presently searching for a specific person or persons in relation to this violence, but the investigation was in its early stages and ongoing.

And then late this afternoon in La Caridad, an Austrian couple on holiday were the victims of a vicious mugging that left both dead on the streets near the shop where they had stopped for coffee on their way back to their hotel in Marbella, having spent the early part of the day out sightseeing. Again, the police had no ready suspects to identify.

I had little doubt as to who the Austrian couple were, just wasn't sure who had done the deed. The bad guys, or the *really* bad guys. I was sitting in the front room checking all the local stations, the laptop open on the coffee table in front of me. And now the T-1 was rigged under my left arm, comfortably nestled in the designer hol-

ster. At my back, the Walther was in place as well. Doubt if I'd be without it for the duration of this mission. Even if I wasn't dressed.

That last thought made me think of Kellie Martindale. She probably looked pretty good wearing nothing at all and holding her compact Beretta.

Hopefully the erection I was currently experiencing had more to do with the idea of the naked woman and not the gun, but I was probably never going to be entirely sure.

Early the next morning, The Asset received a phone call, and an invitation.

By late evening we were on a chartered flight leaving Marbella.

Next stop: Cairo.

Despite orders to the contrary, and because over the past couple of decades of surviving largely on my own, I have become unaccustomed to following anyone's orders beyond my own, I gave Shoshanna Merleman a jingle, made some casual comments that anyone listening to would never understand, but the Israeli major would know meant she needed to check a dead drop that we had hastily set up for just such an occasion.

Next, Brenda Gray and I left for the airport.

Chapter 37

CAIRO MARRIOTT HOTEL & OMAR KHAYYAM CASINO CAIRO, EGYPT

The hotel consists of 1,087 rooms, making it one of the largest in the Middle East. The rooms are located in two identical twenty-story buildings—the Gezira and Zamelek towers. Situated between them on ground level is the palace and main entrance to the hotel, which contains the reception and administration areas. On the roof of the palace is an open-air theatre which faces the Nile and central Cairo. And completing the brochure highlights, it contains nineteen meeting rooms and boasts a total event space of more than 28,000 square feet. In other words, a fucking lot.

Luxury does have its high points, but as I looked around at my latest accommodations, and believe me, they were grand, however I knew I would never get used to this and couldn't wait to return to something approaching normal. Not a Motel 6, but a Comfort Suites would be just fine.

Each of the towers had two multi-room penthouse suites on the top floors and we rented both of the ones at the top of the Zamelek. One for The Asset and me, and the other for the rest of the security team. I had brought the four from Spain with us because things were moving fast and there wasn't time to look for another local team in Cairo. Besides, Hector, Raul, Anton, and Carlos had performed well in Marbella and didn't have a problem with short notice first-class travel and accommodations. Again there would be twelve

hour shifts, same setup as in Spain. They knew their jobs and didn't require much supervision, so I left them to it.

There was only one level in the penthouse but it was even more luxurious than the Hotel Feurte had been. Brenda had the master bedroom and it was larger than most of the apartments I had ever lived in, but the room I had just down the hall was nearly as palatial. Standing and looking at the huge sunken tub in the bathroom almost had me stripping down to give it a whirl, but there were other things to do first. I was flushing the toilet and started laughing. I had been thinking about Kellie Martindale joining me in the tub, which would be nice, and would involve *water*. But when I was relieving my bladder, I thought about her again.

Damn, I was going to have to get that particular thought out of my head. Fucking *water sports*!

Brenda was in the front room sitting on the sofa still wearing the white linen designer pantsuit she'd worn on the flight from Marbella. She had her iPhone in her hands, scrolling the screen, glanced up when I came in wearing tan slacks and a dark blue button-down shirt, my jacket left back in the bedroom, the T-1 holstered under my left arm. I noticed she stared at it for a few seconds before returning her attention to her phone.

"Nothing new from our mysterious contact yet," she said. "And I expected there wouldn't be. The last message said we should relax and enjoy the hotel and casino until contacted sometime within the next few days. So I take it that means we'll be watched."

I nodded, moved to one of the plush wing chairs across the coffee table from where she sat on the large leather sofa in the middle of the room.

“Yes,” I told her. “The suite is clear now, and I’ve got the masker up. When we’re out one of the guys will be on the door at all times, when housekeeping comes, someone will escort them into every room. And afterwards, the place will be swept again.”

She glanced over at me and smiled.

“As thorough as ever, Gabin. I may have to give you a raise.”

I didn’t respond, checked my watch. Local time was nearly five in the evening and my tummy was starting to growl.

“Are you hungry?” I said to her.

She glanced up, thought a minute, then turned to me and nodded.

“Now that you mention it, I could eat.”

“I was thinking that maybe room service would be best,” I told her. “But then thought better of that. We need to be seen. Rather, *you* need to be seen. I think we should go down and have dinner in the restaurant. Order a big meal, have something sent up to the guys, too. Then maybe spend some time in the casino, blow some of that cover capital we’ve been generously supplied with. And perhaps later, go up to the open-air theatre and look around, again be visible.”

Brenda Gray was nodding.

“Okay. But I’ll need to change first, maybe a quick shower. Say an hour?”

“Think I can hang on that long,” I said as she pushed up from the sofa.

She smirked at me as she stepped around the coffee table and headed down the hallway to her room. I watched her go. Brenda’s ass had always been small, but cute, probably very tight, too. And that was the last time I was going to be thinking about it.

I pulled out my iPhone. Yeah, I was carrying one these days, the latest version with all the bells and whistles, plus a few others that the CIA and probably the NSA had come up with and didn't want anybody else to know about. And when this mission was over, it was going right back to them and I was going back to my prepaid Android, all the *alleged* Smartphone I was ever likely to need.

Once the phone unlocked after accepting my password, a large menu displayed on the screen. My options were many. I could probably order a pizza or launch nuclear missiles with this thing.

But I settled for checking Gabin's email.

Chapter 38

Some people could probably get used to spending days of leisure in a place like the Cairo Marriott, and I have to admit, it was a lot better than some places I've spent my idle time, but after three days, it was starting to wear thin. For me at least. As for my client, well Ms. Gray seemed to be enjoying the role she was playing, the mysterious woman of privilege and distraction, without a seeming care in the world other than indulgence.

She gambled (and did pretty well), she shopped (again did pretty well), went to shows, toured nearby museums and other attractions, dined on exotic dishes, occasionally with other guests at the hotel, usually unaccompanied businessmen looking for *something on the side*, and spent at least two hours a day being pampered in the hotel's exclusive spa. And everywhere she went, I went, always in the background (like a good bodyguard) but close enough to respond if needed. At first, with so many people around (Cairo is kind of crowded) it was hard for me to determine whether or not she was under surveillance, although I was fairly certain we both were.

Then, near the end of the second full day, I confirmed my suspicion. After that, spotting and keeping track of all of the others became much easier. From what I could tell there were four teams that rotated at irregular intervals. Six men and two women, and they ap-

peared to have decent training. Considering who they worked for, I was not surprised.

I did receive quite a shock Friday evening, though, just after ten p.m. as Brenda and I were leaving the casino to head into the executive bar for a nightcap. The evening manager at the concierge desk came up to Brenda with a sealed envelope, smiled becomingly, and informed her that someone had left the envelope with instructions that it be passed to her when she exited the casino. Brenda smiled and took the envelope, thanking the woman.

The woman smiled again, and then her almond colored eyes lit on me and the expression in them became glacial, but for just a microsecond. My heart had stopped, for maybe the length of two beats.

The woman was in her early fifties now, still beautiful, still buxom, a light skinned black woman wearing gold octagonal framed glasses that emphasized her prominent nose. She wore a charcoal skirt suit over a white pullover blouse, an expensive looking watch on her left wrist, a single ring on each hand, small gold earrings, and a pearl choker at her throat. The years had been kind to her.

“You’re American, aren’t you?” Brenda was saying to the concierge.

The woman nodded, refocusing her attention on Brenda. “That’s correct,” she said. “Originally from Texas, but traveled all over as a kid. My dad was in the army. You’re from the states, too, huh?”

Brenda confirmed this, going with the cover story. I stood by silently, casting what I hoped were surreptitious glances about me to determine if any hostiles were closing in on us. So far the coast appeared clear, but with the appearance of this particular concierge, one that I had not noticed before, I was suddenly very concerned. *Of all the gin joints... or luxury hotels in Egypt.*

Brenda thanked the woman again and continued on toward the executive bar. I glanced at the concierge as I passed, seeing nothing but a sweet smile on her face. She definitely recognized me, the beard and the hair on my head notwithstanding. And because of that I was curious as to why she hadn't said anything. What was her game, and how might it affect the one Brenda and I were playing? Were we already compromised?

And what the hell was in that envelope?

The answer to that question was the easiest to uncover. Once we were seated at a table near the back corner and a waiter had taken our drink orders, Brenda carefully unsealed the envelope, took out a single sheet of hotel stationary, unfolded and read it. After a few seconds she passed it over to me.

"Well that's convenient," I said, refolding the stationary and dropping it on the table.

"Quite," Brenda agreed as the waiter returned with our drinks, vodka martini for her and Perrier for me. "So they've been here the whole time?"

"Probably," I said. "They wanted to watch you for a few days first, continuing to check you out. Being in the same hotel just made it easier. Makes it easier for us too, as all we'll have to do tomorrow afternoon is come down to the lobby and walk over to the elevators for the other tower, then up to the penthouse floor over there."

Brenda took a sip of her drink, looking at me over the top of her glass.

"What's wrong?" she said. "I know you've been a little bored the past couple of days following me around and all, especially when I was on a *date*, but it's not really anything new for you. You seemed

okay up until a little while ago, right before the concierge came up with the note. Figured you'd be happy that we're progressing now."

"I am," I told her, slowly rotating my glass around on the table in front of me, and also considering how much I wanted to share with her. Still that trust thing. Then I thought about the fact that her life was on the line here, too.

I picked up my glass and emptied it. "Finish your drink. Something I need to tell you. But not here."

She eyed me with concern now, frowning a little.

Five minutes later we were on the elevator and heading back to our suite, the silence around us thick with apprehension, and I was sure my client felt it as much as I did.

Chapter 39

“What is it with you and prostitutes? And should I be jealous that my operation was not the first one you wrecked?”

It was almost midnight and I had just responded to the second response from my original secured flash message to Operational Control at The Point. Brenda and I were both sitting on the sofa in the front room, my laptop open on the glass coffee table in front of us. My jacket was off but the T-1 and shoulder rig were still in place. Brenda had kicked off her shoes and curled up on the sofa beside me as I told her the story and typed at the same time. In between responses and responses to responses from Control, I filled in some more details. Now I was doing that again and she was having way more fun with this than she should’ve been, given the circumstances.

I glanced at the electronic masker on the table two feet away from the laptop, then sat back and sighed, looking sideways at her.

“What can I say, a man’s got needs,” I said, and she laughed, leaning over and punching my shoulder.

“Well in her case it sounds like she got a lot further with you than I did,” Brenda quipped. “Lucky girl.”

“Hardly,” I retorted. “She spent five years in federal prison. Unlike you. And she wasn’t the boss either, unlike you. Makes me wonder what did happen with her boss. Haven’t kept up, but perhaps I

should have. No doubt Control is digging up everything right now, but in the meantime, we have to decide if we're compromised."

"Well she knows who you are, but she made a point of not saying anything in front of me. She's probably seen you before tonight, even though you didn't see her. She could be playing for time, maybe just wants to make you nervous, letting you know that she knows you're playing somebody else. She's still using her real name, so she's probably here legitimately. Could be just a huge coincidence."

I looked at her skeptically.

"In this business, coincidence is quite rare, Brenda. Almost nonexistent. It is possible that she doesn't have anything to do with our business, but the fact that she knows I'm not who I say I am, and that I'm with you, it puts the operation in jeopardy. If people know I'm a phony, they might suspect that you are, too. And because my cover is so well backstopped, as is yours, the conclusion could be that we're both shams, possibly working for a rival group, or worse, a government. That would be very bad. Primarily for us."

We were silent after that, both thinking, considering angles, and for my part, not liking any of them.

Another message came in on the laptop, this time requesting live crypto transmission. I acknowledged the request, went through the necessary process, then sat back and waited for the connection to be established on the other end. It took three minutes. This time there was only one person on the other end of the screen, and I was not at all surprised.

"I just finished reading through all the reports on your escapades in Miami way back when," Shelbee Roberts said. "FBI and the U.S. Attorney's office down there owed you big time for turning them

onto a major international sex-trafficking ring ^[v]. They put a lot of people behind bars, some of them are still there. Unlike your concierge, friend, Ms. Saxon. She got out after four years, one off for good behavior, in accordance with the cooperation agreement she signed. Pretty good considering she was part of a plot to kill you, kept you occupied and distracted, or so she thought, until the hitter could get into place. But you turned the tables on him and her, used her to roll up the big dogs in the end. And your friend who was attacked was avenged, too. Very neat.”

Memories flooded through my mind as she spoke, things I didn’t want to think about now, especially now, too much tied up with them.

“Leisa Saxon,” I said. “Tell me about her post-prison?”

“Being a convicted felon is not such an easy thing to live down,” Shelbee said. “Especially when it’s federal time and you are an admitted prostitute. She found it difficult getting work that paid decently anywhere in the United States. She still had her looks, though, and she was no dummy. Had a degree in marketing. During her time with the Excelsior Modeling (and hooking) Group she did a lot of international travel and made good contacts, many of whom knew what she really did for a living and didn’t care. She bobbed around for a few years, Paris, Geneva, the Riviera, Morocco, and then three years ago she turned up in Egypt. Started out at the Cairo Marriott nearly two years ago, been in her current job nine months. Oh, she’s got a kid back in the U.S. Girl, well woman now. In law school in Oregon. No known connections to anything criminal since she got out of prison, but with all that overseas time, could be things that weren’t recorded officially. Especially if it had something to do with sex for money. A lot of countries around the world are not as

hung up on that as Americans seemed to be. Anyway, I don't like coincidences any more than you do, Gabin, but this could be one. I agree that it is odd that she didn't let on that she knew who you really were, at least not in front of your protectee. The operation needs to go forward, but we need to gather more information about Ms. Saxon first. Your meeting is at noon tomorrow?"

"Today now," I confirmed.

"Well that gives you a little time," Shelbee said.

"Time for what?" I frowned.

"Time to find out what exactly Ms. Saxon is up to and whether or not she poses a threat to the operation or you and Ms. Gray."

I stared at her image on the screen for a few long moments, letting all of my distaste for this idea show.

"And just how am I supposed to do that?" I said.

Shelbee glanced away from the screen for a few moments, then looked back up, a sly smile on her full lips.

"Well she got off work at eleven," she said. "According to the information we have here. But I do have her address. And it's not all that far away. Perhaps you could pop by for a quick visit. A nightcap, perchance."

"At midnight plus?" I said incredulously. "What if she has someone staying over? What if she's married now?"

"Not married, according to my information. Could have a suitor. If so, you'll have to deal with it. Gabin, this is very important, you know that, a lot is riding on the outcome of Brenda's mission. We have to know if you've been compromised, and if so, how badly. And can it be contained."

I was looking into those cold black eyes when she said the word *contained*, thought back to some of our other joint projects where I

watched as she *contained* several loose ends. One time she did this with a razor sharp knife across someone's throat. [\[w\]](#)

Not liking this at all, but realizing she was probably right, I said I'd give it a shot. She smiled again, then gave me the address.

I told Brenda to go to bed and try to get some sleep, then I gave very specific instructions to Raul and Hector as they were on duty now.

At a quarter to one in the morning I was out on the street, walking in random directions for another ten minutes before hailing a cab and giving the driver the address to where I wanted him to take me. It wasn't where I would eventually end up, but close enough.

I settled back into the uncomfortable and worn backseat of the cab and let my mind drift to that other time many years ago when I'd dropped by Leisa Saxon's place in the middle of the night. The first part had gone rather well, rivaling the recent evening I spent with Kellie Martindale in Marbella, but then things took a turn downhill when a diminutive hitman who actually went by the moniker *The Mini Guinea* tried to shoot me in a nearby park. Now that I thought about it, she had more in common with Major Merleman than I realized.

Let's hope things went better tonight, because for the most part I was flying blind and solo.

Just like the old days.

Chapter 40

Just south of Nassar Station, and approximately three miles west of the Cairo Marriott, there are several apartment buildings (flats) that cater to long-term foreign workers and some permanent residents. One, just off 26 July Street and about midway down Shambliuan Street is a recently renovated five-story stucco building that is the listed residence for Leisa Saxon, evening concierge manager at the Cairo Marriott and Omar Khayyam Casino. Her flat is on the south end of the third floor just off the stairwell. Security is not great at the building, which is why I was able to access it and the floor I was looking for with little effort. Now, at a quarter to two in the morning, I was standing in the badly lit hallway outside the door to Ms. Saxon's unit.

After a few minutes of silently seeking inspiration with nothing brilliant springing to mind, I took a breath, knocked on the door, standing in the center of the peephole and staring forward. I was out there for about three more minutes, knowing that I was being carefully observed from the other side, before I heard a deadbolt being released, then another, and finally the main door lock itself. Lastly, the latch.

When the door opened, Leisa Saxon stood leaning against the jamb, one hand behind the door, the other across her stomach. She wasn't wearing her glasses, she was smiling, and from what I could

tell, appeared to be wearing nothing more than a black silk bathrobe with Japanese characters adorning it. The length was just long enough to cover the upper half of her still delightful looking brown thighs. And her hair was damp, probably not long from the shower, although if she got off at eleven and came straight home, she should have been done with her shower some time ago. Or maybe she had something else to do first. Like set up an ambush perhaps?

“Somehow I knew I would be seeing you again tonight, Derrick Olin,” she said with a sly grin, not moving to admit me, and definitely enjoying herself. “Or should I call you Gabin Rocc? Like the beard, despite the gray. But you look better completely bald, not that you don’t look good now.”

I smiled, casually glanced down the hallway to my left, and into the apartment behind her. Presently it appeared that we were alone, but I couldn’t see that far inside, there was only one lamp turned on and at the lowest setting.

“You certainly do,” I turned on the charm, or at least I think I did. I was never sure because it wasn’t something I usually gave a damn about. This, of course, explained why I was over fifty and still single. Well, part of the explanation anyway. “Been a while since we saw one another.”

She nodded, something behind those slightly out of focus eyes of hers turning just a bit chilly.

“Yeah, not since you sent me to the federal pen for five years,” she told me.

“Ah, but I hear you only did four, time off for good behavior, as per your plea agreement.”

She paused to consider me more closely for a few moments, then chuckled.

“You kept tabs? Or more likely checked up on me once we ran into each other at the hotel. No matter. It is good to see you, Derrick. Would you like to come in?”

That was a really loaded question, and so reminiscent of... what, twelve, thirteen years ago? I smiled again, nodded. Leisa stepped back, her right hand still behind the door. I stepped into the front room of her flat and the door closed behind me, sending a sudden chill up my spine.

Or that might have been the hard, steel-like object I felt pressed into my left kidney a second after the door shut and the lock clicked into place.

Chapter 41

Rubber underwear is not a bad thing to have in my line of business, or very good bladder and bowel control. Thankfully I possess the latter.

“If you knew how many nights while I was locked away in that filthy place that I dreamed of, fantasized about this moment, you would understand the depth of my joy right now.”

Her mouth was at my left ear, her breath hot on my skin, and the pressure against my kidney had intensified significantly over the past few seconds. Didn't know what was pressing against it, but I could guess.

Leisa's right hand was on top of my right shoulder, squeezing, but the pressure was nothing compared to the opposing kidney. I was already calculating my options, not liking any of them too much, but understanding that I was going to have to do something, and sooner rather than later. She had already made the classic mistake, talking instead of getting on with the deed, giving me a little time, but I didn't know how much.

“I was not built for prison,” she went on. “And because of how I looked, all the big bitches wanted me as their pet. If you had any idea the things I had to do just to survive, to keep my nose clean and not make trouble so I could get out early. And not just with the other prisoners, the guards, too. Male and female. It was like I was

still turning tricks, only now I wasn't getting paid and couldn't go home and shower afterwards. And this all happened because of *you!*"

That last was punctuated with a sharp jab into my kidney and that's when I made my move, but Leisa stepped away just as I swung back with my elbow aiming for her arm, and missing completely. She was pressed against the door, grinning at me, a small caliber revolver hanging from her left hand, now pointed at the floor.

"Gotcha!" she shouted, now laughing fully. "The look on your face right now is all the payback I will ever need. Tell me, did you at least pee yourself a little?"

I stood glaring at her for nearly a minute, allowing my heart to climb out of my throat before risking speech. I exhaled, took another deep breath, let that one go, too, indicated the revolver.

She held it up, the muzzle pointed away from me.

"Not loaded," she said. "Didn't want to take the chance that one of us might be injured. I was pretty sure you'd try something, too, you being you. Derrick Olin, Gabin Rocc, no matter. Still a really dangerous bastard."

"Mind handing it over?" I said, not taking my eyes off of hers.

She stared back at me for a few seconds, then smiled again, handing it to me butt first. I opened the cylinder and made sure it was empty, then put it in my jacket pocket. Leisa pushed off the door and came very close to me.

"I'm not really holding a grudge," she said sweetly. "Actually, the prison I was in wasn't all that bad. Although I did get a few *girl-friend* offers. But I just couldn't resist yanking your chain a little. Forgive me?"

I smiled as graciously as I could manage, and it was all fake.

“Of course, luv,” I said, and she stood on her bare toes and pecked me on the lips. With my hand secured in hers, she led me over to the small sofa in the center of the room, turning the lamps on both sides of it up to medium illumination. We sat, my hand still in hers, and the bottom of her robe opening a little wider to reveal even more of those lovely light brown thighs of hers. As I recalled, they were a lot more dangerous than the empty revolver now in my pocket.

“I probably should ask how you found out where I lived so quickly, but I can guess. And you’re here because you want to know if I told anyone who you really were, correct?”

I turned and looked at her for a few moments before responding, seeing the mirth still in her eyes, at the corners of her full red lips. She had aged extremely well, prison notwithstanding, and I still felt the same electric pull toward her that I had when we met in Miami more than a decade before.

“Everything I’ve seen regarding your post-release life suggests that you have tried to stay on the straight and narrow,” I responded. “Although when you came overseas you did use a good many of the contacts you amassed while working for Excelsior. You’ve worked hard to reestablish yourself. You have a good job here, making decent money, working in a luxury establishment, and able to help out your daughter Jana in law school out in Oregon.”

The mirth left her eyes at the mention of her daughter’s name, and she released my hand.

“So you have been checking up on me?” she said a little coldly now.

“Yes,” I admitted. “Look, Leisa, I’m happy for you, that you got your life back on track after everything that happened. And in case you’re wondering, I don’t have any hard feelings for you either. I

can't say I'm exactly all right with the fact that you were part of a plot to have me killed, but I do understand why you did it. You cut your deal, stuck by it, did your time. Far as I'm concerned, that's done. I have no intention of messing up your life, any part of it."

"As long as I don't mess up yours?" she shot back, folding her arms across her plentiful chest, the top part of her robe now gaping.

"Period actually," I told her. "Didn't even know you were in Cairo until last night. Didn't see you at the hotel on any of the other nights we've been there."

"That's because I've been off for a few days," she told me. "Went away with a friend, just a quick trip. I only saw you when you were headed into the casino with Ms. Gray about two hours before I came up to you with the message for her. Shocked the crap out of me, too. If the message hadn't been left for your client, I would have contrived another means for getting in touch. I checked the registry and saw that there was a second person listed on the suite with Ms. Gray, Gabin Rocc, and when I pulled up the passport photo, your handsome face was staring back at me. So I figured you were up to something sneaky. Didn't know if your client knew who you really were or what's going on with you and her, so I figured I'd play it cool till we could talk later. And now here we are."

"And you've also had your revenge," I pointed out.

Leisa snickered.

"Well of course. That really was fun."

I didn't think so but chose to keep that to myself for now.

"So what are you up to, Derrick?" she said, lowering her arms, the smile now firmly back in place. "I find it hard to believe that you're into scams now, identity theft, romancing rich ladies out of their

money as a gigolo or something. Although I'll bet you'd make a good gigolo. Like Richard Gere in that movie back when I was a kid."

American Gigolo.

Hardly.

"I can't tell you what I'm doing, Leisa," I finally said after some more lengthy consideration. "And I would appreciate it if from now on you addressed me only as Gabin Rocc, even when we're alone, okay? It is very important that you do not make any slip ups."

She stared at me for quite a while, her expression a combination of curiosity and intrigue. Finally she licked her lips and leaned in close, the gap in her robe becoming more pronounced.

"Derrick... Gabin. I was serious about not meaning you any harm before. No hard feelings about what went on in the past. I take responsibility for that, what happened in Miami, Excelsior, the attack on Dee, setting you up, all of that I own. And to be honest, if you hadn't come along when you did, I doubt if I'd even be alive today. So I'll keep your secret."

I was in the process of nodding when I saw something else move behind her eyes.

"Of course, a girl still has to eat and live and pay the bills," she said, uncrossing and recrossing those magnificent legs of hers. "Cairo is a very expensive place to live, especially for a foreigner."

I stared back at her for a few heartbeats, then smiled.

"I can imagine," I said. "I think an accommodation can be reached that is mutually beneficial to all concerned parties."

Leisa stared at me, her head tilted sideways.

"Did you become a lawyer since we last saw one another?"

"Some days I wonder that myself," I said. "Let me just say that a sizable donation to your cost of living fund will be forthcoming."

Leisa smiled, leaned over and touched my thigh.

“And let me say that your secret is safe with me, *Gabin*,” she said huskily.

Derrick Olin probably would have gotten up and left at that point, business concluded, perhaps a hearty handshake in closing. Fortunately, Derrick Olin was not in this room, not even in Egypt, he was whoever the fuck knew or cared where.

Gabin Endre Rocc reached down and took the hand that was on his thigh, squeezed it, then moved that same hand over and undid the belt on her robe.

Another question suddenly answered.

All she had been wearing was the robe.

Emphasis on *had*.

We were both naked when I chased her into the bedroom twenty minutes later to continue what we'd started on the sofa, but I did manage to send two coded texts before then. One to the team back at the hotel, letting them know that all was well and that I wasn't under duress. Well, no hostile duress anyway.

The second text was to Major Shoshanna Merleman of Israeli Military Intelligence, who had been on countersurveillance watch somewhere nearby since before I entered the apartment building, letting her know pretty much the same. Only in her case, a part of me seriously thought about inviting her inside to join us.

Yeah, Gabin is a really bad dude.

Not that you would ever get Leisa Saxon to agree with you after this night. A hundred thousand euros deposited into your bank account and several gut-wrenching orgasms over the course of two hours does the trick every time.

Chapter 42

Brenda Gray and I stepped off the elevator on the top floor of the Gezira Tower at the Cairo Marriott at five of noon the next day. Immediately we were flanked by several large men wearing dark suits, swarthy, hard complexions, hard men. The one who spoke did so with an accent I recognized right away.

“Hello,” he said curtly, his eyes coming to me first, holding for a few seconds, then turning to Brenda, and for her he made an attempt at a smile. “My name is Avi and I am head of personal security for the people you are about to meet with, Ms. Gray. I must first ask that you submit to a small intrusion of your privacy. My employers do not like to be recorded without their permission. So if you are carrying any recording devices, including Smartphones, I will have to insist that they stay outside the suite. And I will have to scan you and your associate before you can enter. It will only take a few moments.”

Brenda glanced at me for a moment, then gave Avi Schulman a charming smile that would have melted the heart of a true human, reached into the side pocket of the purse she carried, pulled out and handed over her Smartphone.

“Of course,” she said graciously, holding eye contact. “I completely understand security. Gabin here takes care of all of my needs in that respect.”

Schulman did not comment, turned next to me.

“In anticipation of this requirement, I left my phone secured in my room’s safe,” I told him. “I don’t like other people handling my devices. Security, you understand.”

He stared at me for a few more moments, then nodded to one of the other four security men in the corridor. This man stepped forward with a hand wand and began to carefully run it across both of us, starting with Brenda. When he finished with me he said something to his boss in Hebrew, and then all security eyes turned on me.

I smiled, my eyes on Avi.

“Yes, I am armed. And will remain so. When on duty, my weapon is always on my person.”

When he spoke next, Avi Schulman’s voice was made of ice, contempt barely contained.

“Then I’m afraid you will have to remain out here while your client meets with our employers,” he said. “No one is allowed to be armed in their presence except my security people.”

“There’ll be an exception today,” I told him. “Otherwise my client will not be meeting with yours. Because I do not allow her to be in the presence of other armed persons without me present. And armed. So make a decision, Mr. Schulman. And make it quickly.”

I could see a bit of a flare in his eyes at the mention of his last name. Not surprise really, because he had to know that as a good security man, the irrepressible Gabin Rocc, I would do my homework regarding the people my client was meeting, especially when it came to the people who would be carrying weapons around her.

“Then I’m afraid this meeting will not happen...” he started saying, but then the doors to the central suite behind him opened and a statuesque, long-haired brunette stood in the entryway wearing

black high-waist designer slacks and a sleeveless button-down white satin blouse. Tall, busty, gorgeous, arrogant, she sported the expression of a woman who always got what she wanted, especially when someone else was determined not to give it to her.

“It’s all right, Avi,” said Kavala Baumgartner in an offhanded, impatient manner. “Let them in. There is only one of him and more than enough of you. Let our guests in so that we can get down to business.”

Without waiting for a reply, assuming her orders would be obeyed without question, Mrs. Baumgartner turned and went back into the suite, the heels on her designer pumps clicking pointedly on the tiled floor of the entryway.

I turned to Avi Schulman and smiled, but said nothing. I could see him considering whether or not he should order his men to shoot me despite what his boss had just said, but then pushed that idea aside. For now.

“All right,” he said. “Ahud, Viktor, both of you will be inside with me. Ms. Gray, after you please.”

Brenda smiled again and then preceded him. Before I could follow, he stepped in front of me. He was thicker but we were the same height. His eyes were dead level with mine. He didn’t say anything, didn’t need to, but I understood him loud and clear.

When he stepped aside a few moments later, I smiled at him again, then let it drop just as quickly as it had appeared, the expression replacing it just as cold as his was. Don’t think it scared him, though.

Hard to scare a former Mossad killer. Even if you were a man of reputation such as I.

Chapter 43

If I hadn't already known I would find him here, I would have known Boaz Baumgartner anywhere. He looked just like the most recent photographs CIA had of him. Shorter than his wife, shorter than me by three inches, about Brenda's height, when she wasn't wearing heels.

Forty-eight years old, wire rimmed glasses with steel frames, a full head of thick, curly black hair tied back in a ponytail and a matching, somewhat scraggly, beard. The eyes behind the glasses were a pale blue, a stark contrast to his deeply tanned skin and other dark features. He wore blue jeans, a blue long sleeve button-down shirt with the cuffs rolled up on thick and hairy forearms, and a pair of well-worn brown loafers, minus socks. Kind of an Israeli version of *Sonny Crockett*, only shorter, and Jewish.

He greeted The Asset with a warm smile and a handshake, holding her hand between both of his as he stared deeply into her eyes, his wife at his left shoulder.

"How good of you to come today, Brenda? May I call you Brenda? A distinct pleasure."

"A pleasure to meet you as well, Mr. Baumgartner," Brenda said formally.

"Dear god," he laughed. "No one calls me that, not even the folks who work for me. My given name is Boaz, but I prefer Bo. Kind of

American sounding. I watched a lot of *Dukes of Hazard* reruns when I was a teenager in Israel. I was a fan of *Bo* because he was the one who got to drive the *General Lee* most often.”

Brenda smiled again, nodded.

“Bo then. A pleasure to meet you at last. And thank you for inviting me.”

He then turned to his wife, but still holding onto Brenda’s hand.

“And this is my charming and beautiful wife, Kavala. Also the true brains behind our business successes.”

Kavala Baumgartner’s smile was not as gregarious as her husband’s, and she did not extend her hand, perhaps because her husband was still holding on to Brenda’s.

“A pleasure, Ms. Gray,” she said, also formally.

I was standing a few feet away, about ten feet from the main entrance to the suite. To my right stood Avi Schulman about three feet away, and at my back were the two security men he had ordered inside, Viktor and Ahud, although I wasn’t sure which was which just yet.

Mr. Baumgartner turned and glanced at me, meeting my eyes, smiling again even as he bent and kissed Brenda’s hand before releasing it. He walked over to me, stopping far closer than was necessary, and because of this he had to lean back awkwardly to look up into my eyes.

“The famous Gabin Rocc,” he said with great delight. “Or rather, the infamous I should say. After all these years I now find myself lucky enough to meet the man behind the legend. Your reputation is known far and wide, Mr. Rocc, by people on both sides of the law. Many praise you, and just as many curse you. Do you know that in my country the intelligence services still have a price on your head?”

Quite a substantial one from what I am given to understand. It seems you did some jobs years ago in which they lost agents. And I believe you once had another client, a fellow countryman of mine, who ran afoul of the political and legal establishments in Israel, and when they tried to arrest him, you intervened. Quite lethally, I hear.”

The smile was still in place but the eyes had hardened. I stared down at him, keeping my face completely devoid of anything, and we stood like that until he blinked.

“I’m afraid I don’t discuss former clients or their business, Mr. Baumgartner,” I said. “They pay me a lot of money for my services, and discretion is high on the list. And as for a price on my head, well one has to have hobbies, I suppose.”

Bo Baumgartner stared at me some more, then laughed, reached up and clapped my right shoulder. The little fucker had some power in those thick arms, too, but as much as I wanted to cringe, I simply smiled at him in return.

“Call me, Bo,” he said, offering his hand, which I shook, preparing myself for the inevitable steel grip. “And perhaps later we can discuss potential business between ourselves. As you can see, I have some of the best security in the world with me now. Avi does an outstanding job of keeping my wife and me safe, but from time to time there are clients and assets that require the services of an outside vendor. I have often thought of getting in contact with you, but you are not the easiest man to find, and I was not sure how you would feel about doing business with Israelis again, especially those who at one time worked for the government. I assume you know my background, and my wife’s?”

I nodded.

“Yes. And Mr. Schulman here,” I added. “I’ll consider what you have to say. Later, after you and my client have discussed your business.”

“Of course,” Baumgartner said with a huge grin, again clapping the same shoulder. “Of course. We’ll have much time later. We were going to entertain Brenda over lunch, the hotel has prepared an excellent feast. You should join us. I understand you’re a vegetarian, and this is no problem. You probably know that my wife is a vegan, and while I am a confirmed carnivore, there are several meatless dishes on today’s menu. Come, join us in the dining room.”

Avi Schulman stepped forward to object.

“Bo, he’s armed. I can’t let him out of my sight while he’s in here.”

Baumgartner turned to his security chief, glanced up into his eyes, his suddenly very cold.

“Avi, Gabin is our guest, along with his client. You have personally vetted him, you know his background and reputation. It is highly unlikely that he would come here to do harm to me or Kavala today, knowing that you and your men are everywhere. Secure the suite, but stay out of the dining room.”

And on that note, the head of the Gemini Syndicate took me by the left arm and led me over toward his wife and Brenda and then we all moved into the dining room where members of the hotel’s kitchen staff were already putting food out. My stomach grumbled as soon as the aroma reached my nose.

Well we were in, and still alive.

So far so good.

Phase One complete.

Now for Phase Two...

Chapter 44

Lunch was a *get-to-know-you* affair, no business discussed. This was due to the fact that the servers from the hotel were in attendance the entire time. And I suspected that both the Baumgartners wanted to use the time to assess us in person after having read whatever research their people had put together on our cover identities. As I enjoyed some exquisitely delightful spinach and tomato quiche, I silently hoped that Melva Kingsley and Amy Stovall had covered every detail in detail a thousand times over. If not, well as last meals go, the one I'm having right now would be adequate. Still...

It came as no real surprise that *Brenda Gray* was an excellent liar, in addition to all the training that the specialists in Shelbee Roberts' shop had given her, she had really been preparing for this role her entire life. Actually, she'd spent most of her life pretending to be someone else, keeping her true identity and her true vocation a secret from even those closest to her. A part of me wondered what her ex-husband now thought of the life he had had with this woman, the children they had raised together. As memory served, word was that he wasn't the brightest of fellows to begin with, so perhaps he didn't think much or often.

Bo Baumgartner was enchanted with her, laughing and smiling as she told him stories of a personal nature, all concocted by the CIA,

of course. He was boisterous and animated, even pounding the table with an open palm on occasion as he laughed, nearly spilling his glass of wine.

For her part, Kavala Baumgartner was far more circumspect. She said very little, ate, watched her husband interact with Brenda, ate some more, and then spent some time staring at me, as I also ate in silence, watching all three of them, and the servers, making sure that I had at least two escape routes in sight at all times. Of course, given the several armed men in the next room and outside the suite, it was unlikely that we'd get all that far, but it never hurts to dream. And prepare.

When the meal was over, Bo dismissed the servers with his compliments to the chef, then took one of the two remaining unopened bottles of wine and moved down the table to sit next to Brenda, pouring her another glass. I declined, as did his wife.

"How ever did you end up as an international smuggler, Brenda?" he said without warning, lifting his glass to his bearded lips, all traces of humor now gone, his eyes inquisitive and cold. "A woman of such obvious charm, beauty, and intelligence. So many things you could have done. A Vassar grad, a year at the Sorbonne in Paris, then a job with a very good firm on Wall Street, opportunities open right before you that would have set you on a completely different path, one free of most dangers and complications, such as you recently experienced with some very unpleasant Chechens. Of course, I have never before heard of a *pleasant* Chechen." He laughed and pounded the table again.

Brenda smiled, Kavala did not. In fact, she was sitting back with her arms folded across her well put together chest, staring at Brenda, eyes impassive.

Brenda raised her glass, took a deep sip, then set the glass back on top of the white linen tablecloth. She looked into Bo's eyes for several moments, saying nothing. He waited. Kavala waited. I checked my lines of escape again.

"I could ask you the same thing, Bo," she said softly. "Considering the storied career you had back in your homeland. A major in the IDF, a paratroop battalion commander at the age of thirty, and then a member of the General Staff's elite *Sayeret Matkal*, the best of the best of the Israeli Special Forces. And now you're an international arms broker for some of the worst people on the planet. One might wonder how you came to be what and where you are, too."

He smiled briefly, but then the coldness returned.

"Yes, but I know the how and why of my situation, Brenda, that's why I was inquiring about yours." His voice now had a grating edge to it, his manner antiseptic, and his eyes never left Brenda's. Kavala Baumgartner was now looking directly at me, her expression hadn't changed one bit. Chances were good that if trouble started, she'd be the most immediate threat, but the others were so close by that it probably wouldn't matter. I suppose mission-wise, killing the two top people in the Gemini Syndicate might be considered somewhat of a victory. It would just be too bad that Brenda and I wouldn't be around to celebrate it.

So she told him the story, as it had been drilled into her a thousand times over the course of her training at The Point, even before I had been brought there. It all sounded completely natural, completely sincere, completely convincing. Even so, both Baumgartners continued to stare at her unblinkingly for a long time after she eventually finished and reached out for her wineglass once again.

I was watching Kavala, not a bad job if you can get the work. She might have been more deadly than a nest of tarantulas and an ocean full of sharks combined, but she was also an incredibly beautiful woman. I was also fairly certain that she had a small caliber semiautomatic pistol tucked inside the high waistband of her designer trousers, left side, but forward. Of course, with her being Mossad-trained, any of the available silverware or cut crystal glasses nearby would be deadly in her well manicured hands. Speaking of which, she could probably gouge out an eye or slash a throat with her nails. Yeah, when the time came, I was shooting her first.

“Arturo and Helene Guzman had been business associates of ours for about two years,” Bo said, pushing his glass away from him and folding his hands in his lap as he sat sideways and addressed Brenda. “They were limited in intelligence, but loyal. At least in the beginning. The problem they had was that they really did not possess the talent for the work, at least not on the level I required. We were thinking about canceling our limited business partnership, and they knew this, were desperate to return to our good graces and to expand from contract work to something more permanent. However, there had been a spate of recent failures on their end that cost us a great deal of money, and raised the ire of certain very influential clients of ours. Kavala conveyed our displeasure with their work, and demanded that we be compensated for all losses suffered by our clients, which we reimbursed ourselves, and those we lost directly from our own shipments. Then, perhaps, we would consider continuing our association. A lie, of course, if we could recoup our losses, great, but our business with the Guzmans was at an end either way. They probably suspected this, but pretended not to. Some people can be rather delusional when it comes to their own status. Anyway,

then they ran in to you, Brenda, in Marbella, after you left Baltimore following that Chechen ugliness. They probably thought their luck had finally turned around when they realized who you were, what a golden opportunity you represented. They courted you, told you about some of their business deals, no doubt even mentioning our organization in a roundabout way to keep you interested. I think you know now that they never intended to bring you in on any deals with us. They simply wanted to use your resources to get them out of the hole their incompetence had created. I dare say their plans for you were along the same lines they planned for Gabin.”

He glanced over at me briefly, smiling, before returning his attention to Brenda.

“They really were dumb people. Tell me, did you have anything to do with their unfortunate end back in Spain?”

Brenda stared back at him with implacable eyes.

“Don’t ask questions you already know the answers to, Bo,” she said stoically. “And the Guzmans are old news, along with the six fools they sent after Gabin. Unfortunately, the British woman they attempted to set him up with got away, but I have people looking for her. She won’t escape for long. No one fucks with me or my business, Bo, *no one*. Something you would do well to remember.”

Baumgartner smiled widely then, glanced over at his wife. She was actually smiling, too.

“I told you, my dear,” he said to her. “I told you she was a woman almost as tough and ruthless as yourself.”

Kavala Baumgartner suddenly stood up and stretched her arms above her head, and I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. She glanced around, eventually focusing on her husband.

“Do you want to get down to it now, my love?”

Bo Baumgartner glanced back at Brenda, then at me, turning to his wife once more and nodding.

“Yes, let us do that.” He stood. “Come, the both of you, down the hall is a private office where we will continue this conversation and see if we can come to an accommodation that will be mutually profitable to all of us.”

I stood before Brenda did, and Bo pulled her chair back for her. When we reached the other side of the table, Bo held on to Brenda’s arm and took the lead. Kavala waited until I was there, then slipped her left arm through my right and led me. At my back I could sense Avi Schulman’s eyes on me, radiating a heat like lasers right through my spine. Although it could just be the fact that I was recently shot in the back and was experiencing a psychological reaction to the trauma.

Probably not, it was definitely Avi Schulman.

He would be the second person I shot, given the need and opportunity.

Chapter 45

On Gameat el-Dowal el-Arabiya Street, approximately three miles west of the Cairo Marriott, is the less luxurious Al Nabila Cairo Hotel, a lot of reviewers on Trip Advisor rate it as a one, but you can't always be too choosy in certain situations. In a modest two-room suite on the ninth floor is a forty year old Danish school teacher on holiday from the dreadful weather back home. She's tall, busty, with short cut dark hair, and brown eyes flecked with gold. To me she would always be Kellie, but now the passport she carried identified her as Klaara Pedersen. Guess she had a thing for the letter K. Or the cover people at AMAN Headquarters did.

"My superiors have expressly forbidden me from working with you," the Israeli Military Intelligence major said to me once we were secured in the front room of her suite and the sound masking unit was engaged. "And disobeying such an order would be considered treason, for which I could be shot."

"Well it's better than being peed on," I quipped.

Despite herself, she smiled, shaking her head and walking over to the small scarred bar in the corner. "You will never tire of that, will you? Can I get you something?"

"No on both counts," I told her, glancing around the room for a minute. She mixed a scotch and tap water and came back over and we both sat down on the sofa against the wall that separated the sit-

ting room from the bedroom. Shoshanna was wearing stonewashed blue jeans and a yellow button-down blouse, the top three buttons undone, as well as the cuffs rolled up on her forearms. I missed the blonde hair, and the length of it, but she had done a good job on the transformation. Not enough to fool anyone who actually knew her, but a casual observer probably never would notice. Less is more in the disguise game. Some features she couldn't do anything about on short notice, but then there were a lot of beautiful women out there with incredible bodies.

“And just so you know, my side of the fence doesn't want me talking to you anymore either,” I told her as I leaned back against the cushion and watched her. “Or at the very least, not sharing data. Doubt I'll face a firing squad—or a *peeing* squad for that matter—but the woman I'm currently working for would be quite perturbed. And she's not someone I would like to see perturbed.”

The major nodded, sipping her drink, savoring it as it slid smoothly down her throat.

“Ah yes, that would be Shelbee Roberts, correct? Chief of the Special Operations Group within CIA's Special Activities Division. She is running you from their base in Hertford, North Carolina, the site known as *The Point*, yes?”

I was absolutely still, absolutely silent, staring into the altered eyes of the woman before me. I liked the green better, too.

She stared back, holding her glass above her lap. The staring contest lasted about a minute and a half before she laughed and looked away, setting her glass on the coffee table in front of us.

“Don't look so surprised,” she chided, patting my right knee. “Even friendly intelligence services spy on one another. And we in AMAN have kept close tabs on Ms. Roberts ever since she was in the

Army, a member of their Criminal Investigations Division. She has been attached to the star coattails of Nicola Calavici for some time now, at one time an undersecretary at your Department of Homeland Security, but originally a CIA field operative herself. Now returned as the Deputy Director of the Agency. Yes, my people have compiled a great deal of information about your operation in the past week, including this joint project between the CIA and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, but why CIA is involving the Air Force is still a mystery to us. They are not known for playing well with others. Our understanding is that the Executive Director of OSI himself, retired Air Force Colonel William Jordon, is personally involved. Which we find very curious.”

I was still doing a pretty good imitation of a deaf-mute.

Shoshanna smiled at me like a cat playing with a mouse, then sat back and crossed her strong legs, legs that I remembered unsheathed and wrapped around my waist, to say nothing of my head. Fond memories, but what I was experiencing right now was anything but fun.

“The one thing we have still not been able to learn, however, is who you really are,” she continued, arms folded across her bosoms. “I had a thought that perhaps you were Air Force, and that maybe this is why OSI is involved. But still nothing. Every OSI record we have access to, every record within American Air Force Intelligence, which they now call the 25th Air Force, there is no one matching your description on active service, or inactive for the past twenty years.”

Which explained why they couldn’t find me, I thought. They didn’t go back far enough. Although it was just as likely that Will had me completely scrubbed from OSI’s systems in an effort to make my

cover watertight. Perhaps my entire Air Force record was gone. Hopefully that was the case because while I wasn't too concerned about the Israelis as it pertained to AMAN and Shoshanna Merleman, I was concerned about the Israelis as it pertained to the Baumgartners, Avi Schulman, and the rest of the Gemini Syndicate.

"One day you will have to tell me who you really are, Gabin," she said finally, shifting around and getting comfortable on the sofa. "Or maybe you are in fact the real Gabin Rocc and there is no cover."

I said nothing, just continued to stare.

She sighed heavily, lowering her arms, and her chest bounced a little, sending a surge right to my cock. There were certain interrogation techniques that I could think of that she might employ to elicit the truth from me right now, but chose to keep them to myself.

"So officially we aren't supposed to be talking," she said with a grin. "But unofficially..."

"We have each other's backs," I finished.

She nodded.

"We do. So tell me, what was your first meeting with the Baumgartners like?"

I told her.

Almost everything, but not quite.

TWO DAYS LATER THE BAUMGARTNERS had to fly to Prague on other business and invited Brenda along to continue discussions on their would-be deal. It was abrupt, with little warning, which I suspect was the point, but Brenda agreed, and I reluctantly did as well. I really didn't like the fact that we were traveling on their private jet, a fully loaded Gulfstream V, and all of their security people, including the fun-loving and charming Avi Schulman. I was told that there

would not be enough room to accommodate the other members of my security team, something I found suspicious given what I had looked up online regarding the seating capacity of the Gulfstream V, but there was little I could do about it. Anton and the others would charter a plane as soon as they could and get to Prague when they could. Assuming, of course, that the Czech Republic was where we were really heading.

If it wasn't, then there was the slightest of possibilities that OPERATION GRAYSCALE might just have hit a tiny bit of a snag...

Chapter 46

PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

The good news is that we did make it to Prague, and in one piece. The bad news is the greeting we received less than twenty minutes after leaving Vaclav Havel Airport and heading into the city where we were booked at the Four Seasons Prague. We were crossing over the Vltava River on the Manesuv Most (bridge) just a couple of blocks away when several large unmarked armored vehicles boxed in the three SUV convoy in which we were riding. The Baumgartners, along with Brenda and I, rode in the extremely comfortable back compartment of a modified Mercedes SUV while Avi Schulman rode in the jump seat across from us, occasionally casting a glare my way, and up front were the so far last name deficient Viktor and Ahud, the latter at the wheel. We were in the middle vehicle, two less luxurious but no doubt equally modified Expeditions were in front and back of us filled with Schulman's people, all of them quite well armed.

I was armed, too, having refused to surrender my weapons, despite the presence of Schulman's force, actually because of it, but I really didn't want to get into a gun battle within the first hour of arriving in town, especially with people in vehicles that looked to be sporting military-grade armor plating and mounted twin fifty caliber machine guns.

Schulman was on the communications net prattling away in Hebrew. I glanced over and noted that both the Baumgartners seemed

perfectly relaxed, as if this type of thing occurred all the time. No doubt in their line it did.

Brenda was sitting to my immediate left and she was not too calm. She cut a quick, nervous glance my way and I tried to nod encouragingly, but I might not have done such a good job of it. Then a few seconds later we were coming to a screeching halt.

“Gabin,” Bo Baumgartner spoke directly to me. “Please do not do anything rash. This is just a minor inconvenience. Nothing to be overly concerned about. It will be handled.”

I stared into his mirthful eyes for a few moments, then nodded slowly. If I had trusted him I might have been reassured, but because I didn’t, I wasn’t.

Heavily armed figures wearing black tactical clothing, covered from head to toe, alighted from the armored vehicles, all carrying submachine guns or assault rifles, at least twenty of them. Suddenly I was having visions of George Armstrong Custer, and I had never been a fan of his.

Other traffic was being diverted around us as the armed men—at least I assumed they were all men, sexist, I know—formed a semicircle around us and a couple of them began waving cars off to the one unobstructed lane left on the bridge. There was one individual not carrying an SMG or long gun, but there was a pistol rigged in a tactical holster on his left thigh. I could tell he was a *he* because his face was not covered, rather he wore a black beret on his head, tipped forward over his left brow. The man stood glancing around for a few moments, then said something to another of the dark clad figures, receiving a reply, then nodding. Now he and several others were approaching in crisp military fashion.

Kavala and Bo Baumgartner exchanged looks, then he reached for the door on his side, but Avi Schulman got there first. After a brief expression of irritation, Baumgartner relented and allowed his security chief to open the door and get out first. A few seconds later, Baumgartner followed, closing the door behind him.

Kavala glanced over at Brenda and me, smiled.

“Just business,” she said confidently. “Prague is quite the place for entrepreneurial commerce. Always people looking to make a quick euro. Particularly those who hold power within the government establishment.”

She turned and glanced out the back window as her husband and Schulman greeted the approaching armed men, the beret wearer now smiling as he opened his arms wide and embraced Bo Baumgartner. The two men laughed and appeared to know one another very well. They began to converse animatedly and Kavala turned back and pulled out her phone, began typing almost immediately.

Brenda glanced at me once again, I suppose looking for reassurance. Her hand was next to mine on the seat so I casually reached over and gave it a quick squeeze. Best I could do for now as I was deep into planning just how she and I would get out of this vehicle and off the bridge without dying if the shit started hitting the fan.

But the shit did not hit the fan. After five minutes, Bo Baumgartner pulled a thick envelope from the inside pocket of his blazer and passed it to the man in the black beret. The other man smiled, embraced Bo again, then signaled for his men to return to their vehicles, business concluded.

Back inside, Bo looked at his wife, shaking his head.

“He actually thought we were going to try to stiff him,” he said. “As if it was our fault he was not at the airport when we arrived at

Customs.”

Kavala grinned, turning to us.

“That man is the deputy commanding general of the Customs Police in Prague,” she said by way of explanation. “Someone that Boaz and I have to deal with a lot as we do so much business in the Czech Republic. He is horribly corrupt, but useful. He was supposed to meet us when we arrived but was delayed elsewhere. Most likely he believed we would still be at the airport when he arrived late, but he should have known better. We have other contacts within Customs and Immigration who are only too happy to take our money. We were just making a point to the general. Even though we still had to pay him, he now knows that he is not the only game in town. He will be more careful now, and more attentive.”

Brenda nodded, forcing a smile.

Schulman returned to the backseat, his scowl even more pronounced. The armored vehicles pulled out first, and a few seconds later, we were back on the road for the short continuation of our journey to the Four Seasons.

Chapter 47

I had expected there to be a problem, so I guess I shouldn't have been too disappointed when I was proven correct. Some paperwork SNAFU at the airport resulted in my security team being detained by the Customs Police until such time as the matter could be satisfactorily resolved. I was informed that this might take several days. No doubt the work of the Baumgartners, or Avi Schulman himself, most likely at their orders. Then I thought about that envelope Bo had passed to the Customs general.

"So what does that mean?" Brenda asked after I told her. We were in the sitting room of our joint suite on the top floor of the hotel a few hours after we checked in.

"That means we're on our own for the time being," I told her matter-of-factly, removing the T-1 from the holster under my left arm and checking it. "But you shouldn't be worried. This was done to make a point, but I don't think they intend any harm to either of us. Although they seem casual, as if they have all the time in the world to get from you what they want, they are apprehensive. Things have not gone as smoothly as they needed them to go, thanks in part to the Guzmans; they're off-track, and behind schedule. They need you and your resources to put things right. But first they have to make it seem as if they have all the cards."

“So we have no backup at all?” she said, worry clouding her brown eyes.

I shook my head.

“Contingency plans to cover everything, luv,” I told her gently. “We’re still covered, and on track. Trust me.”

I wasn’t lying either, well for the most part.

She was about to say something else when a knock sounded at the door. I told her I’d get it, went to check the peephole, turned back to let her know it was all right.

When I opened the door, Avi Schulman was standing there, looking as unpleasant as ever, and over his left shoulder I could see Bo Baumgartner standing a few feet away, with two more security men at his back.

“Step aside, Rocc,” Schulman commanded in a gruff manner.

I stood and stared back at him impassively, my hands folded in front of me.

His nostrils flared and he almost snorted. He was a lot faster than his size would have suggested, but then again, so am I, especially after five weeks of having to fend off two unarmed combat instructors twenty years my junior, with occasional help (on their side) from Shelbee Roberts.

The snap-kick came right for my crotch and I had no time to think, simply blocked with my hands, shoving the foot back down to the floor while at the same time moving forward, dropping my center of gravity, and slamming my forehead into Schulman’s nose, hearing a sickening and satisfying snap.

But knowing the man was a former *kidon*, I was pretty sure a broken nose wouldn’t even faze him, and it didn’t. Even as blood began to pour from his nose, Avi Schulman was grabbing my jacket’s

lapels, pulling me off balance and into a raised knee that caught the ab muscles on my right side. The blow was powerful and I felt it, but it wasn't the first time I've been hit hard either. I inhaled deeply, absorbing the pain, steadying myself, and delivered another head-butt, this one to his jaw because he was smart enough to keep his nose turned away from me. Think I loosened a few of his teeth with that one, hopefully nothing was loose in my brain. Other than the screws that were already loose in there and explained why I kept doing work like this instead of something sensible, like maybe window washing skyscrapers in Chicago during high winds.

I dropped lower, pulling Schulman with me, and that's when he started with the haymakers on my back. They hurt, too, but I pushed the pain aside as I got under him, lifting quickly with my knees, growling as I took him off the floor, over my back, and down on his as he landed hard. I spun around before he could move, drew the T-1 and pointed it at his forehead. He was looking up at me in reverse, his face a bloody mess, as was his suit jacket, shirt, and tie.

"Nobody would hear the shot," I told him coldly.

"But we would know you did it," Bo Baumgartner said from behind me. "I suppose then you would have to dispose of us as well."

I glanced back over my shoulder, saw the arms dealer grinning at me, and the two bodyguards with weapons drawn, pointing at me.

"What was the point of this, Bo?" I said with irritation, my weapon still aimed at Schulman as he lay looking up at me, fully conscious but unmoving. Just like my weapon. "No way he would've done this without your approval, his dislike of me notwithstanding."

Bo nodded in concession, stepped forward, pushing his other bodyguards aside.

“True,” he said. “And the only answer I can give you, Gabin, is that Avi wanted to know. He wanted to know if your reputation was well-deserved or simply myth and legend. He was under instructions not to kill, but he could satisfy his curiosity once and for all.”

I stared back at him for a second longer, then down at Schulman, strongly considering pulling the trigger. Probably going to have to do it sooner or later anyway.

I shook my head in disgust, putting the T-1 away.

“He comes at me again, Bo, I’ll kill him. And any of the others on his team who get in my way. Is that understood?”

Baumgartner was still smiling as he nodded.

“Only fair,” he said, snapping his fingers. “And he won’t trouble you again. Get up and go clean yourself up, Avi, playtime is over.”

Schulman snapped to his feet, already holding a bloody handkerchief to his busted nose. He was not looking at me too kindly, but he didn’t make another attempt. He passed silently into the hallway and one of the security men stepped inside while the other remained outside as the door closed.

We looked over to where Brenda stood by the edge of the sofa, scowling.

“You know, fellas, it’s ridiculous bullshit like this that makes me wonder why every woman on the planet isn’t a lesbian!” she seethed, then turned and angrily stalked out of the room.

Bo looked at me. I looked at him.

Not much to say to that, which was good because I wasn’t feeling too well right now, wondering if perhaps Avi had broken a rib or two of mine.

If he had I would shoot him. And Bo Baumgartner, too.

Chapter 48

Brenda came back into the front room ten minutes later, after Bo had spent that entire time standing outside her bedroom door apologizing profusely for the wretched display of testosterone for which he was largely responsible, stopping just short of offering to open a vein for her. When she came out, Brenda's eyes were cold, making it clear that she was strongly reconsidering any business propositions they had discussed prior.

"I don't care for games, Bo," she said in a quiet tone, her eyes never leaving his. "I work too hard for the things that I have, my reputation, my business. I don't have time for people who are not serious about business. I have spent much of the last two weeks making myself available to you, traveled from Spain to Egypt and now here. But still we do not have a deal. And now you and your man play these macho games with my head of security. I have a good mind to get on a plane this evening and head back to the states. There are other things that I could be doing, other clients whose money is just as good as yours. Clients who take my time and services seriously."

Baumgartner was not smiling now as he sat a few feet from her on the plush sofa. I was standing with my back to the wall across from them, the remaining bodyguard to my left still at the entrance to the suite.

“I apologize again, Brenda,” he said contritely. “Had I thought better of it, I would not have allowed Avi to behave that way in front of you. I suppose a part of me wanted to know as well. Regarding Gabin. There is so much rumor and speculation out there about him, so much myth, it is difficult to comprehend that one man could be that good, to have accomplished everything that is attributed to him. There have been rumors for years in Mossad and AMAN that perhaps Gabin Rocc was more than one person, that maybe the real Gabin Rocc had died and someone else assumed his identity, perhaps several someones, kind of like that movie, what was it? *The Princess Bride*! *The Dread Pirate Roberts*!”

I snorted.

“I hated that movie,” I lied. “And I’m not a fucking pirate!”

“No, Mr. Rocc, you are not,” Bo turned to look at me. “And you are not myth. Please, both of you, accept my apologies. And let us get on with business. It is the real reason that I am here now, to expound upon what we have been talking about, to lay out some concrete details. We had to come to Prague to straighten out some operational details before we could proceed with our joint ventures. Kavala is taking care of that now. When she is done, we will be ready to proceed. What I need to know from you now is how secure are your black market shipping routes into the United States?”

Brenda Gray stared at him impassively, at least from outward appearances, on the inside I was pretty sure her stomach was doing cartwheels. The magic question had just been asked.

“I have very good security on all my routes, Bo,” she said evenly, her eyes unblinking. “Plenty of the right people on the payroll to make sure things go smoothly. I just need to know the destination,

which coast, which city or cities. I can get you anything you need with the right notice, and, of course, for the right price.”

Bo smiled at that, nodding. Then he reached up and removed his glasses, folding them in his lap.

“Yes, always the price,” he said absently, glancing over at his man by the door. He nodded, the man turned without question and went out into the hallway. Bo turned back to Brenda.

“I’m going to need access to all your shipping routes inside the United States,” he told her. “Beginning in two weeks. I will need you to clear up all other business by then and be ready to take on my business exclusively for the foreseeable future. And before you ask, I can assure you that money, price, is not an object here. Before this project ends you stand to clear one hundred million dollars profit. Ten percent up front if you agree to the deal.”

Shit, I thought from across the room. A hundred million bucks. Maybe this mercenary thing was the way to go after all.

I’ll give her credit, The Asset played it very cool, didn’t answer right away, asked some pertinent questions, thought about the answers, or appeared to, then leaned back and folded her arms across her chest.

“I think we can do business, Bo,” she said finally.

He put his glasses back on and smiled, just like a shark. A lot of that going around these days.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed, standing quickly. “Excellent! We must celebrate tonight. Once Kavala comes back I will tell her. I know she will have good news as well. And then the four of us will go out, there’s this club not too far away, the food is world-class, and they have dancing! We will close the place out, as you Americans say!”

He was looking at me so I corrected him on two accounts.

“I’m not American,” I told him. “And they say *close the place down*.”

Bo grinned, nodding.

“As you say, Gabin. As you say.” He checked his watch, frowned. “I’m actually late for another appointment. I or Kavala will be in touch shortly to let you know what time we are meeting up. In the meantime, relax and enjoy yourselves. This hotel has an excellent spa, and in-room massages. Feel free to indulge, everything is on my bill.” He turned and headed for the door, but then something occurred to him and he stopped, turning back.

“Oh, one more thing, Brenda,” he said in a businesslike tone. “We, of course, require a total guarantee that all shipments will make it to their final destinations without delay or harassment. We have anxious clients who can brook no delays. You have a reputation for this sort of thing and that is why we have come to you. You must not let us down.”

Brenda stood up, staring back at Baumgartner. She nodded, smiled.

“Of course, Bo,” she said genially. “I completely understand.”

He stared back at her for several seconds, then smiled again, turned and left without further conversation.

Brenda turned to me, her composure quickly fading. Before she could speak, I held up a finger of warning, went over to the end table drawer a few feet away and retrieved the electronic masker, turned it on.

“He just said they want access to *all* the routes across the entire United States,” Brenda exclaimed, eyes unbelieving. “That means this is even larger scale than previously suspected. And in two weeks...”

I nodded.

“Yeah,” I said, my mind racing a mile a minute. “Gotta contact Control, let them know what’s going on.” What I didn’t say out loud was that I also needed to get in touch with Shoshanna Merleman, or whoever the hell she was now. Although I didn’t know where, I knew the Israeli major was somewhere close, and was the backup that I was counting on if things went *tits-up* before the Agency security team could get clear of the Prague Customs Police.

Yes, Hector, Anton, Raul, and Carlos were CIA contract operators and not actually freelance. In fact, they weren’t even Spanish, but had established covers in that region and were made available to me for the duration of this operation. Unfortunately, now they were separated from us and I had to improvise.

I had been staring off into the distance for some time and when I came back to reality, Brenda was frowning at me. I shook my head, waved a hand.

“Sorry, a lot to think about,” I said, then went to boot up my laptop.

Chapter 49

THE MISSION IN BROAD STROKES

Although some still dispute it, for obviously biased reasons, it is generally accepted that the Russian government, with the full knowledge and at the direction of its leader, Vladimir Putin, did wage a massive intelligence operation to interfere with, inveigle, and confound the legitimate outcome of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, the short-term goal being a Kremlin-friendly, possibly owned, occupant in the White House. The long-term goal as yet to be determined, but surely nothing good from the standpoint of said United States.

For years the Russians and their allies around the world, including in the United States, had been making bolder and more daring strides in their efforts to roll back democracy where they saw it encroaching upon their territory after the end of the Cold War. Two entities in particular, NATO and the European Union, were of paramount concern. When Vladimir Putin first came to power in the early 2000s, halting the expansion of these two western international organizations became his main priority, and he saw the key to achieving this goal being to limit the involvement and support of the United States in both of them. The problem he faced, however, was that all U.S. leaders, regardless of political party, understood that the key to security and peace in Europe, and ultimately the Western Hemisphere, lay in keeping NATO and the EU strong, and Russia boxed in.

For the first few years, as he consolidated his power at home and gave lip-service to democratic reforms, Putin played the *nice guy*, even charming President George W. Bush into believing his bullshit, *I've looked into his heart*, or some such nonsense. However, as the Russian leader became stronger at home and began to reconstitute many of the secret organs of power from the old Russia into the new, and with the assistance and financial backing of the emerging wealthy oligarch class, of which he is a part, Putin began to show his true stripes. That in his heart what he truly wanted to be was Russia's new *strongman*.

When Barack Obama became President of the United States in 2009, he sought to have a cordial relationship with Russian leadership, and Putin was receptive, as long as it was on his terms. He made it clear that Russia would tolerate no further expansion of NATO, and insisted that the former Soviet republics should not be granted entry into the EU. When Obama, in so many words, told him to fuck off, Putin decided to test the untested world leader, and began a *secret* campaign of aggression in those aforementioned former republics, Ukraine especially, even going so far as to send troops into the Crimea under the guise of protecting ethnic Russians, but in reality it was nothing more than a naked power grab. An action that essentially went unchallenged, other than paltry economic sanctions and Russia being kicked out of the G-8, but Putin didn't really care about that, he had proved to himself what he had long suspected, the United States and NATO, for all their talk about defending democracy against aggression in whatever form it took, even to the point of taking up arms, was just that, *talk*. And to a thug like Vladimir Putin, the worst thing you can ever do is let him get away with anything.

Interfering in the internal politics and elections of other nations is nothing new. The Russians have been doing it for decades, and so has the United States, along with every other world power with the desire and capability. However, *Uncle Vlad* in Moscow took it to a whole new level in the 21st Century by waging covert psychological attacks not only through traditional propaganda means, but also in cyberspace.

2016 in the United States was the culmination of many years of practice and preparation, of developing and refining, of testing, honing, calculating, and calibrating multi facets until each would perform as required when required to achieve the desired result. Funny that an operation of such technical complexity and sophistication was actually orchestrated, *technically*, by a man who barely knew how to turn on a computer, but he did have a lot of brilliant minds around him who understood the ins and outs of cyber warfare, so all Putin really had to do was give the approval, and he did. There were a number of smaller operations prior to this, some successful, some not, however the first major coup for the Russians came two years preceding 2016. The target: the European Union.

It was called *Brexit*, a brilliantly conceived and almost flawlessly executed propaganda operation designed to whip up anger and fear within the United Kingdom, using everything from suspicion of immigrants to the worsening economy to drive wedges between the populace and ultimately focus rage against the EU, who many had been blaming for all of the UK's problems for years anyway. When the British prime minister at the time unwisely decided to hold a national referendum so that the matter could be put to rest once and for all, the Russian operation moved into full swing, unleashing a torrent of fake news accounts all across the net that were taken as

gospel by people with too little time to verify facts or simply did not care because their beliefs were finally being validated. In the end, the British people voted to leave the European Union, and the turmoil in Europe soared to new heights, and was only growing worse some four years later. Just the outcome Putin desired. With a major crisis to redirect the EU's attention away from him, he had a freer hand to further solidify his control over the former republics.

Now, with the first domino expertly tipped in his favor, the Russian leader green lit his most ambitious plot to date, his target this time: the United States of America.

A lot of what happened is already known or at least credibly suspected, and is even now still being investigated by criminal prosecutors in the United States, as well as various congressional committees and the press. One thing is certain, if Putin's goal was to sow division within the United States and destroy public trust in the institutions and organs of government and democracy, that mission was already accomplished. As was the U.S. pullback from NATO and Europe. Presently, people in and out of government were wrestling with that question and what to do about it if they ever found the answers that they didn't really want to find. Most were just biding their time until the next presidential election in the hopes that whatever happened in 2016 could be undone, but perhaps they never heard the expression *hope is not a plan*. One thing is certain, Uncle Vlad is not sitting on the sidelines waiting, he and his people are still actively engaged in undermining the United States and the West, in ways large and small, subtle and not, but all insidious.

But my mission has nothing to do with the cyber warfare campaigns of the past or the future, or solving the mess of 2016—thank the universe, because while my solution would be quick and deci-

sive, not to mention bloody, it would be a bitch to get approval for it. No, *Brenda Gray* and *Gabin Rocc* were recruited to take on another problem that U.S. intelligence agencies and some of their allies had come to realize was more than simple black market profiteering and illicit business dealings. There was deliberate methodology and plotting involved, and upon closer inspection, a familiar pattern emerged. A pattern that led straight back to the Russians.

Well, not so straight because FSB^[x], SVR^[y], and GRU^[z] are quite good at keeping their actions concealed when they want them to be, and for this they needed total deniability because if this operation were ever exposed, the recriminations and repercussions would be devastating to the *Rodina* they served.

Violence across the world has been on the rise for many years, from tribal conflicts, to civil wars, to terrorism, to outright wars. Violence and death. And running through the heart of all of these conflicts are the means by which those horrors are perpetrated: weapons. There never seems to be a shortage of guns, bombs, tanks, planes, and whatever else people need to slaughter their fellowman; woman and child, too. And look who's talking, the man with enough firepower in his bedroom closet to overthrow a small island nation, or more likely prevent it. But the point is no less valid.

Three years ago some clever wit in the Crime and Narcotics Center at CIA, a junior mid-level analyst, was playing around with some statistics from various countries in different parts of the world, industrialized and developing, largely as a test project for some new data analysis program she was working on to upgrade her present systems. The data she chose was random and it didn't really matter the type or source, just as long as it was raw and unfiltered. She wanted her program to do that, to learn from the building blocks

she had designed for a previous system and to follow the next logical points in the process, if possible, and see what the result would be. Though brilliant, the analyst never could have imagined what would happen next.

The first thing that occurred to her upon seeing the results was that she really was a fucking genius and really deserved a huge raise, which seemed unlikely given the recent freeze in federal worker wages. The second thing was the shock she received when her test program began connecting the data in ways she had not expected, or could have anticipated, and what it revealed was a clear pattern, a specific methodology, carefully concealed in what appeared to be random occurrences if they were taken separately, as they were meant to be. However, her program, soon to be christened *Optimus Prime* (in honor of her kid brother who had been a huge Transformers fan before his death by leukemia at the age of fourteen), had brought all the data together and stripped away the subterfuge and deliberate randomness (because human beings are not nearly as good at creating *random* patterns as they would like to believe) until the picture lay before her unvarnished and stark. And she had no idea what she should do with it. This project had not been sanctioned by her section leader and since she had used Agency resources to build her system without prior approval and on company time, technically she could be in serious trouble. But on the other hand, she had a major breakthrough to show for her efforts. That had to trump whatever technical violations of the rules she might be guilty of. Or so she hoped and told herself as she walked to her boss' office late one afternoon.

Her section leader was not so quick to dismiss the misuse of Agency resources and personnel time while on the clock, however he

did have the good sense to listen when she presented him with her findings and the process by which her new creation had come about them. This because despite never telling her so, the section leader believed this analyst was the brightest in his shop with a future far beyond her time in the Agency. But if she didn't stop breaking the rules when she got bored, she might be looking for work beyond the Agency a lot sooner than she expected.

The section leader wanted to see the raw data himself, and then he wanted it run through the old system that they were using for this kind of analysis. After three tries it became clear that their old programs were woefully out of date and unable to keep up with the changing technologies that were being developed around the world and in use by some of America's enemies. Also painfully obvious, the fact that his rule-breaking analyst was in fact a fucking genius.

The Chief of the Crime and Narcotics Center received a report one day later. Two days after that, the section leader and the analyst were summoned to a meeting in the Chief's conference room where several bigwigs were present, including an undersecretary from the Department of Homeland Security and another woman simply introduced as her *assistant*. At the time, the bigwigs weren't interested in the new program, just the analysis and the end product report; they wanted exact details of everything, no matter how minor. And then there were questions, lots and lots of questions, some that could not be readily answered, but the Chief of CNC promised his people would get right to work on them.

Before the meeting ended, after a side consultation between the Homeland Security undersecretary and two CIA middle managers, a request was put to the analyst and she was told that this was a top priority, to the exclusion of everything else she might already be

working on. Whatever resources she needed, any personnel to assist her, her section leader would provide, and if he needed additional resources, the Chief of CNC would personally see to it that they were made available ASAP.

The analyst was overwhelmed, but excited, too. She had no idea if she could pull off what was being requested of her, but she would do her damndest. And *Optimus Prime+P*, for her little brother Percy, was officially born. Three weeks and practically no sleep for a lot of analysts and geeks in the Crime and Narcotics Center's Emerging Threats Section later, they pulled it off, and another meeting was hastily arranged. This time in a SCIF over at the Department of Homeland Security.

The analyst was a bit more confident as she presented her report this time, again, skipping most of the process and sticking to the results of her analyses. The seven other people in the SCIF sat in stony silence as they listened to her, no one interrupting until she was finished. Then the undersecretary glanced around for a moment before setting her steely brown gaze back on the analyst, asking both the simplest and most difficult question for her to answer.

"Are you sure?"

She should have hesitated, maybe even prevaricated a little, but it simply wasn't her way, and being honest with herself, she didn't have any doubts, and said as much to the undersecretary. There were no more questions after that and the analyst was dismissed, told to return to her regular duties at the Agency and not to speak to anyone, not even superiors, about her recent work, which was now classified well above her level of security access.

When they were alone, Homeland Security Undersecretary Nicola Calavici turned to her Chief of Special Projects, Shelbee Roberts,

and asked for her assessment.

“I think that girl is probably wasted in her current job,” Shelbee Roberts said. “As for her analysis of the problem, I’d say it is spot on, and in line with some other reporting we’ve been receiving from other sources for a while now, though not nearly as detailed. There is no way this would have been uncovered in time to do anything about it if we had gone at this through traditional intelligence work, even with supposed state-of the-art technical means. That said, however, I don’t believe the information we have now will be enough to convince the politicians to act, not in a way that would actually deter the behavior we’re talking about now. They’d probably threaten sanctions, perhaps some other economic squeezes, but I do not believe they would ever authorize covert action to stop them. And, Madam Undersecretary, that is exactly what we need to do. Two things actually. First we need to get more, absolute proof would be great, but that’s unlikely any time soon, but we can get more. And when we do...”

Nicola Calavici did not need for her to finish the sentence; she knew and understood the position. Shared it. After a few moments of reflection, she turned to the others assembled in the SCIF, two from CIA, another from Homeland, one from FBI, and a soon-to-be retired colonel from the Air Force Office of Special Investigations.

Will Jordon was the person on whom her gaze lingered. She didn’t say anything then, but Will knew they would be having a private chat later. And said chat took place twenty-five minutes after they left the SCIF as they drove around the outer loop of Washington, D.C. in Will’s official car, the colonel himself at the wheel, an electronic masker affixed to the middle of the dash between them.

“You know I’m retiring in a couple months, Nic?” he said after moving around some slower traffic, checking his mirrors again before settling on the road ahead. “Twenty-eight years in uniform. I’ve had a pretty fair run. Going out a full colonel is good. Vice Commander at OSI is quite an achievement, too. My wife is looking forward to our life after the service. The kids are all out on their own now, living their lives, and it’ll be just the two of us.”

“Still got a little ways to go with mine, the youngest is still at home,” Nic told him. “Vincent and I started a little late because of my field work with the Agency. But I understand what you’re saying, Will, really I do.”

“I don’t think you do, Nic,” he said, a quick glance her way. She saw something in his eyes then and frowned a little. “I have to retire from the service, but I’m not ready to retire from *service*. There’s still a lot that has to be done, and this current threat just proves it even more. The world is becoming more dangerous by the day; our enemies are getting stronger and stronger while we try to placate them, to play nice. You can’t play nice with these people because they’re thugs. You don’t reason with a thug and you sure as hell don’t give in to them. You beat them into the ground and you make damn sure they don’t get up again! Ever!”

The vehemence with which Will Jordon spoke caused the Homeland undersecretary to reexamine him in a new light, to see him as something a little different than she had always imagined, as somehow *more*. And she liked it.

“Then maybe we should talk about how we’re going to keep you in the game a little longer, Colonel” she told him, then grinned. “And hopefully in a way that doesn’t have your wife murdering you.”

It was not really funny, although he offered a token chuckle. In all likelihood, his death at the hands of his loving wife was a distinct possibility when she found out that the plans she'd been making for after his retirement might have to wait a bit longer. At the very least he was in for the verbal equivalent of a colonoscopy. Probably several.

Over the course of the next two years, as administrations in Washington changed and post-election controversy swooned, Nicola Calavici left DHS and returned to CIA, and Will Jordon retired from uniformed service and was appointed as the civilian Executive Director of the Air Force OSI. A move made possible because the previous XD was offered a recently vacated undersecretary's position at the Department of Homeland Security.

A small group was formed off the books, all resources allocated from a black budget project under the jurisdiction of the CIA's National Intelligence Council and directly overseen by the National Intelligence Officer for Counterterrorism, before she was bumped up to Deputy Director. The group initially consisted of Nicola Calavici, Will Jordon, and Shelbee Roberts. But Will soon brought in Amy Stovall, by this time a civilian as well and assigned to the Office of Special Projects at OSI, to be his assistant because in his position as Executive Director he had other overt commitments that needed to be taken care of and he couldn't get away as often as required. Some time later Shelbee Roberts recruited Melva Kingsley.

The program developed by the CNC analyst had already been appropriated and was now under the exclusive purview of the group, which by this time was being called the Jensen Committee. The name had no specific meaning or significance, just a random selection that would appear in a few footnotes in project reports so clas-

sified that almost no one would ever see them, and no one would question.

Shelbee Roberts worked with Melva Kingsley to refine the program and hone its search and analysis protocols, amplifying its targeting capabilities along very specific lines of inquiry. Within days of completing the modifications they were receiving all of the data they wanted, building a complete picture of the threat they were up against, marveling at its scope and complexity, not to mention its simplicity of action.

The five committee members gathered in an Agency safehouse in Maryland one snowy night late last October for an update prior to making the final decision as to whether or not to proceed with the next phase of their plan. As Director of Operations, Shelbee Roberts dominated the presentation, with the Deputy Director for Security and Counterintelligence, Amy Stovall, and the Chief Technical Analyst, Melva Kingsley, providing their specific expertise where required. The co-chairs, Nicola Calavici and Will Jordon, sat impassively listening to everything in its entirety before speaking, neither surprised by the detail of the briefing, but at the same time struck by the realization that now they were actually going to have to do something, and in doing that something, they would be violating their oaths of service to their country, at least in a technical sense because in reality what they were planning was being done in order to protect their country and their fellow citizens from all enemies, *foreign and domestic!*

“Ethnic killings in Helsinki eighteen months ago?” Will said.

“A marginalized hate group that the Finns had been keeping an eye on for some time,” Shelbee Roberts explained. “Neo-Nazis preaching about the evils of immigrants and a desire for the *return*

of pure Aryan rule. The police did a good job of keeping an eye on them, rousted them from time to time, never let them forget that they were being watched, and they were assessed as being not much of a threat. Finland has fairly restrictive gun laws and most of these nuts had never even handled a weapon, and couldn't get their hands on them anyway. They occasionally beat up an immigrant they found out walking alone, or someone who looked like one. Some vandalism here and there. Minor stuff. But then somehow they got their hands on some guns, and not the run-of-the-mill stuff you find on the streets all over the world, broken down cheap pieces of shit and such. No, quality semiautomatic handguns, Glocks, CZs, H-Ks. Nine random street killings in the span of three weeks, rocked Helsinki, and the country. Huge outcry from the immigrant community, the international community, and the government put pressure on the police to find the perpetrators fast, whatever it took. However, before that could happen, the immigrants started taking matters into their own hands, and somehow those hands were filled with previously hard to find *handguns*."

"And Optimus Prime+P has confirmed the weapons are from the same source?" Nicola Calavici asked unnecessarily.

"Yes," Melva Kingsley told her.

"Johannesburg," Will Jordon said. "Around the same time?"

Shelbee Roberts was standing, she shifted and glanced down at the screen of her laptop before answering.

"Same type of problem," she said. "Only this time it wasn't about immigrants, more centuries'-long tribal strife that usually bubbles up into violence every decade or so. The only difference this time was the weaponry involved, and the number of fatalities." She went on to explain, and over and over again as they moved from one con-

flict to the next all across the globe, from Europe to Asia to Africa, to the Middle East, Australia, and most recently Latin America.

“And about a month ago OP+P started tracking this pattern inside the United States,” Amy Stovall informed them. “We had the system monitoring the homeland from the beginning, just in case, figuring that it was only a matter of time. So far there are seven confirmed that fit the pattern.”

Shelbee Roberts took over once more. “Miami, Oxnard, Oakland, Memphis, Charlottesville, Seattle, and Columbus. All cities with either major gang and crime problems or that have had recent increases in racial violence, in some cases both. The number of gun deaths has recently spiked in all of these cities, and the types of weapons being used are of a higher quality; all manufactured in the U.S. Which confirms, in a backdoor way, some things the FBI has been looking into regarding that female Russian operative they arrested last year who had been cozying up to the NRA and several American weapons manufacturers for years. Overseas sales have increased tenfold for all of them in the last year, and OP+P has cut through scores of shells and blinds to establish that the funds being used to pay for all of them come from the same source, accounts ultimately linked to Vadim Voloton, the oligarch most trusted and praised by Vladimir Putin.”

“So the weapons are being sold overseas,” said Nicola Calavici, by this time just weeks away from ascending to the Deputy Director’s post at CIA. “Then somehow smuggled back into the United States and distributed to criminal gangs, neo-Nazi thugs, and other malefactors likely to use them for nefarious purposes, not caring if innocents get hurt or killed in the process?”

“And not just malefactors, Chief,” Shelbee Roberts corrected. “In some cases, as in the situation in Charlottesville, South Carolina, some of those weapons ended up in the hands of anti-Nazi and other ANTI-FA groups.”

“Great,” said Will Jordon derisively. “So they’re just arming everybody and sitting back to see how many get killed?”

“About the size of it, sir,” Amy Stovall confirmed.

“For instance in Oakland, California,” Melva Kingsley stated. “They have a big gang problem out there, and some of it is ethnic and racial between the gangs, a lot of old grudges. The police have stayed on top of them with aggressive tactics and monitoring for years, making mass arrests of gang members whenever it looks like a gang war is about to break out. This time it happened before the cops were ready, and the bangers were packing some heavy duty firepower, including illegally modified fully automatic rifles. The Chief of Oakland PD called in federal assistance, FBI, U.S. Marshals. Actually, she used to be with the Bureau herself, last job before she retired to come to Oakland was Assistant Director in Charge of the LA Field Division. Anyway, with the joint taskforce she assembled, even strapping on tactical gear and getting out on the streets herself at one point, they managed to bust all the gang leaders and most of their top lieutenants, currently holding them on domestic terrorism-related charges, although there is some question as to whether or not that will stick over time. But at least for right now they’re off the streets, along with their weapons. Oh, and on a side note, some of the remaining bangers on the street have vowed to *take out that Latina Chief Bitch*.”

Nicola Calavici shook her head. “I’m sure the chief can handle herself. Okay, just the seven right now, correct?”

“Yes,” Shelbee Roberts said. “But there is every reason to believe there will be more, and soon. If the mid-term election results are close to what is predicted, then the focus will soon turn to the next presidential election in two years. The biggest weapon they have in their arsenal is the same one as last time: fear. What better way to stir that up than with an organized campaign of gang and racial violence across an already divided country? Organized but seemingly random.”

Nicola Calavici and Will Jordon turned to look at one another, their grim expressions precisely mirrored. Finally, Calavici turned back to the other three in the room.

“Executive Director Jordon and I are in complete agreement,” she explained. “We have been patient for long enough, gathering information, watching as the other side became more and more aggressive, now even openly flaunting their power and control over the White House. Before long, all the sanctions against Russia will be lifted and Putin will probably be spending his weekends in the Lincoln Bedroom.”

“Or golfing down in Florida,” Melva Kingsley muttered under her breath.”

Will Jordon smiled, though without much humor, and the CIA executive continued.

“We’re going operational now,” she announced. “And on the offensive. We’re going to stop this. Expose it, and stop it, make sure that no matter how much Uncle Vlad and his minions there and here try to spin it, the truth *will out*.”

She glanced over at her co-chair and he nodded.

“Agreed,” he said. “And now there is something that Nic and I need to share with the rest of you. Information about an asset that

has recently been transferred into the custody of the Agency's Counterterrorism Center. Someone we believe might be very valuable to our upcoming plans."

That's when the other members of the Jensen Committee learned of the woman that they would eventually turn into Brenda Gray. OPERATION GRAYSCALE.

It was also the genesis for what would eventually be called OPERATION MERCENARY.

Around this time I and the other members of *DDD* Countermeasures were overseeing security for a journalism conference at the BJCC^[aa] in Birmingham at the behest of Nadya Shaba, founder of Magic City Dreams, and Karly Manchester, CEO and Publisher of the Birmingham News Digital Media Group. Several of the more prominent attendees were regular recipients of death threats, a couple of them actually the victims of physical attacks, and many in the local nutjob scene were all over the net condemning the *lefty, loser press* and *suggesting* that *maybe* something bad might happen during the five day conference. And maybe if it did, it wouldn't be all that *bad*.

The conference went off without a security hitch, though there were a lot of long hours for all of us, but it was an easy enough payday. As were the next three jobs that came up during the holidays before things slowed down. Now I suppose I was making up for those easy jobs with my current one.

In Prague, surrounded by a cast of characters I did not trust, my *client* and the woman from AMAN included, I was trying my damndest to keep everything moving on track and in the right direction so that the *good guys* could stop the *bad guys* before their *evil* plans could succeed.

I do not use terms like good guys and bad guys, nor do I believe in evil, just human behavior, venal and stupid. And good and bad are usually up to interpretation, though not always. And while I'm certainly not a defender of the government of the United States, or any government for that matter, I hate assholes of every stripe. When we put Triple-D together a few years ago, Ollie and I sat around one night making jokes and throwing out slogans. The one that stuck with me and is still our unofficial motto: "*Because the world is full of assholes, and in a world full of assholes somebody has to be there to stop them before they shit all over everybody else!*"

Seems appropriate here.

I don't really care about the politics, I don't vote, never have, never will. To quote the author Victor O'Reilly, "*Politicians, fuck 'em all, the long, the short, and the tall!*" **[bb]** So if millions of morons are too stupid and blind to realize they're putting a Russian chaos agent into the White House, or millions more are too dumb to realize they're supporting the corporate stooge whose husband's administration actually helped Wall Street become *too big to fail*, and who has no actual shot of being elected president, then so much for democracy.

But spreading death and misery as a means of achieving political ends, cheapening the lives of millions just for personal gain, that kind of pisses me off. And people like that need to be stopped.

Permanently.

Fatally!

The two million bucks is a nice incentive, but it wasn't the only motivation I had. Or even the primary one.

No. To put it simply:

I HATE ASSHOLES!

Chapter 50

Shoshanna Merleman (I've given up on keeping track of her cover names now) was staying at the Hotel U Pava just across the river from the Four Seasons and down a quiet back street. For tourists on a budget, or students thumbing their way through Europe, or covert operatives trying not to draw too much attention to themselves, it was the perfect spot.

"They followed you when you left the hotel?"

"Of course, and after an hour of leading them in the wrong direction, I lost them and came here, by an even more circuitous route. Not even the wind could have tracked me."

"Won't they be suspicious? I mean your client is back at the hotel and you go off and leave her."

"She's in no danger from them as long as they need what she can provide. And after a week of BS, my guys were finally released by the Customs Police. Two are covering the hotel suite right now while the other two are resting. And I felt like annoying them today, Baumgartner is becoming too chummy with me, and I'm still trying to figure out what was really behind his decision to let Schulman challenge me like that. And speaking of that prick, since I broke his nose, he's been far less hostile towards me, which is suspicious on a whole other level. I let it slip that I was working on another business proposal regarding another client, and this bothered him because he

has been after me to come to work for him, Bo Baumgartner, not Schulman. Perhaps he'll believe that I slipped away for a meeting with the other client."

Shoshanna Merleman grinned, raising her naked thigh across my lower body.

"And right now you are engaging in some very persuasive negotiation tactics, Mr. Rocc," she said, her right hand slowly stroking my abdominal muscles, now more prominent because of the fifteen pounds I had lost while training to become Gabin Rocc.

"Well, my dear," I said, rolling onto my side and pulling her closer to me. "You are somewhat of a tough nut to crack."

She snickered, slid her hand down between us.

"And speaking of *nuts*..."

I kissed her as she played with my testicles, the head of my cock against her abdomen. We were lying in the middle of the tiny double bed in the small bedroom of the small hotel room with thin walls, an electronic masker on the nightstand next to the bed. It would inhibit someone from using a device to overhear anything we said in the room, but not anyone from pressing their ear against the door or one of the walls. We whispered when we discussed the ongoing operation, and interspersed with that conversation was a lot of uninhibited kinkiness that no doubt some pervert close by would enjoy. Now it was time for some more of that.

I rolled her onto her back and pulled her into the middle of the bed as I knelt above her, watching her full breasts bounce onto her chest as she settled, the sight causing a surge to my cock. Shoshanna stared back up at me, her hands on either side of the pillow beneath her head. I was pleased that she was a blonde again, although a significant portion of the length was gone. But now her eyes were blue.

Still didn't know what their natural color was, however, of one thing I was quite certain. She was a real blonde.

She grinned, raised her knee up between my legs.

"You can't decide what you want to do first, can you?" she said. "Eat me or fuck my tits."

I laughed.

"Decisions, decisions," I mused as my eyes roved the luscious body beneath me. "I think I want to make you squirm first," I said, and before she could respond further, I moved down and pushed her legs apart, dropping onto my stomach and slipping my tongue into her, my fingers quickly joining the action, and in just a few minutes I had her whimpering and cumming, trying to push my mouth away, then pulling me closer, the sheets beneath her butt now soaking wet as she quivered with abandon.

I rose to my knees, my right middle finger still inside her, insistently rubbing her G-spot as her stomach muscles contracted over and over again, her head thrown back on the pillow, her eyes shut tight, her deeply tanned skin flushing. She cried out as she exploded in wave after wave of orgasmic pleasure, unable to control herself, and probably not wanting to. I watched her as my own arousal grew, my cock swollen with excitement and desire, demanding to be put into the game, not to mention Shoshanna, however, not just yet.

When she had settled once more, began catching her ragged breath, her eyes coming open, I smiled at her, then returned to my former prone position between her thighs and slowly took her with my tongue and lips yet again, starting the whole chain reaction all over again... and my bedmate nearly crushed the sides of my face with her powerful thighs.

I've never been a fan of huge tits, although I have no objection to them, provided they are real, definitely not a fan of the artificial. Shoshanna Merleman's are quite real, and still very firm as she enters middle age. She's in great shape anyway, no doubt the result of some brutal Israeli exercise routine I'm sure, and this helps to not only keep her fighting fit, but *fucking fit*, as well, which could be seen as one in the same from a certain point of view. *Operationally ready!*

Watching me the whole time, holding her breasts together, occasionally extending her tongue to meet me on the upstroke, Shoshanna let me straddle her chest and fuck her tits, my cock moving smoothly between them because of the baby oil she had generously coated them with in preparation, while I watched with barely constrained anticipation. I do not believe I have ever cum so hard or so much before now, and even Major Merleman seemed impressed with the results. When I was depleted and tried to roll off, she stopped me by clamping her hands onto my thighs, shaking her head, telling me not yet. Exhausted, I smiled, scooted forward so that she could take me into her mouth.

To my surprise and her delight, I came again a couple of minutes later...

We showered together, using the running water as an additional masker as we discussed other operational details, she even shared some information that she claimed her superiors wanted her to keep secret, in the spirit of cooperation between agents in the field. "And as a reward for the way you got me off today," she added, and we both laughed. I decided to *reward* her one more time before we finished, turning her into the wall as I knelt down behind her, eating

every inch of that fine, round ass of hers until she lost her balance and fell, but I caught her, and then *finished her off*!

I got back to the Four Seasons at seven-thirty that evening and the night team was already on duty, reporting that a request had been sent by the Baumgartners for Ms. Gray to join them in their suite for dinner tonight, and that I should accompany her if I was back before eight. The message had been delivered by Avi Schulman personally. I thanked Raul for the update and entered the suite.

Yeah, the opposition wasn't happy about me ditching their surveillance. Good, I thought, walking into the front room and finding Brenda Gray standing in the middle of the room and not looking very happy at all. Her fists were balled up against her sides and her dark brown eyes were glacial.

"You and I need to talk, Gabin," she informed me in a haughty tone. "And get a few things straight right now."

A pleasant conversation this did not sound like it was going to be. In fact, it didn't sound like it was going to be a conversation at all. Luckily I had spent a few good hours this afternoon having my brains royally fucked out by a horny and uninhibited Israeli Military Intelligence officer and was now completely stress-free.

"Sure," I said, walking over to the sofa and pulling off my jacket, the T-1 in its rig underneath my left arm. "Would you like a drink while we talk?"

She was not in the mood for affable, but chose to be civil. Apparently neither of us was in the mood for alcohol so it was cranberry juice all around. She sat on the plush white sofa, I sat in the comfy matching recliner across the coffee table from her, leaning back and sipping my juice.

"Okay," I said after a minute. "Let me have it."

And she did.

Chapter 51

Dinner was a working event and both Baumgartners were in a serious mood, which was nothing new for Kavala, but took some getting used to with regards to Bo. After the greetings his smiled seemed to vanish instantly and once dinner was served he dismissed the hotel servers, having Avi Schulman activate the electronic maskers and seal the suite. We ate in general silence for about ten minutes before Kavala wiped her mouth with a napkin and glanced up, first at Brenda, then at me. Bo continued to eat.

“We have a problem, Brenda,” the former Mossad katsa said. She was speaking to my client, I knew, but her gaze was on me the entire time. Brenda lowered her fork to her plate, dabbed at her own lips with her napkin, then folded her hands in her lap as she stared back at the other woman, just like her instructors had taught her, never plow right into a denial or explanation, take your time, remain calm, see how much the other person will spill before you commit to anything. But be prepared to tap dance for your life at any moment. Or run for it.

“What are you talking about, Kavala, I thought we were on track with everything we discussed and agreed upon. Once the ten percent down payment reached my account in the Caymans, I provided all the details that Bo requested, access to all my shipping lines into the United States for the expressed time period, and I have forgone any

additional business until ours is concluded. Has a problem come up that I am unaware of?"

Kavala Baumgartner glanced over at her husband as he continued chewing, watching Brenda, and me. She turned back to Brenda. "With regards to what you have provided, Bo and I are very satisfied. We anticipate great success with our venture and look forward to others in the future if everything goes to plan this time."

"Then I don't understand what the problem is," Brenda said, truly perplexed, but I could tell she had relaxed somewhat after being reassured that they were pleased with the arrangements she had made on their behalf so far.

"Let me apologize for my wife not being clearer, Brenda," Bo Baumgartner finally spoke, no longer eating, his elbows propped on the table on either side of his plate, his bearded chin resting on his folded hands. "The problem is not with you, but with your chief of security, Mr. Rocc. He seems to be preoccupied with some other business endeavor and may not be providing you with the quality of service you are paying for. Quite odd for a man of his reputation in his field, but perhaps as he has aged his attention to detail is not what it once was."

I couldn't help but smile, finished swallowing some delicious steamed vegetables, washed them down with a swallow of red wine, also delicious, if a bit too sweet.

"What business is it of yours?" Brenda said with a touch of annoyance in her voice, and more of the southern drawl that she had been working for years to cut from her speech patterns all together. "Gabin works for me, not you. If I have no objections to the service he provides, why should you?"

“Because you are now working for us,” Bo Baumgartner said icily, his gaze made of flint. “And when people work for us we demand complete commitment and accommodation. You might recall the Guzmans did not live up to our expectations in that respect, and we had to part company with them prior to their untimely demise. I would hate to see the same thing happen with our partnership before it has a chance to fully flourish.”

Brenda’s eyes flared but before she could respond, I set my glass down on the table, probably a bit harder than it needed to be, but making a point. All eyes were now on me, as they should be.

“Careful now, Bo, Kavala, you wouldn’t want me to get the impression that you were threatening my client,” I said in an amiable tone, knowing that as I spoke my eyes were devoid of anything remotely amiable. “Or you might find out just how good the services are that I provide for my client.”

Kavala stared at me, her full lips curling into a smile.

“Now that sounded like a definite threat,” she said. “You do know that within the sound of my voice there are several heavily armed and highly trained men just waiting to end you if I or Bo order it? And Avi still has trouble breathing correctly after you damaged his nose, so he would take great delight in your death.”

“I’m sure he would,” I told her. “But he started it, and for some reason your husband allowed it. I would not take much pleasure in his death, or the deaths of any of your men, or either of the two of you for that matter, but at the same time, none of them would concern me in the slightest. I don’t work for you, what I do for my client is none of your business, what other business I may be conducting is none of your business either. You really should stop wasting your time having me followed. The spy dust trick yesterday really was a

nice touch, a throwback to the days of yore, but I've been at this game for nearly thirty years and have a lot of tricks up my sleeve, too. The reason no one has ever been able to outflank me or hurt a client of mine is because I am that good."

"What about that client in Venezuela you had recently?" Kavala pounced. "Didn't he die due to your inattention?"

"Strictly speaking," I replied wearily, "he died from a bullet in the neck. And the only reason that bullet found his neck is because he didn't follow my instructions, snuck out of his hotel in the middle of the night for a rendezvous he didn't want me or anyone else, least of all his wife, to know about. A sin for which he paid dearly. The only mistake I made there was choosing him as a client. I should have known better, given his reputation." That last bit was offered with a small measure of contrition and angst, and we were all silent for some time afterwards. Brenda reached for her wine glass and took a few sips. Bo went back to eating. Kavala sat and stared at me as I appeared to struggle to push bad memories aside. What I was actually thinking about was Shoshanna Merleman up against the wall in the shower a few hours ago and how exquisite it had felt to have her sexy, round ass cheeks wrapped around my cock.

"Gabin," Kavala said in a more conciliatory tone. "We are entering a critical phase in a very delicate business arrangement, dealing with other entities that have invested a lot of time and money into ensuring the success of this enterprise. In order to move forward from here, we are going to have to share some very sensitive details with Brenda, and because she insists that you are always with her, that means we have to share them with you as well. In order to do that, we have to be absolutely sure of your commitment, not only to Brenda, but to the success of our deal as well. Brenda is making a

great deal of money from this venture, and I can imagine she is paying you very well, too. Perhaps more compensation might be in order to help you focus solely on our endeavor. How does five million dollars sound?”

“Who do I have to shoot?” I said, and after a few seconds everyone laughed, except Brenda Gray.

“That may be a necessity in the near future,” Bo admitted, now wiping his mouth with a napkin and pushing his empty plate away. “But for right now we just need your undivided attention and support. No other contracts, no other business meetings for the duration of our dealings with Brenda, and perhaps when we conclude this business, as I said before, there may be things that you might like to work on for us directly. I assure you, there is so much more money to be made after this, especially for someone of your talents. We are just at the beginning. If we are as successful as we plan to be, the world will literally be ours for the taking.”

I stared at the head of the Gemini Syndicate for a long time, glanced over at his wife for a moment, then at my current client, *The Asset, Brenda Gray*.

Smiling, I nodded at Bo Baumgartner as Avi Schulman appeared in my periphery at the entrance to the dining room. He caught Kavala’s attention as well and she excused herself, walking out into the corridor to join their security chief. I noticed Bo following the progression of his wife’s ass. Couldn’t say that I blamed him, considering how grand it made her black designer jeans look.

A few minutes later she returned, leaned down to whisper something to her husband, and he nodded, smiling and rubbing his hands together.

“All right,” he said aloud. “Now that we’re all done eating, let us go into the study and continue this conversation. Many details still need to be covered, and a surprise or two.”

I really didn’t like the sound of that surprise bit, and took some reassurance from the T-1 under my jacket, and the Walther at my back. The two knives strapped to either ankle. The non-metallic spike strapped to my left forearm. And the three decades of unarmed combat training and practical field experience.

Oh, and there was my pure heart and clean mind.

Well, okay, I can hear *BULLSHIT* from the cheap seats now. But all that other stuff is valid. Even so, I made sure I was the last one to leave the dining room, caught sight of Avi Schulman as soon as we were in the small corridor that led to the front room at one end and the study on the other. This was a two-floor suite and the bedrooms were all on the second level. I noticed that one of Schulman’s guards was posted outside the study and took that to mean something valuable was inside, or maybe this was the point at which that ambush I had been expecting since this whole thing all began would occur.

Stay loose, stay ready, I told myself. *And remember to fucking breathe!* Funny how often in critical situations people forgot to do that. Even funnier when you considered the fact that continued breathing (and living) was precisely the point.

Chapter 52

No ambush. At least not yet. There was someone waiting in the nicely appointed study, however, short, stocky, bald, and wearing a fawn colored three-piece suit that had to have been specifically tailored to contain his build. Not that I'm an expert even now, but I detected London's Saville Row. He was introduced as Mr. Crawford, no other name, and when he spoke the cockney accent was hard to miss. No one shook hands with him during the introductions, just nods.

There was a large desk in front of a large picture window and Bo Baumgartner moved to sit behind it. His wife joined him, a second smaller chair to the right of his. Brenda took one of the two leather wing chairs in front and Crawford took the other. That left me with the Italian leather sofa to Brenda's left. I was the last to sit, after scanning the room with a casual glance.

"Mr. Crawford is here representing our client in this endeavor," Baumgartner announced as he folded his thick hands on the back of the desk. "He has come to approve the final details and deliver additional instructions. And he wanted to meet with you, Brenda, face-to-face, before proceeding."

Brenda turned to the man called Crawford and he was already staring at her, his dark, hooded eyes peering deeply into her. Brenda smiled charmingly and any normal man would already be squirming

in his underwear, but not Crawford. Then again, this man's name was not Crawford. I recognized him the second we entered the study, had wondered how long it would be before we met. I'm pretty sure Brenda recognized him, too, we had received a joint briefing about him.

Sebastian Aldridge Ibold, fifty-five years old, British-born, served a total of twenty-five years in the Royal Army, sixteen of them attached to the Special Air Service, 22nd Regiment, rank of staff sergeant, patrol leader. Record of exemplary service with a lot of medals and other decorations to go with them, most of which were classified *most secret*. So one might ask how it was that he came to be the *fixer* for a man like Vadim Voloton? The answer is simple: MONEY. Voloton had it, Ibold wanted it. Military pensions don't stretch that far these days, if they ever had, and Ibold had developed some very expensive tastes over the years, and not just with respect to his clothing. Intelligence was not complete regarding how he and Voloton had first come into contact with one another, but there were suspicions that it went back to when Ibold was still with SAS and working in Eastern Europe. This would have been about the same time that Voloton was with FSB-Spetsnaz and operating in the same areas. No matter really, how they got together, it was simply a fact that they had. And now he was here, in this room. Another confirmed connection between Gemini and the Russians. Control would be pleased.

"Bo and Kavala have conveyed to my employer all the information you have provided regarding your illicit shipping services into the United States," Ibold finally said. "Everything appears to check out, and my boss wanted me to tell you that he is most pleased with your thoroughness."

Brenda smiled, began to nod, but Ibold cut her off with a raised hand.

“However, he wanted me to also express the point that he would be very displeased should you fail to live up to the promises you have made and he is paying for. My employer does not tolerate failure. So I am to make sure that all of the contacts you claim to have at all of these ports are as reliable as you say and can deliver as you allege.”

Brenda stared back at the man calling himself Crawford, her gaze becoming icy.

“You know, I’ve been in business for a very long time and have a proven record of success in a very exacting and difficult field. There have been minor hiccups from time to time, but any loss to a client has always been made up by me. I have worked very hard for a long time to build my reputation, to recruit and cultivate contacts all over the world. I only deal with the best, make sure they are well-compensated, and in turn can vouch for their loyalty. I am getting very tired of people in this deal threatening me.”

She turned her focus on the Baumgartners across the desk from her when she said that last part, before returning to Voloton’s man.

“Let me make it clear for you, Mr. Crawford,” she continued. “I guarantee my services, always, and take full responsibility for everything I promise in a business deal. My word is all I really have to trade on, and none of you would be here with me now if you didn’t believe I could deliver, so why don’t you all stop fucking around and let’s just get on with it.”

She snapped her head around and her hair flicked across her face for a moment. Her skin was flushed and the anger in her was

seething. *That's my gal*, I thought proudly, after witnessing her performance.

Ibold turned to look at the Baumgartners, and Bo was about to speak when Brenda added one more thing for good measure, turning toward me on the sofa.

“And, Gabin, the next person who makes a threat toward me, even thinly veiled, you have my permission to kill them. Is that understood?”

I smiled, glanced at the three other people in the room before coming back to her, nodding.

“Of course, ma'am,” I said. “Completely understood.”

There was silence in the room for a few strained moments, but then Bo Baumgartner slapped the desktop and started laughing. None of the others joined him but he appeared not to care.

“A hard woman, Brenda,” he said, still laughing. “Just like my Kavala. The only difference is that she would do it herself. And enjoy it.”

I had no doubt about that, her dark eyes were smoldering right now as she looked at me, her arms folded over her impressive chest, the sleeveless white blouse she wore the perfect showcase.

Ibold picked a briefcase up off the floor beside his chair and opened it on his lap.

“All right,” he said, pulling out a black leather portfolio. “Let's get down to it as the lady requested, before she threatened to have her bodyguard shoot us all.”

Again, Bo smiled, and so did Brenda, but not Kavala. She glanced at her husband, shook her head, then sat back and watched and listened as Crawford/Ibold began speaking.

Almost there, I thought, suddenly irritated that my beard was itching again. It had stopped doing that weeks ago, but lately was starting to bother me again. Maybe it was telling me that I should hurry up and finish this gig and shave it the fuck off.

Soon, hopefully.

Emphasis on the *hopefully*.

Chapter 53

A week later we were still in Prague. Bo insisted that we all remain together until the shipments were all underway toward their destinations in the United States. There were forty-three, each departing from various ports around the world, each with their own timetable for arrival at their points of entry. All plans had been finalized and approved, and the first half of the payment had been transferred into Gemini's various secret offshore accounts, confirmed by AMAN and passed on by Shoshanna Merleman, who was still hanging around, too.

Tomorrow at seven a.m. local time the word would be given for all the ships to set sail on their journeys. At that point, we would part company with the Baumgartners, but Brenda would be required to stay reachable for the next few weeks until all the cargo was safely delivered. Bo was already planning further deals with her, some involving U.S. ports, others in different locations in which Ms. Gray had access and contacts.

Tonight was to be a celebration for the culmination of a lot of hard work during the last month, and Bo had suggested we go out and party, but Brenda nixed that idea, insisting instead on hosting a feast in our suite, prepared by the hotel's world-renowned chef, of course. Bo was disappointed, but Kavala agreed that it was best to stay contained until the cargo was underway. Avi Schulman put his

two cents worth in as well, expressing various security concerns that he and his people would have to deal with if we all went out again. Eventually Bo relented.

At eight p.m. our guests arrived, along with Avi Schulman and four of his guards. Knowing this would be the case, and desiring a *show of force* of my own, I kept Carlos and Anton on shift a few extra hours to keep Raul and Hector company. Schulman had not been expecting this and I could see the apprehension in his cold eyes as I stood in the doorway greeting Bo and Kavala. When the Baumgartners passed me, I smiled warmly at Avi Schulman.

“Now you boys play nice out here,” I drawled. “No roughhousing, you here?”

The Gemini security chief was staring murder at me right now, and for a brief moment I thought some of my guys looked as if they might like to assist him. I told them that I’d have food sent out to them in a bit, then went inside and closed the door.

Tonight we were all in formal attire. Bo and I wore traditional black tuxes with crisp white shirts and black bowties. Kavala and Brenda wore exquisite evening gowns that showcased their marvelous figures, accentuated all their best features, of which there were many. Kavala wore blue, Brenda red, and both were absolutely stunning.

As the hotel staff finished in the kitchen and setting up the dining room, the four of us drank champagne in the front room.

“A toast to the two most beautiful women on god’s Earth,” Bo said as he raised his glass.

“I’ll second that,” I said, and everyone clinked glasses. The two women staring at one another silently as they drank.

A few minutes later, the head server announced that dinner was ready and we all went into the dining room. The setting was spectacular, the presentation nearly indescribable, and the aroma of the food had us all salivating. I told the staff they could go, that we would manage without them, and to thank the executive chef, promising to mention them all favorably to the general manager before we departed the hotel. This move took them somewhat by surprise, and Brenda as well, but they did not object, of course, the head server telling me that if we needed anything more... I promised we would be fine, escorted them all to the door.

There was barely any room to move around in the corridor outside the suite because of the nine men with concealed weapons under their dark suit jackets loitering about out there. The staff passed them nervously and made their way around the corner to the service elevators. I glanced around, then settled on Anton, who was closest to the left side of the door, directly across from Avi Schulman on the right.

“I’ll get that food out to you guys in a bit,” I said. “Just hold tight.”

“Not a problem, boss,” Anton told me, his eyes never leaving Schulman, whose eyes never left me. Luckily looks can’t kill.

I nodded, turned and went back inside, suddenly feeling a bit lightheaded. I took some very deep breaths, released them slowly, walking back into the dining room, my pulse suddenly quickening.

Chapter 54

“Before we tuck into this delicious feast the chef has outdone himself by preparing,” I said as I returned to the dining room where the other three were waiting, Bo speaking across the table to Brenda in an excessively pleased tone. “I’d like to propose another toast. And this time, with something very special that I just happen to find in the hotel’s impressive stock.”

I was in the kitchen for just a moment, returning with a chilled three liter bottle of champagne in my left hand. “This is a Dom Pérignon Rosé, 1989 vintage. It is from the vineyard owned by the American television and movie producer and director, David Lynch. Mr. Lynch’s other claim to fame and good taste is that he happens to be the husband of American actress Michelle Pfeiffer.”

“Well then we know the man has some talent,” Bo said as he chuckled, glancing to his left where his wife sat at the third side of the square dining table. “I don’t believe I knew he was into wines, though.”

I came to the table, standing at my place setting, putting the bottle down in front of me. “As I am given to understand, a lot of Hollywood types make investments such as this, for tax reasons mostly, and not all of them are successful, but some are, and Lynch has done very well with this one. It’s very expensive, nearly twelve grand per bottle, but considering the money everyone stands to make on

this business deal, including me now that you have been so generous, Bo, Kavala, I thought we should really celebrate in style.”

“By all means,” Bo said. Kavala was less impressed, but nodded, and Brenda was a bit confused but managed to conceal it well enough.

I turned to her.

“Brenda, would you be a dear and go into the kitchen and get fresh glasses? This stuff really should not be contaminated by anything lesser than itself.”

She glanced up at me for a moment, then nodded and silently stood, heading into the kitchen. Just then there was a series of crashes and thuds that sounded as if they were coming from out in the corridor.

Bo and Kavala turned in their seats and glanced that way. I frowned.

“I do hope our boys aren’t getting restless out there,” I said with a small smile, removing my hands from the bottle.

“They better not be,” said Kavala with some distaste. “I warned Avi that there better be no trouble with your people tonight. If he has disobeyed me...” At that moment it was more than clear who really wore the pants in their business and personal relationships, even when she was attired to the *nines* in such a sexy dress.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” I said. “But I better go check.”

I stepped away from the table, rounded behind Bo, turning for the front room. Then I paused suddenly, snapped my fingers, turned back toward the table while slapping my left palm against my forehead.

“Oh, how stupid of me,” I said as Brenda started to reenter the dining room, four fresh champagne glasses held before her on a

small silver tray. "I know what all that commotion was about." Both Baumgartners looked at me expectantly, and Kavala's gaze was suddenly tinted by suspicion, her hands leaving the table and dropping down into her lap.

I took a step back toward the table, my left hand still raised, palm open.

"That was your security team being disposed of by mine," I said, a silenced 9 mm Beretta now in my right hand and tracking toward Kavala Baumgartner as she pushed back in her chair, raising a Beretta .22 caliber pistol in her left hand. I shot her in the chest, ruining that beautiful dress, along with that even more gorgeous chest of hers, and then added one to her left eye just as her weapon discharged into the ceiling, the small report not much louder than a pop, but louder than that of the weapon I was holding. Not that it mattered, because glass was shattering as Brenda dropped the tray and started screaming. For the moment she was immaterial, however, as Bo Baumgartner was sweeping his body sideways, reaching toward the small of his back.

For concealment purposes, an excellent place to keep one's firearm, but for practical access, not so much.

I shot him in the forehead and his eyes bulged behind his glasses just before I shot him twice more in the chest and his body toppled over the back of his chair and joined that of his wife on the floor a few feet away. Brenda was still screaming.

I moved quickly, kicking Kavala's .22 away from her hand. Bo had managed to get a hold of the Walther at his back and now it was on the floor next to his lifeless right hand. I kicked it away, too. I knew they were both dead, but bent to make sure. After that, I turned to Brenda.

“Please stop that annoying screaming right now,” I said firmly, but in a calm tone.”

“Why?!” she demanded, hands on her face. “What did you do that for? Derrick... *Gabin!* What’s going on? Why did you kill them?”

There wasn’t time now, so I didn’t bother explaining that Phase Two of the operation had just concluded. Instead, I turned for the front room, moved quickly over to the door, looked out through the peephole. What I saw on the other side was what I was hoping to see. I took another deep breath, then released it.

I opened the door.

Chapter 55

Anton, Raul, Hector, and Carlos moved with speed and expertise getting the bodies of Avi Schulman and the other four into the front room of the suite, then Carlos and Hector went back into the hallway to tidy up. When that was done, I removed the jacket of my tux and gave them a hand arranging the bodies as they should be. Brenda had been taken to her bedroom and told to stay there until I came for her. She had gone numb, which was better than hysterical, but I was pretty sure that was going to make a comeback before long, perhaps accompanied by rage. It would have to be dealt with later. Used, actually.

The four CIA contractors and I stood looking at our work, nodding to ourselves.

“Think that’s about right,” I said. “Anton?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Should be. You got the genetic trace?”

I nodded, reached into my pants pocket and pulled out a sealed plastic evidence bag, handed it to him.

“Okay, we’ll make sure it gets left behind in the right spots. Won’t ask how you obtained it either. You have all their devices?”

I nodded, pointing to a duffel on the sofa. “Yes.”

“Then you and the lady should leave now, we’ll clear the rest of your things out and deal with them. All other arrangements have already been made with our people on the hotel staff. Once you’re

away we'll start the next phase. We should be clear ourselves before tomorrow morning, before all the fun starts."

I nodded, reached for my jacket.

BRENDA GRAY TOOK A SWING AT ME when I reached for her arm, trying to help her up from the bed. She was fast, fueled by that accompanying rage I mentioned earlier, but not experienced. I managed to pull my head out of her striking line just in time, grabbing the forearm of the punching arm, pulling her up against me, forcing her head back so she was looking up into my eyes. I also canted my body so that my crotch was not close to either of her knees.

"There's no time for that now, Brenda," I told her. "We have to go."

"Fuck you!" she spat. "And my name is not Brenda, you fucking murderer! You killed them, for what? You just shot them like they were nothing! Fuck you! *Fuck you!*"

Is it wrong that I was highly aroused right now?

Don't answer that question.

"As I said, *Brenda*, we don't have time for this. But it wasn't like either one of them was a decent human being, and you know this. Plus, they were going to shoot me, and probably you, too, afterwards."

"But.."

I cut her off by shaking her by both arms, the way they definitely tell you not to do to a baby or child.

"Enough!" I hissed. "I said we have to go, and we're going. If I have to toss your butt over my shoulder and take you out of here *caveman style*, then so be it!"

We glared at one another for several seconds, and I knew she was seriously thinking about trying to get at my crotch. It was only fair, because I was seriously thinking about getting at hers right now, too, only for entirely different reasons.

“Fuck!” she swore again, then pulled away and I released her.

There were no words spoken as we moved quickly through the suite, past the corpses, past the security team, and out into the corridor. Brenda was wearing a lightweight evening coat in black and she hugged it close to her, eyes high so she wouldn’t have to see too much of the scene. I nodded at the guys and then we were in the corridor, the door closed behind us.

As we rode down in the second service elevator, the one with the *out of order* sign on it, I took out my phone, hit a speed-dial number. Three rings later, Major Shoshanna Merleman of the Israeli Directorate of Military Intelligence answered, a sexy hue to her already husky voice.

Before I hung up thirteen seconds later, that voice had gone from sexy to vitriolic and she was swearing at me in multiple languages, the only one other than English that I understood for sure was German. I sighed, putting my phone away. Didn’t blame her at all, could fully understand why she was pissed. Being framed for murder was not a pleasant thing. Especially when you were a covert intelligence operative in a not-so-friendly foreign country conducting a deniable operation without the benefit of diplomatic cover. Even more so when you just learned that your country was going to be exposed as the perpetrator of an execution it had not authorized and had no actual hand in. Oh, and your cover was compromised, too.

As the doors to the service elevator opened on the garage level of the Four Seasons back-of-house area, I was not feeling particularly

good about myself, even knowing that what I had done—had always planned on doing since shortly after the Israeli operative came into my life—was operationally necessary.

We were out of the hotel in back of a nondescript electrician's van a short time later, rolling through the brisk evening traffic, Brenda to my left, my hand still on her arm. I didn't think she'd try to jump out of the van and make a break for it while we were in motion, but I couldn't be sure either. Also couldn't be sure if she'd try to hit me again. Of course, after tonight, she'd have to get in line for that.

In just a little while I found myself suddenly wanting to chuckle as something occurred to me, inappropriate as it was. Nothing new there, either.

What occurred to me was that on some level, at least, Shoshanna Merleman had finally gotten her wish. *Gabin Rocc* had just *peed* all over her.

Chapter 56

News of the murders at the Prague Four Seasons broke early the next morning across every local network and internet new service, the scene described by police sources as *a bloodbath* and *a charnel house of horror*. Seven people butchered by unknown assailants, and weapons had been found on or near the bodies of the deceased, none of them believed to have been fired. The police were not saying much at first, as the investigation was early, but then by midday word began to leak regarding the identities of some of the deceased, two very well known to international police authorities for their criminal affiliations, although neither had ever been arrested.

By late afternoon it was being reported that Boaz Baumgartner and his wife Kavala, both Israeli nationals, were two of the dead. Their pasts as soldier and spy were revealed with hints of the romantic and melodramatic, as well as their present as international arms brokers suspected of dealing weapons to many questionable parties around the world, some known to be unfriendly to the state of Israel.

With that revelation, speculation began to swirl that perhaps the Israelis, likely the Mossad, had been responsible for the *hit*, as revenge for some past outrage or as a preemptive action to halt some future attack. A lot of internet chatter supported this supposition, coming from unnamed, but apparently very well connected sources,

including a leak that appeared to identify one of the potential Israeli assassins, a woman who had been staying in the Hotel U Pava just across the river from the Four Seasons for as long as the Baumgartners had been in the Czech capital. And while video surveillance from the hotel the night before the bodies were discovered appears to have been electronically wiped somehow, someone posted footage that purported to show the woman in question *casing* the Four Seasons on several occasions prior to the carnage.

Despite not having any other solid leads to follow, the police refused to give weight to this speculation or to allow the internet to drive their investigation. At least until forensic investigators collected genetic material from the hotel room the woman used at U Pava that conclusively matched genetic evidence found at the crime scene at the Four Seasons. At that point, multiple sources widely released photos purporting to be of the woman in question across every media platform known to man.

Luckily for Shoshanna Merleman, by this time she was safely back in Israel, where she would probably remain for the rest of her life because her cover was permanently and spectacularly blown. Adding to that was the very real fact that she was a wanted international fugitive and could no longer travel anywhere that had an extradition treaty with the Czech Republic. Her career was likely over, for a variety of reasons, all of them having to do with *yours truly*.

Pissed on indeed.

Chapter 57

RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

Two days post-Prague and Brenda Gray was still pissed at me, still looked at me with rage and contempt, but had only tried to claw my eyes out once since the Four Seasons. Progress.

Arrangements had already been made to spirit us out of Prague that night and we flew by private charter, first to London, and then on to Brazil, where we were greeted by several familiar faces once we reached the secluded safehouse on the outskirts of one of the largest party cities in the world.

Shelbee Roberts, Amy Stovall, and Melva Kingsley were each dressed comfortably in jeans or cargo pants, and loose fitting short sleeve tops, as the weather was delightfully warm right now, even though they weren't venturing outside the safehouse much.

The anger that The Asset felt toward me apparently extended to the others as well but no one had time to deal with it right now, so Shelbee ordered one of the plainclothes security specialists at the safehouse to take her to a bedroom in back that had been made up for her and to keep her there. For the briefest of instants, I thought Brenda was going to take a swing at the CIA group chief, but apparently her anger hadn't completely gotten ahead of her good sense.

When we four were alone in the safehouse SCIF room, the debriefing began, all details laid bare as I could recall them, and I turned over the electronic devices that I'd taken from the Baumgartners and Avi Schulman. Shelbee informed me that Anton had re-

ported finding additional devices when the Baumgartner's suite was searched later, and the two guards left there *dealt with*. They were being hand-escorted by special courier to Rio with all due haste.

"Thanks to Melva and Amy, the story broke across the media spectrum just as we wanted it to," Shelbee was saying after I finished speaking and everyone took a bathroom break. The three of them all had cups of coffee in front of them at the table, while I opted for green tea. "They managed to drive the story in the direction we wanted and moved the police to pursue our chosen suspects. The clean up team in Prague played their parts as well, made sure all hotel records matched, and that our people on staff told the right stories to the right people, including a select few international correspondents in an off-the-record, *you didn't hear this from me* manner. As of right now the world is convinced that what happened at that hotel was an assassination sanctioned by the Israeli government and carried out by operatives of their Military Intelligence Directorate. And while her real name has yet to be revealed to the press, your Major Merleman's photo is in wide circulation."

I sipped my tea as she spoke, then set the cup down on the saucer on the table and looked at her.

"How long have you known her real name?" I said.

Shelbee stared back at me for a few seconds before responding.

"Not too long after you first informed us of AMAN's involvement," she admitted. "I was pretty sure you were holding that part back for some reason or other, but you had to know that eventually I'd find out."

I nodded. "Of course. And because of us her career is completely torpedoed."

“An unfortunate consequence,” she admitted. “But for the ultimate goal of our operation, the success of it, a necessary one. And while she may no longer be capable of going into the field, her career at AMAN may yet be salvaged. Major Merleman’s primary mission was to protect the interests of the state of Israel, and to neutralize any existential threats to the nation. Well the Gemini Syndicate was definitely a threat, which is why the Israelis did take out a previous head of it. And thanks to the intelligence we’ve been able to glean from Boaz Baumgartner’s encrypted phone so far, we’ve confirmed that three consignments of surface-to-surface missiles and several caches of automatic weapons and explosives have already been shipped to storage locations in Lebanon, soon to be picked up by Iranian-backed hardcore Hezbollah fighters who are planning to launch a new series of attacks on the Israeli mainland, most likely from Gaza. If this information happened to find its way to Major Merleman in time to be actionable...”

I shook my head, smiling despite myself.

“Then she would be a *hero of the state*,” I said.

“I have her current contact number back in Tel Aviv if you would like to call her and deliver the information personally,” Shelbee said.

I considered this for a few moments.

“I don’t know if my ears could survive another tongue lashing,” I said. “She was pretty pissed when last we spoke.”

“Understandable,” Shelbee said, smiling a little as she sipped her coffee. “Considering how you quite literally *fucked* her over. But this should make some amends, don’t you think?”

Probably, but not much, I thought. Still, I gave it a shot, taking an encrypted satellite phone into an empty bedroom and making the call. I have never been called a *lying motherfucker* so many times or

in so many languages in my life. Nor had I ever been threatened with castration quite so colorfully before. Also, I was not looking forward to finding out what a bayonet felt like when shoved all the way through the head of one's penis. Yeah, she was still pissed, but eventually she listened. Then let me have it again before hanging up. Didn't even say thank you, much less goodbye. Guess I could understand that.

When I returned to the SCIF, the others were still there, but were now joined by a fourth, and this one probably wanted to go halves on that bayonet with Shoshanna Merleman right about now.

Great.

Sighing, I shut the door after I was all the way inside, rolling the lock before going over to retake my seat.

Chapter 58

“You were kept in the dark about what was to happen to the Baumgartners for two reasons,” Shelbee Roberts patiently explained to her asset as the two women sat next to one another at the round table in the middle of the SCIF. I was seated on the opposite side with Melva and Amy flanking me, both currently busy working at iPads in front of them.

“The first was that you simply didn’t have an operational need to know. And before you say anything, simply consider what might have happened had you known. You’re not a trained field operator, and while in your previous life you did have occasion to use violence by proxy, even order other people to be killed, it was never that close or in your face. Despite what you were, and what we have turned you in to now, you are not ruthless enough or cold-blooded enough to be burdened with that kind of knowledge ahead of time. It was my call and mine alone, I stand by it.”

The Asset fumed at her handler, color rising at her cheeks, arms folded across her chest, dark hair hanging long around her shoulders. Still, she said nothing and the CIA group chief continued.

“The second reason for not telling you is the shock value. To have actually witnessed that horror, to have seen all those bodies, death that close up, that’s exactly what we needed for you to see, to experience.”

“*What the fuck..?*” The Asset could hold back no longer. “What kind of sick fucking people are you? I thought I used to be a criminal, even a bad person to some extent, but you fucking people are insane. How could you think putting somebody through that kind of shit would be a good thing?”

“Never said a good thing, Brenda,” Shelbee corrected, still the *patient parent*. “But necessary. You see, for the next, and arguably the most important phase, we’re going to need you to be very convincing. You will need to draw on your feelings about what happened in Prague, and when you talk about it, what’s in your mind will be real, and hopefully very convincing to the person you’ll be talking to.”

Brenda frowned, even more confused.

“What the hell are you talking about, Shelbee?” she demanded. “You’re changing things up on me. When you first brought me into this operation I was told that we were looking for proof that the Gemini Syndicate was smuggling weapons into cities all over the world to arm rival groups and stir up political, ethnic, and racial tensions, in particular to destabilize emerging democracies. And also to sow similar conflict in Western European nations as well as in the United States itself. You told me that my mission was to infiltrate the syndicate, get proof of what they were doing by allowing them to use my phony smuggling routes all over the world, especially into the United States. Once the shipments were in the pipeline, you’d monitor them, find out who specifically was receiving them on the other end, and then have the receivers arrested by the FBI and other authorities. You never said anything about murdering people in front of me!”

She paused, turned on me.

“And I knew you were a killer before, Derrick Olin; I told you that at our first meeting in Atlanta. But I never thought you would do something like that. You killed them in cold blood!”

I exhaled and leaned back in my chair, feeling a bit tired.

“First off, and for the last time, both of them were armed and reaching for weapons when I shot them. Kavala already had hers out and even got a shot off. Second, and hopefully for the last time, both of those people, and every member of their security detail for that matter, especially Avi Schulman, were killers themselves with a lot of innocent blood on their hands. The weapons they’ve put in the hands of a lot of bad people have hurt a lot of good people, kids, too, just like your kids. They picked a dangerous business to get into. They had a choice. Just like you did before you started turning tricks in college. Don’t try to get righteous with me, *Melissa*, I know you too fucking well! The only reason you’re here now is to try to keep your butt out of jail for the rest of your life, which is where we all know you belong.”

Probably twisted the knife in a little deeper than was necessary with those last comments, but I was not really in the mood to be judged by anyone, least of all a former human trafficker who had once come very close to killing a client of mine and the rest of my team.

“Okay,” Shelbee Roberts said in a placating tone. “Okay. Let’s leave all that aside for the moment. Nothing good ever comes from rehashing the past, particularly while we’re still in the middle of a current operation. And for the duration of it, would you two please refrain from using any name other than your covers? Please?”

The Asset and I glared at one another for a few seconds before she looked away sulkily. I took a deep breath and released it, then

turned to Shelbee Roberts and nodded.

Shelbee stared back at me for a few seconds, gave a small smile, then nodded back. She turned to Amy and asked that the Air Force Special Projects deputy program manager begin her briefing, which the former Air Force major was only too happy to do because she had been pretending to be occupied with her iPad for some time now and growing restless, as was, no doubt, the case for the former Delta Force master sergeant on the other side of me.

Chapter 59

Sebastian Ibold was at Vadim Voloton's dacha outside St. Petersburg when news of the Gemini massacre in Prague reached him and his boss, Russia's top oligarch and Putin protégé. Apoplectic was far too mild a word for the former FSB-Spetsnaz commando's vitriolic response. Initially this was because of what he was doing at the time; in the middle of enjoying his regular late morning fetish session with a couple of twenty-one year old fraternal twins (sister and brother) he had found last year selling themselves on the streets of Moscow. He took a liking to the *dynamic duo* after an impromptu *get-together* in a nearby seedy motel, then had them brought to his dacha, cleaned up, fed, and given some expert training under the guidance of a local madam-cum-dominatrix who had been supplying the kinky tastes of Vadim Voloton for years. He'd been in the middle of whipping the girl's ass raw with a leather strap while the boy knelt on the bed and masturbated, when urgent knocks on the bedroom doors interrupted them. He howled at the outrage and demanded that whoever was out there go away that instant or risk certain execution. However, Sebastian Ibold is not a man who frightens easily, and he stood his ground until Voloton came to the door, completely naked, his cock red and engorged, the leather strap still in his right hand. Believe it or not, this was not the weirdest scene Ibold had ever encountered in his life. Not even close, actually.

Calmly, he explained to his boss what had happened. At that point the oligarch's erection instantly faded and the color drained from him as the strap dropped to the floor.

Because of all the police and press activity, Ibold was not able to get any information directly from the scene at the hotel, at least for the first day, but he was able to get confirmation that both Baumgartners had been shot to death, along with Avi Schulman and likely all of his security people. This news was not welcomed by anyone in that dacha, least of all Vadim Voloton, who had a lot riding on the deal he had just struck with the two Israelis, and not just money, although there was a considerable amount of that, too, billions in the long run if everything went to plan. But there was something even more substantial than money that had him worried. If this deal were compromised even a little, a certain powerful man in the Kremlin would not be happy, and no matter how rich and powerful Vadim Voloton was himself, he knew he would not survive if *that* man ever turned on him, which he certainly would do at the first signs of failure. Especially now. So whatever he had to do to salvage the deal and the operation behind it, no matter the personal cost to him, Voloton must do it. Or he and everyone else in his dacha would soon be dead.

The next news Ibold presented nearly sent the Russian into seizures as he learned that despite the killing of the Baumgartners, the go order to proceed as scheduled had been given early the next morning for all the arms shipments that were supposed to be smuggled into the United States from various points around the world in the coming weeks. The order was verified as coming from Boaz Baumgartner himself. An impressive feat for a man who had been dead for about eight hours by then.

Voloton told Ibold that he had better find out exactly what was going on and quickly. Not just his job was riding on the outcome either. Ibold, though not known to frighten easily, fully understood, knew about the pressure his boss would be under from Moscow, knew what would happen to everyone at the St. Petersburg dacha if this became a first-class fuck up. And for that reason, Sebastian Ibold had already activated his backup escape plan; he was ready to bug out in an instant should he feel the wolves getting too close. In fact, if the Israelis were actually behind the Gemini hit, then it was possible that they were aware of his connection to them, and maybe even Voloton's. In that eventuality, a team might already be enroute. And if anything could truly frighten the ex-SAS noncom, other than a Russian *wet work* unit, it was a highly efficient Israeli covert kill team.

Then a call had come in on Ibold's secure satellite phone, and when he saw the number his first thought was that he must be hallucinating from the stress. Either that or Bo Baumgartner's phone plan extended into the afterlife. Hesitantly, he answered the call, holding his breath.

The caller was a woman, and for almost two minutes straight she raged near hysterically and with increasing anger, shouting sometimes, incomprehensible at others. When Ibold was finally able to get in a word, he demanded to know who was calling him and how they had gotten a hold of Bo Baumgartner's phone.

"Because I was standing three feet away from him when they shot him in the fucking head!" she shouted down the line. "I got his fucking blood all over me, you asshole! That's fucking how!"

The conversation lasted ten more minutes, with Ibold quickly establishing the identity of the woman, Brenda Gray, the American

smuggler who had been brought into the deal by the Baumgartners to ensure safe delivery of the weapons into U.S. ports. He recognized her voice now that she wasn't shouting at him anymore, though she was still clearly upset. She gave a quick account of events, including how her security team managed to extricate her from the scene as the attackers began killing. She confirmed some parts of the news accounts, but offered some different information regarding casualties. All of Baumgartner's people were dead, including security, but some of the attackers had been killed as well, and one of the members of her own team. She could not confirm that the hitters were Israeli but saw no reason to dispute it, and suspected that they were receiving some tacit cover from the Czechs, although publicly Prague was denouncing Tel Aviv as Tel Aviv denied any involvement whatsoever. Typical.

"I grabbed Bo's phone when he went down. My bodyguard knocked me to the floor just before taking out the shooter who killed him and Kavala. The phone was right there. I grabbed it, I don't know why, just did. He was using it so it was unlocked at the time. I kept it active as my team evacuated me from the hotel. Christ I was so frightened that I pissed myself."

Ibold frowned at hearing that unnecessary add-on. He remembered thinking how he would very much like to have the opportunity to see more of the skinny American bitch in the future, perhaps when she was naked and sitting on his face. But after that image... Then he thought again, well perhaps she was in to *water sports*...

"I've got too much invested in this deal already to let it go down the drain," she told Ibold. "Too much already expended. Everything was already set, the ships ready, the cargo onboard. I used the information on Bo's phone—by the way he relied way too much on the

fact that his phone was encrypted because once the primary password was entered, everything else, including shipping codes and contacts was available. I took that information and used it to dispatch the cargo and ships on schedule. And now I'm contacting you to tell you that I'm taking over the Baumgartners' end in this deal, and I get their percentage, as well as that originally promised to me. Either that, or I order the captains of all those cargo ships, *my* cargo ships, to dump the shit overboard and return to their home ports."

The second conversation was a lot shorter because Brenda hung up on him. Conversation number three started with Ibold, but quickly became a one-on-one with Vadim Voloton himself, who spoke English as if he had learned it in the states. He started out charming, but quickly reverted to his bullyboy nature, which he realized, too late, was the wrong tack, the hard click in his left ear confirming that Brenda Gray had indeed hung up on him, too.

Twenty-four hours later she finally answered Voloton's call, the man himself already on the line. He would agree to her terms, but he wanted to meet with her face-to-face, to *shake on it*, as the Americans say. Brenda was reluctant at first, but finally agreed, at least until he suggested she fly to St. Petersburg.

"Not even to the one in Florida right now," she told him, not using his real name because so far he hadn't gotten around to formally introducing himself, and Ibold and Voloton didn't know she knew it either. The number was listed in Baumgartner's phone under Ibold's cover name, *Crawford*. "I'm not going anywhere near your home turf, if that's even where you're based. You want to meet with me and talk about our new partnership face-to-face, fine, but you come to me. Bring all the security you like, but I will not go anywhere that I am not familiar with and do not feel safe. My head of security is

very good at his job, as recent events have shown, and he assures me that where I am now is perfectly safe. So you can damn well come to me. Or not!”

Voloton had seen the pictures the Baumgartners had sent of the middle aged American smuggler, and like Ibold, he fancied her as well, although he generally preferred his women younger, his men, too, and less mouthy. Perhaps when he met with her he could teach her some manners, introduce her to his leather strap. Before he killed the insolent bitch, anyway.

“I’ll have my man contact you,” he said coolly, then hung up.”

That was three days ago.

Now it was a waiting game.

Chapter 60

“You said you were friends with the chief out in Oakland, California?” Melva Kingsley said to me one afternoon when I entered the SCIF. She was in there alone working at one of the computer stations against the back wall.

“I know her,” I confirmed. “We worked together a few times while she was still in the FBI. Mary Anne Tellez. First met her in Miami where she was a unit chief at the field office there. That’s actually the case that originally involved Leisa Saxon, now concierge at the Marriott in Cairo. When I next ran into Agent Tellez she was ASAC in Las Vegas, that’s the job where Amy and I met the first time Will Jordon roped me in to coming back to OSI for a gig. Mary Anne was eventually promoted to Assistant Director in Charge of the LA Division before she got the offer to come to Oakland. She had twenty-five years in with the Bureau, could retire with a decent pension, it was a good move for her. We email sometimes, not much more.”

I left out the part about us occasionally seeing one another naked, didn’t seem relevant. I also left out the fact that the current ADIC at FBI’s Los Angeles Division was another old *acquaintance* of mine, Millicent Trent, former Birmingham Special Agent in Charge. Which reminds me, I’m going to have to get out to LA sometime soon to fulfill a promise...

“Why do you ask?” I said, suddenly remembering the original question.

Melva turned to look at me, removing her headset.

“You remember that some of the local thuggery promised to *take out that Latina Chief Bitch?*” she said.

Suddenly my insides went cold. Mary Anne had three kids, one special needs, and she and her husband had divorced about five years ago.

“Yeah?” I said cautiously.

“Some of them tried yesterday,” Melva told me evenly. “But not to worry. She was at a public event, pre-scheduled and announced. Three bangers show up, draw weapons, and immediately get taken down by a plainclothes security detail arranged by the Bureau on account of Tellez having previously been one of theirs. Chief’s speech didn’t even get interrupted.”

I smiled, nodded, relief filling me.

“Score one for the good guys,” I said, then sat down in front of a laptop that I had been using while at the safehouse.

BRENDA WAS STILL COOL TO ME AS the days wore on, barely meeting my eyes when we were in the same room, and never initiating conversation. I was beginning to wonder why this concerned me at all because it wasn’t like the woman and I had ever been friends, the exact opposite really, but for some reason the coldness of her gaze was starting to... I’m not really sure how to put it. Not quite bother, or maybe more than that. Not annoy either, I was past that, I think.

Well whatever it was I was going to have to put it aside and she was going to have to get over being pissed at me long enough to

complete our mission. We were still operational and about to enter the most critical phase yet. While it was true that the weapons on those ships were no longer a threat, the crews were all CIA contractors and the cargo was being fully catalogued for disposal later—so I was told—, there was still nothing concrete that would tie this whole endeavor to Moscow, and ultimately to *Uncle Vlad*. Right now there was more to tie it to Israel than Russia, and the members of the Jensen Committee wanted more than anything to obtain direct proof that Russia was behind this. To finally pin one on them that they could not credibly deny, and that the oaf in the White House and his toadies couldn't dismiss as *fake news*. Vadim Voloton was the key to everything, which was the reason why the Baumgartners had to be taken out, and done so in a manner that would jeopardize not only the Gemini operation, but Voloton's standing with the Kremlin, with Putin himself. That was the only way he would ever risk exposing himself, because he had no choice.

Brenda Gray was essential to making the rest of the plan work, and essential to her living through all of this was yours truly, Gabin Endre Rocc.

**PRESIDENTIAL SUITE
BELMOND COPACABANA PALACE
RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL**

"I DON'T THINK I'M EVER GOING TO BE able to stay in a hotel room that isn't the Presidential Suite again," I said after finishing my sweep of the bedrooms upstairs. Brenda was waiting in the front room with Hector a few feet away. She was dressed in blue jeans, a gray turtleneck sweater, black boots, and a black leather jacket, and

she was still giving me the cold shoulder, or in this case, the cold eye.

“Thanks, Hector,” I said. “We’re good in here, you can go do your thing. Check in every fifteen.”

He nodded, turned to leave without saying anything. I looked at Brenda.

“Your things are upstairs in the master bedroom,” I told her. “I’m kind of hungry and was thinking about ordering something from room service. If you’d like...”

She turned away suddenly, her annoyance flaring.

“I don’t want to eat with you,” she said, stalking toward the stairs.

That’s when whatever it was that had been bothering me suddenly boiled over and I went after her, caught her in just a few quick strides, grabbed her left arm and pulled her away from the stairs, then around to face me.

“Let me go, you jerk!” she spit with fire, raising her right fist, her eyes dark orbs of hate. Her color was rising and the anger in her could no longer be contained either. She swung.

Unfortunately for her, she has not had a lot of experience with physical combat in her fifty-three years. In my fifty-one, I have. I let go of her left arm, stepped just out of range, and as the fist sailed past my face by a few inches, reached out and caught the wrist in my right palm, pulling downward and twisting her arm up behind her back, bringing her up on her toes.

I held her back close to me, her scent filling my nostrils, felt the tremble through her skin, the electricity of her touch as she struggled but could not overpower the arm lock.

“Let go of me!” she demanded, the pain in her voice not my intention, but for some reason a part of me seemed to gain some satisfac-

tion from hearing it. And after a few seconds more, “*Please!*” she whimpered. That brought me back to my senses. I am a hard bastard, no debating that, but I am not a bully and I don’t enjoy the suffering of others. Usually.

I let go of her and stepped away. She grabbed her wrist with her left hand and massaged it, turning to face me, some of the glare gone from her eyes, the anger replaced with hurt, vulnerability.

“I knew how stupid that was before I did it,” she said, holding my gaze, her eyes becoming watery. “You being you, and I suppose if you wanted, you could have executed your *Level 9* order right then, be done with me once and for all.”

I looked back at her, feeling very annoyed with myself, and a little ashamed.

“I’m sorry I hurt your arm,” I told her. “I could have deflected your attack without doing that. I let my anger cloud my judgment and you paid the price. Sorry again.”

She didn’t respond at first, unsure, then lowered her wrist.

“Derrick...”

I held up a finger.

“We’re still operational,” I cautioned. “Brenda.”

Exasperated, she nodded.

“Gabin, I’m just really messed up right now. What happened in Prague just set everything off, but the truth is I’ve been spinning out of control since I turned myself in to the feds. Maybe I should have just gone to prison because I’m not sure I’m cut out for this. I’m scared all the time, trying to keep the lies straight in my head, and not knowing if I can even trust the people I’m supposed to be working for. I know I don’t really have a choice, and they don’t owe me anything, I got myself into this mess. But still...”

The tears came then, along with the sniffles, and finally the shakes. For just the briefest of instants I considered the prospect that the lady was playing me, which was definitely a possibility, given who she really was, but I decided to put those thoughts aside for the moment and go with humanity.

I took her in my arms and held her close as she sobbed into my chest. The shirt I had on was handmade and expensive, but I hadn't paid for it so why should I care if she messed it up?

A few minutes later she pulled back, still sniffing. I gave her my handkerchief, also expensive, and she wiped her eyes and nose, looking up at me so unlike the woman I had first encountered a few years ago, the trafficker in human misery, and as it turned out, so much other criminality. Could be an act, or her past persona might have been one. Weren't we all just playing roles as we stumbled along through life trying to find our way?

Getting way too philosophical in my middle years.

She came to me first, stepping close again, raising her chin, her eyes on mine. I could feel the heat emanating from her body and mixing with her scent, it was a lethal combination that ignited the fire in my belly.

And lower.

I didn't kiss her, instead took her by the arms again, spun her around and bent her over the back of the sofa in the middle of the room. She didn't resist or complain, suddenly very compliant, and this ignited something in me, too. That animal part of my psyche that I fight every day to keep contained because I'm not exactly sure what would happen if I ever let it out and off its tether.

Well today, finally, the animal was about to be let out to roam free, at least for a little while, and somehow I got the sense that the

woman bending over in front of me right now knew this, was excited by the prospect. She glanced back over her left shoulder with such a wicked little smile on her full red lips, her narrow rump up high, just millimeters of air separating it from me. My cock burned for her, and right now nothing else mattered. GRAYSCALE, MERCENARY, the Russians, the Israelis (Shoshanna Merleman in particular), the CIA, none of it. Suddenly what was before me was all there was, and I intended to *have it*.

I dropped down onto my knees while at the same time reaching around front and undoing her belt and zipper, my tongue and lips already wandering across her ass through her jeans, Brenda-Myrna-Melissa squirming back against me as her own fire filled her.

Soon, I smirked to myself, that wouldn't be the only thing that *filled* her.

For the first time in my life I actually ripped a woman's underwear off, one-handed, a single forceful yank, and the sheer material of the black thong tore away from her body. She gasped in shock, once again looking back at me, her mouth open.

Gasp number two was the result of where next I put my tongue...

Chapter 61

Vadim Voloton's advance team arrived in Rio four days before Sebastian Ibold got in touch again. There were ten of them and they were really good, very well trained, however they were at a disadvantage because they were late to the party and the specialists on our side were handpicked and trained by Shelbee Roberts herself. They were able to tag and ID all of the opposition members within thirty-six hours of their arrival and keep them under discreet coverage the entire time as they moved about the city and the Belmond Copacabana itself, some of them conducting reconnaissance, others making preparations for the arrival of their boss. All of their activities were sent to me in report form via secure transmissions at the end of each day, along with biographical information and photos of all of them.

I shared this information with Brenda, which only seemed fair because when the reports arrived she and I were usually in bed together, or just coming out of the shower. She wasn't trying to punch me anymore, but had come up with some very creative ways to make me feel pain, one of them involving ice cubes, the second woman in recent years to express this particular predilection with frozen water.

"Flooding the grid?" she frowned, settling down next to me in the huge round bed in the middle of the master suite. She adjusted the

covers over her breasts as she leaned back on fluffy pillows propped against the ornate curved headboard.

I nodded, turning to look at her.

“What happened to the *no covering your breasts* rule?” I said with mock annoyance. “Somebody might need another spanking. And this time I won’t use my tongue.”

Brenda snickered, then puffed out her chest, pulling back, the sheet sliding down to her tight little tummy, exposing her still firm B-cups. And as I’ve said before, size is irrelevant, I like all women’s breasts, as long as they’re natural, and the lady sitting next to me was definitely natural, and in phenomenal physical condition.

“Better?” she said, grinning.

“Much,” I said, then turned back to the oversized iPhone that I was carrying for this job, once again missing the tiny Android that I sported when I was *me*. “And flooding the grid simply means they’re putting as many people into place ahead of time as they can safely get away with to give themselves the best advantage when the main event arrives. Voloton himself. They know they have time because the first shipments aren’t due to arrive at their destinations for another week. Voloton knows he’ll have to meet you before then, but he can string it out till the last minute, knowing that despite your threats about dumping the cargo, you’ll hold out for as long as you can because the payday is too big.”

“Kind of like your cock, huh?” she quipped with another snicker.

I laughed, too, turning to look at her, admiring the hardness of her ruddy nipples, feeling a surge of *hardness* myself.

“Well not quite that big,” I said, and we both laughed.

Then I didn’t feel like laughing anymore. What I felt like doing was pulling the covers all the way off and *eating* her again.

So that's just what I did.

AN HOUR LATER WE WERE STILL IN BED, Brenda on all-fours in front of me as I gripped her lithe, sweat-slicked waist in both hands, pulling her back against me while my cock drove into the wetness at the center of her womanhood, my balls slapping against her clit and driving her wild, and it was in the middle—actually closer to the climax—of that when the late Boaz Baumgartner's Smartphone decided to start its shrill ringing.

Fuck!

Or in this case, *stop fucking!*

Despite operational importance, neither of us had any real desire to stop doing what we were doing, but we weren't about to blow off the call either. The compromise was for Brenda to drop down on her stomach and I would follow suit, only I was now on her back, keeping our bodies firmly connected, and she, while trying to catch her breath, reached for the phone on the nightstand. She got it on ring number four, managed to swipe the screen in time to answer the call before it switched over to voicemail.

Sebastian Ibold.

"My employer will be outside your hotel suite at eight in the morning," he said without preamble. "Please alert your security that they should not interfere, if they value their lives, and yours. Our security will arrive first and perform a thorough sweep. Your people can keep their weapons, but if they make any sudden moves, the results will be tragic. For them. Is this understood?"

Brenda said that it was.

Ibold hung up without further comment.

“Rude,” Brenda remarked humorously, putting the phone back on the nightstand. The next thing out of her mouth was a deep groan as she felt me swell inside her, my pelvis suddenly grinding against her butt.

“Oh fuck!” she moaned, then arched her back and began to convulse in orgasm, the sheet beneath us suddenly soaking wet.

Yep, I thought with an impish grin of satisfaction, the *boy from Bama’s* still got it.

As apparently did the *gal from Bama* because just a minute later, as I felt a distinct tightening around my cock, I was shuddering and spewing like a fire hose myself.

Chapter 62

The security team arrived at six-thirty. Actually they already had rooms in the hotel on floors five and nine and had been in place two days before Ibold called. Anton was leading our greeting party in the isolated corridor. The Presidential Suite was alone on the top floor of the hotel so we had it all to ourselves. In addition to Anton, Hector and Raul were there, along with a new fourth, Martin. Since Carlos was pretending to be the man we *lost* in the ruckus in Prague, he had been relegated to backup duty far out of sight, knowing it was likely that Voloton's people had been keeping tabs on us all along and might be suspicious to see the same four faces after being told that one had been killed.

The opposition team was six-strong, led by a squat, heavily muscled man in his mid-thirties with stringy blond hair who introduced himself as Dimitri. I came out into the hallway a few minutes later when Anton called. I had been awake anyway, had only gotten about an hour of sleep once I finished speaking with Shelbee Roberts via secure phone, going over last minute arrangements.

Brenda and I showered together afterwards, but the mood was very somber, still, being naked with a beautiful woman was never a bad thing in my book. Then I told her she should try and get some sleep, at least for a few hours, I was going back to my room so she wouldn't be disturbed. I could tell she was a little bit disappointed,

and truth be told, so was I. The past few days had been a lot of fun, but we both knew it wouldn't last, couldn't last, and honestly, I'm not a *lasting* kind of guy anyway. Some days I regret that, mostly I don't.

"We must search and secure the suite," Dimitri announced in heavily accented English when I stepped out wearing highly polished black Oxfords, dark slacks, a blue button-down shirt, and a charcoal blazer. "Before our employer arrives at eight. And we will be activating electronic countermeasures, including a cell phone jammer."

I objected, which was to be expected, and Dimitri became insistent. Also expected. I relented on allowing them into the suite, although I made it clear that they were not to enter the private quarters of my client, adding that one of my people would be posted at her door before they were allowed in. To this, Dimitri relented. Then the question of the cell jammer was bandied about, with me expressing grave misgivings about having our communications at the mercy of someone else. Dimitri was as polite as he knew how to be, which wasn't very, but on this point he would not relent.

I wasn't really worried about this issue, though, just needed to make a show. The phones and other electronics we were using were NSA-grade anti-jamming capable against all the latest countermeasures on the market. Or so Melva Kingsley assured me.

I made them wait until seven before allowing them inside the suite, first making sure that Brenda was awake and aware, then posting Martin outside her door on the upper level. Four came inside, including Dimitri. Anton came inside with me, leaving Hector and Raul out in the corridor with the last two of Dimitri's team. They started on the first floor first, breaking into two teams and tak-

ing equipment from the large cases that two of the men carried, some of it I recognized. The sweep was reasonably quick, but thorough, every nook and cranny getting the once-over. It was obvious that Dimitri and his men did this a lot.

When they went up on the second level, I went with them, just to make sure that our deal regarding Brenda's room was honored, and while they didn't try to enter, the guy who accompanied Dimitri did run his equipment across the walls outside the room. After about five minutes, he turned to Dimitri and nodded, apparently satisfied.

Dimitri then turned to me and smiled. Kind of like a shark just before attacking a baby seal. We went back downstairs. It was almost time for the show to start.

The Main Event.

Coincidentally, for this operation, that just happened to be the codename assigned to Mr. Voloton.

Chapter 63

Brenda was wearing another designer pantsuit today, this one yellow, a light gray button-down blouse and green sandals completing the outfit, her freshly manicured toenails on full display, and I had to be careful not to smile. She really did have some dainty little feet and I was trying very hard not to think about what she liked to do with those feet with regard to my cock.

We stood in the front room in the middle of the sofa group, Brenda flanked by Anton and me on one side, Dimitri's three inside men over by the door, Dimitri alone facing us, completely relaxed. Suddenly he raised his left hand to his ear, a rookie move and I hated it when security people did that. You didn't need to put your hand on your receiver to hear better, it was just a sign of bad training, and perhaps too much television watching.

Dimitri looked at us.

"The boss is here," he announced, turned for the door. Before he got there, one of his men opened it and Dimitri stepped out into the hallway. Brenda glanced at me and tried to smile. I nodded reassuringly, I think, then turned my full attention on the front doorway as Dimitri returned, followed closely by Sebastian Ibold wearing a tan suit and white shirt, open at the neck, and right behind him was Vadim Vassilivitch Voloton himself, wearing black designer jeans, a green pullover shirt untucked, black cowboy boots that probably

cost more than I would ever make for the rest of my life, this job notwithstanding, and a green designer blazer that reminded me of the *green jacket* that the winners of the *Masters' Tournament* received as commemoration of their achievement.

The Russian oligarch was rangy, thick-bodied, had let some of his physical conditioning go since his days with Russian Special Purpose Forces (Spetsnaz), but there was still toughness there as well, strength, especially in the steel of his gray eyes. At fifty, he still had a full head of hair, mostly dark, but going gray around the temples, and his mustache and goatee were freshly trimmed, also showing some signs of aging.

He walked into the room as if he owned it, no hesitation at all. Dimitri moved to one side, Ibold to the other, and Voloton kept coming all the way into the room, his eyes fixed on Brenda the entire time, his heavily tanned face without expression. He stopped three feet from her, knowing that this close she would have to lean back to meet his eyes.

They looked at one another for several moments, each taking the measure of the other, and no doubt Voloton wondering what she would be like in bed, his lechery now undisguised. I could have answered that question for him, but gentlemen never tell, or so I've heard, and for the moment there was no one else of importance in the room except the two of them.

Finally the Russian's large face cracked into a smile, revealing excellent dental work that was obviously done some place outside of Russia. He extended his hand.

"A pleasure to finally meet you, Brenda Gray. May I call you Brenda?"

She took the offered hand, or as much of it as she could because she has small hands and Voloton has very large ones.

“You may,” Brenda told him in a self-assured tone of her own. “And what may I call you? You never did introduce yourself on the phone, and Mr. Crawford only refers to you as his employer.”

Voloton smiled again, glanced back at Ibold on his right.

“Despite being born in Britain, I’m afraid dear Sebastian is far from being an English gentleman,” Voloton said playfully, still holding on to Brenda’s hand. “His name is not Crawford either, as I’m sure you probably suspect. I will not tell you his real last name for now. As for me, my darling, you may call me Vassily.”

“Vassily?” Brenda said as the handshake finally ended. “Just Vassily? Like Cher or Madonna, no last name either?”

“You forget *Prince*,” Voloton added with a wicked grin and a raised brow. “*The Purple Wonder*, although he is now sadly deceased. But yes, just Vassily will do.”

Brenda continued to stare at him for a few moments longer, then nodded, inviting him to sit, which he did, on the opposite sofa, and invited her to join him there. Brenda smiled, and did so without hesitation. Ibold moved to a wing chair on the right, Dimitri moved back to join his men close to the entrance, and Anton stepped around to the back side of the sofa where I stood and moved close to the wall so that he could keep all the opposition forces in sight. I was the last to sit, occupying the large sofa on this side of the room by my lonesome.

Voloton sat very close to Brenda, closer than two people who were not familiar should, but he was making it clear from the outset that he made the rules, that he was the one in charge, that he was *The Man*.

“So do you have something for me?” Voloton said as he crossed his long legs.

Brenda stared at him again, taking her time, making it clear that she was not going to be intimidated or rushed. She reached into the right side pocket of her jacket, extracted the phone that had belonged to the late Bo Baumgartner.

“The phone features don’t work at the moment,” she told him. “It would seem that your men are jamming all cell phone signals.”

Voloton took the phone, nodding absently as he examined it. “Yes, yes, a necessary precaution. There are always people trying to spy on me these days, and I am a man who enjoys his privacy, insist upon it, in fact. Which is why you should be so honored that I am here today, Brenda. Do you know that in all the time I did business with Boaz Baumgartner and his lovely wife Kavala, I never once met with them in person, never even talked with them on the phone? All of my communications were through Sebastian, my business manager. I prefer it that way, as I am a very private person, and quite a busy man.”

He tossed the phone to Ibold who caught it one handed, without apparent effort, and began going through it. Then Voloton turned to me, his expression less cordial.

“Gabin Endre Rocc, the man himself. You know I have heard a great deal about you over the years, a lot of legends, actually, and to be honest, I did not believe most of them. You have worked all over the world, even in my country, and your record for success is stellar. I have had my people look into you thoroughly, and frankly, it was the first time that they had difficulty in such an assignment. A lot of people will not talk about you, no matter the enticement, or the threat.”

I stared back at him, saying nothing, letting smugness color my countenance.

“You worked for General Oleg Kalugin,” he said pointedly. “A great man, a true patriot of the Rodina. And later a shrewd businessman with wide interests around the world, some of which coincided with mine. His passing was a great loss.”

“I don’t discuss clients,” I told him. “Ever.”

“Of course,” Voloton went on. “I spoke with Lyudmila Kochanko the other day. You know she took over the general’s interests when he died? She was the closest thing he had to family, he never married, never had any children. Lyudi is quite a formidable woman in her own right. Tougher than most men I have ever known. She occupied a special place in Oleg’s heart. And she regards you very highly, which is quite possibly the greatest compliment anyone will ever be paid.”

Still I did not respond. I knew precisely what the former GRU officer and current head of the Kalugin Organization had told Voloton, which was not nearly as much as he was hinting at. First off, she did not discuss the general’s (now hers) business with outsiders, and if she had done so with Voloton this would have immediately made him suspicious of the information she provided. No, Lyudi had stuck to the script we’d discussed a few months ago; the Russian oligarch was just fishing now to see if he could wrangle something more out of me. And in that endeavor, as we used to say back when I was doing security clearance investigations in the early days of my OSI career, his efforts *met with negative results*.

He watched me, unmoving for more than a minute, no one saying anything, and I sat comfortably and watched him right back. All of a sudden he laughed, deep from his belly, then turned to Brenda.

“You have a tough man working for you,” he told her boisterously. “A hard man. Which is why you are still alive. Tell me exactly what happened in Prague, from the beginning.”

Brenda protested, stating that she had already gone over all of this on the phone with Ibold/Crawford/not-Crawford/Sebastian and him, but Voloton was insistent, saying that he wanted to hear all the details again, now that they were face-to-face, before anything else transpired.

Ibold looked up from the phone his boss had tossed to him.

“It’s all here, boss,” he said. “Bo’s entire business operations, all unlocked. I can download it all if you like.”

The Russian waved a hand dismissively, nodding. Ibold stood and went over to one of the men by the door behind Dimitri, retrieving a briefcase, taking it back to his chair where he sat once again. He opened the case, then pulled out a USB cable, attached it to the phone and started doing something that I could not see behind the raised lid. Voloton was still staring at Brenda, waiting.

She sighed in exasperation, nodded.

“Fine, *Jesus*, okay. The sooner we get this over with the better, and then we can come to terms on our partnership, yes?”

“Of course,” Voloton lied smoothly, smiling at her.

Brenda smiled, and then started to speak. Abruptly he stopped her, glancing over to me.

“No, Gabin, I wish to hear it from you this time,” he said in a deadpan voice. “You are always with your boss, you were there when it happened, presumably killed at least one of the attackers. I want to hear you tell the story, in detail, all of it.”

I stared at him briefly, glanced at Dimitri and the others, noticed that Ibold was still working with the phone and whatever device was

in the briefcase on his lap.

“I’m not much of a storyteller, Vassily,” I said, shifting on my lone sofa. “But I’ll do my best.” Which I did, for about ten minutes, laying out the story as rehearsed, with just enough differences (for perspective’s sake) from Brenda’s rendition to give it that ring of authenticity, or so I hoped.

When I was done, Voloton sat silently, his eyes unblinking. I noticed that Ibold appeared to be finished with what he was doing; now disconnecting the USB cable from Boaz Baumgartner’s phone.

Voloton started nodding.

“The press claim the murderers were Israeli, possibly Mossad,” he said. “Of course the Jews are denying this, but what else would you expect? All governments would, mine included. “*Deny, distract, counterattack* was our motto back in my day,” he chuckled, glancing at Ibold. “All done?”

“Sir,” Ibold replied sharply.

“Good then. Do you believe it was the Israelis, Gabin?” he said to me.

“I have no idea,” I told him. “They were professionally trained, no doubt about that, unfortunately, with the fluidity of the situation, we didn’t have time to stick around for a chat and an exchange of credentials, so I can’t confirm anything.”

He nodded, absently scratching his chin with a finger.

“The Israelis had reason to want to take out the Baumgartners, I know this. As did a few other governments and private parties. The timing is very inconvenient for me, though, with this current deal, the shipping arrangements he was working on with you, Brenda. Although I must say that I admire your initiative and ambition. Not to mention your greed, having the wherewithal to grab Bo’s phone like

that, in the middle of everything that was going on around you, people being killed, to be thinking about how you were going to salvage your deal and make a fortune in the process. A remarkable woman.”

Brenda Gray smiled charmingly, and Vadim Voloton replied in kind, reaching for and taking her hand, kissing it.

“So we can do business then?” she said. “You will permit me to take the place of the Baumgartners in this deal?”

“You are a smuggler of reputation,” the Russian said thoughtfully. “But what do you know of weapons? You do know that munitions and illicit diamonds were the primary business of the Gemini Syndicate going back many years before the Baumgartners, and this does not match your background.”

“No,” Brenda admitted. “But Gabin knows weapons, and if this deal goes through and we become permanent partners, I would bring him onboard as my head of operations.”

Voloton glanced at me before responding, smiling once again at Brenda Gray.

“You really have thought about this at length, and seem to have considered all the possibilities. Gabin, would you be interested in such a position in Ms. Gray’s organization, her new organization, and its relationship with mine?”

I stared at him for a few moments, then glanced at Brenda. She patted Voloton’s knee and made to stand up.

“I’ve got some champagne chilling in the kitchen,” she said. “Permit me to go get it so that we can toast to our new partnership.”

Voloton nodded, standing. Ibold and I stood as well, suddenly all proper gentlemen. The Russian and the Brit quickly retook their seats. I remained standing, facing Voloton. After Brenda was out of sight down the corridor, he turned to me and grinned.

“A little too skinny for my Russian tastes,” he chuckled. “But I bet a tiger in bed, hey, Gabin?”

I did not respond, although I completely concurred with his assessment, not the *too skinny* one, of course.

“The offer is generous,” I answered his earlier question. “Although I have to admit that it is a bit out of my line. I’ve always done one thing in my adult life, and have become quite good at it, very successful, too. But I am getting older and perhaps it is time to pass the torch on to younger generations, take a *desk job*, so to speak.”

I glanced over and saw Brenda coming back down the hallway from the kitchen, a tray with an ice bucket, a bottle of champagne, and four glasses balanced in her hands at waist level.

“Unfortunately, it won’t be working for her,” I said, moving casually, stepping past the sofa where Voloton sat, Ibold now on my immediate right, Anton further to the right, still on the back wall, and Dimitri and his comrades to my left, Dimitri a few feet closer than the others.

The T-1 was already in my right hand and I was raising it as Brenda was still some distance away. When she saw what I was doing she recoiled in disbelief, dropping the tray.

“No, Gabin!” she shouted, turning to run back the other way.

I fired twice, both bullets catching her dead center in the back, most likely severing her spinal cord on impact. She pitched onto the highly polished wood floor and slid a few feet before coming to rest in a heap, blood beginning to pool at the back of her previously pristine yellow jacket.

I lowered my weapon to the floor before turning with my hands raised high in the air. The only two people in the room who were not pointing guns in my direction were Anton and Vadim Voloton him-

self, and the latter was staring at me in total confusion and unaccustomed shock. Out of the corner of my left eye I saw that Martin had now made it partway down from the second level, standing in the middle of the staircase with his back to the wall. He, like Anton, was pointing his weapon in the direction of Voloton's enforcers and Sebastian Ibold, only, unlike Anton, his weapon was a fully automatic assault rifle with a fully loaded one hundred round drum magazine attached to the well.

"Please, let me explain," I said calmly, focusing exclusively on Voloton. "Before anyone does anything rash. And we don't have a lot of time, that is, unless you want to spend the rest of your life in an American prison, or worse."

Voloton's expression went from shocked confusion to cold inquisition after my last statement.

"What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"I'm talking about the fact that the woman you were just pretending to be interested in partnering with, the woman I've been working for these past few months, was not just a smuggler, but something more, and far worse. She was a plant by the Americans. An undercover CIA agent, a spy. And her mission was you, Vadim Vasilivitch Voloton, and ultimately the person you answer to back home."

The proverbial pin was dropping right about now, and still no one moved.

More importantly, no one started shooting.

Chapter 64

“There were some inconsistencies with her story from the very beginning. As you might suspect, before I agree to take on a client, I do a thorough background check, from birth to present, leaving nothing to chance. It’s how I’ve survived this long. If something does not seem right, I walk away, often times without ever taking a meeting. I have enemies, too, many in fact, and it would not be out of the realm of possibility for one of them to try to set me up. And when I began to look into Ms. Brenda Gray, something just seemed off, but I could not quite put my finger on it, her story was just too perfect, her references too pat. Again, nothing I could specifically point to, which is why I eventually agreed to meet with her and take the assignment. The money was fantastic, and I am, after all, a businessman myself. You probably heard about that mishap shortly before this job, in Venezuela, where a client of mine was killed? Now, with more time to think about it, the timing of the approach from Gray is very suspicious, and I believe not a coincidence. I think the Americans were behind it, the death of my other client, to put me in a difficult position so that I’d be willing to take Gray on as a client in an effort to quickly repair any damage to my reputation.

“However, as I said, despite my misgivings, I agreed to take the job, contacted Anton and some others I knew in Spain and other places, set them in motion, with others like Martin on standby for

backup. I didn't know what the game was, but I wanted to be prepared. I was mindful that I could be the target and always had a contingency ready to go. However, as things progressed, and we eventually came into contact with the Baumgartners and the Gemini Syndicate, I began to suspect that I was not the target of whatever Gray was playing at, more like an additional layer of cover. My reputation in certain circles is well known and if I was working for her, then she must be genuine. There was an attempt on my life in Marbella, I don't know if you heard. At first I believed it was arranged by the late Helene and Arturo Guzman, but now I think differently. I believe it was yet another CIA action to help sell Gray's cover. Even so, I still had no actual evidence and couldn't really understand why the CIA would go to all this trouble just to infiltrate a group of illegal arms brokers, even ones who were doing business inside the United States, which would be more in the purview of the FBI anyway. And then I found out about you, Vadim Vassilivitch, and your connections in *high places*. After that all the pieces fell into place."

We were still in the front room, only now Voloton and I were seated on our respective sofas once again. Ibold was still on his feet, now standing next to Dimitri, who had moved further into the room, the other three bodyguards closer, too, covering the entire room from various points, and behind me, Anton and Martin, Martin still on the stairs, both still pointing their weapons. But none of that was important right now, at least not to Voloton, who sat hunched forward, elbows on his knees, eyes intent on mine as I spoke. Oh, and Brenda Gray's body was still on the floor in the corridor, no one bothering to go check on her. They had seen the hits and the blood, knew there was no point, she could be dealt with later. Her corpse anyway.

“Tell me everything,” Voloton urged coldly. “How you learned my name, and more importantly, why you believe the CIA is behind all of this, including the murders of the Baumgartners?”

I did, all of it, without any deviation from the script, using parts of the information I had gotten from Lyudmila Kochanko, information not generally known about the man, not even at CIA, and mixed in some decent speculation on the part of several outstanding Russia analysts at the Agency. As I spoke, watched the reaction from the Russian, I knew that those analysts had been pretty damn close to the mark because I detected more than just tension rising within him, but cold fear as well. Something this all-powerful general-of-destiny was unaccustomed to feeling.

Suddenly he turned to Ibold.

“Send a message to our friend in Washington,” he commanded. “Find out if this is true, and if it is, find out why we were not informed before now. They are paid a small fortune for this very reason, and we do not pay this money out of the kindness of our hearts, we expect results.”

Ibold nodded, reholstering his Glock and taking out his satellite phone. It would work despite the jammers. He stepped away and began dialing.

Voloton turned back to me.

“So you believe the hit in Prague was CIA, that Brenda arranged it?”

“I don’t know if she arranged it,” I admitted, “but she was sure in on it, and prepared for Baumgartner to go down. I saw how quick she moved to get his phone when the shooting started. And another thing, he wasn’t on his phone at the time, he was seated at the table drinking champagne I had just poured for everybody. I saw her go

through his pockets while my men and I were in a firefight for our lives. And after I had some more time to think about it later, I realized that the closer we were to her, the wider the *attackers'* shots went, like they weren't trying to hit us, like they were play acting. Only using real bullets. And I lost a man, too. That pisses me off more than anything. Plus I don't like being lied to."

Voloton swore loudly in Russian, pushed up and began to pace.

"If the Americans know about me, and they suspect the true purpose of those shipments, this could be very bad," he mused, speaking out loud, but I suspect that he was really talking to himself. "The shipments themselves are not all that important, nor the people who were supposed to receive them, just another piece on a very large chessboard. But an important piece nonetheless."

He paused, turned to face me, smiled coldly.

"You are correct, Gabin. I was not going to do a partnership with Ms. Gray over there. I was going to kill her. And you as well, all of your men, too. With the shipments on their way and the Baumgartners dead, there was no further use for any of you. In time, if they had not already been taken care of by the CIA, I would have had Sebastian deal with the Baumgartners. Another loose end to be tied up. But if what you tell me is true, then Gemini has been compromised for some time, and this could cause me some severe problems, at home as well as out in the world. I wish you had waited before killing Ms. Gray. We could have interrogated her at length to get whatever information she had about the CIA's investigation, what they were planning. Now she can do none of that."

I nodded, sitting back and stretching out my legs.

"True," I admitted. "But I didn't kill her because of you. I killed her for myself. She violated the one rule that a client of mine is not

allowed to violate. She lied to me, she used me, and for that, there is only one resolution.” I inclined my head in the direction of the hallway that led to the kitchen.

Voloton stared down at me for a few moments, then laughed.

“Hard bastard indeed,” he said.

Ibold lowered the phone from his ear.

“She’s moving to a place where she can talk securely,” he said to his boss. “Call back in five. And she is not happy that I called while she was at work. She was just leaving a meeting with the *big man*, her boss at her side.”

Voloton nodded, turned back to me, apparently not caring about the happiness of anyone who was not him.

“So what do we do with you now, Gabin?” he said. “The simplest solution would still be to kill you, all of you.”

“Not necessarily simple, Vassily,” I responded casually. “We might all go down, but you certainly would as well, and most of your men. And I suspect you don’t want to go down. Look, I wasn’t lying about thinking that perhaps it’s time I got out of this game, retire, do something else, I’m not sure. But you will agree that I just saved you a lot of headaches, and maybe there is more that I can do for you, things that you would be willing to pay me a lot of money for.”

Voloton chuckled, and then Ibold’s phone chirped. Without looking at him, Voloton snapped his fingers and held out his left hand. Ibold walked over and handed the phone to him.

As soon as the phone chirped, I raised my hands above my head and stretched, yawning. By the time Voloton raised the phone to his ear, my hands were at my ears, seemingly massaging my lobes. What I was actually doing was inserting a pair of specially designed plugs into my ear canals, identical to the ones that Martin and An-

ton were already wearing, and Raul and Hector in the corridor outside.

Voloton began to speak into the satellite phone without pleasantries, and was on the second sentence when the high-pitched sonic screech momentarily lanced through the room and everyone not wearing the special earplugs suddenly dropped to their knees in excruciating pain, screaming and holding their ears, then rolling around on the floor as blood began leaking from their noses, mouths, and ears, and probably another orifice or two. They were completely incapacitated in under four seconds.

I stood up, glanced at Anton and Martin, both coming forward, weapons trained on the downed men. The front door opened and Raul stuck his head in, said that everything was clear out in the hallway, Voloton's men were down.

I nodded, glancing around at the now unconscious men on the floor, Anton collecting their weapons as Martin continued to cover them, although I knew it really wasn't necessary.

Two things happened after that and neither was a surprise to me. The first was Shelbee Roberts walking through the front door wearing a black pantsuit and pink blouse, hair loose around her shoulders. She was quickly followed by several others dressed in black tactical gear and carrying assault weapons similar to Martin's, the *late* Carlos was one of them. Shelbee walked up to me, nodded, and I once again detected that faint smile at the corners of her mouth.

The second thing was Brenda Gray not so miraculously *coming back to life* and standing up a little shakily as Anton helped her to her feet. She removed the earplugs from her ears as well, frowning as she reached one hand behind her, gingerly feeling her back. She was going to be hurting for a few days, but she was alive, because I

had shot her with rubber bullets specially designed by the CIA. The impact had been sufficient to rupture the blood pack she was wearing in the middle of her back, but go no further, the rest was just more playacting on her part, something at which Brenda Gray was becoming rather excellent.

Shelbee Roberts began issuing quick orders and very shortly all the men on the floor were secured with zip-cuffs on their wrists and ankles and black hoods were drawn and secured over their heads. One of the tacticals was asking about Ibold's briefcase, and that's when Melva Kingsley walked in, also wearing a pantsuit, hers dark green.

"I'll take care of that," she announced, coming over to join us. "And any other electronics you've taken off of them."

Shelbee nodded at the tactical agent, giving assent. Melva stopped next to her chief as Brenda ambled over to me, punching me in the shoulder.

"Well you finally got your wish," she quipped. "You shot me."

"Christmas came early," I laughed.

Shelbee was nodding when Melva finished speaking, now looking at me.

"Your job is done, Derrick," she said curtly. "Time for you to go home. Arrangements have already been made for you to leave Rio this afternoon."

"Just like that?" I said. "*Wham, bam, thank you, sir.*"

"Well we could lie back and enjoy a leisurely cigarette," she said, smirking. "But you don't smoke. And I quit ten years ago, so..."

I stared at her and she stared at me.

"You aren't going to tell me who was on the other end of that phone call, are you?" I said.

“No,” she said. “You don’t need to know. But I promise, that person will be dealt with, as will everyone else involved in all of this. Your part is over though, Derrick, and your help has been invaluable in getting us to this point. But the ultimate operation is far from over. Now that we have Voloton... Well, let’s just say that now our side has some significant leverage. Will wants to talk to you, too. You’ll be getting a call. And Nic has something for you, as well. But for now, you should go.”

I really hadn’t expected any more, and shouldn’t have been disappointed to get exactly what I got. I glanced at Brenda Gray, not sure if I should call her Myrna, Melissa, or what. Didn’t know if she was done with this thing or not either, but I suspected even if she were, her usefulness to the CIA was far from over. Judging by the expression in her deep brown eyes, I knew that she was aware of this as well.

She hugged me, didn’t say anything, and then turned and headed for the stairs. Shelbee nodded at Martin who followed her up.

One last glance around, I nodded.

“Well, Shel, it’s been a heck of a lot of fun. Let’s never do this again.”

She put out her hand and I shook it, then she surprised the hell out of me by leaning in and kissing my cheek. Anton and the others just shook my hand, but Melva Kingsley hugged me, then led me to the door. Outside, a plainclothes escort was waiting.

“Take care, Derrick,” Melva whispered in that husky voice of hers, then closed the door to the suite in my face. I had been officially dismissed.

Thank you for your service.

This suited me just fine because suddenly I was overwhelmed by a strange desire to climb out of my skin and start screaming at the top of my lungs.

I settled for being escorted to the service elevator and hustled out of the hotel. Still, that strange desire lingered with me for days to come.

Chapter 65

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

It took a little over a week and a half after I was flown out of Rio before I got back home to Birmingham, and by that time it was three-quarters into spring, warm weather and sunshine one day, rain and thunderstorms the next. As I always say, gotta love *Bama* weather.

I flew into Harvey Point in the middle of the night on a C-130 cargo plane that was hopping from different spots along the east coast, beginning in South Florida, where CIA had a number of covert sites that operated under military cover. I was waiting at one of them with a two-agent escort from the Office of Security and hitched a ride.

I was greeted at the airstrip by Will Jordon and Amy Stovall. Will gave me a manly handshake, the accompanying slap on the shoulder, and Amy opted for a *girly* hug and a brief kiss on the cheek. As we drove to the SOG building on the other side of the base, not much was said, and nothing about the mission. Due to the lateness of the hour, Will said the debriefing would not start until the next day. My old quarters were waiting and I could sack out for the night, and if I was hungry they could arrange something. I was not hungry, opted for bed.

The next morning at 0930 I was escorted into the SCIF by the tactically dressed Officer Taglio and found Will and Amy already there, along with a third, two of them dressed as casually as I.

“Deputy Director Calavici,” I greeted Nic with more gregariousness than I felt. “How wonderful of you to join us this morning.”

Nic was wearing a gray pantsuit and white button-down blouse. She smiled and came around the table, stopping just a couple feet away, her eyes on mine. She reached out and took both my hands in hers, squeezing them.

“It’s very good to see you alive and in one piece, Derrick,” she said, and actually sounded as if she meant it. She hugged me, then brought me to the table and told me to sit, which I did, and she sat down beside me, Will and Amy taking seats on the other side of the table.

“You shaved,” Will observed, settling into his chair.

“They didn’t make you Executive Director because of your pretty face, did they?” I said.

Will grinned.

Yes, I had shaved my face and head in the shower this morning, getting my old look back, hoping to catch a glimpse of the man I had been before this all started. I missed that man, wasn’t sure if he would ever truly come back.

“Congratulations are in order, Derrick,” Nic said. “You pulled the assignment off brilliantly, we couldn’t have hoped for better results.”

I turned to the CIA’s number two, staring into her large brown eyes.

“Where’s Vadim Voloton now?” I asked.

Nic studied me for a few seconds, carefully considering her response before giving it.

“In a safe place,” she told me. “Where he can do no more harm, and perhaps help do some good for a change.”

“That’s vague as hell,” I said to her. “Even for an old spook like you, Nici-dear.”

She smiled.

“Careful with the *old* there, Derrick. Only got you by a few years. And as for Mr. Voloton, officially he no longer exists. And you know as well as I do that nobody will truly miss him. However, his disappearance, sudden as it was, will scare the living shit out of a lot of people in the Kremlin, one in particular. Which was a main goal of this entire operation. Besides stopping the weapons shipments here and overseas.”

“So I assume the FBI is standing by on the home front?” I said.

“They are,” Will answered. “They aren’t happy to be operating without full details, but considering the headlines they’ll get from the arrests, they’ll play ball. They need a big win right now with all the bashings they’ve been taking from the politicians lately, and some in the press, too.”

“So you’ll squeeze Voloton for everything he knows, and then use it to squeeze the Kremlin and anybody else they’re dealing with? Especially if they’re connected to Washington?”

No one responded, and I was half expecting this.

“Oh, I see,” I said. “I’m out of the club now, that it? My part being over and all?”

Nic grinned at me, reached over and patted my forearm.

“Well if you want to come onboard fulltime, I can arrange that pretty quickly, have you assigned to Shelbee’s team, she’d love that.”

I held up my other hand, shaking my head.

“Yeah, and one of us would be dead in under a week. No thanks.”

“Then I’m afraid we can’t discuss that with you, Derrick, because as you said, your part in the operation is over. Once your debriefing

is done, you can return to civilian life and continue in the private sector as a much wealthier man. You've earned every penny. Not to mention the gratitude of everyone in this room and some other places."

I was considering that when she released my arm, then something else occurred to me, a question I really didn't want the answer to, but decided I was going to have to ask anyway.

"And what about *The Asset*?" I said. "Brenda Gray, Myrna Blessing-Walcott, Melissa Browner?"

"Brenda Gray no longer exists either," Nic said. "And frankly, neither do any of those other women, but as for The Asset, well I'm sure she can be of further use to us. She did rather well on this assignment, kept her head, did what we wanted. Helped us catch a significant fish."

"And now she's on your hook until she's no longer of any use?" I said. "Or gets killed."

"You of all people should know who and what that woman really is, all the bad shit she's done in her life, including trying to kill your people a few years ago. Don't tell me you're feeling sorry for her now?"

I really wasn't, but her situation just didn't sit right with me either. Still, there was nothing I could do to change it. At least right now. Nic was right, she had done a lot of bad things that had led her to where she was now, and on the plus side for her, at least she wasn't rotting away in prison where she belonged.

So the debriefing began, handled largely by Will and Amy as Nic had to head back to Washington. She did return for the final day, bringing with her my final payment. We made arrangements for it to be shipped to my place in Birmingham the same as last time so I

wouldn't have to explain the cash in my carryon to the TSA when I tried to board my flight.

Nic also informed me that the Gabin Rocc operating account had received a transfer of five million dollars from an account in the Caymans traced back to the Gemini Syndicate, dated the day before the Baumgartners were killed.

"So the bastard really intended to pay me after all," I mused.

"Apparently so," Nic said. "Technically the money belongs to the Agency, as Gabin Rocc never really existed and the account is ours, however, I could see my way clear to making it a bonus payment for extraordinary services to your country."

Hell no was the first thought to my mind, but before it could tumble past my lips, I had a better idea. The money was dirty but it could do a lot of good for a lot of people who needed it. And none of them were in the CIA.

Three anonymous donations, the first to the Alabama chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (one million dollars), the second to the Alabama chapter of Planned Parenthood (one million dollars), and the third to the Magic City Dreams Foundation in Birmingham, with a specific stipulation that the money be used exclusively to fill up and maintain every private food bank that served the hungry and homeless throughout the state of Alabama as long as the three million dollars lasted.

Nicola Calavici smiled when she finished writing down the details, nodding at me.

"I'll take care of it," she said. "A lot of people might have made different choices than these, probably me, too. You're one weird dude, Derrick Olin."

I smiled in return.

“Sweetheart, you have absolutely no idea.”

OLLIE PICKED ME UP AT THE AIRPORT on the Sunday night that I came back to town. There was a lot to catch up on but he only gave me the highlights as we made the quick trip from the airport to my place downtown. I was pleasantly surprised to see that most of the freeway construction work had been completed in my absence and hopefully that meant the traffic nightmares that had gripped the city in the downtown area for the past few years were finally over. Ollie told me that I should keep on dreaming.

Work had been steady in my absence and the entire team had been employed on one job or another for most of the time, and when they weren't working, Ollie had them training, keeping up their skills. He'd maintained detailed reports on everything and I could read them all when I was ready. I commented that perhaps I wasn't needed at Triple-D anymore and that maybe it was time for me to *hang up my spurs*.

To which Ollie responded: “Do that and I'll fuckin' kill ya. You ever think about leaving me alone to run this by myself again and I'll kneecap your ass about forty times.”

I laughed, tired as I was, then took the single piece of luggage I had with me out of his trunk and went inside my building.

Gradually over the next week I eased back into my old routine, regular exercise, training with the team, letting clients know I was back. Nadya Shaba was very excited when we spoke, telling me about a mysterious donation that her foundation had received a few days ago that would allow all the food banks in the state to stock up and feed a lot of hungry people for a long time to come. *How about that*, I said, smiling to myself.

I received a bit of sad news upon my return to the world as well. A month ago a guy I worked with some time out of New York, Lou Morano [\[cc\]](#), had suffered a massive heart attack and died. That bummed me greatly. Lou was a terrific guy, a total pro, and funny as hell. He was also a husband and father of four. I was sorry to have missed the funeral, but I would send a condolence note to his family, and see about another anonymous donation to a worthy cause. If I remembered correctly, all of Lou's kids were under the age of twenty; his wife might need some help, even if Lou did have excellent life insurance coverage, which I knew he did.

There was another bit of tragedy that I heard about a week or so after my return, this time out of D.C., and it didn't involve anyone I knew or cared about, or had even heard of before. Bethany Lorimer, Special Assistant to the White House National Security Advisor, was the victim of a savage mugging while out for her morning jog. She did not survive her injuries and so far there had been no arrests or even suspect descriptions released. The news report stated that Ms. Lorimer was thirty-eight, unmarried, and had been a close friend and advisor to the president's daughter for many years in the private sector. Many had been critical of her appointment to the National Security Council staff because of her lack of credentials and experience, however the president had insisted that she get the job and had even gone so far as to overrule strong objections to her being granted top secret security clearance. Her primary focus had been on improving relations between Washington and Moscow, and she was the NSC's chief proponent for lifting all economic sanctions against Russia without conditions or exceptions.

I sat back after reading that story, thinking that I now knew who Vadim Voloton had been trying to contact when he and the others

were incapacitated by the CIA's still experimental (but very effective) sonic nerve stunner down in Rio. Likely I also knew how the Jensen Committee planned on putting a bow on operations GRAYSCALE and MERCENARY. Couldn't really say I blamed them. Even with Voloton as a star witness, with the way the country was divided into tribes now, with facts no longer meaning anything to a significant portion of the population, with online *tweets* replacing real news, arrests and successful prosecutions were never going to happen, and ultimately the guilty would lie their way out of trouble with barely a slap on the wrist and maybe a token fine.

Voloton had said it himself, *Deny, Distract, Counterattack*. Muddy the waters so badly until no one could discern the truth and eventually they'd get tired and give up. Nope, best not to play that game.

I suspected that Shelbee Roberts was going to be a very busy woman for quite some time to come.

"Good luck, old girl," I said to my empty condo, shutting off my laptop and heading into the kitchen to make a snack.

I WORKED MY FIRST GIG WITH THE team since my return, a two-day close-protection job for a German banking executive in secret negotiations with a Birmingham-based financial group he wanted to acquire. Thursday and Friday, with us putting him on a private plane at seven Friday evening. Saturday the gang wanted to take me out to celebrate my return to the fold, and as we took over one of the private dining rooms that Dex's Place in Five Points West now offered, I was peppered with a lot of questions about what the heck I had been doing and where I was for so long, some of my mates speculating that I might have been in prison. But Ollie put

that rumor out to pasture by proclaiming that I had been away for a *sex-exchange* operation, but the doctors couldn't find a penis tinier than the one I already had so the procedure was scrubbed. It had been quite a while since I had offered up the *middle finger salute*, but I'd not lost my flair, giving him *both barrels*. I really had missed my team.

I pulled into my parking space in the lot behind my building on 1st Avenue North, just two blocks east of Birmingham Police Headquarters, right before eleven p.m., sleepy, full, and actually happy. I was not going to be leaving Birmingham again any time soon, and that was such a strange thing to contemplate when considering that as a kid all I wanted to do was get the fuck out of here. It's why I joined the Air Force in the first place. Things change, though, and sometimes people do, too.

I stood in the lot for a few minutes glancing around, in particular at the dumpster far off to the right. The lot was half full and well lit, and I could see everything. I used to feed stray and feral cats, but couldn't tell you why because I hate the little furry bastards. Even so, for about three years I bought food and put it out for them. Then, despite myself, I became attached to one of them, named him *Scottie*, fed him exclusively for several months, protected him from the other cats when they went after him, which led to me not feeding any others but him from that point forward. But then something happened, he witnessed me kill a man, a man who deserved it, of course, but it was still violent and grotesque and horrible [\[dd\]](#). And Scottie had run away from me. He'd never come back, at least not when I was around.

So now I didn't feed strays and ferals anymore.

I took the back stairs up to my fourth floor unit, had my keys in my hand when I rounded the corner on the far end of the corridor. Mine was the end unit on the other side of the floor, to the left of the elevator. I had my head down, absently thinking about a hot shower and then my comfy bed. It took me a few seconds longer than it should have to realize someone was standing in front of my door waiting. In my line of work this could have been a fatal mistake for me. Luckily the person waiting there was not a threat, but seeing her still damn near stopped my heart.

I froze in my tracks, eyes widening, breath stopping dead in my lungs, the keys almost tumbling from my suddenly shaky fingers.

“Jesus!” I breathed.

“No, just me,” Traci Brenner said with a grin, taking a couple steps in my direction, stopping and staring back at me. “Good to see you again, Derrick.”

It was very good to see her again, too, although at the moment my mouth wasn’t working too well so I couldn’t tell her this. She smiled again, took a few more steps, stopping just within arm’s reach. My heart was beating a lot faster than it should have been right now. Hell, maybe I was dead. And maybe there was a heaven!

She put her arms around me and I managed to return the hug after a few unsteady moments. I now knew that I was not dead and I was not dreaming. Traci Brenner was real and right here in front of me, in my arms. I wasn’t sure, but I think she was shaking a bit too, and then we pulled back a little to look into one another’s eyes. I could see tears in hers, felt like there might be some in mine, too, which was ridiculous because I hadn’t cried since Spock died in

1982^[ee].

“How long have you been waiting out here?” I said, glancing at my watch.

“Been a while,” she admitted. “And if you hadn’t come back by midnight, I was going to leave you a note and go.”

I frowned, thinking of something else. “How’d you get in here, all outside doors are locked and you need a key, or the guard at the front has to let you in.”

She smiled sweetly.

“Or you just need to be a hot chick with a great pair of legs,” she quipped.

I grinned. She did have great legs, but was wearing blue jeans now. Even so, I didn’t doubt she could have charmed her way past the guard downstairs, or anybody else if need be. She really was a *hot chick*. Smart as hell, too.

“I came in just as someone else was leaving, he held the door open for me, and the guard was away from the desk.”

I nodded. So much for a *secure* building.

I had a lot more questions, but then decided I was being rude, opened the door to my loft and let her in. She looked around for a while as I took care of a few things in back, then we met up in my kitchen.

“This place sure is bigger than that shoebox you use to live in over in Homewood,” she said, leaning on the island counter next to me. “And a great city view, too.”

“Yeah,” I told her. “Sometimes I miss the old place, especially the price compared to this one, but it’s grown on me in the past few years. See you kept the address when I sent it to you.”

“Of course,” she said. “Just like I know you kept mine when I moved the last time.”

“How’s that going in Middleburg by the way?” I said, turning and looking at her. “The school?”

“JJ’s Equestrian Academy,” Traci smiled, a touch of sadness in her voice. JJ had been her little black and white Jack Russell Terrier, a treasured member of the family, now gone. “We’re doing really well, Derrick, all classes are full and we’re thinking about expanding later this year. There’s plenty of room to build on, add more horses and staff as needed, too. I’m really glad I decided to do this. Have to admit to being a little frightened in the beginning, but now I’m glad I took the plunge.”

“Good for you,” I told her, smiling. “And how’s MJ enjoying life in the working world?”

She smiled proudly. “Can you believe I have a twenty-five year old son who has two degrees from MIT? And by the way, he goes by Marc now, even though I slip up from time to time. He’s doing great, already a top programmer at the gaming design firm he works for. One day I can see him running his own. My kid’s really smart.”

I smiled.

“Well considering who his mom is,” I said, reaching over and stroking the back of her left hand. It wasn’t the first time I had seen the engagement ring, but it was the first time that I decided to mention it.

She proceeded to tell me all about Sam Bronson, the former Olympic gold medal swimmer who now ran a foundation in D.C. for Special Olympics, and who had stolen her heart. God did I hate this motherfucker already, which was really a shame because Traci obviously loved the guy. Hey, even gold medal winning Olympic swimmers do drown from time to time, just saying.

“I wanted to come tell you in person, Derrick,” she was saying, now holding both my hands in hers as we stood very close. “You’ve been so important to me for a long time, you’ve helped me through some really difficult periods, me and MJ both. You’re so special to us, and while I know we tried but couldn’t make it work long term, you are still one of the most important people in my life. I wanted to see you and let you know about this, see how happy I am. Maybe even rub it in a little.”

She grinned and I smiled. Traci reached up and touched my cheek with her left hand.

“I do love him, Derrick,” she said in a very small voice, her eyes unblinking. “But I will always love you, too. I wanted you to know that.”

If she hadn’t added that part I probably would have been okay, but she had, and I wasn’t. Almost forty years of tears came flooding out of me then, and try as I did, I was unable to stop them. If this shocked Traci Brenner she never showed any signs of it as she held my head against her chest and I sobbed like a four year old until close to midnight.

She made us tea and we sat on the large sofa in the front room with the inside lights off, the lights from the street providing enough illumination for us to see one another. I told her everything, exactly what I had been doing for the past few months while I was away from Birmingham, holding nothing back, those secrecy agreements I had signed with the CIA and OSI going right out the window, I just didn’t care. And to be honest, I knew Traci was not a security risk. At least not as big a one as I, apparently.

She curled up next to me, sipped her tea, and listened, occasionally touching my shoulder or thigh just to offer support. As I talked,

I realized just how much what I had done recently and a lot of the things I had done in the past really bothered me, how shitty they made me feel now. I didn't cry anymore, felt that door was once again firmly closed, but I was feeling a lot of things I had never known I was capable of, and wasn't really sure it was a good thing, either.

Traci put her hand on my face, turned it toward her. There were tears in her eyes. "Derrick, you have helped far more people than you have hurt in your life, you know that. And most of the people you have hurt, the vast majority of them, really did bring it on themselves. You're a good man. A lot of hungry people in this state are not going to be as hungry for a good while, thanks to you. A lot of women in this state are going to be able to get medical services when they need them, thanks to you. And a lot of people in this state who can't afford it will be able to get the legal help they need because of you. A lot of people wouldn't have done what you did with that money, and most who did sure as hell would have wanted some credit."

She took my hand with her free one, squeezed it while still touching my face. She grinned, leaning close.

"And you don't have to worry, I won't tell anyone that I saw the *great* and powerful Derrick Olin cry like a four year old girl."

I was shaking with laughter the second she made that comment, my stomach hurting before long. "I wonder if my license to kill is still valid," I mused.

Traci laughed, patted my cheek. She glanced toward the windows overlooking 1st Avenue.

"It is such a beautiful night out," she said in a faraway tone. I turned and glanced toward the windows as well. As I did so I sensed

her moving beside me. When I turned back she was climbing into my lap, straddling me.

I glanced up as her pelvis aligned with mine, hands on either side of her trim waist. Traci didn't say anything, just reached down and started lifting her shirt over her head. When that was done, we stared at one another in the semi-darkness for nearly two full minutes, unmoving, our bodies reacquainting with one another.

"I do love him," she said finally. "But tonight I *want* you, just like it was before. No doubts, no shame, no regrets."

"And no clothes," I added.

She snickered, leaning down close, taking my head in her hands.

"Yeah, well that goes without saying, smartass."

She kissed me.

I kissed her.

Later I would discover that tonight we were going with *no condom*, too.

But first, I took off her bra...

END

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- [a] From the *Off Book* Derrick Olin set.
- [b] From the *Off Book* Derrick Olin set.
- [c] Written under the pseudonym Leo Croix.
- [d] Written under the pseudonym Leo Croix.
- [v] Minimal Inside Carry.
- [f] See *Deadline* by Stellen Qxz.
- [g] Deputy Director of Central Intelligence.
- [h] See *Blackball* by Stellen Qxz.
- [i] 1st Special Operational Detachment-Delta; Delta Force; officially Combat Applications Group or Army Compartmented Elements.
- [j] See *Compulsive* by Stellen Qxz.
- [k] See *Blackball* by Stellen Qxz.
- [l] Hebrew for case officer.
- [m] See *Traffic(k)* by Stellen Qxz.
- [n] Counterterrorism Center (CIA).
- [o] National Intelligence Officer.
- [p] For a reference to what this means, read *Damage* from *Glock Smoke: A Derrick Olin Anthology* by Stellen Qxz.
- [q] Temporary Duty.
- [r] Firearms Training Simulator.

- [s] Intelligence term for cover identity.
- [t] Intelligence term whereby one pretends to represent one group or entity but in fact is a member of another, sometimes hostile organization.
- [u] Israel Defense Force.
- [v] See *Inactive?* by Stellen Qxz.
- [w] See *Reciprocity* by Stellen Qxz
- [x] The Russian Federal Security Service, internal security and counterintelligence.
- [y] The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service.
- [z] Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate, the only holdover from the former Soviet Union when it was the primary Military Intelligence Agency of the USSR.
- [aa] Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex.
- [bb] From *The Games of the Hangman* by Victor O'Reilly.
- [cc] See *Purity* and *Rogue* by Stellen Qxz.
- [dd] See *Faithful* by Stellen Qxz.
- [ee] *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan!*



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