

The Trojan Treasure Conspiracy

A Clayton Lovel Stone Adventure



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PROLOGUE

The Grecian Cliffs of Aulis
Above the Aegean
Spring, 1267 B.C.

When the gods demand a sacrifice, they participate in the slaughter.

“Give me your eldest,” Ares, the god of war and son of Zeus, demanded, “and I shall send you the winds.”

Agamemnon bent forward on a stone bench in the thick air of a hot August night, his thumbs buried in his cheeks, his knuckles flattened against his forehead. A thousand fires sparked undisturbed in the valley beneath, but no Aegean breeze filled the sails of the hundred ships stalled in the Bay of Aulis, as none had these many months.

A tent flap opened and two men in tunics emerged, a viper’s headband snaked around their shaven skulls. “She is prepared,” the tallest said.

When Agamemnon did not answer, both men backed away and descended a path that wound toward the beach below, the crunch of stones beneath their sandals fading in the beat of drums.

Agamemnon rose. He turned his back on his stalled ships, lifted the tent flap, and entered.

Iphigenia lay prone on a hard, flat ceremonial slab, her thirteen-year-old face covered with the cold hardness of a falcon’s death mask; its black beak curved to a point down her nose, its gold-encrusted feathers protruding from both cheeks, prepared to spread and fly her to the heavens.

“I swear upon my daughter’s soul,” Agamemnon cried at the sight. “I will slay the enemy and ravage their women. I will plunder their city and leave Iphigenia’s death mask at the foot of their gates for all to see the source of my rage. I will offer a portion of their treasure at the temple of Zeus as the oracle commanded. All else is mine.”

When he removed the mask, the smell of pine and balsam filled his nostrils. His daughter's chest rose and fell softly, her fear lightened with the sleep of papaver root. Her eyes closed in innocence, as they always had when he stole into her chamber at night to ensure she was safe. In choosing duty over innocence, was he not to blame for the death of innocence? Did his duty to Thebes, Pylonia, and to his own Mycenaean outweigh his love for his daughter?

When he could no longer look upon her face, he crouched next to Iphigenia. He slid his hands beneath her narrow waist and lifted her, her wrists dangling at her sides as he rose and carried her from the tent.

He walked her to the edge of the precipice and faced the fires and the drums below. “*Bring me the wind!*” he cried. “*I give you your demands!*” He raised Iphigenia above his head and displayed her body to the gods, then hurled her over the cliff, her skull careening off the rocks below. “*I swear, I will take my vengeance on the sons and daughters of Helen!*”

By the first light of day, a breeze gathered in Knossos, swirling and gaining force as it darted in and out of the jagged Aegean coast. It halted in a curved ridge just beyond Aulis as if uncertain which way to turn. When it broke loose, it swept around the ridge and spilled into Aulis Bay, filling Agamemnon's sails and pointing them east toward the Trojan city of Troy.

CHAPTER 1

Athens

April 1884

Sophie Schliemann opened the double French doors on the second floor of her father's house and stepped out onto the narrow, wrought iron balcony that overlooked a garden bursting in deep reds, orange, sky blue, and the vibrant yellow of daffodils, their curved pedals spread like trumpets bells ready to declare good news that had long since frozen in place.

As she stepped out from the shade of her room, the air filled her nostrils with jasmine and lilac and the sun warmed her cheeks and just as they had when she had sat in her garden with Heinrich the morning he proposed, when he came early, when he couldn't wait till afternoon, let alone evening. When she had expected his proposal and had dressed in her finest fluff blouse and yellow skirt to match those daffodils in blossom that summer.

"You needn't fret about his age," Sophie recalled her mother advising her. "Your father was sixteen years older than I when he asked for my hand. Heinrich is only a bit older than that."

"I'm not certain of such a match," Sophie's father had said in a more deliberate tone.

"But Papa. *You're* the one who brought him home."

"Not for *marriage*."

"I love him, Papa. Almost as much as I love you."

Her father shook his head and glanced away. "If that's what you wish, then," he had muttered without looking back.

Sophie returned from the balcony and crossed her room. She sat in a wide wicker chair and sipped the tea her mother made to comfort her. She clinked the cup on its saucer, picked up the letter resting on the table, and read it once again

Dear Mrs. Schliemann,

First, may I offer my condolences and deepest sympathy on the unfortunate and untimely death of your esteemed husband, Herr Doktor Heinrich Schliemann. Although I did not have the privilege of his personal acquaintance, please be assured his death is a tragic loss for archeology. Your husband's brilliant efforts, and I might add, his results, have transformed the scope and practice of our fledgling science.

I apologize for this awkward timing, but in sincere respect for your husband's contribution and in anticipation that other offers will follow, I have been authorized by the Board of the Berliner Staats Museum to propose the construction of a Henrich Schliemann Memorial Wing in the west garden of the museum's main complex for the exclusive purpose of displaying and protecting the Schliemann Trojan treasure and artifacts.

If, in your grief, you could give this matter your most serious and urgent consideration, I would propose traveling to Athens for further discussion. I await your reply.

Yours in Sympathy,
Gustaf Dektiv, Director
Berliner Staats Museum
Berlin, Germany

Sophie laid the letter back on the table and pushed it back with her fingers. She picked up her teacup, the tea now lukewarm, then clinked it down again without sipping. She bent forward, laid her head on the table, and wept.

“But it was not I who found it,” Heinrich had always teased her. “It was you, my dear.”

“It was the most amazing find,” Heinrich had told Sophie’s father after dinner upon returning from his first trip to the Dardanelles. “No one believed me. *Absolutely* no one. Certainly not the academics. And yet, there it was, right before their eyes. I simply followed Homer’s *Odyssey*, navigating his poetic instructions and allowing the trade winds to sweep me where they chose, to

Tevfikiye, as it turned out. A village. Hardly that. More a road with a few mud huts. After they fed me and lubricated my senses with Ouzo, they asked me why I had come. ‘I am looking for a very old city,’ I told them. I asked if they had ever heard of a small city of great wealth that may have fought an ancient war against the Greeks. ‘A city?’ they asked. ‘A *small* city?’

“I recall their smiles,” Heinrich said. “They looked at each other and grinned as much with their eyes as their faces. One old man with the creviced face of a worn mountain wrapped his arm around my shoulder, grabbed his wine pouch off a rack, and dragged me to the edge of the village. He nodded toward a biscuit mound poking out of the earth less than a kilometer away. ‘There is what you seek,’ he said. ‘Your city is buried under there.’”

Henrich and Sophie made plans immediately after returning home. They gathered all the equipment they needed. Closer to the truth, as much as they could afford to carry in the tiny fleet of fishing skiffs they were able to commandeer on the spur of the moment. Henrich made the purchases while Sophie checked the inventory and supervised the loading of the equipment: two dozen wheelbarrows, all manner of picks, shovels and spades, spools of rope of various lengths and thickness, pulleys galore, and all the related hardware they were able to beg, buy, or borrow. With their sights on the west and a tattered copy of Homer’s *Odyssey* clutched in Henrich’s hand, they followed the coast to Aulis. From there, they set their sails in a northwesterly direction across the Aegean just as Homer had described. The winds blew them across the same waters Agamemnon had followed when he set sail to sack Troy and seek his revenge.

“I want to take you where history occurred,” Henrich had promised his new bride. “I want to adorn you in the same jewels that once adorned Helen.”

But Henrich had not told her what he could not have known himself, that the same fortune and misfortune awaited them that had once awaited Agamemnon.

CHAPTER 2

Paéz, South Coast of Cuba

The Present

“*Qué es eso?* What piece?”

“That piece you sold me. The falcon feather.”

“I sold you nothing.”

“Here... This.” Cynthia Slater slipped a thin flat package from her shoulder bag, unwrapped it and held it up.

“It is a lie!” the old Cuban protested, raising a wrinkled hand between him and the object. “You are mistaken. I sold you nothing.”

“You did. Yesterday. Right here,” Slater insisted as she glanced around the barroom and noticed the metal crucifix hanging behind her - the only adornment in the room.

“I was not here yesterday. I fished.”

“Look, all I...”

Movement disturbed the curtained doorway behind the man.

Slater glared at the man.

“My grandson,” he said.

“Look, I don’t mean to bother you.” She laid the object on the counter between herself and the Cuban. “I just want to know where you got this, where it came from, that’s all.”

“Por favor!” the Cuban pleaded. “Please!”

THUUUD!

As the Cuban’s eyes rolled back in their sockets, Slater stepped back horrified as he dropped forward onto the bar, blood spurting from both nostrils. A three-foot fishing spear planted itself deep in his back with a rope dangling behind him as if he were the catch of the day, hooked and about to be reeled in.

Cynthia Slater stood frozen in the middle of the barroom. A man had just

been killed in front of her. The reality was so serious, so threatening, she needed time to think, to grasp what had happened. But there was no time. A hand parted the curtain behind the bar, and a man with the wide yellow eyes of a mad dog stepped through.

“You *killed* him,” Slater blurted, staring at the Cuban’s body strewn across the bar.

The killer, his face deeply scarred above his left eye, stretched a clown’s grin as he wedged out the fishing spear buried in the Cuban’s back, allowing the body to slip behind the bar.

The killer looked up as Slater glanced back toward the entrance door. “No try,” he said calmly. “You be too slow,” he added in a stilted accent. “Too far to run.” “If *that’s* what you’re after,” she said, nodding toward the object she had laid on the bar. “Take it.”

“I take it *and* you.”

She backed toward the wall and instinctively reached up and behind her and gripped something. The crucifix.

The clown’s grin broadened, then he suddenly planted his right hand on the bar and used it as a fulcrum to leap across. But just as he landed on the other side of the bar, a hand sprung out from behind. The bartender’s hand gripped his ankle and hurled him forward, toppling him between Slater and the exit door.

Step across him, she thought. *Jump!* No. He was too close. Try the curtain behind the bar.

As the clown drew his left knee up to his chest, Slater swung the crucifix and gouged its sharp corner across the man’s forehead, drawing blood. She tried to step around him, but his hand lunged and grasped her right ankle. Struggling to free herself, she dropped the cross, stretched her arm toward the bar and grabbed the cylindrical object she had laid there. She raised it and plunged its point into the man’s chest, spouting blood from a well deep inside him. She leveraged one foot on the clown’s ribs, pried the weapon loose, then stumbled out the door and into the night.

CHAPTER 3

Quarter-Mile Railroad Lane
South of Annapolis, Maryland
The Present

Past is prologue, Clayton Lovell Stone thought, his muscled legs propped up on the top rail of his watertower deck overlooking the Chesapeake. He sat there thinking, trying to relax as he stared out across the water, but relaxing had never found a solid home in his comfort zone. The fact was, he didn't have a comfort zone. Unless he had something to dig his teeth into, the rest of his body developed an itch that steadily grew worse the more time he had on his hands.

His elevated deck-perch at least provided a needed perspective he often lost at ground level. In his occupation, stolen art and artifact recovery, it was easy to get misled or waylaid skulking through the ruins of some long-forgotten medieval castle, or plunging into the depths of Roman catacombs. It's impossible to stumble through an Edinburgh dungeon without being haunted by tormented screams still reverberating in its thick walls, desperate to reveal its secrets to anyone with courage enough to lay an ear on those cold stones and listen to their tortured whispers.

And Stone did listen. He was paid to listen. But it didn't matter. Not at this point. Like any obsession, once addicted, you're hooked. You might think you're free. You might escape long enough to lean back and prop your feet up on the rail of a watertower deck. But it's not long before that itch starts itching again and you need another dose, another fix to scratch it.

It hadn't always been that way, he thought as he wrapped his fingers around a warm terracotta coffee mug he had come by on one of his near-miss adventures. Working for the FBI's Stolen Arts and Antiquities Unit had simply been a job. But he was on his own now, working for himself after being fired for rescuing Ezzy – Ezra Ezekiel Edwards, Ezzy for short – when Stone was ordered

to let Ezzy “hang out to dry in the Syria desert until the wind blew him away.” Of course, Ezzy wasn’t even supposed to *be* in Syria. The Bureau wasn’t authorized to operate out of the country. They had shunted Ezzy around that restriction in liaison with Langley.

At least now, with Stone on his own, taking on private cases kept cat food in his cat’s dishes, and an occasional Maryland crabcake on his own plate, and he could roam wherever a case took him. Stolen art and antiquities recognized no borders. They jumped them like rabbits over a fence to avoid detection. If you wanted to catch stolen art as it moved, you had to stay a jump ahead. You had to be waiting on the other side of that fence to grab it when dropped in your lap, or at least spot it on the run and give chase.

Stone lifted his coffee mug, tilted it up, and sipped the last few drops. He let his legs slip off the wooden rail and strolled back through the sliding-glass, double-doors he had installed when he built the deck on the front side of his converted watertower house. It had taken a bit of persuasion to get the proper permits to convert that aging structure into living quarters, but twisting a few arms and massaging a few egos was another part of his FBI training.

He crossed the small, round water tower room and sat his mug on the kitchen counter. He lifted the lid on Pee and Dee’s food box—he had two cats to keep each other company when he was gone -- grabbed two hands full of cat chow, and clinked them into side-by-side metal dishes. That reassuring sound always got them stretching out their paws on the bottom corner of their common bed as they saunter in to have a look as if *she* were doing *him* a favor. That was good. They understood each other. Stone was on a case for long periods when various odd-smelling women came to keep them company and look after them. Stone and P and D had to pretend they didn’t need each other. It kept them both sane.

He sat on a stool at the counter and grabbed his mug again, now cold to the touch without coffee to warm it. He turned it around in his fingers and studied it a second -- long, thin clay cup with a curved lip on one edge and flat around the

rest. That terracotta vessel was given to him for saving a Turkish colonel's life in the midst of saving his own. It was never meant for coffee. It was meant for wine. It was an ancient piece. Not worth much. There were plenty of them. Yet ancient hands that touched that mug and rapped their fingers around it reached back a thousand years.

If past is prologue, then the past's art and artifacts provide proof of that prologue. The stories they represented. The tales embedded beneath their surface. And maybe that lay at the heart of his fascination. Using evidence from resurrected art and artifacts –baked-in Rosetta Stones – to solve a past and present mystery.

Instead of refilling his mug – two cups were about all he could stomach in the morning – he slid the mug back on the counter. He turned toward the window and looked across the railroad tracks and the Chesapeake Bay that seemed to ripple an uneasy calm, as if something bubbled beneath its surface, awaiting just the right irritant to erupt. There had been no train along the tracks that morning. No mournful wail rolling toward him from a distance. The tracks lay deadly quiet. Pee had crunched a few nuggets on the top layer of her dish, then crawled back into bed again. The rest of the day still lay ahead, and Stone was already bored.

CHAPTER 4

Athens

April 1884

“What brings you to Athens?” Sophie asked Henrich that first night in her father’s garden, her father having invited Herr Doktor Heinrich Schliemann home for an authentic Greek dinner. “Herr Schliemann is a business acquaintance,” her father had told the family. “But you will like him,” he told Sophie. “He speaks perfect Greek and seven other languages. A self-taught man of wealth.”

“What *brings* me to Athens?” Herr Schliemann repeated Sophie’s question as she shifted uneasily in a garden chair after a lavish dinner. Her father went inside to fetch sherry for his guest. “I’ve come for history,” Heinrich told her, a sparkle in his voice discharging twenty years from his face. “And to unearth antiquity.”

That was the Henrich that Sophie learned to love - a man of impossible dreams and the courage to follow them. None of the Greek boys she had known in Third Level School, and none since, for that matter, seemed at all interested in Greek mythology - its heroes, its history, its contribution to art and civilization. Heinrich, as she came to know him, although German, felt the soul of Greece more passionately than any Greek she had ever known.

Well then, we have plenty of antiquity here, Sophie felt like saying on their first night together, but didn’t. It seemed too flippant. “You’re a very serious man,” she said instead.

“If you mean I know what I’m about, then I would say, yes, that is so.”

“And exactly what *are* you about, Herr Doktor Schliemann?” she dared ask, studying his eyes as he spoke.

“The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*... Homer’s Troy.”

A smile escaped Sophie.

“Of course,” he said. “I wouldn’t expect you to believe that tale. No one

does.”

“Then why do you?”

“I pay no attention to others.”

“To whom *do* you pay attention?”

“To history,” he shrugged as though it were obvious. “To oral tradition passed from teller to teller long before the stories were written. They were simply embellished and rhymed to help the teller remember the tale.”

“History added too?” Sophie asked.

He looked at her and drew in his chin as if seeing her for the first time. “Then you *do* understand. Yes. History added too. Surely that. But still. Added to *something. Something real.*”

“I can see you have definite ideas. You seem the sort of man who would. Tell me more.”

“You *are* interested?”

“Very much so.”

Henrich hesitated. “And you seem very...” he glanced away as if searching for the proper word.

“Yes?”

“I mean for your age... You seem... substantial.”

“Thank you,” she said, knowing he intended a compliment.

“I plan to take Homer’s words quite literally. To set sail from the Bay of Aulis just as Homer’s Agamemnon did. To travel seven days and follow the same trade winds to see where they take me. If I’m wrong, I get seasick and have a grand adventure.” He held an index finger to his lips as if trying to hide the faintest smile behind it. “But if I’m *right...*”

“It sounds so exciting,” she blurted, sorry she had, afraid it sounded childish and immature, although he didn’t seem to notice. “When do you plan on leaving?” she quickly added.

“Within the month. As soon as I can get what I need and make arrangements.”

“If you happen to come back to Athens,” she said, her hands crossed in her lap, “I’m sure father would be pleased to have you for dinner again. And I would so much like to hear about what you found.”

“Then I *shall* return. You can be assured of that.”

CHAPTER 5

1 Quarter-Mile Railroad Lane

South of Annapolis

The Present

James Arthur Maculvaney, Stone's old nemesis at the Bureau, had finally fallen off the slippery edge he had tiptoed along over the years. Stone never liked the man, but no one deserved the kind of personal torment he was going through these days.

The problem is, when you kill someone, you're either repulsed right off or you secretly enjoy it. You crave it. You feel its addictive power. An internal spring winds up anticipating the next opportunity.

"Most people can't handle it," Maculvaney said. "Not and look their victim in the eye. It's not natural. It's not human. But once you do... Well, you know."

Stone wasn't sure he did know. He had killed but hadn't become addicted. Not yet. He knew Maculvaney had fought in the second Gulf War and that his reserve unit had been called up again for Afghanistan.

"It wouldn't have mattered," Maculvaney confessed to Stone as they sat on Stone's deck on a warm Monday afternoon. "The truth is, I *wanted* to go. I would have volunteered. Not even if I could take it back. And not even after what happened."

Maculvaney knew that Stone had a master's degree in psychology and that his colleagues at the FBI often came to him for advice, or counsel, or to relieve themselves of some of the burden of guilt they suffered.

"It was on my first tour," Maculvaney said. I was in a Humvee, third in line, when a boy, no more than five or six, darted out in front of the lead vehicle. When the lead slowed to avoid hitting the kid, we took on fire from a rooftop. My gunner, exposed out on the turret, took a direct hit just below his helmet and

dropped back, bleeding in my lap.

Maculvaney paused as if uncertain if he should go on or if he could, chewing on his lip with his lower teeth. “He tried to tell me something,” Maculvaney started in again. “Maybe something for his wife or his mother, but all he could do was spit blood and garble. Sonofabitch died on me right there. Right in my lap. We stopped the whole goddamn convoy and stormed the building, popping off anything that moved. We didn’t give a shit. Man, woman, or kid. If it walked or talked or just sat there, we eliminated it. We figured, what the hell, it could have been any one of them. Why not take care of the problem now? A preemptive strike... And you know what? It felt good. I’m not talking about the revenge part. I’m talking about doing it for the first time, taking a life. It’s when you think about it later that it gets to you. You start wondering who you are and what kind of person would do that and actually enjoy it.”

But Maculvaney had not come to Annapolis to talk to Stone on his own. He was not the sort who would. The Bureau had sent him as part of their “don’t investigate what you don’t want to know” policy. With Maculvaney’s years of experience, they wanted to keep him on but needed to assess how dangerous he was. It’s true the Bureau had fired Stone. They had to. They had no choice. He had not only blatantly broken protocol by rescuing Ezzy. He had stomped protocol into the ground. Which didn’t mean they didn’t trust Stone. They did. They trusted him *because* of his integrity. With his psychology background, he could give them a quick read on Maculvaney that worked around the Bureau’s in-house shrink. Stone could be relied on to nod a quick “yes” or a “no” without passing on any details that might have to go into Maculvaney’s permanent file.

“Do you have flashbacks?” Stone asked. “Do you have cravings that interfere with your work?”

“They got me on a desk now. Like that’s all I’m good for. It’s mostly supervision.”

“Do you think about it a lot? Is it on your mind?”

“You mean the craving or the anger when it comes?... I don’t know.

What's it like for you? You know, when you killed someone?" Maculvaney asked.

"Never angry... Cold. Just cold."

CHAPTER 6

Athens

April 1884

Sophie Schliemann glanced at the photograph on her desk. It was the one Heinrich had taken and sent to *The London Times*. A photograph of a dark-haired woman with a jeweled headband and a six-tiered, gold necklace adorned with amethyst, emeralds, crystals, and tiny golden animals arrayed across her breasts. It was a photograph of Sophie that The *Times* caption labeled "*Helen of Troy*." Thirty years younger than her beloved Heinrich, the jewels and the image still seemed to fit her perfectly.

"You *are* my Helen," Heinrich said on the occasion of their first wedding anniversary. In that same summer, he draped those jewels around her neck. "And I want you to be the first to wear what Helen wore. Helen could not have been more beautiful."

Sophie had *felt* beautiful that day. Beautiful and rich and famous. And deliciously happy. Heinrich was right. On that day, she felt as though she *was* Helen of Troy. And Heinrich, in the *Times* interview that accompanied the photograph, had given her credit for finding the necklace. Why not? She *was* the one who found it.

While Heinrich and the others dug trenches on the opposite side of the hill that day in Turkey, Sophie glanced down and noticed a thin, straight-line crack that ran along the corner of a huge, flat stone – maybe a meter square. When she found a pick, wedged its flat edge into the crack, and pried open a slab, a rush of sweet-smelling air escaped from below and swept up across her cheeks. Astonished, she leaped up and hurried to the other side of the hill, forcing herself to walk slowly the final twenty-five meters so the guards would not be alerted. "Bring your kit and come with me," she whispered to her husband. "And without our overseers," she added, nodding toward two Turkish guards sitting on a rock, drinking kahvesi from clay cups.

Heinrich turned his back on them and whispered, “We can go when they take their break.”

Then, at lunchtime, while the guards rested in the shade of a Pinyin tree and nibbled chunks of hard-crusted somun, Heinrich accompanied Sophie to the opposite side of the hill, out of the guards’ sight. After ensuring they hadn’t followed, he found a crowbar in the nearest excavation toolbox and wedged up the hip-wide, flat stone. He got to his knees and, with Sophie’s help, shoved it aside to reveal the entrance to a small room beneath.

Heinrich sat up for a minute to catch his breath, then got to his knees again and poked his head inside. Just enough light filtered through the opening to cast shadows across an array of scattered objects to his left. He sat up again and glared at Sophie, his mouth drooped, his eyes wide. Frightened, he looked behind and to both sides to ensure that none of the guards had followed. Then, with none in sight, he draped his legs inside the cavity, drew a long breath, and dropped down.

“Hand me the light,” his voice nervously echoing off the walls.

Sophie scavenged a lamp and lowered it on a rope.

After a few seconds, Heinrich hollered, “You must come down. Hurry. Before our overseers finish their lunch and start checking.”

Sophie draped her feet inside, then dropped into Heinrich’s outstretched arms and slid off onto the earthen floor, her pants skirt hiked above her knees. As she got to her knees and inched forward, a shadow emerged as a full-length skeleton covered in layers of thick dust and jagged flakes. Inching closer but not wishing to disturb any more than he had to, Heinrich observed the skeleton’s knees were drawn up to its chest, its curved spine leaning back against the wall as if resigned to leave this world in the same fetal position it had entered.

Heinrich slid the lamp closer, kicking up dust from the floor beneath it. He lifted a brush from his pocket, then gently and meticulously swept its bristles across the skeleton’s left ulna and humerus bones. Next, he slowly brushed down and across the clavicles, then around the outer ribs, then up again and across

several pebble-like projections that gradually revealed themselves as strands of beads fused to the skeleton's ribs.

Heinrich lifted a vial from his pocket, uncorked it, and saturated a hemp cloth with a liquid that smelled of rotting onions. As he wiped across the sternum, a necklace – fourteen or fifteen dangling strands – appeared to stretch from just below the skeleton's neck to the midpoint of the ribs.

"But how are they held together?" he mumbled, shaking his head. "Some of the beads have broken off, held by some sort of early crude wire, which would have had to be handspun or woven. *This* though," he said out loud as he moved his cloth up from the necklace and wiped it across the eye sockets and down around the cheekbones. "Look at it!" he exclaimed as he turned to Sophie. "It's not *just* a skull. It's an overlaid faceplate. A gold-plated half mask with some type of alloy to stiffen it."

The smell of stale air filled the cavity as Heinrich cleaned and polished the mask's forehead and along the bridge of the nose, rubbing concentric circles across the cheekbones, then twisting his moistened cloth along dozens of flat, feather-like projections that extended beneath the cheeks on both sides.

"What are they?" Sophie asked, on her knees and leaning over Heinrich's shoulder, the accumulating dust drying her throat and thickening her voice.

"I simply don't believe it," he said.

"Don't believe what?"

"It's a death mask. A falcon with wings."

"A falcon!" Sophie blurted.

"A symbol of rebirth and flight. Of death and rebirth in a way, in another form. In Greek mythology, a falcon was thought to carry a departed soul to the heavens where it could soar eternally above all the earthly deceit, conniving, and deception. Somewhere they could rest in a place of peace above all that. But *this* piece..."

"What about it?"

"The fact that it's *not* Trojan. It is Greek. The falcon is an ancient Greek

symbol. Yet, here we are in Troy, across the Aegean from Greece.”

“What do you make of it?”

“Well, first, it’s unique, a one of a kind. It’s the sort of death mask that would have been molded and placed on the face of someone of high status. Someone wealthy with power and influence.”

“But *not* Trojan?” Sophie asked. “Of Greek origin? Wouldn’t there have been a good deal of trade across those waters?”

“Possibly,” Heinrich shook his head. “That *would* make sense. Perhaps this mask *is* Greek.... Do you suppose the legend is true? *Literally* true? A Greek burial in Troy. This *is* a death mask. There’s no doubt of that. And we are in a burial chamber.” He glanced down at the skeleton. “What if these remains are Helen’s? They clearly are a woman’s.”

“But it couldn’t be,” she said. “Not from Homer’s tale. The Greeks came *for* Helen. They would have returned her to Greece for burial if she had died or been killed here.”

“Not necessarily,” Heinrich said, turning to the skeleton again and tapping his brush around the circumference of the faceplate. “Whatever territory the ancient Greeks conquered, they considered Greece. Burying her here would have been the same as burying her in Greek soil... Here. Help me with this.”

He carefully worked his fingers under the right side of the faceplate as Sophie gingerly worked hers under on the opposite side. Looking at each other, they nodded simultaneously and gently loosened the mask, releasing a puff of air. They lifted the mask off and set it on a flat spot toward the middle of the chamber.

Heinrich slid a pen and pad from a vest pocket, jotted a few notes, then lifted out a small ruler and measured the width and depth of the skeletal bones. When he compared the results with the mask, he frowned.

“What did you find? What is it?”

“There’s something wrong here. *Terribly* wrong. They’re not the same. The skull and the mask. They’re two different people. The face that the mask

was molded for and fitted to..." He nodded toward the skeleton, "Was not *this* face."

"How could that possibly be? If *not* hers, why was it on her?"

"I have no idea. I can only say this mask was made to fit someone else's face. A young woman, for certain. Just not *this* young woman."

Sophie fell back against the cold rock wall, trying to fathom what that difference meant, then jumped up.

"What is it?" Heinrich asked.

"There's something else in here with us. Something moved."

"Not *moved*," Heinrich said, crawling toward the cavern's center and picking up a small object between his thumb and fingers. "Rolled." He turned and opened his hand. The light from the opening above gleamed down on a marble-sized amethyst ball, perhaps part of the necklace or perhaps some other piece of jewelry." He crawled in the direction it rolled. "Here. There's more over here. Larger pieces."

Working together, they dug into loosened dirt, systematically exploring along all four walls and working toward the center. They uncovered and dusted seventeen decorative oil pots, twelve inlaid casks, and numerous strips and pieces of tiny metalwork, along with numerous cauldrons, drinking cups, and ceremonial implements, most of which were intact and unbroken.

"Lanceheads over here," Heinrich called over his shoulder as he crawled backward toward Sophie. "They all look ceremonial. All flat ends."

Sophie, barely listening, dug her fingers into the earth a meter to the left of the skeleton. She wedged out a small storage chest filled with dozens of armlets, bracelets, and jeweled ornamental rings. As she reached inside for a handful, footsteps overhead startled her.

CHAPTER 7

Rural Cuba

The Present

Cynthia Slater dashed across an open field, her heart pounding against her breastbone, her thoughts racing ahead, murder and mayhem barely behind her. Although, now that it *was* behind her, its full impact struck. A man had been killed. No. Two men. She had killed one and nearly been killed herself. Now, she ran as much from revulsion as fear as she clutched a small, ten-inch, cylindrical package close to her breasts, refusing to drop it no matter what. *That's what they were after. That's what she had been after.* But they would have to kill her to get it. They would have to pry it from her grasp, and she would use her last breath to spit in their face if they tried.

A long line of thick-leaf trees rose twenty-five yards in front of her. Gasping for breath as she headed in that direction, she chanced a turn to glance over her shoulder. At first, the tiny bar shack from which she had escaped seemed quiet and perfectly innocent, as if it had just yawned and fallen back to sleep. Maybe *all* this had been a bad dream. She had had these dreams before. Running from ghosts and phantoms, barely escaping with her life, with an artifact in her grasp. Wasn't that *part* of the business for which she had signed up? Wasn't that what she had always accepted? Wasn't that...

Bang. The door burst open from the bar shack behind her and a bulky man stumbled out.

“*Oh God!*” she heard her own voice echo.

The man whom she thought she had killed straightened his backbone and pointed his index finger in her direction as he leaned forward and limped across the field, wounded but still moving steadily.

As she turned away from the man and tore across the field toward the tree line, her right toe caught a stump and dropped her to her knees. She scrambled to her feet and forced herself to aim toward something specific - the tallest tree in

the middle of the tree line. Death might catch her, she couldn't control that, but as long as she could move her feet, death would have to work for its catch.

She lowered her head, pumped her arms, and stretched her legs until she broke into the dense woods, then knelt behind a stand of trees to catch her breath and look behind her. Her pursuer stood like a frozen stump in the middle of the field, scanning the horizon from one side to the other. Hadn't he seen where she'd gone into the woods? How could he *not*? It didn't matter. He would soon head in her direction, and the longer she waited, the closer she would be when he arrived.

She waited for him to glance along the line furthest away from her, then she stood and staggered deeper into the brush as tangled branches tore into her pants and gouged deep in her skin. As the briars thickened, she shoved what she could out of her way, pushing them aside with both arms and elbows until a root tripped her and sent her tumbling into a bush of stinging nettles. "Ahhh," she groaned as the sharp sting of thorns ripped into her skin, drawing bloodlines as she yanked forward, desperately trying to escape their trap.

Finally loose, she clenched her teeth to quiet her breathing and ease the pain. As she lifted her chin to look ahead, she thought she heard the rush of water beyond a ledge maybe fifteen or twenty yards ahead of her. Raul, she thought. Follow a stream. Get to the sea. Raul had connections. He would know what to do. And he would have the means to do it.

She eased toward the ledge, then suddenly tumbled over and skidded down a muddy embankment, sliding to a stop in cold rushing water, the mixed smell of forest pine and mushrooms filling her nostrils.

As far as she could tell, she had broken no bones, and felt a sense of relief until she heard a branch snap above and behind her.

She lifted her feet from the water and glanced over her shoulder at mud tracks she had left behind, then she thought she heard a thumping headed toward her from above and behind her. She stood and found her balance, then bent forward and trudged downstream, planting her feet between river rocks and the

flow of the water to keep from slipping on the rocks. She could only pray that the trees and the shrubs on the hill would hide her.

When something dropped from above, her heart pounded in her throat. Sweat poured down her cheeks as a green lizard crawled across her shoulder, slithered down her breasts, and fell into the water, leaving her shivering in its wake.

As she trudged forward, she heard feet pound. When *she* stopped, *they* stopped. Five feet ahead of her, she saw the tangled roots of a huge Kapok tree dig into the stream like the contorted legs of a gigantic broken spider. She lowered her head and curled herself up under the largest root, burrowing in and under, pulling her legs and feet behind her. She wiggled the curve of her spine into the soft, wet earth of an overhang that the bank stream had carved out over the years. Her thoughts rushed back to Double R.R. Bar Rim Rock Ranch on which she grew up in the shadow of the Western Colorado Mountains. She could easily picture her younger self scurrying among those tall pines, weaving around huge boulders and through narrow canyons, or wading and splashing along winding creeks, desperately trying to escape or hide from her three older brothers who would roll her on her back to tease and taunt her if they caught up with her.

Until, of course, she grew a little older and was able to climb on roundup fences to mount and ride a horse bareback and then, just a few years later, became the best among riders at breaking stallions. When her brothers and the others were reluctantly forced to accept the possibility, at least in some ways, that she was better than they, that girls could be tougher and stronger than boys, they stopped laughing and looked at her with a certain quiet respect.

As her legs grew, she learned that she could outrun two of her three brothers, all except her oldest brother Chip, and that she could fairly compete with them at calf roping. They were, of course, still bigger and bulkier ranch hands. Each could still wrestle and pin her down if they caught up with her or caught her off guard, although they soon learned they would pay a price in face-

scratches and leg bruises.

The thought of reaching out to scratch them, of fighting to break free, quickly drew her thoughts back to her pursuer, the man she thought she had killed, the man somewhere on the bank above her tree-root hideout. She listened. She waited. She crossed her arms across her breast and held perfectly still. When she heard nothing but a soft breeze rustling through the trees, she decided to take a chance. If he was close, if she waited, he might find her. The farther away she could get, the better chance of getting away.

But, just as she was about to crawl out of her hiding place, a boot planted itself on a root directly in front of her face. For what seemed like forever, only the ripple of the water stirred. Finally, the boot lifted and disappeared. But had her pursuer merely stepped away to see if she would expose herself? “*Clay!*” she whispered, a name that often came to her when she was in trouble. “*Jesus, Clay! Where are you when I need you?*”

CHAPTER 8

The Dardanelles, Turkey

September 1884

“What do we do *now*?” Sophie Schliemann asked Heinrich as they sat at a folding table in their surveyor’s tent, Sophie stabbing her spoon in the lamb stew she had fixed for the two of them but feeling far more anxious than hungry.

“I have been making arrangements for something like this all along,” Heinrich whispered, leaning across the folding table. “I didn’t want to involve you in case things went badly.”

She set her spoon down on the plate and looked up.

“I’ve been setting pieces aside,” he said. “Perhaps a quarter of the total. Some of the best, though not all. The guards keep a close eye. I move things around when I can.”

Sophie tightened her lips. “*Heinrich*. How could you? It’s too dangerous.”

“I didn’t come halfway around the world,” he began in the sort of scholarly voice he always used when he felt an emotion he didn’t wish to convey, “to work for the Turkish government. I would give them their due, but that wouldn’t satisfy them. They would have it all.”

“If the guards catch you, they’ll have you *and* the treasure. Then what will *I* have?”

“Of which are you more concerned?” he asked. “Me or the treasure?”

Sophie stood. She eased around behind him and rested both hands on his shoulders, the light from the kerosene lantern softening his features. “The treasure, of course,” Sophie said. “I shall need it to take care of you when you really *are* an old man.” She dragged a chair up next to him and sat. “Now, tell me what you’ve done.”

“I’ve outmaneuvered them. There are usually only two guards assigned at any given time. No officers, like they had to start. Constantinople must have

concluded that's all the expense we're worth. They don't believe we're clever enough to smuggle something out."

Henrich had well understood from the beginning that the Turkish guards' dress uniforms – dark-green, worsted-wool pants, button-down pockets with starched flaps, and red turbans with flying horse-hair braids – were intended to both impress and intimidate. They did neither, as far as Heinrich was concerned. The long waits the guard were required to endure, the constantly blowing dust that filled every crack in their cheeks and foreheads, and the unrelenting heat that weighed them down, soon took their toll. All the guards – the lower ranks first and then the officers – soon doffed their oppressive dress uniforms in favor of flat-brimmed caps to shade their eyes, loose-fitting cotton shirts that allowed the air to circulate, and floppy, gray pants that looked more like pajamas than uniforms. The excavation's location and atmosphere – as it often did on digs – had done their work and the resulting relaxed attitude played to the favor of Henrich's plans.

"How have you been hiding things behind their back?" Sophie asked.

"Mostavos and I and a few from the village, Mastovos' cousins, are working together. Their secrets are guarded by blood or marriage. They hate the guards. *Anyone* from the government. And then, of course, we pay them to help. Although, I think they'd do it anyway simply for the satisfaction of putting something over on the outsiders."

"Where are you hiding it?"

"In the village."

Sophie stepped back and waited.

"Two guards can't be everywhere. I chip a corner from the crates I wanted and set them on top of what they've already counted. That way the inventory matches when Mostavos and his men carry away the ones I've marked."

"Carry off and undoubtedly keep some for themselves."

"Of course, some of it. It's part of their tradition. It undoubtedly belongs to them anyway, or at least to their ancient relatives."

“And how will you get it out of the country?”

“Three fishing boats were set to sail in two weeks. But after what we've just found, I've moved things up. That's what I needed to tell you. We go tonight.”

CHAPTER 9

1 Quarter-Mile Railroad Lane, Annapolis

The Present

Stone sprang up in bed, his sheet soaked beneath him. *What? What was it?* A shot? *Had he heard anything at all, or was it simply his repetitive dream?* In his dream, he nearly died. He stood there, frozen on the edge of death, as death stared at him in the eyes like the twin headlights of the car about to plow down a frightened deer standing in the middle of the road, awaiting its fate, unable to move. The dream always went back to that. Back to the time when he was maybe three or four, when his parents took him to a summer carnival at night and parked on the other side of the road from a Ferris wheel lit up in swirling lights.

His parents, Mathew and Rose, gripped his tiny hands, one on either side. In his excitement and impatience, he broke free and dashed across the road. Beaming headlights searched him out as screeching brakes and burning rubber suddenly slammed to a sudden stop inches from his tiny legs.

Ever since that memory – an event that actually happened or a dream he had dreamed so many times it seems as though it had – he instinctively grasped the fragility of life and the constant possibility of sudden death. Maybe that's what led him to psychology, trying to figure out and better understand himself. It was clearly part of what led him to join the FBI and specialize in finding ancient art and artifacts as solid proof that a life or a culture existed prior to death. That it stood for something. That it meant something.

His two cats, Pee and Dee, had leaped off the bed, their usual place of comfort, maybe in fear. Maybe *they* had heard something.

He glanced toward his cell phone flashing on his night table. Maybe that's what spooked his cats. He switched on the lamp and touched "listen."

"Clay! God, where the hell are you? I need you. Please answer!"

CLICK.

He knew that voice. It was Cynthia. Cynthia Slater, or simply *Cyn* to him. She was one of the few who called him “Clay” and one of the very few who had his private number. He wasn’t even sure if he allowed that in order to be there for her in one of her tight situations, or whether he simply wanted to leave the possibility open she might call for any reason. Relationships come and go. Some linger longer. Some fade in the distance but never really leave. A few permanently sear and brand in your heart. You don’t get rid of them. You can’t. For good or bad, or some odd combination of both, they remain with you for the duration. *Cyn* was one of those.

Why hadn’t he heard the cell phone ringing? He knew why. He always silenced the ring app when he needed sleep.

He scooted to the edge of his bed, swung his legs around, and planted his feet on the floor, staring at his cell phone, waiting for a callback. None came. His caller ID read “unknown caller.” Her voice sounded desperate. Why hadn’t she called again or at least left a longer message? Maybe she was in danger and couldn’t. When he touched “return the call,” all he heard was a wheezing sound at the other end. Nothing else. No pick up.

At times when Stone wasn’t sure where to start or what to do, he started with Ezzy. Ezzy knew *Cyn*. Maybe she had called him, or maybe he knew where she was. She sounded like she was trapped in some kind of dark pit with the walls closing in on her.

CHAPTER 10

The Dardanelles, Turkey

September 1884

Sophie watched her husband nibble at the lamb stew she had prepared for him, his right hand slightly trembling as he lifted his spoon. A tremble was unusual for him. He was normally a solid rock of confidence and steadiness. She knew he had reason to be anxious. How often had he, or anyone, stumbled across something this archaeologically significant? He had a right to be nervous. He had earned it. She felt so proud of his accomplishment and the fact that he included her in his discovery. He treated her as an equal. The fact that she was so much younger seemed irrelevant to him. It was not that he overlooked it. They were more than husband and wife. They were a team. They have worked together. There was no difference between them. They were one.

He had instructed her to appear as calm as possible, warning her that the guards may already be onto them, watching and listening outside their tent. She rose from the small folding table as if gathering dishes, then stooped and slid a small canvas bag out from under one of the cots and quickly packed, leaving most of her clothes in their storage baskets just as Heinrich had directed her. She tried to steel herself against what might happen, trying to think of what she might say if they were caught. Only now, as she prepared to open the tent flap and expose herself out in the open, she wasn't sure how much of Heinrich's confidence was simply bravado to fortify her own resolve. It didn't matter. Not now. It was time to go.

"Keep the lamp lit after I leave," he whispered. "Sit close to the side of the tent, so anyone who looks will see the light and see you."

"Where to? Where are you going?"

"Out the back to make sure all the crates and everything we've gathered is hidden and ready to go. If all looks good, I'll supervise the loading."

“I want to go with you. We are together in this, you and I as man and wife.”

“Diversion is the best way you can help. Unless there’s someone in here, they’ll become suspicious. They’ll come to check.”

“What if they’re already outside?”

“I’ll sneak out the back.”

“Be careful,” she begged him, her voice quivering.

“Besides,” he said, “if I *do* get caught, someone needs to be uninvolved. Or appear to be. Someone prepared to help the other.”

“You want me to *deny* knowing of this? I *couldn’t*. At any rate, they wouldn’t believe me.”

“They couldn’t be sure. And, until just now, you haven’t known *when* we’re leaving. Tell them whatever you need to. Enlist the Greek ambassador’s help. Anything to cause trouble and allow time. If things go well, I’ll send Mastovos to fetch you, then come at once.”

CHAPTER 11

The Coast of Cuba

The Present

Cynthia Slater knew the village of San Raphael on the west coast of Cuba. She had been there many times. She *knew* it, but not enough to trust it. Not now. Not with what she had.

She hid behind a eucalyptus tree on a high bluff overlooking the village and kept her eyes peeled on the north-south road. The pride of San Raphael, its fishing fleet, poked their masts up from the tiny harbor. At three in the afternoon, with the sun high and hot, most of the fleet had returned to snuggle in the harbor, and the fisherman had curled up in modest straw beds for a well-earned siesta. Later toward evening, when the air cooled a bit, they could often be found cleaning or repairing their skiffs, watching others clean theirs, or playing checkers in the village square. But not now. Now, all lay quiet, the village itself taking a siesta.

Cynthia waited on that ridge for the best part of another hour, just to be sure that no one was coming and going, that there was no unusual activity. When she felt satisfied that all was clear, she eased along a narrow path that led down the bluff and through a low-cut cane field. At the first block house at the edge of the village, she hugged its cool adobe wall to the corner and peeked around the edge to a dusty, dirt road with a lazy dog asleep in front of a door two homes down on her left. She stepped out in the open, then quickly backed in again, listening for a barking dog or a cackling chicken -- anything that might alert the villagers to her presence. When she peeked around again, the dog rolled over with its back to her and stretched its legs, but nothing else moved.

Raul Hernandez's pastel-yellow home stood by itself beyond the village square, its back facing the half-stripped fields where Slater had once watched school children scavenge for roots, and women cart away whatever scraps they could find to sweeten their flan. Raul had twice run for mayor and blamed his

second loss on the fact that his former wife hadn't won the annual flan contest, claiming that would have added just enough votes to boost him into office. After losing the election, Raul felt no obligation to either enforce or obey the law, and saw no reason to comply with any ordinance that might cut into his smuggling profits.

Cynthia had no idea if Raul had stayed awake long enough to see her cross the cane field. Nonetheless, she hurried to the field side and tapped lightly on his back door. As she reached out to tap a second time, the door swung open, and an arm reached out, grabbed her elbow, and yanked her inside.

"Quién es?" a male voice asserted in the dark.

"It's me. Cynthia."

"*Chica! Little One!*" Come in. Come in. Are you alone?"

"I hope so."

Raul turned his back to her and crossed to the window. He lifted the edge of the blind and peeked out, then came back again. "What are you *doing* here?" he said as he stood and looked her over head-to-toe.

At his full height, Raul stood nearly as wide as he was tall, his rounded bulk enhanced by a rugged jaw etched by the salt of the sea and thickly-rooted hair that curled down behind his ears.

Raul clutched Cynthia by her shoulders and held her at arms' length, as if sizing up the day's catch. "You look like you crawled in from of the sea... Here. Sit. Tell me everything."

Raul slid a wooden chair across the floor, swept his hand to offer it to her, then slid another chair up and sat down to face her. "Now, what brings you here?"

Before she could answer, he bent down toward the floor and lifted a small crock. He uncorked it and stretched his out toward her. "Here. You look like you've been through a war, or at least a major skirmish. Another one of your treasure hunts?"

She took the jug up, tilted it up and sipped its stinging heat, then handed it

back. “Someone was after me out there,” she gasped, her throat on fire.

“Someone?... Who?... Why?”

“It don’t think it’s *me* they were after,” she was finally able to say, glancing back toward a small cylindrical package she had dropped when she came in and he grabbed her. “I think *that’s* what they were after.”

“May I?”

“Of course.”

Raul stood and crossed the room. He picked up the package and carried it back. “What is it?” he asked, holding it up as he sat.

“A piece of antiquity.”

He leaned back and shook his head. “You and your gatherings. Your collectibles... How many years have you been coming down here?”

“More than I like to think.”

“And how many pieces have I myself brought you over the years? Most of them relatively worthless.”

“Not this time,” she said, flicking her eyes toward the package. “This one is different. Someone killed for this. I know. I was there.”

Raul reached for the jug beside him, held it toward her, and raised his thick, unkempt eyebrows.

She hesitated. “Maybe one more. You’re right. I need it.”

“Now, who’s this man who’s after you?”

“I’m not certain. I think I lost him. Wishful thinking, maybe.”

Raul glanced toward the door, then looked back again. “You will stay the night with me. I will make you a bed and keep watch. In the morning, we take the truck and drive to Havana and get you to the airport.”

“No,” she protested. “You don’t understand... I’m sorry,” she said. “You, of all people, *should* understand. The problem is, I’m not sure I could clear Customs with this.” She eyed the package. “Not Cuban Security, let alone American. Canadian Customs either, if I go that route.”

“It’s stolen?”

“Perhaps many times over the years.”

“Then leave it here with me. You fly back and I will get it to you somehow.”

“This won’t wait for that. And I wouldn’t want you to...” She hesitated. “Someone’s already been killed for this. I don’t know exactly who is after it, but whoever they are, I need to get it out of Cuba now. That’s why I....”

“Little One,” Raul lowered his head and peered beneath his eyebrows. “Not the boats. You would never make it.”

“I must. I can’t tell you all of it. I don’t want to put you in any more danger than I have already. But I can tell you this much. All my life, I’ve been looking for something this extraordinary. Whatever it takes, I must get it out now.”

“But so many who take the boats do *not* make it. They drown in the storms. The patrol boats catch them. They get shot. They disappear. I could not live with myself if...”

“Raul. That man, the one who’s after me, he’s not Cuban.”

“Not Cuban? What then?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, then how...?”

“His accent. He’s Spanish, all right, just not Cuban. I know Cuban. I’ve been all over this island. And too many people know me. If he’s looking for me, he’ll find me.”

“An American woman escaping Cuba is highly unusual. If you take one of the boats, someone is sure to know. If whoever is after you has enough money, he will learn of it quickly.”

“If I’m lucky, he’ll be too late. I’ll be home.”

“Or drowned. Dead at sea. Or worse, captured by the Communists and thrown in a Havana prison to rot.” He nodded toward the package. “And they will have that anyway.”

She leaned closer and spoke slowly. “Raul. You know when you decided to

stay on after the revolution? To remain here even when things turned bad? That was not a decision, was it? You simply *had* to stay. Cuba was yours, not theirs.”

“This is *that* important?”

“Not compared to what you’ve done. This is trivial, but it’s important to me.”

“Okay. Here is what we do then. There is nothing leaving at this time of day or tonight. One leaves tomorrow from Chavez. Early. *Very* early. Before dawn. There will be eight aboard. That’s all she holds. She’s a sturdy craft, though. Safe, I think. Unless they hit a storm or one of the patrols.”

Cynthia laid her hand on Raul’s knee. “Thank you, Raul.”

“If you get yourself killed, I will hate you for it.”

They stared at each other. Their grins burst into laughter.

CHAPTER 12

The Dardanelles, Turkey

September 1884

With their lives and a fortune at stake, Sophie had no appetite for lamb stew. After Henrich slipped out the back of the tent, she gathered their dinner plates in the dish bin, then slid a folding chair close to the front tent flap. She turned the oil lamp up and opened a book in her lap to Charles Waterton's *Wanderings in South America*. Unable to focus, all she could think of was Henrich rotting away in a Turkish jail.

The oil lamp wick had burnt half down before she heard Mastovos whisper outside the tent. "You come," he said. "Quickly."

"Is he okay? Is anything wrong?"

"The guards. They know. They have sent for their captain. He will bring others. But the boats are loaded. You come."

Mostavos grabbed her wrist and dragged her out of the tent and across a sedge-grass flat once covered by the Aegean that now sloped toward the sea.

"Get down!" he suddenly ordered, shoving her shoulders below the level of the grass.

Breathing heavily, Sophie stretched her neck enough to see a group of men, perhaps ten or a dozen, standing on the beach, holding lanterns and shaking their heads and fists.

"The militia," Mostavos said. "The captain and two other guards with him. The rest are villagers. Our people. They will delay them. The boats are this way."

He led Sophie back beyond the shoreline, then along a winding path between the dunes. When the voices behind were muffled and then drowned by the sea, they straightened and ran.

“Over there,” Mostavos whispered in the dark as they broke across the dunes toward the beach as he led Sophie toward the sound of creaking wood.

“Sophie!” Heinrich called when he looked up and saw her running toward him. He dashed toward her and lifted her in an embrace, then set her down again as all three of them – Heinrich, Sophie, and Mostavos – turned to face the boats bobbing in the water.

“I would have let them sink rather than go without you,” Heinrich said, out of breath as they waded in the surf.

“You have always been a fool, Heinrich. That is why I love you so.”

“You’re the only one who thought I was *not* a fool.”

Loud voices called as footsteps pounded up the beach, headed in their direction.

“Geliyorlar! Geliyorlar!” someone holding the boats shouted.

“Hurry, my friends,” Mostavos yelled. “They come.”

Mostavos pulled them knee-deep into the water and gripped the stern on the last of three boats. He held the boat back with one hand as he boosted Sophie and Heinrich aboard - the skiffs’ sails already hoisted as Mostavos shoved them off.

“Mastovos! You’re coming!” Heinrich looked back and called.

“No,” Mostavos shouted, “This is my country,” he called. “I stay,” were the last words Sophie heard as lanterns dashed up the beach and gunshots cracked the air. Mostavos’ silhouette was the last she saw of him.

These many years later, sitting in her room at her parents’ house in Athens, Sophie carefully placed her teacup back in its saucer. She stood from her chair and moved to the open window that overlooked her father’s garden. The golden yellow daffodils and the sweet smell of hyacinths took her back to those earlier golden days. How lucky she felt for having known Heinrich, for being a loving

and privileged part of his life, even though their time together had been so short.

Her thoughts turned to the day they returned to Athens, sitting in this very garden. Heinrich had draped her neck with the six-tiered necklace of amethyst and emeralds - sixteen pounds of jewels in all - that they had found fused to the Trojan skeleton. Then Heinrich crowned her with another of their finds, a simple strand of gold-linked onyx. "Helen herself could not have been more beautiful," he told her. "Now, they'll believe me. They'll have to. Troy exists, just as Homer described it, and Agamemnon, having sacrificed his daughter to appease the gods, sailed the Aegean to follow his love and seek revenge."

Six months after the winds blew Sophie and Heinrich back to Athens, Heinrich, at age fifty-one, died of malaria after being infected by a mosquito bred in their waterlogged digs. The Trojan plains had once again extracted its price for plunder. But Sophie had few regrets. They had lost each other, but they had fulfilled Heinrich's quest to solve Homer's four-thousand-year-old poetic riddle. Sophie knew that he had little doubt, when he draped the necklace around her neck, that those jewels had once adorned the neck of Helen herself.

CHAPTER 13

Berlin

January 1945

Sometimes inches or seconds straddle that thin line between life and death. If Oberst Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg hadn't left the room to take a phone call, if another officer hadn't shoved the bomb-loaded briefcase further under the table for more foot room, if a heavy table leg hadn't partially blocked the explosion, Hitler would have departed this world in a thousand bloody pieces. Inches made the difference. As it turned out, he was injured. Instead of eliminating that mad man, it merely strengthened his paranoia and fueled his anger.

But that was several months ago now, back in June, when the five-tiered Reichstag stood in its full glory like a spectacular wedding cake on what they thought would be on permanent display. Now, the Reichstag resembled a wedding cake collapsed and partially devoured by rats before they were scurried away. A shame in a way, the highly Oberst Colonel thought. Berlin had deteriorated into a city of human rodents pointing their guns and shaking their fists at American B-29s as their Mustang escorts buzzed and teased from above, then quickly flew beyond the range of antiaircraft guns.

Still, the destruction had been selective. Blocks of residences with no military value remained relatively intact. Berlin had not witnessed Cologne's devastation, although it was only a matter of time before the Allies' primary targets were flattened and their raids spread to targets of opportunity. If there was no formal surrender - if Der Führer stubbornly remained in his bunker, lighting birthday candles and proposing marriage to his mistress - the bombs would soon strike anything left standing. If time remained to escape this madness, now was that time.

The Oberst Colonel looked up from the maps he had spread out on his desk and crossed the room. He had sheltered in the Luftwaffe Auxiliary

Headquarters, hunkered down in the basement during the worst of the bombing. Then alone now, the others long gone for a bit of sunlight and fresh during a lull in the bombing, he had carried his maps up to the sixth floor for better light and to better observe his beloved Berlin's horrible devastation.

He hesitated, uncertain what he would see or what he wanted to see, then crossed the room, opened a central window, and looked out on Wilhelm Strasse. Little remained of its once tall, stately oaks. Nothing but ghostly limbs now that once shaded the grand and glorious spectacle of Hitler's military parades. Most buildings on either side of the street had crumbled or partially collapsed, although every third or fourth, like his own, stood miraculously untouched.

The front wall of the former Treasury Building, across the street and one block south, had been cleanly stripped of its front wall, exposing the pristine interior of what looked like a huge grotesque dollhouse, its lines of desks, its rows of file cabinets, its easel maps, everything undisturbed and in their usual places as if the bombing had never occurred. The Oberst could easily imagine a gigantic Kinder Hitler Youth stooping in front of the building, peering inside and moving little Gestapo bureaucrat dolls from desk to desk, or leaning a secretary doll out a window to watch toy soldiers goose-stepping down Wilhelm Strasse to a cheering crowd of flag-waving Nazis.

But there would be no more parades on Wilhelm, the Oberst knew. No more false German pride. No outlandish propaganda. And the oddity and sadness of it, the military could have won the war if the bureaucrats had listened to the generals and held off opening the Russian front until England had been brought to its knees. The parades, the pride, the dream of a United Europa Germania, all lost and the fault of one man. The dreamer. The house painter, as many now called him. The former World War I Corporal. Adolph Hitler.

The Oberst peered down from his window and watched an elderly woman glance over her shoulder, squat along the side of the War Ministry, lift her skirt, and defecate, expressing a biological urge, a political sentiment, or maybe both. In these times, one could never be certain. She wiped herself with the pages of a

magazine she had carried with her, then stood, tugged her skirt down, and moved on.

The Oberst withdrew from the window and picked up a framed photograph of himself and a tall, thin woman in her mid-forties. She was attractive, despite a lopsided smile brought on from a bout of Bell's Palsy that partly paralyzed the left side of her face. The day the photograph was taken had been a day of smiles all around, a day of salutes and dress uniforms highlighted by an Oak Leaf Cluster awarded the Oberst for his bravery in combat. It was a day when the cats, birds, and the mad dogs – the nicknames for the Luftwaffe and Gestapo officers - looked each other in the eye, lifted their wine glasses, and toasted each other across the same banquet table.

The Oberst sat the photo down and looked up. Smiles, these days, had long since been replaced by regrets, depression, and blank stares into an uncertain future.

The Oberst turned from the window and rechecked the map routes he had committed to memory. Time and logistics. They had to work hand-and-glove for a maneuver to work without a hitch.

Satisfied, knowing a maneuver rarely went off without a hitch, the Oberst avoided the elevator, often stuck or not working. He walked down the stairwell and left the building through the alley door, ensuring it had snapped shut and locked behind him.

As he hurried down the alley, he checked his watch. Four-seventeen in the afternoon, enough daylight still left. Plenty of time to do what needed doing.

CHAPTER 14

The Right Ingredients Restaurant

Annapolis, Maryland

The Present

Ezzy was Italian on both sides of his family and enjoyed bragging about it. “Italians know how to cook,” he liked to say. “It’s in our blood. We can’t run a government, that’s true. But we can damn well cook.”

Cynthia Slater, one of Ezzy’s favorite people in the world, maybe his *best* favorite, was also one hundred percent Italian on both sides. Oddly, and un-Italian like, she couldn’t cook, although Stone, during all that time he dated her, said he didn’t mind. She had talent, purposely leaving to Ezzy’s active imagination what they might be.

Ezzy freely admitted that Italians had strong opinions. “They do,” he said, “They’re just all different,” he said. “Which makes for a lively conversation, loosened up with a little wine when things are already a little *too* loose.”

Cyn may have been Stone’s lover – his “lover *and* paramour” he liked to say without explaining the difference but, in some ways, she was closer to Ezzy. They were both Italian. They had grown up together in the same block of Little Italy in South Baltimore. They attended St. Leo’s Catholic School together, dressed up in their finery for Sunday Mass, and repeated the same lines for Saturday evening confession. According to Ezzy, Cyn always confessed first and then winked at him as she left the confessional, causing impure thoughts to add to his own confession.

It was Ezzy who had introduced grownup Cyn to grownup Stone at a Christmas Eve party all those years later. And it was Ezzy who comforted Stone when Cyn stomped out of his life after finally figuring out that Stone wasn’t going to marry her. Or, maybe it was the other way around. Maybe it was Stone who asked her to leave when he finally understood that she wasn’t the marrying

kind, that *she* wouldn't marry *him*. They both told the same story. They just blamed each other. They told us so many times, they didn't remember who started it. Maybe that was for the best. Denial is sometimes the best offense. (defense ?)

Whichever it was, Stone couldn't get Cyn off his mind after her aborted call, not with the urgency in her voice, so he decided to drive into town to The Right Ingredients, the restaurant he and Ezzy jointly owned. He parked Martha, his classic '57 Chevy convertible, in O'Brian's Salt of the Sea Marina behind the restaurant, a "car slip" Ezzy traded for Tuesday/Thursday lunches with Bill Tubman, the marina manager.

When Stone opened the kitchen door with his key, he found Ezzy with his head slumped face down on the prep table. Whatever he had gotten into the night before had depleted any inclination to stumble back to his studio apartment and sleep it off. When Stone reached out and nudged him, Ezzy jolted up.

"What the...!"

"It's okay. It's just me," Stone reassured him.

Ezzy shook his head like a dog shaking off water. "We had a party here last night," he said. "A fiftieth anniversary. They didn't want to leave. Can you imagine being married fifty years?"

"To the same woman?"

"No. To fifty different women, one a year. *Of course*, to the same woman."

Stone let that hang in the air.

"I can't either," Ezzy said. "It's hard enough living alone with just the three of us. Me, myself and I. It's early. What are you doing here?"

"It's Cyn."

"Cyn?... Cynthia? What about her?"

"She phoned early this morning," Stone informed him. "She left a message. She didn't say much."

"You didn't answer?"

"I would have," Stone said. "I didn't hear it. I had the damn thing turned

off.”

“What do you mean, she didn’t say much?”

“Her voice,” Stone said. “She sounded desperate.

“Desperate about what?”

“I have no idea... When did you hear from her last?”

“It’s been a while.” Ezzy thought a second. “A couple of months. At least that. The last I heard was from Ralph, her brother. I think they were both in Canada at the time. Toronto, I believe. Or maybe South America. Argentina. Or maybe both, back and forth. Who knows with Cynthia?”

“Doing what? Did he say?”

“The usual. Digging up old relics and ancient pieces. The same thing she always does. Now that I think about it, there *was* something. Something Ralph said she didn’t want to talk about. Not even to him. Do you think that might have something to do with this?”

“There’s usually a reason for secrecy. Sometimes it’s danger.”

CHAPTER 15

Berlin

January, 1945

The Oberst Colonel left the Luftwaffe Auxiliary Headquarters by the rear alley exit. He snapped the door shut and checked to verify it was locked, then stepped across the stench of a garbage-littered alley to the still-intact garage on the other side. He reached for the key in his uniform pocket, unlocked the garage door, then stooped and raised it to reveal a line of fourteen staff Mercedes-Benz 770 Grosser Offener Tourenwagen snout-nosed convertibles with side rails to stand on, all shined and polished and standing at attention for the next street-parade.

The Oberst walked to the end of the row and stopped at the only one with a rear two bar sometimes used to haul a parade platform.

He nodded toward one in the middle, then retrieved a gas can from a back corner and topped the Mercedes off. Just behind it on the right, he unlocked and opened a utility trailer he had previously loaded with seven pods. Reassured they were still there, he closed it up again. He climbed in the Mercedes, pulled it forward, and hooked the trailer up to the hitch. He drove up to the garage door, got out and opened it, drove out in the ally, closed the door again, and locked it.

He swung wide in the alley to maneuver around scattered brick and rubble piles, then stopped at the end and climbed out. He walked to the edge of what was left of the building and peered around the corner and down the street at a drivable zigzagged path that more or less ran the center of Wilhelm Strasse. Retrofitted tanks had plowed much of the debris up to the curb, and where possible, onto the sidewalk.

The Oberst climbed back in and turned right onto Wilhelm, avoiding a more direct route closer to Potsdam Station, where he had heard Panzer tanks blocked access.

Ahead, as he drove toward it, an odd shape dangled from a wire strung out across the road. As he leaned into the windshield and looked up, the body of a man twisted in the breeze in front of him, a block-lettered sign draped around his neck. ‘*VERRÄTER*’... TRAITOR.

“S.S.,” the Oberst muttered to himself. The Romans nailed Jesus to the cross for the same offense. Anti-establishment activity.

Death lay everywhere - a dead horse beyond the strung-up traitor, its thin skin stretched over its protruding ribs as an elderly man jabbed a butcher knife into the animal’s belly to extract whatever sustenance he could, and two elderly women wrapped in blankets dug meat from its hindquarters with what looked like railroad spikes. There was no way to tell if any of them had killed the animal or simply stumbled on an eating opportunity.

Farther down the street on the opposite side, a blond-haired Aryan boy, no more than fourteen or fifteen, snapped a straight-armed salute as the Oberst drove by. “*Heil Hitler!*” he shouted. Jesus, the Oberst thought. After all this.

The Oberst had planned his route within a sausage-shaped strip of central Berlin still unoccupied by the Russians. He generally headed west, turning down alternate streets when he found others blocked. The city was surrounded by at least two Russian infantry divisions and a cavalry corps, the latter undoubtedly prepared to lead a mounted charge through the streets and down the alleys, chopping necks off and scattering blood in the streets as evidence they had been there.

According to what the Oberst was able to piece together from sketchy radio reports he had heard, the Third Russian Tank Division had rolled up from the south and found themselves pinned down on the wrong side of the Landwehr Canal, an impossible barrier to cross with the bridges blown.

An explosion suddenly rocked the street ahead. The Oberst stiffened and jerked his steering wheel sharply right as a side-car motorcycle sped by on his left, careened off the Mercedes’ front fender, then spun out of control. The sidecar’s wheel struck the curb, flipped its passengers over, and skidded to a

stop, the driver's boot jutting out at an awkward angle from under a rotating wheel that seemed so frightened it couldn't stop rotating.

The Oberst maneuvered around the cycle, rounded the next corner, and eased to a stop. He clutched the wheel and lowered his head to keep himself from shaking. It didn't take much to rattle him these days. "Okay," he told himself. "Almost there."

He straightened again and pulled the Mercedes to the middle of the road, then turned left on Ubermyer Strasse and drove the final half-kilometer more relaxed than he had been in a long while, as though he needed the jolt of an explosion to relieve the tension.

He parked the Mercedes in a narrow street next to a ten-meter-high brick wall, then reached in the glove box and extracted a ring of keys he had taken from Gestapo offices. He left the Mercedes unlocked and walked to a thick wooden door in the middle of the wall. He unlocked it and opened it to a long tunnel leading into a wide-grass courtyard, his prize for running Berlin's gauntlet tantalizingly now tantalizingly within his grasp.

CHAPTER 16

The Coast of Cuba

The Present

“But you agreed,” a thin-skinned, white-haired man squealed in a high-pitched Spanish accent. “Twenty-five. That was our agreement.”

Raul grabbed the man by his elbow and shuffled him down the beach in the dark. When they returned, the white-haired man approached a much younger man waiting at the dock. Their heads shook, and the younger man picked up a bundle at his feet and backed away.

“No,” Cynthia Slater said when Raul came back. “I *couldn’t* take someone else’s place.”

“Another boat will come for him in a week, or maybe two. Not until the tides and patrols are right. You can’t afford to wait that long. Now, remember, this boat is small and you must stay low in case you are spotted. Do you understand this?”

She reached out and wrapped her arms around Raul’s barrel chest. “If I don’t see you again,” she told him. “I will always love you.”

“Unfortunately for me,” he said as he pushed her back, “not the way I would like.”

“Raul. One of these days, you will find a good woman.”

“You mean another good woman?” Raul asked, raising an eyebrow. “The tragedy of life, Little One. The one you want does not always want you.”

They shoved off under a partially covered moon with thunderstorms brewing to the west. The diesel engine, for anyone listening, rattled under a wooden box on top of which its bearded captain stood and surveyed the horizon.

Cyn leaned back against the ribs of the hull and tried to relax. She clutched her package to her breast, wondering what other seas its contents may have crossed and how many lives, beyond the man killed in the bar, had died to

possess it.

She looked across at a family of four huddled opposite her. Two small children clung to their mother like appendages as the woman mumbled prayers and fingered a rosary, the father staring vaguely at an unseen presence in front of him.

Their captain hugged the coast, darting in and out of coves and stretching his neck to scan for any sign of light or movement. On occasion, he chugged into an inlet, shut his engine down, and listened for any sounds beyond the hoot of loons near the shoreline. Hearing nothing else, he restarted his engine and put to sea again.

“The patrols no longer sail from the north,” Raul had informed her. “Only from the west and south these days. They are lazy. They don’t often go around that far. It leaves their coffee cold.”

The tiny boat attacked the choppy waves head-on as the captain swung a wide arch and then turned north toward the Florida Keys. Cyn’s stomach soon burned to the bombing rhythm of the sea. When the boat’s helm rose, it lifted her body and held it in midair until the craft tilted forward again and splashed down, the planks rising to sack her bottom. Water soon swept over the sides of the hull to create waves of its own, forcing frightened passengers to draw their knees up to their chins to keep their feet dry.

When a light rain began to fall, Cyn had been in Cuba enough to know that these late-night storms often spawn in the Atlantic, then churn up quickly as they whipped across the Caribbean. As the waves grew choppier, the sky darkened, and the moon disappeared, the boat’s engine groaned with a desperate intensity as the boat struggled to hold its course, and the captain leaned into his wheel to steady himself as much as his craft. No longer able to hold the contents of her stomach, Cyn somehow got to her knees, turned around, and threw up over the rail. Relieved for a moment, she lifted her head, her eyes blinded by the searchlights of a Cuban gunboat tearing through the sea toward them.

CHAPTER 17

East Berlin

January, 1945

The Oberst Colonel stood in the shadows of a wide brick archway, surprised and exhilarated by what lay in front of him. The soccer field-sized expanse remained untouched by the devastation beyond its walls, its manicured borders precisely edged and trimmed as if German priorities remained as they had always been -- orderliness, precision, and predictability. But more important, the Schliemann Wing of the Berliner Staats Museum, rising beyond the lawn from the Oberst's position, appeared to be fully intact, its contents presumably undisturbed.

The Oberst hurried through the archway and across the lawn, his heels clicking on the marble patio. He bent forward, shaded his eyes against the door's upper glass partition, and peered inside. When he saw what he had come for, he rapped on the door and waited.

A key turned, a latch clicked, the door inched open, and a swastika collared Corporal poked his head through. "Herr Oberst!" the soldier snapped as he pulled the door back and sprung to attention.

"Be at ease," the Oberst said, stepping inside, closing the door, and latching it shut. He glanced around the room at six large glass cases, each three meters long, shoulder high, and a meter wide. The widest occupied a center row, and the remaining two faced each other along the opposite walls.

The room appeared precisely as the Oberst remembered it with two exceptions -- an MP-40 submachine gun leaned against a side table close to where the Corporal guard had placed his chair, and beyond that, a tightly-blanketed cot.

"What are your orders?" the Oberst asked.

The Corporal reached for his jacket pocket.

"Just tell me."

The soldier shrugged. "To remain until relieved."

"How long have you been here?"

"Three days," the Corporal said. "I lock up for meals and to go out and get whatever I can," he added, stretching his words and staring at the Oberst.

"What is it, Corporal?"

"I know you Herr Oberst. You've been here before."

"You remember me?"

"Yes, Herr Oberst."

"It's been a year... Longer."

"I remember your ribbons," the corporal said, nodding toward the Oberst's uniform string of awards. All you have done for the Third Reich."

"You were here then?"

"A weekend guard as a student."

"But I don't recall your name. Your nametag? As before, I don't believe you wore one."

"Cigarette?" the Oberst asked, reaching in his jacket pocket and slipping out a pack of American Lucky Strikes.

"I'm on duty, Herr Oberst."

"The whole damn world's blowing up Corporal," the Oberst said, pounding the pack on his sleeve and holding out a smoke from the pack. "How many are there?"

"Sir?" the Corporal said, reaching out for the cigarette.

"Guards? How many?"

"You mean here?... Only myself."

"I mean, in the entire museum."

"Just me. That is all." The Corporal fished a lighter from his pocket.

"Just one?" the Oberst asked. "For all of this?"

"All the rest are dead at the front or still fighting. But that's the strange part of it," the guard said.

The Oberst lifted an eyebrow.

"They cleared the whole place out. They removed the last of it four days ago. I know. I helped crate it. Everything except that." He glanced around a room behind him. "We left this room untouched on orders from above. It must have been *high* above. They left me to guard it... With *this*." He fondled the nub of his submachine. "I'm not even sure how to use it. I've never fired one."

"Take aim and pull the trigger."

A nervous smile crept across the Corporal's face, an apparent awareness that the conversation had crossed the line. It had become too familiar between officer and enlisted.

The Oberst tapped out another Lucky Strike. "You mind?" he asked, holding the cigarette out and nodding toward the lighter the Corporal still held in his hand.

As the Corporal flicked a spark, the Oberst bent low to catch the flame while he withdrew a .38 service pistol from his unsnapped holster. He pointed the muzzle behind the Corporal's left ear and fired.

The Corporal's brain splattered onto a glass case as his torso stiffened. His eyes bulged in shocked surprise as the Oberst's caught the Corporal's lighter and slipped it in his jacket pocket. The victim, wracked by convulsions, crumpled and dropped.

The Oberst watched an odd stretched death dance on the floor. He stooped and reached across the body, grabbed the submachine gun, and carried it as far back from the central glass case as the room allowed. He anchored the butt of the gun in the round of his shoulder and fired a horizontal spray along the top edge of the case, sweeping left to right as he stepped back to avoid the splatter of glass. He stopped firing and waited for the echo to subside, then leaned the gun against the wall and slipped on a pair of black leather gloves as he strutted down the row, surveying the case's contents.

CHAPTER 18

One Quarter-Mile Railroad Lane

Annapolis, Maryland

The Present

A grenade lobbed in Stone's lap. He bolted up in bed and grabbed his leg. God, he still *had* a leg. Memories of pain rushed back, his mind refusing to let go.

His cell phone rang again. He had left it turned on, hoping Cyn might call. But experience dies hard. *Hard* experience even harder.

His breathing eased as he reached across his empty bed and picked the phone up.

"Clay?"

Jesus, what's the matter with me? *God*. Cyn. She doesn't call in months, in years, then she phones him at home and expects him to recognize her voice. The damn thing is, he does.

"I have to see you."

"Cyn....," he drew her name out.

"Clay. Someone tried to kill me."

"*What?* Where are you? What happened? You called before."

"I'm here now. I'm at the airport in Baltimore. At BWI."

"Are you okay? Are you safe? I'll come get you."

"No, no, no. I'm okay now. Put some coffee on. I'll catch a cab."

He squinted at the clock. Two forty-four in the morning. "Get here as soon as you can," he said.

"I'll just....."

"Just what?"

"Nothing. My luggage. I forgot. I don't have any. I'll see you in half an hour."

Cynthia Slater, Stone thought, scooting his legs off the edge of the bed and flattening his feet on a cold wooden floor.

Could he *handle* Cyn again? Was there even a choice? A grenade lobs in your lap, you don't have one. It's too late to toss it back. Of course, Cynthia Slater wasn't exactly a grenade. Or, if she was, she was more civilized and far more insidious. Far more dangerous in a way. The damage was internal. Unseen but deeply felt.

To start, there was the little matter of trust. How do you regain it once it's lost? At the end of their last time around, he had caught Cyn making love to someone else. He had popped in to surprise her and found a surprise in her bed. "Why," he had asked. "Because he wanted to," she said. Another man's desire was easy to understand. Her easy compliance was another matter entirely. What was the nature of their relationship? Of their commitment? Was there any? They weren't married. They were both free agents. But at least he abided by a cardinal rule. One at a time. How many others were there that he didn't know about? What about the next guy who came along who "just wanted to do it?" That surprise visit ended that round. But, he always knew, or half-hoped, there would be another round. Till death do us part, married or not? Maybe.

As usual, with Cyn popped back into his life again, he had no choice. Not in any practical sense. No matter how much he told himself that she was dispensable, that he didn't really need her, he didn't sound convincing repeating that mantra. The truth was, he knew he would accept the inevitable damage in advance, then live with the inevitable broken heart and a banged-up ego while he tried to put the scattered pieces of his life back together again. That's just how it was. He was weak. He was vulnerable. And he was stuck. He knew it, and she knew it. He was a dead man walking, but more alive than ever while he was still on his feet.

"Damn," Stone muttered, flicking on the lamp and stumbling toward the bathroom as his eyes adjusted to the light. Pop self-analysis at three AM? The least he could do was wait until he got some caffeine pumping in his veins to fire

up a few more neurons.

He staggered into the kitchen of his round watertower abode. He sometimes had to remind himself, this early in the morning, staggering into the kitchen without turning on the lights, that the place *was* round. When you've been raised and lived in boxes, when you've spent your life looking at square pictures on square walls, shoving furniture into square corners, squares become the expected reality, rounds become part of an odd Alice in Wonderland dream, especially when you're thirsty at three in the morning, just out of bed in the dark, when a dream is still partly real and the real world is still out of focus.

He flipped the kitchen light on, reached in the freezer for a brown bag of hazelnut coffee, an in-vogue gourmet at one point. His Aunt Hazel, through no coincidence, had introduced him. Even when hazelnut went *out* of vogue, he'd stuck with it. In or out, he kept what he liked. Like jeans with a dress jacket. Fashions came and they went, then they came again. Why bother changing? Wait for it to come back. In or out, it didn't really matter. He didn't care. He wore what he wanted. He *did* what he wanted. He drank whatever coffee spoke nice things to him when he drank it.

He sat a coffee pot on the stove – an out-of-style double-boiler he'd bought for seventy-five cents at *Ben & Joe's Recyclable Odds & Ends*. He liked simple things. They were predictable. You could figure them out. They were easy to fix when they broke. In converting his 1922 watertower to his living quarters, he had learned every inch of it. He touched history every time he replaced a rivet, a nail, or a screw.

It was Cyn -- who is not quite so simple to understand or to fix -- who had discovered the watertower. He had been looking for an abandoned railroad station. Something small and derelict on an old commuter line. Or maybe even a converted caboose backed into an abandoned rail yard with a path to drive through and no grass to cut.

“What about that,” she'd said on a rainy Saturday in March when they looked around together.

“What about what?”

“That... Over there,” she pointed across a field through a rain-swept whipper slapping windshield. “That tower.”

“It’s round,” he said.

“What’s wrong with round? I like round. That’s your house. It’s you. That’s the one you’re going to buy. The one you’re going to restore.”

“Well,” she said, lounging out on that deck after long months of negotiations and wrangling with county zoning and regulation officials, months of planning and loving restoration. “I was right, wasn’t I?

“Right about what?”

“The house. The fact that it suits you.”

“Cyn, you’re always right.”

“About that. It was a split deal. You got the house and I got you *in* the house.”

“You’re always right, aren’t you?”

“No. But I’m right this time.”

“Exactly. You’re right *again*. See what I mean?”

It was one of their stock conversations, their stock banter. The content sometimes changed or they’d trade parts. But none of that mattered. What actually mattered when kidding *wasn’t* kidding or when he was never quite sure -- who *was* right. Or which of them cared. Or what they cared *about*.

While the old coffee pot percolated, filling the room with a rich coffee aroma, he went back to the bedroom, slipped on Levi’s and a long-sleeve sweatshirt, and pulled the sleeves up. When he returned to the kitchen, he saw headlights turn off the main road and bump down the track lane that paralleled the Chesapeake shoreline. A grenade with blood in its veins lobbed in his direction.

CHAPTER 19

Berlin

January, 1945

A life was hard to snuff out. The corporal's body continued to twitch after death like a diehard battery that kept spouting – that didn't want to die. The Oberst had seen that before - early rigor mortis squeezing shrinking muscle no longer fed by blood.

The Oberst ignored the twitching. He reached inside a shattered showcase and lifted out a five-tiered necklace, shaking off the remnants of glass before stringing it around his neck. He moved down the rows, using the largest vessels to fill with the smaller items to conserve precious cargo space.

He made choices according to the inventory he had memorized from prior visits. He ignored the common artifacts as he worked along the line, shoving fragments of broken glass aside with the edge of his toe, then bending down to examine whatever glistened and wasn't glass. As he filled each vessel, he carried it across the room, unlocked and opened the door, and set it on the patio before returning to fill another. He selected for value, ignoring three-quarters of what he found.

His greatest prize, the six-pound, feathered death mask, had settled to the bottom of the largest glass-strewn case. He spread his hands beneath it and lifted it gently, careful to avoid stabbing himself with its pointed spires. Then he laid it down on the velvet cloth he had ripped from a showcase, removed the necklace from around his neck, and placed it in the hollow of the faceplate. He wrapped the bundle tightly and set it aside with the other pieces.

With storage space extremely limited, he carted out only what he knew would fit. Once his final container was filled, he stooped over the corporal's body and patted the soldier's pockets for a bulge. "Stupid fellow," he thought. Most men kept their keys in their front pockets and their wallets in back. The

foolish fellow had done the reverse. The Oberst rolled the body over and retrieved the corporal's keys.

He locked the museum door behind him, recrossed the courtyard, and opened the work gate at the end of the driveway. He hurried through it and around the walled perimeter, turning left down the alley where he had parked the Mercedes with its hitched trailer.

His timing was perfect. While he did his work in the museum, a package wrapped in a blanket had been delivered and placed on the back seat of the Mercedes. He opened the door, lifted a blanket corner, peeked beneath it, and smiled. Then, he climbed in the driver's seat, drove to the end of the alley, rounded the corner, and passed through the open gate, pulling up the driveway and stopping next to the patio.

Just as he had determined, his confiscated cargo fit precisely in six of the seven customized pods he extracted from the trailer. He filled all six and placed the seventh, smaller pod in the Mercedes next to the blanket-wrapped bundle. Starting his engine and exiting through the gate, the Oberst was fully aware that the most treacherous part of his plan was entirely contingent on precision flying and hair-trigger timing.

CHAPTER 20

One Quarter-Mile Railroad Lane
Annapolis
The Present

Martha – Stone’s ‘57 Chevy Belair, turquoise convertible with its flared V-shaped tail fins, polished patent-leather front-and-rear seats, steering-wheel gearshift, and its fuel-injected V-8 engine – sat patiently waiting inside a railroad workshed that Stone had shored up and insulated behind his converted watertower living quarters.

“Why Martha?” he thought as he double-stepped down the thirty-four steps from his watertower deck to ground level. Why hadn’t he named her Ginger, or Cassy, or Shirley Temple? Simple. He *hadn’t* named her. The first moment he looked at her on the lot that day – Ezzy had actually found her and dragged Stone down to that lot – it was love at first sight. It simply dawned on him at that very moment that she *was* Martha. She wanted to be called Martha. Martha *was* her name. Stone tried to talk her out of it. He thought Martha might be a bit too feminine for a V-8, twin-barrel, 185-horsepower muscle car. But she refused on the grounds that she might have a hard metal skin and a revved-up muscle engine, but still, deep beneath her hood, beat a tender heart and soul.

It was as if she had winked her left headlight at him on that fateful day and quietly whispered, “You can call me ‘Martha,’” in her low, V8 rumbled voice, then added, “Slide in and have a seat, Big Boy. I’ll take you for the ride of your life.” And that was it, right there. Instant rapture. He drove her off the lot that very day and they’d been together ever since. Still in love, too. Still excited to see each other. He still grinned when she hummed, purred, and revved her engine at the slightest touch of his hand on her gear knob and tap of his toe on her floorboard. What more could anyone ask of a mechanical love affair?

Stone hopped down the steps of his watertower, circled to the back, and

walked another twenty yards down a narrow path through knee-high switchgrass. He loved the feel and smell of the grass as he leaned down and brushed his hand across their soft, billowing heads, blowing and bending in a light breeze. The growth and wildness of the Chesapeake shoreline where the watertower sat was one of the reasons he bought the place and a major reason he never grew tired of it. It constantly changed, constantly reminding him of the ever-changing nature of reality, and that he and everything else were an ever-changing part of that change.

The converted watertower house was a slightly different story. He had bought it as a reminder of the sort of change he missed but never actually experienced. It allowed him to fantasize, reminisce, and romanticize the long-gone steam-train era in which a high-pitched steam engine's whistle echoed from somewhere down the track in the middle of the night to remind and reassure him that all was well and in its place. Those steam trains were gone now. Replaced by more efficient, smoother-running diesels. Their rolling beauty and chugging flamboyance were long ago sidetracked to steam-engine graveyards to be picked apart by entrepreneurial scavengers and human buzzards, or left to rust and rot in place. A modern gain at a tragic loss. Like most of history, things come and go in a wink and a flash. Today's fad or reality dead and gone, left in the shadowed memories of a fading past.

But, at least, the railroad tracks remained beneath the watertower to stoke a bit of fantasized nostalgia as an occasional diesel rolled by hauling a light load of freight down the line somewhere. Just enough to keep the tracks in fair shape and the line in use.

Stone squeaked open the double doors to Martha's shed – her home since she couldn't climb the steps to the watertower. He locked the shed's thick iron hinges in place with a railroad spike dangling from a chain. He settled into Martha's patent-leather driver's seat – the 'patent' part an advertiser's gimmick to distinguish Martha's plastic leather from cowhide. He clicked on his seatbelt, one of the few required add-ons not built into the original Belair.

He slid his key into Martha's key slot and turned on the growl of her engine. There was always the temptation to leave the gearshift in neutral and step on the gas a few seconds just to let Martha roar herself awake and show off her eagerness with the slightest encouragement of Stone's right toe. He skipped that this time. There were too many other things on his mind – Cyn for one – as he backed Miss Tique out of the shed and drove down the single lane, dirt road that paralleled the shoreline for a quarter mile before Martha's 7.50 x 14 mm B.F. Goodrich Silvertown Whitewalls were able to grab solid asphalt toward Annapolis.

Cyn had called and left a message on Stone's cell phone. She didn't say much, but what she did say sounded desperate. Then nothing. No answer when he tried to return her call. Just an odd squeal that sounded like a weasel in pain, frantically crying for help at the other end of the line.

Cyn had always been an enigma wrapped in a puzzle spinning around in a black hole in Stone's emotional universe. Maybe that was part of her draw. Not wanting to let go of that spin until he grabbed hold of it and nailed it down. Which, of course, he knew he never could. How do you nail down an enigma, let alone grab and hold onto it?

At least Ezzy was more objective. He knew Cyn better than anyone. They spent their summers together growing up in "Little Italy," a five-square-block Italian neighborhood in Baltimore. His parents and her grandparents lived two doors down from each other on Murray Street. They played together throughout those long, hazy summers. They stood in the same line for Saturday night confession at St. Leo's. They knelt in front of the same priest to receive the Lord's holy blessing every Sunday morning.

As Ezzy liked to say, Cyn dropped into his life every summer from somewhere out west, then disappeared back to her parents' ranch in Montana until the weather warmed up again the following year. If anyone knew her state of mind or what she might be up to, it would be Ezzy. Even Ezzy, of course, couldn't catch a constantly swirling wind that refused to settle down or

permanently attach to anyone or anything.

CHAPTER 21

Berlin

January 1945

The Oberst drove north, away from Berlin's city center, hoping to avoid the Russian Fourth Infantry Division headed in from the south. He crossed the Fiserner Canal on its last remaining bridge and rode by cafés where he had once cavorted with young fräuleins who rubbed elbows and other body parts with any man in uniform who had a little money in his pocket. He was certain they would do the same when the Americans or even the Russians arrived.

After cornering a sharp right, he passed beneath a gate marked with the inscription, *Berliner Zoologischer Garten*, steering his Mercedes and trailer down a wide pedestrian walkway flanked by animal cages. Prior to the war, Berlin families strolled that walkway to ogle exotic animals pacing and preening themselves on a lazy Sunday afternoon. But there were no visitors this day. The zoo was empty of visitors and most of the animals, many dead from starvation or slaughtered for food.

In the third cage on the left, a lioness wallowed in urine and feces, too weak to raise her head as the Oberst drove by. Across from the lioness and down two cages, *something*, the Oberst wasn't sure what, hissed from a black hole. Farther down on the opposite side, a long-departed animal had killed and eaten a child whose bones the crows now picked clean. The city itself was a jungle where only the most savage survived.

The Oberst parked the Mercedes in front of an abandoned elephant house with the name "MILO" stenciled above a set of double doors that ran along the side of the structure.

He dug a key from his pocket as he climbed from the car. He unlocked the door and stepped inside a vaulted chamber lit by roofline windows, the huge dwelling hollowed out from one of the zoo's three hills.

In the center, an American P-51 Mustang patiently waited as clean as if it came off the production line, a star under each wing, its nose stuck into the air, ready to fly, its wheels tethered to keep it from rolling down an incline meant to drain elephant urine. The Oberst had retrofitted the fighter with a Rolls Merlin engine he assembled with parts from downed or captured enemy aircraft. He had been ordered to piece together a fully functioning Mustang so the Luftwaffe could circumvent its strengths and analyze its weaknesses. But he had pieced together not one, but two - one for Command and one for himself.

A Mustang's fighting prowess was beyond compare, the best in the sky. But the plane had its negatives. As an escort fighter, it was built for speed and maneuverability, not for carrying cargo. Yet even with the aircraft's drawbacks and the modifications required to carry the Oberst's pods, he hoped its speed and agility would allow it to escape Berlin and avoid the traps he knew lay ahead.

He swung the elephant doors fully open, hooked them in place, then returned to the Mercedes and opened the doors to the trailer. He lifted out his pods one at a time, attaching the first two to wing-pin mounts meant to hold bomb casings, then fitted a second pod pair into the previously emptied gun turrets. He latched the next two into the landing gear ducts that would require him to fly with his wheels down, a serious problem since that would be easily noticed. Lastly, he extracted the smallest pod and placed the cloth-wrapped package into the auxiliary hold just behind the pilot's seat.

His cargo fit precisely as planned, every centimeter used for maximal storage and minimal waste. The added drag and fuel loss would reduce his flying speed to four hundred kilometers and his range to around twelve hundred, barely enough to reach the outskirts of Rome.

He retrieved the clothes he had previously stuffed in the plane's cockpit, replacing his German underwear with American *Fruit-of-the-Loom*, his Luftwaffe hat for a flop-eared aviator's cap, and his coat for the fur-collared leather flight jacket of an American Air Corps Captain with the name Frank Russell stenciled over the leather pocket.

He doused the remnants of this former identity with diesel fuel and lit the pile with the dead corporal's cigarette lighter. As the flames died down to embers, he ground the ashes of his past with the heel of his new American flyer's boot.

Relieved of any obvious evidence that could immediately indicate his true identity, he untethered the Mustang from its anchors and kicked out the wheel chocks. The plane required only a slight shove on its left wing to roll it down the elephant ramp, onto the pedestrian walkway, and pointed its propeller straight down the line between the cages. The Oberst sauntered around the plane, running the flat of his hand along its cool skin to examine it for dents or bumps. He arched the tail flaps up and down several times to check their sway, then yanked the prop through two turns to pull the air through the carburetor to ensure there was no oil built up in the cylinders. Satisfied, he climbed into the cockpit, strapped in, and cinched the seatbelts tight around his waist and chest.

The Mustang's twelve cylinders puttered and died on the first turn, then sang on the second, filling his nostrils with petrol fumes. The former Luftwaffe Air Division's Oberst, now Captain Frank Russell of the United States Army Air Corps, tossed the dead corporal's cigarette lighter out of the cockpit and into the past. He taxied between the cages, revved his engine, and lifted up and out of Berlin - a baby crying in the pod behind him.

CHAPTER 22

One Quarter-Mile Railroad Lane

Annapolis

The Present

Stone had driven over to The Right Ingredients restaurant – their joint venture that Ezzy mostly operated – to tell him about Cyn’s desperate message on Stone’s cell phone and to see if Ezzy hadn’t had any advice that might straighten Stone’s confused thinking into some kind of straight-line order.

Ezzy said he hadn’t heard from Cyn in a while and had no idea what to make of her phone call or her desperation, except to say that desperation might be at least as much on Stone’s part as anything Cyn might have said.

Stone agreed. For a man who leaned toward action, he found it hard to do nothing, especially when there was nothing to do. Nothing to do but wait. Nothing to do but hope for another phone call. Nothing to do but drink a little more than usual, a little more than he should.

He returned home and puttered around the house, doing a few dishes he had left in the sink and then taking a walk along the railroad track and back for a little exercise. A tap rapped on the deck door just before evening, the sun’s long shadows stretching over the tracks. He clinked his Bushmills whiskey down on a side table and stood. He crossed the room and opened the door to find Cyn standing there, staring up at him.

“I’ve missed you,” he found himself saying.

“God, how I’ve missed you,” she said, stepping forward, throwing herself into his arms around him, and breathing hard against his chest.

“My God, Cyn. Where have you been? What happened?” he asked as he clutched her shoulders and held her back enough to look her in the eye.

A thin package dropped beside her, unnoticed in her rush to wrap her arms around him. “Clay,” she sighed, her voice muffled and wobbly, as if she were

about to cry. “I’m so glad to see you. I have missed you, you know. I shouldn’t be here. I know that. I’ve treated you badly. No one can tolerate me. Not for long.”

“That’s not the point. You are *here*. You’re here now. Come in. Sit down. You look exhausted.

“That’s an upgrade from how I feel.”

As she sat on the couch next to him, her mood suddenly changed. Invigorated. Cyn had a way of doing that. He never understood how she could spin her emotions around on a dime so quickly. She crossed her legs and leaned forward, wide-eyed with a provocative stare, just as she always did when she wanted to entice him. Even when she didn’t have to. All she had to do was ask.

Looking her over, he noticed deep scratch lines down both sides of her bare arms as if she had been caught in the middle of a knife fight, holding up her arms to protect herself.

“What are those?” he asked as he looked at them. “What happened?”

She glanced down at arms that hung beneath her camouflage-colored tee-shirt whose colors matched her expedition pants. Calling Cyn a “casual dresser” would stretch the term beyond exaggeration. She *could* dress up. She could easily stir a multi-sex “wow!” when she entered or crossed a room, especially when she made an effort. More often, she preferred to disappear back among the trees or into the wallpaper, incognito until she stepped forward to make her presence known. Once she *was* known, she couldn’t be ignored. Her laser stare, when she aimed it at you, cut through to your heart, or to the heart of the matter, whichever she intended at the time.

“I had a little run-in with a few briars and stickers,” she looked up again and said, almost as if she had forgotten they were there. “I managed to tear myself loose,” she said. “They just haven’t gone away yet.”

“I can understand how you feel,” Stone said, sorry he said it, realizing she hadn’t exactly said how she felt, just what had happened. He felt her pull and didn’t want to be sucked in again. He wasn’t sure he could tear loose again. Not

without more internal bruises that took a while to heal, if they ever did.

“God, I’m glad to see you,” she said again. “I know what you’re thinking. I look like a mess. I am a mess.”

“That’s always been part of your charm.”

She grinned, but didn’t answer.

Cynthia Slater was not one to be tamed. Neither was he, although that was the least of his faults. He was a wild stallion, she was a wild mare drawn to each other with mutual danger, admiration, and respect. But neither could saddle or ride the other. At least not long. Not without bucking off a rider and breaking free again. They were both cursed with who they were -- the good, the bad, and the unattainable. And that was the trouble. They each tried to attain *and* restrain. All that did was tear them apart.

All of which made not a bit of difference as he sat across from her now, her laser stare beaming in his direction, knowing it could never work between them but still wanting it to.

“I thought I would die back there,” she said. “All I could do was call your name. I thought your name on my breath was the last I would ever say.”

“Cyn, what happened back there? You phoned. You didn’t say much.”

“The damn Cuban phone system. Their Internet. The whole country’s still back in the ’50s. It’s not just their cars that are rusted. As soon as I got to Florida...”

“How *did* you get back?

“With a little help. It wasn’t exactly a tourist boat. Anyway, as soon as I hit dry land, I caught the first plane I could get and came right here.”

“Because you couldn’t stand to be away from me any longer?”

“There were times I felt like that.”

“And *this* time?”

“I don’t know the reason. Safety maybe. A hug.”

“Cyn, you and I...”

“I know. We were meant for each other. We just can’t stand each other’s

company.”

“Sure, we can. At least for an hour. Sometimes a couple of days.”

When a sudden chill left goose bumps down her arms. She brushed them as if to chase them away. He stood, dug out a cross-stitched Afghan his mother had knitted to keep him warm on cold nights, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“You’re safe now,” he said. “You’re here. You’re home.”

“*Home*,” she said, laying her hand on top of his before he could pull it away. “That’s a word I haven’t heard for a long while. I do feel safe. It feels safe. It does feel like home.”

CHAPTER 23

Berlin

January 1945

Flying low, the Oberst raised the nose of the Mustang and circled a tight loop, searching for a corridor between the Nazi Ninth Corp artillery aiming toward the oncoming Russians, and the Russians themselves pouring into the city on three sides. Unlike any other day the Oberst had flown over Berlin, on this day the city lay colorless, pockmarked, and smoldering. At four hundred feet, Berlin could no longer hide its devastation, its gutted buildings, its grotesquely twisted railroad tracks, its recently bombed steel mills spewing smoke along the River Spree. The city, a ghost of what it was, lay battered, scarred, and flattened, precisely as the Allies intended. They hadn't just brought Germany two her knees; they had cut her knees off and ground her face into the mud.

There! He saw it. A break between the lines, southeast at one o'clock, between the ridges that skirted the still green Grunewald Park and the half-kilometer Stieglitz Apartment complex strung along the park's south side. The Oberst was well aware that there were German anti-aircraft guns mounted on the rooftops, and larger artillery pieces set up in the streets below. All were still manned - although *manned* was hardly the operative word these days - by young boys or tired old men of the Volkssturm, the Nazi home guard, still prepared to defend Deutschland über alles.

He flew low to avoid the gunners' view, relying on speed and stealth as he ran the gauntlet. By the time they spotted him and turned to aim their weapons, he hoped to be out of range. They would not be expecting an American Mustang flying out of Berlin in the wrong direction.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Jesus! Tracers on his left flank at ten o'clock high. He banked right and dove. He saw muzzles flash between two buildings below his

left wing. He throttled back. Two pops exploded in front of him. He throttled again and banked right. Another pop fifty meters behind him. Then two in succession further back. His grin broadened. He had outrun devastation alley, although his smile faded quickly.

A second, more lethal barrier posed an even greater threat. Beyond central Berlin, he would be identified as an American Mustang flying in allied-controlled territory and not fully disguised. Mustangs flew in fighter groups, never alone except for a brief strafing, and never with their wheels down except when in trouble or headed in for a landing.

He pointed his nose directly west, toward Frankfurt, scanning the ground for American infantry. Twenty minutes out, he spotted his first American bomber formation, a dozen Flying Fortresses at 10,000 meters with at least four groups of Mustang escorts sweeping their usually defensive ‘S’ patterns just behind the group.

He leaned against the canopy and squinted as three Mustangs broke free, banked right, and dove in his direction. He throttled back and dove slightly to slow his craft to 200 Kilometers per hour, fast enough to keep him in the air, slow enough to slide the canopy back just enough to reach his arm through. He reached beneath his seat and slid out a quick-light flare. He snapped the top to light it, then poked the flame outside. The group leader swung in behind his tail and held there, then pulled out to his right and eased up wing-to-wing. They flew in tandem, a stenciled *LuLu* and a pinup silhouette painted on the nose of the American’s plane.

The Oberst waved his flair, then let the wind grab and carry it away as he raised his thumb up and added his broadest smile. The *LuLu* pilot scowled at the Oberst a long moment before glancing down as if checking something in his lap. He raised his eyes again and grinned. *LuLu* tipped its wings, backed off and swung left, its escorts following as the Oberst closed the canopy and resumed his former speed.

Fifty kilometers north of Nuremberg, the Oberst veered southeast to follow

the Maine River, then swung west and passed over the flat plains of Augsburg. He tipped his wing whenever he saw an American plane or an occasional group of British Spitfires. The Oberst maneuvered the aircraft through the narrow Alpine valley between the S.S. ski resort at Garmisch-Partenkirchen and Hitler's Eagle's Nest, the sun fading to night out the left side of his cockpit, his precious cargo tucked in the pod behind him, his own future and the future of mankind propelling him forward.

CHAPTER 24

One Quarter-Mile Railroad Lane
Annapolis
The Present

As Stone and Cynthia Slater sat on bar stools in Stone's wood-paneled watertower kitchen, Cyn untied the strings on the package that she had carried with her. She unrolled the muslin wrapping and folded back the corners, exposing a solidly molded feather slightly over six inches long and maybe two inches across at its widest point, with hundreds of delicately feathered lines fanning out from the central spine.

"What is it?" he looked up and asked.

"Go ahead," Cyn said, nodding toward it and sweeping her across. "Take a look."

He picked up the feather, ran his index finger along its surface, and examined the snapped-off end. "Where did you get this?"

"In Cuba. I was doing one of my usual scavenger runs, looking for South American artifacts. Fishermen pick up contraband from villages along the Columbian and Venezuelan coasts. Sometimes from farther around the Gulf. It's illegal on the Cuban side, but they earn a little extra if they find a buyer. The fishermen don't always know exactly what kind of treasure they have. But this time, someone *must* have known."

"Because?"

"Because they scared the crap out of me. They tried to kill me. Someone came after me to get it back. It was that important to them."

"Where do the fishermen get them?"

"Mostly from indigenous natives who carry pieces out from deep in the interior. A lot of it's junk. Most of it, really. *Genuine* junk, just not that valuable. I know from experience. I've made a few Cuban contacts over the years. I travel

down on one of those approved educational tours, then part company and set out on my own until they leave. The tour people know me. I pay them a little extra to leave me alone. It's a risk, but they're willing to take it. I've been going down every couple of years just to see what might have turned up in the meantime. I'm not the only one who does that, but I've gone down enough, I'm a good customer. The traders know me. They'll often save something special if they know I'm coming."

"Something like *this*," he said, examining the stub, cut-off end. "It's a stub," he said. It's broken."

"I think it's intentional."

"What is it?"

"It's not the kind of Mayan or Incan relic normally carried out from the interior. You don't recognize it?"

"Not really. Should I?"

"I thought you might. You've got the proof right here."

Cyn stood, crossed over to the far wall, reached high on a bookshelf, and ran her finger along the row of titles. She wedged out a flat volume, opened it, and thumbed through the pages as she sauntered back. She nodded, then turned it around and laid it on the counter in front of him. "Here." She tapped her finger on the page. "Right here."

"You're kidding," Stone said, bending over for a closer look. "The falcon death mask?" he asked as he studied a photograph of the three-quarter face mask of a black beaked falcon with winged feathers arrayed around both sides of the face and above the forehead. "Schliemann's mask?... My God, I think you're right."

"I'm *always* right," she grinned. "Don't you remember?"

"That *is* one of your faults," he said as he picked the single feather up and laid it on the page to compare it to the one in the book.

"It's been missing since the end of the Second World War," Cyn said. "Everyone's been on the lookout for it for decades."

“What’s this on the surface?... Some sort of overlay?”

“Someone painted it. Can you believe that? Maybe an attempt to disguise it. I don’t think any real damage, though. It’s already peeling off.”

“And under the paint?... Gold?”

“Some sort of alloy to strengthen it. If it is what I think it is, do you realize what this means?”

“The Trojan treasure,” he said. “But we *know* where that is. The Russians have it. They got to Berlin first. They hauled it off to Moscow after the war.”

“Most of it. But not all. They denied having any of it at first. But after Glasnost, they owned up that treasure trove. When the experts were allowed to examine what they had, the inventories didn’t match. Several pieces were missing from Schliemann’s original accounting. A six-tiered amethyst and emerald necklace for one. The same one Sophie Schliemann posed for in the *London Times*, other items, as well, mostly priceless jewelry. And then *this* piece, the mask. Can you imagine the historical value of an intact death mask? One that goes way farther back than Schliemann. Way farther back to Helen of Troy, or at least back to that time. There’s even speculation that it may have launched Agamemnon’s ships across the Aegean to sack Troy.”

“And you’re certain the Russians *don’t* have it? All except this fragment.”

“Not a hundred percent. They’re still looking for it themselves. Everyone is.”

Stone laid the feather back on its muslin wrap and looked across at her. “You haven’t told me all of it, have you? If you found this in Cuba, knowing what it was, or thinking you knew, you would have asked around while you were down there. You would have tried to find out more. To get to the bottom of it.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I might have asked a question or two.”

“And?” he asked, impatiently waiting for her to stop drawing it out and get to the point.

“The fishermen? The ones who pass these things along? They’re always looking for something to bring in a little extra cash. They tend to fish in

particular locations, avoiding each other's territory to avoid a fight. And then, beyond that, where they land in Cuba depends on where the fish are running. Nobody actually knows the fishermen enough to remember their names. Certainly not anyone or anything in particular. Just another South American fisherman with another load of junk, fishing in Cuban waters. The Cubans mostly ignore them."

"So, no help there," Stone said.

"Not necessarily. I do have a few friends down there. If they knew anything, they would have told me. All they knew was, this piece came up from the jungle. *Deep in the jungle.*"

"And?"

"Okay. You're right. Apparently, someone did know a little more. The man I bought it from. The man who was killed when I went back."

Stone's brow tightened. "Someone was *killed?* And you were *there?*"

"I was nearly killed. I barely escaped. Don't ask me how. I left on a fishing boat in the middle of a storm, along with a bunch of others getting off the island for their own reasons. We got lucky. A Cuban gunboat nearly caught us. Our captain lost them in a storm. We made it to the Florida Keys, I caught a ride from there, then a plane, and here I am."

"Here you are with *this*," he said, turning the feather around on its wrap.

"A nice little house gift, isn't it?"

"Okay," Stone said. "If the Russians don't have the full mask, if this *is* genuine, then how did a Greek death mask, at least this part of it, end up deep in a South American jungle?"

A grin curled Cyn's lips. "Aren't you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Mischievous minds flow down the same crooked lines," Stone said. "You're thinking the Nazis. Argentina. Maybe Venezuela. Places where dozens of Nazi officers escaped to blend in and start new lives."

"With the value of the German mark flatter than bombed-out Berlin at the time, they would have needed something of value they could exchange for hard

cash.”

“If part of Schliemann’s treasure *is* still around,” Stone speculated, “and don’t tell me you haven’t calculated the numbers, how much might the full mask be worth in today’s dollars?”

“Somewhere in the millions. There’s no way to put a price on it. The important thing, of course, would be to recover it for posterity.”

“Which, of course, you intend to do,” Stone raised his eyebrows and looked directly at her.

Cyn leaned forward, touched her lips to Stone’s ear, and whispered, “Not alone, I hope.”

CHAPTER 25

Berliner Staats Museum

East Berlin

July 17, 1951

“He’s waiting.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Professor Mühler spouted without looking up from his three-foot trench, without laying down his trowel.

“He’s got a Russian with him. An officer in uniform.”

Professor Mühler straightened up, careful not to brush his white smock against the sides of the trench. Erect, his eyes facing the knees of a much younger man.

“Tell him I’ll be in,” Mühler said, picking up a carved piece of pottery, perhaps part of a drinking cup or a serving dish, one among several he had previously laid in an above-ground, marked-off square next to the trench.

“And don’t bother offering him a chair,” Mühler added, laying the pottery back in the trench.

The man above ground grinned as Mühler watched him turn and weave through a menagerie of roped-off squares and trenches. He passed by the bent backs and Khaki-panted rear-ends of a dozen bobbing students, a young hand occasionally appearing above trench level, laying something above-ground for another student to place in a marked-off square, then disappearing again.

Mühler gave the intruders several minutes before placing his elbows on the side of the trench and boosting himself out. He weaved through the maze, lifted the flap of the yellow-striped circus tent, and entered.

Two men stood expressionless, the one behind, a Junior Grade Russian Officer, with his hands buried in the small of his back, not quite at attention, not quite at ease.

“This is Russian Lieutenant Liegger,” the front man said, nodding toward

the uniformed officer. "I'm Friedrich Hertzmann," he added, stretching his hand toward the Professor. "*Inspector* Hertzmann. And you are.... If I'm not mistaken..." he flipped the front sheet of a small spiral notebook. "Hans Mühler."

"That's right."

Inspector Hertzmann continued reading. "Professor of Archeology at the University of Leipzig." He raised an eyebrow as though his statement were a question.

"See here, Inspector. We're under considerable time pressure here. There's still a lot of work to be done. Once you open trenches, there's always the possibility of rain. You must understand."

Hertzmann closed his notebook and looked directly at Mühler. "Professor. You're the one who called us."

"Well, not actually."

The Inspector studied him with a question hanging in the air.

"I notified the Museum Chief," the professor said. "It was he who reported it."

"Yes, well then, perhaps we can get to why he reported it. To *what* you found."

Mühler stared at the Inspector. "A body. Precisely as I said in my report."

"I didn't see a body," the Inspector said.

"Yes, well then, as I said, the body's of no real interest. It's at least seven years old."

"It still could be murder."

"I'm not sure I would use that exact terminology."

"Well, what exactly would you use?" The Inspector flipped his notepad forward several pages. "The Museum Chief said the man was shot in the head. Point blank, according to his report. I believe he read your written report." The Inspector looked at his notes and followed the words with his finger. "The bullet entered the base of the skull. Left temporal. Exited two centimeters above the

rear parietal on the opposite side.” The Inspector looked up. “If that’s your report, I’d call *that* a murder.”

“I’d call it war. It was 1945. This entire place was a slaughterhouse. Right here where you’re standing. Anything that stood, a factory, a warehouser, a museum. It made no difference. They all got bombed, and anything that moved was shot when the invaders stormed in... Murder?... Many didn’t consider it murder. They considered it war. Some considered it target practice.”

The Inspector waited for Mühler’s raised backbone to settle down on his heels before he spoke. “Well then, since you didn’t report this directly, let’s just get it wrapped up and get you back to work.”

“Of course, in this case....” Mühler began, his voice calm again.

“Yes?”

“Well, in this case, it’s pretty clear it wasn’t target practice. I mean, there was a reason. We know that.”

The Inspector waited.

“Money... Millions of Deutsch Marks in gold and artifacts. I mean, it’s obvious, is it not?”

“I’m not sure.”

Mühler nodded toward the courtyard. “The treasure.”

The Inspector looked around. “Heinrich Schliemann? From the yard? From right here.”

“Precisely where we’ve been digging. *Redigging*, I should say. Digging a second time. Naturally, we had to wait until the more essential entities were reconstructed. The hospitals, the schools. Museums, quite naturally, were last on the list.”

“And?”

“Well, that’s it. At this point, as you can see for yourself, we’re just about finished.”

“Digging the trenches.”

“We’ve pieced it all together as best we could, then compared it to the

catalog, the inventory.... It's all accounted for. All the oil pots, water casks, the metal work, the eating implements, and scraping tools. All of it." Mühler paused for impact. "Except, of course, anything of value. Anything worth anything. Everything except the jewelry, the rings, the emeralds, Sophie's necklace. And most especially, the falcon death mask."

"So you figure the man who was killed, whoever he was, was killed in the process of stealing it."

"Inspector, allow me to show you something." Mühler moved down the row to a longer table under the tent. The Inspector followed, leaning forward and watching as the archeologist drew back a canvas sheet, exposing a partial skeleton with its knees drawn up to its chin.

"Parts of it are crushed," Mühler said. "The left hand, as you can see. The fibula. Part of the right foot, especially the toes. The skull, though. Excellent condition, considering. It was obviously protected by something. Most likely a beam when a wall caved in, or a table, something of that order."

"May I?"

"Handle it?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

"Just the skull. Most of the rest of the body is pretty fragile."

The Inspector lifted the skull from the table, held it in both hands, and slowly turned it.

Mühler lifted a small brush from his pocket and used the tip of the handle to point behind the left ear. "You can clearly see where the bullet entered here, then exited on the opposite side, higher up. Indicating that the gun, a low caliber revolver I suspect, would have pointed up at an angle. Like this." He stuck his index finger through the entry hole and pointed to the exit hole on the other side.

The Inspector glanced away from the skull for a second, then looked up at Mühler. "How do you know all this?" he asked.

"Know what?"

"The revolver, the caliber."

"I have a keen interest in weapons, how people meet their demise. A specialty, you might say.... Forensics.... I testify occasionally. I mean, in a certain way, archeology is all about death, isn't it? The death of people. Societies. The older deaths, I write papers about. The newer cases, I testify."

"And which would you classify this?" Hertzmann asked, placing the skull back in the tray.

"World War II. Recent history."

"So, you dig this body up," the Inspector said, nodding toward the skeleton. "A seven-year-old murder. A war crime, if that's what it was, which was not even under the jurisdiction of the Bundestag at the time." The Inspector rolled his eyes toward the Russian Lieutenant standing behind him. "The Bundestag didn't exist in 1945. Not in any credible way. The dictator had taken over."

"It's not the murder I'm concerned about. That's not what I reported."

The Inspector stared at him.

"That fellow was a common soldier. One among hundreds. Thousands. I have no interest at all in any of that. Unless, of course, after all these years, the fact of his demise could still point to what he was guarding."

"Or stealing."

"Whatever it was. The point is, the death mask. That in itself... Well, there's simply no other like it."

"So, you're not reporting a seven-year-old murder then," Hertzmann said, flipping his notepad shut and slipping it back in his jacket. "You're reporting a theft."

"A presumed theft."

"And exactly would you like me to do about it?"

Mühler jutted a protruding chin toward the Russian. "Ask your friend here. Much of the Berlin art and treasure was.... shall we say, repatriated by the Russians, confiscated for safekeeping. They just never got around to returning most of it. Perhaps some sort of bureaucratic foul-up," Mühler snorted. "And the

Americans? By the time they arrived, anything of value was already gone. You know of the Quedlinburg Medieval Collection? Of course, you wouldn't. Valuable art and artifacts that somehow turned up in a Waco Texas, basement owned by an ex-lieutenant Joe Meador. Somehow it got transferred there. Many of our rescuers were thieves.”

The Inspector reached up and centered his tie on the neck. “Yes... Well, Herr Professor,” he began, stretching out his words. “I’m having trouble figuring out what you want me to do about any of this.”

“I’m not exactly certain myself. Perhaps there are old records somewhere. A paper trail. Whatever it is that inspectors do.”

The Inspector reached down, picked the skull up again, and held it at arm’s length as if trying to get a sense of what sort of the man once occupied that skull. “You forget, Professor,” he said. “Whatever you call this incident, there *was* a murder here seven years ago. You don’t blow a man’s head off and then index that kind of event on a file card. No. In this kind of situation, if you were interested in tracking something down, you follow a killer. A man. Not a paper trail. And a man who was operating in chaos. Someone who wanted to get himself lost in that chaos. I’m afraid your treasure and your man, if it was a man and not a woman, are long gone.”

CHAPTER 26

1 Quarter-Mile Railroad Lane

Annapolis

The Present

Stone sat out on the deck of his watertower house, looking out across the railroad track at the calm waters of the Chesapeake Bay reflecting an afternoon glimmer on its surface.

Cyn had arrived the day before – *stumbled in* would be more accurate – with scratches up and down both arms, a package with a feather from an ancient Greek death mask, plus a murder and near escape trailing behind her. Drained of energy and exhausted after drinking too much wine and telling her tale, Stone had tucked her into his bed, lay beside her until she fell asleep, then escaped to the couch and tossed and turned all night, trying to sleep with her story and her presence churning in his mind.

How many times had he and Cyn been together in this house? In the same bed? How many times, after the next time she had left “for good,” had he slept alone in that bed, wishing she were there beside him? How long had it taken for some sense of normalcy to return? *Had it ever returned?* How many times did certain people *never* really leave? They simply hibernate in some dark corner of the mind, waking up at the sight or smell of some reminder that taunts and teases memory.

And now, here she was again, popped back up in his life. She just opened the door to let herself in with a mystery in her hand and an implied offer. An offer he couldn’t refuse. Not that refusal was really an option. Not when it’s more emotion-charged logic.

“I ah...”

Stone bolted up in bed, more tense than he thought. He sat up to face Cyn in his bedroom doorway, dressed in his terry cloth robe, her hair wet from a

shower and pulled back flat on her head, her calf muscles poking below the robe as strong as ever.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t sleep. I took a shower. Cleaned up.”

“Come over here and sit down,” he said, patting the couch.

“How often have we sat on this couch?” she asked as she sauntered across and sat next to him. “Or out on that deck,” she nodded toward the window. “Just sitting there, having a drink, and watching the night take over. It’s so quiet out here. So peaceful.”

“That’s why I like it,” he said. “That and trying to find a piece of history left to rot, decay, and find itself torn down.”

She looked directly at him. “I left the shower running a while. I was hoping you might hear it and join me.”

“I’m trying to ignore you. I don’t want to seem too easy.”

“You were *never* easy. But you *were* damn good.”

“It takes two to tango.”

Cyn raised an eyebrow. “Is that what we were doing here? Dancing a tango?”

“I think we actually *did* tiptoe around a tango once or twice,” Stone said.

“You haven’t been cheating on me, have you? Dancing with someone else?”

“After you Cyn, how could there *be* anyone else?”

“You always knew the right thing to say. But I don’t suppose I’m the only woman who’s heard that same line.”

“It’s not a line. I mean it.”

“That’s flattering,” Cyn said. “I’d like to believe it. It just feels good to be here again. I feel safe here. I always did. Thanks for being here when I need you. There aren’t too many you can count on.”

“Okay, Cyn. What is it you want? You always were able to wrap me around your little finger. I feel that knot tightening around my finger right now.”

“Clayton Lovell Stone,” she said as she turned to look at him. “How can

you be so cynical after all we've meant to each other?"

"That's the problem," he said. "We meant *too* much. And, at the same time, not nearly enough."

"Your psychology training again? Everything has to mean something?"

"Everything does, Cyn. You know that better than most. That's why you're damn good at what you do. Working the circuit to find a lost piece of personal history. You're good at the *personal* part. Getting to know your contacts. *Making it personal.*"

"I just do the nickel and dime stuff. Customers come to you for limousine service. Finding *real* lost treasures. Tracing them down. Figuring out what and where they are and who they belong to."

"Can we get down to business?" Stone shrugged and asked.

"The *mask*?... I guess we can," she said. "*If we're done flirting.*"

"Just keep that terry cloth barrier wrapped around you a little tighter," he said, nodding toward his bathrobe that had begun to slip a few inches off her shoulders.

She grinned and pulled it up and tightened the belt. "I didn't realize it slipped like that."

"So, what else do we know about the mask?" he asked. "What have you left out?"

"Not much."

"Not much, but some. The man you bought it from. The man who was killed. How did you even know about him? How did you find him in the first place?"

"I didn't know about him specifically. When I go down there, I get in touch with my usual sources. They keep their eyes and ears open for me. When they see or hear of something, they let me know. That's what led me to him. I *didn't* know him. Not even a name. I hadn't dealt with him before. All I knew was his location. Where he was."

"But you met him twice, right? You went back when you realized what

you had. You went back. That's when he was killed?"

"I couldn't believe what I had. I don't think *he* knew either. He gave it to me for two-hundred dollars, American. An absolutely ridiculous price for something of this value. Beyond that, there was something else wrong, not quite right."

"Okay"

"It doesn't usually work that way. Usually, a piece like this, a small piece of something larger, is sent along the pipeline as a sample. Someone is looking for a buyer for the rest of it. They send a piece ahead for an interested buyer to verify it."

"It wasn't *that* this time?"

"The bartender didn't mention that. Maybe he didn't know it was a sample. Or maybe he was passing off more than one piece. Maybe he made a mistake. Maybe he got them mixed up and gave me the wrong one."

"That would have been a hell of a mistake. And then when you got back...?"

"I wanted to know where he got it, where it came from. He denied even offering it. That's when I had a feeling someone else was there. Someone behind a curtain. And that's when the bartender was killed. I was lucky to get out of there in one piece."

"So, no leads then. No idea where it came from?"

"It's not quite that bad. I've been in this business a while. When you know how a treasure river runs, you usually find the streams that feed it. In this case, there aren't that many."

"All in South America."

"Somewhere along the northern Gulf Coast. Sometimes Columbia, mostly Venezuela. If someone from the interior wants to sell something of value, if they know its value, they usually get it up to one of the Gulf Coast villages. Something of *this* value, if whoever had it *knew* its value, would have aimed for a particular village. Someone they trusted. Somewhere they knew a particular

fisherman who had worked with them before.”

“Why take that chance? Why not sell it straight from where they got it? From Columbia or Venezuela?”

“For a piece this valuable, they might be looking for a particular buyer. Someone who can afford what they had to offer. That would have meant someone with a personal collection, knowing it could never be seen in public. A lot of Cubans have connections in the States. Mostly in Miami. That would make it far easier for a seller to find a buyer or for a buyer to find a particular piece he was looking for. It’s a supply-and-demand chain that works for both buyer and seller.”

“Something like *this* sample,” Stone said.

“Maybe the bartender made a different kind of mistake. Maybe he was told to expect someone coming by for a sample to verify. Maybe I got there first. Maybe he thought that someone was me.”

“That’s a whole bucketload of maybes,” Stone said.

“Maybe so, but *that’s* real,” she said, nodding toward the feather.

“So, if Cuba is the usual path to get a piece of South America, how do they get it from Cuba to the States?”

“The way I got out. A fishing boat to a trawler.”

“So, a village somewhere on the coast of Columbia or Venezuela. That’s a lot of coastline.”

“I think I can narrow it down a little more than that. I have a few connections who might give us a little better direction.”

“And?”

“Bogota. The heart of the chain.”

CHAPTER 27

Northern Bolivian Jungle

March 1965

Bruno Schuller was willing to concede that the jungle was a perfect environment for snakes, gnats, mosquitos, and hundreds of other bugs and biting creatures, most of which he still found fascinating when they weren't biting or swarming around him. The only semi-humans who could tolerate the jungle were the Chikamonga natives that Schuller used for his experiments. The Chikamongas had accommodated those intolerable conditions over the centuries. They were a self-contained group, which meant they were inbred -- *purely* inbred among a small, indigenous population. Perfect specimens for controlled experimentation. If it weren't for the Chikamongas and a need to hide to protect the project's secrecy, why would anyone in their right mind choose to live in this godforsaken place?

How long had he been here? He knew how long. He could count the endless days as he leaned back in the rocking chair on the front porch of his home office and stared out at the jungle that trapped and confined him. It had been nineteen years since the so-called "miraculous child" had been delivered from Berlin to Rome. And then, from there, thanks to sympathetic Vatican connections, that prized infant had been secreted by cargo ship to Buenos Aires. And then, from there, to its final Bolivian destination. And *some* cargo it was. "*Magnificent,*" Dr. Bruno Schuller thought. The only word he could think of to express the unique quality of that special child. A new beginning. A proud start to the project's second phase was, unfortunately, followed by a whole string of failures and losses.

A feeling of contempt and disgust swept over Schuller as he stood and went inside to confront himself in a full-length mirror that he normally draped with a sheet to avoid the truth of what he looked like, what he had become. In an

odd way, he was special as well. Unfortunately, in the opposite direction. That delivered child, Falcon, had turned out beautiful in every respect. Schuller, in himself, had created the reverse. That child, now grown, exemplified the epidemic of beauty. Schuller, the depths of ugliness and depravity. That child, the best of nature, versus Schuller, the result of tampering with nature.

In his mid-sixties now, with his elongated earlobes, sunken cheeks, bulging eyes, and jagged deep scars that poked through his skin like twisted worms and refused to heal, he no longer recognized the man he saw in his mirror. He understood that he was difficult to look at without flinching or turning away, although he had gradually gotten used to his grotesque appearance by staring at himself in his mirror half-an-hour at a time and forcing himself to repeat, "*That's me now. That's who I am.*"

Schuller had something else in common with that magnificent child, now a grown adult. Neither of them had parents, at least none they knew of. Falcon's parents were functionally irrelevant. They had only been a part of his life for breeding purposes, not for rearing. That was the same for several before the Allied bombing foreshadowed an end to the war, forcing a need to relocate the entire breeding project.

Schuller never knew *his* parents. They were irrelevant in *his* life also. He was a war orphan. This time a casualty of the First World War. His parents, whoever they were, either died in the fighting or had simply wandered off in the midst of the devastation. Thinking back, that may have been an asset. It allowed him a fresh start with a clean slate. He had always fantasized he could be whatever he wanted. As a foundling off the street, he was sent to grow up on a farm with other discarded children, in a place where the animals, the bugs, and the other creatures were his best and only friends, his only real companions. The only ones he trusted.

He was especially fond of the cockroaches, spiders, and beetles he found sneaking and creeping around in corners, in the rotting of fallen trees, or on the slimy edge of a nearby pond. He would sneak away anytime he could to escape

the supervision of his oppressive Prussian overseers who had the audacity to call themselves his “parents.” But, of course, they *weren’t* his parents. He had no parents. What use were parents anyway? He did just fine without any.

Already hot on a scorcher of an afternoon that was bound to get even hotter, Schuller hobbled back out to his porch and eased down into a wide-armed rocking chair. He leaned back and relaxed to try and relieve some of the discomfort he always carried with him.

As a young boy laying on his stomach on the ground in the woods or down by the pond, he found relief and distraction watching those bugs and beetles slink and slither around right in front of his nose, knowing what *he* knew and they *couldn’t* know. That, if he laid perfectly still, he could ease his hand forward and crush one of those bugs to death, or slowly pick one up, lay it in his palm, and squeeze it tight in his fist until its tiny legs and feet popped out between his fingers and clammy yellow puss oozed out in his hand. He had the power to end life or let it creep and crawl along. Or maybe, he thought even way back then, he could do something entirely different. He could mix and match those bugs to create an entirely new better bug. A bug with the creepy-crawly legs of one and the hard shell of another. Or one with pop-eyes that turned around and looked behind itself as it ran, combined with one that stunk to high heaven to keep predators away and licked itself clean when it was free. There was no end to what he might do, at least in his imagination, to create a better bug. In a way, since he had no parents – none he knew of – he would be their parents. As their breeding creator, he would be both their mother and their father. What difference would it make? Bugs wouldn’t care anyway.

He must have been twelve or thirteen when he began picking bugs up, carrying them in his fist as they squirmed to escape, and tossing certain ones together in a weed-filled shoebox he kept under his bed, hoping they would crossbreed and create a wholly new species. They never did. They mostly ignored each other, except when the stronger ate the weaker. There was clearly a life lesson in that.

Real science, as he grew older, especially biological science, had always fascinated him, even before his biology studies at Berlin University. Now, as an adult, he had tried to take a scientist's objective attitude toward his appearance and about everything else, for that matter. After all, that's what he had become. A scientist. His appearance was simply the result of a botched experiment. *Several* botched experiments. Precisely what might be expected from any complicated, long-term endeavor.

At any rate, the past was prologue. What was done was done. One simply had to hang one's hat on the future, assuming there *was* one, assuming *too* many fatal mistakes hadn't already been made. His appearance, *that* mistake, at least projected power and fear in others, both useful commodities.

A sudden, sharp pain gripped his left knee, as it often did. He stiffened and grimaced, then cupped his palms on both sides of his botched knee. He lifted his leg and propped it up on a wooden crate he always kept beside him on the porch. When he wasn't using it for a leg prop, it made a good chess board for a game he always played with himself. No matter who lost.

As the pain subsided, he eased back in his rocker and stared out at the jungle that surrounded and engulfed everything beyond a few cleared roads, the buildings that remained and the ones that were repaired and reconstituted for other purposes. Anything beyond "the trap," as Schuller considered his living quarters, required constantly clearing to keep the jungle from retaking it. He was far more a prisoner there than the natives – his "experimentals," as he called them – who were born and raised in that godforsaken jungle.

What he saw and just beyond was all that remained of the original rubber-plantation town that stretched out directly in front of him. In its day, it bragged of an opera house in the middle of a jungle that Schuller converted into his first laboratory before he moved to larger quarters in a newly constructed lab. A side path that branched led toward what Schuller called "the zoo," where the more dangerous experimentals were caged for their own safety to protect the others. Beyond those cages, a string of three-room houses poked out just far enough for

Schuller to catch a glimpse from his porch if he leaned forward enough in his rocker, an impossible task with his bad leg propped up on a crate.

Still, Schuller thought as he pulled a folded handkerchief from his shirt pocket and mopped his brow, a handful of deadly diseases had already been pulled from nature's grasp and cured. With further effort in that direction, it might be possible to cure others and, beyond that, reinvent the very nature of what it meant to be human. And that, as a former student of his mentor, Josef Mengele, is what Schuller had set out to accomplish.

He doubled over in his rocking chair and gritted his teeth. The damn knee. His *bad* knee. He reached out and dug his index finger in the soft tissue beneath his kneecap. That boney protection had once again slipped off-center, pinching a nerve. He massaged the tenderness enough to gently ease the bone back in its place, then leaned back into the curve of his rocker.

Time was an even greater pressure point. A decision had to be reached, and reached soon. Word of the project's location may have already leaked. They had simply been at it too long. Too many knew. The Mossad – Israeli Intelligence – was already on Mengele's trail in Buenos Aires, and that was intolerably too close. It was only a matter of time before they got a whiff of the project's location that pointed their inquisitive nose in Schuller's direction.

With the pain in his knee eased now, he gripped his leg with both hands and gently lowered his foot onto the porch. The knee was shot. His entire face, what was left of it, had shrunken and withered to that of a man twenty-years older. Instead of extending his life, his self-inflicted experiments had shortened it. The first blush of hope and pride could only carry a project so far. Reality had slowly ground him down to a state of despair. The time had come to end this phase of the project and end himself along with it. With his usual scientist's dedication and precision, he had a plan. He knew what he needed to do. Now, it was time to strike a match and set that plan into action.

CHAPTER 28

Bogota, Columbia

The Present

At the start of any investigation, as Stone knew deep in his bones from his years at the FBI, you start with whatever thread of evidence you had and then follow that thread until a recognizable pattern began to emerge. The start of that thread this time, Stone thought as he and Cyn boarded a plane at Virginia's Dulles Airport bound for Bogota, was a sculpted feather plucked from an ancient Greek death mask. Part of the treasure that Heinrich Schliemann had dug up in Turkey, secretly transported across the Aegean to Athens, and then ended up in Berlin, only to disappear again while Adolf hunkered down in his bunker, holding a gun to his temple, prepared to blow his head off.

That feather – that evidence thread that he and Cyn were following – pointed in the direction of Bogota, where Cyn had learned that artifacts were often carried up from deep in the jungle on their way to Cuba and then across to the States to a buyer.

"It's a complicated route," Stone had said when Cyn described it.

"On purpose..," Cyn had told him. "A lot of it's illegal, so they *keep* it complicated. They want to make their moves harder to trace. It's harder to hit a moving target."

As Stone peered out the 747's window, a bright sun glistened off the plane's wing as they began its descent into Bogota's El Dorado Airport. The flight attendant had already announced the landing and taken her seat, chatting with a colleague as the plane banked left to avoid the massive Monserrate mountain that dominated the city before the craft straightened and leveled off toward the runway.

After touching down and deboarding, they followed the signs to baggage. As Stone waited for the conveyor belt to spring to life, he watched a young girl,

maybe five or six, chase her younger brother around the legs of adult passengers who were busy jockeying for the best spot to grab their luggage as it rose up the shoot. Stone's and Cyn's bags spit out last, both flopped on their sides. When Stone checked the Scotch Tape he had pressed across their zipper opening, his was broken, hers was not. Rough handling maybe, but it could have been searched.

After passing through Customs, a gray-uniformed Immigration Officer nodded for Stone to approach as Cyn waited next in line. "Purpose of your visit?" he asked as he flipped open Stone's passport, paged through it with a practiced thumb, then held the photo up to study it against the man in front of him. "Business or pleasure?"

"Vacation."

He nodded, glanced back at the photograph, flicked the passport shut, and handed it back. "Enjoy your stay."

"Where to?" a thick-necked cab driver asked as soon they boarded a cab and climbed in the back seat.

"The Bogota Victoria," Cyn leaned forward and announced, a hotel she had stayed at before in the upscale La Cabrera district. "It's one of the city's grandest," she eased back and said to Stone. "This one's on me. A couple of nights, anyway. I wanted to get us off to a good start."

"Get us off?"

"To working together. *Being* together again. Besides, I know the Victoria. Everyone does. If you want to impress someone, that's where to meet them. If you want to deny ever being here, they'll accommodate that, too."

They booked for two nights. "And maybe a third," Cyn said to the dark-skinned clerk.

"One room, or one for each?" the clerk asked, glancing at the different names on their passports.

"Just one," Cyn said without hesitation.

"Single bed or twins?"

“Single,” Cyn said. “The best you’ve got. Something we can sink into.”

CHAPTER 29

Northern Bolivian Jungle

March 1964

The sun strung its long shadows through the bars and across the floor of the cages as the heavy stench of excrement mixed with the sweet smell of jungle perfume, a combination that Bruno Schuller had gotten used to over the years.

Schuller stopped in front of the first cage, holding himself well beyond the reach of its occupant. The doctor shook his head and stared at Emule, who sat cross-legged in the middle of his cage, staring back as if waiting to see if Schuller would speak first. Emule was one of the more dangerous experimentals, all of whom were kept in the cages. Some because they were physically dangerous, others because they might escape and were still potentially useful. For the rest, those not in cages, the jungle itself was enough impediment to hold them close to home.

Emule, one of several failed breeding and injecting experiments in which his hands and feet fused at birth in the approximate shape of two claws, was particularly dangerous. With little awareness of his strength, he could spring one of his claws out from his cage, clutch an unsuspecting passerby by the throat, and squeeze his life away before Emule's anger defused and he doubled over in hysterical laughter. A skull-and-crossbones hung high outside his cage as a deadly reminder.

Schuller nodded in Emule's direction and waited another half-minute, but when Schuller got no response, nothing at all, he shrugged and moved down the row to the next cage, set far enough away from Emule to protect its quieter occupant.

Argo's disposition was the opposite of Emule's. He clapped his hands and jumped with glee as Schuller approached. Argon was one of several Petri dish experiments. An egg from two different women in a Petri dish, then an added

mixture of experimental growth hormones, followed by the injecting a sperm and inserting the result in a native woman's womb for incubation and birth. Most of those experiments didn't work. Most gelled and died. As a result, they didn't get beyond the Petri dish. Schuller was hoping for a random positive hit, a lucky fusion. But, as might be expected, trial and error was most often error.

Argon was one among several failed combinations, but at least one that lived. His slow after-birth growth had left him standing fully developed at the height of 2 feet, 7 inches on his toes, and stretching his neck to gain another half inch.

"Good morning, Argon."

"Morning, Boss! Good morning!"

For the sake of discipline, Schuller generally insisted that all the experimentals call him *Dr. Schuller*, but Argon's infectious grin and squeaky voice sliced right through Schuller's resistance. Beyond that, Schuller liked being called "Boss." He *was* the boss.

"How did your medicine go down today?" Schuller asked.

"Better, Boss. Not that usual glue they pump in my veins. That stuff makes me sleepy. I lose my appetite."

"It's worth the sacrifice," Schuller reassured him. "We need to determine which formula works best. It takes a lot of fine-tuning. You're helping us with that. You're doing good work. We appreciate your effort. Your sacrifice."

"Is this my walk-around day? Do I get a walk?"

"I'll check the schedule," Schuller said, raising his index finger. "But you must promise not to try and run away again. That can't be allowed."

"Where could I run? There's nothing but jungle out there."

"Try and remember that. You could be eaten alive. You wouldn't want that now, would you?... I'll check the schedule on the walk. I'll send someone back to let you know."

"I like my walks."

"I know you do. I'll send someone down."

Shelana – a mixed-sex specimen with two sets of legs, each pointing in opposite directions – cowered in a corner of the next cage. She might have been euthanized early on, Schuller recalled as he passed her cage without stopping. But pain tolerance was a frequent requirement in a lengthy experimental procedure. Shelana was kept to test those limits. The same with Shelana's non-identical twin, Stenga, whose twisted knees bent away from each other, causing her to face one way and crawl like a crippled spider in the opposite direction.

Housed in adjacent cages, Shelana and Stenga reassured and comforted each other, silently communicating in ways not fully understood, providing a unique opportunity to study nonverbal communication. On the downside of keeping Stenga, she had never learned proper toilet habits. She had difficulty reaching where she needed to stretch her arm around behind her to do a proper cleaning job. She often stunk to high heaven in ways that upset and offended the others along the row. Schuller always breathed as shallowly as possible as he passed her cage. He made a mental note to order an extra cleaning before they fed her lunch.

Blatia, in the next cage down the row – pacing back and forth as Schuller neared – served a unique purpose of hair growth. Body hair was an incidental breeding quality but still crucial for humans whose hair follicles lose their thickness and sheen with age. Blatia was a cleaning issue in her own way. Her full-bodied hair sprouted at the end of that hair-growth spectrum. Well into her forties now, she required biweekly trimming, cleaning, and sanitizing simply to keep the relentless jungle bugs and beetles from burrowing in and infecting her body, then passing those diseases down the row, cage-by-cage.

There was always the question of which experimentals to keep and which to discard. Certain mistakes were worth keeping simply to determine what went wrong. All the obvious miscalculations could be immediately eliminated to make room for those deemed worthy of further study.

Schuller stopped and turned to catch a glimpse of the Oberst Nazi Colonel stepping toward him from the other end of the row. The Oberst, 76 now, his

crusted, weather-beaten face devoid of space between an avalanche of wrinkles, awaited Schuller's predictable morning cage-walk. Both hands stuffed in his pants pockets as Schuller neared, the former Nazi fighter pilot gazed wistfully toward the sky as if, after all these years, the sky was where he truly belonged and would soon be headed for good.

Schuller distrusted the Oberst. He always had. The man considered himself the official guardian – *the natural father even* – of the special child he had shuttled across from Berlin to Bolivia in those heady early days when they were all running for their lives. Along with that child, the Oberst had carried a stash of stolen jewels and an ancient death mask to trade or barter for seed money until their new venture got off the ground and their trusted sources of support began to flow in.

Schuller was willing to concede that the Oberst may have actually been the boy's official guardian in those dangerous early days, but that was only symbolic. The Third Reich was the boy's true father. Falcon, as they came to call the boy after the falcon death mask, represented the culmination of years of Aryan breeding back in the fatherland. The best-of-the-best in strength, stamina, intelligence, and human beauty. That breeding feat was both the essence of the original Nazi experiments and the heart of its limitation. Falcon was *entirely* the result of selective breeding, of man-to-woman copulation.

In Falcon's case, of course, his parental selection was hardly natural. It was *highly* selective. Joseph Mengele, the project's first director, had spent years breeding the best physical and mental qualities from wherever he could find them in Germany. Toward the end of that first phase, he had even rounded up the best of clear-skinned Aryans from Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Housed together in luxury, scantily clothed with an array of alcoholic beverages available and patriotic instructions to “fuck for the sake of the nation,” they were more than willing to cooperate. Nine months later, Mengele had his result with little prodding required.

Falcon was the supreme result of one of those pairings. The Falcon Project

– at least its *current* phase – was Schuller’s attempt to leapfrog those inherent breeding limitations by fusing genes and implanting fertilized eggs in the wombs of native women and then observe and measure the results. Failures, of course, were expected, especially in the early stages of any initial effort. Schuller had always considered those inevitable failures merely stepping stones on a steep climb to success.

Schuller nodded toward the man waiting for him at the far end of the row.
“Guten morgen, Oberst.”

The Oberst’s actual name was Malcomb Dorner. But, like a child who never grew up, or a pilot who never fully left the airfield, Dorner insisted on being called Oberst, his final rank in the Luftwaffe.

“Schuller,” the Oberst said with a stretched grin that always seemed pasted on a stoic face that hardly changed no matter his mood. “The villagers? The workers? They seem more restless than usual this morning. Like maybe they’re picking up on something. Have you noticed?”

“Not really.”

“It still seems rather odd, does it not?”

“They’re a superstitious lot,” Schuller said, feeling no compulsion to reveal any more than the Oberst might already know. “Maybe a strange track in the jungle. Things happen. Unpredictable things... How is Falcon?”

The Oberst shrugged. “Quiet. Pensive.”

“But secretive? He can still be trusted?”

“As much as any of us. He knows our cause. He knows the risks involved. He knows what we’re after.”

“He also knows the sacrifices. The difficulty of the task. The failures, the losses.”

The Oberst glanced down the row of cages and asked, “You referring to those?”

“Those and the ones in the village. The ones that run loose.”

“How long have you been at this now? Thirty years?”

“Thirty-two,” Schuller corrected him.

“And how much have you accomplished in those thirty-two years?”

“Less than I had hoped.”

“Far less, I should say. There’s nothing else like him. Nothing like Falcon. He was.... He still *is* the ideal. You’ve come nowhere close to matching that in all this time. Nowhere near.”

“You would know better than most. You’ve been his guardian.”

“You’ve never admitted that fact.”

“I emphasize *guard*. Not his father... But I will admit, you’ve done your part to help raise him. You’ve seen to his education. All those books from around the world in all those languages. Newspapers. Newsreels snuck in. All the tutors sworn to secrecy.”

“Sworn to secrecy. Not *locked* in,” the Oberst said. “One or two might have broken that oath. Others, some of the experimentals who escaped in the jungle...”

“Would never have found their way out,” Schuller finished the Oberst’s sentence.

“One or two may have. That was another mistake. Allowing them to wonder.”

“There were never enough cages to house them all.”

“How many failures can you make and still consider any of this a success?”

Schuller said nothing. The problem was, he agreed. He’d been thinking that way himself for months now.

“The project’s too big,” the Oberst said. “You’ve been at it too long, and too many know. It’s a virus. Secrets spread. You’ve created more freaks than successes. It’s over. You’ve failed. It’s done.”

“We’ve been over this before,” Schuller said. “You know what needs to be done. Just do your part.”

CHAPTER 30

Bogota, Columbia

The Present

Cyn knew that Stone still had his former FBI resources. He always said they could pull his badge, but they couldn't pull the connections and contacts he'd developed over the years. Cyn had her credentials from academia as Dr. Slater and from her antique and treasures trading business. That was another reason for the two of them to work together, she thought, as she sat waiting to connect with one of her resources at a window counter where she could watch for anyone coming and going.

She had spent a restless night staring wide-eyed at the ceiling of her Bogota Victoria Hotel room, lying there next to a man who apparently slept soundly without making a single move toward her. That wasn't the first night Stone had resisted her since she had arrived back in his life. It was the same story that first night in Annapolis when she barged in exhausted but excited about her find. After they had talked, when it came time to turn in, he casually offered her his bed, stretched out on the couch, and apparently slept soundly through the night.

There was something unnerving about that. She was used to ignoring unwanted advances. But *she* was the one who did the ignoring. Rejection was a card she liked to keep in her own back pocket. Maybe Stone's challenge was a personal test to see if he could keep his hands, feet, and other body parts on his side of the bed. Or maybe it was the worst of all possibilities. Maybe she had lost her allure. She knew that would happen one day. Just not today. Not *this* today. Maybe never, if she raised her age limit to aging men as she grew older. But by god, that had to be years off. Decades even. Stone was simply an exception to the usual experience.

A fascination with erotic power had intrigued her ever since she realized

she had that power. She never relied on her body as a pawn or a queen in some sort of erotic chess game – well, maybe, on occasion, she had – but eroticism clearly had its uses. She had pried open more than a few secrets from an open mouth of rapture. But with Stone, it was always more a matter of who was in charge, of who *had* that power. Who could seduce who? Who could hold out longer and who would eventually give in? Maybe *that's* what he was doing. What they both were doing. Playing one of their no-win, no-lose stalemates. Maybe he *did* want her. *He just didn't want her to know that.* He was willing to take the loss to avoid giving her the satisfaction. If he kept it up, maybe she might have to make the first approach. He might find it harder to turn down a direct offer, especially one on full display.

After waking up that morning and climbing out on different sides of their bed, they had both washed up and dressed like an old married couple getting ready for work. They had gone down to the hotel lobby and asked the desk clerk for directions to a decent breakfast and coffee shop and were directed to the Toma Café.

“Half-a-block down on the right,” the desk clerk glanced toward the door and said, “Out the front and around the corner.”

The narrow-roomed Toma Café huddled in the shadow of the ten-story Victoria. The narrow café’s tiny round tables scattered haphazardly along both walls as they entered a brightly lit room. It’s crunched-together seating, as they found an empty table near the rear, required them to scrape their knees when they sat across from each other. Even with that forced intimacy, with the street noise and customers calling out orders to harried waiters and waitresses, they still had to speak above a loud whisper to hear each other.

“How’d you sleep,” Cyn had gotten up the nerve to ask after they had ordered and their coffee was delivered.

“Fine...And you?”

“Like a crumpled-up leaf flowing down a stream in a storm.”

He clinked his coffee cup down and looked across at her. “What the hell

does that mean?"

"It means I *couldn't* sleep. Too much on my mind."

"Like?"

"Like everything. All of it. Like what we're after," she had told him, leaving out the fact that him lying next to her in bed, perfectly sound asleep, was a huge part of what had kept her awake.

After they had finished breakfast, Stone called one of his Bogota connections to get the name of someone local who he said might be able to help them, someone who didn't do emails or phone calls, who had to be contacted directly. Emails left trails. Voice calls could be recorded. Silence and emptiness left no trail.

Cyn had left the Toma by herself while Stone paid the check, still a man's prerogative, in her opinion. She had taken a cab to an antique dealer she had previously dealt with, a woman noted for side-deals that were more under-the-table than on the up-and-up. More in-and-out an alley door than through the front.

The dealer told her that for fifty American dollars, she would see what she could find out about the sale or movement of lost or stolen treasures. She said, if she could find out anything, it wouldn't take her long and that Cyn should come back in half-an-hour. After wandering down the block, looking in the windows of several other antique shops before returning, the dealer told her that someone who knew about that sort of movement had agreed to see her and that she should take a cab to the corner of Carrera 7 and Calle 56 in the Bosque Calderón section and have a seat on a counter stool at the window of a small restaurant where she could be observed before she was contacted.

She grabbed a cab that wound its way down a twisting labyrinth of narrow roads and alleyways that seemed to follow a path for running water than any squared-off urban planning. When she arrived at the designated lunch counter, a stool by the window worked just as well for her to watch as for anyone watching her. Facing the street, she could observe anyone driving by, passing along the

sidewalk, or crossing over at the next corner.

She ordered coffee, telling the man behind the counter that she was meeting someone and wanted to hold off before she ordered anything, hoping it wouldn't come to that as she examined the menu. She waited until her coffee grew cold before ordering another round and then waited for that to cool from lukewarm to tepid.

She nervously twisted her cup around in its saucer as she watched the corner stoplight turn green to yellow, then to red again as two buildings on the other side stretched their morning shadows across the road like thick fingers digging their nails into their neighbor's facades. Several motorbikes buzzed by out front, ridden mainly by hunched-over young men driving as if they were in a hurry to make a delivery and scurry out of this neighborhood as quickly as possible.

Then she saw a man in a pinstriped business suit too dressed up for the neighborhood. She watched him stop at the corner and glance over his shoulder as if he thought someone might be following. Then he turned back again, waited for the light to change, and hurried quickly across and down the sidewalk.

Was that the man she was sent to meet? Had he been spooked by someone after him? Cyn had been given no description. She had simply been told to wait on a stool by the window. But how would anyone even know if a window stool would be available? She was the only one there. Maybe it was just assumed, or maybe, whoever she was meeting, knew the owner and had told him to keep it open. Maybe this was one of those neighborhoods where everyone knew everyone and everyone else's business. Cyn knew exactly how that worked from growing up on a ranch near the small town of Porter, Montana, where everyone did know everyone's business.

She thought of her grandfather. The small-town Porter was just her school life. She spent all her summers with her Italian grandparents in Baltimore's Little Italy, another tight-knit neighborhood half a continent away from her pesky ranch brothers, where she could explore what it meant to be Italian and what it

meant to be a growing girl. An Italian girl growing up to be an Italian woman.

As far back as she could remember, she had always been fascinated with history on both sides of the country; in both her Eastern Italian roots and the history of the west with its Anasazi petroglyphs embedded in the red rocks on the family ranch. She would sometimes ride out on horseback just as the sun began to set, tether her horse at the foot of a red rock cliff, and lay flat on her back, pretending to *be* an Anasazi waiting for the men to return from a hunt holding up a string of rabbits, then handing them to the women to prepare a feast around a blazing fire. It had always seemed to her an accident of fate and timing that she was lying there with her parents waiting for her back at the ranch instead of her Anasazi parents she might have had if she had been born close to that spot at an earlier time. How much of who we are and what we know is a pure coincidence of birth, a random spit of life dropped down in a spinning bucket of time and history?

And then, of course, there was her life in the company of her Italian grandfather who loved the more recent history he found using his metal detector after he'd retired as a meter reader from the Baltimore Gas & Electric Company.

"I been walkin,' and readin' meters all my life," he liked to tell Cyn as she tagged along on one of his metal-detector scavenger hunts, sweeping the ground with the pancake side of the detector, listening for pings and pong and then sweeping that hot spot again when he heard one. "If I stop walkin' now," he'd say. "I'll fall over dead. And even if I did, my feet would keep movin' outta habit. You wouldn't want that now, would ya?" he would glance down with a grin as he asked his granddaughter that terrible question.

"No, Grandpa! You're *never* going to die. Promise me you won't."

"Can't promise you that. Everyone dies. You too, someday. But we all leave our memories behind. Our memories are the shadows after we're gone. Like one of these," he would say, stuffing one of his big hands deep in a pants pocket and fishing out a 1923 Buffalo nickel that he had found on one of his hunts.

“Here, take it,” he would nod and say, laying it gently in her open palm. “Can you feel the spirit in that?... Go ahead. Rub it around a little. Can you feel how it’s worn down even after I cleaned it? Someone else held that very nickel in their hand. A *lot* of someones. Maybe they paid their rent with it, or maybe saved it up to send a daughter just like you to college or somethin.’ That’s a real piece of history right there. It has a story to tell. Sometimes, when you close your eyes, you can even see it?”

“Yes, Grandpa. I can. I can see it.”

“Can you feel what that life must’*a* been like for that person?”

Of course, she could feel it. At least, she thought she could. She had already done that with the Anasazi petroglyphs back on the ranch.

Their shared interest in history – what turned out to be an obsession for both – drew her and Stone together like two ancient mariners in separate boats locking oars and rowing side-by-side, at least for a while. It wasn’t enough to moor them together permanently, but more than enough that neither one wanted to permanently separate and drift apart.

But maybe it was more than that. More personal, having nothing to do with Stone. She was never quite sure who she was or where she belonged. East Coast Baltimore or out west in Montana? Rugged cowgirl or traditional Italian? Maybe that was why she had never settled down or stayed with anyone for long. Maybe that was why she was always so antsy. How could she ever fully connect with anyone until she was fully connected with herself? Maybe that was a part of her interest in history. Trying to put the pieces of her own history together in a way that fit without a question mark in the middle.

All of which she had no time to think about now, she thought, as she looked out the lunch counter then glanced at her watch. She had been sent on a wild goose chase with no goose of any kind in sight. But just as she was about to nod to the waiter for her check, he came from behind the counter and said, “No charge on the coffee. I got a message for you. There’s a movie house two blocks down the other side. A porn movie house. Don’t bother buying a ticket. Just walk

in and sit in the middle in the back row. Wait there. You'll be found."

CHAPTER 31

Northern Bolivian Jungle

March 1964

The central room of Bruno Schuller's single-story, flat-roof, jungle home-office reflected functional practicality-- everything he might need within reach, everything neat and tidy. A double-stack of graph paper and two stacks of #7 white bond sat squared off on the top of his roll-top desk. Evenly spaced in the center of the back, three thick-handled German coffee mugs, black ink pens in the middle, red pens in the left, and a dozen yellow #2 pencils in the right. An organized desk, in Schuller's mind, sets a standard for an organized mind.

A falcon death mask, the symbol of the South American part of the Falcon Project, hung on the wall directly behind him. In Greek mythology, the falcon represented a dying soul soaring to the heavens to foreshadow its rebirth and renewal. What could be more appropriate than a renewal and rebirth of humankind?

When Schuller's bedroom door creaked open, he swung around in his desk chair to face Margo. She stood there with her hands at her side and her usual insipid look across her face as if she had no idea which way to turn or head next. At one-third Schuller's age, Margo had been his most recent maid and concubine, his only real company of late. The only native woman he truly trusted. When he nodded, she stepped across the room dressed in a purple-flowered sarong wrapped beneath her bare breasts, her feet shuffling unseen below the swaying fabric.

With his sunken cheeks, stubbed nose, and elongated ears, Margo was the only inbred who could look at him squarely in the eye without flinching or looking away. She allowed him to make love to her face-to-face without requiring him to turn the lights off or insisting on candles across a darkened room. In his final moment of ecstasy, she allowed him to pretend he was normal.

“Yes?” he asked. “What is it?”

“Nothing, Doctor. I just came to see if you wanted anything. Anything else.”

“That’ll be quite enough for today. Except perhaps straighten the bed up and clean up in the kitchen.”

As Margo nodded and turned and left, Schuller leaned back in his chair and tried to readjust his knee to avoid the inevitable pain of moving too far or too fast.

Aside from the falcon death mask, the only other two objects to adorn his walls hung just above his desk, overlooking his constantly evolving plans. The first, on the left, a black-and-white photograph of his mentor, a young Josef Mengele, dressed in a business jacket and a white-collared shirt and a striped tie, Schuller’s spiritual leader glaring down at him with eyes as sharp and clear as a spring-fed lake. No uniform. His Nazi allegiance was merely a means, not an end. It was that *end*, his human breeding experiments, that mattered.

On the wall to the right of Mengele, hung a simply-framed, black-and-white photograph of a heavily-mustached Charles Davenport. Davenport, a Harvard-trained American biologist, pioneered the statistical correlation between certain favorable human traits with certain intermarriages and human breeding practices. It had been left to Mengele, later passed on to Schuller, to put those breeding practices *into* practice when given the opportunity the Third Reich had enthusiastically financed and supported.

But all that early Phase One effort abruptly ended when the allies swept across Europe in World War II. Seeing that disruption coming, the logistics, operation, and location for Phase Two had been anticipated and planned. And now that second phase -- what Schuller called the “Falcon” phase -- was winding down. The problem was not a matter of will, determination, or desire. It was a problem of selective breeding -- a slow, meticulous process, especially among the natives whom Schuller wished to breed who didn’t particularly want to cooperate. This phase of the Falcon Project, Schuller’s phase, had slowly

descended into total disaster. And now, with the possibility of enemies closing in, it was clearly time to...

“Doctor.”

“*What?*” Schuller stiffened and yelled, turning in his chair to find Margo standing in the center of the room again, her arms behind her back as if she were hiding something.

“What is it *now*? What do you want?”

“Nothing, Doctor. Nothing at all. I just...”

“Get out. Go.... No. Wait. Find Falcon in one of the breeding rooms. Tell him to get dressed and get over here. I want to see him in an hour.”

CHAPTER 32

Bogota, Columbia

The Present

Frank Jamison, a tall, lean man with a flawless Roman nose, a rigid backbone, and a pronounced tic in his right shoulder, ambled along a shaded park path and took a seat next to Stone on the third bench north of the central fountain. Stone had laid his sunglasses next to him, the signal Jamison had been told to look for.

Stone knew that Jamison had been instructed to meet and provide him with just enough information to satisfy him and get him out of Bogota as quickly as possible while, at the same time, giving him as *little* as possible.

“The consulate sent me, Mister...”

Stone held up a hand. “No names,” he said, nodding across the park. “It’s hard to record anything out in the open like this, unless you happen to have a microphone dish set up in one of those buildings over there.”

“Right,” Jamison said. He was a youngish man somewhere in his early 20s, undoubtedly starting at the bottom and hoping to work his way up but still unsure his supervisors thought he was good enough to give him a boost or angle him off in a no-growth desk job.

Stone knew the type. Eager to please but not quite sure how. A buttoned-up kind of guy with a starched white shirt that choked his Adam's apple, leaving just enough breathing room to swallow an hors d'oeuvre at an embassy cocktail party and actually get it down without looking like he was swallowing a duck. He was undoubtedly perpetually nervous without a stiff drink in the evening, and sported a pasted-on “Yes, Sir” smile that he practiced in front of his mirror before leaving in the morning. His girlfriend, if he was lucky enough to have one, had to understand that he would have to pull up and pull out whenever duty called. In short, he was an agency man first-and-foremost who would eventually

have to dump all that artificiality if he actually wanted to rise up that power ladder far enough to set his own course and ignore some of those rules.

“They said you wanted to know something about...Well... They didn’t exactly say. They just said you had influence, you knew a few people. That we should help.”

“What else did they say?”

“Not much.”

“What did they imply?”

“What do you mean ‘imply’?”

“You tell me.”

“Look, I’m not supposed to...”

“I know. Say more than you have to. I know how that works.”

“You’re one of us? *Were* one of us?”

“Another agency. We all work together when we need to. Sometimes the right hand needs to know what the left hand’s up to so the bad guys don’t sneak through the cracks in the middle.”

“I *did* hear you are no longer with us. That you were out.”

“Let’s just say a mutual parting of the ways.”

“Friendly?”

“About as friendly as a friendly divorce gets when you break the rules. I broke one of the rules.”

“So, you were fired?”

“I like to think of it as an involuntary retirement. You’re just starting out. You need to learn which rules you can break and which ones you can’t.”

“How do you tell the difference?”

“That’s the secret, isn’t it? It all depends on who you *are* and who you *know*.”

“Meaning?”

“The higher up, the more rules you can break. You just have to know which ones are essential to the job.”

“I’ll try and remember that. Now, how can I help? What exactly are you looking for?”

“I’m following the trail of a piece of antiquity. A *specific* piece. I’ve been told that it may have passed through here, right through Bogota, before it traveled up north, headed for Cuba and then the States. Does that have the right ring to it? Does that make any sense?”

“It does, if you’re following cocaine. The drug trails. You might want to stay clear of those. Too many who follow those trails never return. They just disappear out there in the jungle somewhere. Their bodies never found for a decent burial.”

“I’m thinking of cremation anyway.”

“You still need something to burn... How much do you know about Columbian history? *Recent* history? Bogota in particular?”

Stone shrugged. “Drug capital of the world in the ’70s and ‘80s. Which made it the murder capital. A civil war between the north and south. They made a recent truce. Weapons turned in. Everything on standby, cops and cartel, all waiting to see if it holds.”

“That’s pretty much it,” Jameson said. “Pablo Escobar was the heart and soul of it. The muscle. He was head honcho of the Medellín Cartel who made a fortune trafficking cocaine through Columbia up to the States. He’s the one who established those drug routes. First through the jungle and then by boat across to Florida, until Miami Vice wised up with a bigger boat budget and ran down his water deliveries with faster gunboats. He essentially ran the government down here for a while. Bought and paid for. He once had the audacity to try and bomb the Columbian Supreme Court when they ruled against him. Of course, he couldn’t have gotten away with that without the tacit support of the native population, especially up north. All the drug routes run through their territory to get where they’re going.”

“What happened?”

“You mean to Escobar?... Everyone got tired of all the graft and killings,

all that blood in the streets. You couldn't go out for a stroll in the evening without any assurance you wouldn't get cut down in the crossfire. It wasn't safe anywhere, even in the small towns and villages. And then, the final straw that broke the Medellín's back, Uncle Sam came down with a fist full of money in one hand and a military sledgehammer in the other. Escobar was finally more trouble than he was worth. He had to go."

"Killed, right?"

"Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid style. Over a hundred Federales and the army's elite strike force surrounded his hide-out. Bullets pretty much flew in every direction for close to twenty minutes. They found his body two rooftops down with more holes than a sieve. He died a day after his forty-fourth birthday. Happy birthday."

"And that pretty much ended it?"

"You mean the coke traffic?... It slowed it down. At least for a while."

"Which brings me back to my question."

"You want to know about those drug routes. How something other than drugs might have moved through that jungle that wasn't exactly on the open market."

"That's basically it."

"The merchandise is sometimes different. The trails don't change."

"Do you know them? Do you know where they run?"

"There are only so many ways to get through those valleys. They snake through hell, that's for sure. It's nothing but dense jungle up there. Like I say, someone could easily disappear. You're not thinking of going?"

CHAPTER 33

Northern Bolivian Jungle

March 1951

Bruno Schuller had long ago concluded that perfect facial beauty required an equal division down a facial middle-line so that one side of the face exactly duplicates the other side. Beyond that, an oval face and large, round eyes, and high cheekbones in women. Blemish-free skin in both sexes, and both sexes with a face the length of which was precisely equivalent to three nose-lengths from the hairline to the tip of the chin. The best of human perfection, face and torso, followed the “golden mean” proportions that Leonardo da Vinci understood and applied to his statue of David.

Schuller didn’t dispute the idea that true beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. It was simply that most beholder’s eyes tended to dwell on the same characteristics. Nearly everyone in every culture has the same *general* idea of beauty, and the same holds for ugly. Most eyes instinctively know what to turn away from.

Quasimodo, for example – or the Beast in Beauty and the Beast, or the tortured side of the Phantom in The Phantom of the Opera – better fit the shape and proportions of Schuller’s distorted face and body, already a good distance from da Vinci’s golden mean even before he started tampering with it. Unfortunately, all those growth hormones, exotic plant potions, and extracted venoms turned out to be more deforming than growth or beauty enhancing. The accumulated result, Schuller thought as he sat at his desk and stared at himself in his hand mirror, was enough to scare a dragon’s baby off its mother’s breast.

After several minutes examining the results of his disastrous decisions, he could no longer stand the sight of his own self-betrayal. He opened a bottom drawer in his desk and slid the mirror beneath a silk cloth next to a German Walther PPK pistol.

The irony of it, he thought, as he straightened again, was that Falcon, the epitome of male beauty, was on his way. And the irony of that, Schuller had played a crucial part in Falcon's birth. He was in Germany at the very time that breeding match resulted in Falcon.

Schuller admired Falcon in many ways. He exemplified the best so far in human potential and physical perfection. Precisely what Schuller had once hoped to surpass in the second phase, the Falcon project. But the higher one's hopes, the further they have to fall. Hope springs eternal only until the weight of reality tumbles them into an abyss, and all that remains is despair, loss, and disappointment.

Schuller stiffened when the door to his front porch abruptly opened and Falcon sauntered in with his usual mix of confidence, arrogance, and authority. He crossed the room as if he owned the place, as if *Schuller* was *his* guest, as if this was *his* house and office and not the other way around.

"Schuller," Falcon said, the name Falcon had chosen to call the doctor ever since he reached the age of thirteen. Everyone else called him Dr. Schuller.

"Falcon," Schuller said as Falcon plunked himself down on one of two overstuffed chairs and spread his large frame out, requiring Schuller to stand from his desk and cross the room to join him.

"I've been expecting your call," Falcon said. "I was starting to wonder what took you this long. When you'd get around to it."

"Get around to what?"

Falcon glanced toward a falcon death mask hanging on the wall, the mask the Oberst had delivered to Schuller along with Falcon as an infant. "Around to *that*," Falcon said, turning back and looking directly across at Schuller. "To the status of the Falcon project. To where it stands. To the obvious."

"It's *that* obvious?" Schuller asked.

"It's hard to put a good face on failure. Even a falcon can't soar high enough to avoid the reality beneath. None of your experiments have gone well in recent months. Really, for over a year. It is obvious how far off-track things are."

Falcon had been christened ‘Falcon’ after the falcon death mask. He had no other name prior to that, none he knew of. He was simply called ‘Falcon,’ a supreme example of selective breeding in the German phase of the project. His appearance itself was striking. Intently focused, his crystal blue eyes sent delight and chills down the spines of everyone he encountered or directly engaged. His thick blond hair was nearly crystal white. His blemish-free skin tinged a natural tan. His tightly-muscled body weight varied little around 183 pounds standing stark naked at his regular 6 A.M. morning weigh-in. At 6'4, he towered over Schuller’s now dwarfed body, even more so over the indigenous natives who worked in the lab or were selected for experimental control or breeding purposes.

“Of course, you’re right,” Schuller admitted. “There’s no use denying it. Things *have* gone poorly of late.”

“*Of late?*”

“For a while, then.”

Schuller had long resigned himself to accepting most of Falcon’s conclusions, and even took his advice into consideration ever since he was a boy of fifteen or so. He had been a phenomenon right from the start -- physically, mentally, and emotionally. At the unheard of age of three months, shortly after his arrival, when Schuller reached into his crib to lift the infant out, the baby grasped Schuller’s index fingers with an iron grip, then hoisted himself up in one quick yank, clinging to the crib railing and grinning as if he understood that astonishing early accomplishment.

By the age of four, he had already developed the abdominal muscles of a youthful gymnast. By five – able to speak with the vocabulary of a nine or ten-year-old – he was easily able to hoist himself up a dangling, twenty-five-foot jungle vine, then slide down with one arm free, grinning and waving to the astonishment of those below. At around that same age, he fell into the habit of lifting huge river rocks, the size of bowling balls, and tossing them ten or fifteen feet into the water as if they were lightweight basketballs, often hitting a floating

target he aimed at. Although his temperament was usually even, he once became so angry when he didn't get his way, he punched a hole in a wall with a bare fist and then stormed across the room and punched a hole on the other side. It was clear from the beginning, as had been hoped and expected, that Falcon was a superior boy on his way to becoming a superior human.

"I agree with your assessment," Schuller said to the now nineteen-year-old sitting across from him. "The entire project has fallen apart. Nothing has gone as planned. We hoped for the best. It was our techniques, our methods, and our current knowledge of how the human body works that reached a dead end. We simply couldn't find the breakthrough we needed."

"You once called this your 'God Scheme,'" Falcon said as he leaned his thick elbows on his knees, resting his chin in his hands.

"Not a *literal* God. When you understand the rules of nature, you *become* God. The problem is, nature's rules are complicated. We've made some progress. We've simply gone as far as we can with what we know. You've seen for yourself. You've stood alongside me for much of it. You *know* how far we've come and what remains."

"A lot of devastation left along the way."

"An unfortunate result of any complicated attempt at discovery."

"Yours were humans. The experimentals."

"There was no way around that. When the subject *is* humans, it *requires* humans. We set out to give everyone the tools to reshape themselves. Isn't that what everyone wants? To have that power in their own hands?"

Falcon shook his head. "How many times have I heard that speech? It keeps evolving. How much of that is simply a rationalization for what you've done? For all the mistakes you've made?"

"Don't we all justify what we do? Don't we try to shine our best light on it? Some good came of it. You are a shining example of that."

"Of selective breeding. Of the *old* way. I've seen my records. You've shown me. Neither of my biological parents, selected for their particular

qualities, guaranteed I would be the result. I was born an unpredictable mix of both. And even discounting the fact that a different sperm from my father burrowing into a different egg from my mother on that particular mating, for better or worse, I wouldn't be here. Someone else would be sitting across from you. All selective breeding does is narrow down the possibilities... You started mating me with others *when*? When I was *how old*? *Eleven*? As soon as I was able. You tried for consistency. Even there, you haven't succeeded."

"You weren't forced. On the contrary, you seemed to enjoy it."

"What boy of eleven wouldn't?"

"You were the constant. The control. It allowed us to compare breeding results with different women. It was all useful work. It could only take us so far."

"How many have I bred?"

"Twenty. Twenty-one. I have to examine the records."

"And how many of those met your exacting criteria of perfection?"

"A few came close. Especially the twins, early on. Those two who follow you around like puppy dogs."

Falcon straightened up in his chair. "Lance and Thrust. And even those two were the result of random breeding factors you couldn't have known until you saw the results."

"You're point being?" Schuller asked.

"The same as yours. You've reached the end of the line with selective breeding. There's nowhere else to go with that. The future's in genetic engineering, not selective breeding, and you just can't do that in a makeshift jungle laboratory. You need precisely controlled refrigeration, for one. A contamination-free environment. And more."

Schuller shrugged. A discussion with Falcon was rarely simple, not with Falcon always thinking a step ahead and often three or four. It was just as often Falcon teaching Schuller as the other way around. "Let's be clear about something," Schuller said. "You've always been the project's standard-bearer, the rightful heir to the project. My time is up. What there is to carry on, if there

is any hope remaining, rests on your shoulders, not mine.”

“I never wanted that. I never asked for it.”

“It was always assumed. I can no longer live like this. My body eats away at me from the inside. I’ve reached a point I can no longer stand to live with myself.”

“Is that why you summoned me here? To tell me that?”

“No, not really,” Schuller said, reaching in a pocket and handing Falcon a folded slip of paper. “Something more specific. Here. Take this. Keep it with you.”

Falcon reached out and took it. “What is it?”

“It’s a list of resources. People who know what we’re trying to accomplish here and who support our cause. Most of them are in the States. Keep it. Hold onto it. Use it when you’re ready. *If* you’re ready.”

Falcon slipped the paper into his pocket without opening it.

“One more thing,” Schuller said. “We may not meet again.”

“Why is that?”

“I’ll leave that to you to figure out.”

CHAPTER 34

Bogota, Columbia

The Present

Pornography is hardly shocking these days, Cyn thought as she left the lunch counter and headed down a seedy, litter-strewn street toward a porn movie house where she was instructed to take a seat in a back row. Anything anyone wanted to see was available online with a flick of a fingertip or a click of a pause button to observe or practice what's being viewed. So, why bother hiding in a dark, dingy movie house unless you need a cheap place to get off the street and sleep, or unless you wanted to meet someone in the dark?

As she continued down the street, she could see that the porn-house marquee read, "*Cinima Ahora Jugando.*" – or "*Movie Now Playing*" in English – with two of the Spanish letters, an "a" and the "h" tilted so far out on the edge they looked as if one of them might drop down and clunk an unsuspecting passerby on the head to slow him down and entice him to enter.

Just above and behind "*Cinima Ahora Jugando,*" – a more permanent block-lettered sign read, "Fine Arts Cinema," the definition of "fine arts" apparently having changed a bit over the years. It didn't seem the theater's current incarnation could afford to pay for a ticket-seller as Cyn passed by a curtain-drawn ticket booth.

She walked across a broken-tile foyer and pushed through a double door that plunged her into darkness as a naked woman knelt on her knees on the screen, staring up at a naked man offering her his fully elevated manliness as Cyn stepped into the shadows.

CHAPTER 35

Northern Bolivian Jungle

March 1951

Feeling both euphoric and dizzy after imbibing a sedative and an aphrodisiac, Bruno Schuller rolled over in his bed, leaned precariously on his elbow, and glanced across at Margo lying naked next to him, having made love to her one final time. Go out with a bang, he thought. A bang and a blaze.

He scooted over, eased his feet onto the floor, and stood, then waited for the room to stop spinning enough to regain his balance before turning back toward Margo. “Get up,” he said to her as he reached out and shook her shoulder. “Save yourself.”

He straightened up on shaky legs and propped his shoulder against the wall to wrestle on his pants and shirt. Then he staggered out of the bedroom, stopped just outside the door, and shook his head in disbelief at the sight of a metal bucket filled three-quarters with kerosene. *A bucket that shouldn't be there. A bucket that he hadn't placed there.* He knew he would be groggy after taking his sedative, so he had filled the bucket and placed it next to his chair before taking the pills. Was he so dazed that he had moved it without remembering? He had lost his body years ago. Now, was he losing his mind? “Pull yourself together,” he muttered. “Think straight. These next few minutes were crucial.”

He bent down slowly and lifted the bucket by its handle, wobbling as he walked across the room, leaving a glistening trail of kerosene behind him. He plunked the bucket down next to his chair, right where he thought he had left it before, then managed to squat and tilt the edge of the bucket up on a four-inch-thick plank that left the pail balanced at a perilous angle. The smell of the kerosene filled his nostrils as he flopped back in his chair and attempted to gather his thoughts in the same organized fashion he had been used to his entire professional life.

His mind drifted back to those heady, early days when his spirit and energy ran high, when a new start was required in a new location as the Allies rushed in from the west and the Russians pushed in from the east, squeezing everything in the middle in a tightening vice. But *where* to locate a new facility outside Germany? *Where* to establish a laboratory to carry on the next phase of their crucial work?

Having been assigned to find that location, Schuller immediately realized his options were limited. Indonesia and Burma were already occupied by the Japanese In the Far East, with the American invasion looming on the horizon. That narrowed down the prospects to South America or Africa. As for Africa, the infrastructure ranged from terrible to nonexistent, and Africa lacked the German community connections that had already been established in South America. Those and several other factors leaned him toward South America. That continent's governments were weak and inefficient, except for Argentina, where Juan Peron's pro-Nazi sympathies would welcome German help and expertise. But Argentina was too obvious. A handful of Nazis were already located in Buenos Aires, and others were making plans to migrate there. Argentina would be the first place anyone searching for a new laboratory would look after the war.

But *where* on that vast continent would be out-of-sight with no oversight? What specific location might at least provide some sort of rudimentary infrastructure? And where could Schuler find an indigenous native population that would be either willing or could be coerced into participating in the continuing breeding and genetic experiments?

Thinking back, he recalled jumping up and prancing with joy when he learned of the nearly abandoned village of Chichamauga deep in the jungle of northern Bolivia. As usual, he had done his homework. He had narrowed the possibilities down to a spot on the South American map that lay just above the unnavigable rapids of the Beni River, a location that made all transportation upriver beyond fifteen miles south of the village near impossible. Any cargo

reaching the foot of those rapids would have to be unloaded and carried up along a riverside path, undoubtedly, by then, overrun and blocked with dense jungle growth.

Chichamauga, long down on its heels before Schuller arrived to revitalize it to a functioning laboratory, had once thrived as a rubber production center that employed close to a thousand, mostly indigenous natives engaged in the harvesting and processing of raw rubber. In its heyday – for the comfort, convenience, and entertainment of the owners and the few imported workers – the town boasted its own medical facility, reasonable housing for the plantation supervisors and even, at one point, an opera house later converted to a cinema when talkies came in. And then suddenly, like a lot of grand schemes, after its initial success, the very reason for its existence sputtered, choked, and died. Synthetic rubber – oil-based and cheaper to produce than raw rubber – rang Chichamauga's death knell.

As the years passed, the town's buildings and infrastructure had slipped into a long, slow decline, patiently awaiting its next incarnation as the new center of Schuller's experimental genetic and breeding laboratory. And now, once again, that death knell awaited a final ring. Not the result of anything cheaper or more efficient this time. This time the result of an inability to move beyond human breeding, an inefficient and stubbornly slow process. Any real hope for future progress toward a higher breed of humans would require new thinking and new techniques, and that could be decades off, if eventual success was possible at all.

That next step in that direction, if there was to be one, would not fall under Schuller's direction. His time had come to an end. His health, his very body, ravaged by his own hand., left nothing to offer. It was now time to take his fate into his own hands. And what better way to do that than the example of the project's ultimate leader, Adolf Hitler, who had shot himself and then had his body set afire to prevent it from being strung up and spat upon like Mussolini's.

It was undoubtedly true that der Führer was in ill health after a near

successful attempt on his life, but he still looked pretty much as he always had toward the end. Schuller's body, through his own doing, would better fit a freak show alongside the worst of those housed in the cages. His enemies would just as soon stuff his misshapen body for display in a freak museum as an example of his own ineptitude. He had at least some pride left that he wished to preserve in death. Better nothing at all than a prime example of his own botched experiments.

“*Damn it!*” he mumbled as he reached down to the right of his chair and felt around on the floor. Where *was* his German Walther PPK revolver— the same make and model that Hitler had used to end his life? It *was* there. *It had to be there. Right next to his chair. Right where he had left it.* And yet, he had clearly remembered leaving the kerosene bucket next to his chair and then found it outside his bedroom door after he had awakened and stumbled out. *And now, the pistol was missing.* Had his mind become as warped and twisted as his body? He had practiced all the critical placements and sequence over-and-over, night-after-night, while Margo slept soundly in his bed. So, where *was* the damn pistol? And where, as he patted his shirt pocket, was the matchbox? He tapped the pocket on his other side. *There,* he breathed a sigh of relief. At least the matches were where they should be. One element in place.

If all went as planned, if it all worked together, he would sit in his favorite chair with the PPK pistol in his lap. He would stretch his left foot out far enough to kick the tilted kerosene bucket over, spreading its flammable fuel onto the floor around him. He would then strike a match and hold it directly above the spill with his left hand, pick up the PPK in his right, hold the muzzle to his temple, and pull the trigger. The lighted match would drop to the floor and ignite the kerosene just as his brains spattered across the room. *Wooooofff!* Everything gone in an instant. His life. His memory. *Everything.*

But where the hell *was* the damn pistol? he thought as he fumbled around on the floor. *It had to be there. Of course, it was there.* He was the one who...

“*Ahhh!*” he hollered as an unexpected whack cracked the back of his

skull, shooting an excruciating pain down his spine that caused the balls of his feet to bow inward and his toes to quiver uncontrollably. Then a sudden burning sting scorched his eyes and face, dripping liquid pain down his chin as it saturated his shirt and soaked through to his skin. Then a second whack on his forehead as he struggled to stand, dropping him back, limp in his chair.

Margo, after dropping the now empty kerosene bucket onto the floor, stood above Bruno Schuller with the butt of a German Walther PPK pistol raised high above Schuller's head, prepared to whack him again if he moved. The doctor – the man who had disfigured himself along with so many others, the man who had raped and impregnated her – sat slumped in his favorite chair beneath her. She had taken pride in not having given into him in her mind even while he raped and ravaged her. She had simply told herself to lay there quietly until he was finished. But the idea of revenge had taken seed and festered. She always knew a time would come when evil had its weakness.

She knew his plans. She had watched him practice when he thought she was asleep in his bed. And then, when she overheard his latest conversation with Falcon that afternoon, she knew he intended to carry out his plan that very night. After she had gone to bed and pretended to sleep, she had watched him carry a bucket of kerosene into the house and sit it down next to his chair in the center of the room. She had watched him take his pistol and a box of matches from a bottom drawer of his desk, then watched him swallow his pills before he fucked her one last time.

She had no objection to his killing himself. She simply wanted to have a hand in that. A *personal* hand. Not just for herself, but for all those he had mutilated in the name of what he called progress. *Progress?* Who was he fooling? Any caring Christian God would soon extract his retribution. Her native gods had placed that task in her hands.

With his Walther PPK pistol still held tightly in her grip, she turned the muzzle around and stepped forward, ready to pull the trigger if he suddenly sprung his hand out and grabbed her by her throat. But he didn't. He didn't move. When she reached out and poked him in his chin, his head jerked, then flopped back limp again. Whatever he had taken to bolster his courage, plus the two pistol whips she had delivered, had rendered him temporarily harmless.

Reassured he would remain where he was, she crossed the room to the wall, laid the pistol on the floor, then stood on her toes to lift a falcon death mask off its hook. She glanced over her shoulder at the doctor, still sagged in his chair, then carried the mask out onto the front porch. She laid it down gently on the top step, then returned to the room, leaving the door slightly ajar. She picked the pistol up again and checked to ensure the safety was off, a procedure she had practiced when Schuller was out for one of his predictable morning cage walks. She knew where he kept his gun, and she knew he kept it loaded. With the safety off, it would fire when she pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER 36

Bogota, Columbia

The Present

Sex usually had a story to tell. In Cyn's opinion, the act itself was never as intriguing as the story. Maybe she had stumbled into a porn-house movie in the middle of the porn plot. But, then again, maybe, in this case, there was no plot. Maybe sex *was* all there was.

Less than half-a-dozen other moviegoers sat scattered in the darkness as she took a seat at the end of a row in the back that reeked of stale beer, human sweat, and lingering cigarette smoke that seemed to have given up trying to escape.

"Don't turn around," a man's grinding voice said from somewhere behind her. "Get up and move down three rows and more to the center."

"I think I'll stay here," she said, feeling safer in an end seat with a better chance to escape.

"It doesn't work that way," the man said.

"I don't think..."

"It's up to you. You move down, or it's over."

"Okay. Okay," she said.

She was there, she thought. She was by herself. She was probably trapped anyway.

She stood, careful to keep her eyes focused on the screen as she stepped into the aisle and moved tree rows down and five seats in. As she sat, she heard scraping in the row behind her and then felt a hot breath on the back of her neck.

"We'll talk like this," the man said.

"Whatever you say."

"You've been asking questions?"

"I have."

“That could be dangerous.”

“I ah...”

“Whatever it is you’re after, you think it’s worth a lot of pain? Are you willing to pay that price?”

“I was hoping there wouldn’t be any,” she said, sorry she said it as soon as it slipped out. “That I wouldn’t have to.”

“How much *did* you want to pay?”

“Nothing.”

She heard a snort and a laugh. “Does this look like some kind’a free lunch part of town?”

“No. Not really.”

Another snort. “Well, it *is*,” the man said. “There are a lot of homeless down here. We *do* have a soup kitchen. A free lunch... How did you find me?”

“I made a call to someone I know. They made a call.”

“What do you want? What are you after?”

“I was told that anything that moves, anything of value, *off market value*, passes through here before it moves on.”

“You wouldn’t think that, would you? Not in a place like this. But yes, that’s right. It does. It’s what you call a funnel. Everything squeezes down in the middle before it passes through and spreads out. It’s easy to keep track of things that way. Add a little extra charge as it passes through, insurance, you might say... You’re a dealer, right? University connections in the States?”

“Not exactly a dealer. A finder. How’d you know about that?”

“I don’t meet anyone I don’t know anything about. What do you find then?”

“Art objects. Historical pieces. Mainly Mayan or Incan.”

“Historical? Isn’t that illegal?”

“It depends on what it is. If either one of us were totally legal, we wouldn’t be sitting here in a porn house talking in the dark, would we?”

“You got a point there. What *exactly* are you looking for?”

“An ancient death mask. A part of it, anyway. A broken feather.”

“Incan or Mayan?”

“Neither. Ancient Greek. That’s what stands out about it. That’s why I thought someone might remember it.”

“They might. We don’t get a lot of those down here. The Greeks didn’t sail this far.”

“I’m looking for someone who might have had their hands on it. Whoever did must have known what it was, or at least where it was headed. Where they got it and where they were taking it.”

“So, you figure a buyer using a courier.”

“Probably sample for verification... Is there a way to track something like that down? To find out something about it, what route it took?”

The man paused, then said, “There might be. I’ll tell you what. Don’t move. Stay right here and enjoy the show. I’ll be right back.”

Cyn heard the scraping behind her again, then nothing. She wasn’t sure if the man was coming back or if he had simply left her sitting there long enough to slip out. Either way, it was still hard to enjoy the show. There wasn’t much show to it, except maybe the camera angles and the body contortions. The performers clearly weren’t New York Stanislavski method actors, although she had to give them a certain amount of credit for an athletic performance that might have deserved at least bronze in the Porn Summer Olympics. She wasn’t sure how long to wait, but before she could decide, she heard the scraping behind her again and felt the same hot breath on her neck.

“I don’t usually deal in this kind of merchandise,” the man said. “I like to get a better return on my investment.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“But I think maybe we can work something out here. I may want a little something in return.”

“I’m not sure I can afford your services even if...”

“Maybe you can. It’s not the money. I’m okay in that regard. This place

might not look like much, but I grew up down here. When you grow up somewhere, it gets in your blood. You know what I mean? It seems okay. It's all you know... So, now there *is* a free lunch down here. I know. I pay for it. I guess you might say I'm a behind-the-scenes sponsor. I might even eat there myself if it weren't for certain people tryin' to find me."

"I still don't see how..."

"Stop talking a minute. Just listen. I'm trying to tell you something. A lot of my country's best stuff, our best treasures, got carried off years ago, starting with the Spanish, those bloody bastards. It's pretty easy to whack off a few heads and take what you want if you've got a horse under your ass and you're swinging a sword. Who's gonna stop you? A lot of that early stuff is still resting and recuperating in Spain. The real thieves came later. The ones who knew what they were looking for. Most of that later stuff made its way up north, up to the States. Collectors who can't show it except to their wealthy friends. All of it gone. Lost. Except, every once in a while, a collector wants to move something. Maybe someone dies. They need money. I *got* money. So, here's what I'm offering. You tell me what you're looking for. *Exactly* what you're looking for. You know. The history of the piece. The details. How you came by it. What part of it do you have. Where I can find about it on the internet. Write it all down, put it in an envelope. Write your cell number down. Put a capital 'O' on the front of the envelope and leave it at the desk at your hotel. Don't say it's for anyone. Just leave it. They'll know what to do."

"I'm staying at the....

"You're staying. You're staying at the Victoria. And not alone."

"How did you...?"

"Just give it to the guy behind the desk. No name on the envelope. Just an 'O'. I'll see what I can come up with and get back to you."

"And you want...?"

"A contact in the States who deals in old pieces that don't belong up there. Someone who can work something under the table when necessary. If a piece I

want turns up, something that belongs down here but might get tied up in all kind'a regulations and legal hassles, I need someone who can skip around all that crap and negotiate a deal and get it back down here to Columbia. You think you can handle that?"

"I think I can manage it."

"I'll be in touch. Enjoy the rest of the movie. It's a surprise ending. I've seen it."

CHAPTER 37

Northern Bolivian Jungle

March 1951

Margo, a name she hated but had gotten so used to, stood above the man who thought he owned her. A man who had tormented and raped her. Who had tried to bend her to his will. She knew his plans as she held his Walther PPK German pistol in her right hand, the same weapon he intended to use to end his life and set himself on fire as he did. She had sneaked out of bed and secretly watched him practice kicking over an empty bucket with a match in one hand and his pistol in the other.

So, why not simply allow him to carry out his plan? Then she could make her escape when he was no longer around to stop her. Why kill him herself? The result would be the same. She knew the answer. Satisfaction. Retribution. *Revenge*. A cleansing of the hatred that had now become so much a part of her, she lived with it daily. Maybe killing him would purge that.

Schuller's chin dropped on his chest. He was either unconscious from the heavy sedative he had taken to fortify himself or from the two pistol whacks she had delivered to the back and front of his skull. Whichever it was, at least for a while, he was harmless, no threat.

She moved to his side and touched the PPK muzzle to his left temple. She knew she could only bring herself to pull the trigger once. She had to get it right the first time. She straightened her arm and ran her index finger along the cold trigger. She squinted. She squeezed. She hesitated. She backed off. No, she thought. That would be far too painless, considering all the devastation he had inflicted. *Deliberately inflicted*. All the broken minds and bodies eaten away from the inside out, and those who survived locked up in cages or allowed to roam around in the village part-human, part-animal, part unknown.

She knew how meticulously he had planned his own demise. Still, even

with his usual precision and calculation, he had made one fatal *miscalculation*. Her. Margo. He had underestimated her right from the start, allowing her to be educated with some of the same tutors he had brought in to educate Falcon. She was inherently smart – “brighter than the average savage,” he liked to joke – and she took easily to those lessons. He considered them a favor to her for the use and abuse of her body. But all that knowledge did was turn her further against him. The more she came to know, the more she understood the nature of evil, especially when it justifies itself as a savior of humankind.

Still, despite her festering hatred, there were times she actually felt sorry for him. Times when she even took care of him, wiping his brow with a damp cloth and feeding him broth when he suffered from fever. And now she would help him again. *But this time, she would take charge. She would end his life her way, not his.* She would simply add an element he hadn’t considered. She would turn his home office into an exploding crematorium by extinguishing the pilot light on his propane stove and allowing the gas to saturate the room before she lit a match to spark the kerosene. The propane would rip apart his distorted body much as he had ripped apart bodies and experimentally pieced them together over the years.

She had climbed from his bed to go to the bathroom after he had finished fucking her and fallen asleep. Instead of going to the bathroom, she had slipped out of the bedroom and repositioned his pistol and his bucket of kerosene in hopes of confusing him further when he woke. She knew he would be groggy from the pills she had watched him take, but she couldn’t fully count on them to give her the extra time she needed to get out of bed again and sneak up on him. If he came to his full awareness too soon, he could easily overpower her. She needed every edge, every extra advantage she could get in order to throw him off his plans and give her time to implement hers. *And now, she had gained that time,* she thought as she stood above him, looking down at that pathetic creature whose distorted ugliness matched his very nature.

While he dozed, she went back to the small corner kitchen where he often

sat at a table and ate a meal in the evenings, usually prepared by her while he was working at his desk or sitting in his chair pondering the results of a botched experiment or planning a new one.

She opened the oven and the tiny metal door that hid the pilot light, then turned the gas valve counterclockwise to “off.” She watched the flame sputter and die. Then she turned the valve to “on” and heard the hiss of the gas escaping freely. She crossed the room again to stand in front of Schuller’s limp body. His *body*. She reached forward to gently lift the box of matches she saw poking from his shirt pocket. As she stepped back, she asked herself if she had any pity left for him. She had none. All she felt was disgust.

She knelt directly in front of him, a subservient position he had always insisted on when he wished to think of her as sexually compliant. She tilted the kerosene bucket further off its sloping angle just enough to allow a portion of the combustible liquid to spill out onto an expanding pool beneath the base of his chair. Then she lifted the bucket by its handle and tossed what remained of the kerosene directly in his face. A deafening scream rose from deep inside a body that convulsed as the liquid dripped down his chin and absorbed in his shirt.

She struck a match, flung it directly at his chest, then spun around and dashed for the door. As she glanced back, she watched the flames expand a devil’s halo around his chair. She barged through the door and slammed it shut, pausing on the porch long enough to reach down and grab the falcon death mask before scrambling into the jungle darkness.

CHAPTER 38

Bogota, Columbia

The Present

Stone stood in front of the window on the sixth floor of the Bogota Victoria, peering down at precise, razor-cut shrubs that lined the driveway leading up to the hotel's canopied entrance. He watched a Lincoln Continental circle up the lane. As soon as it stopped, a red-capped bellhop stepped smartly forward and opened the door. A fastidiously dressed, suit-and-vest man climbed out. He discretely handed the bellhop a folded bill before another man rushed out from the hotel lobby to open the door and allow the suit-and-vest man to swoop inside without dirtying his fingers.

The sixth-floor window gave Stone a higher perspective on life below as he peered out across the hotel's manicured lawn and over the roofs of fashionable shops, manicurists, hairdressers, and high-end boutiques that, layer-after-layer, slowly descended into a squalor of rat trails spreading out in no particular pattern or direction across the southern part of the city.

Stone wondered how many of those born and raised in that squalor would end up riding a chauffeured Lincoln Continental up the Bogota Victoria's pristine driveway and handing a bellhop a folded, high-end bill as they climbed out and swooped into the lobby. Obviously, a few would yank themselves by their own bootstraps to make that geographical and financial leap. A handful would trample or climb over the backs of others to crawl and clamor their way up that economic ladder. But most born in that squalor would remain there as if some sort of geographic glue was stuck to the soles of their boots, assuming they were lucky enough to have any.

Cyn had returned from meeting a man in a porn movie house located somewhere in the middle of the squalor. She said her connection had grown up there and, from Cyn's description, could undoubtedly afford a half-a-dozen

Lincoln Continentals and a dedicated garage to hold them. Whatever way he had worked, connived, stolen, or cheated his way to the top, Cyn said he thought he might be able to help track the mask down, or at least the trail it had followed.

She had written down her cell phone number and the mask details he had requested, sealed that information in a hotel envelope with a large capital “O” on the front, then carried it down to the hotel concierge, who nodded as if he had been expecting it. Then they waited, which was never one of Stone’s strong suits even though it was often required when following a strung-out trail of lost or stolen art or artifact.

“So how long *do* we wait?” Cyn asked, leaning back on the headboard of the hotel’s king-size comfort mattress with an English edition of the *New York Times* laying in her lap as Stone turned back from the window.

“As long as we have to.”

“Hungry?” Cyn asked.

“I could use a bite.”

“How about a bite of me, then?” she asked, scooting the newspaper off her lap and onto the bed.

“I have to admit, you’re hard to ignore. I’m doing my best.”

They had slept in the same bed again last night. Stone had kept to his side, and she had kept to hers, never the twain shall meet. He hadn’t reached out and neither had she, although he lay there a long while waiting to see if either of them would before he finally drifted off. Lying close to her like that, he could almost taste her scent every time she moved. Everything that she had once meant to him came rushing back.

He crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed. “Look, I don’t know how hard this is on you, but it’s not easy for me.”

“What’s so hard about it?” she said as she glanced down at his crotch. “Maybe hard is what I want.”

“Cyn,” he shook his head and said. “Did you ever think your mother might have named you ‘Cyn’ with ‘sin’ in mind?”

“She named me Cynthia. You sound like I’m torturing you. *Is* that what you want?”

“No comment. At least not now.”

“So, where *does* that leave us?”

“Leave *what*... You and me?... Caught in the middle just like aways. Treading water somewhere between the devil and the deep blue sea. Not exactly drowning but not moving forward either.”

“Okay,” she looked up and said. “How about we take it easy for now and see how things go? Have a little fun in the meantime?”

“Don’t bite off more than we can chew?”

“There you go again,” she grinned. “Back to biting.”

“Cyn!”

“Okay. Okay. Agreed for now. No erotic fun and games. So, what kind of game *do* you want to play? Chess?”

“I’m not sure that would work either. You always have your tricky little moves. You’d probably beat me at that.”

“You can be pretty tricky yourself. Maybe a tie?”

“You can’t tie in chess,” he said. “It’s win or lose. Winner takes all.”

“Right. That’s not how we want to play, is it?”

Stone nodded toward the newspaper she scooted off her lap. “Let me take a look at part of that. If we don’t get a call from your contact in the next hour or so, we’ll just go down to the lounge and have a drink. Maybe get something to eat.”

When Cyn handed Stone the front-page section, he sat by the window and skimmed the news. Someone had killed a cop in a drive-by shooting in a large American city. A crooked politician got caught spending political contributions entertaining a prostitute in a resort in the Bahamas. Vladimir Putin complained that the United States was trying to dominate the world instead of allowing Putin to dominate it. The usual daily fare in any major newspaper. The details were always different. The substance was pretty much the same, the current state of

human affairs being what they are, and maybe, in a general way, what they always have been.

With still no call from Cyn's contact after Stone finished reading Sports, they rode the elevator down to the lobby, where the concierge stopped them on their way into the bar. "I have something for you," he said, handing Cyn a folded note.

She thanked him as they entered a lounge whose décor could be best described as relaxed elegance. An etched mirrored-wall filled the space behind a bar. Three rows of glass shelves stacked every imaginable size, color, and shape liquor bottle, one of a woman's glass leg with a grin pasted across her gin label.

Stone led them to a table in a quiet corner, then raised his hand for the bartender to hold off on their order. "Okay," he said, nodding toward the folded paper. "What have we got there?"

She opened and read it, then handed it to him to read.

"The piece you're looking for, the broken feather part of it, passed through Bogota on its way up to the Gulf Coast village of Rayo de Sol before moving onto Cuba. It was meant for a high-end delivery. But not for you. When the carrier figured out he screwed things up, he returned to the bar and found a woman taking off with it. That must have been you. That man is no longer in the delivery business. The rest of it, the full mask, started out south of here in Bolivia. It may still be there, maybe not. If you still want to go further with this, check into the Anami Hotel in La Paz, and I'll see what else I can find out. And don't forget. You owe me."

"O"

"A fishing village on the Gulf coast?" Stone looked up and asked. "Rayo de Sol? What's that mean?"

"A Ray of Sunshine."

CHAPTER 39

Northern Bolivian Jungle

March 1967

The explosion that followed the fire lifted the metal roof off Schuller's jungle house, then sat it back down as if it were tipping its hat in a fond farewell. The blast shook the two adjacent buildings as flames lit the sky, awakening everyone in the village and sending the jungle animals howling and scurrying for safety.

Falcon, dressed as usual in loose-fitting fatigues, sprung up from bed at the sound of the blast. He dashed wide-eyed through the door and headed directly toward a fiery-orange ball rising above Schuller's home, each stride twice the length of an ordinary man's. A wall of heat stopped him fifty yards away. It was clear there was nothing he could do. The inferno had already taken on a life of its own that would have to play itself out until it died of exhaustion. It was one of the few times in Falcon's young life – nineteen years now – that he felt impotent. When events overtook his ability to direct or control them.

He stood and watched as the angry flames ripped through what was left of the structure. The drama of it didn't surprise him. Not after his last conversation with Schuller. The doctor's plans had always been grandiose, verging on grotesque. Even his failures, by his own admission, were spectacular. Why not that same flamboyance in death? Falcon assumed that Schuller was in the middle of that inferno, orchestrating his own demise just as he had orchestrated the assembling and disassembling of so many lives. It seemed fitting that he would orchestrate his own death and annihilation.

The doctor's ultimate end, the end of his side of the project, had been coming on for months, years even. Building up experiment-after-experiment, followed by failure-after-failure until the entire scheme crumbled and fell of its own weight. Ambition, promise, and even hard work hadn't been enough to hold

it together.

Schuller had carried out his final plan. Now it was Falcon's turn to carry out his. Falcon's origin, his heritage, had been drilled into him as early as he could remember. He knew how he had arrived in Chichamauga and why he had been carried there as an infant. In a certain sense, he was both Schuller's greatest success and his biggest disappointment. He was not a product of Schuller's native-village breeding, and neither was he one of Schuller's genetic experiments. He was conveyed to Schuller as a prized, generic experiment no different than a prized breeding bull, or a thoroughbred racehorse, or a pure-bred dachshund. His existence was intended as a jumping-off breeding-point for Schuller's higher hopes and ambitions, as a model of perfection to be aimed for using other experimental methods.

But now, as Falcon watched Schuller's grand hopes and schemes burn to the ground, it was up to Falcon, if anyone, to carry forward those hopes and ambitions. The question remained, *was* there a path forward through the complicated twists and turns of the human genetic code that could break that code in a way that could be controlled and manipulated? Falcon had always been told that he was born and bred to lead, that he was a natural leader. But was he willing, or was that just another one of Schuller's dead-end assumptions?

Falcon was willing to concede the possibility that further experimentation might eventually bring success. It was certainly possible that Schuller and his earlier German colleagues were on the right track without sufficient knowledge to carry them further. Or perhaps, at this point in time, in the middle of 1967, the experimental tools and the structure of genetics simply weren't fully understood. For the immediate, whatever the future held would have to be put on hold. Falcon had more pressing matters to attend. The day would surely come when Chichamauga, and everything that had gone on there, would be discovered. Whatever the future held, why leave any evidence of past failures?

When a second explosion ripped through the auxiliary fuel tanks in the back of Schuller's home, Falcon backed away from that heat and hurried toward

the zoo, grabbing the cage keys from a lock-box as he passed. As he came closer, he saw the experimentals pacing in their cages, that final explosion sending them into a frenzy. Emule, his hands and feet fused at birth into what looked like lobster claws, rocked back-and-forth in his cage. As soon as Falcon opened his gate, he crawled out and scampered into the jungle.

Gorilla-haired Blatia grabbed the bars as if trying to shake them off their anchors as Falcon approached. “Am I free? Am I free?” she shouted.

“You are,” Falcon said as he unlocked and opened her cage. “Go to the village. The villagers will take care of you now.”

Blatia bolted out, then turned and glanced over her shoulder as she ran, as if her cage had been the only home she had ever known and she was reluctant to leave the known for the unknown.

“Go!” Falcon shouted.

As Blatia scurried down the path toward the village, Falcon opened all the cages along the row and watched the experimentals run for the cover of the jungle as if they were trying to escape their former lives as much as their confinement.

With the last of them out of sight, Falcon tossed the cage keys as far into the bush as he could. Further than even he had thrown anything before. With the experimentals free, he turned back and headed for his final task before he could close the door on this part of his life and leave it behind him.

CHAPTER 40

La Paz, Bolivia

The Present

Information *is* power, but often no less than its source, Stone thought as he strolled along an oak-shaded sidewalk as a hot sun steamed waves of moisture off the cobblestone from an earlier morning shower. He had called Hector Hernandez, a former FBI agent he knew from when they both worked for the Bureau. He was on his way to meet Hector at the World Café in a La Paz neighborhood noted for its manicured garden plazas, its trendy restaurants, and its jammed-in mix of high-rise apartments towering over columned, 18th Century colonial mansions.

Until recently, most information actually came from someone who knew. Most of today's was broadcast through little metal boxes everyone carried around in their purse or pocket. Curious about what the number of square miles is in the smallest country in sub-Saharan Africa? Google it. It's Gambia, 4,361square miles. Or let's say you're at lunch and have an insatiable curiosity to know which former South American dictators wore a toupee. Google says, "three for certain, possibly a fourth." The fourth wore a beret out in public and was once caught in a sauna-bath photo with a sweat-soaked beret pulled down over his ears. Forget your shoe size and desperately need to know it so you can buy an expensive pair of Jason of Beverly Hills shoes at a half-price sale. Somehow Google has stored that crucial piece of information and passed it along to a dozen national and international shoe manufacturers who pay a small fee to paste their gyrating shoes above your next ten Google searches. Don't know your shoe size? You don't need to. Take a picture of your shoes or your feet and read what it says on the screen.

Despite that pocket-size search engine, at least *some* information, especially insider information, can't be found on Wikipedia. It actually has to

come from someone inside, from someone *in the know*. Stone's former FBI badge had often wedged open a tightly guarded piece of information from a reluctant informer. These days, he no longer had that shiny persuasive power that he could flip open and hold up with a simple, "FBI. Would you mind answering a few questions? And keep in mind, it's a federal offense to lie to the FBI."

Maybe he no longer had his badge, he thought as he headed for a striped-awning café just ahead on his left, but he still had his contacts. He still knew a few of those *in the know*. In theory, of course, the Bureau had zero influence in a foreign country, although that was always more than winkable. It was laughable. International crooks don't take international borders all that seriously. Chasing the bad guys required a spider web of connections that stretched across borders.

Sometimes, he got lucky. He found himself somewhere he had a reliable source. All he had to do was ask. When Stone learned after Cyn's clandestine meeting in Bogota that the route of the death mask's travels likely started further south in La Paz, he couldn't help feeling that he had stumbled onto a little of that luck. He had a close friend in La Paz. Hector Hernandez, a former agent who now had deep roots in Bolivia.

Hector, a senior FBI agent when the Bureau hired Stone, immediately took Stone under his wing. Against agency rules, Stone soon discovered that Hector had been seeing Regonda Cardinal, an attractive interpreter and translator for the Bogota consulate, while he was investigating a smuggling case involving the consulate. Stone was seeing Cyn at the time, and the four of them occasionally got together for drinks and conversation at each other's homes.

Hector and Regonda's relationship heated up even more after Hector's smuggling case ended, and he and Regonda started seeing each other out in public. When Bogota recalled Regonda back to La Paz in the midst of political upheaval, Hector turned to Stone for a little friend-to-friend advice and counseling. He had fallen into a depression after Regonda left and had started leaning a little too heavily on the booze. He finally got himself together enough to make one of those life-changing decisions. He took an early retirement from

the Bureau after finagling a job -- with Regonda's help and influence -- a contract job as head of security for the American Consulate in La Paz. Stone hadn't kept in touch in the intervening years, but they had one of those relationships in which you take up a conversation years later without missing a beat.

It was a little after 10:30 in the morning when Stone sauntered through the door of the World Café, well after the mandatory morning coffee jolt, yet still too early for a pre-lunch refueling. Only a few diehard coffee-hounds sat around on bar stools or leaned their elbows at a dozen tables scattered around a room filled with the aroma of mocha and espresso.

Stone spotted Hector at a corner table in the rear with his back to the wall where he could easily observe anyone entering, and no one could sneak up on him from behind. His hair had thinned considerably over the years but, as always, he was fashionably dressed in a dark business suit and a Windsor-knotted tie as he glanced up and nodded when he saw Stone weaving through the tables.

"Good to see you, old friend," Hector said, standing and coming around to give Stone a tight bear hug without quite lifting him off the floor. "So, you're still at this game?" Hector asked as he backed off and sat. "I heard you were out."

Hector had been in La Paz long enough, he was now considered himself a local. He ended up marrying Regonda, a Bolivian citizen. He knew the town and the country. He knew its history. He knew how it operated. Since he was still in the security business, he would have his local list of contacts and informants added to those he knew from the Bureau. He would have known that the World Café was a designated safe-haven where all the agencies agreed not to listen in or record each other. It came down to a matter of trust in which a single violation permanently broke that trust.

"*Officially* out," Stone said. "I figured you heard about that. I'm taking on private cases now."

“Still doing art and antiquities like you did for the Bureau?”

“It’s what I know.”

“On your own, that can’t be a steady income. Not like when we both milked the system. We got paid the same every month no matter what we did or turned up... You make a decent living on your own?”

“Pie in the sky or flat on my face. More than I need or barely enough to scrape by.”

“How *do* you manage when it’s barely enough?”

“Ezzy.”

“*Edwards?*... Ezzy Edwards?... Is he still around?”

“He’s no longer sucking off the bureaucratic breast either. Not after his agency let him hang out to dry in Syria. I went in to drag his ass out of there against orders, which ended my career. Ezzy’s never been the same since. Neither was I.”

“All that was long after I left,” Hector said. “What the hell happened?”

“You know. The usual.”

“*What* usual? What happened?”

“I shot someone,” Stone said, surprised how easily he said it.

“You were FBI. We were *trained* to shoot.”

“This was close up. A kid.”

Hector leaned forward and waited.

“Ezzy and I were held up in a half bombed-out shelter. No more than what was left of an open-roof basement. I heard something behind me. Instinct, maybe. You know how you get that feeling in your bones? My weapon flew right to my hand as I spun around. There was a revolver pointed right at my chest. Maybe fifteen feet away. The person who held it wore a black headscarf with another wrapped around his face. All I could see were eyes staring straight at me. We both hesitated. I knew now what he was thinking. The same thing I was thinking. Which one of us would fire first? He squinted. I fired. I hit him right in the center of his forehead. I blew his head off. Only it wasn’t a he. It was

a woman. A young woman. No more than seventeen or eighteen. Just a kid really, an American. An al-Qaeda recruit trying to have an adventurous life. Maybe marry someone over there.”

“My God.”

“Ezzy and I got out okay. Part of us did. Part of us is still back there. Back in that basement. It’s those eyes. They never leave. They just keep staring at me. Almost pleading. *‘Don’t shoot me. I’ll back off, if you back off.’* That’s when I blew her head off.”

“You had no choice.”

“There’s no way to know that. It’s one of those things you can’t second guess. It’s done. You live with it.”

“Do you?”

“Not really. You never get over it. Life suddenly seems a little more fragile after that. You hold something back. Everything’s breakable. You try not to get too close. You try not to touch it.”

“Cyn?”

“Not especially. Anyone.”

When Hector reached across the table to touch Stone’s hand, Stone pulled back. “It’s okay,” he said. “I get by. I do what I need to do. While I was in there, while Ezzy and I were getting our asses kicked, I carried out a little piece for my efforts, a quite valuable piece. A piece valuable enough to cash in and buy a restaurant back in Annapolis. Ezzy’s the chief cook and day-to-day operator. It gives him something to do. Something he sorely needed. I drop by every once in a while and pretend I’m an equal partner. I’m not. It’s all him. He pours his heart and soul into it. He keeps it going, and he’s damn good at it.”

“And you skim a little off the top when you need to?”

“On occasion... How about you? What keeps you going down here? Business wise, I mean? Besides Regonda.”

“Pretty much the same as you and I always did. The good guys against the bad guys. Only it’s a little more convoluted down here. They’re too often the

same. This whole place, the whole country, is a house of spooks and mirrors. Nothing's ever quite what it seems. You know the game."

"We both do."

"So, what can I do for you, my friend?" Hector looked across and asked. "What brings you all the way down here?"

"I need a little background. A better idea of what I'm up against."

"What exactly *are* you getting yourself into?"

"I'm looking for an artifact. An ancient death mask this time."

"And you think it's down here? Here in Bolivia?"

"That's what we've been led to believe."

"We? What *we've* been led to believe?"

"Cyn. She's the one who came across it. It nearly got her killed."

"Cyn?... You little devil. Everyone had their eye on Cyn. The problem was, as I saw it, she only had eyes for you."

"We broke up."

"And now you're back together? She's here? She's with you?"

"I wouldn't call it back together. She needed help."

"Oh, I get it. And you just thought you'd mount up and ride to the rescue. You got suckered in again?"

"If that's what you want to call it."

"What would you call it?"

"I haven't decided. It's a work in progress."

"Okay. So, how can I help? What is it you need?"

"I want to find out more about the Nazi connection down here. We're pretty sure that's how the mask got here."

"You're a little late on that. About seventy years."

"That may have been when it arrived, but there's a good chance it's moved lately. At least a piece of it moved. A sample for a buyer. That make any sense?"

Hector shrugged. "It might. A South American Nazi connection sure as hell does. How much do you know about that?"

“A little. Not much.”

“Right after the war, and in those final days just before it ended, a whole group of the bastards slipped across the pond and spread out all across this continent. Mostly in Argentina, but pretty much all over the place. Anywhere they could find fertile soil to dig their roots in and a residence and a whole new identity while they were at it. Spreading out like that made it a lot harder for determined Nazi hunters to track them down. And believe me, they tried. Bolivia was a perfect place to disappear at the time. It met three requirements on their wish list. A weak government. A corrupt government. An inept government. *Bingo. Bolivia. They hit the jackpot.* It had all three. And the Nazis already had established a presence in this country. A small group had come here early on, when they started seeing the handwriting on the wall... So what exactly pointed you in this direction?”

“The usual breadcrumb leads. Cyn came across a broken feather from the mask that found its way up to Cuba. Probably a sample meant for a buyer in the States. She found herself in the wrong place at the wrong time. A middleman thought she was the buyer’s contact. She wasn’t.”

“So, how did she know about the piece in the first place?”

“She didn’t. She was down on one of her normal junkets, looking for whatever she could find. One of her known contacts had heard a rumor about that particular piece, and Cyn followed up on it. She knew enough that the intermediary, a bartender way out in the middle of nowhere, thought it *was* hers. The next thing she knew, she was running for her life with the damn thing clutched in her hand. That’s when she got out of the country and got back to me.”

“And persuaded you to give her a little helping hand.”

“She may have done a little arm twisting, okay?”

“Arms? Hand? Any other body parts twisted? Nothing broken, I hope.”

Stone raised both palms. “Not this time around. I’m trying to stay clear of that?”

“Trying?”

“So far, so good.”

“About the mask itself,” Hector said. “How much do you know about it? What have you learned so far?”

“I did a little arm twisting of my own in Bogota. It seems a lot of stolen antiques and artifacts flow along the same routes as the drugs use on their way up north. Does that have a familiar ring?”

“Pretty close. Right now, you and I are sitting in the literal heart of two ancient civilizations. *Exactly* in the center of the Incan. The Mayans overlap that territory a little further east. They’re both long gone, but the greed their artifacts fostered is still very much alive and well all these years later. There’s a lot of local trafficking in those artifacts. But no death masks, as far as I know. Both cultures chopped heads off the losers in one of their kickball games. It was a great incentive to keep in shape. No death masks, though. That wasn’t part of their rituals. I’m not sure how I can help beyond that.”

“How about the usual check and double-check? I’d like to verify what Cyn learned in Bogota. That a lot of those artifacts actually do funnel through Bogota.”

“Who told her that?”

“A dealer.”

“Drugs?”

“Very likely.”

“And Cyn got herself involved in that?”

“At the periphery. For a resource.”

“That sounds like her. What did she find out?”

“That it’s mostly the same people moving drugs and property.”

“That does sound more than vaguely familiar,” Hector said. “But why would a drug dealer tell Cyn anything? What did she have on him?”

“A trade. They made a deal that benefited both. Can you ask around, see what you can find out? It’s an odd piece. It’s got to stand out in someone’s

memory.”

“Where are you staying?”

“The Anami.”

“It *would* be good to see Cyn again.”

“It’s always good to see Cyn. At least for a while.”

CHAPTER 41

Northern Bolivian Jungle

March 1967

The Chikamonga natives – along with the few imported workers and occasional unnamed visitors – had always considered Falcon the inheritor of Schuler's experimental throne, the project's heir apparent. In many ways, he was the anointed one whom everyone admired and respected. And yet that lofty position, if that's what it was, had not been his choice. He was born into it. He had grown up as an integral part of it. While others may have considered him a prized rose in Schuller's experimental garden, he more often considered himself a dandelion in a patch of weeds. A one-of-a-kind. An anomaly, oddly out of place.

He knew that he was brighter than most. Certainly stronger. A faster runner. Quick in thought and quick on his feet. He conceded that he was easier to look at than most. That there were no apparent flaws or imperfections. But did these attributes amount to impenetrable barriers? Others seldom looked at him directly in the eye. Instead, they either glanced away or looked up at him in deference, never equal to equal. While his obvious assets may have left him exceptional in many ways, these attributes too often left him alone and lonely. He often felt out of place and as oddly misshapen as Schuller and any of those subjects he experimented on housed in the cages.

The founding of Chikamonga and all it stood for – its few accomplishments and its endless string of disappointments – was deeply embedded in his body and his nature. He found it hard to separate who he was from who he had become. Who was he *separate* from what he had learned about himself? If the project were to end, how much of who he was would be lost?

While a few would be interested in the experiment's evolution and would encourage and support the project's continuation, others would violently

disapprove should any of that work already done ever be uncovered and revealed. An intruder stumbling into Chikamonga would find the human results of the experiments living in the village. That would be enough evidence to turn the stomachs and sour the attitudes of the squeamish.

Uncertain exactly where his future lay, Falcon *did* know what he needed to do. He knew that Schuller's house explosion had to have been fueled with more than kerosene, the primary energy source for operating the generators. Propane would have had to be added to generate that kind of blast. Both fuels were supplied to Chikamonga along a spiderweb of dense jungle trails leading south and west below the rapids. That fuel combination would just as easily serve Falcon's purpose -- the kerosene for ignition, followed by a propane explosion to destroy whatever evidence remained. Anything beyond that would have to be sorted out with a rake.

With the experimentals freed from there and out of sight, Falcon hurried down a well-trod trail and burst into the laboratory. His strength allowed him to carry out two large metal cabinets containing the experimental procedures that Schuller felt still held some potential for future progress. He hauled both, one at a time, fifty yards up the path, then left them there and hurried back to what was left of Schuller's house. He knew he could do the job ahead alone, but he wanted the villagers to know what he had done to the lab, to the building they called the "torture chamber."

Of the two dozen or so children that Falcon had sired with selected native women, the twins, Lance and Thrust, were considered among the most successful of those experiments. Of them, Lance stood slightly taller and sported his father's thick blond, almost white hair, along with his mother's native flat nose. Thrust boasted broader shoulders and wore a constant smile that lightened the mood of everyone he encountered. Both had been eager to learn and followed Falcon around like wag-tailed puppy dogs.

Falcon found them, as expected, watching what remained of the house fire, now with a yellow haze hovering above it. In the rampage that followed the

explosion, both boys had left their mother in their village hut and dashed toward the fire, the center of the action.

Falcon came up behind them, tapped Lance on his shoulder, and told both to follow him back to the lab as a bright moon lit their way down the narrow path. Falcon stopped in front of a storage shed and instructed Thrust to open it and extract two propane tanks while he and Lance hurried ahead. When they reached the lab, Falcon instructed Lance to check the windows on all four sides of the building to ensure they were shut tight. Then he hurried out the back door and around the corner of the building and unhooked a kerosene barrel used as the lab's primary fuel. He turned it on its side, rolled it up the ramp and into the lab, then aimed its retainer plug between two long lab tables that ran down the center of the room.

He had just straightened up when Thrust rushed through the front with a propane tank dangling from each arm. Falcon instructed him to set one of the tanks toward the front, just inside the door, and the other in the center of the room between the two long lab tables. Then he told both boys to return to the village and take care of their mother, that she would need them now more than ever. Despite their protests, they reluctantly turned and left.

Falcon found a box of matches in its usual counter drawer. He struck a match and used the light to quickly rummage through a pile of crumpled rags stuffed inside a basket in a storage closet. He grabbed a long-handled broom from the closet, carried it over to a moon-lit window, and tightly wedged four of the rags between broom reeds. He returned to the rear of the room, leaned his makeshift rag torch against the doorframe, then went back to the storage closet to lift out a long-handled mallet from a toolbox. He walked between the lab tables, stooping in front of the forward propane tank and banging off its safety valve to release a steady hiss of gas. Then he moved to the center tank and whacked off that valve to release its telltale smell and hiss.

He headed to the back again, knelt behind the kerosene barrel, then leaned far enough over it to unscrew its retaining plug to allow a steady trickle of the

combustible fuel to spill onto the floor. Then he grabbed his rag-wrapped broom-torch and leaned it over the barrel, soaking the rags with kerosene.

With the smell of gas and kerosene quickly saturating the room, he hurried outside, closed the door, and counted to thirty. Then, he struck a match and held it to the soaked rags until they burst into flames. He drew a deep breath, opened the door, flung the burning torch inside, then slammed the door and ran.

When he turned back fifty yards out, all lay quiet. Time stood still. No sound. No movement. Nothing. Had he miscalculated? Had the gas somehow escaped? Even if it had, the torch should have lit the kerosene.

Then *Woooofff!* Lights flared behind the lab windows like burning eyes trying to escape the inferno. Then *Baagranngng!* A deafening explosion. Then a wave of heat scorched Falcon's forehead as a fire-orange cloud mushroomed toward the night.

With Falcon's old life up in flames, his future, whatever it held, lay ahead of him.

CHAPTER 42

La Paz, Bolivia

The Present

After meeting with Hector Hernandez at the World Café, Stone grabbed a cab back to the Anami Hotel, satisfied that Hector would find out *what* he could *when* he could, and then get back to him as *soon* as he could. But just as the cab turned the corner toward the hotel's entrance, Stone caught a glimpse of Cyn ducking into the backseat of another cab. He checked his cell phone. No message. He leaned over the headrest. "That cab just pulling out up there," he said to the driver. "Follow it."

"I've never been asked to...."

"Can you do it?"

"Si... I can."

"Keep your distance. I don't want them to know we're back here."

The cabbie nodded and stepped on the gas.

It wasn't that Stone didn't trust Cyn. He did trust *her*. He simply didn't always trust her *judgment*. Why would she leave like that without letting him know? She knew La Paz far better than he did, that was certain. She had her reasons for leaving. Maybe even good reasons. There was just no way to know. He would keep his distance and see what developed.

Slowing down through the hotel's fancy part of town, the cab soon left the upscale neighborhoods and descended down the economic scale as they bounced onto a patchwork of cobblestone roadways that barely survived between concrete strips and overlays that narrowed and squeezed them from both sides. The cab rounded a circle to pass under the shadow of a steepled church, itself cowering beneath a five-story parking garage as if it feared those parked cars might somehow topple over the edge and crash down on parishioner's heads in retribution for a long list of unpardonable sins.

After several blocks, they veered a sharp right down a narrow street festooned with multi-colored shop signs poking out and above store doors and windows and larger advertisements painted and plastered on walls or stacked up edge-to-edge along rooftops. The bizarre mix of shapes and colors gave Stone the distinct impression of three twisted rainbows endlessly trying to untangle themselves and break free from each other to see what colors actually belong to them.

Just beyond the stacked and scattered rainbows, the cab passed beneath a canopy of multi-colored towels, and men's shirts and women's dresses stretched out across the road from window-to-window, all of them flapping in the cab's wake like angry flags protesting the disturbance. The narrow streets and jammed-together buildings allowed only scattered sun streaks to light their way through a corridor that twisted in and out as if it had no idea where it was headed and didn't much care. As if their only purpose was to confuse and lose an intruder. Where the hell *was* Cyn headed in this tangled mess, and what kind of trouble was she getting herself into?

When the cab ahead finally slowed and stopped, Stone's driver pulled in as close to a building as he could without scraping a fender, far enough behind the cab in front of him, close enough for Stone to see Cyn get out and disappear down an alley. Stone glanced at the meter and handed over a twenty-dollar bill. More than he thought the meter read.

As he climbed out and followed Cyn on foot, he found himself wandering down an unending stretch of hemmed-in buildings with no obvious way out without breaking into what might easily be a family of six or a drug lord's den. Soon out of sight, and nowhere in sight as he tried to move quietly and catch up, Cyn had lost him in a neighborhood where anything could happen and probably did. Had he been fool enough to follow her into an Alice in Wonderland maze, circled around and in on itself with no escape in sight?

What *was* she doing down here, he thought as he swung around another corner that pretty much looked the same as the last. Somehow, he needed to

break free of this entanglement and get back to the hotel so he would be there when she returned to deny he had any intention of following her. He considered phoning her, but if she had wanted him to know where she was and what she was up to, he would already know. She would have told him.

And then, without warning, a sharp pain struck him in his back. “Don’t turn around,” a deep voice behind him warned him as he felt the sharp point of a weapon, probably a knife. “You hear what I’m sayin’? Walk half a block. Keep lookin’ straight ahead.”

Stone nodded. He assumed his assailant wanted confirmation. He had told him half a block. On the good side of a bad situation, his assailant’s instruction had been foolishly given. Never divulge more than required. It gave a captive or a hostage too much information to work with as he tried to figure a way out.

Another half a block? Stone was obviously dealing with an amateur. He was clearly being led to someplace specific. Usually someplace *inside* specific. A *trap*. Knowing a trap lay ahead, it was always better to deal with a lion out in the open instead of in its den. The open allowed more options. More room to maneuver. Stone knew he had half-a-block to deal with the situation before he found himself trapped inside a lion’s den.

“Keep movin’,” the man said when Stone slowed to test his leeway. When he felt the knifepoint dig in a little deeper, it was evident that his leeway was limited. “Okay. Okay,” Stone said, at least as much to reassure himself that it *was* okay as the knifepoint guided him another twenty yards.

“What do you want? My wallet?... Take it.”

“What’s your business down here?”

“Tourist.”

“Nothin’ to see down here. You been followin’ somebody. A woman.”

“We happened to be headed in the same direction.”

“Until you lost her.”

Stone spoke and slowed his pace again, gently this time, hoping his assailant wouldn’t notice. With his heart pounding and his adrenaline pumping,

he took a slow, deep breath to try and calm himself and relax. When he made his move, it had to be smooth, quick, and unexpected. It had to be as much a surprise to him as his opponent. If he got it right, one strike would be a final strike. It would be over before it began.

“I wasn’t following her,” Stone said. “She’s a friend of mine. She just got ahead of me, that’s all. I was trying to keep up.”

“Is that so?”

“I got lost.”

“Over there. That door there on the right. Open it.”

A slow move now, toward the door, would seem normal, Stone thought. As if he were simply following instructions. “You mean *this* one?” he asked as he took a short step toward it. “*This* one?”

As he reached out, he flattened his palm to a chop position and stepped forward just enough to ease away from the point of the knife. Then spun to his right, slamming his forearm into the man’s wrist, sending the knife clinking into the alley and sliding away.

His assailant – a thick-necked, ram-chested man – stiffened in surprise that quickly merged to rage. He hunched his shoulders forward like a bull in a ring who had been fooled once but wouldn’t be again. With a little precision and nuance, an experienced bullfighter could redirect that energy. Stone awaited the man’s charge. In the final instant before he arrived, Stone spun again and stepped out of his way, booting him in his rear as he passed to increase his momentum into the wall.

“Ahhh!” The man shrieked as he turned again to face an enemy who had fooled him again.

“Stay put,” Stone said as he raised both hands. “You’re a big man. That makes a big target.”

“Ahhhhggg!” the man yelled, this time more directed, more focused.

Stone shrugged. “Okay, then.”

A bull in a China shop can do a lot of damage. A bull in the open, in the

middle of a bull ring, or in the middle of an alley, simply floundered while charging a moving target. As any matador might, Stone felt sorry for the frustrated fellow as he waited for him to choose the direction of his next charge and commit. Stone could almost hear the bullfight crowd as they rose in the stands and hollered “olé, olé” in unison while the frustrated bull dug its hooves into the dirt and charged again and again, never quite goring his target.

Poor sonofabitch, Stone thought as he dodged the next charge, spinning around and flat-fisting the man in the neck as he passed. On his next attempt, Stone simply side-stepped and stretched out a foot, tripping his opponent forward and hurling him down the alley and sliding face-first across the pavement.

“Ahhhhh!” he screeched. This time more the anguish of an animal desperate to regain control.

Stone sauntered over and bent down to pick up the knife when he heard a woman’s voice behind him. “*Clay?... What are you doing? What have you done?*”

He turned to face Cyn, her head cocked, both hands on her hips as she scowled across at him. “You could have hurt that man. You *did* hurt him.”

“I ahh...,” Stone said, unsure what to say.

CHAPTER 43

La Paz, Bolivia

The Present

Stone had just taken down a bull. Only he *wasn't* a bull. He *was* a man. And that fact, for anyone who knew the human body and had a little FBI karate/judo training, made him vulnerable. A human opponent, unlike a bull, had no horns to gore. A man, *unlike* a bull, stood on his hind legs, exposing his sensitive body parts -- a throat required for breathing, a thin breast bone to protect his heart, an exposed gut with its vital organs floating around in a soft cavity. And then, of course, the most sensitive male part of all, his dangling testicles. Even with the added human advantage of two raised fists, a man can't protect everything at once. Covering up one vulnerability left other targets wide open. But why lay an opponent totally out when you could simply incapacitate him enough to have a little chat? Try a chat first, at least as a distraction. What's to lose?

“What the hell have you done?” Cyn asked, standing in the alley, staring down at a collapsed bull-of-a-man.

“Trying to protect myself,” Stone said. “Trying to protect *you*.”

“What made you think I needed protection?”

“What made you think you didn’t? And why the hell didn’t you just tell me where you were going?”

“I was told not to. When the call came in, I was told not to hang up. To carry my cell phone outside to a waiting cab that would know where to take me. I was told to sit up front, hold the phone in my lap, and not call or text anyone. I didn’t want to lose the contact, so I did what I was told.”

As they spoke, the bull of a man rolled over and groaned as he sat up on his own, shaking his head like he was trying to reengage a few loose gears.

“Sorry about that,” Stone said, reaching his hand out to help him up, ready

to pull back if the man grabbed Stone's hand and yanked.

Just as the man refused Stone's gesture, an alley door squeaked open to expose a dark, black hole in a wall. An invitation or a trap?

Stone glanced at Cyn, who shrugged. He nodded toward the door. Then they cautiously stepped into a windowless room, Stone first, Cyn directly behind, both perfect targets silhouetted against the doorway light of the alley.

"Step on in," a high-pitched voice said, although clearly a man's voice, not a woman's.

"In where?" Stone asked, quickly moving to his left to avoid the silhouetted exposure as he grabbed Cyn's hand to yank her behind him.

"There's a chair up here. Only one of you was invited."

Stone's eyes slowly adjusted to the light of a tiny amber lamp, no more than forty watts, tilted toward the center of a large room from a low-slung stand in a front corner.

"A little closer," the man said. "We'll find another chair in here."

As Stone eased forward, Cyn a step behind, the bull-man slipped through the door behind them and lumbered into the room. He scrounged a chair from somewhere against a side wall, dragged it across to the center, and placed it next to a stiff back chair already there.

"Have a seat," the unseen man said as the bull-man kept his distance, circling behind them again to close the door and plunge the room into deep shadows.

The man who spoke was in partial view now. "You," he said. "The woman. What's your name?"

"Slater... Cynthia Slater."

"It seems like you have friends in high places... And *him*? Who's he?"

"Stone. Clayton Lovell Stone."

"Friend? Lover?"

"Yes."

"You were told to come alone."

“I tried. He thinks he’s my guardian.”

“You might need one for where you’re headed.”

“You *know* where we’re headed? You know what we’re looking for?”

“An ancient death mask. The rest of it. The part you don’t have.”

“You know where it is? You can help us?”

“I don’t know where it is *now*, but I can tell you where it’s been, where it came from.”

“How do you know?... How did you find that out?”

“Nothing moves through a pipeline without someone knowing. Inanimate objects don’t have legs. They don’t walk or run. They need to be carried. The kind of business I’m in? It’s a business of favors. I owe someone. When I got a call, helping you helps me. It all breaks even.”

CHAPTER 44

La Paz, Bolivia

The Present

“The Voice” – the name that Stone and Cyn had come to call the man they met in a darkened room in a rundown section of La Paz – had apparently used his considerable resources to learn that the ancient death mask, the *entire* mask, had started its South American journey decades earlier in the tiny river village of Chikamonga, a long-abandoned rubber plantation, once a small town high in the northern jungles of Bolivia. The Voice’s source said the location was relatively inaccessible and nearly uninhabited except for an indigenous tribe who staunchly defended their territory. The source said that the particular piece they were after had started its journey in Chikamonga decades earlier and then vanished until the broken feather that Cyn came across turned up further north of Chikamonga in a tiny fishing village on the Gulf Coast.

The Voice not-so-subtly warned them that the trail that fragment had followed was about as dangerous as a bullet aimed directly between the eyes. But he offered to help them find Chikamonga if they were still foolish enough to go and if they were willing to endure the hardships and accept the risks. He said he owed a competitor a return favor and that helping them was another way to break even along that trail. When they agreed to those less-than-tempting stipulations, they were advised to carry only what was necessary. They were told that every extra ounce under the oppressive weight of the jungle would soon feel like a pound of dead-weight holding them back and grinding them down. Armed with the Voice’s unexpected penchant for helping them, a shopping list for Freddie’s Camp Emporium awaited them back at the front desk at their hotel.

Freddie’s Sports and Equipment Emporium rose two stories high in the middle of a long block on La Paz’s Hernando Siles Avenue. In front of this building sprouted a huge tent-like awning shading a doorway that opened to

zigzagged aisles of hiking, biking, and camping equipment and clothing that required shoppers to wade through stacked mounds of wooden crates overflowing with tents, backpacks, trail shoes, knee-high socks, sweat-repelling shirts and trousers, adjustable spring-loaded walking sticks, trail spikes, pots, pans, collapsible stoves, hand-pumps, water filtration systems, single and double-lens binoculars, and all makes and models of compasses, GPS tracking devices, and everything else imaginable that an expedition trekker in Antarctica, a determined Sahara desert crosser, or a Sunday afternoon stroller in Central Park might need or want.

Stone and Cyn kept their purchases simple and strategic – Mosquito repellent, a snakebite kit, two wide-brim hats with fold-down bug netting, air-flow pants and shirts, and ankle-high boots with breathable sides. The young woman who checked them out reminded them to buy extra phone batteries since they would be traveling well beyond electric lines and extension cords just didn't stretch that far into the jungle.

After carrying their equipment back to the hotel and eating a light evening meal, Stone spent the rest of the evening anxious and ready to go. After a sleepless night, he woke to a thunderstorm that had gotten worse as it progressed. Thankfully, by the time he had showered and dressed, the storm had vented its fury and moved on, clearing the way for a bright yellow sun that seemed to invite them out into the light of day. A good omen for what lay ahead.

They were instructed to take only what they could carry and leave anything else with the hotel concierge for a later pickup. They were to wait in front at 10:30, allowing just enough time to fortify themselves in the hotel restaurant with a light breakfast of toast and jalapeno scrambled eggs. The jalapenos cleansed Stone's sinuses as it jolted him awake.

At 10:30 sharp, they were picked up in a camouflage-painted Hummer that gave Stone the impression that they were climbing into a tank headed into battle as the vehicle bumped out of the hotel drive and began to wind its way through congested morning traffic.

“Where are we headed?” Stone leaned forward and asked the driver.

“The river,” the man said, glancing in his rearview mirror with an irritated look across his brow.

“The river?”

“The river.”

As they left the city behind and broke into the countryside, the twin peaks of the mountains Illimani and Illampu rose 20,000 feet on their right as the Hummer headed north and the La Paz Valley Plateau sloped off to their left.

They drove six hours, stopping to gas up twice and then again along the road for a small boxed lunch the driver had carried along -- some sort of pastry dough stuffed with yellow cheese that oozed out from both ends when Stone tried to grab it and hold it in one piece. As Cyn leaned forward and let hers drip on the ground, she stared straight ahead, off in her own little world, preoccupied with something.

“What is it?” Stone asked, still trying to hold his pastry together.

“It’s not *this*,” she said, struggling to hold onto her lunch. “It’s not the food. I can’t help thinking how they always fattened up a steer before slaughtering one. We’ve been warned. We have no idea where we’re headed or what we’re getting into.”

“You’re right. We don’t. You want to turn back now?” he looked at her and asked.

“No. You?”

“No.”

“I guess we’ll know when we get there.”

They drove another two hours without much small talk. Cyn drooped her chin and nodded off every so often, then jolted awake again when the Hummer hit a bump. It was a little after six in the evening, still well before sunset, when they finally arrived in Rurrenabaque, a town of 20,000 that stretched north to south along the Beni River and boasted a block-lettered sign above its entrance gate that dubbed the town, “The Rainforest Gateway.”

They checked into the Pampa Hotel, complete with window air conditioning, a Spanish language TV and, as advertised, “a private bath with a hot shower.” What more could a traveler headed into the jungle want, Stone thought as he and Cyn climbed the creaky stairs to their second-floor accommodations, prepared to enjoy relative luxury compared to where they were headed.

CHAPTER 45

Beni River, Bolivia

The Present

Stone and Cyn acquired a jungle guide, a brown-skinned man named Dango who introduced himself and his two porters the following morning after breakfast. The group boarded two flat-bottom riverboats and headed up the Beni River, already a few miles northeast of Rurrenabaque when Stone reached his hand out in the water to grab a tangled glob of plastic floating in what was touted to be pristine river water uncluttered by human discards.

“Steven Hawking,” Stone mumbled. The civilized problem. He had always admired Hawking as much for his courage as his brilliance and creativity. Hawking once said that humans are nothing more than an advanced breed of monkeys living on a minor planet of an average star drifting out on the edge of an unremarkable Milky Way. But, Hawking added, we have the capacity to understand the universe, and *that makes us* special.

Maybe so, Stone thought. But a more pertinent question might be, can we comprehend and save our tiny part of the universe before we destroy it, and can we understand and accept each other before we destroy ourselves? Humans were simply too damn good at procreation and spreading themselves around in the world’s pristine places and too monkey-like in understanding themselves and their impact. Small groups of a hundred or so of our ancestors roaming around and scavenging for food on the African savanna couldn’t do a hell of a lot of damage. Their numbers were too small, and they hadn’t yet learned *how* to do a lot of damage.

Fast forward several thousand millennia from that inauspicious beginning, and the ancestors of those hairless, fangless, two-footed humanoids, now equipped with bigger brains, had pretty much populated nearly every corner of the earth, floating their discards down every pristine river, sending islands of

discarded plastic to float out across the Pacific, and turning the earth's temperature up enough to kill the barrier reefs and melt the icecaps. How special is that, Steven Hawking? How much hope would that give you if you were still among us? Maybe, wherever you are now, you have a better perspective on how things look and how we can save ourselves.

Stone held his fistful of plastic out over the water far enough to let it drain and then squeezed what remained back into the river – the part that *belonged* in the river – before stuffing the plastic glob in the boat's ribs. He had made his little effort to save the planet. A futile effort, but one added up, if humans straightened up and smartened up, that might actually make a difference in the long run.

They traveled upriver in two sixteen-foot, green-painted, longboats powered by double-stroke outboards engines. Cyn sat at the bow of the lead boat, her elbows on her knees as she absorbed the changing jungle's sights, sounds, and smells as they passed by and then disappeared along both sides. Stone squatted on a narrow board in the center of that lead craft while Dango steered from the stern.

Dango's two porters trailed in the second boat, all their supplies wrapped in waterproof packages lashed down in the center. "If one of us capsizes," Dango cupped his hands and called, his words hard to hear above the chug of the engines, "the other stays free and clear. You don't want to be overboard too long in these waters."

After another several hundred yards, Dango slowed his boat to a crawl, then cut his engine and allowed the boat's forward momentum to drift in close to shore. He leaned over the side, staring intently at the water as the trailing boat drifted alongside and stopped. Then he raised his left hand for silence, keeping his eyes focused on the river as he reached into a bag with his free hand and tossed out what appeared to be small chunks of meat. That bait, if that's what it was, floated gently on the surface and then began to sink slowly when an unexpected frenzy of excitement leaped from the water, splashing and pounding

in a furious attack, biting and slashing at themselves as much as the meat. And then, just as suddenly, the water calmed again, a swirling pool of blood the only evidence that anything had happened.

“Keep your hands and fingers in the boat,” Dango said. “You never know what kind of threat these waters might hide.”

All that excitement and frenzy reminded Stone of a bunch of crooked politicians fighting over the truth when there wasn’t much meat of truth to fight over, when all that was left in the end was bruised political clout and bloodied egos.

After motoring another half-hour up the river, the water churned to a deep muddy brown, maybe from some sort of upstream runoff. The jungle on both sides slowly settled into an eerie quiet until the high-pitched call of a bird shattered that silence, immediately answered by a second high-pitched call, maybe in search of a mate, or maybe a warning to the others that intruders were on the river.

And then, no more than a minute after that initial disturbance, the first shriek of a howler monkey cried out from somewhere high in the density of the treetops, soon joined by others in what quickly became a screaming match to determine who could howl the loudest and longest. As soon as that skirmish settled, other birds and animals – apparently awakened by what could no longer be ignored – joined a growing jungle chorus, perhaps taking comfort in the fact that life was now far enough upriver from civilization that they could safely reveal itself without fear of being shot or exposing nests or breeding grounds.

As Dango’s boat rounded a bend, Stone shaded his eyes to glance up at a pure white hawk gliding in circles overhead, perhaps sent out to spy for others. The further upriver they traveled, the more the chug of their motors reassured Stone that they still had a small grasp on what amounted to civilization, always tentative in the best of circumstances.

Two hours out, Dango pulled into shore and stepped out under a canopy of wide-leaf palms as his two porters hopped ashore and dragged both boats onto

dry land. As Cyn stepped out and Stone followed, no hint of a breeze stirred the air's stillness. On the shore now, thick stands of tightly wrapped vegetation blocked any possibility of airflow. As Stone squatted and sat, the dense jungle humidity seemed to reach its arms up to wrap around his chest and squeeze him with an oppressive hug. Overhead, as he glanced up, a haze hung over the treetops, filtering the light in long yellow streaks that seemed to dance from leaf-to-leaf before the few streaks that survived dropped to the ground in scattered spots and patches.

It was apparent to Stone that he was out of his element. He loved living on his tiny strip of the Chesapeake's overgrown shoreline, but this was a bit *too* overgrown. From here on out, it was clear who was in charge of the show. It wasn't him. He doubted it was Dango or his crew. It was raw nature.

After checking the gear on the boats to see that it was still all there and tied down, Dango came over and sat next to Stone and Cyn. He reached in a worn leather pouch and handed them strips of some sort of gray, hotdog-length Jerky. He pulled his knees up to this chest and snapped off a bite, then nodded for Stone and Cyn to do the same.

"What is it?" Stone asked after chewing on what tasted like crunchy sawdust laced with jalapenos and a touch of burnt licorice.

"Meat," Dango said, looking straight out at the water.

"Any special kind?"

"Whatever they had on hand when they ground it up."

"I was afraid of that."

"It starts to taste better the longer you're out here."

"Sounds like you speak from experience."

"In the jungle?... Experience only takes you so far. It's new every time. Always fresh with lush beauty laced with deadly surprises. The jungle can turn on you whenever it chooses."

"Is that why you take the lead?"

"I *don't*," Dango said, slapping a palm on a fourteen-inch machete

strapped to his side. “*This leads.*”

Stone sat quietly, working his jaw on the Jerky as half-a-dozen Monarch butterflies fluttered in from the bush to either greet him or test his sweat for the taste of nectar. One sea-blue beauty with parallel lines of white spots along both wings flew away and then returned to light on Cyn’s left knee as if it recognized her from some past reincarnation and wanted to renew their acquaintance. Cyn grinned and looked across at Stone in a kind of silent understanding they always had when one of them experienced something that touched them both.

When one of the porters passed water bottles around, Dango said, “Drink slowly. Let it absorb. It takes a while for the body to adjust.”

“You make this trip often?” Stone asked after his first sip.

“Not a lot.”

“What do you know about where we’re headed?”

“I know where it is. I’ve been there a few times. Not many, though.”

“But others have?”

He shrugged. “A few.”

“You know the place?”

“I speak their language. Some of them, a few of the natives, speak English. It’s nothing more than a native village now. It used to be a real town.”

After sitting quietly another twenty minutes, Stone and Cyn slowly sipping the warm water they were given, they reboarded the boats and shoved off again, headed back upriver. After another hour out, Stone thought he caught a glimpse of a large animal or maybe a man hidden in the bush, but he couldn’t be certain. Whatever or whoever it was quickly backed off and disappeared.

Dango had informed them that their trip would be a two-day journey. Eight hours total by river. Five on the first day, three on the second, and then another two-hour hike on a river trail above the rapids where the waters were no longer navigable. “We’ll make better time coming back,” he told them. “At least when we get back to the river. It’s downstream going back.”

At a little after high noon, with an already hot day headed toward

unbearable, Dango directed the boats toward a small clearing among the trees. He said he wanted to be in the shade during the hottest part of the day, that they would set up camp for the night, then make their final leg first thing in the morning, and hopefully arrive at Chikamonga sometime after noon. “What’s left of it,” he added.

Dango and his porters quickly got to work lashing bamboo poles they cut and hauled in from the jungle. They lashed two sets between tree trunks and overlaid them with a large, green tarp to form a makeshift shelter. Then they strung two rope hammocks between poles that ran down the middle. “These are for the two of you,” he said to Stone and Cyn. “The rest of us will turn the boats over and sleep under for protection.”

“From what?” Cyn asked.

“From the rainforest. There’s a reason they call it that. It rains.”

An early dinner consisted of meaty frog legs that one of the porters speared in a fresh-water pond, then skewered on bamboo stakes and barbequed over a hot fire. Dango added a pot of boiled rice to the meal, flavored with some sort of sweet fruit he carried in from the bush and sliced in thin layers as one of his men used machetes to carve crude eating implements.

“Well?” Dango looked across at Cyn and asked after she had taken a few bites of the rice.

“My friend over there,” Cyn said, nodding toward Stone. “He’s part owner of a restaurant. Maybe he could use your recipe. And then again,” she added, “maybe not.”

“It’ll get better as we go along,” Dango said. “You learn to eat what you have or what you can kill or trap out here. All kinds of things get eaten that aren’t on a regular menu.”

“Such as?” Cyn asked.

“Humans. White meat or dark. A leg or a thigh.”

CHAPTER 46

Deep in the Amazon Jungle

The Present

With the jungle night not quite settled in, and the night jungle prowlers not quite awake, Stone tightened his fist around a knot in his rope hammock. He did his best to roll over on his side while remaining half-asleep without tumbling off and ending up flat on his face on the ground. His adult spine simply didn't fit the curved shape of a rope hammock. As a boy, his body seemed to fit almost anything, often allowing him to wiggle out of an uncomfortable situation he shouldn't have been in in the first place.

Dozing for an hour was the best he could do when a colony of bats swarmed above his head, their mouths open wide to gulp any unsuspecting bugs they encountered. It wasn't long after their appetites were satisfied when the low growl of a big cat drifted across the jungle floor, either celebrating a kill or bemoaning one that got away. It didn't take too many smarts to realize that a jungle night, for a newbie, was not the most quiet or comfortable place to get a good night's sleep, or even *get to sleep*.

Lying there half-asleep, half-awake brought back more comfortable memories of sleeping in a hammock as a kid on summer vacation at his Uncle Max's in Peckatony, Pennsylvania. In the cool of those summer evenings, after capturing fireflies in a perforated-lid Hellmann's Mayonnaise jar and being sternly warned by his Aunt Marie to "stay out of that hammock until every one of those poor creatures is turned loose," Stone was easily able to wiggle his pliable, boyish spine into a hammock strung between pillars on his Uncle Max' front porch. But as he lay there now in a grown-up jungle hammock, recalling how it felt to be that boy, he was about to finally drift off when an insistent group of tiny-winged insects flitted around his right ear and did their best to buzz up his nose.

“*What is it?*” Cyn sprung up in her hammock next to him and called as Stone swatted wildly in front of his face. “What are you doing?”

“Swatting monsters,” he said. “At least the big cats attack one at a time... How about you?” he asked. “You able to sleep?”

“Not really. I’m hungry.”

“Hungry? At this godawful hour?”

“Hungry for you,” she said. “Doesn’t the jungle bring out the beast in you? It does in me.”

“*What?*” Stone asked. “You want to do it in one of these hammocks?”

“In a hammock. On the ground. Whatever’s your pleasure.”

“You on top then. Mosquito bites on my back are too hard to scratch.”

“You sure know how to entice a woman.”

“Years of practice and I’m still not any good at it.”

“Better than you think. Or maybe than you’re willing to admit.”

When the gnats and bugs and the other unidentifiables finally flitted off for fresher prospects, Stone was finally able to drift off until the jungle birds sounded their early morning wakeup call – a shrieking, howling, high-whistled call of the wild. Stone wrapped a fist around a top rope on his hammock and slowly rolled over enough to slide off and plant both feet firmly on solid ground.

After stretching out a few dozen pains and kinks, and after Cyn managed to roll out of her hammock, they headed to a clearing where Dango had already brewed coffee on a crackling fire. After an edible breakfast of hard-cooked eggs and some kind of footlong, chewable fruit – sweet and more orange than banana-like – they broke camp and reloaded the boats.

“We’ll be another couple of hours on the river,” Dango said. “When we reach the rapids, we’ll be on foot. We need to get to where we’re going while there’s still plenty of daylight. We don’t want to stumble around in the brush anywhere near dark. That’s when the prowlers wake up and start to get serious. A fire tends to hold them off, but we can’t carry fire with us.”

They took their familiar positions, and the boats started chugging upriver

again. The closer they came to the rapids, the more Stone could feel its churning power trying to push them back where they came from, almost as if to warn them that they might want to rethink proceeding any further. After several more hours, Dango nodded toward a lopsided wooden dock poking out from a clump of trees and maneuvered toward it. As one of his men climbed out and tied the boats up, another man unloaded and unwrapped the gear that had been stowed and lashed to the trailing boat's ribs.

"We walk and slash our way from here," Dango said, slipping his machete out from its sheath and pointing its blade up a path that followed the river's edge.

"What about the boats?" Stone asked, glancing back as they started up the trail.

"This's a toll on the river. You don't see anyone, but they're here. They've been paid. You don't want to get behind in your payments. Boats could easily sink or disappear before an owner returns. Sometimes the owner along with them."

"I hope you kept a receipt," Stone said.

With Dango in the lead, one of his men directly following, Cyn and Stone next in line, and Dango's remaining men pulling up the rear, they headed down a narrow, partially cleared trail that Dango hacked his way through when the vines or the brush threatened to block their passage.

Halfway around a river-bend the path forced them to follow, Dango held his hand in the air and motioned Stone and Cyn forward to point out what he said were fresh jaguar tracks. Then, after another thousand yards or so, he stopped again and told them to stand perfectly still as a swarm of bees crossed the path a few yards ahead.

"The bees aren't the problem," Dango said. "It's the damn mosquitoes. They don't pass. They attack."

As they continued to follow the shoreline, the thickness of the brush and the vines slowly shifted from barely passable to open and inviting, almost as if

the vegetation was luring them into a trap to wrap them in its cocoon and digested them in jungle juices before spitting their bones out on the trail as a warning to others to venture no further.

At least on the river, Stone thought, they were out in the open. He could see danger looming ahead. He could feel an occasional breeze brush his forehead. But as the trail thickened with vines and underbrush, any hint of breeze was soon choked off. With the morning heat and humidity already weighing him down and beads of perspiration starting to drain down his chest, the best he could do was trudge forward, trusting that Dango knew what he was doing, and let raw nature take its course.

CHAPTER 47

Deep in the Amazon Jungle

The Present

Dango stopped abruptly in the middle of the trail and slowly raised his hand as he turned and gestured for Stone and Cyn to come closer.

“Quiet,” he whispered when they were within earshot. “*Very* quiet. No sudden moves. They’re all around us. We’re being watched. When they’re ready, they’ll make themselves known. Stay close behind,” he said as he turned again and slowly led the way ahead.

As they eased ahead, everything before them – the birds, the trees, the jungle itself, lay deadly still. No sound. No movement. Nothing. They were strangers in a strange land, and whether or not they were welcome was yet to be determined. Finally, after another twenty yards, Dango raised his hand again. He turned and whispered, “They want us to stop here.”

“Who?” Stone whispered. “How do you know?”

“I just do,” Dango said as he turned again to face the trail.

Silence again. And, then suddenly, without warning, four painted warriors dropped down from the trees on both sides of the trail as half-a-dozen others sprang out from the bush ahead of them, shaking spears and hollering high-pitched warbles.

Dango raised a flattened palm for Stone and Cyn and his men to stand in place. After several minutes of wails and spear-shaking, a warrior with a bone through his nose and a huge tail-feathered band around his head stepped forward as others parted to let him through.

Dango stepped toward him. The two of them spoke, the warrior shaking his head as Dango nodded. Then Dango turned and walked back. “They want to know what we’re doing here. They don’t understand artifacts. I told them you’ve come to learn of their proud traditions. That you wanted to know about them

firsthands.”

“You think they believed that?” Stone asked.

“I doubt it. They shouldn’t. They’re not known for trust.”

“Okay, so now what do we do?”

“I told them you have no weapons. *Do you?*”

“No,” Stone said.

“I do, but they know me. They’ve invited you to stay. The two of you will be their guests at a feast tonight. Until then, you’re free to roam, look around, and prepare for tonight.”

“Prepare how?”

“Think of something you want to ask about their traditions. Something that fits the cover story I gave them. They won’t believe that either, but they’ll respect it.”

After the initial show of yelping and spear-shaking had served its purpose, Stone and Cyn and Dango and his men were led another quarter-mile when that path suddenly opened to a group of twenty or so thatched-roof huts arrayed in a circle around a huge central bake-oven. As Dango and his men wandered off in one direction, Stone and Cyn stepped out of the way of four naked, brown-skinned children teasing, taunting, and chasing each other around and between them.

Halfway across the clearing, Stone noticed two other hut clusters down side paths and maybe a third beyond those. He felt totally out of place as he and Cyn ambled past four flat-nosed, bare-breasted women squatting in front of the central bake-oven, spreading some sort of heavy paste mix across two flat stones while three others sat cross-legged on blankets weaving thick-strand baskets as they laughed and chatted and occasionally glanced up and nodded understanding.

By contrast, the men – mostly heavily-muscled with shoulder-length, black hair matted flat against their heads – gathers in standing groups of five or six, mostly doing little or nothing, occasionally shifting from one foot to the other.

All the males beyond adolescence wore loose flowing loincloths draped down to their ankles and strings of bone necklaces, the size and number of which seemed to signify status. The majority, maybe eighty percent, painted thick colored rings around their nipples. Maybe ten percent of those wore headbands with feathers poking out horizontally as if their wearers might take off and fly if those feathers started flapping when a warrior got up enough speed and made one great leap off the ground.

As they walked around, Stone was surprised that they were allowed to wander about as if they belonged there. Their presence seemed to generate no more interest than the dogs or tamed wolves, whatever they were, roaming freely or sleeping their flat-faced on the ground. Between one of the huts, Stone thought he caught a glimpse of some sort of oddly-shaped creature poking a head and an arm out, then quickly pulling back when Stone stretched his neck and bent closer.

As they passed to the other side of the clearing, they followed two women down a path that led to the river where other women, bent at their waists, pounded loincloths on rocks, then stood and wrung them out and flung them around in the air before bending over and pounding them again. All in all, the whole place felt oddly surreal and surprisingly harmless. A normal human community going about its normal daily business, doing what it needed to do to get through their day.

Dango had instructed them to walk around enough to give the tribal elders a chance to look them over. He had added that “the sacred areas” – what was left of the original plantation town – were strictly out of bounds. Wandering back there required permission rarely given. But as they turned back from the river, Dango rejoined them to say that permission had been granted.

“Why?” Stone asked.

“They didn’t say. But they *do* want you to go. It wasn’t exactly a request. Just be careful back there. Tread lightly. Angry ghosts still live there. I have a feeling they have reasons for their anger.”

CHAPTER 48

The abandoned town of Chikamonga

The Present

What was left of the abandoned rubber plantation town of Chikamonga – now apparently considered sacred space that required permission to enter – lay down a path two hundred yards beyond the tribal village. The farther Stone and Cyn walked down that path, the more the jungle seemed to close in around them as if to warn them that this was not a place humans should venture.

While the village bustled with life and activity, the abandoned town, at least the little that remained, exuded an aura of death and despair, as if it had suddenly stopped in its tracks to let its skin and bones decay in place. Thick, tangled vines had stretched a stranglehold over what was left of the structures as though those vines were the only glue holding them together. The jungle, inch-by-inch, year-by-year, had eaten away most of the town and was slowly digesting the little that remained. With one exception. A two-story, white, freshly painted building – the only one fully intact – stood to their left in the center of a two-block stretch. *Why* was it still standing, Stone thought. *Where* did the paint come from? *Who* had painted it? And *why*?

“My God,” Cyn said, reaching out to clutch Stone’s hand. “This really *is* a ghost town. Can you *feel* it?”

He could. The abandoned main street reeked of death and despair as a foot-long rat scurried across the road ten yards in front of them as if the frightened animal realized that even he had made a wrong turn and wanted no part of this.

They cautiously stepped beneath a block-long canopy of vines that had climbed the trees on one side to swing across from there and drape down on the other, allowing only a greenish haze of light to filter through and touch the street below.

Stone looked up as they passed a side trail leading to what looked like vine-covering stilts that might have once supported a larger structure. Straight ahead of them, facing them squarely at the end of the road, a flattened rectangle of pillars popped up, possibly the foundation for what might have been the plantation superintendent's home or office. To the left of that, a partially cleared trail ran downhill toward the river.

"What do you make of it?" Cyn asked.

"Someone has been keeping this road and some of the trails at least partially cleared. Dango said this was a sacred place. Maybe it has something to do with that. Maybe they're appeasing the spirits. It looks like the old plantation town simply closed up shop when the rubber market collapsed. The owners probably didn't bother to lock the doors. Why? They weren't coming back."

"This doesn't seem to have anything to do with a death mask," Cyn said. "If we've been pointed in the right direction, that mask would have been carried up here far later than that. Long after the plantation had folded. So, how would an ancient death mask that started in Berlin make its way this far up in the Amazon? If it ever *was* here. An ungodly place for anything. Agreed?"

"A little air conditioning might help," Stone added with a smirk. "And maybe some sort of mattress that didn't involve ropes or canvas."

"That painted building," Cyn said, nodding toward the structure on their left in the center of the row. "What do you make of that?" As she spoke, they stepped toward what appeared to be an old movie house, or perhaps once a live theater, its marquee missing above a double-door entrance that might have been a ticket booth poking out like a tongue stretched out in the middle to lap in a customer.

Cyn raised an eyebrow. "What do you think they might have played in there? Godzilla reruns?"

"And why the hell *is* it still in such good condition?" Stone asked. "Why is it even still standing?"

"Hallowed ground," a voice said as the double doors opened and a man

stepped forward – tall and broad-shouldered with a thick flat nose and pure white hair. “It’s a temple of sorts. A shrine.”

Stone took a step backed. “Who the...?”

“I’m sure you have many questions. But since you’re the ones who are out of place here, I’ll do the asking.”

“Okay.”

“Why have you come? What do you want?”

“Answers.”

“What kind of answers?”

When Stone glanced at Cyn and nodded, she reached in her jacket pocket and lifted out her cell phone.

“There’s no signal up here.” the man said. “That won’t work.”

Cyn ignored him as she flipped through her photos, turned her phone around, and stepped close enough for him to look.

“What is this?”

“Here...Take it... Take a look.”

The man took the phone and studied it without expression.

“Do you recognize that?” Stone asked. “You know what it is?”

“You tell me.”

“It’s a death mask. Ancient Greek.”

“It hardly belongs up here in the jungle,” the man said as he handed Cyn’s phone back.

“That’s what we thought,” Stone said. “So, what was it doing up here.”

“It’s not here.”

“I said when it was. What happened to it? And why was it here in the first place?”

“Too much knowledge can be a dangerous thing. It can easily get you killed.”

“We’ve come a long way just to get killed,” Stone said. “I’ve spent my entire career trying to avoid that.”

“Anyone,” the man began. “Man or woman who doesn’t want to be eaten alive by puranas shouldn’t venture this far up the river.”

“Is that what we’re among here?... Puranas?”

“Those men who brought you. Go back to where they’ve set up camp. There’s a feast tonight. You two are part of it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re expected for dinner.”

CHAPTER 49

A Native Jungle Village

The Present

As the sun sank slowly over the horizon, darkness crept in to devour what remained of the day. On a moonless night, even the brightest stars, the few that managed to break through the jungle canopy, did little to illuminate the jungle floor.

Dango had informed Stone and Cyn that he would not be accompanying them to the ritual that night, that native warriors would convey them to the ceremony and they were to remain silent and follow whatever instructions they were given. Cyn immediately bent those instructions. They had each been given only ankle-length loincloths and moccasins to wear, but Cyn had chosen to cover her breasts with a loose T-shirt, apparently hoping she could get away with it.

After dressing in what they were given and being fed some sort of sour-tasting root-mash, they followed six warriors ahead of them and six others behind for the better part of half-an-hour as they wound in circular paths in near-darkness. Stone stumbled twice, and Cyn twice grabbed him from behind to keep her own balance as the air began to stir with a steady beat of drums that grew louder as they came closer.

Feeling increasingly dizzy, maybe from the mash they had been given to eat, Stone caught a glimmer of dancing fires ahead that looked, at first, like fireflies flitting about in the night. After another hundred yards, they passed beneath a canopy of thickly woven vines that opened to a wide clearing with a huge bonfire blazing in the center, with dozens, maybe hundreds, of warriors waving fired torches in the air as they stomped and spun in tight little circles, working themselves into a frenzy.

Stone and Cyn were led to step across to two jaguar skins stretched out facing the bonfire, the intense heat of the flames scorching Stone's forehead as

the firelight reflected a brilliant orange on Cyn's cheeks.

"On your knees," someone said in English. "On the ground." But was it English? Stone wasn't sure. Maybe he just understood what they meant and translated their thought or gesture into English as he knelt and Cyn knelt beside him.

He had been in tight situations before, but he had always managed to squirm and wiggle out of them with most of his body parts intact. But, even if he were able to somehow squirm out of this one, that would still leave him stranded somewhere in the middle of the Amazon jungle, chased by angry warriors who knew the territory and were excited by the chase. More to the point, he couldn't exactly leave Cyn there while he went for help. He was at their mercy. He knew it, and he knew they knew it. If it hadn't been for Cyn, he might have chanced a run for it. If he was going to die, why not die making a last-ditch effort at life? Dying with a spear in his back had to be a lot less painful than being barbecued on a bonfire.

The drumbeat and dancing lasted for close to an hour as the warriors spun themselves into a trance. When Stone reached for Cyn's hand to try and reassure her, someone slapped his wrist from behind, and he yanked back. Then a face-painted warrior with a huge feathered headdress stepped between them and the fire. He raised both hands high over his head and lifted his chin toward the heavens. He screeched a loud, deafening yell before he lowered his arms and the noise and frenzy slowly died around him.

In the sudden eerie quiet, two native women stepped forward, both bare-breasted, each holding a wooden bowl in their hands. Stone watched from the corner of his eye as one of the women knelt in front of Cyn, slowly lifting and tilting the bowl toward Cyn's lips, dripping a trail of liquid down Cyn's chin before she opened her mouth and quickly swallowed what they offered her.

Then the second woman knelt in front of Stone and held out her offering. Stone's instinct told him to knock the damn thing away, but he thought he might need whatever it held to fortify himself for what was to come. It had to be either

a sedative or a poison, either of which seemed preferable to being tossed even half-alert on a bonfire. So, he closed his eyes, opened his mouth, and accepted the acid taste offering in two quick gulps.

“I love you Cyn,” he heard himself mutter.

As the native women stood and stepped back, Stone felt the hot sting of needles stabbing his stomach wall. When he bent over to grab the pain to try and contain it, he glimpsed movement on his right and turned his head enough to see Cyn’s T-shirt fling away from her, leaving her half-naked and vulnerable. She didn’t flinch. She seemed resigned to her fate, whatever it was.

With his thoughts increasingly spinning in a confused whirl, the two native women appeared again, each with a second wooden bowl, one in front of him and the other in front of Cyn. The woman in front of him dipped two fingers in her bowl, then reached forward and painted parallel lines across his forehead and down both cheeks. He had no idea what they were doing to Cyn. He no longer seemed to care.

As the women stood and left, a tingling, almost a buzz, spread from somewhere deep inside him, rose up his spine, spread across his shoulders, then shot down along both arms and out to his fingertips that began to convulse as if they were trying to shake loose from the rest of his body and fly off on their own. Then his head floated off his shoulders. He felt serenely disconnected from all his earthly troubles, as if none of them ever really mattered in the first place. As if he had finally found the peace and serenity he had always sought.

As his lips stretched into a child-like grin, he heard the drums and the chanting started again, far away this time. The bonfire glistened in his eyes, its fiery lips trying to tell him something he couldn’t understand even when he moved his own lips to mimic the fire’s words. When he turned to look at Cyn, she had disappeared, replaced by a rainbowed image whose colors reflected her mood as if a dark shade of blue had crept in around the edges of her legs to try and take control of her.

He faced forward again and slowly raised his hands in front of his face to

see if they were still there or what they looked like, his fingertips spit out floating pink and purple bubbles that reminded him of soap-wand bubbles he played with in a park as a boy while his mother laughed hysterically, almost crying. He remembered chasing after one, trying to catch it before it popped, before he killed it trying to catch it.

Then everything slowed to the slowest of motion, the dancers floating off the ground as they spun and twirled in tight little spins that shrunk their bodies toward their core. And then some kind of creature – part human, part fish, part unknown – laughed and wiggled its disconnected fins and legs in front of him. Then a wide-eyed woman with two sets of feet, one on top of her head and one beneath her legs, started turning summersaults, giggling each time she spun. Next, a thick-haired gorilla woman with a deeply wrinkled face and huge sad eyes looked directly at him, inches away, and began to weep. Then someone, or some *thing*, with a single eye for a face, stretched out a pointed finger and rubbed Stone's lips with a ginger-tasting paste he licked off, then stretched his tongue out for more.

He suddenly understood that he belonged somewhere beyond himself. In some other place and some other time. But he wasn't sure where or when as four warriors lifted him off the ground and carried him on their shoulders as the sky above opened its arms to beckoned him home.

How could Stone be spinning in an empty void and still be alive? How could he even think, it occurred to him, as he stretched out a hand to try to grasp some sense of reality. But there was none to grasp. His hand squeezed emptiness.

“The circus is no place for monkeys.”

“*What?*”

“There’s no freedom in the circus. It’s all a charade.”

Stone shook his head, yet his head remained perfectly still as his body spun beneath it.

“We’re all monkeys trapped inside a traveling circus. We do our little acts.

Perform our little performance. And then..."

"I know that," Stone found himself saying. "Life is but a walking shadow. A poor player that struts and frets its hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It's a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

"Shakespeare's dead," a veiled voice said. "We're all dead in our time. What does any of it really matter in the end? What's it all amount to?"

"Is this *my* end?" Stone asked. "Have I finished my sound and fury?"

"Who knows, really? What you're looking for is nothing more than a moving shadow. That's all you'll ever find."

"Are *you* a shadow?" Stone asked, still dizzy but feeling his thinking beginning to clear.

"We're all shadows of our past, are we not? All of us look toward the horizon, looking for meaning out there somewhere, trying to make sense of it all. But not you. You're searching for something more specific. A death mask."

"You *know* that? You know of it?"

"I am *of* it."

"What?"

"It *was* here. It is no longer."

"Where *is* it then? What *is* this place?"

"A place of evil. Of tortured ghosts."

"Are *you* a ghost?"

"A walking dead still waiting to die. Aren't we all?"

"I can't see you. I can't see anything."

"You've been blindfolded... Your hands are tied. You were thrashing."

"Am I a prisoner?"

"To keep from going blind in the sudden light. Don't harm yourself as you come down."

"Do I know you? Your voice. It sounds familiar."

"You should. We met at the temple when you walked the street. The opera house. You and your..."

“Cyn?... Where is she?”

“She still sleeps. We all react differently.”

“Last night? Today? Whenever this was. What happened?”

“A ceremony. A test. If they trust you, you pass. If they don’t... They don’t trust many. They shouldn’t.”

“You called this ‘a place of evil.’ Are *you* evil?”

“A result. That shadow hangs over me. How much do you recall?”

“Of what?”

“Of last night. Of what you’ve been through?”

“I remember colors. Dancers. Distorted animals.”

“They weren’t animals. They were human. But they weren’t distorted. You saw them as they are.”

“But how...?”

“The experimentals. The old ones. The ones still alive.”

“What kind of place was this?”

“It’s a breeding ground. A quest for a superior species. A new kind of human.”

“And you...?”

“Not me. Not an experimental. I’m a result of selective breeding. My father mated with my mother, a native chosen for her strength and beauty and whatever else they were looking for.”

“Your father?”

“Their stud. Their prize bull who was carried over here as a baby for that very purpose. The best they could breed in what they called the Father Land.”

“Your father’s still alive then? He’s still here?”

“Long gone.”

“But not you. You’re still here. You stayed.”

“My father cared nothing of me. I’m a twin. *Was* a twin. My brother died a few months after my father abandoned us. Schuller, the doctor, had been injecting my brother with one of his trial substances. I was what he called ‘a

control' to see if the injections worked. They didn't. They killed him. He died a few months after the fire the natives call 'the fiery night.'"

"Schuller? Who's Schuller?"

"The boss. The doctor?... Doctor Bruno Schuller. The man in charge of it all."

"What happened to *him*?"

"He went out in a blaze of fury. He set himself and his house on fire. That's the last I saw of the good doctor. The last I ever want to see of him."

"Why are you telling me this?" Stone asked, trying to fit the pieces together in some sensible way. "Are you the one who saved us from whatever they were going to do?"

"Not really. The truth saved you. You didn't flinch in the face of death. The mask you're looking for? The death mask? The old ones, the experimentals, believe it belongs to them. That it was stolen."

"If it's not here, where is it?"

"I'll untie your hands. Keep your blindfold on a little longer. You could go blind until your eyes adjust."

When Stone felt the knots loosen around his wrists, he shook his hands free.

"Margo took it with her," the unseen man said. "That's what *he* called her. Her native name is Margondo. I saw her take it. She took it after the fire. She ran off with it."

"Took it where?"

"Who knows. But that's not all she took. She took her child. Her infant. The Doctor's son. He *was* the father. Maybe he used Margo for another one of his experiments. Or maybe he just fucked her for the fun of it. She was the last of his favorites. He used her like all the rest. She hated him."

"And now?" Stone asked. "What happens now?"

"To you and the woman?... You're free to go as soon as your sight recovers. Those who brought you are here are waiting for you. Don't look back."

Never return.”

“I’m not sure if I should thank you or if...”

“One more thing.”

“What more could there be?”

“My father. Falcon, they called him. He took the doctor’s files from the lab. The experiments the doctor thought might still show some promise.”

CHAPTER 50

La Paz, Bolivia

The Present

Dango was right. The river trip back was a lot faster than fighting the current going up. Stone and Cyn soon found themselves back in the same room in the same hotel in Riberalta, the town from which they had started their upriver journey. After a needed shower, they ate a hot meal of spiced stewed chicken and mashed cornmeal at the same small restaurant they had eaten before, then turned in early.

Stone slept soundly with Cyn next to him in the same bed. He had no thoughts of sex or anything else except the pure luxury of an actual mattress and air conditioning. With so much that had happened still on his mind, sex had slipped so far down on his might-want-to-do-list that it had fallen off completely.

As soon as they arrived back in La Paz the next afternoon, they checked back into the Anami. Stone put in a call to Hector Hernandez and left a message asking him to call back as soon as he got in. When Hector returned the call in less than twenty minutes, he suggested they meet at their usual place, the World Café, in an hour.

Traffic was light as Stone took a cab across town at a little after three in the afternoon. The traffic lights seemed timed to let him through as if they knew he was in a hurry and didn't want to hold him up.

Hector was waiting at a corner table with his back to the wall in his usual gunslinger's position, glancing up and nodding as soon as Stone ambled through the door.

"How did things go upriver?" Hector asked as soon as Stone pulled up a chair and sat across from him.

"Good in one respect. We weren't eaten by alligators."

"Puranas?"

“No Puranas, no bloodsuckers... Well, maybe close, in that regard.”

“How’s Cyn?”

“Safe and sound. A little worse for wear.”

“It must have been a hell of a journey. What’d you find up there?”

“In another world.”

“And what about what you were looking for? The death mask?”

“No mask, but I got a name. Schuller. Bruno Schuller.”

Hector leaned back and shook his head. “My god. That sonofabitch. What about him? How did his name come up?”

“Apparently, he was there. He had something going on in the jungle up there.”

“So, *that’s* where he’s been all that time,” Hector said. “There’s been all kinds of speculation about that over the years. Argentina, naturally. But that would have been a little too obvious. Chile, maybe. A lot of folks put their bets on Chile. He sure as hell *did* have something going on up there. A goddamn breeding farm. Not animals, though. *Humans*. He was using the natives as guinea pigs.”

“How would you know about that if you weren’t sure where he was?”

“I didn’t know for sure. No one did. Not a hundred percent. But there were always rumors, *wild* rumors, that had more than a ring of truth. An extension of what the Third Reich was up to back in Germany. Their Aryan race notion. A higher breed of humans.”

“And Schuller was *part* of that?”

“*Part* of it?... He was Mengele’s heir apparent. His chief assistant back before they brought their whole operation over here. But Schuller always wanted to be more than that. He always thought he *could* do more.”

“So, what happened to him?”

“You mean after he arrived?” Hector shrugged. “That’s when all the speculation started. No one knew for sure. Certainly, by now, he’s presumed dead.”

“I think you can move that presumption over to the definite category.”

Stone slid his coffee cup back on the small round table and filled Hector in on the details of what he and Cyn had been through and what they had learned, after which Hector glanced down at the edge of the table and thought a second. “So, some of those... What did he call them? *Experimentals*? Some of them, some of those results, are *still* up there? *Still* alive?”

“Apparently, a few. All old now. The ones who survived. Maybe some of their children. The ones able to have children.”

“So, where does that leave you and Cyn with the mask? Where do you go from here with that?”

“Schuller apparently had a daughter by one of the natives. A young woman named Margondo. He called her Margo.”

“And?”

“I was told she escaped. That she ran off with the mask. But not alone. She carried something else with her. A daughter by Schuller.”

“That shouldn’t surprise me, but I still don’t see where that leaves you.”

“Neither do I.”

“Maybe I can help with that.”

“When you’re spinning around in circles, any direction helps. What are you thinking?”

“The Mossad. The Israeli Intelligence Service. They were after Schuller for years. Searching everywhere. Right here in La Paz. It was common knowledge they were here. Everyone knew. That’s how I know. Then the ‘67 war came along and shot everything else to hell. They dropped the case. They never got back to it. Or, at least, they put it on permanent hold.”

“If the Mossad dropped it,” Stone asked, “how can they be of any help?”

“I’m not sure they can. But I’ll check with my counterparts at the Israeli consulate. I’ll see what I can find out and get back to you. It’s going to cost you, though. There’ll be a charge.”

“For what?”

Hector nodded toward Stone's cup. "The coffee. It's on you today."

CHAPTER 51

La Paz, Bolivia

The Present

In Stone's line of investigation work, there are four questions to consider when evaluating an informant's veracity. First, how could that particular informant be expected to know the specific information you're after? Second, has the source been reliable in the past? Has the information proven accurate? Third, why are they willing to tell you this? What's their motivation? Fourth and finally, is there any way to verify or double-check what they tell you or, at least, substantiate part of it?

In this particular case, when Hector called back, Hector *wasn't* the source. He was *the source of the source*. He had gone through his Washington intelligence connections to find out if they had any recent information on Bruno Schuller, anything other than his presumed death. Washington put Hector in touch with the Mossad Information Office in Tel Aviv, which was generally inclined to do Washington a favor when they could, hoping for reciprocity. The Mossad Information Office didn't mind passing on what they knew since they had already concluded that the good doctor was, in fact, no longer among the living.

Hector was told that the Mossad had gotten word from one of their trusted sources that Schuller likely fathered several children and that one of them, a grown man now, was living in one of the poorest sections of La Paz. They had caught up with the boy several years ago and photographed him at a distance. They had collected some DNA from a restaurant glass. They already had Schuller's prints from Germany in the early days. They said the match between Schuller and the boy was 85% confident that Schuller *was* the father of that now grown man.

But they couldn't be a hundred percent. So, according to what Hector had

learned, the Mossad paid the man a little visit and carried along their usual two persuaders --a pair of muscle-bound, Mossad interrogators who could throw a scare into anyone, and a bag full of cash from the Mossad's discretionary bribery-interrogation fund. Stone knew the approach. Start with scare tactics. They were cheaper and didn't require filling out a lot of forms to justify an expense. If muscle didn't work, try cash.

According to what Hector was told, neither was needed. All they had to do was mention Schuller's name, and the alleged son was more than willing to answer the questions. . He reportedly blurted right out, "The sonofabitch killed my mother."

He told the Mossad that the man who fathered him had died in a fiery explosion. "Broiled alive," he said he hoped. He said his mother died of cancer years after they left the jungle, but he thought it was more than the cancer. He said he thought it was fear that wore down her resistance. That the constant anxiety that they might be tracked down and killed ate away on the inside.

Hector said the man pleaded with the Mossad to keep his whereabouts secret. And then, just as the Mossad was wrapping things up, he said he didn't need their money anyway, that he had some coming in. The Mossad didn't follow up on that. They had no reason. They had gotten what they had come for, a verification that Schuller was dead. Case closed as far as they were concerned.

That was pretty much all that Hector had learned, but their confirmation that the man *was* Schuller's son was all that Stone needed. That and the man's address and the photograph the Mossad had taken and that Hector had already gotten and forwarded to Stone's cell phone.

"It's good news," Stone told Cyn, who was sitting in a chair in front of a mirror, brushing her hair. "It gives us a head's up. But not right now. It's a little late in the day. First thing in the morning, we'll need a car, a rental. I'll get that set up now. Anything you want to do tonight?" he asked.

She glanced toward the double bed and rolled her eyes.

"Does anything *else* ever occur to you?" he asked.

“Not often.”

Stone raised an eyebrow. “You’re just not used to your charms not working.”

“Should I be?... You said something to me back there in the jungle when we both thought we were going to die. When we were kneeling in front of that fire.”

“I did?”

“You said, ‘I love you, Cyn.’”

“I *said* that?”

“You don’t remember?”

“It doesn’t matter if I remember. It’s true. I do. I’m just never sure...”

“*Of...?*” she asked, looking directly at him.

“Exactly what that means? How much of me is just grabbing at straws? Wanting something that isn’t really there? That never was?”

“How do you know unless you try?” Cyn asked.

“Isn’t that what we did once?”

“Maybe not hard enough,” Cyn said. “Maybe *I* didn’t. Maybe I was too vulnerable. You ever consider that? Or maybe you were.”

“Maybe we’re both afraid of each other. Maybe that’s why I don’t want to...”

“Want to what?” she asked. “Make love to me?”

“I don’t want to get inside you again in any way. I think having sex is a distraction. Our way of *keeping* it physical. Let’s have a little fun. Let’s fuck. Let’s just keep it at that. Well, maybe that’s not enough. Maybe I want more. Maybe I *do* want to try. *Really* try. Maybe I don’t want to just glide across that slippery surface again and feel wet and empty on the other side.”

“Let’s go down to the bar, then I’ll buy you a drink.”

“I will take you up on that. But let me get that rental car over here first. We’ll need that first thing in the morning. *Early* in the morning.”

CHAPTER 52

La Paz, Bolivia

The Present

Stone crawled out of bed well before dawn and slipped into the bathroom without waking Cyn, who was still fast asleep. Humans are a predictable lot, he thought. They sleep at night, and that makes them vulnerable. Which is why the elite military – the Special Forces and the Seals – preferred to attack in those lazy, hazy morning hours well after midnight and long before dawn. Add the elements of darkness and surprise, and nature sides with the attacker.

Hector's resources had come up with a specific name for Sculler's son, which led to a specific address. Hail Carrano, 13275 West Slade Avenida. Which, as Hector's resources informed him, was clearly not in one of the more fashionable La Paz neighborhoods when Stone zoomed in on it in Google's Earth View. It was more a ramshackled hodgepodge of broken puzzle pieces that some angry god might have tossed down on a bad day without bothering to come back when he calmed down to straighten the pieces out in any particular order. Which made it a perfect place to get lost or hide out if that's what you were up to. Despite that, if you did happen to live there and paid your gas or electric bill, or paid anything at all, you weren't all that hard to find with a little rudimentary FBI computer hacker skill.

Once Stone had the address, Earth View allowed him to trot down to the hotel's business room computer in the middle of the night and look at 13275 West Slade Avenida at ground 3-D level without actually bothering to climb in a car and drive down there. Earth View allowed a virtual drive-by without lifting his elbows off the computer table, which allowed him to choose the best place to park and keep an eye on the place when he got there.

After completing his middle-of-the-night virtual drive-by, Stone had gone back up to the room and set his cell phone shake- alarm for 4:30 A.M., slipping

it under his pillow before he drifted off. When his phone jiggled him awake, he staggered into the bathroom, splashed his face with cold water, and ran his fingers through his hair, hoping to stimulate a little circulation to inform the rest of his body it was time to wake up and get moving.

When he came back into the room, he reached across the bed and nudged Cyn's bare shoulder poking out from under the sheet. She rolled over and groaned a grudging acknowledgement, then tumbled out and lumbered into the bathroom.

He dressed quickly, then ambled across to the hotel's fifth-floor window. He glanced down at the headlights of the early-bird rolling metal boxes already beginning to transport their boxed-in occupants from point "A" to point "B," from home to work, mostly headed down the same road they had headed down yesterday, the same as they would tomorrow, aiming to the same shop or office that always drew them in that direction. After arriving at point "B" and sliding into their allotted cubical or office, they would end up spending close to a third of their waking lives sitting in that same office chair, at that same desk, with those same certificates and yellowing college degrees tacked up on that same wall. Maybe two or three times in their working lives, they would lift those pictures and degrees off that wall, carry them down the hall or across the street, tack them up in another boxed-in office wall, and start traveling from point "A" to point "C." And then years later, if they got lucky, maybe move the whole operation from "A" to "D."

Except, of course, for weekends. Time to do the laundry, cut the grass, pack in some groceries, and get reacquainted with a friend, a lover, or a dog or a cat if they're lucky enough to have at least one of them in their non-working life. Time to rest up and recoup before hunkering down and plowing in again on Monday morning.

How many days left before retirement as those college degrees slowly yellowed on that second or third office wall? By the time a boxed-in rider reached his final working destination, his kids, if he or she had any, were grown

and gone, a few crayon marks on their old playroom wall, the evidence they once lived there. And maybe a husband or a wife gone too, depending on how well the two of them learned to get along and tolerate each other over the years.

And then what? Retire? The root of “retired” is “*tired*.” Although it could mean “*retired*” in the sense of retreading an old *auto tire* worn down by too much time on the road.

So, now what do you do when those yellowed degrees and certificates are on the wall at home or stuffed in a closet? With a car parked outside but has no point “X” to give it direction? Who *are* you when you no longer serve your function? When you no longer drive or roll along the same path you used to? When you no longer have a *specified* role? Retired, how do you fill what’s left of your time when your work experience and degrees no longer matter? How do you wrap some sort of meaningful function around emptiness? When you’re no longer *required* to do anything, who *are* you, and what *do* you do?

Maybe that’s why Stone preferred being “*fired*” to being “*retired*.” He was on his own after the Bureau had fired him. He chose his own cases. Point “A” was always his Annapolis watertower, but points “B,” “C,” or “D” were never quite the same and never the same twice. When he was on a case, he always knew what to do. Solve the case. Dig up clues and follow the trail. Like a bloodhound after blood, simply follow his nose. He didn’t have time to worry about the meaning of life, or of *his* life in particular. The meaning, at the moment, took care of itself. It was the in-betweens that got to him. Sitting around a little too long, doing a little of nothing too much of the time.

He turned away from the hotel window and sat on the edge of the bed, watching Cyn as she emerged from the bathroom freshly showered in a white hotel robe, running her fingers through her wet hair to encourage it to dry.

“Good morning,” he said.

“That’s your opinion,” she said, glancing toward the darkness outside as she crossed the room and fished around in her suitcase for a pair of fresh underwear as if they were an old married couple and that sort of underwear-

fishing no longer meant anything. "There's no light out there," she said. "Why this early?"

"A surprise visit. The early bird catches the worm."

"Schuller's son? *That* bird? He talked to the Mossad, but why would he talk to us?"

"I'm not sure he will. But Hector said the boy hated his father. He blamed him for his mother's death. Anger is often a good wedge to pry open information. It overrides reason. Stir up a little emotion and see what spills out. Once it's out, you can't take it back."

"So, what's the plan?"

"We have his address. So we drive over and check it out."

"*This* early?"

"People are mostly home at night. They come out in the morning. We wait there and see who comes out."

"Why not just let him get dressed and knock on his door?"

"That tends to get too many doors shut in your face. Then what do we do? Break in? That would just get the cops out there. Not to mention, we have no idea who else might be in there. It's better to wait and catch him alone. Wait for him to come out. Catch him off guard."

"Then what?"

"We see what develops."

Stone had rented a black, nondescript Toyota Camry -- color and model with the least presence. But that still left the question of whether to drive by every so often or park outside and hunker down until some sort of movement made its presence known. Drive-by's drew attention. Sitting there, hunkered down, made him a sitting duck target. Still, if he smiled, and waved, and quacked like a duck when someone passed by, he could usually get away with it. Most people prefer to steer clear of trouble. They know you're *not* a duck, but pretend you are. They ignore what doesn't directly affect them. But you couldn't count on that. There's always someone who likes to stir up trouble policing the

neighborhood. It made their day.

After gathering themselves together and making their way down to their rental, Stone said, “We’ll get there before daylight and park just down the street. There’s an empty lot half a block down on the opposite side with a clear view of the house. The neighbors will just be waking up, getting ready for their day. They mostly won’t notice.”

“*Mostly?*” Cyn asked as she climbed into her side of the rental and Stone climbed in behind the wheel.

“They’re too busy shaving and pulling on their pants.”

“What if someone *does* notice? What if they see us parked out there and come out?”

“We smile and wave like we belong here. We send them good nonverbals. Good vibes.”

“And what if one of them walks over and threatens to give us a nonverbal punch in the nose?” “We smile and step on the gas.”

CHAPTER 53

Hamburg, Germany

The Present

The day was dark and dreary to begin with. The dreariness only added to a painful throbbing in Wolf Richter's head. It had started after midnight and proceeded to beat a pounding rhythm through the rest of the night and early that morning.

As a member of the German Bundestag representing the Hamburg District, Richter had to rid himself of that distraction to focus on the task in front of him. With a crucial redistricting bill set for a vote, he had pressing legislative duties to attend, not to mention a constant barrage of constituent requests and complaints. All of which was far more confusing than it once was. Even more unsettling, his family had noticed a disturbing change in him lately. At the age of forty-eight, he was far too young for Alzheimer's, although there were times when he couldn't recall his eldest daughter's name. Or worse, when he did call her a name that *wasn't* hers. There were times she just stared at him as if he *had* lost his mind. And, as if all that weren't enough, odd feelings and emotions had lately appeared out of nowhere to overwhelm him, attached to memories and events he wasn't sure had ever happened. Had he crossed that slippery slope into pure fantasy and delusion? *Was* it early Alzheimer's, or was he simply losing his mind one piece, one memory at a time?

The confusion and disarray had been getting worse in recent weeks, now with images of people and places swirling in his head that he didn't recognize and that didn't fit any particular pattern. He frequently found himself disoriented, uncertain where he was or why or how he had gone there. Most recently, he had started misplacing small items -- his watch he always left on his nightstand at night, his car keys not in the tray just inside his front door, His toothbrush on its rack not there, simply gone. Even more disquieting, he had

caught himself reaching out to open a car door in the Bundestag parking lot *that wasn't his car*. That was a make and model he always wanted, that he had always dreamed of owning. He was confusing desire with fact. Interweaving hope and dreams with reality. He found himself, more and more, stumbling around in a world that didn't exist.

Whatever was happening to him, he simply had to know. He could no longer live this way. It was unfair to him, to his constituents, and most importantly, to his wife and family. He made an appointment with a prominent Hamburg neurologist that a Bundestag colleague had recommended. He rode the Metro into town and stepped off onto the platform at the Dammtor Station, raising his umbrella in a light rain as he walked from beneath the station's overhang and headed north on Haller Strasse.

That's when he saw it! "*Oh, my God!*" he screamed. His youngest daughter Hanna was standing naked in the middle of the road with cars zooming in and out and around her, one of them aiming to hit her as she jumped on its hood to dance and taunt the driver. "*No!*" Richter hollered as he dashed out to save her just as a delivery truck, squealing its brakes on the slippery road, slammed into him, hurling him into an oncoming Mercedes headed in the opposite direction and thrusting him back into a third vehicle.

He was pronounced dead on arrival at the Hamburg-Eppendorf Hospital emergency room. Ricocheted back-and-forth like that, there was little left unbroken. And yet, beyond the obvious destruction, beyond what might be expected with that kind of multiple blunt force trauma, the emergency room physician observed something odd and clearly out of place. The victim's head had apparently struck a shattered side-mirror or the sharp edge of a fender. His skull had cracked open just enough to reveal a tiny microchip embedded in his left temporal lobe with a probe extending several millimeters inside the delegate's left brain.

The autopsy made no sense of it. The medical examiner had no idea of the device's purpose or why it might have been implanted there. According to the

local newspaper, the Hamburg police had conducted a thorough investigation but could make no sense of it either. The delegate's death was simply deemed an accident, and that was that. No one brought charges. The mystery of the embedded chip was left hanging. The case was closed.

CHAPTER 54

La Paz, Bolivia

The Present

As the night slowly released its grasp on darkness, Stone and Cyn hunched down in the front seat of their nondescript Toyota Camry. They watched what was left of the darkness make room for a bright yellow sun emerging over the rooftops. As they sat half-a-block down on the opposite side of the street they were watching, a few lights flicked in several windows while others flicked off. The street traffic, which had been non-existent, began to pick up one-or-two cars at a time as a front door opened here-and-there and a man or a woman staggered out and stumbled into a car parked out front or squeezed in a narrow space between houses.

Like an aging prostitute with her evening makeup, the neighborhood looked considerably better under the cover of night. As daylight appeared, so did its wounds and peeling scars -- empty bottles, discarded beer cans, and scattered unidentifiables sat in front of the houses and along the side of the road if they had no place to go and had given up looking for one. Chunks of stucco had fallen from walls and spattered on the ground like splotched tears. TV dishes and antennas poked out from window sills and stacked up along rooftops like the twisted limbs of gigantic bugs trying to untangle enough to latch onto a TV signal and escape back to its source.

Sitting there and waiting without much else to do, the squalor of the neighborhood seemed to Stone to be another example of humans living in stacked-up, uneven, economic layers, the top of the tier inaccessible to those walled off at the bottom. Those in the mid-range, closer to the city's core or further out in the suburbs, were at least able to scrape enough together to put three-squares on the daily table, pay off their monthly credit card bills, and carry at least some kind of high-end iGadget in their purse or pocket. On the other

hand, the largest group on the economic ladder – the very lowest-of low – more often walked a mile or more for a clean drink of water, or waited until dark to climb into a drain pipe or slip beneath a cardboard box to try and get a little sleep before they were rounded up by a passing constable and rousted out.

Okay, Stone thought. Life's not fair. It's not supposed to be. He got that. Fairness itself was unevenly distributed. You are born who you are, where you are, and then try to make the best of that. A lucky few – and that's what it is, pure luck – slide into this world under the protective shield of well-heeled parents eager to add to that fortunate circumstance right from the crib. The nanny raised them while mom and dad popped in every once in a while to see how things were going. Then it's off to an exclusive prep school, then onto Harvard or Stanford to refine their raw edges and add to an accumulating network of high-up friends who help each other navigate that privilege path.

The neighborhood in which Stone and Cyn found themselves stood about as far off that privileged path as a neighborhood could get. The house they were watching – halfway down in the middle of the block – found itself wedged between a crumbling two-story on the right and a sagging story-and-a-half on the left.

As Stone leaned back in the Camry, the house they were watching stood quiet until the door opened onto a narrow side porch. A man in a yellow T-shirt and baggy jeans bounded out as if bouncing on a heavy dose of caffeine or a quick shot of something a little stronger. Stone was able to catch a good look at him as he rounded the hood of what looked like several aging Chevrolets pasted, glued, and ducttaped together without bothering to blend any of its fading three or four fading colors. When Stone glanced at his cell phone, the man looked, at least superficially, like the photograph that Hector had provided.

"What do you think?" Stone asked as he handed his phone to Cyn.

"I think it is," Cyn nodded and said. "It looks like him."

"I'm not so sure."

As soon as the man started his engine, Stone started his, and he and Cyn

ducked beneath the windshield until the man pulled out and drove past. Then Stone straightened, watched the car grow smaller in his rearview mirror, made a quick U-turn, and followed.

The man didn't travel far. After a little more than a mile, when his pasted-together Picasso Chevrolet turned left down a narrow sideroad, Stone slowed then followed at a distance. The car made another left halfway down the block, then stopped in front of a wide gate in a ten-foot-high chain-link fence. The rider got out, fiddled with a padlock, swung the gate open, climbed back in, and drove through.

"Now what?" Cyn asked.

"We give him a little time to settle down and get comfortable. I want him to feel safe before he realizes he's not."

With the man inside the building and out of sight and the gate still open, Stone drove into what could only be described as an auto-junkyard treasure-trove. The man had obviously pasted together his Picasso jalopy – at least large parts of it – from his junkyard workplace.

"How do we play this," Cyn asked. "Good guy, bad guy?"

"That takes too much time to establish. It works best if the bad guy starts, then leaves someone alone to consider his situation before the good guy saunters in and offers something a little more palatable, a little easier to swallow."

"Okay. Then what *do* we do?"

"We use what we've got. Information. We know who the man's father is. At least, we think we do. We know his mother died and that he blames his father for that. He told the Mossad he hated him. So, we start by agreeing that his father was a sonofabitch. Then, we use information *and* threats. A combination that usually lubricates the tongue to spit out more of the truth."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then, we play it by ear. It doesn't matter how many dead-ends or U-turns as long we get what we want."

"I've never done this before," Cyn said. "Interrogation, if that's what it is.

“Maybe you should handle it.”

“A team effort works better. Especially a man and woman. It tends to throw someone off. Shakes them up. We need to get in there before his first customer beats us. He’ll think that’s what we are. You ready?”

“No.”

“Just stay loose. Play along however it goes.”

CHAPTER 55

La Paz, Bolivia

The Present

The inside of the auto-parts building that Stone and Cyn entered looked like a mirrored replica of the junkyard outside. Only, inside car parts broken down into boxes, crates, and wall shelves stacked and filled with worn tires, new and dented fenders, jacks and jack handles, hubcaps, steering wheels, license plates, and all manner of identifiables and unidentifiables haphazardly scattered about as if they had stopped in the middle of some kind of elaborate *La Cucaracha* dance waiting for the music to start again.

As Stone passed a crate, he lifted a heavy tire iron and dangled it at his side as he approached a thin man with a nervous grin sitting behind a paint-spattered desk. The man stiffened when he saw Stone head toward him, quickly glanced at Cyn, then turned his eyes back to Stone.

“Americano?” the man asked.

“How can you tell?”

“Your walk, Amigo. Loose. Americano... What part do you look for? A steering wheel? A muffler?” he asked, staring at Stone’s exhaust-pipe weapon.

“I’ve found what I’m looking for,” Stone said. “You.”

“Me?” The man asked, drawing in his chin. “I didn’t...”

“It’s okay,” Stone said, dangling his exhaust pipe loosely in his left hand as he raised his right hand in a sign of peace. “You didn’t do anything. Or maybe you did. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“What is it? What do you want?”

“Answers.”

“Those men who came. That was months ago. I told them everything I know. I swear.”

“They were someone else,” Stone said, assuming he was referring to the

Mossad. “Now, you need to tell me.”

“Who are...?”

“I’m not here to hurt you. It doesn’t have to come to that,” Stone said, allowing the exhaust pipe to drop and clang on the floor. He scooted a chair around to the man’s side of the desk and sat close, facing him knee-to-knee as he glanced across at Cyn, who pulled up her own chair.

“She can’t help you,” Stone said when he caught the man looking hopefully in Cyn’s direction. “You need to look at me.”

“What is it? What do you want?”

Stone reached in his pocket and slid out his cell phone. “I want to show you something.” He flipped through his photos and stopped at one with the death-mask’s falcon feather. He turned the phone around and held it up. “You know what this is?”

“No!”

“I think you do. I think you know *exactly* what it is.”

“All I know is cars. That’s not a car part.”

“No, it’s not. But it is a part of *something*.”

The man tightened his lips as if trying to hold in a thought before it slipped out.

“We’ve come a long way to find you,” Stone said. “We know about your father.”

“You *know*... Then they *did* send you. You *are* from...”

“No. We’re not. But they could come back. You didn’t tell them everything.”

Stone simply assumed he didn’t tell the Mossad all he knew. It was always best to assume something was held back. It often was. It’s a no-lose strategy.

“I did. I told them all of it.”

“You didn’t tell them about *this*,” Stone said, holding up the photo of the feather. “They didn’t *know* about this, so they didn’t ask. They didn’t know about the mask.”

“It’s mine. It was my mothers.”

“Where did *she* get it?”

“She carried it with her.”

“And kept it? Kept it *where?*”

“Hidden.”

“Hidden where?”

“Where we lived. Under a floorboard.”

“How do you *know* where she kept it?”

“She showed me. She knew she was dying.”

“What did she tell you about it?”

“She said it was mine. She said she kept it for me. It’s all she had.”

“Where is it now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t. I don’t have it.”

“Okay, *you* don’t have it, but you know where it is.”

“He came after it. I gave it to him.”

“*He?*” Stone raised an eyebrow and asked. “*He* came?”

Just as Stone spoke, a man in bib overalls ambled through the door, balancing a heavy fender over his right shoulder that he had apparently carried in from one of the wrecks outside.

“We’re closed,” Stone looked at him and said. “Come back in an hour.”

“I don’t have an...”

“Everything’s free today. One item only. Take it with you.”

When the man shrugged his free shoulder and left, Cyn stood and went back and closed the door and snapped the bolt shut.

“Okay,” Stone said, turning his attention back to the man in front of him. “Let’s get this song and dance over with and get you back in business. You’re losing customers. No need for anyone to get hurt here,” Stone added, stretching his foot out to scoot the exhaust pipe closer to his chair. “Who came for it? Who *was* he?”

When the man slumped and hung his head like a whipped puppy, Stone

felt sorry for him. He had no intention of hurting him. “Just tell me what you know,” Stone said in the strongest voice he could muster. “Tell me all of it. Don’t leave anything out. I’ll know if you do. I can tell.”

The man said his mother told him the death mask was his inheritance. She said it was valuable but cursed. After she died, he didn’t know what to do with it, so he asked one of his customers who dealt in pretty much everything, legal and illegal. When his customer told him, for a percentage, a finder’s fee, he could turn the mask into hard cash. He said he could make those arrangements, but he would need a photograph of the mask and a sample to authenticate it.

“So, I cut off one of the feathers,” the man said. “And I gave him a picture.”

“And?”

“Then I waited... That’s when the other man came.”

“What man?”

“Not the ones that came before. A tall man this time. Blond hair. Thick, almost white. The one who wanted to know more about my father. If I was his son.”

“What else?”

“Nothing. He said he came for the mask. That’s it. He gave me money. Cash. Look around here. What do you see?... Piles of junk. This is all I have. That’s all I am. I’m the junk man.”

“If he gave you money, why are you still here?”

“It was good money. Just not enough to last.”

“How much?

“Five-hundred thousand?”

“Half a million? That not enough?”

“Okay, I gamble. I’m down to less than a quarter of that. Besides, where could I go? What can I do? All I know is junk.”

“The man who came. The one who bought the mask. What else about him?”

“You mean Falcon?”

“*Falcon?*”

“Falcon. That’s his name. That’s what he said.”

“He *told* you his name?”

“He said he knew my mother. He knew what she went through.”

“What else?”

“Nothing. Just that, if I ever need anything, anything at all, maybe he could help me.”

“Help you with what?”

“Anything. I don’t know. He didn’t say.”

“How would you know where to find him?”

“Email. Call him.”

“He gave you his number?”

“His business card.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s here. It’s right here.” He opened a drawer in front of him. “He said to let him know if anyone else came to...” The man’s mouth dropped as if he had already said too much. “No. It’s *not* here. It’s home, I think.”

Stone reached down, picked up the exhaust pipe, and glanced at Cyn. “Turn your head,” he said to her. “You don’t want to see this.” He stood and glared down at the man. “Put your right hand flat on the desk. Spread your fingers. Tighten them. It won’t hurt as much.”

“Wait a minute. Maybe it *is* here. I forgot. Yes. I think it *is*.”

Stone lowered the pipe but stood looming over the man as he scrambled through his desk drawer.

“I forgot. Here it is. Right here.”

“Lay it on the desk, face up.”

Stone glanced over at Cyn, who immediately understood what he wanted. She dug out her cell phone, leaned across the desk, and snapped a photo of the card. She examined the result, then sat back down.

Stone picked the card up and read it.

Marcus Falcon
Falcon Enterprises, Inc
Biological Engineering
Rosslyn, Virginia

He looked up and said, “There’s no phone or email. So how are you supposed to find him?”

“He didn’t say. He just said I could find him in Virginia. In Rosslyn. Just like it says on the card. He said everyone knows him there. He owns a building. His name is on it. Just come in and ask for him. Just say I’m Margo’s son.”

“Rosslyn’s a long way from here. How are you supposed to get there.”

“I guess with some of the money he gave me.”

“Here’s the thing,” Stone said, raising an eyebrow and glaring down at the man. “Falcon doesn’t know we’re here. There’s no way he *could* know unless you tell him. So, you’re in no trouble with him right now. And you’re in no trouble with me. But if you *do* tell him we’ve been here, and I find out, I’ll be back. That could be *real* trouble. Any questions?”

“No.”

“It’s not that I trust you. I don’t. But I trust you’ll do the best thing for you. For your own safety,” Stone laid the card back on the man’s desk and clinked the exhaust pipe on the floor. “You’re open for business. Have a good day.”

CHAPTER 56

A Penthouse
Rosslyn Virginia

The penthouse was private enough and high enough for Marcus Falcon to stand out on his seventeenth-floor penthouse balcony totally nude with a full erection. With the better part of seventy-four years behind him now, his seventy-fifth birthday less than three weeks off, his prowess had never diminished and never been in question. He had fathered more children by the age of twenty than he knew of, or at least for which Schuller had ever made a full accounting. Selective breeding, of course, was no longer an integral part of the Falcon Project. That facet of the operation had ceased the day Falcon destroyed the Bolivian jungle lab and slipped under the radar into the United States. Which didn't mean, even at his advanced age, that he didn't fully appreciate the functional part of his anatomy that identified and qualified him as a man.

His body still pleased him. How many men could say that at his age? His *biological* age – still tracked at prescribed intervals – had consistently measured twenty years below his actual years ever since they began keeping track in those early days in the jungle. He was the best-of-the-best that selective breeding could produce at the time. A model of perfection symbolized by the falcon death mask, a symbol of a higher perspective that foreshadowed a death of an old human biology and a rebirth of a new.

Falcon turned away from his expansive view of the Potomac. He wandered back inside and into the kitchen of his 4,000 square foot luxury dwelling that rested like an eagle's nest atop the building he owned. He opened his double-door floor-to-ceiling wine cooler, moved in close, and let the cool air drift across his naked body, then stepped back and extracted what he needed for his afternoon power drink. A Pink Lady Apple, a seedless Navel Orange, and a half cup of sliced, imported Costa Rican pineapple. He juiced the combined fruits in

his thousand-dollar juicer, then transferred the concoction into his eight-hundred-dollar food processor and added a cup of cubed watermelon, a teaspoon of freshly squeezed lemon juice, and a sprig of fresh mint to add just the right touch of flavor. He pureed the result for half-a-minute then poured it into a Waterford goblet with a carved crested falcon etched in the center and two curved indentations that perfectly fit the shape of his thumb and forefinger. He carried his drink to the center of his sixteen-foot-high great room and plunked himself and his still-erect appendage down in a leather lounge without spilling a drop.

He would be the first to admit that he was self-indulgent – *rich* self-indulgent – he thought as he savored the first sweet sip of his drink and glanced across the room at the falcon death mask that hung in a prominent spot in the center of the wall. After searching for it all this time, after finally getting word about where it was, he had personally gone down to La Paz to acquire that treasure. “Finally acquire it,” he muttered, nodding with pleasure at his most prized possession.

After all his years of fruitless searching, he still found it hard to believe that he had finally been informed of the mask’s whereabouts. He had learned that it was still in Bolivia and that it was being offered for sale, minus a feather that someone had sent ahead to find a buyer. Someone who knew he wanted it had gotten wind that a verification sample had failed to move past an intermediary in Cuba. From that starting point, it wasn’t hard to trace it back to the man who had put it on the market. He *wanted* to be found in order to sell it, and Falcon wanted to buy it. As it turned out, the seller had no idea of its value. He let a priceless piece go for half a million.

Falcon stood from his lounge chair, carried his power drink out on his balcony, and sat with his feet propped up on a cushioned footstool. He leaned back, still perfectly naked and perfectly in control of his own world as he looked across the Potomac at the towering spires of Georgetown University and, beyond that, Foggy Bottom and the capital of the free world, Washington D.C.

Marcus Falcon had anointed himself “Marcus” as a first name. Falcon was

the only name he had ever known before he arrived in the States. Yet long before that arrival, imported tutors in Bolivia had taught him everything he needed to know or wanted to know, particularly how the Bolivian government worked and what America's founding fathers thought about the nature of humans. *Trust in God. Not in humans. And certainly not in each other.* Humans are born selfish and self-interested and only reluctantly resign themselves to the fact that the world doesn't spin around them and their changing whims and desires.

With that fact as a foundation, design a system of checks and balances to catch, check, and balance all its parts. The checks catch the connivers and cheaters by requiring them to catch each other. And the system worked for two hundred years until the connivers and cheaters figured out how to move in-and-out and back-and-forth among themselves in a way that was hard to tell who was who and which was which. They simply grinned at each other as they slipped past each other in the halls of power.

Falcon's heritage of Nazi dictatorial government was a bit more complicated. He was born in Germany at the tag-end of the Second World War. The dictatorial efficiency of the Third Reich had been drilled into him from childhood. His initial name, more an identity, was Baby # B413. He was wrapped in a blanket as a stolen symbol of their cause, a falcon death mask, then gently fitted into the tiny cockpit of an American Mustang. He was then flown to Rome, where he and his Oberst overseer, with the covert help of the Catholic Church and dozens of others, made their way to South America.

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their way to South America.

Falcon – as they began to call him soon after he arrived – was immediately delivered to Dr. Bruno Schuller, the man who would raise him, educate him, and indoctrinate him into what was known of human genetic and biological engineering. Yet, despite all that early promise of a brighter future for the human species, that post-German phase had slowly spiraled into abject failure. Some minor progress had been made. Just not enough. Not *nearly* enough. Even Falcon's very existence, a German-phase accomplishment in-and-of itself, was not enough to carry the Bolivian phase of the project forward.

Further progress, if there was to be any, would require new approaches, new understanding, and an entirely new technology. It would require the kind of fine-tuned precision that could never have been accomplished in a hot, humid, disease-infested jungle. It would require a sophisticated laboratory and a team of top technicians and scientists sworn to secrecy. It would need a computer with a massive memory to break down the millions of genetic permutations, combinations, and possibilities. And all that would necessitate the financial backing of someone, or some entity, with the interest and resources to support such a vast undertaking.

That formidable list of requirements had quickly narrowed the possible future locations down to one location and one backer. *To North America. To the United States*, where an underground foundation of financial and political support had already been established. And just as importantly, perhaps even more so, where deep secrets could be hidden until the results bore enough fruit to change the world as we know it.

CHAPTER 57

One Railroad Lane

Annapolis

The Present

The plane ride from La Paz to Baltimore had been uneventful. Stone and Cyn had boarded at 6 A.M. and then watched their bags pop up on the BWI shoot at 5:30 that evening. The cabin crew, still smiling at the end of a long journey, had been a cheerful lot, donning sombreros as the plane started its descent and singing *Vaya Con Dios My Darling* as they strolled down the aisle, checking seatbelts. The seats, of course, were constantly being incrementally reduced in a sardine-squeeze experiment in steps too small for passengers to notice. Their experimental research question? How many sardines (or passengers) can be squeezed inside a sardine can (or a fuselage) without popping the container open and spraying skin or olive oil all over the table or the tarmac? That tiny seat space had already been reduced to cheek-to-cheek, depending on the size of a passenger's cheeks, on the theory that passengers would be willing to pay more-for-less if the airline industry could gradually decrease the normal human boundary space down to no space at all. Passengers are stacked up lap-on-lap, thus doubling a 747's seating capacity and creating an opportunity for friendships that hadn't existed before. A win-win all the way around.

The best of the two airline meals – if Stone were generous enough to call either one of them the best of anything – came down to a choice of fried or grilled cold chicken, limp green beans, and a “mustard potato product,” along with an oatmeal cookie that couldn’t wait to hit Stone’s mouth before it started crumbling in his lap.

The next economy step, already being discussed at Airline Corporate H.Q., required greasing passenger’s bodies with Vaseline, then sending them directly down a greased shoot from the terminal straight into their designated seats, thus

saving time and getting the plane into the air as quickly as possible.

After landing, Stone and Cyn grabbed the first cab in line and arrived back at Stone's watertower just after dusk. They had not slept together the entire trip. Not *together* together. They had occupied the same bed, occasionally rubbing feet and other body parts, and then backing off half awake. Surprisingly, that had been fairly easy for Stone. He had been occupied and *preoccupied*. He was on the move and on a mission. They were never in one place long enough to get too comfortable, long enough to settle into a routine or translate any back-of-the-mind fantasy into an onstage reality.

But now they *were* back in Stone's familiar territory with all those familiar memories and fantasies of when they *were* together together. When Stone *did* have a routine and when part of that routine had once been a passionate love affair with Cyn. Their relationship may have moved on since then, but all those wishes, hopes, and daydreams – along with those memories – had found a permanent place in the back of his mind and refused to leave. Not to mention the fact that the bed they had once slept in was still there, patiently waiting for a next encounter. With all they had just been through, now that they were back in his familiar watertower, he couldn't trust himself not to fall into *deja vous* all over again. He thought it best to sleep on the couch their first night back, and then, like any hopeless addict, take things one day at a time.

"Me too," Cyn agreed when Stone broached the subject, although he wasn't entirely pleased with her response. He thought she might at least have struggled a bit. Maybe she had. Maybe she just didn't want to admit it. Maybe that would make her a little too vulnerable, which was pretty much how he felt. And maybe, as usual, they had settled for one of their quiet standoffs, a huge part of the magnet that drew them together. They both understood each other. They both got it.

After a restless night of tossing and turning, Stone crawled out from under his on-the-couch blanket, staggered into the small kitchen, and brewed a pot of coffee. He carried his mug out on the deck, leaned his elbow on the rail, and

looked out beyond the railroad tracks at a Chesapeake Bay still churning after an overnight storm. Halfway through his coffee, Cyn sauntered through the door barefoot, her body wrapped in a terrycloth robe that fell just above her knees.

There she *was* again, he thought. *At it again.* That damn robe. That mysterious cover. That loosely wrapped package that always demanded unwrapping. Whatever else she wore beneath it, if anything, wasn't entirely clear, and Stone preferred to leave it that way. There they were. Right back where they started that first day she had stumbled into his watertower with a broken feather from an ancient Greek mask in desperate need of help, or just plain desperate. Now, here *she* was again. Just like she had been many other times. Still tempting. Still irresistible. Still standing right in front of him. Still testing his will to resist.

“Well?” she nodded toward his half-empty coffee mug and asked. “Where’s my coffee?”

“It’s brewed,” he said. “I’ll get it for you.”

“Don’t bother. It’s not your job to wait on me. This is your place. Not mine.”

“It feels like *our* place,” he said. “At least, it once did.”

“That’s part of the problem,” she said. “It never *was* our place. It was always *yours*. Maybe I found it, but you’re the one who brought it to life by restoring it. It was always *your* dream. Not mine. I was just part of the furniture. Part of your dream.”

“I never thought of you as just part of the furniture.”

“I know you didn’t. You were just being Clayton Lovell Stone. Wanting what you wanted. Don’t we all?”

“And what about you? What do you want?”

Cyn shrugged. “Me?... I’m a rolling stone. How can you pin that down?”

“I never tried to pin you down.”

“Really?... Look, let’s face it. You’re far more settled than I am. This *is* your place. Your dream. You trot off from here on one of your little adventures,

but you always have your home to come back to. I don't. I'm not sure I ever had a home or even wanted one. None that I remember. If I belong anywhere, it's out west on a Montana ranch, riding the range and chasing the sunset. That's the thing about sunsets. You can never catch one. They're always unreachable. Always on the horizon."

"You're right. I *hate* it when you're right. Maybe there never was an *us*. Not the way I wanted it. But when I felt like there might be, it felt damn good. I miss that. You remind me of what I want. Maybe you never find exactly what you want. Maybe it doesn't exist...What do you think?"

"I think you think too much. Where's my coffee?"

CHAPTER 58

The Right Ingredients Restaurant
Annapolis
The Present

When Stone phoned Ezzy to let him know they were back in town, Ezzy said,

“Are you okay? How’s Cyn?”

When Stone said Cyn was fine and that she was there, Ezzy let out a “Woopeee,” the sort of animal yelp that might have come from a contented cow who had just had the best milking day of her life.

It was Monday, and The Right Ingredients was closed. Monday’s were Ezzy’s recipe try-out time, and a time to clean up his account books and get a little well-deserved shuteye. He liked to complain that there was no “rest” in the restaurant business, and that the word “rest” should be mercifully dropped from the start of the word “restaurant,” that whoever added “rest” to the word must have had a sadistic streak running down their spine.

Stone had given Ezzy a quick rundown over the phone of where they had been and what they had learned, and then asked him to check into something before he and Cyn came over.

“When are you coming?” Ezzy had asked.

“As soon as Cyn gets dressed.”

“She’s *undressed*? ”

“None of your business. We’ll see you in an hour or so.”

As soon as Stone parked Martha in The Right Ingredients parking lot and he and Cyn reached the top of the deck steps, Ezzy bounded out the door, grabbed Cyn around her waist, and lifted her in his arms.

“I’m glad to see you too,” Cyn said as he set her down enough to catch her breath.

“I’m just glad you’re safe,” Ezzy said, stepping back and looking her over just to make sure. “You never know when you go off with this guy.”

“I never know when I’m *home* with this guy,” Cyn said, glancing across at Stone.

They sat out on the deck facing the Naval Academy directly across the Severn as a group of starched-white plebs jogged along the academy shoreline to the beat of some sort of a *“Ra Ra, now we’re in Navy, the coffee’s mighty fine. It looks like muddy water and tastes like turpentine.”*

Despite Ezzy’s Syria-related PTSD that required Stone to fill in at the restaurant every so often, or when Ezzy had to find someone to fill in when Stone couldn’t, Ezzy still had his agency experience, his former connections, and his honed-in investigative skills. In less than an hour after Stone had phoned, as expected, Ezzy had put everything else aside and came up with what he could find out about Falcon Enterprises, Inc., and about Marcus Falcon in particular.

“You’re definitely onto something here,” Ezzy said as he leaned across a deck table shaded by the restaurant’s awning. “You can always tell something’s up when you hear a long string of pauses. When there’s something hanging in the air that just won’t drop.”

“Something like...?” Stone asked.

“Like when they finally get around to saying, ‘This has got to be off the record. You didn’t get this from me’... Sound familiar?”

“I think I’ve heard that a few dozen times. So, what *did* you find out?”

“Not a hell of a lot. Standard stuff. You didn’t give me a lot of time. I’ll dig into it a little more to see if I can come up with something with a little more meat.”

“What’s the standard stuff?”

“Marcus Falcon. President and C.E.O. of Falcon, Inc. Corporate headquarters in Rosslyn, Virginia. He apparently lives right there, in a penthouse on the top floor. The guy’s got money dripping down on the sidewalk from that lofty view. It’s odd though, and here’s the kicker, there’s something Vaseline-

slippery about his background, where he comes from, where he was born. As far as I can tell, he *wasn't* born. He just showed up. He *has* a background alright. It's just not his. Like he was in some kind of witness protection program as far as I can figure."

"You think that's what it is? Witness protection?"

Ezzy shook his head. "Not likely. I couldn't find out exactly. All I know is, whoever he is, or *was*, someone wanted that information buried deep. *Real* deep."

"Anything else?"

"Just the mention of his name gets too long a pause. Anything related to him comes with a warning. Don't dig into this. Leave it alone."

"A warning from...?"

"That, I don't know. It's the usual story. I got it from someone who got it from someone."

"Thanks, Ezzy."

"One more thing."

"There's always one more."

"Apparently, it's not just the guy's name that draws attention. He's described as a huge, impressive man. Thick, stark, white hair. I was told his mere presence rivets eyes in his direction. But, it seems he doesn't actually go out all that often. He tends to avoid the spotlight. Maybe he has a reason."

"That'll make him a little harder to get to."

Ezzy nodded. "You always seem to find a rabbit in a hole when you want to."

"I'd like to dig this rabbit out of his hole, hold him up by his ears, and ask him a few questions."

"None of which, I suspect, he'll want to answer."

"Then I guess I'll have to take a little persuader along."

"You got one in your back pocket?"

"Not yet. I'm still working on that."

“Maybe I can help you with that too,” Ezzy said.

“You got something?”

“I’m not sure exactly. I just got a feeling that there’s something out of whack about this guy. Something besides his identity. You know how you get that feeling sometimes?”

Stone patted his gut. “Usually right here.”

“The person I talked to. I got the distinct feeling that there’s some kind of vendetta going on with Falcon. Like there was some kind of hidden payback involved.”

“Any idea what it might be?”

“None. It’s just a feeling.”

“Your informant? You think he maybe he could get back to *his* source and set up a meeting?”

“Could be. If there *is* a vendetta, *that* could be an incentive. I’ll see what I can arrange. But I got an idea you better tiptoe in on this one, be ready to make a U-turn and run.”

CHAPTER 59

The National Mall

Washington, D.C.

The Present

Stone drove Cyn back to the watertower with the idea of leaving Cyn there while he pursued a meeting with Ezzy's informant, if Ezzy could arrange that. Stone told Cyn not to worry, that he would be fine on his own. But, of course, she didn't buy that, and he wasn't entirely sure himself. He tried to convince her to get a little rest and stay close to her phone. If he got into trouble and needed help, he'd call. He said it would be better if they weren't in trouble in the same place at the same time. Two rats caught in the same trap couldn't help each other escape. Beyond that, he said, if he *did* run into trouble, it would be easier to wiggle out on his own if he didn't have to worry about dragging her out behind him.

"First of all," she said in a firm voice that indicated she didn't want to be interrupted, "I don't like your rat analogy. I think that might apply to you more than me. Secondly, nobody drags me anywhere. I might end up dragging *you* out. Third, what you're saying doesn't make much sense, and you know it. You get into trouble out there and I'm supposed to sit by the phone waiting for a call? How much good would that do? Then am I supposed to do what? Call 911? Wouldn't it make more sense if I were at least close by? Somewhere I might actually *be* of help?"

Stone had to admit, she had a point. Which is why he considered personal and business relationships, especially those that involve any sort of danger, should never mix. It muddies the thinking and clouds the emotional waters. Cyn was right about being there if he needed help. There was no sense denying it, so he didn't.

It hadn't taken Ezzy long to set something up. He had gotten back with an

answer within the hour and had arranged a meeting that afternoon. He said the woman he was to meet was a little skittish and that she wanted to get it over with before she changed her mind. Stone was told to come alone. The woman would sit at a table in the café in the lower-level bookstore of the National Art Gallery, open a Van Gogh coffee-table book, and open it in front of her. Stone was to buy a cup of coffee, carry it over and ask what it was about Van Gogh she liked. If she felt comfortable at that point, she would stand and ride the escalator up to street level and then leave the building on the Mall side, and he was to follow at a distance. When she was certain he was alone, she would wait and tell him what she had to offer.

Foolish instructions, Stone thought. Another nonprofessional, just like the bull of a man he had encountered in an alley in La Paz. Only an amateur would divulge where they intended to head after an initial encounter. Unless, of course, she *wasn't* an amateur. Unless she was a professional trying to *look* like an amateur to throw him off his stride while she left by another exit.

Stone took Route 50 into town until it merged onto New York Avenue and turned down North Capital Street when he saw the Capitol's dome looming in the distance. As soon as he turned onto the Mall's access road, he spotted a family of four climbing into an SUV a few yards beyond National Gallery's main entrance. Luck was running with him. He waited and pulled into that spot as soon as they pulled out.

His informant had chosen her time wisely. Four-thirty in the afternoon. The National Gallery's Book crowd would be sparse enough to spot someone yet crowded enough to hide if someone didn't want to be spotted.

"Whoever she is doesn't know what *I* look like," Stone said as he and Cyn passed through the main foyer entrance. "She's expecting a man," he added as they headed down the long hall toward the marble stairway that led down to the basement. "She won't be looking for a married couple or a pair of lovers," he said, taking her hand and squeezing it as they entered the gift shop.

Directly inside the shop, a shelf of coffee-table books stood to his left,

arranged in alphabetical order by artist, Van Gogh nestled toward the far end of a middle shelf. As the two of them ambled past that row and into the coffee shop, no one seemed to be glancing in their direction, at least none as far as Stone could tell without appearing to look.

“Find a book,” he turned to Cyn and said. “Have a seat over at one of those tables.” He nodded toward a cluster of four in the center. “Buy a cup of coffee before you take a seat. I could be a while.”

“Then what?”

“Read your book. Don’t look around. You can’t chance an eye to eye contact. It’s a dead giveaway.”

“And you?”

“*She*, if she really *is* a she, will expect me to come early, but not *this* early. I’ll wander upstairs and hang out in one of the rooms, then come back fifteen minutes before we’re supposed to meet. You’ll already be sitting there when she comes in. That will seem normal. She’ll get used to you. You’ll be part of the background.”

“When you come back, what do you want *me* to do?”

“Watch my back. If I need you, you’ll know.”

CHAPTER 60

The National Art Gallery

Washington, D.C.

The Present

Stone lost himself in Gallery 15 on the ground floor of the National Museum of Art as he looked up with hands cupped behind his back to study Saint Jerome in the Wilderness in his robes under a tree by an artist follower of Andrea Mantegna. Stone stood there a minute, maybe longer, then glanced at his Timex and shook himself back to reality. How long *had* he been there? He had left Cyn downstairs in the museum café, waiting for an informant to appear. How long had *she* been there? Was she alright? Of course, she was alright. Why wouldn't she be? She was out in the open, in a public place. There were people around. What *could* happen? Nothing.

But when he couldn't fully persuade himself, he left Saint Jerome and hurried down the long marbled hallway. He skipped every other step down the spiral staircase, his footsteps echoing off the wall, rushed through the café book shop, then stopped behind a display shelf. There she was, safe and sound, sitting quietly at a table and reading a book, just where he had left her. The problem wasn't Cyn. It was him. He was used to looking after himself. Looking after Cyn, after she had popped back into his life, had apparently raised his paranoia to a sharp edge.

She sat at a table in a cluster of four, both tables to either side empty. A thick-jawed man in a tweed sports jacket sat reading a newspaper on the table just behind her. That newspaper rang one of Stone's internal alarms. Did the café bookstore even *sell* newspapers? He glanced behind him into the book shop and saw none, and none in anybody's hand when he turned and looked around the room. Maybe it was perfectly innocent. Maybe the man had bought a paper outside and carried it in to read while he drank his coffee. Still, there was

something else about him that rang a sour note. He held his paper high enough to read, yet low enough to glance over the top and scan the room if he chose.

Stone crossed over to the greeting card section to better view the café and the escalator leading up to the entrance. He lifted a random greeting card from its slot, held it up like the man with the newspaper, and peeked over the top. Seeing nothing else suspicious or out of order, he slid the card back. When he looked up again, he thought he saw the tweed-jacket man nod to someone across the room – he wasn't sure who – then fold his paper, stand abruptly, cross the room, and escalate up to street level. As soon as he was out of sight, a woman suddenly appeared from one of the alcoves carrying a large picture book under her arm. She crossed the room and sat two tables away from Cyn, opened the book, and laid it flat on the table in front of her.

She looked somewhere in her late 30s, possibly early 40s, with a few streaks of gray in her hair that she hadn't bothered to cover up. She dressed smartly in a no-frills, black business suit with a white blouse buttoned up tight around her neck as if she were trying to protect everything below her chin.

Stone waited the better part of another minute but noticed nothing else suspicious, although it was impossible to tell for sure with so many others in the room. He stepped out, walked directly across to the woman, nodded toward her open book, and slid into a seat across from her. "What is it you like about Van Gogh?" he asked.

"His ear," she said as she looked up wide-eyed.

"*What?*"

"His ear," she said, her voice, even with just those two words, strained.

She was nervous.

"*What?*" he asked again.

"His ear."

She suddenly avoided his gaze, glancing around him toward someone else in the room.

He started to speak again when she lifted a finger to quiet him. "Look, I

ahh..." she sputtered. "I have to go."

"Wait a minute. Hold on."

"Don't follow me. Someone's watching."

"Let's just...?"

"An implant," she blurted as she stood and headed toward the escalator.

Stone was tempted to follow, but thought that might make things worse if there *was* someone watching them. Cyn, relying on instinct, stood quietly and followed.

Stone watched to see if anyone came after Cyn as she rode the escalator up. Just as the woman she followed reached the top and disappeared, Stone saw the tweed-jacket newspaper man ride the parallel escalator down, then leaped over the middle rail directly behind Cyn. The man shoved something against Cyn's back and lifted her in his arms.

Stone stood and dashed across the room, pushing others out of the way as he skipped up the escalator two steps at a time until he reached the top. He stopped there, breathing heavily as he glanced to his Mall exit on his left and then toward the Connecticut Avenue exit to his right. Cyn was nowhere in sight. Frantic, he stepped to the middle of the room and scanned it methodically, area by area. "*Damn it. Where is she?*"

Then he caught sight of Cyn leaning against a wall in a corner, her head slumped. He rushed over and took her in his arms. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"God. I don't know."

"What happened?"

"He said he could break my spine with one little twist. After that, I'd never walk again. And I believed him."

"*My God,*" Cyn said, her eyes wide, her breath heaved, perspiration dotting her forehead. "I thought he was going to kill me. He said he could snap my neck."

". Try and relax. Take your time. You're safe now. He's gone."

He waited for her breathing to settle. "What did he want? What did he

say?”

“Nothing. He didn’t say anything. He just propped me up against this wall and told me to stand here. Don’t move. I did.”

“Are you *sure* you’re okay?”

“I wouldn’t say okay,” she said, looking at him. “What *did* he want?”

“He must have watched you follow that woman. I guess he didn’t want you to catch up with her. Maybe she knew something he didn’t want us to know.”

“Just before she stood and ran,” Cyn said, nodding toward the down escalator. “She said something to you down there. I couldn’t hear her. I saw her. What was it? What did she say?”

“Something about Van Gogh’s ear. Something about an implant. I have no idea what she meant, but it must have been important. She wanted to get it out before she took off.”

“That’s not all,” Cyn said. “There’s more.”

“More what?... Do you need to sit? Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine. I just need to catch my breath. That book. The Van Gogh book. The one she left open on the table.”

“What about it?”

“She bought it. I watched her pay for it. She wrote something on it right after she bought it. On one of the pages.”

Stone thought a second, then said, “Maybe she knew she was being followed. She wasn’t sure she’d get a chance to say what she had to say.”

When Stone was sure Cyn was steady on her feet, they rode the escalator back down to the coffee shop and saw a book lying open on the table, right where the woman had left it.

CHAPTER 61

The National Art Gallery

Washington, D.C.

The Present

After escalating back down to the National Art Gallery's Café, Stone and Cyn sat at the same table where Stone had sat with the woman informant before she jumped up and took off. Her Van Gogh coffee-table book still lay open just as she had left it, a receipt poking out from one of its pages. As soon as they sat, Stone slid the receipt out and read it. She had paid cash. No credit card. No I.D.

When he picked the book up and flipped through the pages, a folded paper fell out from a page with Van Gogh's self-portrait of his bandaged ear -- the ear that he'd sliced off in Arles. Above the ear, on Van Gogh's temple just below the edge of his thick fur cap, the woman had apparently circled a small red "X." No words. No other markings.

Stone unfolded the paper and read it, then handed it to Cyn, who scanned it and passed it back. "What is that?" she asked. "What do you make of it?"

"It looks like an article from a German newspaper that someone's translated to English. Something about a member of the German Parliament, the Bundestag. Apparently, this fellow, this Wolf Richter, died in a terrible auto accident. Bounced back and forth between vehicles a couple of times. He didn't have to wait to be dead on arrival. He was dead on the spot."

"What's any of that got to do with Van Gogh?"

"Maybe it has to do with something the woman said. She said, 'An ear. An implant.'" He tapped his finger on the coffee book page. "Something to do with *this*. The 'X' just above his cut off ear."

Still uncertain what that might mean, Stone told Cyn that he had one more piece of business to attend to, and that he needed to do it alone. If he needed to make a fast retreat, he didn't want to have to worry about her. After what Cyn

had just been through, she agreed. She called for an Uber to drive her back to Annapolis to stay with Ezzy in his apartment just behind The Right Ingredients. Ezzy never wandered far from his kitchen, at least not for long. He needed the freedom to jump out of bed in the middle of the night to dash in and try out a recipe he had just dreamed up before the ingredients faded with wakefulness.

Stone had one more card to play. The business card he had snapped a photo of in Schuller's son's auto junkyard back in La Paz.

Marcus Falcon
Falcon Enterprises, Inc
Bioengineering
Rosslyn, Virginia

The address itself exuded power. Rosslyn sat directly across the Potomac from Washington. That entire half-mile-row of high-rise condos and office buildings glared across at the Nation's Capital like a string of hungry falcons – all birds of prey – ready to swoop down and devour anything worth devouring.

As Stone drove Martha past the Kennedy Center and crossed Key Bridge into Rosslyn, the seventeen-story Falcon Building towered above him as if it was one of those birds of prey about to swoop down and pick him and Martha up and drop them both to drown in the river.

He circled the block that contained Falcon, Inc, then pulled into the only underground entrance that indicated public parking. He nestled Martha into the first available slot, then rode the elevator up to street level, which was as high as the parking elevator went. When the door opened and he stepped out, two other elevators stood directly across the hall. He turned left toward a large, open lobby with what looked like a combination guard/reception desk just inside the Henry Street entrance.

His footsteps echoed across the marble floor as he headed toward a scowling receptionist who had an uncanny ability to stretch her upturned lips to look more like an upside-down frown than a right-side-up smile. A gray uniformed guard sat directly behind her in front of a bank of monitors displaying all three elevators, both entrances, and several hallways.

“I’d like to see Mr. Falcon,” Stone said.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “May I help you?”

“Falcon. The boss. The man who runs this place. I need to see him.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“Not really. I just dropped by. I thought he might want to see me.”

“If you would like to leave a message. Is there anything I can do for you?”

“This is personal. I need to see *him*.”

“I could relate that to him. Do you have a business card?”

“Is he in?”

“I’m really not at liberty to say.”

“Do you do email?”

“I’m sorry...?”

“An email address.”

“Mr. Falcon doesn’t...”

“Not him. *You*.” Stone dug his cell phone out of his pocket and flipped through his photos. “I want to send *you* something. Something I think he’ll be interested in.”

Stone found a photo of the broken falcon feather and turned the phone around to show her.

“I’m sorry?” she leaned forward and said. “That’s not familiar.”

“It’s part of something he’s been searching for a long time. I’m sure he’ll want to see it right away. What’s your email address? I’ll send this to you. You can forward it to him. I’m pretty sure he’d be upset if you don’t get this to him right off. I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t want to take that chance.”

The woman glanced over her shoulder at the guard, who nodded

affirmatively.

She wrote down an email on a notepad, then turned and laid it on the counter facing him. He tapped the address into his phone, attached the falcon feather photo, and pressed “send.” While he was at it, hoping they wouldn’t notice, he snapped a photo of the guard and the receptionist area.

“Anything else, Sir?”

“No. That’s it,” Stone said, bending over the counter far enough to look at the guard’s monitors. “You might want to get that to him as soon as you can,” he said as he glanced back at the receptionist. “Is there a coffee shop around here somewhere? I’ll give you *my* email address if he wants to get back to me right away.” He pulled out a business card and handed it to her.

Clayton Lovell Stone
Finder of Lost Art and Treasure
One Railroad Lane
Annapolis, Maryland
Clay@Stone.com

Phone: If I want you to have it, it’s written on the back.

He nodded, then left the building on the Henry Street side and found the coffee shop the receptionist had indicated two blocks down and around the corner. He ordered an espresso, then emailed a copy of the receptionist/guard photo he had taken to Cyn and Ezzy with the message, “This is the inside of the castle’s watchtower. I’m having coffee around the corner, waiting to see if the target takes the bait I tossed him. I’ll let you know.”

Stone’s cell phone buzzed with his cup still half full.

“Mr. Falcon will see you,” the receptionist said.

As soon as Stone returned and the guard pushed some kind of button to let Stone back in, the receptionist nodded toward the two elevators across from the one he had taken up from the garage. “Take the one on the left,” the guard said. “No numbers. I’ll control your stop from here.”

Stone thanked them and rode the elevator up for what felt like a two-minute ride with no jerks, bumps, grinds, stops, or blinking numbers. As soon as the door opened and he stepped out, a sudden movement caught his eye to his left. As he spun toward it, an electric shock struck his kidney from somewhere behind. A needle punctured his right shoulder as he swung around to instinctively grab it. He staggered. He convulsed. His knees gave way, and he folded in a ball on the floor.

CHAPTER 62

Unknown Location

The Present

Stone awoke from a bad dream with a splitting headache. A sharp pain pulsated across his back, ran down his spine, and out through his legs. A deafening “WHHAP! WHHAP! WHHAP!” pounded around him like the devil banging a metal garbage can to drive its occupant out.

“Where the...? He managed to say as a fog of confusion began to lift and the pain loosened its grip.

“Take it easy over there,” he heard a voice say above the rhythmic beat he now recognized as the repeated clap of a Blackhawk helicopter in flight. He was relieved to hear that sound, plus the fact that a Blackhawk was a military craft, and he found himself sitting in the middle of the three-seater facing a man in a uniform directly across from him.

“Wheeere the...?” he slurred.

“You’re in no immediate danger,” said a wide-shouldered man that Stone could now see wore the uniform of an Army two-star general.

“No *immmmediate* danger?” Stone was able to ask. “Am I beeing drafted?... I thought it was all volunteer these days. I don’t recall volunteering.”

“Your sarcasm, your so-called sense of humor, might get you somewhere in civilian life,” the two-star said. “There’s no place for that here. And no place for it where you’re headed either. This is serious business. Far more than you realize.”

When the general stiffened his back, then relaxed and leaned back in his seat, Stone realized he would get no more information from a man used to parcelling out as little as possible. Name, rank, and serial number, if that. Stone found no sense wasting any further energy until the little that remained had a chance to restore and replenish.

Beyond that, he thought he might as well go along for the ride since there wasn't much choice in the matter. He couldn't exactly kick a Blackhawk's side door open, hop out, and wave a cheery goodbye on his way to the ground. And even if he *could* tackle and overwhelm the general, flying a Blackhawk was not in his usual bag of tricks. There wasn't time to check the cellphone store to see if they had a helicopter-flying app he could download to fly the damn thing. Furthermore, when he tapped his pocket to check for his cellphone, it wasn't there. Someone had removed it.

It occurred to him that there was something else wrong. *Terribly* wrong. The last he recalled, it was evening, or somewhere close to it. He had been riding up an elevator in the Falcon Building when he stepped out and everything suddenly went blank. *This wasn't evening. This was bright daylight with a late morning or early afternoon sun filtering in through the front of the Blackhawk.* They had kept him overnight somewhere. Unconscious. Unaware. The last thing he recalled was a sharp pain in his back and then some kind of needle prick in his shoulder. Instant anesthesia. Whoever's hands he was in, they knew what they were doing. They had rendered him unconscious and held him overnight. They had the capacity to do that with an Army general sitting across from him.

What remained of the trip didn't take long – maybe another twenty minutes – although he had no idea how long he had already been in the air before he came to any kind of awareness.

He felt the copter circle a wide arch, then slowly drop and bump twice before settling onto the ground. The general unbuckled his strap and nodded for Stone to do the same as the door to Stone's right opened to what looked like some kind of huge athletic field.

"Your final destination," the general said. "This is where you get off."

For the first time, with Stone's thinking nearly cleared now, it was evident that the two-star general wore no name tag, no personal identification.

"I don't exist," the general said, apparently catching Stone looking. "I'm just one of two-hundred-ninety-three two-stars. We're all just all doing our job."

As soon as Stone unbuckled his strap and hopped out, he found himself in the middle of what appeared to be some sort of track-and-field arena. A two-story tower stood directly on the other side, with twin bleachers extending out from both sides. As the Blackhawk cut its engine and the dust from its blades settled down, Stone had no idea where he was or what all of this was about.

CHAPTER 63

Unknown Location

The Present

"Up here, Mr. Stone," Stone heard a loudspeaker announce. "Up in the tower. It's more comfortable up here. You can see better."

Stone raised his eyes toward a darkened window atop a two-story concrete pillar resembling some squat airport tower.

"There's a door at the bottom," the speaker voice boomed as Stone shaded his eyes. "It's open."

Stone crossed the field, pushed through a heavy metal door, and wound his way up a set of clangy metal stairs that led to a small room one-third the size of Stone's watertower. As he entered, a man stood across the room, silhouetted against the window's light.

"I understand you've been looking for me," the man said.

"I've been following a trail with your footprints written all over it, if that's what you mean."

"Indeed, you have. But you have no idea what you've stumbled into."

"I suppose you brought me here to tell me," Stone asked, standing his ground as the silhouetted man stood his, neither taking a step toward the other.

"Marcus Falcon," the man said after a pause, stepping forward and holding out his hand. "I go by Falcon."

"I don't shake with my captor," Stone said. "Any reason I should?"

"More than you know," Falcon said.

The man was tall and solidly built. He stood somewhere around six-foot-four and weighed in at close to a hundred-eighty pounds of pure packed muscle. He was a handsome man by anyone's standard. Square jawed. Bright blue-eyed. A few minor wrinkles on his forehead but, otherwise, a smooth, tanned complexion. His most outstanding feature, his pure white hair, thick and neatly

cropped. It was hard to figure his age. Over fifty. How *far* over was anyone's guess.

"You mind telling me where I am?" Stone asked.

"I can't tell you *where* you are," Falcon said. "That's classified. But I can tell you *why* you're here. You've stumbled into a quagmire."

"Stumbled?" Stone asked. "You don't give me much credit for finding my way."

"A quagmire deep enough you could disappear from the face of this earth."

"That wasn't part of my plan. There's still a couple of movies I want to see."

"You're here by special invitation. Not mine, I assure you. I've been instructed to show you how your tax dollars are being put to work. It's a rare opportunity."

"Why me?"

"You're former FBI. You know the importance of secrecy until the time is right to lay your case out."

"I am no longer in the agency's employ."

"I heard that. They let you go."

"You seem to know a lot about me."

"I know *everything* about you. All I need to know."

"Then how about a little reciprocity? You brought me here for a reason. Let's hear it."

"You're right. I don't like wasting time either, so I've arranged a little show. A demonstration of sorts. Have a seat over by the window." He nodded. "I think you'll be impressed. Everyone is."

"Do I have a choice?" Stone asked as he shrugged and followed the man to a window-wall and sat next to him in a thickly padded armchair, looking down at an oval running track with an array of platforms and exercise areas running down its center.

"Olympic training?" Stone asked.

“Better than that. *Far* better. Better than you ever imagined.”

“I can’t wait to see.”

“You won’t have to,” Falcon said as he flipped open a side-panel on the arm of his chair. When he punched in what looked like a code, a gate opened on the far end of the field below. A dozen or so youngish men and women jogged through a gate, stretching their arms and pumping their legs as if revving up for a hundred-yard dash.

“What am I supposed to be looking at down there?” Stone asked.

“Just watch. You won’t have to ask.”

Falcon lifted a hand-held microphone tucked into the side of his chair, held it up, and said, “Broad jump.”

A young woman approached the chalk-marked line. Thin, muscle, and long-armed, she toed the mark, spread her legs shoulder-width, and rose on her toes. She glanced down and nodded, then bent at her knees and rocked her arms rhythmically up-and-down. She rolled her arms a final time, squatted, and sprung forward, stretching her feet and stiffening her legs parallel to the ground as she flew horizontally through the air until gravity overcame her effort and dropped her onto a bed of sawdust.

As soon as she clambered to her feet and brushed herself off, a man in a striped referee shirt rushed forward from the sidelines and bent over her landing spot. Then he stood and spoke into a lapel microphone that echoed in a speaker behind Stone.

“Twelve feet, two and a half.”

“Do you know what the world record is in the broad jump?” Falcon asked while still looking down the field.

“I have no idea.”

“A little over eleven feet. And *that* was a man. A much taller man. This was a woman. She just hit twelve feet, two-an-a-half. And that’s not her longest jump.” Falcon punched a button next to him. “Next.”

A bushy, red-haired young man took the woman’s place at the chalk mark.

He rocked back on his heels, stretched his arms overhead, rolled his arms up and down, then leaped forward with his legs straight out, scattering sawdust as he landed. The striped-shirt referee stepped up to the sawdust marks and bent forward. “Twelve feet, two,” his voice echoed in the tower speaker.

“Two world records right there in front of you,” Falcon said. “Just not recorded. The odd thing is, *you* might find it odd, those two jumps were nothing special. Everyone down there in that field does that on a regular basis. Official records no longer hold. Not in the broad jump, in track, weight lifting, javelin. Everything. All of them.”

“Genetic engineering?”

“Old hat,” Falcon said. “We’ve moved way beyond that. What you’ve just seen down there,” he nodded out the window. “There are others like them already out there.”

“Other’s out there?” Stone asked. “Who’s out there? Out *where*? ”

“Out in the real world, where it counts. What’s the point of being stronger, wiser, brighter, whatever you want, if they’re not out there, out in the world, making a difference? Being part of it all? A genuine upgrade? Part of a long-needed change?”

Stone raised an eyebrow. “A change for the better, I suppose?”

“I would think you might agree that the human race could use a little improvement. It’s about the future, my friend. *The future of everything.*”

“Okay. So, what are you getting at? What’s your point? Why have you brought me here?”

“You were getting too close. You would have figured it out.”

“Figuring it out is a part of the fun. You’re not going to spoil that are you?”

“Keeping your head above water wasn’t my idea. I would have held you under and eliminated you as a nuisance factor. You *and* the woman. Higher authority prevailed.”

“How high?”

“About as high as you can go. You figure it out.”

“You tell me. My brain’s not working all that well.”

“No one’s brain is working as well as it could. Most people wander around in a mental fog, using ten percent of their mental or physical capacity. What if that capacity could be increased to, say, twenty percent? Or, how about fifty? A good thing, right? That *is* the point.” Falcon nodded out the window. “All those down there on that field. They all look different. They *are* different. Different strengths and abilities. But each of them, every one, is measurably smarter, stronger, more manly or womanly. Even their lesser strengths are better. Better singers. Artists. Mathematicians. Engineers. Athletes. All of them with far better memories. They easily tuck four or five languages under their belt by the age of nine or ten. They’re all biologically younger than their chronological age and far more attractive. They’re just growing old slower and staying healthier to the very end. It’s about being a better human being. Better in every way.”

“And who decides what is better?”

“Everyone decides. You decide. You’re given that choice. Not for yourself, of course. It’s too late for that. For your children. You choose the sort of child you want from a range of high-quality options. A menu of choices. Naturally, there are limitations. There has to be close to the same number of each sex. The Chinese figured that out with their one-child policy. They ended up with too many boys looking for too few mates. But beyond that, what father or mother wouldn’t choose to have a healthier, brighter, stronger, more attractive child? What parent would condemn their child to the relative trash heap of human existence compared to everyone else’s son or daughter? And I mean *everyone else’s*.” Falcon paused and looked squarely at Stone. “Would you?”

“A devil’s choice,” Stone said.

“Or a choice of the gods.”

“Is that what you’re doing here? Playing God?”

“Nature *is* god. I’m simply manipulating nature’s rules. I didn’t make them. I’m using nature’s rules as tools to create a better product.”

“A product?”

“A product crucial to national security. The threat today isn’t artificial intelligence. It’s not cyber warfare. It’s not who has the biggest bomb or the most powerful navy. It’s none of those. It’s biology, which comes down to bioengineering combined with implanted microchip technology and brain surgery. So, yes, a higher human order *is* a product. And the difference between a nature-made product and an engineered product is vast. It’s greater than the difference between Cro-Magnon and Modern Man. Both are human. One is just further up the evolutionary ladder. If Modern Man and Cro-Magnon were both around today to compete and fight each other, there’d be no contest. That’s the spread of difference we’re talking about here. If another nation jumps ahead of us in that, they’ll think of us as we think of monkeys and baboons. They’ll bring their kids out to a zoo on a Sunday afternoon to point at us in cages and wonder if we have any intelligence at all compared to them. Is *that* what you want? That’s the kind of national survival we’re dealing with here. It’s the nation with the stronger, brighter, more creative population that beats the rest.”

“You mean ‘beats’ or ‘*defeats*’?”

“It’s the same thing. You simply don’t want to be second-class humans. You want to be first class. *That’s* the point. Giving the United States that capacity. You’ve seen a small glimpse of that right down there on that field. The best *so far*. And, until we arrive, until we’re actually there, this project needs to remain buried. Nonexistent. There are too many internal enemies who would oppose that kind of great leap forward, while other nations are hard at work to achieve it.”

“You’re not exactly hiding. Your name’s attached to a building.”

“Falcon, Inc?... Known for our expertise in biological research. And that *is* what we do. A private corporation, working mostly for pharmaceuticals. And doing very well at that, thank you very much. What you’ve seen down there is the hidden arm of that research. The biggest United States contract ever awarded to a private corporation for national defense. A contract that doesn’t exist out in

the open. Which means, if you don't exist, the source of any potential leak is plugged.”

“Sounds like a threat.”

“I don't make threats.”

“You just did. I just don't believe it. If you wanted to get rid of me, you would have done that already. There'd be no point in bringing me out here to show me any of this. You wanted to threaten me with knowledge, thinking you could persuade me to hold onto your secret if it came down to that.”

“Not just *any* secret. A *crucial* secret for national survival. World dominance, to put it bluntly. Beyond that, it's what everyone wants. It's the future of our children. Of the human race. We're getting close to placing that power in the hands of every parent. They'll be able to bring the best of their own innate qualities to the breeding table and then tweak them with a whole range of strengths and assets. And that power will change the very future of what it means to be human. Those nations, those families, who choose less won't survive. Are you sure you want to stand in the way of that?”

“I'd have to think about that.”

“Think about this while you're at it. I had my own reason for bringing you here. For showing you all this.”

“I'm sure you did.”

“Not to do you in. To hire you.”

“What?”

“You were clever enough to find me. Stop chasing me and start helping.”

CHAPTER 64

Annapolis
The Present

Cyn's cell phone buzzed an incoming email from Stone. She glanced up from her bench on The Right Ingredients deck and rushed into the restaurant's kitchen to catch Ezzy slicing potato wedges.

"What?" Ezzy looked up and asked as she barged through the door. "What is it?"

She held up her cell phone. "*It's him.* I think... I hope he's okay." She had been worried. Neither of them had heard from Stone since yesterday. The last they heard, he sent an iPhoto of the security desk lobby at Falcon, Inc.. Then nothing. Cyn had emailed back and then tried to call but had gotten no response. "*Oh, my god!*" she flattened her hand against her breast and gasped at the email. "*They have him.*"

His cellphone email photo showed Stone sitting in a high-backed chair with his eyes closed, a man dressed in a black hood standing directly behind him, holding Stone's chin up with one hand, a knife in his other, ready to slice his weapon across Stone's Adam's apple. The added message beneath read. "You have something of mine. A feather from an ancient death mask. I suggest a trade if you ever want to see this man alive again. Further instructions to follow."

"*They have his cell phone,*" Cyn said to Ezzy. "That's *why* he didn't answer. He *couldn't*. Now, what do we do?"

"We do what they say. We wait for instructions."

CHAPTER 65

Western Maryland

The Present

After meeting with Marcus Falcon, Stone was escorted back to the Blackhawk with instructions to take the center seat in the rear, facing a blank wall again just as before, the windows on both sides blocked to keep him from seeing where they were headed. Despite that, knowing the sun's angle when he climbed into the chopper and their direction at takeoff, he was confident they were flying east.

Flying at a Blackhawk's cruising speed of 174 miles an hour before landing on the roof of the Falcon Inc. headquarters in Rosslyn, less than twenty minutes after takeoff, gave Stone a pretty good idea of where they had been. Very likely at Fort Detrick, Maryland, not far from Camp David, the presidential retreat in the mountains north of Frederick. His suspicions were verified by the fact that he had traveled there with a two-star general. Detrick had once been the center of the nation's biological weapons program, more recently, the center for biological defense. Most of Detrick's work was top-secret, and Fort Detrick's layout, spread and scattered out like it was, could easily conceal another covert program.

As soon as the Blackhawk touched down on Falcon Inc's helipad, Stone hopped out. A man clutching a baseball cap to his head to keep it from flying away escorted Stone through a roof-top door to an elevator halfway down a narrow corridor.

"Have a seat," the man said as soon as the elevator door opened to face a cushioned bench along the elevator's back wall. "Wait inside at the bottom. It may take a while for Security to let you out."

When Stone stepped inside and sat, he felt a sense of relief. If they had intended to rough him up, or break a few bones, or shave the hair a little too

close on the back of his neck, they wouldn't have bothered to fly him back to Rosslyn. Why waste all that copter fuel, he thought as he leaned back in cushioned comfort and stared up at a corner security camera staring down at him.

Cyn and Ezzy, having followed the instructions they were emailed from Stone's cell phone, parked in Falcon Inc's underground garage, then rode the elevator up to the main level and crossed a marble lobby to a reception/guard desk. "We were told to say we have a gift for Mr. Falcon," Cyn said to the receptionist as the security guard stood up from behind her in front of a bank of monitors. "Do you have it with you?" he asked.

"We might have," Cyn said. "I think you have something for us. I'd like to see that first."

The guard rotated one of his monitors far enough around for Cyn and Ezzy to see Stone leaning back on a bench in an elevator.

"He's *here*?" Cyn asked. "Right here?"

"Just waiting for an exchange. Now, let's see what *you* have."

Cyn reached in her shoulder bag, lifted out a six-inch cylindrical package, and laid it on the counter.

The guard nodded. "Open it"

She unwrapped a muslin cloth to reveal a falcon feather severed at its stem. The guard opened a drawer, snapped a rubber glove on his right hand, and picked the feather up between his thumb and two fingers. He sat down in front of his monitor and clicked open to an image of an ancient Greek death mask, then compared the mask's feathers with the object in his hand. He studied both for close to a minute, then glanced at the receptionist and nodded. When she touched a button beneath her desk, an elevator door opened across from the one in which Cyn and Ezzy had taken from the garage, and Stone sauntered out as if

he worked there and was just leaving after a long day at the office.

CHAPTER 66

The Right Ingredients

Annapolis

The Present

“You’re cell phone,” Cyn said, sitting with Stone and Ezzy out on The Right Ingredients deck as a late afternoon sun gleamed bright yellow off the State Capital’s cupola across the Severn. “They had it. They must have hacked into it.”

Stone nodded. “High-end hacking. Whoever did that knew what they were doing. The Bureau was getting close to that level while I was still there.”

“They had a picture of you. A man with a knife at your neck.”

“I don’t remember that. There’s a whole day I don’t remember.”

Stone brought them up to date on what had happened and what he had learned as a captive audience. “The whole thing comes down to bio-engineering,” he said. “Trying to engineer a super race of humans before someone else beats us to it.”

“What the hell does any of that have to do with an ancient death mask?” Ezzy asked.

“A symbol. A death of the old, a rebirth of the new. They carried the mask along with Falcon as a baby from the old country over to the new. Their lab back in Germany was finished. The war took care of that. They needed a new start in a new place. A new beginning.”

“Where *were* you?” Cyn asked. “Where did they take you?”

“Not far. Wherever they’re conducting their current experiments. That’s what he wanted to show me.”

“What *he* wanted to show you?” Ezzy asked.

“Falcon. Marcus Falcon. The sonofabitch made me an offer.”

“An offer for what?” Ezzy asked.

“He didn’t say exactly. I think maybe to keep me off his back, keep me in sight so he could keep an eye on me. I guess he figured I might be useful to him somehow. He’d figure exactly how later.”

“What’d you tell him.”

“I told him ‘no.’ Not, ‘no thank you.’ Just plain ‘no.’”

“No to what?” Ezzy asked.

“It all came down to a simple question he put to me. He wanted to know, if I had a child, which I do, grown now. If I had a chance before she was born. If I could choose to have her born smarter than she would normally be... I don’t know. Maybe twice as smart. And add healthier to that, stronger, and a bunch of other exceptional strengths, traits and talents. Plus strikingly beautiful. No imperfections. If I could make that choice for her and everyone else was making it for their kids, would I turn that option down for less? *Far* less. Would I condemn her to less? Could I live with that choice when she gets pounced on and outstripped at every turn? Could I deliberately consign her to a Cro-Magnon life in a Super Human world? How could I explain that when she asked, when she’s stomping her feet and angry as hell that I did that to her?”

“So, how’d you answer?” Ezzy asked.

“I didn’t. I don’t know the answer.”

CHAPTER 67

Union Station
Washington, D.C.
The Present

Cyn left her suitcase by a bench next to Stone while she went to the window and bought a one-way train ticket for Toronto at Washington Union Train Station. She had accepted a long-standing offer as a research assistant at the University of Toronto, which would get her back to being Dr. Slater again.

After purchasing her ticket, she glanced up at the station clock as she came back and sat next to Stone, who had been watching her as she walked away and then came back.

“Well, I guess this is it,” she said, turning and looking straight at him.

“You think so?” he asked.

“No. I don’t... Not really. Do you?”

“I’m not sure what I think. It might take me a while to figure that out. I’m not sure if we ever had anything for each other except hope and desire. Just enough to think maybe there was more. Maybe there was everything.”

“We always seem to get everything right *except* reality,” Cyn said.

“Maybe we did get that right this time. We skipped the sex part. We kept it professional. *Mostly* professional.”

When the loudspeaker called for Cyn to board her train, they both stood and hugged, and Cyn turned and walked away without looking back.

Driving home in Martha, Stone felt both sadness and relief, both lucky and unlucky. Cyn had come and gone in his life. Come and gone *again*. But then again, she had never really been there. Not fully. Not completely. Not in the way

he wanted her. Or *thought* he wanted her. Maybe all illusions were like that. They only seem real when there's a thread of possibility, just enough to wrap your hopes and dreams around but not enough to hold it together for long. Maybe that's what makes them so compelling. You're never fulfilling but are never fully disappointing either. There's always a "might be" because you never really experience what it would be. It's always just out of reach. Close enough to keep pulling you forward as it slowly backs away.

Still, Stone's watertower house felt awfully empty when he arrived back home, climbed those thirty-two steps up to his deck, and opened his sliding door to a quiet emptiness. Thankfully, Pee and Dee, his two cats, were there to greet him, both looking up with their sad eyes as if to say, "Come on in, Fella. Pull yourself together. It's just the three of us again. We can make it... Oh, and by the way, how do you think *we* feel when you take off for work on one of your so-called adventures, leaving us alone in the company of some damn cat sitter we don't really like. "My only hope," Pee seemed to say, "that it won't happen again for a while."

EPILOGUE

Rosslyn Virginia

The Present

Relaxed and leaning back in his deco-modern Eames-Chair in his penthouse on the top of the Falcon Building, Marcus Falcon glanced up with satisfaction at a completely intact falcon death-mask, an ancient symbol of death, flight, and rebirth. He was especially pleased with the revival of the project's third phase, the Falcon phase. The first in Germany, the second in the Bolivian jungle, and now the third, well-established and flourishing with massive government support and funding. Eventual success, now within reach, would change the world for the better by changing those who inhabit it.

But Falcon Inc., the corporation, was not *part* of the government. On the contrary. Falcon Inc. worked *for* a government, even though Falcon himself would be the first to admit it was those government contracts that provided the seed money to underwrite another project even more world-changing than bioengineering.

After all, even the most intelligent humans, the best fit, the brightest, the most talented, are still human. They are all *who* they are. Or more precisely, *who they think they are*. Falcon knew, as every psychologist knows, that humans are more than their intelligence, their physical makeup and biological components. They are more than the sum of their traits and talents. *Beyond what their biology dictates, they are each a specific product of their unique experience stored in memory.* They *become* what their experience teaches them *about* themselves. They are who they think they are. Change those memories, and they become who they think they are. They believe what those memories support. They are, or believe they are, what their implanted memories inform them.

That process of memory implantation was the essence of the new *Falcon Project Remold*. Implant a microchip into the memory portion of someone's brain and then, while they sleep, gradually broadcast new memories to replace those that lead them to conclude who they are. When you control enough minds, you control the world by controlling those who reside in it.

Perfect, Falcon thought as he stood up from his chair and ambled out on his balcony overlooking the Nation's Capital. He felt pleased with himself. He had stretched for a lever of ultimate power now within his grasp.

But *Project Remold* would belong to *no* government. It would belong to the highest bidder. Or to no one at all. It would belong to him, to Falcon, the Keeper of Memories.

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Bruce Hutchison

Sample Chapters

In an adventure based on the factual four-hundred-year-old plot to disguise the true authorship of the Shakespeare plays, Clayton Lovell Stone tracks the murderer of a female friend and in the process uncovers the greatest literary conspiracy in history.

CHAPTER 1

*“Methought I heard a night voice cry,
‘Sleep no more!’”*

Macbeth does murder sleep.”

Macbeth, II, 2

Hackney Episcopal Churchyard

Hackney, England

Three dimly-lit streetlamps rose between the shadowed limbs of sycamores that stretched between them, hiding any ghosts or ghouls who might creep over the graveyard wall to disturb the dead. Above and behind the trees, the scream of a hawk shattered the 3:00 A.M. silence, then faded as three grave robbers hovered over their grisly task, picking and shoveling their way through layers of black earth. But these were no ordinary grave robbers and this was no ordinary grave. The grave’s location was unmarked, though 392 years ago it had been clearly marked and registered by date and day. Burial, by Elizabethan custom, was in the afternoon. Grave robbery, then as now, by necessity, was a nighttime operation.

After successive fires in the mid-1700s, the original Hackney Church had collapsed, first its roof, then its walls, the congregation finally forced to move the wooden altar that had miraculously survived the flames into a new structure built in what had once been the old church garden.

Three days preceding the grave robbery, the church vicar -- a balding man with a hook nose and a broad, reddish face -- had informed a stranger that the fires weren’t the problem. “Not for what you’re seeking,” he added. “I would say it’s the order that makes it difficult.”

“What about that?” the stranger had asked. “What about the order?”

“Simply that there was none. Not in those days. Well, I wouldn’t say none at all. After a death, the deceased simply took the next empty spot toward the

road down there.” He nodded downhill. “You didn’t own a plot or buy one as today. They all belonged to the church. When you died, you simply took the next in line. Every so often they would go out of order and hold a space to accommodate a wife or a husband. So, for what you’re seeking,” the vicar squinted as if calculating, “if we presume the first grave was dug along the lower wall in the summer of 1517.” He pointed down a sloping grade that ran toward the road. “Then a 1604 internment would be halfway between the wall and where we’re standing. Everything moved up the hill toward the church in fair order until September 1687. That would have been the last of them, if that’s any help.”

That information had provided the inquisitor at least a vague idea of where to dig. The inquisitor’s name was Cory Lee Tobin, though no one called him that. He was a handsome lad by anyone’s standard, including his own -- thick-shouldered, sunny-day blue-eyed, and a square-jawed face baked an outdoor-bronze acquired from his weekly sessions at Mic and Kip’s Hair and Tanning Salon. His only distinguishing feature, a trademark, was a bleeding-heart tattoo on his left hand. He burnt the blood drips in himself and kept them scarred with a lit cigarette. The thing was, he didn’t even smoke. So he bought the cheapest brand to do the job. He only whimpered, never sobbed through all that searing, even when tears rolled down his cheeks.

His mug was the one good thing he got from his mum. He’d allow her credit for that. And his hair, like hers, was long and thick and honey blond. He was one of those fortunate blokes who could sport a pigtail and still look manly. The girls always liked the hang of it, ogling him even back in primary school and calling him Pigtail before the schoolmaster booted him out. The nickname stuck, so he grew the tail down to his ass. He figured once a woman’s eyes started sliding down that slope, they’d just keep rolling. He could always tell when a bird wanted to tug him by his tail. He’d swing his head and jiggle a little twist when he caught one staring.

Pigtail didn’t count on his looks, though. His mum had done that, and what

had it got her? He earned his keep. He was a tradesman, an extraction and demolitions man. He blew things up, and he was friggin' good at it. When there wasn't any call for demolitions -- it was a now-and-again sort of trade -- he filled in with odd jobs that weren't exactly on the up-and-up, usually for blokes who didn't like to get any dirt under their manicured fingernails. Pigtail didn't mind a little dirt, so word spread that he was available for demolitions, or for this and that. They rang him whenever an odd job or a precision blow popped up.

He hadn't killed the vicar. For one thing, the London police took the murder of a man of God seriously, even in run-down Hackney. Besides, Pigtail had been warned to avoid a killing. Killing gave grave robbing a bad rap. It made a minor crime stand out, which was exactly what Pigtail didn't need, especially when the sort of work he did was meant to be hidden. That's where the disguise came in.

This was a new angle for Pigtail. It was Creiger's idea: an actor's rubber mask with a wide nose, a chin piece, bristled eyebrows, and makeup mixed in to pull it all together and smooth it out. Pigtail hardly recognized himself when he gawked at Creiger's work in the mirror. Made up, he wouldn't *have* to kill the vicar. The only problem was concealing Pigtail's pigtail. He flattened it, and then one of Creiger's butlers folded it up and tucked it under.

The vicar hadn't been suspicious. He'd seemed happy to help when Pigtail inquired about the bloke in question. "They never gave him his proper due," the vicar had added, speaking like he cared about that sorry dead chap while thumbing through a bunch of old Records of Burial. "Which doesn't a'tall mean he did what they said he did. *Some* said he did. He *didn't*." The vicar lifted a folder from the cabinet drawer, turned and glanced up. "Can you imagine if he did?"

When the vicar accompanied Pigtail among the gravesites, Pigtail knew that a few weeks after that visit, the vicar might notice a grave or two dug up and refilled, but so what if he did figure it? Even if someone dug up some of those old holes, all the bodies would still be there. There'd be nothin' missing, not as

far as anyone could tell.

Pigtail sketched burial sites on a notepad as the Vicar pointed them out, and later carried his notes back to Creiger's estate, where he lay them out on the dining room table. Then the two of them narrowed down their best prospects to three graves in the left-center of two rows, halfway up from the wall. Creiger said the chap they were looking for had been buried with his wife but no kids, which meant two bodies close together. Since this bloke was way up in rank, the headstone would have been wider and deeper than most, leaving one of the larger sinkholes.

They picked Guy Fawkes Day -- the yearly celebration of Fawkes's failed attempt to assassinate Protestant King James I with explosives -- for the night of their operation. Fawkes was a demolitions man, just like Pigtail, so the profession even got its due recognition way back then. The darkness of Guy Fawkes Night would mask their operation, and the crackle of firecrackers would cover any minor digging noise. If Fawkes was lookin' up from Hell, he might be proud of modern demolitions, or at least crack a smile.

With their first dig well underway, Pigtail raised his head to the sound of three drunks staggering along the knee-high wall by the road, gaping in their direction. "Aye, mate!" the tallest called as they staggered closer. "What ya doin' there?... Buryin'?"

"Not buryin'," Pigtail hollered back. "Diggin' up a lost uncle."

"*A lost uncle!*" The sozzled man elbowed his friend, shouting loud enough for Pigtail and anyone in earshot to overhear. Pigtail might have to do something about all the commotion.

"Hearrrr that, Jerrrrry?" he slurred. "They looost an uncle."

"Agggh," Jerry grunted, scrutinizing the sidewalk.

"What say we give'm a hand?"

Pigtail slipped a stiletto switchblade from his pants pocket and flipped out the sixteen-centimeter steel blade.

CHAPTER 2

*“Affection is a coal that must be cool’d,
Else, suffer’d, it will set the heart on fire.”*

Venus and Adonis, Stanza 65

1 Quarter-Mile Railroad Lane
South of Annapolis, Maryland

A chill blew up the Chesapeake, skimmed over a low-lying marsh, bumped across the single-line railroad track, and rose and spilled through Clayton Lovell Stone’s open window, shivering him awake. He preferred to sleep in the nude when Tracy stayed over, even though she usually stole the blankets and accused him of pushing them over to her side rather than taking responsibility for her own tugging. The best advice Stone ever got from a woman. “Yes, we *are* all interested in doing it. We’re just not all interested in doing it with *you*.” That was the day, as a young man, he considered himself grown up.

He grabbed his robe from the back of a chair and snuck across the bedroom. He passed down the hall that connected his round watertower bedroom to the kitchen and living room in the adjacent switchhouse. When he turned the lamp on, four days’ worth of the *New York Times* crossword puzzles stared up at him from the bookshelf, the top puzzle with a third of its spaces unfilled.

He lifted a pen from several poking up from a chipped FBI coffee cup, then glanced down at a string of nine blanks and studied the clue, “An Empire that ruled when the pre-medieval Slavs swept across Western Europe.”

He looked up, thought a second, then grinned and filled the blanks with “Byzantine,” his satisfaction bordering on delight. Stone hated unfilled spaces, unfinished business, and unanswered questions of any sort. That was one of the reason’s the Bureau hired him. That, and the fact that he had spent two years St.

John's College Great Books Program before transferring to American University before going on to Stanford to earn his masters in psychology. St. John's gave him a broad understanding of religion, philosophy, history, science, and literature -- knowledge useful in understanding and tracing lost or stolen art and artifact.

The Bureau sent him to Quantico for small arms and rough-and-tumble training. He was a natural at it and had a chance to make a few Marine friends and stay on another month-and-a-half at the Advance Combat Academy. The Bureau thought it might be useful. It turned out to be more beneficial than he or they imagined.

The FBI's Art and Treasury Recovery Division selected him right out of the Bureau's Training Academy for his bulldog tenacity in tracking clues, as well as his refusal to back off until the last clue fell into place and the case was solved. His stubbornness and compulsion for closure were the same reasons the Bureau eventually fired him.

A red flash on his computer caught his eye. He thought he'd turned it off. He always shut down and rebooted fresh in the morning. Tracy must have emailed someone or looked something up, although he didn't recall seeing her do that. It was probably nothing, but still, it bothered him.

CHAPTER 3

*“And now remains
That we find out the cause of this
effect,
Or rather say, the cause of his
defect.”*

Hamlet II, 2

Hackney Episcopal Churchyard
Hackney, England

The first drunk raised a leg over the wall but caught his toe on the lip, tumbling sideways and landing him flat on his back on the sidewalk that ran along the graveyard. Pigtail didn't want to kill any of these assholes unless he had to. There wasn't time for that, and he had been ordered to work clean. As the first drunk got to his knees and scrambled to his feet, his two companions gripped the wall and tried to lift him up. With several hands and arms entangled, the three of them leaned together and stumbled along the wall, then pushed off at the end and lurched down the first side street they came to.

Pigtail had worn a disguise when he'd talked to the vicar about the grave's location. He felt satisfied the drunks hadn't gotten close enough to identify him or his men. The same brew of the Guy Fawkes celebration had wobbled their stance, clouded their eyes, and would fog their memories, which was bloody good. If he had been forced to kill the bastards, that would have cost Creiger extra. That fell under the category of incidental charges. "Don't get paid by the clock," Speed had always taught him. "By the job. Any extra, that's extra."

Speed had more or less raised Pigtail, his mum doing what she could. But it was Speed -- Francis J. Carmichael -- who taught him demolitions and other tricks he needed, such as how to do a bloke in and get away with it. Everyone called Francis "Speed" because of "Car" in his last name and because he was quick on his feet. Speed took Pigtail on as an apprentice and didn't even take a cut. He let Pigtail, a twelve-year-old at the time, keep everything he made.

"Practice on bugs," Speed told him. "Killin' is killin,' people or bugs. Everybody kills bugs and don't even think a thing of it, right? That's how it is. Just hold up in your basement and crush'm when they wiggle by. Just stomp with one shoe. It's easier scrapin'm off." Pigtail had told him at the time that he was already killing bugs for the fun of it, or just for somethin' to do.

It was the coppers who killed Speed. They claimed it was an accident. Some accident. They were out to get him. They chased him up an alley and ran over him with their blinking lights whirlin' and their sirens blaring. Then they

backed up and ran him over twice again for insurance, sayin' he was tryin' to get away. He wouldn't a tried to get away. They had him pinned. He would have gone out with a blast. He would have laughed and charged their friggin' car. That was Speed.

Anyways, when Pigtail got word of what they done to him, he hid in Speed's basement two days straight, squashing as many waterbugs and million leggers as he could scrape from the corners. Speed was the second father Pigtail lost. He never knew his first.

These images flashed through Pigtail's mind as he and his boys laid out a large plastic sheet on the downhill side of the graveyard before they started digging their first grave. The plastic kept them from disturbing the grass when they shoveled the dirt back in. Pigtail held a steady eye on the road while his two companions stretched the sheet out and staked the corners down. Traffic ran light at that time of the morning, and except for the occasional car, only the odd firecracker broke the silence.

Just as Pigtail had gone over again and again with Creiger, Pigtail and his two men removed the top layer of grass in square patches and set them aside in even rows so they could place them back exactly where they dug them up.

It took somewhere between five and ten minutes to burrow down and around the remains of the first coffin, digging a wider space along the sides to leave enough room to drop down and crowbar the lid off. But all their work resulted in nothing but bones, no dangling pendant and no signet ring on the corpse's fingers. This wasn't their man.

Their second dig uncovered fragments of a coffin slightly below two meters, but no ring or nothin' when they opened that one either. On their third and final dig, they were already so far down that only one of them was able to squeeze inside the narrow trench and shovel dirt over his shoulder, while the second man, a man with a crewcut, lowered a rope-handled pail and hauled up buckets of black soil. At forty centimeters below where they struck wood in the other two graves, all they found in the third hole was the Queen's good earth --

no wood, no coffin, no friggin' body of any kind, let alone somethin' to tell who the dead guy was.

On the good side though -- Pigtail always liked to look for the good side, just like Speed always told him -- at least they hadn't had to bump the drunks off. That would have cost Creiger extra for nothing, plus all that clean up.

Pigtail sent the boys back for the van and stayed behind. They had quickly unloaded their tools and parked two streets over along a row of abandoned warehouses when they first arrived, so the van wouldn't look like a fox parkin' near a hen house. Pigtail always took the trouble to look a job over just to make sure he got the details proper. One thing wrong, something dropped, even a match or a butt or somethin,' could do you in. He waited for the boys to pass under the last street lamp and turn the corner, all the while watchin the road to make sure no one was gawkin' in their direction or comin' along. Satisfied that the early morning was still quiet, he trudged uphill toward the vicar's office, carrying his shovel just in case he needed to pat down a hole or fill one in here or there.

He turned and surveyed the rows of graves when he reached the crest. After refilling the final hole, they carefully replaced the squared grass patches and pounded them down. As far as Pigtail could see from his higher vantage point, everything looked flat and in place. There were a few lines, but no telltale bumps to show where they had dug.

He jumped. He tightened his fist around his shovel. Shit, he thought when he turned to look. He hadn't counted on this.

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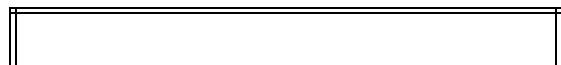
About the Author



Dr. Bruce Hutchison is a clinical psychologist who has practiced in Delaware, Maryland, and New Mexico. For many years he was the chief psychologist at the Upper Shore Mental Health Center in Chestertown, Maryland and in private practice in Easton. He taught counseling, therapy, and psychopathology courses in the Washington College Graduate Psychology Department. He has worked as a consultant for adult and adolescent rehabilitation programs, geriatric centers, and law enforcement agencies, and has testified as an expert witness in psychological profiling for both the prosecution and the defense. He has been a long-time member of the State of Maryland's Forensic Evaluation Team. He has supervised psychologists for the Maryland Prison System and served in the Mental Health Section to the 24th Infantry Division of the United States Army in Munich, Germany.

Bruce received his master's degree from Stanford University and his Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Maryland. He has presented on these topics in the U.S. and internationally. He currently lives with his wife Nancy on Long Island, New York.

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