

FORCED TO KILL

The background of the cover is a photograph of a military helicopter, possibly a Black Hawk, flying over a desert canyon. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a warm, golden light filling the sky and the canyon walls. A black targeting reticle, consisting of a crosshair and a vertical line with tick marks, is overlaid on the right side of the image, partially obscuring the title and the sky.

A NATHAN MCBRIDE NOVEL

ANDREW PETERSON

**FORCED TO
KILL**

Also by Andrew Peterson

First to Kill
Option to Kill

FORCED TO KILL

**ANDREW
PETERSON**

 **THOMAS & MERCER**

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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To my brother Matthew. Thank you for being such a treasured friend.

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CHAPTER 1

The loadmaster issued a nod.

USMC Staff Sergeant Erick Ramsland leapt into a moonless night.

Subzero air instantly whipped his jumpsuit. A slow tumble offered him a final look at the C-130J's black form. Higher than Mount Everest, he stabilized into belly flight as he reached terminal velocity—nearly a football field per second.

He glanced at the backlit GPS device strapped to his wrist, but it didn't register coordinates. His forward speed hadn't bled off yet. Ten thousand feet lower, massive cumulus towers awaited his arrival. He'd be penetrating their ghostly forms within the next thirty seconds. They weren't fully developed, but they'd still pack plenty of punch.

He took another look at the GPS. Good, coordinates were displayed. Using the compass on the opposite wrist, he made a slight course correction to the east, then a finer adjustment due south. On the western horizon, the faint glow from Porlamar foreshadowed the vast city of Caracas beyond.

This wasn't his first HALO jump, but it could be the most dangerous. His orders were to secure tonight's target alive and transport him to the extraction point. Using the target's personal vehicle remained the best option, but he wouldn't know how to play it until he assessed the situation. Ramsland considered himself a human smart bomb. Nothing more, nothing less. Questioning orders led to doubt, and this mission had no place for it.

Directly below, the wraithlike structure of the clouds looked menacing and cold. He adjusted his flight toward a valley between two immense columns, but knew he'd never make it. He took a deep breath and steeled himself. *Here they come!*

Ramsland cleaved into total blackness. Eddies bent and twisted his body. He stopped monitoring the GPS and concentrated on keeping his free fall stable. A wet chill penetrated his jumpsuit and the polypropylene thermal undergarment, forcing a shiver.

Things got worse when a violent wind shear jerked him onto his side

and propelled him into a vertical spin. Without a horizon as a reference, he couldn't correct the hideous sensation of cartwheeling out of control. At least there wasn't hail in here. Being blasted by hailstones—even small ones—at three hundred feet per second would definitely ruin his evening. He summoned an image of his wife to calm his mind. He took slow, deep breaths and told himself to relax. Stable air would return any second.

As quickly as it had arrived, the turbulence ended and the lights of Tobago snapped on.

With a solid horizon, he arrested the spin, stabilized into controlled free fall, and checked his coordinates and altimeter. Both good.

He remained on target as he tore through twelve thousand feet and welcomed the slight increase in temperature. That cloud mass had been freezing. He zeroed in on a large, dark area.

Eleven thousand feet.

He visualized the exterior layout of his mark's house. Plantation style. A backyard pool and spa occupied a landscaped courtyard.

Ten thousand.

Two security cameras were mounted atop a ten-foot perimeter wall, with two more on the roof observing the rear yard and pool. Another camera eyed the entrance courtyard and driveway. Two Dobermans patrolled the property inside the walls. Three bodyguards were present. Two worked with the dogs, while a third monitored the camera feeds.

Eight thousand.

He stayed on pure oxygen.

Six.

Thicker air now. Five seconds per thousand. Perfect terminal velocity.

Four.

Warm air engulfed him.

Three thousand...

Two...

Fifteen hundred—now!

The multicell, ram air canopy issued a *whoof* and burst open at eleven hundred feet.

His body jerked to a relative stop compared to its previous speed. He removed his oxygen mask and goggles and let them dangle around his neck. Next, he unzipped the belly pack, powered up his night-vision goggles, and secured them in place on his helmet. He pivoted the device down to his eyes

and adjusted the focus. The world turned bright green, resolving into perfect clarity. It felt eerily quiet now with the roar of rushing wind gone. He began a rapid spiral descent toward his LZ, the Mount Irvine Bay Golf Course. At three hundred feet AGL, he lined up on a fairway and focused on the exact spot he wanted. Ten feet above the ground, he pulled hard on both toggles, executed a perfect flair, and touched down in a slight run.

Incredible.

Thirty thousand feet to sea level in under three minutes.

Juan Montez de Oca peeled his latex gloves and washed his hands in the marble sink. His richly appointed bathroom brought a smile. Ten years. That's how long it had taken him to rebuild his wealth. The regime change in Nicaragua had stripped his military power and prestige and left him with only the clothes on his back. Literally. He'd barely escaped into Honduras. Only his lifelong devotion to fitness, endurance, and survival skills saved his life during the arduous trek through two hundred miles of jungle. Lesser men would have perished. To make matters worse, all his property and bank accounts had been seized and stolen. *Never again*, he had vowed. Now, a full decade later, he'd rebuilt his life and his status. One more year and he'd have enough to retire and live a secure life. He didn't feel guilty about hoarding money. He gave plenty to an orphanage on Trinidad, more than most Tobagonians made in ten years. Having never known his own parents, he had a soft heart for homeless kids.

He removed the elastic band securing his black ponytail and shook his hair out. Hazel eyes complemented a light Hispanic complexion. Nearly fifty, Montez could still turn young women's heads, and frequently did.

Tonight's interrogation had concluded with solid results. He'd finally broken his latest subject and gleaned valuable information. In the living room he made an encrypted call, relayed the info he'd just obtained, and scheduled a disposal. The call ended abruptly and left him somewhat irritated. He didn't like his contact at all. Apparently, no new subject would be forthcoming this week. No matter, he told himself. He'd use the break to do some reading.

Montez retrieved his Heckler & Koch P30 from the study and headed for the upper basement door. At the bottom of the stairs he opened a second

door and was assaulted by the noxious smell of blood mixed with a homeless stench. Disgusting, but understandable. He didn't hold it against the man. It wasn't his fault. Part of breaking a subject involved denying all semblance of hygiene.

He reached inside the concrete chamber and snapped on the light.

The floor, walls, and ceiling were covered with polyurethane plastic, the kind painters used to protect furniture. Spattered blood patterns testified to what his subject had endured over the last three days. He removed his shoes and stepped into a pair of cheap slippers. The remains of a slaughtered animal lay in the corner of the room, its sightless eyes cloudy. A video camera mounted on a tripod loomed in the opposite corner.

Secured in a bloodstained chair, his subject moaned but didn't open his eyes.

"It is over," Montez said. "You offered a noble fight and need not feel shame. I am going to unbind you. If you resist or try to attack me, I will bury you with the carcass. You will be forever entombed with it."

Giving this subject the respect he deserved involved a certain degree of risk. In order for the prayer to be performed properly, the man would have to be freed from the chair, but Montez would not release him without a bodyguard present. Though his captive didn't seem to have any energy left, Montez always played it safe. Subjects in this condition were unpredictable. Two years ago, he'd dropped his guard with a female captive. The deep oval scar on his left forearm was all the reminder he needed. As punishment, he'd removed all of the vicious woman's teeth, *all of them*, with a pair of pliers. Her high-pitched screaming had been hideous, but an example was needed. Many times since, Montez had used the video of the tooth extractions to show his subjects the price of defiance.

"I will return in a few minutes. Prepare yourself."

Ramsland pulled the right toggle to collapse the canopy and knelt on the grass. He adjusted the NV brightness to maximum before conducting a 360-degree scan for any sign he'd been seen. All quiet. No late-night lovers. Or loose dogs. He gathered the black nylon into a ball and hustled over to a massive tree between fairways. Holding perfectly still, he surveyed his

surroundings again. Nothing moved.

He shucked off his backpack, removed the ghillie suit, and put it on. Keeping his head up, he stuffed the nylon into the backpack and zipped it closed. The waxed zipper made zero noise. With adrenaline still coursing through his system, he took a moment to settle his thoughts. That high-altitude tumble had rattled him more than he cared to admit. He hated being helpless. Now, back on the ground, it was the thought of being captured and tortured that concerned him. He'd long ago decided to take his own life if ever facing that nightmare—assuming he could.

He pivoted his NV goggles up, removed the thermal imager from his waist pack, and swept his position. No warm bodies registered within its range. So far, so good. The sultry ambient temperature didn't offer the best conditions for a thermal sweep, but it was better than nothing. He switched back to NV and tracked south across the next fairway. He didn't like being out in the open, but felt confident his insertion hadn't been detected. He adjusted his heading to take advantage of some smaller trees between fairways. Every fifty feet or so he stopped and swept his six o'clock. Several hundred yards distant a dog barked, followed by its owner yelling something. The dog went silent. Ramsland smelled the air and detected nothing but freshly cut grass and something else, maybe a nitrogen-based fertilizer.

He looked at his watch: 0134. Less than three hours until extraction. If he failed to make the rendezvous down at Grange Bay at the precise time allocated, the SEAL special boat team would leave without him, no questions asked. He'd have to secure his target and wait twenty-four hours for a second attempt. If he missed the second attempt, his orders were to stay put until contacted. He wasn't worried. Being African-American, he'd have no trouble blending in with the locals, and English was the official language here. His backpack also contained a change of clothes, a fake ID and passport, and two thousand dollars in cash.

He pulled his suppressed Beretta M9A1 from the waist pack, worked his way into the tree line south of the golf course, and began a slight uphill trek toward his destination. His NV goggles allowed him to avoid obstacles and objects that would make noise. Concealed in a ghillie suit at night, he was all but invisible. He advanced in slow, deliberate steps, looking left, right, and behind. He consulted his GPS and made a slight course correction to the southeast.

He should be able to see the residence. There...the perimeter wall.

White stucco. Ten feet high. If his intel remained accurate, cameras would be mounted on opposite corners of its fifty-yard length. He slowed his pace to one step every five seconds. A cleared area followed the contour of the wall, similar to a castle's moat, but without water. He saw what he needed to the east—a tree with several thick branches overhanging the wall. He worked his way over, focused his NV tight on the trunk, and circled it. Good, no ant columns. The smooth trunk didn't offer an easy climb, and the two Dobermans on the other side of the wall remained a concern. His movements weren't detectable by humans, but they *were* to dogs.

He used the hollow knob of a broken branch as a foothold and boosted himself up. Hugging the trunk, he held perfectly still. Nothing stirred. The next hold was just out of reach. He needed to jump to his left and grab a branch forking out from the trunk with both hands. If he missed and fell to the ground...Again, he wasn't worried about the bodyguards hearing him, only the dogs. He'd climbed dozens of trees, many of them tougher than this. He trusted his training and decided it was an acceptable risk.

Ramsland made the leap and grabbed the branch, but it shuddered more than he anticipated.

He hung for several seconds, listening for any indication the dogs had heard him. Nothing. He swung his leg over the branch and hauled himself up. The waist pack dug into his stomach, so he slid it to his right hip. Lying perfectly still, he scanned the rear yard and pool area. A lavish place, big money for sure. The house beyond was partially obscured behind a stand of mature trees. Several windows on the west wing glowed brightly, but he detected no movement inside. The rear yard looked deserted. Where were the bodyguards and dogs? No intel was ever perfect, but this development didn't track. Ramsland used the lack of activity to inch his way forward along the branch until he was directly above the wall. The cameras at the corners of the wall were pointed outward and didn't appear to have pivoting capability.

The dogs' absence concerned him. He conducted a thermal scan in case they were obscured by the landscaping. Nothing. Where were they?

His answer arrived with the sound of laughter. He watched two men in shorts, T-shirts, and running shoes appear at the far end of the yard with the dogs on leashes. Both men carried handguns in waist holsters. He sized up their movements as they strolled over to the pool, sat down, and freed their companions. One of them lit a cigarette and waved a hand. He couldn't make out what was said, but they laughed again. These two were sloppy, rank

amateurs.

He looked around and formulated a plan. The interior base of the wall offered an opportunity. A box-trimmed hedge followed its entire length with a concrete sidewalk between the hedge and the wall. The hedge shielded the lower third of the wall from view. Gaps in the hedge allowed access up to the pool via fern-lined, flagstone steps.

Using his Predator knife, he cut a chunk from the branch and watched the Dobermans as he dropped it. It landed with a barely audible sound. Two sets of ears perked up simultaneously, but the dogs didn't approach. The bodyguards seemed clueless to the alerted status of the animals and Ramsland saw why. They were both drinking, exchanging a small liquor flask. He carved a bigger piece and let it drop.

That did the trick.

The dogs padded down the steps toward the wall.

He heard bodyguard one call after the dogs. "Hey, where you guys going?"

The other waved a hand. "Probably to take a dump."

Watching the dogs approach, Ramsland anchored his knife into the branch and leaned left so he could grab the laser-sighted dart pistol from his waist pack. The ticking of the dogs' nails on the concrete grew louder. The first dog sniffed the big sliver of wood and issued a low growl. He toggled the laser, lined up on its back, and fired. The second dog jumped as its companion whined. He opened the breech and loaded another dart. The second dog yelped as the projectile delivered its payload. He exchanged the dart gun for his Beretta.

Bodyguard one looked his direction. "What was that? Did you hear something?"

His partner took another swig from the flask and wiped his mouth. "No, and you didn't either."

"Sancha. Teva."

"Leave 'em be, will ya?"

"Sancha. Teva. Come!"

Bodyguard one cursed and got up. "Come on, we'd better see what they're up to down there."

"You're being paranoid."

"Get off your ass and come with me."

"Okay, okay. You don't have to get nasty."

He watched the guards tread down the steps and turn left at the wall.

The lazy one said, "I can't see anything. We should've brought flashlights."

"Sancha! Teva!"

Keep coming...

Bodyguard one tripped over the lead dog and fell onto the second. "What the hell? What're you guys doing down here?"

In the green NV image, Ramsland saw everything in perfect clarity. He zeroed the laser on top of the lead man's head and squeezed the trigger. The subsonic round did its work. His mark went stiff for a split second before slumping against the wall.

"Genaro!" The second man reached for his sidearm, but not in time.

The next bullet tore through the top of his scalp and exited under his jaw.

Gravity did the rest.

Ramsland's Beretta went into the waist pack before securing his Predator knife into its ankle sheath. He lowered himself to the top of the wall, crouched down, and looked toward the house.

He waited thirty seconds.

No movement. All quiet.

To avoid making scuff marks, he kept his boots away from the wall as he lowered himself to a hanging position. Using his knees to make a whisper-quiet landing, he dropped the last two feet. He knelt behind the hedge and pulled the dead bodyguard off the first dog. He put a gentle hand on its shoulder, removed the dart, and broke its needle off before securing it into his waist pack. He repeated the procedure for the second dog. Both animals would fully recover in a few hours. The guards weren't so fortunate.

He picked a guard's radio, turned the volume to zero, and clipped it to his waist pack under the ghillie suit. Using his NV goggles, he moved in a low crouch along the base of the wall toward the west end, where it turned ninety degrees to the south at the property corner. From there he paralleled the wall through a landscaped area of ferns and small palms. Close to the house, he pivoted his NV goggles up. He no longer needed them. Dozens of small, solar-powered landscaping lights lined the walkway.

Without raising any suspicion, he wanted to lure the third bodyguard into the rear yard. There were two exits out to the pool area, the sliding glass doors in the middle of the house and a side door just ahead. He wasn't sure

how much time he had. If the third bodyguard had seen his friends head down to the wall before disappearing out of camera shot, he'd be coming out to investigate why they hadn't returned.

Doing his best imitation of bodyguard two's accent, he intermittently hit the transmit button while talking. "Can you bring me out a pack of cigarettes?"

The response came a few seconds later. "*Repeat. You were broken and unreadable.*"

He said the same thing again, but added, "Dropped the radio."

The tone was annoyed. "*Be right there.*"

The sliding glass doors or the side door? He waited a few seconds before hustling up to the rear wall of the house. All bets were off if the interior guard hadn't immediately stepped away from the bank of television screens. His sprint toward the house would've been seen.

Ramsland would know soon enough.

If his mark appeared at the sliding glass doors, he'd have a twenty-five-yard shot. Not impossible, but he'd have to shoot center mass. He wouldn't risk a head shot. It made tactical sense to halve the distance. Ramsland crouched below the windows and moved along the wall toward the sliding glass doors.

His answer arrived.

The side door opened and closed behind him.

He pivoted 180 degrees and steadied his Beretta at the corner of the house.

A 350-pound man in flip-flops, Bermuda shorts, and a white tank top stepped around the corner, made eye contact, and froze.

He painted the laser on the man's forehead and pulled the trigger. A red hole replaced the red dot. Like an expertly cut tree, the big man fell. He twitched on the ground for several seconds before lying still.

Three shots. Three kills.

He abandoned the radio he'd taken from the first guard and eased past the downed man.

At the side door he shucked off his ghillie suit and backpack and visualized the interior layout. This door led into a den connected to a library with a large central living room and kitchen beyond. Five bedrooms, each with its own private bathroom, occupied the west wing, served by a wide hall. The security room with the bank of cameras was in the first bedroom on

the right side of the hall. A guest bathroom occupied the same wall. And the door to the basement was hidden in a small coat closet off the central hall leading into the living room.

Time became critical. Ramsland didn't know how long it would take for his target to notice the absence of his men, or if he was even home. All bets were off in that case. Too many questions with no answers. Only one way to find out.

He reached for the handle.

Montez entered the living room and turned toward the hall leading to the bedrooms. "Raul. I need your help. Now."

No answer.

"Raul? Are you in there?"

Silence.

He walked over to the security room. Empty. So was the guest bathroom. Montez looked at the bank of monitors and saw no sign of his men. He knew Raul smoked. Maybe he'd gone out to the pool with the others. The cameras couldn't see the area immediately next to the house where they usually lit up. Looking back and forth, he strode through the living room and peered out the sliding glass doors. Nothing.

Uneasy at finding himself alone, he grabbed a small device that looked like a TV remote from the coffee table. He returned to the sliding glass doors and scanned the rear yard.

Where were they? Probably walking the Dobermans. He'd trained them to vary their routes to avoid establishing a pattern. And they definitely weren't supposed to walk both dogs at the same time. He sighed. Good help was hard to find—at least help he trusted.

The study, dimly lit from a banker's light on the desk, made Ramsland edgy. He didn't like interior work. It was well outside his comfort zone. Sharp lines, smooth surfaces, and square forms were everywhere. He'd considered

cutting the power, but that would immediately alert his target to danger. Normal citizens considered a power outage a pain in the rear, but a trained spook had a completely different reaction.

He eased to the double doors leading into the living room and heard a male voice say something he couldn't hear clearly.

A few seconds later, he heard the same voice again. "Raul. I need your help. Now."

Ramsland flattened himself against the jamb and froze. Was this his target and was he coming in here? The voice held a command tone, but that didn't prove anything. He needed visual confirmation.

Just outside the study's door, an indoor palm occupied a large ceramic pot. The base of the palm was surrounded by peat moss material, but the pot was too low to use for cover. He sidestepped toward the open side of the double doors and, inch by inch, peered around the corner. At the same instant he confirmed this man was his target, the man turned from the sliding glass windows and looked in his direction.

He pulled back. Had he been fast enough?

Montez pivoted away from the window.

As he did, he saw movement in the study.

He drew his pistol and, using his best lighthearted voice, said, "Raul, come out of there. I'm in no mood for a drill tonight."

Raul didn't come out.

A US Marine did, wearing tactical gear and body armor. He recognized the combat utility uniform.

Montez crouched down, closed his eyes, and simultaneously pressed two buttons on the remote.

Six interior palm trees exploded, including one by the study door.

The flash-bang grenades detonated with thunderous concussions and blinding light.

The soldier dropped to one knee and fired his weapon.

The sliding glass door behind Montez shattered.

Knowing his opponent couldn't see or hear his movements, Montez leapt over the leather couch, flattened himself into a prone position, and

pulled the trigger. A forty-caliber armor-piercing bullet plowed into the soldier's shoulder.

The soldier grunted and gained his feet. Still blinded by the flash-bangs, he ran head-on into the closed library door and bounced back. He whipped around and emptied the remainder of his magazine from one side of the room to the other.

All shots missed high.

Montez fired again, nailing the chest cavity. Remarkably, the marine didn't go down. He watched in awe as the soldier ejected the spent magazine and reached for another. This man was damned good, and tough. A shame to kill him. He wondered how this assassin would hold up under a controlled interrogation. Montez sent a third bullet before the soldier could slam the next magazine home.

That one did it.

The marine slumped into a sitting position against the closed door and began breathing in quick, shallow puffs, like an overworked dog. A cough revealed blood.

Montez silently approached and kicked the handgun out of his opponent's hand. It clattered away on the wood floor. Sadly, he wouldn't have time to question this man at any length. He retrieved a syringe from the refrigerator, pushed it into the soldier's neck, and injected the thiopental. The soldier tried to bat it away, but too late. He watched an expression of calmness take the man's face.

"To ease your pain. Are you alone?"

No response.

He backed up and took a knee. "My men, you killed them?"

Again, nothing.

"Do you speak English?"

"Yes."

"You have perhaps...one minute of life remaining. Don't be too hard on yourself, you couldn't have predicted the flash-bangs. Do you have a wife? Children?"

"Pregnant, our first."

"Has your vision returned yet?"

He nodded.

"Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"I didn't—" The soldier coughed up more blood and closed his eyes.

“Didn’t what?”

“The dogs. I didn’t kill them.”

“You have a soft heart for dogs?”

The soldier nodded.

Montez told a white lie. “I will find a good home for them.” He backed up a step. “My men, killing them...you did what you had to. Just as I did with you.”

Anger flared, not at this assassin before him, but at the savage betrayal he represented. Whoever ordered this would pay dearly.

Finding them wouldn’t be easy, but at least he knew where to start.

CHAPTER 2

Holly Simpson, Special Agent in Charge of Sacramento's FBI field office, shook her head. How had this happened? And more importantly, when? Good grief, her office looked like a giant paper recycle bin. Tomorrow she'd have her assistant help organize this clutter. But where to start? Her desk and filing cabinets were covered with stacks of interoffice memos, printed e-mail, NCIC reports, crime scene photographs, and unopened mail. The result? An unsightly mess. Well, all this was about to change. Starting tomorrow.

Something else concerned her as well, something she'd seen this morning, half circles under her eyes and the distinct beginnings of crow's-feet. Were they there last year, when she turned forty? She supposed her dark hair and hazel eyes helped a little. Thank goodness for small favors. In fairness, she attributed some, if not all of her accelerated aging, to the tragic bombing of her field office that had claimed twenty-one lives and ended the careers of seventeen others. She'd nearly been killed herself. A few more foot-pounds of pressure from whatever had struck her head and she would've been dead instead of contemplating her messy office. All things being equal, she preferred the latter.

Holly looked at the clock on her computer. 9:08 PM. *What am I still doing here?* She opened her e-mail for the twentieth time today and started with her personal account. Nothing from Nathan. *How long now? A week? Don't dwell on it. He's just busy with his security company. It doesn't mean anything.*

Halfway through her inbox she zeroed in on a BAU memo from Quantico. She double-clicked the message, read the note, and scrolled down to the attached photographs.

She put a hand to her mouth. "Nathan..."

Nathan McBride stretched his six-five, 240-pound frame and yawned. His entire body felt sore from three hours of rototilling five hundred pounds of mulch into his flower beds. He'd also made the mistake of removing his shirt without applying enough sunscreen. The resulting sunburn enriched the diamond-like pattern of scars on his skin—grisly souvenirs from his captivity and torture in Nicaragua fourteen years ago. Making matters even worse, his captor hadn't spared his face. People who looked at him, if they got past the initial shock, saw a giant *N* carved into his expression. Those scars couldn't be covered up. A plastic surgeon had improved things, but anyone with Coke-bottle vision or better couldn't miss them.

He hit the power button on the TV's remote and relished the silence. Despite the dark nature of the movie, he'd enjoyed it. Stephen King's *The Shining*. Definitely gory in places, but a necessary evil. And the ending had been terrific. The little boy kept his wits about him and outsmarted his possessed father. At least the good guys got away. If only the real world worked like that...

His cell rang.

"Nathan, it's me."

"Hi, Holly."

"Something's come up. Something you need to see."

He half laughed. "Okay..."

"How soon can you get here? It's serious."

He heard it in her voice. "I can be there in five hours. I'll land at Sac Exec. Same place?"

"Yes."

"Holly, what's going on?"

"Please, just get here as fast as you can."

"Are you in some kind of danger?"

"No, it's nothing like that."

"Holly..."

She didn't respond.

"I'm on my way."

In the bathroom he splashed water on his face, brushed his teeth, and made a head call. He retrieved his ready-to-go travel bag from the hall closet and clipped his phone to his belt. Sixty seconds after hanging up, he was arming the security system and walking out the door into his garage. He didn't like the way Holly sounded. Desperate, almost frightened. What

could've rattled her like that? She was a veteran law enforcement officer *and* a special agent in charge for the FBI. He doubted much *could* rattle her. And yet that's exactly how she'd sounded.

Whatever was on her mind, it was important enough to ask him to drop everything and fly four hundred nautical miles at night. He considered the logistics. Night flight wasn't his preferred mode of helicopter travel. Following the I-5 corridor north would make the flight a little safer, but if his aircraft lost power, all bets were off.

He backed his Mustang out of the garage and looked at dashboard clock. 9:12 PM. He'd better call Harv. If his closest friend and business partner ever discovered he'd flown through the Los Angeles basin—alone at night—there'd be hell to pay.

"Hi, Nathan." Harv's baritone resonated so deep, it survived the cellular hatchet job.

"Sorry to call so late."

"Not at all. What's going on?"

"Holly just called. Said I need to get up there right away."

"From your tone, I take it this isn't a social call."

"She sounded scared, Harv."

"Of what?"

"She didn't want to say over the phone. You and Holly aren't, you know, pulling a fast one on me?"

"No."

"I'm on my way over to Monty right now. I'm flying up there."

"Not without me you aren't."

"Harv, it's the middle of the night. You've got a family."

"And your point?"

Nathan wouldn't win this round. In truth, he'd known this would happen, and two sets of eyes when flying were better than one, especially at night. "Can you get a weather brief into Sac Exec via Fresno?"

"No problem."

"I'll land at the polo fields at Via de la Valle. It's pitch-black out there."

"I'll be waiting. Do we need any special equipment?"

"I don't know."

"I'll throw a duffel bag together with some basics. See you in forty minutes."

Nathan made a flawless approach to the polo fields. The Bell 407 helicopter made a boatload of noise, but he wasn't worried about getting cited. No one on the bluff would be able to read his tail numbers, even with field glasses. Besides, what real harm was he doing to anyone? Were ninety seconds of helicopter noise really such a monumental crime to the neighborhood?

He set the ship down and reduced the throttle. Harv materialized out of the blackness with a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. No matter how many times he saw his friend, Nathan marveled at the man's ease of movement, especially when running. Had it not been for his size, topping six feet by a good inch, Harv could've been a gymnast. He and Nathan were the same age and they both kept themselves in top physical shape.

He felt the helicopter shudder slightly as Harv tossed the duffel into the luggage compartment. Fifteen seconds later, he applied power. When the helicopter became light on the skids he executed a maximum performance takeoff. At 200 AGL he flipped on the navs and beacon and flew west toward I-5.

Harv secured his helmet and plugged in the audio jack.

Nathan continued to climb and turned north, paralleling the freeway. He made sure to stay well right of the centerline. The airspace above freeways served as helicopter flight routes.

Harv folded his aeronautical chart into a twelve-inch square and clipped it to his right kneeboard. "We'll have to use the twenty-four-hour self-serve pumps at Fresno."

"I know where they are."

A comfortable silence expanded between them for a time.

"I've been thinking about Holly's call," Harv said at last.

"Me too. I don't like it. I wish she'd given me, I don't know...something."

"Whatever it is, it's got to be important. It could have something to do with your father's Senate committee."

"Yeah, I thought about that, but she would've told me."

"I'm glad you're back on speaking terms with him. He running for another term?"

"What's six more years to a career politician?"

"Are you okay with it?"

“And if I’m not?”

Harv didn’t respond.

Nathan dialed Palomar Field’s frequencies into the NavCom—they’d be entering Palomar’s airspace in a few minutes and were required to make contact.

“How’ve you been sleeping?” Harv asked.

“Not great.”

“Holly?”

“She deserves a commitment.”

“I think it’s safe to say she’s not looking for that.”

“It just feels like I’m preventing her from finding someone else.”

“If she felt that way, she’d tell you.”

Nathan scanned the sky, looking for aircraft beacons.

“Don’t worry,” Harv said. “I’m sure she’s not calling it off.”

“We’ll find out soon enough.”

CHAPTER 3

Holly heard the helicopter before she saw it. 2:25 AM. Nathan had called it pretty close. Its rotor noise careened off the surrounding hangars as the ship passed directly over her sedan and settled onto the tarmac a hundred yards distant. It took them several minutes to complete the engine shutdown. After the main rotor stopped, they climbed out, removed their flight helmets, and stretched. She watched Nathan give the helicopter a pat on the fuselage before starting over. Using her cane, she limped toward them. A pang of guilt raked her for asking him to drop everything and fly up here, but it had to happen this way. Still, as Nathan approached, everything she'd planned to say suddenly felt wrong.

"Hi, Holly."

She started forward, but stopped.

"Well," Harvey said, taking her cane, "don't just stand there, hug each other."

They did, for a long moment. When she let go, Nathan asked, "What's wrong? What's happened?"

"I'll show you."

They followed her to the sedan. Nathan climbed into the passenger's seat while Harvey slid into the back. She turned on the dome light and removed a manila envelope from her briefcase.

She hesitated. "Nathan, I don't...I guess I don't know how to do this any other way. I'm sorry." She pulled an 8x10 photograph from the envelope and held it under the light.

Harvey leaned forward to see. "Son of a bitch! Where the hell did you get that?"

Nathan didn't move. He looked frozen—paralyzed, almost.

She realized he *was* paralyzed. Caught in a horrible memory from an earlier time. Another world. A world of pain and humiliation.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He opened the door and walked into the darkness.

Harvey put a hand on her shoulder. "Let him go."

"Harvey, I didn't want—"

"Where did that photo come from?"

"From the bureau. It was circulated to all our field and resident offices because it has the characteristics of a serial."

"A serial murderer?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Two days ago."

"Where?"

"Utah. Some Australian exchange students were camping in a remote area of Lake Powell a few miles from Bullfrog Bay when they heard a houseboat. One of them had a cheap night-vision scope, but it was good enough to see what looked like a body being dumped in the water. It was the middle of the night, around one thirty. They called nine-one-one and reported it. At daybreak, the federal park service sent divers down and found the body. It had been wrapped in chain-link fencing."

Harv took it all in, then reached out to touch her arm. "You did the right thing calling us, Holly. But it has to stop here. You can't tell anyone Nathan has the same markings on his body. His life depends on it."

"You think the murderer is Nathan's interrogator from Nicaragua?"

"No doubt about it. It's his unique signature. As far as we know, Nathan's the only person on the planet to survive Montez de Oca, and I intend to keep it that way."

CHAPTER 4

With a sickening twist of his stomach, Nathan felt a dark force stir. *No! Not here. Not in front of Holly.* He couldn't let it happen. She must never see that part of him. He left the sedan and walked toward the hangars. He pulled his cell and keyed a memorized number.

An older man's voice answered. "I haven't had my coffee yet. This had better be damned important."

"It's Echo Five."

Nathan knew he'd have General Robert "Thorny" Hawthorne's full attention now. *Echo Five* was his old code designation from his covert missions in Nicaragua. Back then, General Hawthorne had been his commanding officer. Thorny had since risen to the position of commandant of the Marine Corps. Nathan's successful missions in Nicaragua had helped boost Thorny's career by a star. There were unspoken debts in play—in both directions—neither of which would be mentioned.

"Well, Echo Five, something tells me I'm not going to like this call."

"An old friend of ours from Central America has surfaced. A body was discovered with signature markings."

Thorny didn't respond.

"You still there?" Nathan asked.

"Yes."

"Containment may be impossible."

"We need to meet."

"Agreed."

"Today," Thorny said. "I'll move my appointment up with Lieutenant General Pearson, MarForPac's CO. He won't like the change of plans, but he's a good man. He'll deal with it. I'll come to you. You know where."

"Yes."

"I'll call you from the air with an exact ETA. Count on around twelve-hundred."

Nathan ran the calculation in his head. They'd have to leave Sac Exec

by no later than 0700 hours. They weren't getting much sleep tonight, if any. "We'll be there, Echo Four and me."

"You're both invisible."

"Understood."

"Twelve hundred."

Nathan looked toward Holly's sedan. No doubt she and Harv would be talking about him, and understandably she'd be feeling some apprehension—probably more than *some*. His own apprehension reached much deeper. He didn't know how this development would affect him, and he desperately wanted to avoid slipping back into the fractured state that had nearly driven him to suicide. He'd moved past that years ago. Had it not been for Harv's unyielding friendship, he *would* have ended his life. Harv had given him purpose. Started their security company. Invested their money. Protected him. He owed Harv more than he could ever repay in ten lifetimes.

He closed his eyes. It was one thing to be tortured in private, but publicly? In front of women and children? For days on end? Juan Montez de Oca had been especially twisted in his methods. He'd gathered dozens of local villagers to witness the interrogations. One day, while Montez watched with casual indifference, one of the mercenaries who fancied himself an expert with a bullwhip had demonstrated his skills. During the unthinkable pain and blood loss, Nathan had discovered a dark side of himself, a savage part of his psyche that he'd come to call the *other*, for lack of a better term. This hate-filled personality had made it possible for him to cope with the pain and humiliation of being brutalized in front of an entire village, including women and children who'd been openly sobbing. Nearing death, Nathan had lost count at twenty-eight lashes.

Now, fourteen years later, he felt an uncontrollable impulse to scream into the night until his throat bled.

No. I won't do it. It's not who I am anymore.

Nathan relaxed his hands and slowed his breathing.

He couldn't allow Montez to ruin his life, his friendship with Harv, and everything he'd developed with Holly. He'd imagined going after Montez many times, but never tried. As far as they knew, Montez had dropped off the face of the earth more than a decade ago, apparently exiled from his own country, never to be heard from again.

But if Holly's photo was authentic, Montez had returned. And not only returned, he'd become active again, torturing and killing another victim—and

probably more than one.

Nathan couldn't turn his back on this, but going after Montez involved considerable risk. He knew Harv would demand to be part of any operation against Montez. Could he risk that? Harv had a wife and two sons.

One thing was certain, Montez couldn't be allowed to operate like this again. On that, he and Harv would strongly agree. So be it. But first things first. Montez had to be found.

Holly looked toward the hangars. "How long will he be out there?"

"If he were by himself," Harv said, "it could be hours. But he won't keep us waiting that long. He's going through all kinds of scenarios in his head right now. If-then scenarios. If this happens, I'll do this. I'd also be willing to bet he's making a phone call."

"To whom?"

"General Hawthorne."

"The Marine Corps commandant?"

"Yes, our old CO. He helped us with the Bridgestone case, looked into the DOD records for us."

Holly remembered. "What can you tell me about Nicaragua? The man who did this?"

Harv sighed. "We called him Monty Goose, but his full name is Colonel Juan Montez de Oca. *Oca* means 'goose' in Spanish. Nathan made up the nickname to antagonize him. Montez hated it."

"Why would Nathan want to anger his interrogator?"

"Despite the physical pain, interrogation is a mind game more than anything else. A strong-willed victim can turn the situation around on his tormentor, but it usually comes at a very high price."

"Are you saying Nathan purposely made it harder on himself?"

Harvey joined her in the front seat. "What I'm saying is, he could have made it easier, but didn't."

"Montez didn't break him?"

"Not entirely. Nathan kept changing his story. Montez never learned the real truth, or even extracted Nathan's real name. Even if he had, he couldn't have verified anything. We were off the books. No paper at all. So in a sense,

Nathan broke Montez, not the reverse. At the end, he was torturing Nathan purely out of frustration and anger.”

“I can’t imagine what he went through.”

“Few people can. Nathan is the ultimate unsung hero who will never, *ever*, be publicly acknowledged for his sacrifice to his country. He is the finest, most honorable man I’ve ever known. I’d give my life for him, and he’d do the same for me. And you.”

Holly thought back to the first time he’d spent the night at her house. Nathan had insisted on sleeping on the floor. That was odd enough. Then came his horrible dream. The way he’d jumped off the floor when she’d yelled his name. The expression of rage in his eyes and the paralyzing sense of danger she’d felt. Almost as though he’d been someone else for a few seconds.

Something else...

CHAPTER 5

Nathan walked back to Holly's sedan. The longer he stayed out here, the more it would worry her. To avoid startling them, he approached from the front of the vehicle, then came around to the passenger's side and climbed into the backseat.

"I trust my absence hasn't spooked either of you irreparably?"

Holly turned to face him.

"I needed to clear my head. Sorry."

"You've got nothing to apologize for. What you went through..."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not *okay*."

He forced a smile. "Can't say I like it much. We're pressed for time, but let's grab a bite. Anyone hungry?"

"There's an all-night coffee shop about a mile from here," Holly said.

Harv climbed out. "I'm gonna lock her up and grab our bags. Be right back."

Nathan stayed in the backseat and an uneasy silence ensued. He knew she didn't want to break it, so he spoke first. "You look great, Holly."

"I don't feel great. I've gained ten pounds since the bombing. It's this damned cane. I can't exercise like I used to."

"You look fine."

"I've really missed you."

"Me too."

"Will you stay with me tonight? Harvey too. I mean—"

"I know what you mean. No problem."

"You going to sleep on the floor?"

"I like sleeping on the floor."

"You're the most unusual man I've ever met."

"You don't get out much."

"Is Harvey a light sleeper?"

"I'm afraid so. The man can sleep with his eyes open. It's the

damnedest thing you ever saw.”

“I’d like to sleep next to you tonight, even if it’s on the floor.”

“You can’t.”

“I’m willing to risk it.”

He took her hand. “But I’m not.”

“Think I’ll ever be able to?”

“Probably not. I’ll never lead a normal life, Holly. Montez stole that from me. All I can do is be the best person I can to you.”

“You’re one of the kindest men I’ve ever known.”

He nodded toward the helicopter.

“Is he coming?”

“Harv knows the score. Don’t worry about him, and don’t let him insist on staying in a hotel tonight.”

“I won’t.”

Harv placed the bags on the seat next to him and slid into the front. “We’re good to go. Listen, you two should be alone tonight. I don’t mind roughing it at the Hyatt again.”

Holly smiled at him in the rearview mirror. “I’ve got a spare bedroom. It’s no trouble at all.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

The all-night diner featured an aeronautical theme. Model airplanes of all shapes and eras hung from the ceiling. Wooden propellers and memorabilia adorned the walls. As always, Nathan was amazed at Harv’s ability to eat an inordinate amount of food.

Holly filled Nathan in on what she’d already told Harvey.

“Do you have an ID on the body?”

“Yes, his name is Arthur Kramer. His fingerprints were identified quickly. He was an American attaché assigned to the US embassy in Hungary.”

“Hungary?” Harv asked. “What kind of attaché?”

“A commercial attaché—basically, a person whose job it is to promote American businesses in foreign countries. Apparently, he was part of a joint

task force involving the US and the Hungarian government to pursue clean coal technology. He had ties with a consulting firm called Energy Solutions, Incorporated. The group's focus was on a huge reserve of lignite discovered in an open pit mine near the Mantra power plant."

"How big a reserve are we talking about?" Nathan asked.

"Half a billion short tons."

"What does that number mean?"

"I'm not sure, but the case notes say that because of this mine, Hungary could become a major exporter of lignite to other Eastern Bloc countries."

Harv asked, "What kind of money's involved with something like this?"

"Hundreds of millions of euros, maybe billions," Holly said. "I'm obviously no expert, so I did a little research before coming to meet you. Most experts believe clean coal technology won't be commercially viable on a large scale until the year 2025. In a nutshell, it involves two processes. The first is chemically washing the coal to remove undesirable minerals and impurities, and the second is treating the emissions. Steam would be used to remove sulfur dioxide, but that still leaves the problem of capturing and storing enormous amounts of carbon dioxide gas in solid form. Essentially, dry ice. Many environmental experts believe it just trades one evil for another. They're worried all the carbon dioxide will be released into the atmosphere someday."

"So Montez tortures and kills a clean coal consultant?" Harv asked. "That sure doesn't sound like his usual MO."

"More shocking," Nathan added, "is the fact that he's working inside the United States. Think about it. The man's a murder and torture machine. We could be looking at dozens more victims in the months ahead. Hundreds, maybe. It's obvious he loves his work too much to stop. And how are we supposed to find him? He's not the type to leave traces of his whereabouts behind. Or witnesses, for that matter."

"Is there anything you can remember from your time with him," Holly asked, "that might give us a starting point?"

"I've been racking my brain since you showed me the photograph. I can't think of anything. He didn't talk about himself much, and truth be told, I was a little distracted at the time."

"A bit," Harv added.

"Have you considered hypnosis?" she asked.

"Yes."

“Are you sure you want to drag that pond?” Harv asked.

“Let’s keep it as a fallback plan. I called Thorny. He cleared his calendar to come out here.”

“That doesn’t give us much shut-eye before our flight back.”

“He also wants us invisible from now on.”

“Not an easy task.” Harv sighed and pushed back in his chair. “I’ve got a meeting with a Ford engineer tomorrow on our armored SUV line.”

“We don’t need to totally disappear, he just wants us under the radar for a spell.”

“I guess Lewey can take the meeting,” Harv said. “He’s up to speed.”

“Good, because we’re flying out to Utah.”

“So much for staying under the radar,” Harv said.

“You don’t have to go out there in person. I’m sure I can get you photos.”

“Holly, I appreciate the offer, but doesn’t it seem strange the body was dumped in Lake Powell? Wouldn’t it have been a whole lot easier just to bury it somewhere? And why Utah? I know Montez. He’s lazy. His henchmen do all the heavy lifting. I’d be willing to bet our security company that Arthur Kramer was interrogated at or near the lake.”

“Let’s not place that bet,” Harv said.

Nathan looked at Holly. “You could really help us by figuring out what Kramer’s work involved.”

“I’ve already got Henning looking into Kramer’s background in depth. I told him to keep everything he does confidential.”

“How’s Henning doing, by the way?” asked Nathan.

“He’s doing great. He thinks you guys are superheroes in disguise.”

Nathan smiled at that. It was a far cry from his first encounter with Special Agent Bruce Henning during the Bridgestone case.

“Seriously, though,” he said, “there’s got to be a reason Montez chose to dump a weighted body in a tourist-ridden lake. There’s a million safer places to dispose of a body out there. Also, I want to know if Kramer owns property in the area or was just on vacation. Was he staying in a motel or cabin? Or maybe a rented condo?”

“Good questions,” Holly said. “Our local resident office will be able to help. Kramer was dumped on federal property, so technically it’s a joint federal case.”

“Good. But whatever we do, it has to be low-key. Otherwise, Montez

could find out the feds are after him, and if he gets spooked, we'll never find him."

"I agree about being low-key," Holly said, "but it may not be possible if the State Department gets involved. And it's reasonable to assume it already is. Attachés assigned to US embassies fall under the State Department's jurisdiction. Whatever time we have, I'm afraid we're looking at a very brief window."

"Right," said Nathan. "So all the more urgent we get to Utah as soon as possible."

"Like today," said Harv, looking at his watch. "Right after we meet with Thorny."

CHAPTER 6

Nichole Dalton backed her Escalade out of her garage and smiled. Another blue-sky day in San Diego. The only flaw in the weather? A slight haze from a wildfire in San Bernardino County. One of many in a newer tract of single-family homes, hers was secured in the desirable end of a cul-de-sac. She lived in an area of Del Mar where her daughters' bicycles could be left in the front yard overnight, where you didn't have to lock your front door for a short trip to the market. Or worry about finding graffiti on your fence in the morning. On the other hand, she lived with a huge mortgage associated with such amenities. Fortunately, her ex-husband made a generous, five-digit alimony payment every month and Nichole's own Eastern Bloc language skills were in high demand, especially by her employer, the National Security Agency. With both incomes, she was doing well. The vast majority of Nichole's work involved translating telephone conversations through encrypted data links in her soundproof home office. The only drawback was the constant intrusion of the NSA's technical surveillance countermeasure specialists, one of whom kept hitting on her. She didn't mind as long as it didn't get too heavy. She could handle friendly flirting—she'd been dealing with it since age twelve.

On a whim, she decided to hit the huge women's shoe sale at Nordstrom today. To promote the event, the store would open two hours early. The place was going to be a zoo, but shoes remained one of her weaknesses and she'd just have to brave the hordes. Nobody beat Nicky Dalton when it came to shoe shopping.

At thirty-nine, she possessed the energy of a high school cheerleader and the looks to match. After her divorce, she never had a lack of offers, but often declined when asked out. Marriage remained out of the question, at least for the time being. Before walking down the aisle again, she needed to know her man was firmly committed to her *and* her daughters first, his job second. Her first husband, a former air force officer, had been a walking job. *Been there. Done that. No thanks.*

The man she'd been dating lately worked as an industrial refrigeration

contractor and spent the majority of his time in Eastern Europe. At first, she didn't mind so much. Their reunions often spawned some of the most intense sexual encounters she'd ever experienced. Five years younger, the man was an animal. Voracious. But within the bigger picture, sex played a minor role in their relationship. A union based on sex alone felt empty, like a vacant house. Sex was a fleeting commodity. Here today. Gone tomorrow. Love remained eternal, like a diamond buried in the sand, or more appropriately, adorning her finger. But diamond or not, when her man returned this evening, she intended to greet him in a new pair of Manolo Blahniks. *Only* the shoes. Not by coincidence, both her daughters were headed for sleepovers after school.

She pulled into the Fashion Valley Mall's parking garage on Friars Road and realized she couldn't remember her drive down here. Weird. She had tons on her mind, but having no memory of the thirty-minute trip frightened her a little. Had she run any red lights? She hoped not. At least no one had honked at her; she would've remembered that. This wasn't New York. Honking your horn around here was practically an act of war.

Nichole looked at the dashboard clock: 7:47 AM. Perfect. She'd have time for Starbucks before Nordstrom opened. Got to have it.

USMC Gunnery Sergeant Christopher "Big Kid" Kiddrich slid out of his Jeep Cherokee and stretched. Just under six feet tall, he looked like an aging surfer because he *was* an aging surfer. Cropped blond hair. Blue eyes. Broad shoulders. Not quite buff, but definitely not flabby. He worked at Miramar as an MP. He liked his job and had his sights on the San Diego PD after retiring. Who said forty was too old to become a street cop?

He also looked forward to the Nordstrom shoe sale, but for a completely different reason. Simply put, he loved looking at women—not in a perverted or stalking way—he just liked them. All of them. Short or tall, big or thin, he just liked watching them. The way they walked. The way they dressed. The way they cocked their heads when considering a purchase. Their interaction with each other. Everything. Nothing boiled his blood more than the idea of a woman being abused. Women were to be cherished, not mistreated.

He'd just locked his Cherokee and started toward the pedestrian bridge

linking the parking structure to Nordstrom when a stunning beauty drove by. More than stunning. Gorgeous. Nice wheels too. He slowed his pace as she pulled into a parking stall. Incredible. She looked like Angelina Jolie. It couldn't be her, but the similarities were striking. Mesmerized, he watched her slide out and use her remote to lock her SUV. It chirped once in confirmation.

He turned his head toward the roar of an engine and frowned—the dumb-ass. This was a friggin' parking garage.

A white van sped by, its passenger-side mirror missing his arm by inches. What a jerk.

The van screeched to a stop behind the woman's Escalade. Two Hispanic men in dark clothes jumped out of the rear doors and rushed toward her. Before she had time to react, the bigger of the two grabbed her.

Without conscious thought, Big Kid sprinted toward them.

The smaller man pulled a handgun from under his Windbreaker.

Big Kid dived for cover between two parked cars just as the gun boomed.

The bullet skipped off the concrete and plowed into his left shoulder. Shit!

Throughout the structure, car alarms blared from the handgun's concussion. The woman's screaming and electronic howls echoed eerie desperation.

Big Kid ignored the fire in his shoulder and lifted his head just enough to peer through the parked car's windows. The bigger man clamped his hand over her mouth and dragged her toward the rear of the van.

The gunman hadn't advanced.

He watched in admiration as she drove the back of her head into her assailant's nose and stomped down on his foot.

She jerked free and bolted toward Big Kid.

The gunman cursed in Spanish and took off in pursuit.

Big Kid needed to time his move precisely. With a wrecked shoulder, he couldn't do much, but at least he could help her escape. The problem was staying alive, and he didn't like his odds. If he only had his Beretta. He could end this with two quick head shots. Big Kid had many faults, but cowardice wasn't one of them. He'd never be able to live with himself if he didn't help this woman, even if it cost him his life.

Steady. Steady.

Now!

He swept his foot and tripped the gunman.

Arms whirling, the gunman went down. He managed to land on his elbows, but his momentum drove his face into the concrete.

Big Kid had the satisfaction of seeing the gunman's nose explode. The pistol clattered away. He gained his feet and lunged for the weapon. He was inches from reaching it when multiple gunshots deafened him. Two hard blows struck his rib cage. Despite being shot twice more, he grabbed the gun and pivoted toward the van.

A fourth bullet nailed him squarely in the stomach.

Determined to stay in the fight, he brought the handgun up and took aim at the shooter. He squeezed off a shot, but missed. The report hammered his eardrums.

Like something out of hell, a harbinger of death materialized through the smoke and dust. His eyes grew as a red laser beam swept onto the middle of his torso...

And stopped.

His legs quit as the fifth bullet ripped through his large intestine and shattered his spinal column. Paralyzed, he fell forward like an expertly cut tree. His jaw struck the concrete with a sickening crack. Barely conscious, he watched in fury as the gunman ran past him and grabbed the woman.

The van's tires squealed as the driver backed up.

Right on top of him.

His body contorted into an impossible position when his chest caught on the differential. Crushed beneath the van, he saw the woman's legs and feet leave the ground as her assailant threw her into the van. He sensed their combined weight added to the vehicle, heard the doors close, and steeled himself for the agony of being dragged.

The van accelerated and Big Kid's body bent and broke again. He tried to scream, but couldn't draw any air into his lungs. Fifty yards farther the van hit a speed bump and freed him from the differential. Broken and dying, he tried to call for help. Nothing came out.

The last thing decorated Enduring Freedom veteran Kiddrich thought as his life ended was, *I'm sorry I couldn't save you.*

CHAPTER 7

Nathan watched General Hawthorne's C-20G, more commonly known as a Gulfstream IV, taxi up to the transient parking area in front of the jet center. He knew Harv was thinking the same thing: *What a beautiful ship*. Thorny had arrived a little early. Nathan's watch indicated 1147 hours. A minute or two passed before the passenger stairs unfolded from the fuselage. A sharp-looking aide stepped out, surveyed his surroundings, and nodded toward the interior. Thorny ducked slightly as he exited the aircraft. The aide offered him a crisp salute, which was promptly returned.

It felt good to see his former commander again, even under the circumstances. Thorny's no-nonsense expression hadn't changed over the years. He still looked as though the weight of the world remained planted on his shoulders. Nathan had never known the man to back away from a fight. Thorny, nearly eight inches shorter, seemed taller than his actual height. At sixty-two, he didn't look a day over fifty, except for his hair color, but at least he still had it. His aide looked equally crisp and professional, just thirty years his junior. They were both dressed in summer attire—desert marine pattern—Thorny's preferred appearance. Were it not for the four black stars, he could easily pass for a sergeant major, not the Marine Corps' top dog. Thorny entered through the automatic sliding glass doors, and out of habit they both saluted.

Their former commander extended his hand. "We're indoors and you're civilians now. Get your damned hands down."

Nathan suppressed a smile. "Aye, aye, sir."

"Damn, it's good to see you two."

"The same, sir."

"Harvey, you're looking fit as ever."

"Thank you, General."

"This is my aide, Major Bob Halliday. He's not a Robert, like me. It actually says *Bob* on his birth certificate."

"Major," Nathan said, pumping his hand. Harvey did the same.

“Please, call me Bob.”

“How was your flight?” Nathan asked.

“Comfortable. It’s a nice ride.” Thorny lowered his voice. “Maybe too comfortable.”

Harv said, “There’s nothing like a cross-country flight in a herky bird’s jump seat.”

“Amen to that. Is your vehicle clean?”

“Yes, we did a sweep of Harv’s Mercedes yesterday. Mine’s in the bat cave as we speak.”

“The bat cave?”

“It’s the nickname for our countermeasures garage.”

Showing no reaction, Thorny said, “Let’s take a drive.”

Three minutes later, Harv turned right onto Pacific Coast Highway and accelerated into traffic. Seconds from touchdown, a commercial jet roared over their sedan.

“Harv, how are the wife and kids? Candace, Lucas, and...shit.”

“It’s Dillon.” Harvey made a left onto Laurel Street. “But ‘shit’ isn’t too far off the mark at times. They’re doing great, thank you for asking. Lucas graduates from high school this year. I think he’s going to enlist. He wants to be a sniper. Army, though.”

“Army? You’re screwing with me.”

“Afraid not, General. He likes the army.”

“Well, if he must...I’ll personally follow his career.”

“He’s a good student, OCS material, but he wants to be a sniper. I haven’t discouraged him from pursuing it.”

“You have anything to do with that, Nate?”

“Lucas is a good kid. I had a heart-to-heart talk with him about what it’s really like. For a while, he reconsidered, but I’m pretty sure he’s going to do it.”

“If he’s anything like his old man, he’ll do fine.”

“Thank you, sir,” Harv said.

Nathan looked out the window. Time to change the subject. “I’m going to be frank, General. If Montez *is* up to his old tricks *and* operating on US soil, then he needs to be neutralized.”

“Agreed. I can’t think of a better team. Nobody knows Montez better. On the flight out here I reread your debrief.”

Harvey crossed Sixth Avenue, heading for the Cabrillo Bridge.

“I’ll be honest, sir, this is a major skeleton for me. Harv too. I—” Nathan broke off in midsentence. This wasn’t a discussion he wanted to pursue in Major Halliday’s company.

“Don’t worry about Bob,” Thorny said. “He’s had a complete briefing. I didn’t want him involved in the dynamics of this operation unless he knew everything. Bob’s very resourceful.”

“Being the personal aide to the commandant of the Marine Corps has its advantages?” Harv asked.

“Indeed it does,” Halliday replied.

Thorny rolled his window down a little. “So what’s your plan?”

“Harv and I talked about this. Whatever we do, it has to be covert. It can’t be leaked that we’re after him. We’ll only get one shot. If we miss, he’ll disappear forever. We’ll start at Lake Powell, where Kramer’s body was dumped. We’re getting some help from the FBI, but there’s a number of things we want to look into. Where Kramer was staying, and why. Where Montez stayed, if anywhere, and the location he used to torture Kramer. We plan to look into every rented, leased, or stolen boat in the area just prior to Kramer’s death. I doubt Montez is doing much himself, it’s not his style. He’ll have mercenaries doing the heavy lifting. They’ll probably be Hispanic. Maybe they were seen. Harv and I are flying out there this afternoon. In the meantime, there’s something you could do for us.”

“Name it.”

“See what you can dig up on Kramer and Montez with any intelligence agencies you have trusted contacts in. Discreetly, if possible.”

“In my circles, there’s no such thing as discreet. Harv, you’ve been awfully quiet.”

“It’s no secret I’d like to see Montez skinned. But we can’t let that compromise our mission, assuming we’ve officially agreed to find him. Have we?”

“Yes,” Nathan said.

“Then you should know,” Thorny said, “this is purely a Marine Intelligence operation, and off the books at that.”

“Sounds familiar,” Harv said under his breath.

“You know the score. It’s your call how it goes down.”

“As in dead or alive?” Nathan asked.

“If the opportunity presents itself, we’d prefer to get Montez alive for obvious reasons. He’s a walking gold mine of military intelligence. We’ve

got MIAs all over the globe, some in Central America. We might be able to close some files and give some families closure.”

Harv said, “I guess it wouldn’t break my heart to see Montez get a dose of his own medicine.”

“Look, I’m only asking you to bring him in if the opportunity presents itself. But under no circumstances are you to risk your lives. Clear?”

Nathan’s cell interrupted them. He looked at the screen. *Holly*.

“General, I’m sorry, but I should take this. It’s SAC Simpson.”

“Go ahead.”

“Hi, Holly, I have you on speaker. Harv, General Robert Hawthorne, and his aide, Major Halliday, are with me.”

“Hello, gentlemen.”

“Nice to meet you, SAC Simpson.”

“A few hours ago, a woman was kidnapped at gunpoint from the Fashion Valley Mall in San Diego. I think it could be connected to Kramer’s murder.”

“Why is that?” Thorny asked.

“I was doing a search in the NCIC database with the keywords *Eastern Europe, Eastern Bloc, Hungary, and attaché*. I got a positive hit on the abducted woman. Her name is Nichole Dalton. Six years ago, we did a complete background check on her. Ms. Dalton currently works for the NSA as an Eastern Bloc language specialist. Care to guess what one of her languages is?”

“Hungarian,” Thorny said.

Nathan glanced at Harv.

“And she was abducted today? There’s no way that’s a coincidence,” Thorny said. “No way.”

Nathan squinted. A slideshow of a woman being tortured by Montez invaded his thoughts.

“There’s more,” Holly said. “Her two daughters are also missing, presumed kidnapped. The report said they’re eight and nine years old. San Diego PD activated the AMBER Alert system.”

“That’s a bad deal,” Harv said.

It was no secret Nathan held a soft place in his heart for kids. He forced the images aside and tried to stay focused. “We need to find out all we can about any potential Kramer-Dalton connection as soon as possible. Holly, can you send us more info on this? Pictures of Ms. Dalton and her daughters, the

police report, and anything else you've got?"

"Sure. Can we set up an encrypted fax line at your office?"

Harv jumped in. "No problem, I'll take care of it within the hour."

"General Hawthorne," Holly said. "I hate to tell you this, but there was another victim in this morning's kidnapping. An off-duty Miramar MP was shot to death while trying to stop Dalton's attackers."

"One of my marines was murdered? I want the details," Thorny said.

"I'll forward a copy of the police report to you, General."

"Well, if I wasn't before," Thorny said with venom in his voice, "I am thoroughly pissed off now."

"Don't worry, General," Harv said. "We'll get them."

"Think about what this means," Nathan said. "If Montez *is* behind the kidnapping, then he's here, in San Diego."

"That's not necessarily true," said Harv. "Given the time that's elapsed, he could be anywhere."

Nathan thought for a moment. "I still say we go out to Utah. But let's keep a close eye on developments in the Nichole Dalton case. General, can you add her to the list? See what your sources can dig up?"

"I report to the secretary of the navy. He's friends with the NSA's director."

"Will the secretary of the navy keep your inquiry confidential?" Nathan asked.

"He will if I ask him to."

"What about the NSA's director?"

"I can't guarantee that. All I can do is ask a friend to ask a friend. You know the drill."

"It's your call, General."

Thorny grunted, obviously still upset about his murdered marine.

"Is it possible the Hungarian government might be involved in both cases?" Harvey asked.

"It's a possibility," Nathan conceded. "Pretty bold move if they are. Hiring Montez to torture and murder a US citizen on US soil?"

"Gentlemen, I need to step into a meeting," Holly said. "I'll be back in touch shortly. Nice meeting you, General, Major."

"SAC Simpson," Thorny said, "the pleasure's been mine. Great work on the NCIC search. Sharp thinking."

"Thank you, General," she said. "Nathan, I'll call you with anything

new. Have a safe flight.”

Nathan ended the call.

“Make sure you copy my office on that police report when Simpson sends it to you. If Montez or his goons killed my marine, I want that Nicaraguan’s skin hanging on my wall.”

Nathan looked away. So much for capturing Montez alive to track down MIAs.

Harv executed an illegal U-turn and reentered traffic.

When Thorny spoke, he sounded calmer. “Nate, I know you’re worried about leaks, but at the pay grades we’re talking about, I highly doubt Montez has any way to find out what we’re doing. I think we’ll be okay.”

He wasn’t sure he was in agreement, but he didn’t see a better way to proceed.

“I’ll call the secretary of the navy once I’m airborne and ask him to call the NSA’s director,” Thorny said. “Since there won’t be any real way to keep this under wraps at that point, I’ll also ask him to call CIA Director Rebecca Cantrell. And since both of them report to the director of National Intelligence, it’s a good bet the DNI will become involved. And you know who the DNI reports to.”

Nathan did.

CHAPTER 8

Nichole Dalton opened her eyes and tried to focus.

She couldn't see anything.

Total blackness.

What happened? The last thing she remembered was being attacked. A man had been shot trying to help her. She got loose and ran away, but they caught her and dragged her into a van. She remembered a horrible chemical smell, like rubbing alcohol. No, not alcohol. *Ether*. They'd used ether on her. She couldn't remember anything after that.

She tried to sit up, but couldn't move her arms or legs. A cold chill raked her body when she realized she was completely naked and strapped to some kind of metal table. Bound and naked! She jerked her arms in a frantic test of her bonds, but they wouldn't budge. Same with her feet. She tested the straps again, much harder, and felt her skin burn from the friction. Craning her head, she looked left and right, but found only blackness. *Her daughters!* Where were her daughters? Did they kidnap them too?

Full-blown panic seized her.

She turned her head toward the sound of a door opening. A few seconds later, it closed with a bang. The reverberating echo meant this had to be a fairly large room. The sudden squeal of wheels terrified her. It was a hideous sound, like fingernails on a chalkboard, only worse.

"Who's there?" Her voice cracked and she hated how weak it sounded.

The squealing got louder.

"Who's there?"

Nothing, just the increasing screech of wheels. A chill raked her again, not from the cold, but from that hideous sound.

She began jerking her body in a frantic attempt to break free. Tears flew as she whipped her head back and forth in frustration and fear.

"Someone help me!" she screamed.

The squealing got louder by the second.

"Please, someone help me!"

The squealing ended. Then slow footsteps. Unconsciously, she held her breath.

Directly above, a floodlight snapped on. The stab of pain shot through her skull. She squinted against the blinding intrusion, looked down the length of her body, and froze. Mounted on a tripod, a video camera loomed, its red eye unblinking.

A face appeared above her, eclipsing the bulb. A man's face. Hispanic. Black, braided ponytail. Smiling. Empty eyes swept over her breasts. The smile widened. A hand caressed her cheek. She jerked away from the touch. The smile faded, replaced by a frown.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?"

The hand grabbed a handful of her hair and jerked her head off the table. The smile vanished.

"I am asking the questions. Understood?"

"Please..."

"Understood?"

"I don't know anything."

He slammed her head onto the metal surface and hauled it back up.

"Understood?"

"Why are you doing this? I don't know *anything!*" It was true, she didn't. The NSA never told her anything. All she did was translate phone calls. *Boring* phone calls.

Another slam. Her vision grayed, then winked out for a few seconds.

"Understood?"

"Yes."

"Very good." The hand gently lowered her head back to the table, but this time a small pillow cushioned it.

"Better? We're going to work on a positive and negative reward system. When you cooperate, you'll be rewarded. When you don't, you'll be punished. Are you thirsty?"

A straw touched her lips and she took it into her mouth. She pulled cool water, swallowing as much as she could before it was withdrawn.

"Better?"

"My daughters."

"You are concerned for them, as you should be. They are unharmed. For now."

"Please don't hurt them. Please, I'll do anything you ask. *Anything.*"

He leaned in close and whispered, "Yes, I know you will." Then he stood erect. "My name is Colonel Montez de Oca, and over the next few days we're going to become close friends."

She felt a clank-like jolt from under the table. The next thing she felt was the entire table being tilted upright. It stopped at a forty-five-degree angle and another clank locked it in place. The video camera's lens loomed large and black. Then the hideous squealing of wheels started again. A table came into view, draped by a white sheet marred with brown stains. Dried blood? She closed her eyes and willed herself to wake up.

This can't be happening.

Half of the table held all kinds of surgical instruments in neat rows, the other half hosted household tools. Pliers. Tin snips. Vise grips. Chisels. Wood files. An ice pick. Her eyes locked onto the box of condoms. Tears began flowing again and she hated herself for being weak. How could this be happening? Why was she here? She didn't know anything. She tried to recall anything she'd heard that could be considered secret.

He stepped into the light and reached toward her.

She flinched and tried to withdraw.

Smiling, he slipped his hand under the table and unlatched something. She watched in horror as a stirrup locked into place. He grabbed her ankle in a firm, painful grip and unbound her leg with his free hand. He forced her foot into the stirrup and rebound her ankle to the heel of the stirrup with a thick leather strap. He repeated the process on her left leg. Next, he swiveled her bent legs out from the table and locked the stirrups in place. She ended up in a horrifying position, completely open and vulnerable.

Oh no. Please no, not this.

"Shall we begin?" He made a mock frown. "I'm afraid I forgot to bring flowers."

She couldn't stop crying. She was about to be tortured for information she didn't have. It was so unfair. So brutally unfair. A sickening wave of nausea overpowered her. She turned her head just in time. Some of the vomit remained on her chest.

"I'm terribly sorry about that. Here, let me clean you up." He wiped her mouth and breasts with a damp cloth. "You can relax a little, Ms. Dalton. I have no plans to rape you. I find rape a vulgar and offensive act. The position you're in, it's...how do I word this? Designed to create maximum insecurity. It's especially effective on men, probably because they've never been in this

position. Sadly, I wish I could say this won't be painful, but that would be a lie and I think we should be honest with each other."

"Please. I don't know *anything!*"

"My dearest Nichole, how charmingly arrogant. What makes you think this has anything to do with *you?*"

CHAPTER 9

Nathan and Harvey lifted off from Montgomery Field just after 1300 hours and flew due east to avoid entering MCAS Miramar's airspace. With a little luck, they'd be landing at Bullfrog Basin Airfield by 1900.

"We're at a distinct disadvantage," Harv said. "We can't initiate a full-blown pursuit using dozens of federal agents without spooking him into deep hiding, and we probably won't find him without using dozens of agents. We're damned if we do and damned if we don't."

"The key to finding him is in here." Nathan lifted his hand off the collective for a split second and pointed at his flight helmet. "We just have to dig it out."

"That could be dangerous."

"Tell me about it."

"You aren't seriously considering Holly's hypnosis idea, are you?"

"Actually, I am. If the question's whether it's worth the risk, then I'd have to say yes. I really hate the idea of the woman and her little girls in Montez's possession."

"Yeah, me too. Who else is at risk? Montez will keep torturing and killing for decades if we don't stop him. Apparently he loves his work too much to quit."

"Whatever he's up to, the stakes are high. He wouldn't involve himself in a trivial operation. I'll bet he's being paid a bundle."

A telephone tone interrupted them. Harv patched it through the NavCom. He pressed the transmit trigger on his cyclic control. "Hello."

"Harvey? It's Holly."

"Hi, Holly. Nathan and I are on our way out to Lake Powell."

"Just wanted to let you know that through my counterpart in Salt Lake, I've arranged for your transportation and lodging at Bullfrog Bay."

"You didn't have to do that," Nathan said.

"It's no trouble at all. A special agent from our Monticello resident office will meet you at the airstrip. Can you write his cell number down?"

Harv noted the phone number on the aeronautical chart.

"Give him a call about an hour and fifteen minutes before you land. That will give him plenty of time to get there. I also have some basic info from the Kane County Sheriff's Department. They handled the initial nine-one-one call and then called the federal park service to arrange the divers who recovered Kramer's body. It was held at the marina until transported to Kanab. From there, it went to Salt Lake's ME. The autopsy should be complete any time now."

"What has local law enforcement been doing to investigate around the lake?" Nathan asked.

"About what you'd expect. They're looking for eyewitnesses and trying to figure out what boat the killers used. Apparently no boats were reported stolen or missing over the last week or so. Boat rentals are all checking out as legit so far. There was one odd report, though. A local claimed someone stole his houseboat on the night in question, then returned it. Since no evidence of theft could be found, the sheriff's department didn't pursue it. Apparently, the boat owner is known in the area as being somewhat of a troublemaker. The deputy sheriff told our local agent that this kind of thing happens all the time. It's the equivalent of houseboat joyriding. Most of the time it's drunk high school or college kids."

"The timing sounds about right."

"I have the owner's contact info if you want to talk to him. I'm looking at the report. The deputy referred to him as a quote, 'cantankerous old cuss.'"

"My kind of guy."

"Apparently he lives on his boat. Moves it around a lot."

"We definitely want to talk to him. Will our local FBI agent play along with my special way of communicating if this cantankerous old cuss isn't nice to us?"

"Nothing rough, okay?"

"I promise, nothing rough. Do you think Director Lansing will catch wind of what we're doing?"

"Probably. He'll at least be briefed on the Kramer case."

"Why's that?"

"We have legats all over the world."

"Legats?"

"Legal attaché offices. The FBI has them in every major embassy,

including Budapest. I can't imagine he wouldn't have official word on Kramer's murder by now."

He looked at Harv. "If Lansing finds out we're involved, I doubt he'll be real happy about it."

"He definitely won't."

"Will you be okay? We can handle things from here on."

"I'll be okay. You've got Grangeland on your ops team when you need her."

Special Agent Mary Grangeland was a pro's pro, and she'd helped them in the Bridgestone case. She'd also nearly paid the ultimate price.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"All right then. Thanks. And thank Grangeland for us too."

"Will do. When will you be arriving in Bullfrog?"

"Around nineteen hundred."

A call-waiting tone interrupted them. "Holly," Harv said. "We've got another call coming in. We'd better take it. It could be General Hawthorne."

"No problem. Have a safe flight."

"Will do, thanks again."

Harv brought the call in.

It was Thorny. *"You boys on your way?"*

"Yes. You?"

"We're still a few minutes away from our takeoff roll."

"We just heard from Holly," Nathan said and brought Thorny up to speed.

"I made the call to the secretary of the navy. I'm waiting for a return call."

"Thanks, General. Let's see where that leads us."

"Make sure Holly coordinates her efforts with Major Halliday. We don't want to duplicate work."

"Sounds good. Harv and I will look around at Bullfrog and report back to you by tomorrow evening at the latest. Hopefully, you'll have something by then."

"If I hear anything sooner, I'll call you right away."

"Have a safe flight, General."

"You too."

Harv ended the call.

“This Hungarian clean coal business is still our only real lead so far,” Nathan said. “I’m trying like hell to see how it makes sense. I guess the stakes are high enough, at least in financial terms. Once we know what Kramer’s role was, things may start to add up.” He looked down at the sleepy community of Julian a few miles to the south. “It just doesn’t seem like Montez’s cup of tea, getting involved with Hungarian business interests. Wrong hemisphere, for one thing. And the coal industry?”

“Like you said, the money’s big.”

The images of Nichole Dalton and her daughters returned. He shook his head. “Montez told me many times he’d interrogated children. I hate thinking about it. He’ll use them like pawns to his advantage. If their mother knows anything, she’ll talk.”

“We’re gonna nail him to a wall. Don’t lose sight of that. Also, it’s still possible that Nichole Dalton’s kidnapping isn’t connected to Kramer.”

He didn’t respond.

“Yeah, I think Montez did it too,” Harv said.

“He’s many things, but stupid isn’t one of them. Dumping a body in Lake Powell seems like a pooch screw. It’s out of character. Why risk it? There’s thousands of square miles of empty real estate in every direction out there.”

“I think it’s fair to assume he didn’t think he *would* be seen. It was the dead of night. The lake’s in total darkness. It was just dumb luck there happened to be campers in the area. More than that. They happened to be awake at the time, heard the boat, had a clear line of sight, *and* had night-vision equipment. You have to admit, the odds are pretty low anyone would see it happen. The campers could’ve been on the opposite shore and not seen what happened. There’s a million what-ifs.”

“I suppose you’re right, but it sure seems like more risk than he needed to take. I mean, if you want to be certain you aren’t seen losing a body, there are surefire ways to do it.”

“Yeah,” Harvey agreed. “We should know.”

CHAPTER 10

Montez spoke softly and with only a slight accent. “Do you have your line straight?”

Nichole Dalton nodded.

“Good, try to relax. I know you’re in pain. Make the call and put it on speaker, please. Soon this will be over.”

Montez handed her the phone and stepped back. He’d freed her hands, but her body remained bound to the table. She wasn’t going anywhere.

The chirping ringtone indicated a successful connection.

“Increase the volume, please.”

She obeyed.

He smiled at the voice on the other end. *Glorious.*

“Nichole. Where are you? Where are the girls? The State Department said you’ve been kidnapped. I’ve been trying to call you for hours.”

“Duane, we’re in trouble.”

“What can you see? What kind of sounds can you hear in the background?”

Montez stepped forward and took the phone from her. “Did you know Nichole works out for an hour every day? She does it to keep her body in shape for her new boyfriend. I can personally attest to this fact.”

“Who the hell is this?”

“I’m asking the questions, not you, Mr. Dalton.”

No reply.

“Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid your lapdog, Mr. Kramer, is no longer with us. Fortunately for me, we had a little chat before he...departed. Your ex-wife seems quite eager to cooperate. She graciously supplied your telephone number.”

“What do you want?”

He reached out and bent Nichole’s little toe the wrong direction. It strained and broke. She screamed.

“Okay. Please don’t hurt her again. My daughters...”

“Was that a question?”

“No!” he yelled.

“Their future depends entirely on you, Mr. Dalton. Do you have access to the Internet?”

“Yes.”

“I want you to go to the following website.” He provided a numbered Internet address. “Did you get that?”

“Yes.”

“You have sixty seconds. Let me know when you’re online.” He turned toward Nichole. “Mr. Dalton sounds concerned for your safety. Perhaps this will be over as soon as we hoped.” He knew Dalton heard the comment. “You have forty-five seconds.”

“I’m logging on right now.”

“Thank you for being prompt.”

Montez ignored her pleading expression, secured her arms to the table, and stepped back. He turned on the overhead spot and admired his handiwork. Perfect.

“Thirty seconds.”

“I’m typing the address.”

“Very good, Mr. Dalton. You’re doing well.”

Montez knew what Duane Dalton would see once he viewed the streaming image coming from the camcorder. The mother of his children, naked, bloody, and strapped to a torture table. He hadn’t made her incisions especially deep, but they looked adequately shocking.

He waited, tapping a finger on the handset.

Dalton’s shout distorted the tiny speaker. “*You sick son of a bitch!* What the hell are you doing to her?”

Montez approached the laptop’s webcam, presented the stun gun, then plunged it into an open cut on Nichole’s torso. Her scream drowned out the electrical crackle. She whipped her head back and forth in agony.

“*Stop!* Okay. Okay. *You’re asking the questions.*”

“Your momentary lapse in concentration is understandable, given what you’re seeing. But after your next outburst, it will be much worse. I hope you can appreciate the seriousness of her situation?”

“Please don’t hurt her again.”

“Do you know who I am?”

"I have my suspicions."

"Please, do share."

"Colonel Montez de Oca."

"Retired."

No response. In the background, Nichole Dalton cried.

"Were you aware there was going to be an attempt on my life?"

No answer.

He gave the woman another jolt. She screamed louder.

"Wait! Okay. Yes, I knew."

"You see? We *can* have an honest conversation. All it takes is the proper motivation on your part."

Montez unfolded a white sheet and draped it over the woman. Red splotches began forming above the cuts on her torso.

"My colleagues have expressed interest in coming in here and meeting your ex-wife. I haven't allowed them to. Yet." He held a box of condoms up to the camera. "I have a week's supply for all six of my men. I trust that such a prolonged interaction won't become necessary?"

"No, it absolutely won't."

"I have no interest in you, Mr. Dalton, or your ex-wife. My sights are...let's just say they're above your pay grade." He held two small photographs up to the webcam. "I'm sure it's difficult to see the mother of your daughters in such a horrible situation."

"Please, leave them out of this. They're only children."

"That depends entirely on you, Mr. Dalton. My men have expressed interest in meeting them as well." He turned to his left and snapped a finger. Arturo, his right-hand man, dragged two chairs from the shadows and placed them next to the table. Two more men, each with a blindfolded and gagged young girl, hauled them into the chairs and held them in place by their shoulders. Both were crying and shuddering with fear.

"Please, I'm *begging* you. Leave them out of this."

"I see no reason to indulge my men as long as you cooperate."

Nichole managed to stop crying long enough to say, "I'm here, babies. Mommy's here."

He snapped his finger again and Arturo covered her mouth with duct tape and blindfolded her.

"Please don't hurt them. I'll do whatever you want."

"I'm prepared to give Nichole an injection of morphine. Would you like

me to do that?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not without compassion, Mr. Dalton.” He stabbed a needle into a patch of undamaged skin and depressed the plunger.

Nichole groaned through the tape covering her mouth.

He lowered his voice and leaned over her. “This won’t act as quickly as an intravenous injection, but in a few minutes you should feel better.” He placed the syringe on the table and leaned into the camera. “Mr. Dalton, you and I are now going to discuss our situation. I trust our conversation will remain confidential?”

“Yes.”

“Do I need to remind you what will happen otherwise?”

“No.”

He inserted a thumb drive and opened the record program on his laptop computer. “Very good. Shall we begin?”

CHAPTER 11

After a fuel stop and head call in Seligman, Nathan and Harvey were on their way to Page, Arizona, near the Utah border. In Page, they topped off the Bell's tanks and resumed their flight. Passing beneath them was some of the most beautiful territory Nathan had ever seen. The reddish-orange rock formations seemed random and yet master-planned. Truly God's country, but a nasty place to lose an engine and crash—nothing a spatula couldn't clean up.

After passing over the huge, concrete monolith of Glen Canyon Dam, they wound their way up Lake Powell, staying close to its centerline. On both shorelines, dozens of narrow bays snaked their way out from the lake's main body. Party barges and waterskiing boats occupied most of them.

There were a million and a half places to dump a stiff out here. Blind luck had led to Kramer's body being seen as it went into the water. What were the odds? Maybe not all that bad. There were probably hundreds of impromptu campsites along the shorelines with many of them outside designated areas.

"Let's climb to five hundred AGL. This light isn't great for spotting power lines."

"No problem," Harv said.

"We'll be over the marina in a few minutes. We'll reconnoiter the area before landing."

"You want the controls?"

"You're doing fine." He refolded the Denver sectional chart, putting Bullfrog Bay in the middle of his knee board. "Fly a heading of...zero-three-zero. That should take us directly to the marina."

"Zero-three-zero," Harv repeated. "Our FBI escort should be there by now."

"Yep." He dialed in the UNICOM frequency and pressed the transmit button. "Bullfrog Basin, helicopter eight-zero-five-bravo-tango is five miles southwest of the airfield at four thousand three hundred inbound for landing."

Bullfrog Basin.”

No response, but he didn’t expect one. Bullfrog Basin encompassed uncontrolled airspace. If any other aircraft were in the area, they would’ve responded.

They overflew a long finger of water with a small island. “There’s our destination, the thriving metropolis of Bullfrog Bay, Utah.”

“It’s not so bad. Looks kinda quaint.”

“Let’s climb a little. We don’t want to be rude.”

“The airstrip’s at twelve o’clock, up on the bluff beyond that cliff face. This is beautiful territory. The sunset is making the landscape even redder.”

“Let’s make one orbit.”

There wasn’t much to Bullfrog Bay. Two large boat launch ramps flanked either side of the marina. Looped trailer parks and campgrounds shared the higher ground with several condo projects. The marina itself hosted hundreds of slips with about half of them covered. Harv was right. It looked peaceful, but crowded. The lower parking lots supporting the launch ramps were packed with SUVs and pickups. This place could handle a ton of boat traffic, and from the looks of things, it did.

“Let’s head up to the airstrip and see if our FBI friend is there. I’ll tune in the AWOS.” He dialed in the frequency and listened to the automated weather conditions. Next, he transmitted their intentions on the UNICOM channel. Again, no response.

Harv made a flawless approach to the south end of runway 01. A few single-engine planes occupied a small transient parking area. A man standing next to a dark sedan waved.

“Our FBI escort,” Nathan said.

The light breeze from the south wasn’t a factor, so Harv set the ship down as far from the fixed-wings as possible. Rotor downwash created a huge dust cloud, but the paved surface didn’t stir up much.

“Nice landing,” Nathan said.

“Thanks.”

They removed their helmets and went through the shutdown checklist together.

The FBI special agent waved again. Nathan waved back. At least they were off to a friendly start.

Four minutes after touching down, they climbed out and stretched. The breeze felt warm, but not overly so. He gave his helicopter a pat on the

fuselage and nodded to Harv.

They met their contact halfway.

To his credit, the FBI agent didn't register any outward reaction to the scars on Nathan's face. He'd probably been warned. Sometimes no reaction *was* a reaction. "Mr. McBride, Mr. Fontana, I'm Special Agent Jeremy Duns."

They shook hands. Duns had a friendly smile and casual demeanor. Medium build. Dark hair. Probably in his early thirties. He wore his fieldpiece in a compact holster over tan Dockers. His green shirt had *FBI* embroidered in small gold letters. A class act. Nathan liked him.

"Let's use first names. This is Harvey, I'm Nathan. My friends call me Nate."

"Will I be calling you Nate?"

"That remains to be seen."

Jeremy smiled. "I've arranged for your lodging down at the marina. It's nothing special, but I think you'll be okay with it. Is that your helicopter?"

"One of them."

"You're kidding."

"Harvey owns one too. We think of them as community property, though."

Jeremy's brow furrowed.

"We're not."

"I wasn't sure what to say. I mean, you know, it wouldn't matter if you were."

"Don't worry," Harvey said. "We get it all the time."

"Are you guys hungry? There's a diner at the marina."

"Now we're talking," Harv said.

"I took the liberty of contacting our houseboat's owner through the park rangers. He's expecting us tomorrow morning. I didn't want him conveniently disappearing."

"Good thinking," Nathan said.

"Are you guys packing?"

He exchanged a quick glance with Harv, then motioned toward the helicopter. "We've got a duffel bag with some essentials. A couple of suppressed SIGs, Predator knives, field glasses, night-vision goggles, and a handheld thermal imager."

"You guys expecting a war to break out?"

“You know what they say. It’s better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it.”

“You okay leaving your *essentials* in the helicopter?”

“We’d rather not,” Harv said.

“We can secure your bag in the trunk.”

Harv walked back to the helicopter.

“Thanks for not staring,” Nathan told the FBI man.

“I must admit to a certain amount of curiosity,” said Jeremy. “Those scars definitely give you a rugged look, a don’t-mess-with-me expression. I know a little about you guys. One of our Monticello agents went through the academy with Bruce Henning. They’ve kept in touch over the years.”

“Henning’s a good man. We didn’t exactly hit it off very well when we first met, but he came around, and so did I. It was my fault we got off to a rocky start. I appreciate you meeting us.”

“I’m glad to do it. This isn’t exactly the center of the universe. The lack of action is more than made up for by the scenery. But still...”

He pointed to his face. “Be careful what you wish for.”

“What happened? Can you talk about it?”

He shook his head.

Jeremy remained silent for a moment. “I guess I’m fine with mostly paperwork.”

“A wise choice.”

The diner offered unhealthy food and typical marina decor—lots of brass and rope. Vacationing families, sunburned boaters, and weathered fishermen occupied most of the tables. The dim lighting offered adequate privacy from prying eyes, but a few patrons did double takes at Nathan’s face.

Harv ate an entire pizza, not one of those little designer jobs, but a full-blown, sixteen-inch combo with the works. At one point Nathan and Jeremy stared in awe. The man had a hollow leg.

An hour later, they were checking into a modern condo overlooking the marina. Jeremy told them the entire area’s lodging had been sold out since early spring. The condo project’s owner had graciously tendered his own three-bedroom unit to accommodate them. Of course, pocketing three times the normal rent might have swayed his decision a tad. The FBI had its share of faults, but a lack of resourcefulness wasn’t one of them.

The following morning broke bright and clear. Another scorcher in the works. Nathan and Harv took a twenty-minute jog around the marina. Three Ss later and they were ready to meet old Mr. Houseboat.

Jeremy parked in a dirt lot to the east of the uncovered slips. "I'm not expecting our man to be real cooperative. The park ranger told me he was a first-class jerk."

"He won't be a problem," Nathan said.

"If you say so."

They walked across a connecting bridge onto the dock. "I might need you to play along with us. I want him to think you're on his side, so do a little acting if we need it."

Jeremy smiled. "Good cop, bad cop?"

"Something like that."

At 0715 hours, most people weren't up and around yet. They passed some buildings on the dock's main structure that offered all kinds of recreational needs, from tackle to suntan lotion to groceries. Most of the slips hosted houseboats. A few fishermen were prepping their crafts for a day on the water. Twenty yards farther down the dock, one fellow already had his line in the water. Sitting on a metal folding chair and dressed in tan overalls, he glanced at the three of them before looking back at his bobber.

Someone was cooking bacon nearby.

The creaking planks under Nathan's feet mixed with a newborn's muffled cry. He didn't know why, but the sound made him think of Holly. He kept his voice low. "This is a nice marina, not what I expected at all."

"It's a major hub for recreational activity."

"I can see that."

"I was afraid of this," Jeremy said. "He's not here."

They stopped at an empty slip.

"You sure this is the one?"

"Positive. He was moored here yesterday. The bastard flew the coop. He knew we were coming. Wait...what are you smiling about?"

"Mr. Houseboat doesn't know we have a helicopter."

The man in tan overalls waited until the three men left the dock before pulling his cell phone. "It's Arturo."

"Report."

"Three men came looking for the houseboat."

"Describe them."

"Two white, one Hispanic. One of the white guys was pretty big. Tall, I mean, and hard looking. The Hispanic guy was pretty tall too. I was too far away to see much detail, but the other white guy was FBI. I saw the lettering on his shirt. The two tall guys looked like government agents too."

"Interesting."

"I overheard them mention a helicopter. I think they're going to look for the houseboat with it."

"Get the tail numbers. Make sure you're not seen following them. Park at a safe distance and use your field glasses."

"Yes, sir."

"And call me back immediately."

CHAPTER 12

During the drive up to the airstrip, Nathan asked Jeremy to call the park ranger and ask if the houseboat had any distinguishing features. It did. It seemed Mr. Houseboat fancied himself as something of a pirate. His party barge hosted a large Jolly Roger on the stern of the sundeck. His sundeck canopy was light blue. Shouldn't be too hard to spot.

They lifted off just before 0800 hours.

Nathan applied power and climbed. "We'll check the north end first and work our way south."

Jeremy had a pair of field glasses slung around his neck. "I've cruised this lake many times. He'll be hiding in one of the fingers off the main body. But when we find him, where do we land? This is pretty rugged territory."

"If we have to," Nathan said, "we'll come back with a park ranger on the water."

Nathan maintained five hundred feet AGL. It gave them the most bang for the buck. Jeremy kept his eyes in the field glasses, calling out the locations of any houseboats he spotted. The north end of the lake didn't yield their man. The few scattered houseboats beached or anchored in the inlets were all Lake Powell rentals with light burgundy canopies.

Jeremy said, "I have to admit, this is the coolest assignment I've had in a long time. Looking at things from above is totally different."

Harv directed him to an inlet on the east side, but it didn't contain any boats.

Nathan read the fuel gauges and ran a quick calculation. They had about ninety minutes left before reaching their half-hour reserve. "Harv, give Cal Black's UNICOM a call and make sure the jet-A fuel pump is good to go. If it isn't, we'll need to head for Page within the next forty minutes or so."

"You got it." It took a minute for someone on the ground to respond with an affirmative reply. Jet-A was available 24-7.

Nathan looked at the chart on Harv's knee board. "Let's go directly to that long inlet on the west side. I've got a hunch he's in there."

“Heading...two-five-zero,” Harv said. “That should take us directly to the mouth of the inlet. If we find him in there, we’ll overfly his position and orbit at a distance while we decide where to land. With a little luck, we’ll be able to get close. Getting down to the water might pose a problem, though. These canyon walls are pretty steep in most places.”

Nathan said, “We didn’t check density altitude. Think we’re okay for a steep approach?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem, we’re way under gross.”

They reached the mouth of the inlet and initiated an east-west zigzag pattern, checking all the alcoves.

Several miles in, Jeremy said, “Houseboat at three o’clock. It’s got a powder-blue canopy. Could be our man.”

He turned right and flew up the canyon.

“That’s him. We’ve got a Jolly Roger on the stern.”

“I see him. He’s beached on a small island. What do you think, Harv?”

“It’s pretty narrow in there, but we should be okay. Let’s circle back to the north and come in low. I think we can set her down just south of his position. He’s gonna be pissed.”

“Screw him.”

“He might have a gun.”

“I seriously doubt he’d actually shoot, but he might wave it around. You stay on the controls after touchdown.”

“Don’t get yourself shot, partner. He’s not worth it.”

“I second that,” Jeremy added.

“I can always jump in the water if he gets trigger-happy.”

“You guys are something else. Do I want to know what you used to do for a living?”

They answered simultaneously. “No.”

He circled the ship around to the north, bleeding off altitude. “Power lines?”

“Negative,” Harv said. “We’re good.” He skimmed the south wall of the inlet by no more than thirty feet and dropped down to water level.

“Oh, man...” Jeremy said.

“You okay back there?” Harv asked.

“I think I left my stomach on the cliff.”

“The worst part’s over. Harv, you see any crossings? Cables or ropes, anything like that?”

“We’re good.”

The target LZ was straight ahead, several hundred yards distant. They were totally engulfed by the towering red walls above them. Nathan had done some confined flying before, but nothing like this. Total focus.

“It’s loud enough to wake the dead out there,” Harv said. “All this rotor noise must be reverberating like a freight train.”

Nathan concentrated on a flat spot near the middle of a rocky island and slowed his approach to twenty knots. “He definitely knows we’re here.”

“I don’t see anyone,” Harv said.

He slowed to ten knots and looked at the water. Smooth. No wind. A slight amount of dust swirled as they went feet dry. He eased forward and hovered over the LZ.

Total focus now. Eyes straight ahead. Ease down on the collective.

A little more...the helicopter shuddered slightly. They were down.

“I think I need to change my shorts,” Jeremy said.

“Nate’s a good pilot.”

Jeremy pointed. “There’s our man.”

Nathan throttled down and looked up. Their mark stood on the sundeck with his hands on his hips. Even from this distance, he didn’t look real happy. Understandable, but too bad.

“I’m getting out. Harv, you’re on the controls.”

“You sure about this? Maybe we should all get out.”

“That would appear threatening. Jeremy, I want you to get out, but stay here.”

“You got it.”

He climbed out, removed his flight helmet, and walked across the uneven terrain toward the houseboat. Halfway there he stopped. Mr. Houseboat didn’t move.

Nathan cupped his mouth and shouted, “May I come aboard?”

The man put a hand to his ear.

He walked another twenty yards and repeated the request. To his surprise, he received an affirmative nod and a wave over. Well, at least they weren’t off to a combative start. The houseboat looked a lot nicer than the floating wreck he’d expected. The man disappeared from sight. A few seconds later, Nathan saw him reappear at the bow, unlatch a gate in the rail, and slide a gangplank onto the island.

Nathan turned and gave Harv a nod before continuing toward the boat.

The man, like his boat, also surprised him. He was clean-shaven and dressed in blue jeans and a black Oakland Raiders T-shirt. In his sixties, he looked fit, except for a slight gut.

“That was some damned fine flying.”

“Thanks,” Nathan said. They shook hands. “I’m Nathan McBride.”

The man studied the scars on his face and offered a nod. “Lars Stiegler. I flew Hueys for the army in ’Nam. Two tours.”

“Thank you for your service.” Nathan placed Stiegler’s accent as Texan.

Stiegler attempted a smile, but it didn’t quite shine. The vet nodded toward the helicopter. “Bell 407?”

“Good call.”

“Your friends are welcome too. Might as well make it a party.”

“One of them is an FBI special agent.”

“Don’t matter to me. I ain’t done nothing wrong. At least not lately.” This time he did smile, for real.

“I apologize for the intrusion.”

He waved a hand. “I figured you’d come and find me, just didn’t figure it would be from a helicopter. Expect the unexpected.”

“May I ask why you left the marina?”

“That park ranger pissed me off, told me I couldn’t leave. Screw him. Is that your ship?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll bet it handles like a dream.”

“It does.” Nathan looked up at the canyon walls.

“Truly God’s country. I feel at home inside here...couldn’t tell you why. I just do.”

“No cell phones or Internet. Just you and the rocks.”

“What branch were you in?”

“Marines.”

“Officer?”

“Yes.”

“My father was a bullet catcher. Saw lots of action in Korea, nearly froze his ass off at the Chosin Reservoir.”

“My father was there too.”

“No kidding? You marines are a tough bunch.”

“Thank you. We don’t need much of your time, Mr. Stiegler.”

“Call me Lars.”

Nathan turned when he heard Harv cut the engine. It would take a minute for the main rotor to wind down. “We were worried you might have a gun.”

“I do.”

Nathan waited.

“Hell, anybody crazy enough to strap himself into a flying blender, hover down this narrow canyon, and land on this rock isn’t a threat. To himself, maybe, but not to me. I have a kindred heart for helicopter pilots. Screw all them fixed-wing pussies. I couldn’t give a hoot in hell about them.”

Nathan feigned agreement. “Amen to that.”

More introductions were made as Jeremy and Harv joined them. Nathan watched Lars size up the new arrivals.

“Come aboard,” Lars said. “I can offer anyone who isn’t flying or on duty a cold one.”

“We’re good,” Harv said.

The interior of Stiegler’s floating home could’ve doubled for a showroom model. Neat to a T. Nathan’s preconceptions had been dead wrong. This man was meticulous and organized. Nothing out of place. Vacuumed. Dusted. No dirty dishes in the sink. Or clothes strewn about.

“You run a tight ship,” Harv said.

“A man’s home is a reflection of how he sees the world.”

“Then you must see the world in a positive way.”

Stiegler popped a Corona. “I do.”

An awkward silence ensued.

“You guys want to know why I’m so positive someone stole my boat and returned it.”

“Yeah, we do,” Nathan said.

“It’s simple. I always tie my mooring rope to the cleat in a special way. Whoever took my boat nearly got it right. It was the same kind of knot, but tied differently. I go left over right on the last part, not right over left.” He waved a hand. “Hell, I know what I know.”

“How easy is it to hot-wire one of these things?”

“I couldn’t say, but they didn’t need to. I’m sure they found my spare key. I keep it on a hook inside the cabinet over the sink. They put it back on the hook backward.”

“You don’t keep your doors locked?”

“Nope. Despite a few rowdy kids now and then, this is an honest community.”

“Don’t you live on your boat full-time?” Harv asked.

“I do, but I was staying with a cousin in Banning for a few days. But here’s the clincher. I found this under my sofa, just out of sight.” Stiegler pulled a ziplock baggie from his pocket and handed it to Jeremy. Inside was a piece of dull, silver wire with an offset ninety-degree bend on one side. It looked to be about one-eighth of an inch thick. “I’m willing to bet my boat that came from galvanized chain-link fencing. I’ve worked with it before.”

Nathan exchanged a glance with Jeremy. Arthur Kramer’s body had been wrapped in chain link before it went into the water.

“I may not be the brightest bulb in the ceiling, but I’m also willing to bet this has something to do with that body they found a few days ago.”

“This is an important find. Jeremy, can your forensic people magnify the cut edge and try to match it against the fencing found on the body?”

“Yes. It’s like a ballistic signature.”

“I knew it,” Stiegler said. “Pisses me off they used my boat.”

Jeremy tucked the baggie into his pocket. “Thanks for giving this to us.”

“I wasn’t going to. That lousy park ranger. Do I look like a vagrant to you guys?”

“He called you a vagrant?” Harv asked.

“The jackass. Don’t get me wrong, I like the federal park rangers and think they do a great job, but this particular turd has it out for me. He’s constantly harassing me.”

Harv smiled. “Maybe he doesn’t like the Oakland Raiders. He wouldn’t be the only one.”

“Hey, watch it.”

“Is there anything else unusual or out of the ordinary that’s happened around here lately?” Nathan asked.

“Except all the commotion a few days ago, not really. It’s a fairly quiet place except for a few partying college students now and then. I don’t mind too much, lots of T and A in the narrows.”

Nathan stood. “I think we’ve taken enough of your time, Lars.”

“Y’all are stand-up guys. I’m sorry I made you chase me down.” He turned toward Jeremy. “If you talk to that park ranger again, will you let him know I cooperated? I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s already on his way. You

raised quite a ruckus landing in here.”

“I will,” Jeremy said. “Thanks for talking to us.”

Leaving offered less of a challenge. From a hover, Nathan executed a vertical takeoff, cleared the canyon walls, and headed back toward the marina. Stiegler waved from his sundeck.

“That went better than I expected,” Jeremy said. “He seemed like a pretty decent guy.”

“He told me he flew Hueys in Vietnam.”

“Professional courtesy?” Harv asked.

“Probably.” Nathan’s cell interrupted them.

Harv patched it through. “It’s Thorny,” Harv said.

“Hi, General.”

“Where are you?”

“We just left our rendezvous with the houseboat owner. We’re flying back to the marina.”

“Flying?”

“Our contact left the marina. We had to track him down by air.”

“How did it go?”

Nathan filled him in.

“Good work.”

“General, we’re not alone. We have an FBI special agent with us.”

“This is for your ears only.”

“I’ll...ah...remove my headset,” Jeremy said.

Nathan nodded his thanks. With all the engine and slipstream noise, Jeremy wouldn’t be able to hear them, especially from the rear seats.

“Okay, it’s just Harv and me now.”

“This isn’t easy for me to say, but I have to back off. I just finished a face-to-face with the secretary of the navy. He thought it was important enough to meet in person, and he was crystal clear. I am not to inquire into Kramer or the kidnapped Dalton family ever again or support you in any way. He asked me to forget I ever heard those names. He also let me know that certain people in high places are questioning your ability to deliver a live prisoner. I’m sorry about this, Nate, but I’m a good soldier. I follow orders even when I disagree with them.”

“Don’t worry about it, General. We’ll handle things from here. We’ll be fine. I understand your situation. If the roles were reversed, I’d do exactly the same thing.”

“For what it’s worth, I suggest you call your father. As the chairman of the Senate Committee on Domestic Terrorism, he’s privy to all national security issues. He’s got better intelligence resources than I do. He may even know what’s going on.”

Thorny was right. He felt a pang of guilt for not doing it sooner. “I’ll call him.”

“I may not be able to help you directly, but I’m staying in the loop. Keep me informed.”

“Will do. We’ll call you later this afternoon.” Nathan ended the call.

“While Jeremy’s unplugged,” Harv said, “we should call Holly and see if she’s got anything new.”

Holly answered right away.

“What timing. I was about to call you. We have at least one answer about Kramer, why he was in Bullfrog Bay. His brother-in-law owns a condo out there.”

Nathan looked at Harv. “That could be our crime scene.”

“Are you ready for the address?”

“Yes,” Harv said, and wrote it on the edge of his chart. “We’ll check it out as soon as we land.”

“One other thing, but I don’t know how significant it is. Kramer recently shut down his company, Energy Solutions, Incorporated. He flew home from Hungary a little over a week ago. Kramer was a loner. No wife or kids or girlfriend. As far as we can tell, his sister’s his only living relative.”

“That sudden shutdown of his firm could be significant,” Nathan said. “We should find out all we can about Energy Solutions, Inc.”

“We’re trying, but so far it’s what we don’t know that stands out. It’s a Delaware corporation and likely nothing more than a shell company. You know, a business-cards-only type deal. Henning is scouring Delaware’s public records, but we’re not expecting to find much more than what’s required legally to be a legitimate corporation. Have you learned anything useful from Hawthorne’s connections?”

“Yes and no. His boss just ordered him to back off, in person. He also told us there are people in high places who don’t think we’ll deliver Montez alive. Which tells us three things. First, it’s pretty obvious that something big is going on. Second, it virtually guarantees that the Dalton and Kramer cases are connected, meaning Nichole and her daughters were taken by Montez. And third, someone wants Montez alive. In other words, it’s all about

Montez, and whoever's calling the shots doesn't want it getting out in the open. Whatever it is."

"What could Montez be doing that makes defense and intelligence agency chiefs react like this?"

"Good question. Montez is an interrogator by trade. When he interrogated me, he was working for the Sandinista holdouts. But now he could be working for anyone. One thing's certain. Whoever hired him to take Kramer and the Daltons wants information. It could be a corporate espionage thing, maybe related to Kramer's clean coal technology. Whatever it is, you can bet there's serious money involved." Nathan paused for a moment. "I'm only speculating here, but what if a scientific breakthrough *has* been made in clean coal technology? A breakthrough that solves the carbon dioxide problem you mentioned. It could change the global energy dynamics. The OPEC countries would be quite concerned. Oil exports would drop. How much, I couldn't say, but I'm willing to bet we're talking billions of dollars. Ask yourself this. What would the Saudis and other OPEC nations be willing to do to keep their oil empires healthy?"

"That's an interesting take on things."

"I could see that," said Harv. "And it might explain why Thorny's 'people in high places' want it kept under wraps and why they want Montez alive."

"My assistant just handed me a note. I've got to take a call. Will you promise me something?"

They both waited.

"I don't want you guys getting killed trying to collar Montez. He's not worth it, even if it means letting him go."

"That wouldn't be my first choice."

"Letting him go, or getting killed?"

"Getting killed."

"Good, because my world's much more interesting with Nathan McBride and Harvey Fontana in it."

"First things first," Nathan said. "I'll call you as soon as we've looked at the condo."

Holly agreed, and they said their good-byes.

Harv turned and nodded to Jeremy. The FBI agent donned his headset.

"Sorry about that," Harv said.

"No problem."

Nathan said, "I wish we could share everything with you, but we can't. We *can* tell you we may have located the crime scene. Kramer's brother-in-law owns a condo at the marina."

"We going there?"

"Yeah, but I don't want to call in the cavalry until we've had a chance to look around."

Ten minutes later Jeremy drove them down State Highway 276 toward the marina.

"Somebody's screwing with us, right?" Nathan asked.

"I'm afraid not." Jeremy turned into the same condo complex they'd stayed in last night.

Holly's address led to a different building, but it stood uncomfortably close to their own.

Jeremy parked fifty yards shy of their destination. "Is there any chance the bad guys could still be in there?" he asked.

"It's been three days, but let's play it safe. I think Harv and I should be packing."

Jeremy opened the trunk, and Harv removed their gun belts from the duffel bag. He watched Harv give the SIGs a quick assessment.

"Suppressors? Subsonic rounds?" Harv asked.

Nathan said no.

Jeremy donned his Windbreaker with huge FBI letters on the back. "If anyone sees us walking around out here with guns, I don't want them to be alarmed."

"Good thought," Nathan said.

They walked past two covered parking areas. Nathan pointed to his eyes, then pointed to the rear of the next condo building. Jeremy veered off to the right, staying as close to the condo's wall as possible. He watched the FBI agent weave his way through some small shrubs and cacti growing in terracotta pots. If anyone looked out their sliding glass doors, they'd see Jeremy for sure. There was no place to hide in this arid landscaping. Nathan and Harv continued along the sidewalk and entered the courtyard between the target building and its neighbor to the left.

“Looks like it’s the second unit on the right,” Harv said. “Are we worried about trip wires or booby traps?”

“I don’t think so. From what we believe, they left in a hurry. We’ll be careful anyway.”

They kept their SIGs holstered until they arrived at the front door.

“You ready?” Nathan whispered. “I’ll take the lead and left.”

Fingertips only, he reached for the knob.

CHAPTER 13

Unlocked.

He slowly pushed the door, feeling for any resistance. None.

Gun first, he rushed down the hall and pivoted to his left at an open door. A small bathroom. Empty.

He sensed Harv slip past and cover his blind spot. He continued deeper into the condo and turned toward the bottom of some stairs. He pointed his SIG to the upper landing and froze. All quiet. No movement. He made eye contact with Harv and motioned to the top. He stayed put while his friend began a silent ascent.

Harv was back thirty seconds later. They cleared the other rooms before heading into the living room and kitchen. Nathan noticed it right away. The smell. One he knew well. Familiar and noxious. They glanced at each other, rounded the hall corner, and stopped.

What lay before them could only be described as hideous.

The grisly aftermath of a cruel and protracted murder.

A bloody chair sat in the middle of an expanse of plastic drop cloth. Dark red pools surrounded each leg. Dried and cracked. Countless bloody footprints encircled the chair. An end table had been hauled onto the plastic—the tools of pain adorning its surface. A filleting knife. Wire cutters. Pliers. And a small Coleman burner. A strip of plastic had also been laid into the kitchen with more bloody tracks to and from the sink.

“Do you see it, Harv?”

“See what?”

Nathan didn’t respond.

“Talk to me, Nate.”

“Rage. Montez was pissed. That isn’t like him. Neither is leaving a scene like this. He’s making a statement.”

“This was a violent interrogation, but I’m not sure you can draw that conclusion.”

“I need to see the body.”

Harv shook his head. "Nathan, that's reckless. In your current mental state, it's *beyond* reckless."

"I need to be sure."

"Sure of what?"

He waved a hand. "That this wasn't business as usual. This was personal for Montez."

"Personal? You're thinking he knew Kramer? And you think seeing Kramer's body will confirm that?"

"Yeah, maybe. I don't know. But look at this. Does this look like the aftermath of a professional interrogation, or a sadistic indulgence?"

"No more over-the-top than what he did to you."

"Right, but it got personal by the end with me."

"We don't have to go to Salt Lake in person. We could look at photos, or even view the body by video."

"It's not the same."

"That's exactly my point."

"Harv, I appreciate you trying to insulate me, but it's something I have to do. I'll be okay."

"Will you?"

"Yes, absolutely. Come on, let's go find Jeremy. This is his crime scene now." They found him at the southwest corner of the building.

"You guys look like you've seen a ghost. I take it you found something."

"The front door was unlocked," Harv said.

Nathan saw the curtains of an upstairs bedroom move slightly. "We're gonna have company soon. Someone's watching us." He pointed toward the window. The curtains moved again.

"I need to call this in right away," Jeremy said. "And notify the Kane County Sheriff's Department as well."

They led Jeremy down the hall into the living room where the FBI special agent stared, unmoving.

"This is the worst I've ever seen."

Nathan shivered at the thought of Nichole Dalton and her two daughters. Would Montez really do something like this to children?

"It looks like whoever did this left in a hurry," he said to Jeremy. "They probably knew they were seen dumping the body and had to get out fast. I doubt they would've left things this way otherwise."

Jeremy agreed. "That sounds right. The body was dumped about a half an hour's boat ride from the marina. By the time they got back, they wouldn't have had much time to bug out."

"They must've beaten the response," Nathan said. "If a deputy had been there when they returned to the marina, they would've been questioned about why they were mooring in the middle of the night, especially after a nine-one-one call about a body being dumped."

"What's the typical response time to get here?" Harv asked.

"I don't know. If a deputy was in the marina area, it could be relatively fast. I'll find out the exact times when sheriff's units reported on scene."

Nathan looked at the end table with the tools. "I'm willing to bet those are your wire cutters we talked about, the pliers too. Let's find out if they were bought here at the marina. If they match stock sold locally, somebody might remember who bought them. It's a long shot, but we might catch a break. You've got a lot of legwork to do, Jeremy."

"No doubt. Since the wire cutters and pliers are still here, it probably means they wrapped him in the chain link here."

Nathan squinted.

"What?" Harv asked.

"The piece of chain link on Stiegler's houseboat."

"If they wrapped Kramer here, why was there a loose piece on the houseboat?"

Jeremy said, "If you're thinking it was planted, I can't see the logic of it."

"Let's not worry about that now," Nathan said. "It's not critical at this point."

Harv looked at Jeremy. "If Kramer was wrapped in chain link here, he wouldn't have been able to walk."

Jeremy agreed. "They carried him for sure."

"Let's go over how we think this went down," Nathan said, then paused to think it through. "The bad guys arrive sometime during the day and gain entry. They overpower Kramer and do their dirty work. Later that evening, they retrieve the chain link from their vehicle, wrap him up, and carry him out, all unseen by the neighbors. They drive down to the marina, where one of them steals Stiegler's boat. It's too risky to move the body along the dock, so the vehicle with Kramer's body probably goes to a more remote beach location where they make the transfer. Maybe a loose piece of fencing comes

off. They motor out and dump the body. Let's assume they think they were seen. They rush back to the marina, moor the boat in a hurry, put back Stiegler's key backward, and retie the mooring knot differently. The same vehicle picks them up at the dock and they bug out without returning to the condo."

"Or they could've stolen Stiegler's boat ahead of time and had it waiting at the beach. There's no way to know," Jeremy said.

"My gut says they'd want to minimize the amount of time Stiegler's boat was missing in case he returned. If our scenario's right, it would've been gone for only a little over an hour."

"How many perps are we talking about?" Jeremy asked.

"I'd have to say three or four." *Including Montez*, he thought. "I suppose it's possible to do all of that with only two, but unlikely,"

"Jeremy, can you talk to the people staying in the adjacent condos?" he asked. "Maybe somebody saw them. We might get a description."

"I'll definitely ask."

"Can you come back tonight and check the lighting between the buildings? They might've unscrewed some bulbs. You might get prints."

"No problem."

"We have to leave."

"Right. Wait." Jeremy put his hands up to stop them. "You know who did this."

Nathan looked at Harv, then back to Jeremy. "Yeah, we do."

"It would make my job a whole lot easier."

"We can't."

"I have to tell my boss *something*. This crime scene didn't just land in my lap. He'll want to know how I found it."

"You'll have to decide how much of our involvement you share with him. The less you reveal about us, the better."

"You're stand-up guys. I'll think of something without compromising you. Can you be contacted after you leave?"

"No."

"I figured you'd say that." Jeremy handed him the keys to the sedan. "I can't leave this crime scene unattended. Did either of you touch anything?"

"Just my fingertips on the front doorknob. Do you need anything out of your vehicle?"

"No, I can keep people away without using crime scene tape. Go on, get

outta here before I change my mind. I'll need your FBI connection, whoever it is, to explain to my supervisory special agent why I gave you my vehicle. You *do* have an FBI contact, right? Preferably kinda high up? SAC or better?"

"SAC," he confirmed. "We'll leave the keys on top of the front right tire. Stay safe, Jeremy." They shook hands and left the condo.

Harvey drove the FBI sedan out of the condo complex and turned right at Highway 276. "I felt bad withholding info from Jeremy."

"Me too, but it's the right thing to do. We should tell Holly she needs to call her counterpart in Salt Lake to cover Duns."

"We'll also need her to arrange things with Salt Lake's ME. We can't just show up unannounced and ask to see Kramer's body."

He pulled his phone and appreciated how easy a special agent in charge of a major FBI field office had made it to contact her.

She answered immediately. "Was it the crime scene?"

"Yes, I have you on speaker. Harv's with me."

She hesitated for a second. "Was it bad?"

He closed his eyes, thinking of the Dalton family. "Yes."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but we need your help with a couple of things."

"Sure, no problem."

He briefed her on everything they had so far, including his theory that Montez knew Kramer, and that the murder may have been personally motivated.

Holly seemed encouraged and said she'd get Henning to start following up on leads. Namely, the purchase of the tools and chain-link fencing and anything else that Jeremy might turn up with the neighbors. Because Montez hadn't expected Kramer's body to be found, his men probably hadn't been too concerned about where they purchased their wares.

"We need you to protect Duns from any negative fallout. He didn't want to leave the crime scene, so he gave us his vehicle. He also doesn't have an explanation of how he found the crime scene."

"I'll take care of that. He'll be fine."

"Thanks. We didn't share any details, but he knows we know who murdered Kramer. I promised to tell him more when I could."

"You've got enough to do. I'll take care of that too."

"Holly, it's not my intent to dump all of this on you."

"I consider this a team effort. I'm just doing my share."

He sensed some unease in her. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Nathan, hold on a minute."

Nathan waited on hold for a few minutes before she returned.

"Holly, what's going on?"

"I'm closing my door, hang on...Lansing just called. He knows you're involved, and he's not real happy about it."

He looked at Harv.

"I didn't tell him," she added.

"We know that."

"He's concerned about your further involvement."

"With all due respect, we don't report to Lansing."

"Technically, neither do I. My boss is in Los Angeles. In fact, Lansing said it was my call. He made it clear this operation is outside the normal chain of command and that I'm to report directly to him on all matters related to Montez. He also made it clear that letting you and Harv proceed involves risk for all of us, and that my political capital is all used up."

"Meaning you take the fall if we screw this up."

"I made a deal. It's the price of your admission."

"The hell it is. You're not taking the fall for anything. Period. If Lansing wants to get in the mud with me, he'll regret it."

"Nathan, please..."

He heard the stress in her voice. The last thing he wanted to do was contribute to it. "I'm sorry, Holly, I didn't mean that. I'd never do anything to damage your relationship with him."

"It's okay. We're all on edge. I just can't stop thinking about that monster having Nichole Dalton and her daughters. It's really tearing me up."

"Yeah, me and Harv too."

"Grangeland's already in Salt Lake. I'll have her meet you there."

"Grangeland's in Salt Lake?"

"Early this morning Lansing asked me to send one of my agents out there to do an assessment of Kramer's body. Grangeland was the perfect choice. She has a master's degree in forensic science. Plus, I had a feeling you'd end up there. She'll get you into the ME's facility."

"Thanks, Holly."

"We're just pulling into Bullfrog's airstrip," Harv said. "We'll be airborne in ten minutes. Can we call you after we land?"

“Please do. I’ll give you Grangeland’s cell number. You ready?”

Harv wrote it down.

“Have a safe flight. And don’t worry about Lansing and me. We have an...unspoken understanding.”

“He owes you a lot.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to put it quite that way.”

“Thanks again. For everything.”

“Have a safe flight, and give my regards to Grangeland.”

CHAPTER 14

Nathan hadn't felt real talkative on the flight. Hearing Mary Grangeland's voice had brightened his mood a little, but something continued to bug him. Something deep in his subconscious, more than just the sight of Kramer's torture and murder, and more than the missing woman and her girls. The more he thought about it, the more elusive it became, like a lost thought during a conversation. It felt important, which made it even worse. Maybe he *would* do the hypnosis thing.

All in all, he'd thought he done a pretty good job concealing the hatred he felt toward Montez. He knew Harv sensed it. There was little—if anything—he could hide from his friend. Deep down, he needed Harv's stability more than Harv needed his maverick nature. One thing was certain, they were ten times stronger as a team.

He broke the silence. "How long to Salt Lake?"

"About thirty minutes. We're coming up on Provo. You've been kinda quiet since we left the marina."

He didn't respond, didn't have to.

"We don't have to look at it."

"Somehow that seems...I don't know..."

"Cowardly?"

"I wasn't going to use that word, but yeah."

"Truth be told, I'm a little uneasy too."

"We'll get through this. It's just a body."

They looked at each other. No, it wasn't *just a body*. Far from it. More like a malevolent version of Alice's looking glass. A portal to a dark chapter in both their lives. A chapter neither of them wanted to revisit. Maybe the company shrink had it right after all. Maybe hatred *is* the strongest of all human emotions. Nathan had survived his torture by tapping into what seemed like an endless supply of it.

"You okay?" Harv asked.

"Huh?"

“You looked lost in thought.”

“Thinking about Montez.”

“Don’t obsess.”

“I was starting to, thanks.”

Harv refolded his chart, putting Salt Lake City in the center of his knee board. “What are friends for?”

“I feel like there’s a time bomb in my head.”

“There *is* a time bomb in your head.”

“I was hoping for an argument.”

They flew in silence for a few minutes.

Harv said, “We ought to get on the horn to Salt Lake approach and request flight following from here on. It’s a beautiful day, there’re probably more than a few fixed-wings around.”

“Good idea.”

South of Provo, Harv entered Salt Lake’s approach frequency into the NavCom and made contact. Harv entered the assigned squawk number into the transponder and hit the IDENT button. Salt Lake approach saw them on radar right away. The approach controller informed them of traffic at ten o’clock, climbing through 5,300. Harv acknowledged the call. A few minutes later, Salt Lake approach handed them off to the tower. Nathan made the approach while Harv worked the radio.

An employee from Salt Lake’s Million Air jet center directed them to a transient parking area. After the main rotor wound down, they stepped onto terra firma and stretched. The Bell 407 was a comfortable ride, but sitting for long periods of time took its toll. He did a quick walk around the ship. Everything looked good.

“There she is!” Harv said.

He turned toward the jet center, where Special Agent Mary Grangeland had just stepped through the sliding glass doors.

“Easy,” Harv said, “you’re staring.”

“I can’t help it.”

Grangeland waved.

Her lean physique, blue eyes, and blonde hair made for a stunning combo. Her sidearm closed the deal. Fifty feet away, she almost broke into a run. He took a few steps toward her. She wrapped him up in a bear hug and didn’t let go.

“It’s good to see you, Nathan.”

Harv stepped forward. "Hey, save some of that for me."

She let go and gave Harv a long hug too. To Nathan's surprise, Grangeland had a single tear running down her cheek. She wiped it away. "Sorry about the emotional reunion."

"Hey, no need to apologize," Harv said and released her. "This is just what the doctor ordered. You look great. Everything okay? You made a full recovery?"

She patted her stomach. "I lost my gallbladder, but that's not the end of the world."

"I'm sorry," Nathan said.

"The bullet missed my spine by an eyelash. All things being equal, I'm just glad to be alive. *And* walking."

"Amen to that," Harv added.

"I owe you guys my life."

"That debt," he said, "goes both directions. You took a bullet for us."

Though as attractive as any woman he'd known, Grangeland had incredible physical strength, which, when combined with her combat training, made her a tough opponent. Under adversarial circumstances when they first met, Grangeland had challenged him to an open-handed fight—minus any head blows—and to his shock *and* admiration, she'd wrestled him into a half nelson in mere seconds. A rocky start, but their friendship had grown closer ever since. After the dust had settled, she told them she preferred being called Grangeland, not Mary. He had a hard time picturing her as "Mary" anyway. While working, she wore her hair in a utilitarian ponytail. Her eyes and strong cheekbones gave her a distinct Scandinavian look. Nathan had never asked her age but guessed she must be in her early thirties. Never married, it seemed. He'd have to ask about that sometime.

A tanker truck rumbled up to refuel the helicopter. The driver slid out and did a double take at Grangeland. She probably got that all the time. She smiled and the driver smiled back.

Despite himself, Nathan found his mood lifting.

The three of them started toward the jet center.

"You guys realize that you've become something of a legend in our Fresno office, don't you?" asked Grangeland. "Unofficially, you're known as the Lone Ranger and Tonto."

"Who's who?" Harv asked.

Nathan said, "That's kinda obvious, Harv. A white guy. A brown guy."

Harv objected. "Hey, I'm the one with the silver horse."

"You own a horse?"

"Eight of them."

"I love riding."

Nathan smiled. "I'll bet you do."

She punched his arm.

"What?"

CHAPTER 15

Nathan used the drive to the medical examiner's office to fill Grangeland in on everything they could. The call from Holly. The meeting with General Hawthorne. Bullfrog Bay. Stiegler's houseboat. The Kramer crime scene. Thorny's removal from the case and the ironclad implication that Kramer's murder and the abduction of Nichole Dalton and her daughters were all linked to Montez.

Nathan knew she had a ton of questions. He forestalled them by pointing at his face. "We're after the man who did this to me."

Grangeland winced. "What can you tell me about him?"

"Not too much. In a nutshell, one of our missions went south and I fell into his hands. Harv got away. I didn't. I was held captive for three weeks."

She softened her voice. "Nathan, I'm sorry."

"It happened a long time ago. When Harvey rescued me, I was close to death. He carried me through two miles of jungle at night."

"I know you guys are really close, I just never knew why."

"His name is Colonel Juan Montez de Oca, formerly of the Sandinista National Liberation Front. He's a professional interrogator."

"How will you find him?"

"We may not. He's a trained spook."

"Did seeing the crime scene spark anything?"

"That's why we're here."

Harv cut in. "As far as we know, Nathan's the only person on earth to survive a Montez interrogation. If Montez finds out Nathan's alive, we might as well paint a target on his forehead. We're trying to keep our involvement under wraps for as long as possible."

"Understood. I'm yours for as long as you need me."

Nathan let Harv continue. His thoughts were elsewhere.

"You're a proven asset," Harv said. "We definitely want you on our team."

"Can you tell me *anything* about your past? What you guys used to do?"

“We were a marine scout sniper team, then CIA operations officers. That’s about all we can say. Sorry.”

“I can live with that.”

“Holly said you have a master’s degree in forensics?”

“Criminal science with an emphasis on forensics.”

“You’ve already seen Kramer’s body?”

She nodded.

“What did you think?”

“Well, at that time I didn’t know a professional interrogator had killed Kramer. It looked like some sort of ritual killing, but I wasn’t sure what to make of it. Now that I know a bit more about the suspect, I’d have to say there’s a savageness to the injuries that goes beyond what an interrogator would inflict strictly to extract information. Either way, I suppose my best guess remains the same. Montez is a severely twisted individual, bordering on psychopathic.”

“He’s all that, and more,” Harv said.

The onboard nav took them east, through downtown toward the mountains. The pleasant female voice issued turn-by-turn directions and deposited them into a large complex of medical buildings and offices. He could still call this off, but each passing minute made the decision more difficult.

She parked, cut the engine, and pivoted to face Nathan. “It’s not too late.”

“Let’s just get this over with.”

Inside the brick building, Grangeland flashed her FBI badge to the receptionist, who made a call and said Dr. Salk would be right with them.

Nathan took another deep breath and exhaled slowly. He relaxed his hands and focused on Grangeland. She offered a reassuring smile. Harv seemed equally nervous, but was much better at concealing it.

A man in a gray business suit stepped out of a door and extended his hand to Grangeland first. Not unexpected. They’d already met.

“Thank you for seeing us,” she said. “This is Nathan McBride and Harvey Fontana.”

“I’m Dr. Jonas Salk, no relation.” No doubt he said that to everyone. In his midfifties, Salk had thinning hair that looked a shade too dark. “I’m the chief medical examiner.”

Dr. Salk looked over the top of his black-rimmed glasses, obviously

fascinated by the scars. Nathan was sorely tempted to lean in close and turn his head from side to side so Salk could “examine” the damage in all its glory. “Doctor,” he said, and shook hands.

Salk recovered his composure. “Would you...ah...like a brief tour first?”

“Thank you,” Grangeland said, “but we’ve got another appointment after this.”

“No problem. This way, please.”

They followed Dr. Salk down a short hall. Salk spoke as they walked. “We’ve got the body in our refrigeration room. I didn’t want to bring it out until you arrived. I should warn you, it’s one of the worse cases of mutilation I’ve ever seen. Whoever did it knew what he, or she, was doing. The victim’s submergence in water washed the exterior applications, but we found traces of QuikClot in the victim’s bloodstream. The only reasonable conclusion is that his attacker didn’t want him to bleed to death. The margins also indicated cauterization. There still would’ve been significant bleeding, just not as much.”

Harv looked back and mouthed the words, *You okay?*

He gave a tight nod. Montez hadn’t used a hot knife on him, but he *had* used a clotting agent that had stung like all hell.

They entered the examination room and he noticed the drop in temperature right away. It looked and smelled both sterile and chemical. Lots of shiny surfaces and stainless steel. Drainage sinks. Mobile instrument tables. Cabinets. Computer stations. Four autopsy tables lined one wall. A large stainless door on the far side of the room probably led to the walk-in refrigerator.

“I’ll need one of you to help me with the body.”

Harv volunteered.

Nathan and Grangeland waited in the exam room.

Grangeland spoke softly. “I can’t begin to imagine what you’re feeling.”

Nathan steadied himself for what was about to roll out of that icy cell and what it represented. Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea after all. Escape was a few steps away. No. Not now. Especially not now. How would that look? Running away at the moment of truth?

The door reopened with a clank.

CHAPTER 16

Nathan squinted as Salk rolled the body into the room. An opaque plastic sheet covered Kramer's form.

It's just a body.

Harv's expression told all. One part revulsion, one part anger. The gurney stopped.

Dr. Salk removed the plastic.

What lay before him looked sickeningly familiar.

An inch apart, diagonal knife cuts savaged the ash-gray skin in a crisscrossing pattern from collarbone to belt line. The cuts on the outer portions of the torso extended down to the steel surface of the table. The flesh within the wounds looked raw and dark. Montez had turned this man into a human wicker basket.

When Nathan spoke, he felt like two people imprisoned in a single body. "We've been thinking about something. In the middle of a desert, why would the killer bother to dump the body in the lake?"

Salk answered matter-of-factly. "Because it wasn't a body when it went into the water."

"What did you say?"

"I said this man was alive."

"Alive?"

"We found silt in his lungs, consistent with the location where he was recovered. Our conclusion is that he held his breath for as long as possible before inhaling the muddy water after he hit bottom. His body was recovered ninety feet down. The diver reported the silt was disturbed immediately around the body. We're positive he thrashed around."

Nathan couldn't respond. He was with Kramer in that pitch-black water during his last moments. Descending. Veins bulging. Eardrums bursting. Eyes wide open in terror. Plummeting into a freezing abyss. Inhaling water when he couldn't hold his breath any longer. No hope of surviving...

He sensed Grangeland taking his hand...

And something else. Hatred, deep and vicious, expanded inside him like an acidic fracture.

Grangeland called out, her tone frantic. "*Nathan!*"

"Huh?"

"My hand!"

He released it.

Harv grabbed his arm. "We're outta here."

"What's going on?" Salk asked.

Harv pulled him toward the door.

The next thing he knew he was sitting on the floor in the hallway with his back against the wall.

"What the hell just happened?" Salk asked.

"He's been under a lot of stress lately," Grangeland said, rubbing her hand. "And he's been really nervous about seeing the body. He just needs a minute to clear his head."

"I've been doing this a long time. I've never seen a reaction like that. I saw him crush your hand. He nearly broke it. You want to tell me what's going on? That man just spooked me, and that's not easy to do, not at this point in my career." Salk started toward the door.

She touched his shoulder. "Please, Doctor, just give them a minute."

"Breathe, Nathan. Close your eyes and use your safety catch."

"I can't." Images from a tortured past flooded his mind, all of them terrifying. A bullwhip's crack. Clenched teeth. Scattering birds. Moths. Sneering faces. A bloody knife.

"Do it now." Harv grasped both his shoulders and yanked him forward. "Send him away, he doesn't control you anymore. He can't do anything without your permission. Send him away."

Nathan closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and visualized autumn-cloaked trees. He stood under the branches and spread his arms. A gentle

breeze fluttered the leaves past his body, brushed them against his skin. A few swirled at his feet. He took another breath and let it out slowly.

"That's it," Harv said. "Deeper."

It took a moment, but a calmness washed through him. All traces of hatred evaporated.

Replaced by resolve.

Harv smiled and offered a hand up from the floor. "Welcome back."

"Damn, that was close."

"Tell me about it. I was about to deliver a haymaker."

"You'd really do that?"

"Damn straight."

"He drowned him, Harv."

"Don't worry, we're going to skin him alive for that."

"Let's get back in there."

Salk stared as they reentered the room. Respectfully, Grangeland didn't.

"Doctor, Special Agent Grangeland, please accept my apology. I'm not used to seeing this sort of thing."

"It's an understandable reaction," Salk said. "This is an exceptionally bad case. Would you like some water?"

"Thank you, no." When Salk turned toward the body, he mouthed *I'm okay* to Grangeland.

Her expression held genuine concern, but she didn't react.

He appreciated her discretion and took a closer look at the body, pointing at several pairs of dark spots between the knife cuts. "Doctor, what are those marks?" He already knew the answer, all too well.

"They're from a stun gun. Based on the pole spacing and the degree of discoloration, we think it's from a King Cobra police model. Packs quite a punch, nine hundred thousand volts. The body has twenty-two sets of marks. I put a rush on all the lab work. We should have the results tomorrow afternoon."

Grangeland handed Dr. Salk a business card. "When the results come back, will you call me right away?"

"Yes, I can have the reports faxed to your field office."

No one spoke for several seconds.

Dr. Salk broke the silence. "Mr. McBride, have you seen this before?"

"What, a dead body?"

"This exact kind of trauma."

He locked eyes. "Why do you ask?"

"Your reaction. I just had a feeling you recognized it."

Harv stepped forward. "We do recognize it. We saw photographs a couple days ago."

"I didn't mean to suggest anything. I'm sorry."

Yeah, Doc, you did. "No harm done," Nathan said. "I might've asked the same thing in your shoes." He forced a smile. "I probably looked like I saw a ghost."

"That's a pretty fair description."

Distraction time. "Do you ever get used to it? I mean, you know..."

"Working with the dead? I enjoy my work, although truth be told, I'm not as involved with postmortem examinations as I used to be. As the ME, my job involves more administrative work now. I made an exception here. Now that I've had a chance to study this case in depth, I'd have to say this man wasn't a victim of a ritual killing. I believe he was interrogated."

"Interrogated? You mean for information? Like that?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think that?"

"Although it looks like a serial killer's signature, the pathology of most serials involves ritual to some degree or another. In this case, for example, the crisscrossing diagonal cuts seem to suggest the pattern has meaning to the killer. Why else would he or she do it? We may never know the significance of the diamond pattern, but I guarantee it would have a significant meaning to a serial killer. With me so far?"

Nathan nodded.

"Then we seem to have a contradiction. The killer marred the untouched diamonds of skin by using a stun gun on them. It would be like a killer applying makeup to a dead woman's face and then purposefully smearing it. Granted, there are no absolutes, and there are always exceptions, *and* this could be one of them, but I feel the stun gun was used on the diamonds of skin to inflict maximum pain, *not* as part of a ritual. Because the nerve endings surrounding the incisions were frayed, burned, and exposed, the electricity would've been excruciatingly painful. Hypothetically speaking, if this man knew what his killer wanted, he gave it up. Something else. Serial killers rarely leave their victims alive before disposing of them."

"Your knowledge of serial killers is impressive," Harv said.

"At the risk of sounding morbid, they're often the most interesting and

challenging cases, but they're also extremely rare." Salk looked at Grangeland, then back to Harv. "The FBI uses the information medical examiners discover to help formulate profiles of serials. I had my assistant do a database search and there aren't any cases like this in our system, even for as long as we've kept records." Salk looked at Grangeland. "Even your FBI has nothing like this in its ViCAP national database. We seem to have a unique case here. A special agent from Quantico's behavior analysis unit two is flying out here tomorrow to examine the body."

"Thank you, Doctor," Grangeland said. "I think we've taken enough of your time. I have a favor to ask."

"Sure, name it."

"Will you please keep our visit here confidential?"

Nathan had completely forgotten about that.

"If you folks don't want anyone to know you were here, that's fine with me. But I have a request of my own." He turned toward Nathan, but addressed all of them. "It's quite obvious that you know more about this case than you're giving up. When you're able, I'd appreciate you sharing it with me. Deal?"

"Deal." Nathan stepped forward and pumped hands. "You don't miss much."

"I've been doing this a long time." Dr. Salk looked down to Nathan's chest, then back to his eyes.

Doesn't miss much at all.

They arrived in San Diego after dark, fatigued from the flight. Holly had arranged a rental sedan for Grangeland's use. Everyone parted company for the evening.

His Clairemont home felt welcoming as Nathan plopped down on his couch and thought about the day's events, especially his close call at the medical examiner's office. He hated being so vulnerable, especially in front of strangers and *especially* after all these years. Hadn't he moved beyond this? He stood and began pacing, then picked up his TV remote and hurled it across the room. It smashed into the wall next to the front door and exploded.

Great job, Nate. Way to control your temper.

Even without Harv's advice, he knew what he needed. He needed time with his giant schnauzers, Grant and Sherman. Besides, his La Jolla home was empty now. On his insistence—and dime—his live-in housekeeper had taken a much-needed vacation to Maui. Angelica would've left plenty of food for them, but they'd miss human companionship.

He grabbed his car keys from the kitchen counter and avoided looking at the scattered pieces of plastic and computer chips littering his floor.

At that moment, his phone rang. Holly. He considered letting it go to voice mail.

"Hi, Holly."

"You back home?"

"Yes."

He sensed unease on the other end.

"Want to talk?"

"My TV remote lost an argument."

"I've got tons of vacation time accumulated."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You aren't asking."

"I'm okay, really."

"I'm still coming down there."

"I'll come get you."

"You're in no shape to fly anywhere. You're exhausted. I can hear it in your voice. I booked a flight earlier this afternoon. I figured Salt Lake might be kinda rough. I'll be arriving at Lindbergh tomorrow morning, just after eight." She gave him the info.

"Thanks, Holly."

"Try to get some sleep."

CHAPTER 17

He spotted Holly right away. Dressed in designer jeans and a blue silk shirt, she looked beautiful.

Holly waved and quickened her pace down the concourse.

What can she possibly see in me?

Outside the security barrier they hugged. The female TSA guard smiled. Nathan wondered if she ever got tired of seeing such reunions.

She took his arm. "You look exhausted. Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Not much. I can't get Montez out of my head. I keep thinking about Nichole Dalton and her daughters. Like a feedback loop, it keeps running again and again. I can't turn it off."

"I feel it too. When we get to your house, you're getting eight hours of uninterrupted sleep."

"Yeah, that's sounds about right."

"Do you have something you can take? Over-the-counter?"

"We'll pick something up."

Holly insisted on paying the parking fee and drove onto North Harbor Drive, heading east toward I-5.

"So what now?" Holly asked.

"Exactly." Nathan sighed. "What now? My next move is to call my father, as much as I'd prefer not to."

"I thought you'd patched things up."

"That's not it."

She waited.

"I'm worried Montez will catch wind of our pursuit and disappear forever, especially as more people get involved."

"Do you really think that's possible or even likely? Wouldn't he need someone deeply embedded at a high level of government?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't put it past him. If he's got such a source, the Dalton family is dead. He doesn't leave loose ends."

“That’s a terrible thought.”

“It kept me up most of the night, but my instincts are telling me he’s not finished yet.”

“You think he’s going after more people?”

“Yeah, I do. A lot more. Maybe we should take a closer look at Nichole Dalton’s past. Montez might be interested in someone she knows or has worked with. She’s got two daughters, but is she married? Divorced? Does she have a boyfriend? Who fathered her children?”

Holly fell silent for a moment. “It’s likely the San Diego PD has already made those types of inquiries. I wouldn’t be surprised if Henning has a copy of the police report. I’ll find out.”

He closed his eyes and rested his head.

“When we get to your house, you’re getting some sleep.”

Nathan crashed most of the day. He didn’t like losing the hours, but it couldn’t be helped. He still abided by his personal Marine Corps adage: Sleep when you can.

Now it was Holly’s turn. Curled into his shoulder, the darkness hid her face. She looked so unguarded and yet strong. Somehow this woman had slipped through his defenses. She felt like the missing piece of a puzzle. They’d talked for hours, sharing each other’s lives. Nathan had talked about his loneliness and quick temper. The nightmares. The anger and dark thoughts. The *other*. His need for privacy.

Holly had reciprocated and told him about her troubled childhood and high school years, her bout with drugs, and her tequila-shooting, can’t-remember-how-she-got-home days. She admitted to looking for love, but never finding it. It seemed they shared a few things in common.

They’d spent the day at his La Jolla home. She really loved its architecture and the collection of Civil War relics and weapons. She’d been especially taken by his dogs and vice versa. After dinner, they came over here, to his Clairemont home. She wanted to see where he spent the majority of his time. She liked this house too, said the modest scale and furnishings somehow fit him better, made him more—

The red LED on the security panel next to the front door began flashing.

Someone just tripped the motion detector in the rear yard.

The low whistle of the alarm coming from every room in his house confirmed it.

“Holly,” he whispered, giving her a firm shake.

She opened her eyes.

“We’ve got company. Someone’s in the rear yard.” Nathan put a forefinger over his lips.

She needed no other prodding. Within seconds, they were both in the bedroom, where he punched a sequence of numbers into a small gun safe on his nightstand. Holly put a hand on his back as the metal hatch silently popped open, revealing his SIG 9-millimeter. He retrieved the weapon, suppressor, and two subsonic round magazines before grabbing his night-vision scope from the nightstand drawer.

“Where’s your service weapon?” he whispered, screwing the suppressor into place.

“In my hand.”

“You’re with me. On my six.”

Dressed only in underwear, Nathan and Holly advanced down the hallway into the den, where vertical blinds covered the sliding glass doors. Standing off to the side, he cracked the slats just enough to see out. He activated his NV scope and scanned the yard.

Nothing. No movement at all.

He backed away from the blinds, returned to the hall, and stood perfectly still—listening. He inhaled deeply through his nose. No smell of anyone or anything. No faint cigarette odor, or cologne, or leather. Nothing.

He put his lips to her ear. “Stay close, I’m going to check the house.”

Knowing that any security system could be beaten—even his own—he conducted fast-moving reconnaissance, looking in every place big enough to conceal an intruder. In the living room, he picked up their clothes from the floor and tossed them into the coat closet.

The house was clear.

A second red light on the panel indicated a front yard motion detector had also been tripped. From the den, he checked the rear yard again. *There*. Two dark figures. In tactical SWAT-type gear. Moving toward the patio. In the green image of the night-vision scope, he saw they carried suppressed Heckler & Koch MP5s.

He approached the keypad by the door and turned it off. If possible, he

wanted to take one or more of them alive.

They hurried back to the bedroom.

Moving fast, he slipped into a pair of jeans, grabbed T-shirts for himself and Holly, and led her back through the house into the kitchen.

He handed Holly a shirt and put his on. "We'll hide in here," Nathan whispered, and pulled the cabinet doors open. Where there should have been pots and pans, a wide-open space loomed.

"In there?"

"Yes."

Precious seconds were wasting; he didn't have time to explain. Once they were both inside, Nathan pulled the cabinet doors closed. Holly ended up sitting with her back to one end of the cabinet with Nathan opposite her in the same position. They were enveloped in near blackness. The only source of light came through tiny holes on the cabinet veneer facing the living room.

"Nathan, what's going on?" she whispered.

He closed his eyes and concentrated. He was forgetting something, something critical. What was it? *Come on, damn it. What am I forgetting? Come on.*

Holly's purse. On the kitchen counter above them.

He opened the cabinet door, retrieved the purse, and placed it between his legs.

Low on his left, he turned the knob of a dimmer switch, adjusting it to the lowest setting before pressing the knob to activate a series of night lights plugged into wall outlets.

The tiny points of light in the cabinet face brightened.

"Peepholes," he whispered.

CHAPTER 18

He had to keep Holly calm. Yes, she was a special agent in charge of a major FBI field office, but this situation could rattle even the most battle-hardened soldier. If she made a tactical mistake, they were both dead.

“We’re protected,” he whispered. “These cabinet walls are armored with ballistic vest material. We need to stay absolutely quiet. Pretend nobody’s home. We’re just part of the furniture. Inhale deeply. Exhale slowly.”

“How can you be so calm?” she whispered back.

“No one’s home. This is an empty house. Inhale deeply, exhale slowly.”

He heard her take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m okay.”

They both heard it, a sudden crash of glass.

“They’re inside. Absolute silence from now on.” He gave her hand a squeeze and pressed his eye to a hole.

Like demons from a nightmare, four dark figures rushed into the living room.

In the ambient light, Nathan watched the laser dots sweep through the room. He hoped they were mercenaries, not federal agents. If they were feds, or US military, they’d have a much harder battle on their hands. One thing was certain, he’d never allow Holly or himself to be taken prisoner. One way or the other, this fight was to the death.

Intruders one, three, and four advanced down the hallway toward the bedrooms, moving with precision and silence. Number two stayed put and crouched down.

Number two looked directly at the cabinet where they were hiding.

He gave Holly’s hand another squeeze. After several seconds, number two looked in the other direction and froze again. Seeing nothing, number two moved to the base of the cabinet and ended up inches from Holly’s face.

He watched a red laser beam flash three times on the dining room wall. Number two painted his laser at the same spot and gave three flashes in return, predetermined signals to avoid being blown away by friendly fire.

One, three, and four emerged from the dark hallway. Two joined them for a whispered consultation. Good. They weren't feds. Feds would have used hand signals to implement one of several backup plans.

Trying to take them now, while they were all together, wouldn't work because of their ballistic vests. If he didn't score four head shots, it would be over. Be patient. Wait for a better opportunity.

One, three, and four disappeared down the hall again.

Number two advanced toward their position. When he lost sight of the gunman, he aimed his SIG at the cabinet's door. A rustle of clothing announced two's pivot around the corner. Nathan imagined the mercenary taking in the empty kitchen.

Go on. Leave. Nobody home.

It didn't happen.

Through a peephole in the cabinet's door, Nathan watched the merc crouch beside the base cabinet on the opposite side of the kitchen and begin opening doors.

They had less than twenty seconds.

He studied the man's movements and watched a pattern emerge. At each cabinet, the gunman pulled the door open while pointing his gun into the space, then closed the door. Pull. Point. Close.

His enemy was halfway through the kitchen now.

Ten seconds.

Pull. Point. Close.

Nathan took slow, deep breaths. All tension gone. *Them or us. Definitely them.*

Three seconds.

One cabinet remaining ahead of theirs.

Pull. Point. Close.

The vertical crack of light between their hiding place and the outside world expanded.

Like a slow-motion python, the black silencer of an MP5 eased toward his face.

Nathan shoved the cabinet door, knocking the man onto his haunches.

He centered his laser on two's throat and pulled the trigger.

The man jerked twice and lay still. The subsonic round wasn't completely silent, and knocking the intruder down also caused noise. It was a good bet this man's friends heard the disturbance.

He sprang out, pulling Holly with him. "Stay behind me," he whispered. The next thirty seconds stretched into a nightmarish melee of violence. One, three, and four eased down the hall, hugging the wall.

Nathan flashed his own laser three times, hoping to lure them into the open.

It worked.

Three and four entered the living room in a crouch. Visible in the dust and smoke, their lasers swept back and forth in quick motions. Using the bulletproof cabinet for cover, Nathan painted his beam on the bridge of number three's nose and squeezed off a shot. The man spun and crumpled to the floor.

Two down, two to go.

Thirteen shots remaining.

Surprising Nathan with his speed, number four emptied an entire magazine in the general direction of the shot that killed his partner. He yanked Holly down with half a second to spare.

Even suppressed, the staccato sound of the high-speed discharge ripped the air. Splinters flew. Dishes shattered. Glass flew from shelves. Pots and pans jumped and clanged. The microwave, range, and dishwasher exploded, showering Nathan and Holly with glass fragments. The countertop erupted, sending shards of granite in every direction.

Number four disappeared behind the couch.

Nathan heard him eject the empty magazine and jam another home. He had less than two seconds before a second barrage of bullets slammed into the kitchen.

He straightened up and opened fire, walking his shots along the length of the couch. From behind and above, Holly's Glock boomed, mirroring his pattern. Her non-suppressed weapon flashed like a strobe light, the reports hammering his eardrums. They were both rewarded with a loud string of Spanish obscenities, followed by another discharge of an MP5. The bullets went high, pulverizing the ceiling.

Nathan yelled, "Holly, cover fire."

She fired her Glock into the hallway to keep the fourth man from coming out. Staying in a low crouch, Nathan rushed the sofa and dived to its base. He jammed his gun underneath and fired four more shots. At the right edge of the sofa, he peered around the corner.

Number four lay on his back, shuddering, the left side of his face gone.

Three down, one to go.

Five shots left.

A sudden barrage of bullets tore down the hallway. Slugs careened off the slate floor and splintered the door leading to the garage.

A black blur dashed into the den.

Two seconds later, the wall erupted toward Nathan in a horizontal maelstrom as the remaining merc fired blindly through the wall. Something struck his head. Hard.

His vision grayed for an instant. *Damn it.* Through the haze, Nathan returned fire, emptying his magazine through the wall along the same pattern the merc had fired.

From behind, Holly's Glock boomed again. Nathan watched chest-high holes appear along the entire length of the wall.

He ejected the spent magazine, jammed a second home, and thumbed the slide release lever. The first of fifteen more rounds slammed into the breech. Feeling light-headed, he crawled across the debris field toward the den. Gun first, he peered around the corner.

The merc was gone.

Cracked pieces of glass still clung to the corners of the sliding door.

The floor was trashed with drywall dust and tempered glass fragments. He saw it then, a small, dark object several feet distant. Fighting to stay conscious, Nathan recognized its form.

A severed finger.

CHAPTER 19

Holly felt a severe stinging in her left forearm. In the dim light, she saw an area of torn flesh the size of a silver dollar. What started as a bee sting quickly turned ugly. Within seconds, the fire in her arm had doubled. By the time she stood up, it had multiplied by a factor of ten. *Damn, this thing's really bleeding.* She was pretty sure she hadn't been shot, so what had nailed her? Then she recalled the granite countertop exploding. She must've been clipped by a sharp piece. Although her arm hurt like hell, she was more concerned for Nathan.

"Nathan?"

"It's...not too bad. Just a glancing..." He didn't finish.

"Nathan?"

Holly looked around. The kitchen was trashed. What had Nathan said? *It's not too bad?* Bad? *What* wasn't too bad? She ran into the den, ignoring the pain in her arm and the debris under her bare feet. She found Nathan on his back with a dark stain spreading into the carpet under his head.

"Nathan. *Nathan!*"

His eyes opened and blinked a few times. "How long?"

She parted his hair and felt a deep cut along his scalp.

"How long?" he repeated.

"Have you been out?"

He closed his eyes.

"Ten seconds. You need a hospital."

"No hospital. No police."

"Nathan—"

"Cleaner could be coming. You can't stay."

"I'm not leaving you here."

"In the den...a severed finger."

"Severed finger?"

"Take it with you."

She felt numb. Everything had happened so fast. Tranquility had turned

into chaos. Blood splatter covered everything. The walls. Carpets. Ceiling. The room smelled of burned gunpowder, plaster dust, and the coppery salt of gore. The man she loved—*loved?*—was lying in a growing pool of his own blood.

“Nathan, I can’t leave you here.”

His head slumped to the carpet.

Part of her wanted to run. Her instinct for self-preservation was strong. She looked at the garage door. Beyond it, certain escape. She could be gone within ten seconds, fifteen at the most. She looked at the wound on her forearm. It could have been a lot worse if it weren’t for this man. She could never face herself again if she abandoned him, even if it meant her life.

Fueled by a desire to save herself *and* Nathan, she groped her way into his bedroom and noticed the bottom of her feet stung. She must’ve stepped on some broken glass. She found a necktie in his closet and a washcloth in his bathroom. She set her Glock on the bathroom counter, folded the washcloth into a small square, and covered her forearm wound. Using her other hand and her teeth, she cinched the necktie to secure the washcloth in place, careful not to make it too tight. Back in the den, she tried to rouse Nathan, but got no response.

Steeling herself against the pain in her forearm and feet, she hooked her arms under his shoulders and dragged him toward the door leading into the garage. She cried out as the torn muscles in her left arm ripped even more. She bit her lip and kept going, but the slate floor in front of the garage door was covered with broken glass and debris. She found a push broom in the garage and swept a corridor through the mess, then used the broom to prop open the door.

She dragged Nathan across the threshold, but quickly decided that dead-lifting him into his Mustang would be impossible. At six-foot-five, 240 pounds, he felt like solid iron. She’d never be able to do it.

The hand on her shoulder made her yelp in fear.

She whipped around, ready for a fight.

“*Harvey!*”

“I’ve got him. How bad is your arm?”

“How did you—”

“Later. How bad is your arm?”

“I think it’s okay, just bleeding a lot.”

“Does Nathan have any kind of spinal wound?”

“I don’t think so.”

She marveled at how easily Harvey lifted him off the garage floor and carried him out to the driveway.

“Holly, cover us.”

She crouched with her Glock and faced the dark garage. She stole a look over her shoulder as Harvey examined Nathan’s scalp wound and took his pulse. He poked Nathan in the shoulder. Hard. Nathan stirred a little and moaned. She recalled from her first-responder medical training that Harvey had just performed part of a Glasgow coma scale assessment.

Harvey looked up. “Stay alert, Holly. He’ll be okay. How many attacked you?”

“Four. One got away.”

“Wait here. I’m going to retrieve their weapons.”

“Nathan said there’s a severed finger in the den. He wants me to take it.”

“I’ll get it. Where are your spare mags?”

“The bedroom on the nightstand.”

“Nathan’s gun?”

“Near the den.”

Harvey pulled his SIG from the small of his back. “I’ll be right back. You sure you’re one hundred percent?”

She nodded.

“If anyone other than me comes back through this garage, shoot to kill. Clear?”

“Clear.”

She heard sirens approaching and figured they had less than two minutes before the scene swarmed with SDPD.

“My clothes are in the hall closet.”

“No problem. I’ll be right back. Your defensive area is the front of the house. I’ve got everything else.”

“Understood.”

Thirty seconds later Harvey returned, carrying three MP5 assault pistols, her spare magazines, clip holster, and thankfully, her clothes and shoes. He set the weapons down. “I’ll cover us while you get dressed.”

She wasted no time. Next, she clipped her service weapon holster to her belt and changed magazines in the gun. “Good to go,” she said.

“I’m going to stash these guns in my trunk. I’ll give you a warbling

whistle just before I reappear. Give me about thirty seconds.”

She watched Harvey disappear down the sidewalk. Alone now, with Nathan at her feet, she reflected on what just happened. It seemed surreal, like a Dalí painting. She had a difficult time believing it had actually happened. Sure, she was an FBI agent, but she wasn’t SWAT trained, and she’d never fired her weapon in anger, let alone killed anyone. Had she really just fought a vicious firefight against four mercenaries armed with submachine guns? She wanted to pinch herself. It seemed crazy. Everything had happened so fast. Given the circumstances, she thought she did pretty well. It seemed little consolation. Nathan was lying on the concrete, bleeding from a head wound.

Keeping her mind focused, she kept scanning Nathan’s front yard and the surrounding neighborhood for threats. A few people had turned on porch lights. The wail of approaching sirens was much closer. She heard Harvey’s whistle and called out, “Clear.”

Harvey appeared from behind a hedge separating Nathan’s property with its neighbor to the east. He hustled up to her position. “I think you should have your FBI badge out when the cavalry gets here. We’ve got less than thirty seconds. No sudden movements. We’ll let the first officer on scene take control. Let’s put our weapons on the deck and step back from them.”

The police cruiser arrived in a big hurry with its siren howling and light bar flashing. The officer killed the siren, parked in the middle of the street, and climbed out, his weapon already drawn.

“You’re on,” Harvey whispered.

Holding her badge at arm’s length, she spoke loudly and forcefully. “FBI. Special Agent in Charge, Holly Simpson, Sacramento field office.”

The officer’s response was predictable. He trained his service piece on them and closed to within twenty feet. “Keep your hands where I can see them.”

She and Harvey complied.

“We need a bus,” she added. “Blunt force head trauma. Semiconscious. Possibly a glancing bullet wound.”

“Copy that,” the officer replied, “medical is already on the way.” He spoke into his lapel mike. A second cruiser arrived from the opposite direction. Two more sirens closed in.

Holly pointed toward the house. “We’ve got three dead inside, a fourth

escaped on foot. He's armed with an assault pistol and dressed in tactical SWAT gear with a gunshot wound to his hand."

Keeping his weapon aimed at them, he again said, "Copy," and relayed the info.

Holly heard a second officer move in behind her.

"I'd like to search you for weapons and verify your identity."

"No problem, Officer. My service piece is on the ground in front of me."

He looked at Harvey, then back to her. "He with you?"

"Yes."

The cop addressed Harvey. "Your identity, please?"

"Harvey Fontana. I own First Security, Incorporated."

"The company with the radio ads?"

Harv nodded toward Nathan. "My business partner, Nathan McBride. The break-in set off an alarm that relayed to my cell phone. I wasn't far away. That's why I'm here. We've got a sensitive crime scene in there. This is an FBI-involved shooting."

"Understood. First things first. Let's get your identities verified. Then we'll secure and protect the crime scene. I want both of you to lay facedown on the ground with your arms out to your sides. We'll clear this up quickly."

She saw the officer focus on the bloody washcloth tied to her arm.

"We'll get you medical treatment and contact your San Diego field office and let them know what happened. Just let me confirm your identities and we'll get this straightened out double-quick."

"Thank you, Officer."

Twenty minutes later, the paramedics were sliding Nathan's gurney into the back of the ambulance and closing the double doors. By the time they left in Harvey's Mercedes, at least twelve SDPD cruisers had arrived on scene, interspersed with five San Diego Fire Department engines and patrol units. Three additional ambulances had also arrived. Every house within one hundred yards of ground zero was being barraged with red-and-blue stroboscopic flashes. Two news helicopters were orbiting at a safe distance while a police helicopter used its blinding spot to search the neighborhood for

the missing merc. Holly was impressed by the efficiency and professionalism of the SDPD.

She felt certain she'd hear from San Diego's SAC tonight, probably within the hour. What a paperwork nightmare. At least Nathan seemed stable and didn't appear to have too serious a head injury. He'd have to undergo all kinds of tests to make sure, but she wasn't too worried. Her throbbing arm reminded her she needed some medical attention herself. Nothing some stitches and antibiotics couldn't handle.

The ambulance pulled up to the emergency room's entrance. Harvey killed the headlights and parked behind it. Nathan waved as the paramedics pulled his gurney out. She felt her chest tighten. Even strapped to a gurney with a blood-soaked bandage around his head, Nathan had a commanding presence.

If there had been any doubt before, it was now dispelled. She loved him. How had this happened? So this was the result of letting your guard down? Now what? Should she tell him? What then? She was being too analytical and needed to trust her own words. *Let's just take things a day at a time and see what happens.*

"Holly, you still with me?"

"It's just...I've never been in a gunfight before."

"Sucks, doesn't it." It wasn't a question.

"It's not like the training."

"Let's get that arm stitched up. We can reflect on tonight's events later."

"How do you do it?"

"What?"

"Keep your cool. How do you do it? I'm shaking like a leaf right now."

"Your adrenaline rush is wearing off. It'll pass." Harvey took a deep breath and sighed. "To answer your question, I'm used to it. I've seen my share of violence and death."

"Sorry, I shouldn't have asked you that."

"I've come to terms with my past. So has Nathan. We neither dwell on it nor sweep it under the rug. You'll get over the way you're feeling. It'll just take some time."

"I guess I've always known this day might come, but this isn't how I imagined I'd feel."

"Holly, those men broke into Nathan's home in the middle of the night

with the intent to kill or capture both of you. It was them or you. What you're feeling? It's normal. It's gonna take some time, but you'll get through this. We'll talk about it later. Let's take care of that arm. I'll bet it hurts."

She looked for Nathan, but he'd already been wheeled inside. "The gunfight," she said slowly.

"What about it?"

"I wasn't afraid. I knew Nathan would protect me."

"He has that effect. Did you guys use the hiding place in the kitchen?"

"Yes."

"I've got one too. Big enough to hold my entire family. Come on, let's get your arm stitched up."

CHAPTER 20

Alone in the dark. The way Montez liked it. The darkness felt warm, like an embrace from an old friend. He stood up from the sofa and stepped out to the deck. After firing up a Cohiba, he leaned his head back and let the smoke meander out of his mouth. He liked this cabin. Liked its view of Bass Lake and its proximity to Yosemite National Park. Yosemite held a special place in his heart. He liked its waterfalls and towering granite walls. He found the park beautiful and fascinating—maybe he'd purchase property here someday, maybe even this cabin.

Arturo's surveillance in Bullfrog Bay had yielded positive results. He congratulated himself for having the foresight to leave someone behind to watch the old fool's houseboat. It had been too risky to clean up the site of Kramer's interrogation, but worthwhile leaving a set of eyes and ears for any follow-up snoops. And sure enough, an FBI agent and a couple of hard-looking thugs had poked their noses into things. The tail numbers of the helicopter led to a company in San Diego called First Security, Inc. The owners of record were Nathan McBride and Harvey Fontana. Getting home addresses had proven to be a problem. There were no public records on either of them. Nothing. His right-hand man, Arturo, had suggested pursuing the airport angle, specifically the leased hangar where the helicopter was kept at Montgomery Field. Arturo's insight had been brilliant. A late-night burglary yielded a file containing pay dirt: a credit application, complete with personal information that included a residential address for someone named Nathan McBride.

Montez wished he knew more than just the man's name. Who was Nathan McBride? What was his story? And why was he involved? Maybe First Security was a shell company. McBride could be a covert intelligence agent. Probably was. He hoped tonight's operation would lead to some answers. His men had orders to take McBride alive if possible. But if things went south, they were to kill him, conduct a quick search of his house, and get out. He had little doubt Nathan McBride would be a challenging

interrogation subject and—

The trill of his cell interrupted his thoughts. He checked the number and answered. “I’ll call you back on the landline in fifteen seconds.” He placed his cigar in an ashtray and went inside. On the keypad of the small encryption unit connected to the cabin’s phone, he entered a numeric sequence and waited for the confirming beep. Satisfied, he dialed his man back and asked, “Are you secure?”

“Yes.”

“Report.”

“We were ambushed. It smelled like a tip-off.”

“Specify.”

“I think the target knew we were coming and set a trap for us.”

“Damage?”

“This guy was good. He killed my team armed with only a handgun. I lost half a finger.”

“Why do you think you were set up? You knew the man owned a security company. Didn’t you see an alarm system?”

“We didn’t see or hear anything except for a security keypad next to the front door, but it wasn’t armed.”

“It wasn’t armed?”

“No, sir. It was dark, no lights at all. I’m pretty sure the target was hiding in the kitchen. I heard a second handgun, a large caliber.”

“The target wasn’t alone?”

“No, sir.”

“Who was with him?”

“A woman. I only got a brief glance.”

“A woman?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You’re sure about the second handgun?”

“There were two distinct discharge sounds. One was suppressed, the other wasn’t.”

Montez paused. “Could the target have been firing both guns?”

“I heard him call for cover fire.”

“What exactly did he say?”

“He said, ‘Holly, cover fire.’ Whoever Holly is, I’m pretty sure it was one of her rounds that took my finger off.”

“*Holly*, eh? Good work. Are you at the safe house?”

“Yes.”

“Stay where you are until you hear from me again. I’ll make sure your finger is cared for.”

“Thank you, sir.”

This development was unfortunate. He should have known this target might prove too difficult for his men to take alive, but they should’ve at least succeeded in killing him.

One thing was certain. A very serious man was hunting him, all because of the botched Kramer disposal. He shook his head, thinking back to Lake Powell. What were the odds? It had to be thousands-to-one. The dump site for Kramer had been remote and, quite frankly, a logical spot. He couldn’t have known anyone would see it, especially at that late hour. He hadn’t been careless, just unlucky.

What’s done was done. No complex plan was ever executed flawlessly. What was the American expression? *Shit happens?* For now, Montez remained in control, but he needed to implement the next phase of his plan and grab Kramer’s contact, Duane Dalton. If he played his cards right, he’d ensure his financial *and* personal security into the foreseeable future. The five hundred grand being squeezed out of Dalton would merely be a down payment. His sights were on a much bigger number. Twenty million. Perhaps more. *Real money.*

He retrieved a beer from the refrigerator.

If all went well, he’d have Dalton soon. Although he now believed Dalton himself hadn’t ordered the assassination attempt in Tobago, he needed to be 100 percent sure. Extracting that information would be relatively straightforward and simple, especially since he had the man’s ex-wife and daughters as leverage. But he didn’t have an unlimited amount of time. How long could he safely stay in the United States? A week? Maybe ten days? The FBI had ample resources. Sooner or later they’d catch up with him. The failed attempt to capture McBride meant he’d need to accelerate his plans. He’d have to conduct an expedited interrogation of Dalton. He’d performed many quick interrogations during his career because most of them had to be fairly brisk. Information was usually time sensitive. It was rare to have as much time as he wanted. Rare, but satisfying. Rushing an interrogation was like swigging down an expensive bottle of wine. Such experiences were meant to be savored, especially that magical moment when a victim breaks down and sobs, not from the pain, but from knowing they’ve been beaten

spiritually. Such was the fruit of unconditional victory and it tasted good.

Montez knew he was many things, but a sexual deviant wasn't one of them. He'd never interrogated a single victim—male or female—with sexual torture. The mere threat usually did the trick. Such sloppy techniques were conducted by rank amateurs with sick, perverse minds. The true art of interrogation didn't employ sexual humiliation. It involved the systematic peeling away of a victim's layers of comfort and control until the naked core was exposed. Only then was total victory achieved. Such skills were extremely rare. Only a handful of people in the world possessed them.

Montez hated mediocrity, hated it with a passion. He had no tolerance for lazy slobs who drifted through life doing the minimum to get by. Interrogating rat-bags like that offered little or no challenge at all. Like children, they broke quickly under pressure. He'd interrogated children only a few times, and in each case it had been easy. Nothing physical had been needed. Fear alone sufficed, as it often does, even with adults. Fear was the most effective tool to use against spineless subjects, while humiliation tended to be most effective against the strong-willed. Obstinate, stubborn subjects were without doubt the most challenging, but at the same time, the most rewarding.

He shook his head. Now wasn't the time for this self-indulgence.

Control remained his. He had Dalton's family securely guarded in a secret location, and they'd stay that way for as long as he needed them. And when they weren't needed anymore?

He took another hit of beer and smiled.

CHAPTER 21

Where was he?

Daylight filtered in through vertical blinds. *A hospital room.*

Nathan sensed a presence in the room and tried to focus. Slowly, the image materialized into a woman with graying blonde hair and blue eyes behind glasses. Grangeland? No, she didn't wear glasses and the hair wasn't right.

"I'm Dr. Rosson. You're in a hospital room recovering from surgery. How do you feel, Mr. McBride?"

"Thirsty. Please, call me Nathan."

She handed him a cup of water with a straw.

He took a sip. "Thank you. How long have I been out?"

"Off and on for eight hours."

"Eight hours."

"The first half was mostly from anesthesia recovery. We kept waking you for neurological tests."

"They kept asking me questions and looking at my eyes."

"It's part of monitoring your level of consciousness. The bullet missed your skull by an eyelash, but it carved a three-inch groove through your scalp. I cut clean edges and stapled the two margins together. It's similar to a brow lift that a plastic surgeon performs. Your left sideburn will be a little higher than the right, but it won't be that noticeable. You also sustained a simple concussion, but there's nothing simple about it. Do you feel any nausea?"

"Not at all. Good thing the bullet hit me in the head, I could've been seriously injured."

She half laughed. "You *are* seriously injured. I've seen my share of gunshot wounds. You're fortunate to be alive. Guardian angel?"

"Dumb luck."

"Let me know if you begin to experience any nausea, dizziness, visual problems, or prolonged headaches."

He stared at the ceiling while she listened to his heart and lungs.

“Deep breath, please...again...one more time...” She tucked the stethoscope into her coat pocket.

“You have some unusual scars on your body. May I assume you didn’t get them learning to eat with a knife and fork?”

He managed a smile. “Yes, that’s a fair assumption.”

She waited for more.

“I lost a bet.”

“Naturally. You have visitors. Feel up to having some company? I get the distinct impression they’re pretty important. One of them is a United States senator from New Mexico.”

“No kidding?”

“He seemed quite concerned when I spoke to him a few minutes ago. He must have grilled me for five minutes about your condition.”

“What makes you think the others are VIPs?”

“Let’s just say this hospital looks as though the president’s here to take a tour. Lots of business suits with bulges, if you catch my drift.”

“I’m intrigued.”

“You must be a very important person yourself.”

“Nope, just an everyday joe.”

“Right...”

“Trust me, I’m nobody special.”

Dr. Rosson smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. “Well, Mr. Nobody Special, I’m going to bring in your guests.”

“You’ve got nice bedside manner, Doctor.”

“Thank you. Think you can avoid any gunfights for the next few weeks?”

“Absolutely.”

“You sure about the visitors?”

“Yes.”

“Good, because that senator I mentioned? He’s extremely worried about you. Like a father might be about his son.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Your eyes.”

“It’s not common knowledge. Will you keep it that way?”

“Of course.”

“Is Harvey out there too?”

“Mr. Fontana? He’s done everything but pitch a tent outside your door.”

“Yeah, that’s Harv, all right. How’s Holly Simpson doing?”

“She’ll be fine. She’s outside with Mr. Fontana.”

“I need to use the head.” He swung his legs out of the bed and sat up.
The world spun.

“Slowly, please.”

“I’m okay.”

“Navy or marines?”

“What makes you think I was in the service?”

“You said *head*, not ‘bathroom.’”

“Marines.”

“I’ll bet you could tell a few campfire stories.”

“A few.”

Dr. Rosson grasped his arm firmly as he stood. “Any dizziness?”

“None.” It wasn’t entirely true, but he wasn’t going to say anything that might prolong his stay.

“I want you sit down when you use the toilet. Use the rails to steady yourself. I’ll be right out here.”

“No problem, Doctor.”

Inside the bathroom he used the mirror to examine the wound. It looked just as Dr. Rosson had described. A three-inch-long incision—closed with a dozen, quarter-inch-long staples—marred his head just forward of his left ear. Surprisingly, his hair wasn’t shaved around the wound. He’d have to ask about that sometime. Overall, it didn’t look too bad. Then again, compared to his scarred face, what would?

As instructed, he sat down to relieve himself and sighed. In hindsight, it had been foolish, perhaps even reckless, to spend the night in his Clairemont house. He should’ve stayed in La Jolla with Holly. Whoever attacked him probably knew about his La Jolla home as well. The end result would’ve been the same, except that his La Jolla home would be trashed rather than Clairemont. All things being equal, he preferred the latter. The thought of armed thugs breaking into his La Jolla home really frosted him. They would’ve had to kill Grant and Sherman—there’d be no other way to get past his dogs. Maybe they *had* killed his dogs. What if they’d gone there first?

“You okay in there?”

“I’ll be right out.” He washed his hands and ran a warm washcloth over his face.

Dr. Rosson helped him get back into bed. “I’d like to leave as soon as possible. No offense.”

“None taken. I’ll sign your release, but only on the condition you take it easy for a few weeks. I’m serious. If you jar your brain again...”

“Understood.”

“No driving for a few days either.”

That wouldn’t be a problem. Nathan disliked driving anyway. “Thank you for patching me up, Doctor.”

Alone, he looked at the IV plugged into his wrist and waited. Whoever was out there would be walking through the door in moments.

CHAPTER 22

Senator Stone McBride entered his room and shut the door. Nathan's father radiated confidence and leadership, even with a concerned expression, although today his usual suit and tie had been replaced with tan slacks and a cobalt sweater.

Nathan smiled to ease the tension.

"How are you feeling?"

"All things being equal, not too bad. Thanks for coming. How's Mom?"

"She wanted to be here, but her hip is still bothering her. She's a nervous wreck, though. Truth be told, so am I."

"I'll call her later."

"I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

"My La Jolla home, my dogs—"

Stone held up a hand. "They're fine, but they proved to be a bit of a problem. They wouldn't let anyone get out of their vehicles. Harvey took care of it. He imprinted the two federal agents to them."

"FBI?"

"They're watching your house as we speak."

"Who else is out there?"

"I'll let you see for yourself." Stone opened the door a crack and nodded.

Two people in dark business suits stepped in. One man. One woman. They were roughly the same height, but the woman looked ten years younger. Nathan knew she was in her early fifties. Attractive and alluring. Perhaps it was her eyes. He liked her, but wouldn't give that up. Both had graying hair and both looked all business. The woman's hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Stone closed the door.

Nathan pushed himself up to a more upright sitting position. He felt somewhat insecure dressed only in a hospital gown. "To what do I owe this honor?"

The man said, "I take it you recognize one or both of us?"

He did. Standing in front of him were two presidential appointees. Director Ethan Lansing of the FBI and CIA Director Rebecca Cantrell. Cantrell stepped forward and offered her hand. Warm, but firm. Lansing also shook hands.

“You didn’t bring balloons.”

Cantrell smiled.

“I’d like to have Harvey and SAC Simpson present, please.”

Cantrell looked at Lansing, who shook his head no.

Nathan leaned back and looked out the window. “Well, thank you both for coming.”

“Nathan, please,” Stone said. “Directors Cantrell and Lansing have included me because I gave them my word this discussion would be kept confidential. Please hear them out.”

Cantrell said, “You were shot in the head last night. How about a compromise? Since Mr. Fontana has the same DOD security clearance as you, I’ll allow him to participate. But for national security reasons, SAC Simpson can’t be part of this discussion.”

National security reasons? What was Montez up to?

Stone stepped out and returned a few seconds later with Harvey in tow.

“How’re you feeling, partner?”

“What’s one more scar?”

Cantrell continued. “Our people didn’t attack you last night.”

“I didn’t think they had. Are any of our vehicles or homes bugged?”

“Not by us. I’m well aware of your past,” Cantrell said. “You’re an unsung hero, Mr. McBride. Very few people outside of this room know what you went through.”

“If you’re here to ask me—us—to back off, I’m afraid the answer’s no. And please call me Nathan.”

Lansing made brief eye contact with his father. “That’s not why we’re here. And I owe you an apology over the Bridgestone business.”

“Accepted. You did what you thought best at the time. I don’t second-guess people, especially people under pressure, and I don’t hold grudges.”

“That’s quite gracious of you. I’m not sure I’d be so forgiving.”

“I’m a chip off the old block.”

Stone said, “Thank you, Nathan. I consider that very high praise.”

Lansing continued. “We’re in a delicate situation here. I’ve talked it over with Director Cantrell and we’ve decided it’s better if we don’t work

against each other. There's too much at stake."

"Would you care to elaborate?"

Cantrell exchanged a glance with Lansing. "First off," she said, "I need to tell you there's more going on than we can share. We *can* tell you that our two agencies are conducting a joint operation, both at home and abroad. The ATF and DEA are also involved. We want Montez as badly as you do, but we want him alive."

Nathan started to object.

Stone held up a hand. "Hear them out."

Cantrell pulled a chair over and sat down. "Have you ever wondered why Montez ended your interrogation so suddenly?"

He had, many times. When he'd last seen Montez, he'd been at death's door. He remembered seeing Montez leave the jungle camp and assumed it would only be for a few hours or the rest of the day. But Montez never came back. During the long months of debriefing, mental therapy, and physical rehabilitation that followed—and the decade and a half since—Nathan had never been able to answer that simple question. Why did Montez stop torturing him and abruptly disappear?

"This won't be easy for you, but what I'm about to say never leaves this room. Ever."

Nathan said nothing, waiting.

"Although Montez was never able to get your identity or what agency you worked for, he had his suspicions. It didn't require a leap of logic to conclude you were working for the US government. He made contact with the CIA after your second week of captivity."

He spoke slowly, deliberately. "Are you telling me the CIA knew I was alive?"

"Yes."

"And they didn't mount a rescue?"

"We couldn't risk sending in more teams to look for you. Your location wasn't known. You became Montez's insurance policy."

"Insurance policy? For what?"

"We paid him off to stop interrogating you, keep quiet, and let you go. We also agreed not to pursue him. Eight million dollars to a numbered account of his choice. Half paid immediately, the other half when we had you back."

"He never released me. He left me there to die."

“We can only speculate on why he didn’t keep the second part of his bargain. He probably left the camp to secure his first four million and figured that was enough and shouldn’t push his luck by returning. We may never know. We *do* know that he kept our presence in Nicaragua secret.” She looked at Stone, then back to him. “Officially, no direct US military involvement in Nicaragua’s civil war was ever authorized by the president or Congress. More than that, no intervention of *any* kind was authorized. If it had leaked, it would’ve been an international scandal of epic proportions. The Iran-Contra scandal wasn’t that distant and the media never got their pound of flesh. The media wanted Reagan’s head on a silver platter. Knowledge of direct US military involvement in Nicaragua might have brought down the Clinton administration. Although Operation Echo was fully justified and stopped countless innocents from being kidnapped, tortured, and executed, it wouldn’t have mattered. Montez could’ve caused major PR damage to us. But he didn’t. He never revealed our boots-on-the-ground training squads or the sniper teams that were mopping up the Sandinista holdouts. When Harvey rescued you, the dynamics changed, but we paid Montez the second half of his money anyway. Hush money, so to speak.”

“You keep saying ‘we’ and ‘our.’ All of this happened on Director Kallstrom’s watch.”

“That’s true, but I was the associate deputy director at the time. Number three in the chain of command. I was neck-deep.”

He looked at his dad.

“I didn’t know any of this until a few hours ago.”

“It’s the truth. There’s no paper on any of it. And there are probably aspects of the Montez negotiation I’m not aware of. I think it’s fair to say that you’re the only reason former Director Kallstrom agreed to tell me what he did. He still has tremendous admiration for both of you.”

“It makes me sick to my stomach knowing Montez was paid eight million dollars, but I’m also grateful. I’m not sure I could’ve held out much longer. He was damned close to breaking me. Or ending it.”

“I read your debrief report. You said he disappeared suddenly *before* his men suspended you in the cage. He could’ve killed you before he left the camp, especially if he never intended to collect the other half of the eight million. So why didn’t he?”

“I seriously doubt seeing me crucified was worth half his fortune.”

“Agreed.”

"I'd love to...ask him that question."

"You just might get your chance."

"I'm counting on it."

"We've continued to honor our deal with him." Cantrell held up her hands. "Before you say anything, let me explain. We have to look at the bigger picture. The truth is, we have similar deals in place all over the world. We don't want to undermine our credibility, *and* we don't know what sleeper measures Montez has in place to release the Nicaraguan info should he disappear. If those exchange students hadn't seen Kramer's body go into Lake Powell, we wouldn't be talking right now."

"But hasn't he broken the deal by killing a US citizen on our soil?" Harv asked.

"At the risk of sounding callous, no. Our deal didn't specify anything other than his silence in exchange for the money and our promise not to pursue him."

"Are you telling me Nicaragua still means that much?"

"In some circles, yes," she said.

Nathan made eye contact with Harv. *What else has Montez got on the CIA?* "So short of spilling the beans about Nicaragua, he has carte blanche to do anything he wants? Is that what you're telling us?"

She looked at his father and Lansing. No one said anything.

"Well, Director Cantrell, Harv and I have no such agreement, and we aren't operations officers anymore. Your deal is to leave him alone, not be bodyguards for him."

"It's not that simple. Montez won't differentiate the specifics. All he'll know is that someone's after him. He'll assume it's us."

"Why? I'm sure he's got enemies all over the world. It could be anyone."

"That's true, of course, but we can't risk it."

"So as far as you're concerned, Montez just walks?"

"The dynamics have changed. We now want him in custody for questioning."

"You haven't mentioned Nichole Dalton and her daughters. What's he doing to them as we speak? How long will they be valuable to him? *Why* are they valuable to him?" Nathan looked back and forth between Cantrell and Lansing. "There could be dozens or even hundreds of people at risk because of him. And you can't tell us anything more about your dealings with

Montez?”

“Nathan, I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Stone took a step forward. “Nathan—”

He held up a hand. “Okay, I get it. So where does this leave us?”

“Here’s what I propose,” she said. “We can’t stop you from pursuing him, so we won’t try. But we’ll neither help nor hinder you. You’re on your own. If he captures you and forces you to talk, you can honestly tell him that you’re not working for us.”

“That’s a lovely thought.”

“I’m not trying to be callous, just realistic.”

“Suppose we find him first?”

Cantrell and Lansing looked at each other again. “There are people in important positions who are skeptical about your willingness to deliver Montez alive if you find him before we do.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“Yes, I know. The NSA’s director called me. General Hawthorne was ordered to back off and not get involved.” She paused and slowed her speech for emphasis. “We need Montez alive. If he’s got a sleeper system in place to release damaging info upon a prolonged absence, we need to wring it out of him.”

“How did he find out where I live?”

“If you’re thinking he’s got a mole within our government, it’s a possibility, but we don’t think so.”

“Then how?”

“We can’t say for sure.” She looked at Director Lansing.

“We think it has to do with your trip to Lake Powell,” said Lansing.

Nathan squinted. *Lake Powell?*

Lansing continued. “The man you visited, the houseboat owner?”

Nathan recalled his name. “Lars Stiegler.”

“He’s missing, presumed dead. Sheriff’s deputies found blood spatter evidence inside his houseboat. Whoever killed him made an attempt to clean it up, but Kane County deputies used BlueStar and found trace evidence all over the place.”

Damn. Nathan had liked the crusty war vet. And now he was dead. Because of his hunt for Montez.

“We’re pretty sure he was interrogated,” said Lansing. “Did you tell

him who you were?”

“I gave him my name, Harv’s too. I didn’t think—” Nathan stopped.

“What?” Cantrell asked.

“Harv, the guy on the dock. The fisherman in overalls.”

“Oh hell,” Harv said.

“What fisherman? What are you talking about?”

“We saw a guy fishing on the dock near Stiegler’s houseboat slip. Hispanic, kinda tough looking.” Nathan pursed his lips and shook his head. “The tail numbers,” he said. “Our mystery fisherman must’ve seen the tail numbers of our helicopter and traced it back to First Security.”

“Is that where it’s registered?” Cantrell asked.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“We’ll take care of that right away,” Lansing said. He pulled a small notepad and pen from his coat pocket. “We’ll hide your two helicopters within our system.”

“Thank you, Director, but this still doesn’t explain how he got my home address. All of our employees are super careful about protecting our personal information.”

“I’ll ask around the office and see what I can dig up,” Harv said. “It’s possible someone got careless. We certainly did.”

An uneasy silence took the room.

Cantrell leaned forward in her chair. “Both Director Lansing and I cleared our calendars to come here in person because of your distinguished service record, not because of who your father is. We can’t sanction your direct involvement in finding Montez, but we won’t undermine your efforts either. What we’re asking is twofold. Keep me personally informed of your efforts, and consider the bigger picture.”

“As in not killing him?”

“Yes.”

“Assuming we have anything to report, how will we contact you?”

“I’ll give you my personal cell number. Use a public phone and identify yourself as Echo Five.”

He took the number but said nothing.

“We wouldn’t be here if we didn’t think we could trust you,” Cantrell said. “I hope that trust goes both ways.”

After Cantrell and Lansing left the room, Stone sat down. "That was some news. I'm glad to hear they at least tried to get you back from Nicaragua. I'm not taking the credit, but I put a lot of pressure on Director Kallstrom. I met with him in person half a dozen times. He never mentioned the Montez payoff."

Nathan still felt stunned. *Montez paid off? By the CIA?*

"Nathan, I would've told you."

"I know. And I've been wanting to tell you I'm sorry about that phone call last year. The things I said. I didn't mean it. I know you did everything you could."

"Already forgotten."

Nathan leaned his head back. "I'm not sure where we stand. Seems we're on our own as far as their joint operation is concerned. At least we don't have to worry about anyone undermining us."

"So they say," Harv said under his breath.

"I strongly recommend you keep Cantrell informed of everything you're doing," said Nathan's father. "You could get caught in a friendly fire situation."

Nathan didn't respond.

"I've arranged with Lansing to secure both of your homes. Several FBI agents will be assigned to watch them until this situation is resolved."

"Thank you, Stone," Harvey said. "My family's already secure. General Hawthorne has them in a safe house back east."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"If Hawthorne was given an order to stop actively supporting us, it came from the navy, which probably means the secretary of defense gave the order. There's no telling how far up this Montez business goes."

"That's quite a development. I know both of those men well. You want me to make contact?"

As chairman of the Senate Committee on Domestic Terrorism, his father had unfettered 24-7 access to ranking members of the intelligence community.

"We're on our own unless you're willing to help."

"Of course I'll help," said Stone.

"I don't want you to jeopardize your Senate seat over this."

"Nonsense. I have the president's ear. If I have to, I'll go straight to him."

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Four armed mercenaries just tried to kill my son and the special agent in charge of Sacramento’s field office. Yes, I’m sure.”

“Montez has proven to be a resourceful man. He discovered where I live, not an easy trick. I don’t want him going after you and Mom.”

“I have two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star, and a Medal of Honor. Do I *look* worried? I’ll call you as soon as I know anything. I don’t need to say this, but you two need to be extra careful from now on. Trust no one except me and Cantrell. Don’t forget to call your mother. She’s worried sick.” His dad winked. “SAC Simpson seems equally concerned.”

Harv cleared his throat.

“I take it this isn’t a subject you want to discuss further?”

“You take it correctly. I’d like to spend a few minutes alone with her.”

“She’s just outside, along with several SDPD officers and FBI agents. This hospital looks like the president himself is taking a tour. Be careful how much you share with her, Nathan. Information of this nature is dangerous.”

CHAPTER 23

Holly entered his hospital room, no doubt having been fully grilled by Lansing. Her bandaged forearm—suspended in a sling—looked serious. As if walking with a cane wasn't bad enough.

She sat on the edge of his bed, leaned over, and hugged him. He smelled a trace of her favorite perfume, Light Blue. "How are you feeling?"

"When I said I had vacation time coming, I hadn't thought it would involve a gunfight to the death. I can't stop thinking about it."

"It'll be with you for a long time."

"Your first time?"

"Yeah, I lost some sleep. Harv too. It was our first mission in Nicaragua. We took out a vicious sadist who deserved to die, and I thought that would make it easier, but it didn't. I can still see his chest explode when the bullet struck. It was a twelve-hundred-yard shot with a Barrett M eighty-two, fifty-caliber. I felt it deeper than I wanted to. Last night was different, Holly. There's no way to know whose bullets did the actual killing, yours or mine. It doesn't matter."

She didn't say anything.

"I'm convinced those mercs were there to take us prisoner. If we hadn't fought back, Montez would be torturing us right now. We've got nothing to feel guilty about."

"I suppose you're right."

"I *am* right. Your mind will go through slideshows of last night's action. It's normal, don't fight it. You'll relive it many times. The visuals, the sounds and smells. Let them work through."

They remained quiet for a few moments.

"How's your head?" she asked at last.

"Truthfully, I've got a blinding headache, but otherwise, not too bad. How's the arm?"

"What's one more scar?"

"I said the same thing to Harv. Did you get a chance to talk to my dad?"

“At length.”

“I’m in trouble.”

She smiled. “I’m not sure what I expected, but he’s really quite charming.”

“Stone McBride has a friendly smile when he wants something and an unfriendly smile when he doesn’t get it.”

“Don’t all politicians?”

“Amen to that.”

“What did Lansing and Cantrell say?”

Nathan decided to tell her the truth. “They wanted to be sure Harv and I knew that Montez is full of potentially damaging information that could smear the country if he’s killed. Sleeper measures. They want him alive.”

“So they can do their own interrogation on him?”

“That was the gist. Cantrell wants to stay in the loop with everything we do. I didn’t mention our knowledge of the Hungarian clean coal business. What would be the point? She probably wouldn’t confirm or deny it anyway. She wasn’t telling me much, that’s for sure.”

“Doesn’t this attack on us change everything?” she asked. “Montez knows you’re after him now. Do you think he knows it’s you? I mean, you personally, from your time in Nicaragua?”

“That’s a good question. I suppose if he knew it was me, he’d be quite concerned.”

“Because he’d think you’d want revenge?”

“People like Montez live their lives looking over their shoulders.”

“He must have lots of enemies.”

“He does. Lansing thinks he found me because Harv and I were blown in Bullfrog Bay. I hate to admit it, but I agree. There was a guy on the dock, fishing near Stiegler’s houseboat. He wasn’t that close, maybe twenty yards, but I think Montez left him there to keep an eye on things. If that guy got a zoomed photo of me, all bets are off. He’ll recognize me for sure. But since I never gave him my real identity down there, I’m hoping that Nathan McBride is just another name to him.”

“So what’s next?”

“Have you come up with anything new about Nichole Dalton and her contacts? Husband, boyfriends, coworkers?”

“Actually, the only thing interesting about Nichole Dalton is what we *haven’t* found.”

“How’s that?”

“It’s been kind of tricky looking into her background. I was worried that sooner or later, Lansing would order me to back off, like what happened to Hawthorne. So now I’m wondering why he hasn’t.”

“Three words.”

“Three words?”

“Senator Stone McBride.”

“You’re thinking they had a chat on the flight out here?”

“Count on it.”

“I know your father’s an influential man, but is he *that* influential?”

“He’s chair of the CDT. His group oversees all matters related to domestic terrorism, and the FBI is primarily a domestic organization. He’s also a ranking member of the Senate Committee on Finance. So yeah, he’s that influential. Now what *haven’t* you found on Nichole Dalton?”

“A husband. Or even a father of her daughters.”

“No one?”

“There are no public records on a Mr. Dalton at all. Of course, we don’t know if that would be his last name. So we decided to go right to the source. My San Diego counterpart sent agents over to Nichole Dalton’s residence to comb the place, but they found nothing. And I mean *nothing*. No wedding pictures, no birth certificates for their kids, no wedding or divorce papers. No files or documents of any kind indicating a father for her children. Nothing.”

“*Somebody* impregnated Nichole Dalton,” said Nathan. “Twice. It sounds to me like he’s a spook. Since Ms. Dalton works for the NSA, it seems reasonable she’d cross paths with them now and then. She could’ve hit it off with one. If so, why is Montez going to all this trouble to get his hands on him, assuming the father’s the real target? If we’re right, then Montez wants the father alive to wring info out of him. He’s an interrogator, not an assassin.”

“That’s true.”

“Everything points toward this clean coal negotiation in Hungary. It’s a small piece of the world’s energy scene, but any threat to OPEC’s oil production raises red flags. Everything we do depends on oil. Everything. Wars are fought over it.”

“Sounds like a question for your father.”

“I’ve asked him to poke around and see what he can find.”

Holly took his hand. “I have some bad news. I have to leave. Lansing

made it clear he doesn't want me in close proximity to you for a while."

"Don't tell me he expects you to return to work."

"I have to be debriefed first. Then I'll need to be cleared to resume active duty by my physician *and* a bureau shrink. I'll be on leave, officially, but I can't spend it near you."

"He's right. It's reasonable to assume there'll be another attempt to kill or capture me. I'd feel a whole lot better knowing I didn't have to worry about you."

"It feels like I'm abandoning you."

"You aren't."

"Well, I'm going to put my recovery time to good use. So far, nothing has turned up in Bullfrog Bay, evidence-wise. The dead mercenaries from last night are being processed and printed as we speak by the San Diego ME. I'm going to glean what we can from them. We're also printing the severed finger and doing accelerated DNA analysis on it. Same with the other three dead men."

"Any idea how long all that will take?"

"The prints are being run through the IAFIS and Interpol databases as we speak. Turnaround time can vary. It's usually no more than twenty-four hours. We're checking the DNA profiles through CODIS. That's also about a twenty-four-hour turnaround."

"CODIS?" he asked.

"It stands for our *combined DNA indexing system*. There're millions of profiles in it. Many Interpol member countries are also using the CODIS program. We can reach well beyond our own borders."

"Sounds high-tech."

"It is. High-speed computers have really improved turnaround time. But with all such systems, they're only as good as the people operating them. We've got a great team in our lab at Quantico."

"No doubt. When are you leaving for Sacramento?"

"Within the hour. I'm flying up there with Lansing in the Lear. He wants a tour of our renovated field office. There's a bright side to all of this," she said.

"What's that?"

"Grangeland. She's not going anywhere."

"Speaking of, where *is* she?"

"I gave her the day off."

“Smart move, given who’s in town.”

“I’m not comfortable concealing her involvement, but I’m more uncomfortable not having her support you. She’ll get in touch. Or you can call her.”

“Well, I guess this is good-bye for now.”

“Nathan...”

“I know. I promise, no unnecessary risks.”

“I hate good-byes.”

“Me too.”

“I’ll call if anything turns up on the dead mercs.”

She gave him a kiss and a gentle embrace, then left the room.

Nathan leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Why had Holly become so important to him?

The answer scared him.

CHAPTER 24

For the second time in as many days, Nathan awoke feeling disoriented and parched.

Quickly he got his bearings. His La Jolla home. On the floor. In his bedroom. Grant and Sherman at his side.

He reached up to his nightstand and grabbed the bottled water. The clock indicated 1910 hours. He thought about Nichole Dalton's daughters. Too much time was passing. He needed to get moving. He sat up too quickly and the room spun.

"Easy, partner."

Harv. He focused on the chair near the closet. "How long?"

"A few hours."

"You been sitting there the entire time?"

"I've been catching up on some reading. You know, you could've slept in your bed. No one would hold it against you. You were shot in the head."

"Don't remind me. Is that a pistol in your lap?"

"Don't get excited."

"Are the SWAT guys still here?"

"Yes. Apparently, they're not going anywhere. I guess our reputation precedes us. Holly said they had more volunteers than they could handle from the San Diego field office alone once the word got out that the Lone Ranger had been shot. You could've ducked, you know?"

Nathan stood, feeling stiff and sore.

"Do you feel nauseous at all?"

"I'm fine." He squinted in thought.

"What?"

"The dead mercs from last night."

"What about them?"

"I want to see the bodies."

"Why?"

"We might be able to confirm they were Montez's men."

“You have doubts about that?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“What you need is more bed rest. That bullet rang your bell pretty good. You look like shit.”

“Quit mincing words.”

“You look like hammered shit on a cold lawn.”

“Let’s get serious,” Nathan said.

“I am serious.”

Nathan shook his head. “Three words. Nichole Dalton’s daughters.”

Harv’s grin vanished. “Right. I’ll call the ME.”

“Just like that? And he’ll see us?”

A trace of a smile returned. “As I recall, we installed a heavily discounted security system in his house last year. I think he’ll take my call.”

Dr. David Phelps didn’t like opening his facility after hours, but softened when Harv explained the situation was “life-and-death urgent.” Harv suggested one of Phelps’s other technicians could meet them, but Phelps thought that would be bad form and said he would handle it personally. They agreed to meet at the front entrance of the new facility. Harv told Phelps they’d be in a blue Mercedes sedan.

“I feel bad about dragging Phelps down here at this hour,” Nathan said.

Harv turned left on Overland Avenue from Clairemont Mesa Boulevard. “No, you don’t.”

“You’re right, I don’t. I feel silly wearing this ball cap. It makes me feel like a redneck.”

Harv said nothing.

“Very funny.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Let’s get this over with. You know how much I love meeting new people.”

“Relax, just be yourself.”

“That’s what scares me.”

They parked and saw Phelps standing near the entrance.

Harv took the lead. “Hi, Doctor, this is Nathan McBride, my business

partner.”

“Mr. McBride.”

“Pleasure,” he said, pumping hands. At least the man didn’t stare at his face. “Please call me Nathan. Sorry to drag you down here in the middle of the night.”

“Don’t worry about it, I know how these things go.”

Harvey asked, “How’s the new security system working out for you?”

“Great. It’s super easy to use. I really like the cell phone link. I can scroll through all the cameras right on my BlackBerry. It’s amazing.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“We promise to make this brief,” Harv said.

“May I ask why you’re viewing the bodies?”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t.”

“I see.”

From Phelps’s tone, Nathan knew he didn’t like being in the dark. “We don’t like being secretive. Sorry.”

“You guys don’t owe me an apology or an explanation. I agreed to this with no strings attached. As far as I’m concerned, your business is your business.”

“Thank you, Doctor. We appreciate it.”

“No problem.”

The main autopsy room looked and smelled similar to Salt Lake City’s, only bigger and more modern. Stainless-steel tables. Sinks. Glass cabinets. Rolling workstations. Desks with computers, and cool air. Nathan again wondered how they did it—worked with dead bodies for a living.

Phelps led them into a large walk-in cooler, turned on the lights, and closed the door. Modular stainless-steel shelving units lined the walls. Black body bags occupied several slots.

“These three,” Phelps said. He unzipped the bags enough to expose ashen Hispanic faces.

Nathan stepped forward for a closer look. “May I?”

Phelps backed up a step. “If you’re planning anything more than just viewing, I’ll have to log it.”

“No, nothing like that. I just want to see if they have any tattoos or other distinguishing marks.” He unzipped the bags. “Harv, take a look.” He pointed at one of the bodies, specifically at a tattoo on a shoulder. The letter S was written across the outline of a dagger.

“Does that tattoo mean something to you?” Phelps asked.

“Yes,” Nathan said. “Can you tell us what you know about this case?”

“At this point we don’t have much, but it seems to have the attention of some very important people. The director of the FBI called me last night just after the bodies arrived. I’ve been told in no uncertain terms that as far as the media are concerned, this shooting is nothing more than a random armed robbery attempt.”

“Interesting,” Harv said.

“Would either of you care to enlighten me?”

Nathan removed his ball cap and turned his head to the side.

“Is that what I think it is? That was *your* house? You were there with Sacramento’s SAC?”

“Look, David,” Harv said, “like the FBI director, we need to keep this under wraps. A very dangerous person tried to kill Nathan last night. We think he’ll try again.”

Phelps frowned, his body tightening.

“We weren’t followed.”

“Is my staff in danger by having these bodies in here?”

A reasonable question, Nathan thought.

“No,” Harv said, “absolutely not. The man these dead guys worked for doesn’t give a damn about them.”

Phelps said nothing.

Nathan zipped the body bags closed. “I’m sorry we can’t tell you more.”

“I can’t share everything on cases I work on either. We have to keep certain aspects of crimes secret to rule out false confessions. You know the drill.”

“We do,” Harv said. “You’re a stand-up guy, David. I appreciate it. Will you please keep our visit here confidential?”

Phelps said he would and escorted them to the exit. They thanked him again and stepped out.

Walking back to Harv’s Mercedes, Nathan spoke quietly. “At least this confirms they were Montez’s men.”

“Versus federal agents?” Harv whispered back.

“I know, it wasn’t likely, but I needed to be sure.” Nathan paused. “Don’t look at me like that. Do *you* believe everything Cantrell told us?”

Harv sighed. “So far, yeah, I do. But only because she told us so

damned little. You know the CIA.”

“That’s what worries me.”

CHAPTER 25

On the drive back to La Jolla, his phone rang. Holly.

“Hey,” Nathan said. “I’ve got you on speaker. Harv’s with me.”

“How’s your head?”

“Not bad, thanks. How’s the arm?”

Holly sounded excited. “No complaints. We have a hit, maybe the break we’ve been hoping for. We weren’t able to ID any of the dead mercenaries at the scene, but we got a positive hit on the severed finger through Interpol’s fingerprint database. Do you remember telling me to take it?”

“Honestly, no.”

“Well, the finger’s owner is Julio Domingo Ramirez. Eight years ago he was arrested in Chile on drug smuggling charges. He served only four years in exchange for his testimony. Given he was our only hit, I had Henning dig deeper. Ramirez has a brother who owns a small business specializing in exotic textiles from Africa. He leases a small warehouse in Long Beach.”

“Sounds promising. Good work, Holly.” He looked at Harv. “We’re going up there. Tonight.”

“I’d feel a whole lot better if you didn’t go alone. I can get you SWAT support from our LA field office.”

“I appreciate it, Holly, but we have to be sure this operation doesn’t leak, especially to the press. There’s no way to do that if an FBI SWAT team gets involved. Reporters can sniff that stuff out. Plus, we don’t know if this will even pan out. It could be an empty building. It’s not worth Lansing finding out that you’re feeding us this information.”

“He already knows. We had a chat on the flight up to Sacramento. He’s aboard with my helping you guys as long as it doesn’t involve direct physical support, but I have a feeling he’d make an exception if I pushed.”

“We appreciate the offer, but we have Grangeland. The three of us can handle it. And if we determine otherwise, I’ll call.”

“Nathan.” She lowered her voice. “If Montez captures you...”

“He won’t. Harv and I have an understanding.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“We won’t take any unnecessary risks. We’ve got years of experience and dozens of ops under our belts.”

“Be careful tonight, and call me afterward.”

“I will.”

“Montez isn’t worth your life.”

“I’ll call you.”

Nathan and Harv rendezvoused with Grangeland, then stopped by their security company garage to pick up the supplies, tactical gear, and equipment they’d need for tonight’s operation, including tools for splicing into video lines. If they encountered anything other than standard coaxial, they’d have to improvise.

“I know we’re in a time-sensitive situation, but let’s go over some things,” Nathan said. He handed Grangeland a spare ballistic vest and black sweatshirt. “We’re not going to get too detailed because everything could change, depending on what we actually find up there. But if anything comes to mind, we want your input.”

She nodded.

“What’ve you got, Harv?”

Harv had always been the primary planner for their scout sniper missions, and he’d done the same tonight.

“We’ll take two vehicles. Having an extra set of wheels could come in handy for lots of reasons. You’ll follow Nate and me.”

Grangeland nodded again.

“If we lose you somehow, pull over and we’ll call you on the radio. If you’re out of range, we’ll try your cell. While I’m thinking about it, let’s all put our cells on vibrate right now.”

Grangeland pulled hers from its cradle and made the change.

Nathan’s was already in silent mode.

Harv continued. “I asked my assistant to print us the best Google Earth photos he could. They’re not too bad, but they’re not current.” Harv spread the sheets on the counter and pointed at the warehouse. “This is our target building. We don’t have any street views, so we’ll need to reconnoiter once

we get there. I think we should park here. It's far enough away to avoid headlight detection. Grangeland, ideally I'd like you to cover the rear of the building when we gain entry. Do you see a good place to station yourself?"

Grangeland pointed to a specific spot on the aerial photo. "I'd say here, the northeast corner of the property. It gives me the best view of the dock. It looks like there's a tall fence along the rear of the property. You can see its shadow. The gate seems to be open in the photo, but it may not be when we arrive. I'll find a place to conceal myself in case a car drives by."

"Excellent," Harv said. "If the gate's closed, that could work in our favor if anyone bolts. The building has a loading dock, you can see the pedestrian ramp next to it. Most docks like that have one or more roll-up doors for freight and an emergency fire exit, so if anyone runs, they'll come out of that door."

"What are the rules of engagement?" she asked.

"We need prisoners. Deadly force only if warranted." He looked at Nathan. "If Montez is in there, we want him alive."

"Understood," she said.

Harv locked eyes with her. "I don't need to say this, but I will anyway. If things get heavy, we shoot first and ask questions later. Your weapon doesn't have a laser, so shoot center mass. Clear?"

"Clear."

"Let's think about our entry," Nathan said.

"Shock attack?" Harv suggested. "Ram the door and rush the interior?"

"Surprise usually works as long as the numbers aren't too lopsided."

"But what if they aren't completely surprised?" Grangeland asked. "It's reasonable to think they might be more nervous because of the botched raid at your house." She paused for a few moments.

Neither of them spoke.

She smiled. "I need a pair of scissors."

"For what?" Harv asked.

They listened while she laid out her plan.

"I think it's brilliant," Harv said. "Nate?"

"Let's do it."

CHAPTER 26

Nathan checked his side mirror again, making sure Grangeland stayed with them. The surveillance detection route detoured them through the grid-like maze of bland, dimly lit industrial streets. This area surrounding the port of Los Angeles had countless rows of tilt-up warehouses with rail spurs serving rear yards. A perfect place for Montez's men to blend in and be invisible among the many Latinos who lived and worked here.

If they *were* being tailed, it wasn't from the ground.

Just to be sure, he keyed the radio. "Grangeland, I'm going to pull over and check for a helicopter. Nothing's wrong."

"Copy."

He pulled to the curb, climbed out, and scanned the sky. Nothing. He cupped his ears and listened. Again nothing. He supposed there could be a blacked-out helicopter way up there, but he gave it long odds. Better to be certain.

"I'm a little uneasy about tonight's op," Harv said.

"I am too, but if we don't get Montez, neither of us will ever sleep well again. We have to think about your family. And the Daltons."

"I also don't like the lack of intelligence. We have no idea what's in that warehouse, or if it's even the right place. We also don't know its floor plan. There could be booby traps. It might be empty or full of armed mercenaries. When we went after Leonard Bridgestone, we had satellite images and live intelligence."

"We'll fall back on our training."

"Nate, we've already made some big mistakes. Not to mention you're seriously lacking adequate sleep and recovering from a nasty concussion."

They drove in silence for a few minutes.

"Look, Nate, I'm not trying to put a dark cloud over this, but I have to wonder if we'd be taking this kind of risk if we weren't pursuing Montez."

"Nichole Dalton and her girls could be in the warehouse. Montez could be torturing them right now."

“You already said that, and I get it. But we can’t help them if we get ourselves killed.”

Again, Nathan said nothing. Didn’t need to. His friend was doing his job, being the voice of reason and good sense.

Harv turned left onto a street lined with smaller warehouses. Streetlights at every intersection threw lifeless, orange light onto oil-stained asphalt. Up ahead, a semi pulled onto the street and headed toward them. Dual columns of smoke belched from its pipes. Nathan lowered his ball cap as it passed by.

“If it comes to it,” Harv asked, “will she hesitate at the moment of truth?”

“No way, not Grangeland.”

“I concur. If this goes to hell tonight, how do we protect her?”

“As far as I’m concerned, she was never here. She can beat feet outta here with no one the wiser. It’s one of the reasons to have a second vehicle. If she fires her weapon, let’s make sure we pick up her brass.”

Harv glanced at him. “You know Grangeland. She won’t like bugging out and probably won’t do it.”

“This isn’t a suicide mission. We’ll do the same thing if it gets too heavy. There’s no shame in fleeing an overwhelming enemy. We have the same policy as an Echo team.”

“I’m relieved to hear you say that.”

Nathan answered his friend’s unspoken question. “She’s an FBI special agent. We can’t let our personal feelings get in the way.”

“I guess I’m being overprotective. I hate the idea of her being killed, or worse. The thought of her being in Montez’s possession turns my stomach.”

“We’ll never let that happen. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Are we talking about what *I think* we’re talking about?” Harv asked.

“Yes.”

“The same goes for us?”

“*Especially* for us.”

Harv pulled to the curb and killed the engine. Behind them, Grangeland parked and joined them in the rear seat.

They all donned ballistic vests and pulled on black sweatshirts over them. Nathan and Harv secured thermal imagers, night-vision monoculars, and suppressed SIGs into their belly packs. They strapped Predator knives in sheaths just above their ankles. Before climbing out, they ran the wiring for

earpieces and lapel mikes under their vests. Next, they powered the radios and clipped them into place. Nathan checked his belly pack. Zipped tight. He applied black skin paint to his face. Harv did the same. For what they had planned, though, face paint wouldn't work for Grangeland.

Nathan looked at his watch: 2247 hours.

They grabbed dark ball caps and started down the sidewalk.

On both sides of the street, cargo containers, flatbed trucks, and stacks of pallets occupied fenced storage yards. A few boats on blocks were scattered among them, most not looking sea-worthy. Along the western fence lines, windblown trash had built up like snowdrifts. Graffiti glared everywhere.

Nathan whispered, "Harv, radio check."

"Good."

"Grangeland?"

"Good."

"We'll make a pass on the opposite sidewalk and look for cameras."

He studied the building as they rounded the corner. Constructed of concrete block with small slotted windows near the roofline, the building looked to be approximately one hundred feet square and twenty feet high. Basically a giant box. It probably had a second-level loft or office above the bathrooms. Most small warehouses had floor plans like that. He wouldn't know until they gained entry. As Harv predicted, the rear wall of the warehouse employed two roll-up doors serving a loading dock. A camera mounted on the roof's parapet was aimed at the loading dock. They kept going down the sidewalk.

The front of the building employed a single metal door with a wall-mounted security camera pointing down at a forty-five-degree angle. A spotlight illuminated the entire area. The place served its purpose—a virtual fortress.

"Harv, I'm going to pretend to light a cigarette. Stay behind me and take a look at the camera."

Harv pulled a compact pair of field glasses from his front pocket and focused on the door.

Nathan lit a match and brought it up to his face.

Harv relayed what he saw. "The camera's cable goes straight up the wall and disappears over the parapet. Looks like standard coaxial. There's also some sort of doorbell button with an intercom speaker below it."

“Do you see a security peephole?”

“No.”

“Let’s position you right there, at the southwest corner of the warehouse while I rig the video bypass. At a full sprint, you’re only five to six seconds from the front door. You can duck behind those recycle containers if you see anyone. Let’s circle around to the opposite side of the warehouse and take a look.” They turned right at a narrow alley lined by bigger warehouses. “I don’t like the look of this alley. It’s too narrow. Ten-yard separation.” Nathan continued while Harv and Grangeland stayed put.

“I’m on your six with Grangeland. I’ll wait between these white delivery vans before moving out.”

“Copy,” Nathan said. He smelled the air and didn’t detect any cigarette smoke, but on his left, there were dozens of butts in the alley below a small loading dock.

“I’m in motion,” Harv said.

He clicked his radio and kept moving down the alley. “After I turn the corner up here, I’m going to hold my position between the buildings until I see you.”

“Copy.”

“Grangeland, let Harv advance and cover his six. From there, he’ll cover your advance. Let us know if you see or hear any vehicles coming.”

“Copy.”

Fifteen seconds later, Nathan saw Harv round the corner. “I’ve got you. I’ll advance to the next alley and turn south. Grangeland, move up to Harv’s position. I’ll be holding at the fenced truck yard on the east side of our warehouse.”

“Copy,” Harv said. Grangeland also copied.

He didn’t like being under the streetlight for the brief trek into the alley, but didn’t think anyone would be out and about in this neighborhood. Still, the graffiti concerned him. Gang tags. No doubt this was claimed turf. He smelled the air again—nothing.

“I’m at the northwest corner of our target’s fenced yard. There’s an old fishing boat on blocks to my left.”

“I’ve got you.”

He waited for Harv and Grangeland. They formed up and huddled in the shadow of a cargo container. “I only saw two cameras. One covering the front door and one covering the rear loading dock. The building’s tall enough

to have a second-floor office.”

“Concur,” Harv said.

They circled back to the narrow alley bordering the rear of the warehouse to the east and stopped out of camera shot at the northeast corner of the fenced truck yard.

Harv spoke quietly. “If anyone runs, they’ll come out that fire exit and head straight for the open gate.”

“This position isn’t going to work,” Grangeland said. “There’s no place to hide if a car comes by. I can use that fishing boat behind us. It’s a little farther away, but it should work.”

“Nate?” Harv asked.

“Sounds good, but don’t move from that position without telling us. We want to know where you are at all times. If anyone bolts, give a verbal command to get on the ground. If they make a threatening move, drop ’em. You’re only watching the rear of the warehouse until I finish the video splice.”

“Understood.”

“Let’s hustle back to our vehicles. We can’t walk along this alley without being seen by the camera. We’ll have to detour to the east by half a block.”

Back at Harv’s Mercedes, they went over the plan one final time.

“Grangeland, grab your change of clothes. At a full sprint, how long will it take you to get from the fishing boat to Harv’s position at the southwest corner of the warehouse using the route we just took? Best guess?”

“Thirty seconds.”

“Everyone ready? Here we go.”

CHAPTER 27

An uncertain part of tonight's operation involved bypassing the surveillance camera eyeing the front door. Nearly everything hinged on Nathan's belief that the monitor wouldn't be continuously watched.

"Grangeland, once again, your threat area is only the rear of the warehouse. Harv will cover the west and south, I'll take the north. I'll have a clear view if anyone approaches from that direction."

"Understood." She hustled down the street and disappeared into the shadows.

"Harv, I'll circle around to the north corner of the building again. I'll take the exact same route and radio when I'm in place." He pulled his gloves a little snugger and grabbed the duffel.

Thirty seconds later, Harv stayed behind at the southwest corner of the warehouse while Nathan entered the alley with the white delivery vans. If anyone drove by, Harv could duck behind the recycle bins next to the warehouse.

Halfway down the alley, he heard a door open on his left.

Crap!

The timing couldn't have been worse. He had no cover. If he ran for the containers twenty yards distant, he'd be seen for sure.

"Harv, I'm busted," he whispered. "Stand by."

"Should I advance?"

"Not yet."

He heard his radio click once.

He began a slow shuffle, pretending to struggle with the bag. He switched the strap to his left shoulder to free up his right hand and began mumbling to himself, mixing in some foul words. No more than thirty feet away, three men stepped onto an elevated loading dock, lit cigarettes, and stared like caged gorillas.

He hoped the smeared face paint would enhance the act. "Spare 'nee change?"

The voice hissed an expletive, then, “Get lost, *pendejo*.”

Perfect. He didn’t respond and kept going. The dim light kept them from seeing the wire leading up to his ear. If they changed their minds and approached, he’d have a fight on his hands. Although he could easily handle them, sooner or later their absence might be noticed and all bets would be off.

“*Quick thinking, Nate. They buy it?*”

“So far,” he whispered. He continued his snail’s pace, feeling three pairs of eyes bore into his back and the duffel bag. “I’m almost to the corner.”

Without looking back, he rounded the corner and hurried toward the cover of a big rig parked on the curb. “Harv, wait one. I’m going to make sure I’m not being followed. Sixty seconds. Grangeland, your location?”

“*I’ll be at the fishing boat in ten seconds.*”

He gave her a click.

He ducked deeper into the shadow of the truck’s cab and kept his eyes on the corner.

A car approached from the west.

The shadows cast from the truck’s wheels moved in a sweeping motion from left to right as the car sped past.

The smokers from the alley didn’t appear.

He crossed under the streetlight and entered the alley leading to the warehouse. Half a minute later, he was flat against the warehouse’s northern wall.

“Harv, I’m in place. I’ll contact you from the roof.”

“*Copy.*”

“Grangeland?”

“*Copy.*”

Nathan pulled a grappling hook with twenty feet of knotted, half-inch nylon rope from the duffel and coiled the rope. The bag also contained a small car battery, an inverter, two compact DVD players, two disks, and seventy feet of coaxial cable. His front pockets contained all the tools and parts necessary to splice into a coaxial line.

He moved to the midpoint of the north wall and swung the grappling hook. It caught on the parapet. He tested its anchor. Firm. Next, he tied the end of the grappling hook’s rope to the strap of the duffel bag. Once on the roof, he’d be able to haul the bag up.

Scaling a vertical wall by rope required strength and skill, especially

near the top, but he'd done this exact kind of climb more times than he could remember. It took him less than twenty seconds.

At the top, a sudden wave of dizziness nailed him. The concussion...He took a knee and steadied himself against the parapet. Precious seconds were passing. Light-headed or not, he had to keep working. He assessed his battle readiness at roughly 80 percent. Not great, but acceptable. With a little luck and a lot of skill, this would all be over in the next ten minutes. He ignored the throbbing above his ear and pulled the duffel up to his position, then took a few seconds to scan the immediate rooftops. No one was present.

Staying as close to the parapet as possible to avoid making the roof creak, he traversed over to a position directly above the front door. If any pedestrians or vehicles approached, he'd be able to lie flat and use the parapet for cover. Several buildings distant, a tomcat wailed into the night. Another issued a challenge in return. A sliver moon gave the roof's galvanized vents a dull, silvery glow. Mixed with the noxious odor of roofing tar, he caught the scent of cigarettes from the men he'd seen earlier in the alley.

"I'm in place above the front door," he whispered. "I'm going to bypass the camera. If the video feed is being constantly monitored, they'll come out to check the interruption. Harv, we'll use that opportunity to gain entry. I'll drop down from the roof using the rope while you rush in from the south. Grangeland, if that happens, you stay put and watch for runners. Deadly force only if warranted. These may not be Montez's men."

"Copy," Harv said.

"Grangeland?"

"Copy."

Nathan took a deep breath, aware that the interior TV monitor would be snowy or blank during the brief interruption. Holding a tiny LED flashlight in his mouth, he worked quickly but carefully. No one came out to investigate the loss of signal. So far, so good. It took just under three minutes to make two plug-and-play connections in the existing coaxial line and get the battery and inverter set up for use. He plugged the cable from the camera into the first DVD's input feed and the opposite end of the cable into the output feed. The DVD recorder was now connected between the camera and the monitor inside the warehouse.

Nathan inserted a disk, hit the record button, and looked at his watch.

"Video splice complete, recording normal scene."

"Copy."

“I’m going to give it seven minutes.”

Harv clicked the radio.

If anyone happened to look at the interior monitor, they’d see what they normally saw, an empty alley. The next phase of his plan involved recording Grangeland standing at the door for approximately three to four minutes. He hoped that would be long enough. If anyone were inside, they ought to be able to answer within that time frame. What if no one answered at all? What then? Did they ram the door? They didn’t have the resources for a prolonged stakeout, and even if they did, how long would they have to wait? Hours? Days? Weeks? Not an option. Nichole Dalton and her daughters could be in there. If no one answered, they’d break in, glean what they could, and bug out.

“I’m almost ready. I’m going to feed the normal scene through the line.” Nathan pressed the play button. Anyone on the inside would now see the seven minutes of empty alley he’d just recorded. He plugged the camera’s end of the cable into the second DVD recorder and inserted the second disk. “Grangeland, advance.”

“*On my way.*”

She called it pretty close. Thirty-three seconds later, Harv reported her arrival at his location.

Nathan heard Grangeland say, “*No peeking.*” She must’ve purposefully keyed her mike for that comment.

Harv said, “*The thought never crossed my mind.*”

“Stay focused,” Nathan said. “Grangeland?”

“*One minute.*”

It was a long minute.

Nathan watched her approach the front door. She looked striking, even in the outer reaches of the security spotlight. She’d swapped her pants, sweatshirt, and ballistic vest for her altered gym outfit. The legs were cut just below her butt and she’d cut the top just below her breasts. It didn’t look like she had anything on under the skintight outfit.

Damn! He hoped the men inside wouldn’t notice her missing high heels. He knew they’d never see the tiny wire leading up to her ear. The camera mounted above the door wasn’t HD. Her image on the interior television screen would be average-to-poor clarity—definitely not doing her justice. As long as she didn’t turn around, they wouldn’t see the radio.

“Harv, stand by. Grangeland’s almost in place. Grangeland, I’m hitting

record...now. You're on." He peered over the parapet as Grangeland did her thing. She rocked back and forth, swiveling her hips and running her hands across her chest. She leaned forward and blew a kiss toward the door.

"Grangeland, for cryin' out loud. They're going to blow their—" He stopped himself. He just couldn't say it.

She eased off a little. "Sorry."

"It's okay. I'm going to keep recording for another two minutes or so. You're doing fine." He couldn't watch the rest—couldn't afford this mental distraction right now.

A few minutes later he said, "Grangeland, we're good." He ejected the disk so it would start from the beginning when reinserted. He unplugged the feed from the first DVD and plugged it into the second DVD. Next, he disconnected the live camera feed, inserted the Grangeland disk into the second DVD, and pressed play. If anyone looked at the camera's monitor, they'd see Grangeland's prerecorded action, not the real action outside the door. Since there was no peephole, they wouldn't be able to differentiate the real scene from the prerecorded scene.

"Harv, we're on. Grangeland, suit back up."

She sprinted to the corner of the warehouse.

He secured the grappling hook to the parapet and descended the rope. Once on the ground, he coiled the rope and threw it over the top. If anyone drove by, he didn't want them seeing it.

Ninety seconds later, Grangeland and Harv were at the front door ready to go.

A thumping music beat emanated from inside—probably rap.

They pulled their SIGs. Nathan wasn't worried about the 9-millimeter subsonic rounds being powerful enough. They'd used them many times and never had a problem. Body armor protected against center-mass shots, but he didn't expect his adversaries would be wearing any, especially inside the warehouse. Besides, he and Harv were quite capable of making head shots if needed.

"Lasers on. Harv, you take the right. Grangeland, you've got the left. I'll take the middle of the room. We need prisoners. Grangeland, your weapon isn't suppressed, so hold your fire unless absolutely necessary."

He pressed the doorbell button.

It produced a muffled ring like an oversized egg timer.

On the left side of the door, he flattened himself against the wall.

Harv tucked in tight behind him.

The location of the doorknob and the exterior jamb indicated the door would swing inward, toward the right. If anyone cracked the door, he and Harv were on the concealed side. The door would have to be opened at least twelve inches for anyone to peer out and look in their direction. By then it would be too late.

The Spanish accent from the tiny speaker next to the door sounded metallic and slightly amused. *"What you want?"*

"I got stood up down the street. Let's party."

"Go away."

"Come on, man, it's cold out here. I need the money. Hundred bucks for all night."

A pause. *"What do we get?"*

"Everything."

"All of us?"

"How many?"

"Four."

"Make it two hundred and you got a deal."

Another pause. They were probably discussing it.

A few seconds later, he heard the dead bolt click.

Then a scraping, metallic sound of something else sliding.

The door swung inward.

CHAPTER 28

The staccato thumping of rap music poured out the door and slammed every building in the alley. Nathan slid past Grangeland and kicked the door.

The man on the other side flew backward as its metal surface hammered his face. The handgun he'd been holding clattered away.

Nathan rushed inside with Harv and Grangeland on his six. He sensed Harv boot the door and heard it slam closed.

Blood gushing from his destroyed nose, the man tried to get up.

Nathan pistol-whipped him, the impact loud and wet. Door Man went limp and collapsed to the concrete floor. It wasn't Montez.

He caught movement on his right.

Another man.

Running. Right to left. Without a shirt. Short. Muscular. Heavy gold chains flopped as he sprinted across the room. Also not Montez.

"I've got him," Harv said.

Nathan watched a red dot form on the running man's hip.

Harv's SIG spit flame.

Gold Chains tumbled. The wounded man howled and clasped a hand on his left hip.

A third man sitting on a sofa directly in front of them lunged for a handgun on a coffee table.

They fired simultaneously.

Two red holes replaced two red dots, both in roughly the same location, upper right shoulder. Sofa Man fell back and cursed in Spanish.

Nathan felt it more than he saw it.

A fourth threat. From above.

Second floor. Far corner of the warehouse. A man stood on a railed walkway, leveling an assault rifle.

Montez? No choice. Fractions of seconds mattered. He painted his laser center mass and fired.

The man jerked at the same instant his rifle discharged.

The bullets impacted high and right, but the sound was deafening in the enclosed space. Grangeland bent over and protected her eyes as chunks of concrete rained down.

Harv sent a second bullet and scored a hit. The man slumped forward and cartwheeled over the rail. Cranium and metal smacked the concrete at the same time, the sounds indistinguishable.

They moved deeper into the warehouse, scanning for additional threats. None appeared.

That damned noise had to go. Nathan placed the laser on the stereo cabinet against the side wall and fired. The glass imploded and the music died with a static thump. Thirteen rounds left. Harv also had thirteen.

“Grangeland, cover our six. I’m on Gold Chains,” he said and rushed forward to the squirming man.

He knew Harv would advance to Sofa Man’s position because Door Man was either unconscious or dead. In less than ten seconds, they’d overpowered and neutralized four hardened mercenaries.

He pointed his SIG at Gold Chains’s head and said, “On your belly.”

“You jus’ shot me,” the man wailed. “You fuckin’ shot me, man!”

“I’m impressed with your powers of observation. Get on your belly *now* or I’ll finish the job.”

Cursing, Gold Chains rolled over.

That’s when he noticed the bandaged finger stump. *Well, well, well, if it isn’t the merc who escaped from Clairemont.* What was his name? Julio-something-Ramirez...Domingo. Julio Domingo Ramirez. These were definitely Montez’s men.

Nathan kept his head up, put a knee on Julio’s back, and leaned on it. The wounded man grunted and cursed again.

He looked over and saw Harv clock his mark. Hard. Sofa Man’s arms went limp and his head lolled back.

“Grangeland, secure that downed man. We haven’t cleared our perimeter or those offices on the far side yet. Stay sharp.”

She handcuffed Door Man’s hands behind his back.

“Grangeland, I need you over here. Keep your head up. I thought I heard something near the offices.”

Gun up and hunched over, she advanced to his position and knelt.

“Duct tape. My belly pack.”

She removed the roll and taped Julio’s wrists.

“Get his ankles too.”

There it was again. A muffled whimper.

“I heard it,” Grangeland said. “It could be the kidnapped woman.”

He motioned toward the sofa. “Secure Harv’s man.”

The sound got louder, emanating from the dark corner of the room where balcony man had fallen.

Harv kept sweeping the warehouse with his gun as Grangeland yanked Sofa Man forward and taped his wrists. He moaned, but didn’t resist. She also taped his ankles.

Nathan spoke quietly. “Harv, this is our fingerless friend from the attack in Clairemont.”

Harv looked at the bandaged stump. “Maybe we’ll give him a matched set.”

Julio became defiant, squirming like a worm on hot asphalt. “I need a fuckin’ doctor, man!”

Nathan locked eyes, toggled his laser, and painted it on the man’s nose.

Julio’s eyes crossed on the red dot. “Okay. Okay, be cool, man.”

He grabbed Julio’s shirt and hauled him over to the sofa. He did the same for Door Man, but also checked for a carotid pulse. Faint, but present.

The center of the warehouse had been converted into a living room of sorts. On three sides, black leather couches surrounded a coffee table hosting Sofa Man’s gun, several electronic remotes, and two cell phones. A small LCD TV sat atop an end table with a muted pornographic movie playing. He grabbed the TV remote and turned it off. Overhead, every fourth fluorescent fixture offered dull illumination. Most of the interior remained in deep shadow.

Julio couldn’t, or wouldn’t, stay quiet. “I’m bleeding bad here!”

Without warning, Nathan swung his pistol. The suppressor caught Julio’s left brow.

A red bead crept down the side of Julio’s head and found his ear. He laid all three captives out like cordwood and taped all their mouths except Door Man’s. With a destroyed nasal cavity, he’d suffocate with his mouth covered. Next, he taped all their feet together into one bundle.

“Grangeland, you’ve got them. We’re going to clear the warehouse. Your threat area is from here to the front door.”

“Copy.”

“Harv, on my six.”

They moved back to the front door and began traversing the perimeter wall. Several dozen pallets of boxes were stacked three high along the wall, too tightly placed for anyone to hide among. A battery-powered forklift occupied the southwest corner, currently plugged in for a recharge. The offices were straight ahead in the southeast corner and occupied an area roughly ten feet wide by forty feet long. All the windows were dark, except upstairs. A narrow staircase served the second floor.

Nathan kept his laser painted on the man's prone form as they approached, but he detected no movement. Unconscious or dead.

They both heard it again, a horrible mewling sound.

"That could be Montez lying there. Cover me."

Harv hugged the wall and kept his gun pointed at the office windows.

He kept his weapon trained at the dark figure as he approached and knelt down. No pulse. Not surprising, his white tank top wasn't white anymore. He looked at Harv and shook his head. Not Montez. They traversed to the corner of the offices.

In a whisper, he said, "I'll duck under these windows and come up on the other side of the door."

"Should we try a verbal command first?" Harv asked.

"Couldn't hurt at this point."

He spoke forcefully. "If anyone's in there, come out now!" Nothing. He repeated the command in Spanish. No response.

"I'll take the left." Nathan ducked below the window and positioned himself in front of the door. He reared back and kicked. The door flew open and banged against the interior wall.

Harv followed him in and swept the right side, his red laser visible in the dust. "Clear."

"Light switch?" Nathan asked.

The room snapped to life with fluorescent light, revealing an old metal desk, some filing cabinets, and several rows of stacked boxes. An interior door led to an adjoining office on their left. They both held perfectly still and listened for any movement on the other side of the door. Nothing. But the muffled cries they'd heard earlier were louder.

He kicked the door and rushed into the adjoining office.

CHAPTER 29

What Nathan saw tore at his heart.

Nichole Dalton. Naked and strapped to a metal table. Feet bound in stirrups. Torso crisscrossed by lacerations similar to his own, but not as numerous or deep. A cloth gag secured her mouth. Her lips were cracked and bleeding. The surface of the table was smeared with her blood, but not enough to run down its legs. Thankfully, she didn't appear to have been raped. Her genital area looked unharmed, and he felt a pang of guilt for looking. A smaller table on wheels held the instruments of her torment. Mounted on a tripod, a compact video camera eyed the table. Sitting atop a low file cabinet, a laptop computer connected to the camera.

Damn it.

He checked the camera. Not active. "*Grangeland, I need you.*" He sensed Harv's presence behind him as he removed the woman's gag.

"My daughters. He took them!"

"We'll find them, I promise. You're safe now," Nathan said.

"Who are you?"

"Let's get you off that table." Tears began as he freed her from the stirrups. Her legs quit when she tried to stand. He caught her before she fell, and she buried her face into his shoulder. Nathan knew her knife wounds stung, but the adrenaline rush of being rescued overpowered her pain.

Grangeland stepped into the office and froze. He made eye contact. "Grab a chair from the other office." She didn't move. "Grangeland, a chair."

She returned a few seconds later and placed it next to the metal table, then put an arm around the woman and helped her into it.

Nathan shucked his ballistic vest and removed his sweatshirt.

Grangeland helped Dalton put the sweatshirt on. It fit like a tent, but offered her some dignity. She whispered a hoarse *thank you*. Her eyes dropped to the diamond pattern on his chest and widened in recognition.

"That's right," he said. "You're Nichole Dalton. You were kidnapped from the Fashion Valley Mall a few days ago. Harv, stay with Ms. Dalton."

Grangeland, a word, please.” Outside the office, he lowered his voice. “Get her something to drink. I saw a small fridge near the stereo cabinet. Try to keep her as calm as possible. Reassure her we’re going to find her daughters, but be vague if she asks you anything about us or how we found her.”

They reentered the office. “Sit tight, Ms. Dalton. This will all be over in a few minutes. Harv, follow my lead. Let’s go *talk* to our beloved guests.”

They returned to the gagged and bound men while Grangeland raided the refrigerator. She eyed the mercenaries with contempt as she hurried back to Nichole Dalton.

Julio and Sofa Man were conscious and looked quite concerned. When they focused on Nathan’s bare chest, their eyes widened even more.

Without saying a word, Nathan unbuckled Julio’s belt and yanked his blue jeans and boxer shorts down to his taped ankles. He pulled his Predator knife, examined its shiny surface, and smiled. Julio began flopping around in a terrified frenzy. His hip wound began oozing blood faster.

“Easy, partner,” Harv said to him, playing good cop.

“You saw what they did to my sister,” Nathan growled. “I’m gonna cut this asshole’s cojones off, cook them in the microwave, and stuff ’em down his throat. Better yet, he can eat ’em raw.”

Julio tried to scream, but the tape covering his mouth muted it. He frantically shook his head.

“What’s that?” Nathan asked. “I can’t understand you.” Of course he couldn’t, the man’s mouth was taped. “Hold him down. We’ll need something to cauterize his nut sack. Is your cigar torch filled with butane?”

“Indeed it is.”

Harv stepped behind Julio and grabbed his shoulders.

Nathan smiled at Julio. “You ready, amigo?” He lowered the knife out of Julio’s line of sight.

Nathan backed away just in time as Julio’s bladder quit. Yellow liquid arced through the air and found his bound partners.

“That’s disgusting,” Harv said.

Nathan sheathed his knife, walked over to the north wall, and removed the five gallon water bottle from the cooler. He poured the water on them, making sure to douse their faces. He winked at Harv and maneuvered behind Julio. Nathan tipped the bottle above Julio’s head, creating a crude but effective bit of waterboarding. Julio coughed and sputtered and whipped his head back and forth. After thirty seconds or so, Nathan stopped and tossed

the bottle aside. He pulled his knife.

“Are you ready to become a woman?”

Julio lost control and began bawling like a child. A pathetic sight. Nathan had broken him in under a minute.

“Is there something you’d like to tell me?” he asked.

Julio desperately nodded.

Nathan bent over and ripped the tape free.

“We didn’t touch her. I swear, man!”

“That’s not what it looks like to me.”

“We didn’t. *I swear!* Ask her.”

“Where’s Montez?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is he coming back?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know much, do you?”

“I don’t, man, I swear.”

“Then you’re worthless to me.” He put his knife to Julio’s throat.

“Wait! There’s a safe house.”

“Where?”

“In San Diego.”

“San Diego’s a big place.”

“I’ve been there, I know where it is.”

“If you’re lying, dinner is standing by. I hope you’re hungry.”

“I’m not.”

“Hungry or lying?”

“Lying.”

“Who else has been to the safe house besides you?”

“Hector.”

“Which one is Hector?”

“You shot him. He was upstairs.”

He re-taped Julio’s mouth and returned to the offices. He motioned with his head for Grangeland to follow.

When they were out of earshot she said, “Nathan, that woman needs emergency care. She’s probably in shock.”

“At the risk of sounding callous, she’s not in any immediate danger.”

“*Not in any immediate danger?*”

Harv stepped forward. “Easy, Grangeland. We’re not trying to be

insensitive, but Nate's right. She looks bad, but her wounds aren't life threatening."

Her expression softened. "I'm sorry, Nathan. I didn't mean it like that."

"I know you didn't."

"I'm just really pissed off right now."

"I am too."

"They haven't given her anything to eat or drink for two days. Those *fucking assholes*."

He couldn't recall ever hearing her curse before. She did it well. "Don't worry. Those *fucking assholes* are going to wish they were never born soon enough. Look, I know it's a crappy deal, but she needs to be debriefed. We can't take her to a hospital. Her wounds can't be explained as anything other than intentional. The police will get involved. She may have vital information on Montez's operation or his whereabouts. We'll formulate our next moves based on what we learn from her and those mutts out there."

"She's worried sick about her daughters."

"That's where you come in. Find the bathroom and clean her up as best you can. Do you have a travel bag in the sedan?"

"My clothes should fit her okay."

"Harv, give Grangeland your keys." He turned toward her. "There's an overnight bag in Harv's trunk with a shirt for me. There's also a green trauma bag. You know how to administer O-two?"

"It's been awhile, but yes."

"When you get back, wrap her torso up with gauze."

Grangeland looked toward the woman for a moment, then left the warehouse.

Nathan pointed toward the bound men. "I'm turning them over to Cantrell. It won't break my heart seeing them under the CIA's special care for a spell. But before we turn them over, we need the ringleader to make contact with Montez. We need to make sure the guy who usually contacts Montez makes the call. It might raise suspicion otherwise."

"Do we know which one it is?"

"We will soon enough."

"Let's hope he's not the stiff with the machine gun," Harv said.

"Cantrell?"

"I think it's fair to assume she didn't know about this warehouse or we would've been intercepted. This gives the CIA more than they had an hour

ago. A lot more.”

“Let’s use this time to update Holly,” he said.

She answered after the first ring.

“We’re okay,” Nathan said quickly. It took about two minutes to update her and answer some questions.

“What’s your next move?” she asked.

“We’re heading down to San Diego. With a little luck this will be over in the next few hours.”

“Be careful. Call me again?”

“Will do.”

Grangeland returned with the bags. Harv walked over and locked the front door behind her.

“Make Ms. Dalton as comfortable as possible,” Nathan said. “Don’t ask any questions until I’m present. If she offers anything, write it down. We’ll give you a few minutes. We’re in a time-sensitive situation.”

She picked up the trauma bag.

“Hang on.” He unzipped the bag and grabbed a handful of sterile pads and a roll of two-inch micropore tape. “You’re good to go.”

She hesitated. “She’s pretty freaked and wants to get outta here.”

“It could be an act. She could be a spook, a trained operations officer.”

“With two young daughters?”

“I’ll admit it’s unlikely, but we can’t rule it out yet.”

“Nate,” Harv said, “if she’s a spook, she won’t tell us anything.”

“Let me try,” Grangeland offered.

“She’ll be a lot more comfortable with Grangeland present,” Harv said. “But if she *is* a spook, it won’t make any difference.”

Nathan looked at Grangeland. “Don’t ask her any questions until we’re present. Bandage her torso, get her on O-two, and take her blood pressure. You know the routine. Let her know you’re going to take care of her and that we’re going to find her daughters.” He nodded toward the office. “We’ll be right there.”

She looked like she wanted to object, but didn’t.

Nathan dug through Harv’s overnight bag, found a T-shirt, and pulled it on. “We need to control our *guests’* bleeding with pressure bandages.”

“Wouldn’t break my heart to watch them bleed out.”

“Me either, but we need pee-pee boy alive. He’s been to the safe house.”

“Pee-pee boy?”

He shrugged.

Harv squinted in thought.

“What?”

“Why San Diego?”

“I don’t follow.”

“The safe house. Why San Diego and not Chicago or Baltimore, or any other city?”

“That’s a good question.”

“There’s got to be a reason.”

“No doubt there is.” He pointed toward the mercenaries. “They might know.”

“Think the safe house confession was bogus?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. You?”

“Unless he’s the best actor I’ve ever seen, I’d say no, but he may not know why it’s in San Diego. Ms. Dalton might.”

“We really need to talk to her.” He looked toward the offices.

“Nate, I feel I need to voice something. Are we being fair to Ms. Dalton? Keeping her here like this?”

He looked down. Maybe Harv was right. Had he lost sight of the big picture? Was catching Montez worth prolonging this woman’s suffering, even for a brief period? Her wounds were superficial compared to what Montez could’ve done. Minor, really, but if she wasn’t a hardened operations officer, this had to be a horrifying experience. Perhaps his desire to see Montez eliminated *had* become horse blinders. No. He knew his core motivation, and it wasn’t revenge. He wanted to get Montez, but also wanted to save Nichole Dalton’s daughters. Given their current situation, questioning Nichole was the best way—maybe the only way.

“Thanks, Harv. I needed to hear that.”

“Grangeland’s right, though. She needs medical attention, preferably a plastic surgeon. Since we can’t involve regular EMS channels, I have an idea. Do you remember that security system we installed for Doug Reavie a few years back?”

“The plastic surgeon in Rancho Bernardo?”

“We’re pretty good friends. I think he’ll fix her up if we offer to cover his out-of-pocket costs. For something like this, he’ll want to use his surgical suite, so we might have to shell out a few thousand bucks.”

“I’m good with that.”

“I don’t have his phone number in my cell, but I can use information and get the number. He’ll have an answering service for emergencies. Most doctors do.”

“Good thinking, Harv. We’ll make the call from the road. Let’s get our guests’ bleeding under control and talk to Nichole Dalton.”

CHAPTER 30

Nathan and Harv made sure to use latex gloves, as there was no telling what these mutts might have. It took several minutes and an entire roll of tape to apply pressure bandages to Sofa Man's shoulder and Julio's hip. The mercs weren't happy about being manhandled during the procedure, but part of the game involved taking a carefree attitude toward them. Satisfied their prisoners wouldn't immediately bleed to death, Nathan and Harv rejoined Grangeland in the office, where she had Nichole on O₂.

Red splotches seeped through the gauze in places and Nathan felt another pang of guilt. Grangeland gave him a concerned look, her thoughts obvious. He nodded for her to begin.

"I'm sorry," Grangeland said, "I know you're in a lot of pain, but we need to ask you some questions."

Nichole Dalton removed her oxygen mask. "Please, I just want to find my girls."

"We're hoping you might know something to help us. Do you know why you were kidnapped?"

"No!" She began crying again.

This wasn't going to work. Nathan turned off the oxygen and the hissing stopped. He stepped forward and took a knee in front of her.

"Ms. Dalton, my name is Nathan McBride. The man behind me is Harvey Fontana."

"Are you police?"

"No, ma'am." She started to ask another question, but he held up a hand. "We aren't going to hold you against your will, but please hear us out first."

"How did you find me?"

"I promise to answer all your questions, but right now, we need to know everything you can tell us about the man who kidnapped you."

She hesitated, her uncertainty plainly evident. "He didn't want anything from me."

“Whatever you tell us doesn’t go any further, you have my word. We already know you work for the NSA as an Eastern Bloc linguist.”

“How do you know that?”

“We’ll get to that, I promise.”

“I don’t know anything. All I do is translate phone calls.”

“What makes you think he didn’t want anything from you?”

“He never asked about my job or the NSA. I thought that’s what this was all about, that I’d translated something he wanted to know.”

“He never brought your work up? At all? Nothing about Hungary?”

She shook her head. “No, he’s after my ex-husband.”

“Ms. Dalton, don’t take this the wrong way, but there’s no evidence, physical or otherwise, that you were ever married.”

“I know. Duane said it was necessary to protect his work.”

“Duane? Is his name Duane Dalton, then?”

“Yes.”

“He’s your ex-husband?”

“Yes, my girls’ father.”

“Your kidnapper wanted you to make contact with your ex-husband? That’s why he used the video camera?”

Her face screwed up as she fought tears. “He made me call him. He could see me on his computer. He showed him our girls too. They were so scared.”

“Duane could see you and your daughters?”

She nodded.

“Did the man hurt your girls?”

Nichole shook her head.

Nathan gave an inward sigh of relief. “Who is your ex-husband?”

“You mean what does he do? He didn’t talk about it much. He was always secretive about everything.”

“Where does he live?”

“Glen Echo.”

He exchanged another glance with Harv. Glen Echo was right across the Potomac River from Langley. “Do you have an address for him?”

“Not a real address. Just a post office box.”

“No street location at all?”

“No. All I’ve had since we divorced is his cell number.”

Nichole Dalton’s voice grew higher in pitch. She seemed on the verge

of losing control. Understandable, given what she'd just been through. Nathan looked at Harv and received a nod to continue. Harv was a better judge of mental states.

"You're doing fine," Nathan said softly. "Everything you tell us will help us find your girls. What does Duane do for a living?"

"He owns a construction management company."

"What kind of construction?"

"Power plants."

"For generating electricity, like that?"

"Yes."

"Here? In the US?"

She shook her head. "Overseas. Eastern Europe and North Africa."

"Nuclear power plants?"

"No, coal and oil."

Another piece of the puzzle. "What's his company's name?"

"Energy something...systems, maybe."

"Energy Solutions, Incorporated?"

"Yes, that's it."

Nathan looked at Harv. It was the company Holly mentioned, the same company Arthur Kramer had worked for before Montez sliced him up and dumped him in Lake Powell.

"Does he have an office somewhere?"

"I don't know. He works out of his home back east, but he's not there much. He hardly ever sees the girls."

"My next question might seem a little insulting. I'm sorry for asking, but could Duane be involved with anything illegal? Drugs or smuggling, anything like that?"

"No way, not Duane."

"What makes you so sure?"

"He hates drug dealers more than anything. His cousin died from an overdose when he was in high school."

"What did your husband do before he owned the construction management firm?"

"He was an air force officer."

"Was he a pilot?"

"No. He worked at NORAD. Something to do with satellites and thermal imaging."

He looked at Harv and received a slight nod.

Harv stepped forward. "Ms. Dalton, you're one of the bravest women I've ever met. I mean it. I'm not just saying it to patronize you."

"I don't feel very brave right now. I'm scared for my girls."

"We're going to find them. Do you know if Duane was in Washington when your kidnapper forced you to contact him?"

"No, he was in Eastern Europe, at one of his job sites. I don't know exactly where."

"How long ago did you make that call?"

"I think around three days. I'm not sure how long I've been here. They kept me in there the entire time except to use the bathroom."

"Have you been in contact with Duane since?"

"No. But he talked to the girls. I heard them talking through the ceiling. They sounded really scared."

"When was that?"

"Yesterday sometime."

"Was that the last time you saw your kidnapper or your girls?"

"Yes."

"Did the man say anything about where he was going next?"

"No, but I overheard bits and pieces of their conversation. I'm sure I heard San Diego a few times. Is any of this going to help you find them?"

"Yes, absolutely." Harv paused to think for a moment. "I have one more question about your ex-husband. You said he only saw his daughters on occasion. Did he ever come out here to see them?"

"A few times."

"Do you have any idea where Duane usually stayed when he came to San Diego?"

Nichole thought for a moment. "He stays in a really big house in the Lomas Santa Fe area. I think it's a friend's."

"Have you ever been there?" Harv asked.

"Three or four times. Just to drop off or pick up the girls. Never inside."

"Can you tell us where it is?"

She took another drink of water. "I only remember turning onto El Camino Real from Via de la Valle. It's a few miles up."

"Is there anything about the property that stands out? Anything you remember?"

"I don't know."

“You’re doing fine.” Harv paused. “Think you can re-create the step-by-step process you went through when the kidnapper made you call Duane?”

Nathan knew Harv had purposely changed directions. Debriefing often employed this method. New memories could trigger older ones.

“I think so,” she said. “He set up the video camera and connected it to his laptop. He made me call Duane and then made him connect to a website so he could see me. Then he took the phone. I couldn’t hear what Duane said.”

“What did he say to Duane?”

She shook her head. “I was so scared. *I don’t remember.*”

“I want you do a breathing exercise with me. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. I want you to let it out slowly. We’ll do it together...Breathe in deep, and let it out slowly. Let your pain recede into the background. Listen to my voice and picture a dark blue color, like a twilight sky. Take another deep breath and let it out slowly. See the twilight sky in your mind. Let’s take another deep breath together. Let it out slowly. Deep breath. Out slowly. One more time.”

Nathan watched Nichole’s expression ease. *Atta boy, Harv.* His partner was so good at this kind of thing that even Grangeland’s expression seemed to ease.

“Keep your eyes closed and picture the twilight sky. Concentrate on my voice. Take another deep breath and let it out slowly.” Harv’s tone had taken on a soothing, melodic cadence. Nathan found himself deep breathing with Nichole. “Rewind your thoughts. Go back to the call. Picture yourself as you were at the time and see the event as it unfolds. He took the phone from you and spoke to Duane. What happened next?”

“He said something about being attacked, asked if Duane knew about it.”

Harv waited.

“He wouldn’t let Duane ask any questions. He shocked me with a stun gun to make Duane talk. It was horrible. Duane said something to him and he covered me with a sheet.”

“What happened next?”

“He said he’d keep his men away from us if Duane cooperated. He held a box of condoms up to the camera. I was so scared my girls were going to be raped.”

“I know this is painful to relive, but you’re helping us a lot. What happened next?”

“He brought my girls into the room. He told me he’d kidnapped them, but he never let me see them. Before that, I could only hear them upstairs. They were so scared. He taped my mouth closed.” She began to cry again.

Nathan shook his head at Montez’s cruel methods.

Harv continued. “Keep your eyes closed. What happened next?”

“He said he didn’t care about Duane. He wanted someone else.”

“Take another deep breath and let it out slowly. Everything you’re remembering will help us find your girls. Let’s drive to the house in Lomas Santa Fe together. You turn north on El Camino Real and go up the hill. Do you remember crossing any streets with stop signs? Anything like that?”

“Yes, we went past a stop sign, but I don’t know the street’s name.”

“Don’t worry about that. What does the house look like?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen it. Duane didn’t want me to drive up.”

“You can’t see it from the street?”

“No.”

“So you drop the girls off at the driveway and they walk up to the house?”

“It’s a safe neighborhood. Duane meets them at the top of the driveway.”

“The house is above the street?”

“Yes.”

“What does the driveway look like? Is it asphalt or concrete?”

“No. It’s made of bricks.”

“Bricks? Or pavers? Maybe interlocking pavers?”

“Yes, pavers.”

“Does the property have a fence?”

“Yes.”

“A rail fence?”

“Yes. It’s white.”

“You’re doing great, Ms. Dalton. Is there an electric gate to get in?”

“Yes.”

“Which side of the street is it on?”

“The right side.”

“Picture the entrance in your mind. You pull up to the driveway and stop. The electric gate is on the right. The girls get out. Can they walk around

the gate?”

“Yes, it’s just to stop cars.”

“Is the gate white too?”

“I don’t remember.”

“What else do you see? Does the entrance have anything architectural? An arch, maybe some stone columns? Anything like that?”

“A stump.”

“Stump? What do you mean?”

“There’s a big eucalyptus stump next to the gate.”

“From a cut-down tree?”

“The girls wanted to know why the owner did it.”

“It’s cut pretty low to the ground?”

“They can climb on it.”

Harv looked his way. He pointed to his wrist.

“Thank you, Ms. Dalton,” Harv said. “You can open your eyes now.”

Nathan took over, moving closer to Nichole Dalton and gently taking her hand. “You’ve given us really helpful information. The man who kidnapped you is very resourceful. If we take you to a hospital, the police will get involved. The news media monitor police and fire frequencies. Lots of people do the same thing with scanners. We’re going to tend to your needs outside the normal chain of the EMS. It’s the only way to ensure you’ll remain hidden and safe. You need to trust us. What I’m about to say may sound insensitive based on everything you’ve been through, but it’s not my intent.”

She nodded.

“I know your cuts are painful, but they’re not life threatening. You’re in no danger of dying. It’s important we keep you completely hidden. Harv and I know a doctor. He’s a very skilled plastic surgeon who can suture you up much better than an ER doctor. He’ll get you on antibiotics too. You’ll be in very good hands. You need to trust us.”

“I *do* trust you. You just rescued me. But what about my girls?”

“Like I said, you need to trust us. While you’re being treated, we’re gonna be busy.” *Time for a white lie.* “I promise we’re going to find your girls. All those questions you answered help us a lot. It’s also the reason for the secrecy I mentioned. We don’t want their kidnapper to know we’re closing in on him. I promise to have you out of here in the next ten minutes or so. I can’t tell you everything, but there are other people who’ll want to

talk to you about your kidnapper.”

“The NSA.”

“Probably the CIA and FBI too. We can insulate you for a while, but you’ll eventually have to talk to them.”

“I don’t understand any of this. It’s like a bad dream. I keep thinking I’ll wake up in my bed and none of this will be real.”

“That’s a normal thing to feel. Ms. Grangeland is going to stay with you while Harvey and I talk to those men out there. I promise this won’t take long.”

Nathan motioned for Harv to follow him out of the room. “She’s not a spook.”

“I agree,” Harv said.

“We need to find out which one of those goons is in charge and get Montez’s phone number.”

CHAPTER 31

The great and powerful Duane Dalton—a truly pathetic sight—broken and sobbing like a child. Not so great or powerful anymore. Yet something bothered Montez. He didn't feel a sense of satisfaction with Dalton like he had with Kramer. He supposed it might have something to do with familiarity. Over the last six years, he'd had frequent contact with Kramer. Interrogating Kramer had been...what? Enjoyable? No, that wasn't the right word. *Satisfying*. He'd always sensed a smug superiority oozing from Kramer, as if the man felt interacting with a mere Nicaraguan interrogator had somehow been beneath him. At the end, he'd actually lost his cool with Kramer at Bullfrog Bay. Montez winced inwardly. He was better than that. Above it. Still, casually pushing Kramer into the water with his foot had been sweet, as was seeing Kramer's final expression.

Dalton was in bad shape, but not as bad as Kramer. Montez's interrogation techniques always produced a lot of blood, but not fatally so. He'd never lost a subject during questioning. Accidentally killing a subject was inexcusable and costly. Rule number one in interrogation: you can't question a dead subject.

Still, he hadn't fully broken Dalton. The man acted as if he were telling all, but decades of experience told Montez he hadn't extracted everything yet.

His cell rang. An unavailable number. Should he answer it? He doubted it could be anyone threatening. No one but his men had this number. With irritation he asked, "Who is this?"

"It's Julio. We've got trouble."

"What phone are you using? Where's Hector?" Montez put the call on speaker so Duane Dalton could hear it.

"Two men broke in here and started shooting the place up. They killed Hector and Pablo!"

"Calm down. What's your status?"

"I'm okay, but Miguel is hurt bad."

"Where are the gunmen?"

"I shot them from the second-floor office, they didn't see me in time. They're both dead. We can't stay here, the police could be coming."

"Who were they?"

"I don't know. Big guys. No uniform or IDs."

"By *big* you mean tall?"

"Yes."

"What phone are you using?"

"Hector's phone is broken. I'm using a dead guy's phone."

"Kill the woman and leave immediately. Don't leave Hector and Pablo there. Put them in the van. Miguel too. Torch the warehouse and get down here right away."

He ended the call and turned his attention back to what was left of Duane Dalton. He yanked the gag from Dalton's mouth.

"*Wait!* Don't kill her."

Montez smiled. "Oh? And I suppose you had nothing to do with this latest attack?"

"I didn't. I swear."

"You have lied to me for the last time."

"Please, she's no threat to you."

"I don't give a damn about your ex-wife."

"Please, I'll tell you—"

"Tell me what?"

"Everything. Call your man back. Don't kill Nichole. *Please!*"

Montez took several steps away and pretended to dial his phone. He had no intention of sparing Dalton's ex-wife. He'd been betrayed for the last time.

"Julio, change of plans. Don't kill the woman," he feigned. "Take her with you. Call me when you're almost here." He completed the act by pressing the end button, then turned back to Dalton. "All right, you have my complete attention. Conceal nothing, color no facts this time, or I promise I'll let my men have their way with your precious little girls. Many, many times."

Montez inserted a thumb drive into the laptop, opened the video recording program, and turned on the camera. "From the beginning, please."

Satisfied, Nathan took his cell back from the mercenary and tucked it into his pocket.

It took several minutes to secure the wounded men and leave the warehouse. With Grangeland and Nichole Dalton following in her sedan, Nathan again pulled his phone and dialed the number Cantrell had given him at the hospital.

“Cantrell.”

“It’s Echo Five.”

“You’re using your cell. Find a pay phone and call me back.”

The signal ended. “She wants me to call back on a pay phone.”

“Let’s clear this area first,” Harv said. “We’ll find something near the freeway.”

Nathan radioed Grangeland. “We’re stopping at a pay phone.”

“Copy.”

“How is Ms. Dalton doing?”

“She’s in a lot of pain. She can’t stop thanking us for saving her, but she’s frantic about her girls.”

“Tell her to hang in there.”

His radio clicked once.

A few blocks from the freeway, Harv pulled into a Circle K convenience store. In the side mirror, Nathan saw Grangeland’s headlights make the turn. She rolled down her passenger window.

“I’ll be right back,” Nathan said. “This shouldn’t take long.” He headed for the pay phone and reached into his pocket. No friggin’ quarters. What a pain in the ass. He returned to the sedan.

Harv grabbed a handful of coins from an Altoids tin in the Mercedes’s center console. “This should be enough.”

He kept the filthy handset away from his mouth, dialed the number, and waited for the impersonal electronic voice to indicate the charge. He jammed the quarters in and waited.

“Cantrell.”

“It’s me.”

“What’s your status?”

It took a minute to brief her.

Cantrell’s voice had an edge. “I thought we’d agreed you’d keep me in the loop.”

“You *are* in the loop, that’s why I’m calling. Three of the four

mercenaries are still there. One won't be answering any questions, the second has a bullet wound to the shoulder, and the third, head trauma. Both will live with proper medical care. We're taking the fourth with us."

"That's highly irregular and unacceptable."

"It's not negotiable. He's ours. If I were you, I'd get my people over to the warehouse a-sap."

"I've had dozens of agents standing by in different areas of the country for just this situation. My people can be there in twenty minutes. I just assumed you'd inform me of any field operations you planned to conduct."

"You know damned well I didn't agree to that."

"Let's keep things civil. What's the woman's condition?"

"Moderate shock. Montez lacerated her torso."

"Like yours?"

"Not as severely."

"Is she in any immediate danger?"

"No, but she needs several hundred stitches, antibiotics. The works."

"Protect the scene until my people arrive."

"Negative. Harv and I are already on the move. We made sure the prisoners were secure before we left."

She started to object.

"Again, not negotiable."

"What about the woman? We need to debrief her."

"I told her your people will want to talk to her. You'll have her soon. What I'm about to tell you doesn't go any further than the two of us."

No response.

"Do we have a deal? If not, I'm hanging up."

"Deal."

"We have an FBI special agent with us tonight."

"Grangeland, from Fresno's resident office."

Nathan paused at hearing that. "As you seem to know, she's been with us since Salt Lake where we looked at Kramer's body. She's off the books. Totally. And you need to keep her that way to protect both her and SAC Simpson. Grangeland has custody of Nichole Dalton. Harvey and I are personally arranging for Nichole's medical care. A plastic surgeon is going to suture her wounds."

"How much does Grangeland know?"

"About what?"

“You know what I’m asking.”

“No, Director, I don’t, because *I* don’t know what’s going on. Care to enlighten me?”

“At the hospital I told you I couldn’t...wouldn’t reveal everything to you.”

“Who is Duane Dalton, and how is he connected with Arthur Kramer and a clean coal negotiation in Hungary?”

“Nathan, listen to me very carefully. You never heard those names. Clear? Do not pursue this further. Let my people handle it from here.”

“Not likely. Montez knows where I live, maybe Harv too.”

“We can protect you.”

“For how long?”

“This is a CIA operation.”

“On US soil? Care to explain that?”

“With all due respect, I don’t owe you an explanation.”

He didn’t respond.

“Your involvement ends now.”

“The hell it does. We’re just warming up.”

“Nathan, please. I’m asking you. Do not pursue Montez. It’s a—”

He cut her off. “A what? An issue of national security?”

“Yes.”

“Has Congress been informed of this national security issue?”

No answer.

“I didn’t think so.” He waited, saying nothing.

“Why are you taking Montez’s man with you? What’s he—” Her voice took on a hard edge. “He knows where Montez is. You’re going after him.”

“And if I am?”

“Then I have to do everything within my power to dissuade you.”

“In my hospital room you said you wouldn’t try to stop us. What’s changed?”

“Let’s stop dancing. Your ass is on the line here, soldier. Big-time. You screw this up and not even your father will be able to bail you out. Are we clear on that?”

“Crystal. My turn. My ass isn’t the only one on the line. I suspect there are lots of asses on the line. Asses higher up on the food chain. How am I doing? Maybe I’ll ask my father to get more deeply involved. I’m sure he’ll be able to uncover a grave or two.”

“Nathan, please. I’m asking you as a personal favor not to do that.”

“Why would I agree to that?”

“Damn it, Nathan, you think *you’re* under pressure? You haven’t a clue.”

“I know about pressure, Rebecca.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

He waited.

“I’m trying to protect you.”

“What do you mean, *protect me*?”

“I have orders to ensure, *by any means necessary*, the successful capture and interrogation of Montez. Remember those people in high places I mentioned in the hospital?”

“Are we talking about what I think we’re talking about?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t respond, didn’t trust himself.

She softened her tone. “Look, this isn’t a black or white directive. It’s my call.”

“Will you level with me?”

“To the extent I can, yes.”

“Would you actually do it?”

There was a long pause. For a second, he thought she’d hung up.

“No. I’d resign first.”

“That means a lot to me, Rebecca. And not for the obvious reason.”

“There are certain lines I won’t cross. Will you tell me generally where you’re going so I can have my people standing by?”

“San Diego. I can’t be more specific than that. There’s video equipment on the roof of the warehouse. Make sure your people retrieve it.”

“I will. Nathan, if you get killed, your father’s going to have my head on a pole. He has the president’s ear. I like my job.”

“I’ll talk to him. Tonight. I’ll make sure you’re insulated.”

“It’s after midnight out here.”

“He’ll take my call.”

“Will you keep me in the loop, please?”

“That’s a given. We’re on the same side, Rebecca.”

“I know we are. Be careful.”

Harv climbed out of the Mercedes. Grangeland joined them, hugging herself in the damp air.

“We need to get you and Nichole on your way to San Diego,” Nathan said. “We’ll call you from the road with a location. Keep assuring her we’ll find her daughters.”

“It doesn’t feel right abandoning you guys.”

“You’re *not* abandoning us. Don’t think of it like that.”

She gave them both hugs and turned to go.

“Grangeland, if you ever want it, you’ve got an ownership position with us.”

“After tonight, I just might need it.”

CHAPTER 32

Julio was in considerable pain, but the bandage they'd applied to his hip showed minimal bleeding. They'd driven a few miles when Harv said, "Let's pull over so we can call Dr. Reavie. I don't want our guest to hear the conversation."

At the curb, they both stepped out and walked a few steps away. Nathan kept a close eye on Julio. Harv used 411 to get Dr. Reavie's office number. He listened to the recorded office message, then pressed zero to be connected to the doctor's answering service. Because it was an emergency, Harv was transferred directly to Reavie's cell phone. It took some explaining, but Reavie agreed to treat Nichole. From what Nathan could discern from the call, Reavie's biggest concern was about Ms. Dalton's condition, not any legal issues.

Nathan said, "We should call Grangeland and give her Reavie's phone number and address. After she's recovered from the anesthesia, we'll have Grangeland secure her in a hotel. I want Grangeland to be the only person in the world other than us who knows where Nichole Dalton is staying."

He made the call to Grangeland, then paused before making the next call. It had the potential of becoming confrontational.

His father answered, sounding perfectly awake and alert. "Nathan? Is everything okay?"

It took several minutes to update him about the warehouse raid and their plans to assault the San Diego safe house and to insulate Cantrell from any negative fallout should things go south.

"Of course I'll protect her, to the extent I can. I don't need to say this, but accepting the director's advice of turning this over to her people sounds like a good idea."

"I appreciate that, Dad, but Harv and I have the element of surprise on our side. We'll be fine."

"As you requested, I've placed calls to the secretary of the navy and the secretary of defense. So far, I've yet to get a return call. I haven't dropped the

ball, but I can't push too hard. It's a fine line."

"We need to talk about that. Cantrell doesn't want you inquiring into this. She didn't come right out and say it, but I know she's worried about leaks."

"It's too late, I've already made the calls."

"When they call back, can you say it was a false alarm?"

"No, that won't work."

Nathan said nothing.

"Don't worry, I'll think of something. I don't want you distracted over this. You need to be focused. Will you call me later, no matter what time it is?"

"Yes."

"Thanks for including me."

"You're the chairman of the CDT."

"I'm speaking as your father."

"I know you are."

"You're a good man, Nathan."

"I'll call you later."

"I'll be waiting."

He hung up, feeling relieved that he'd fulfilled his end of the bargain with Cantrell. She was officially off the hook if things went sour. He'd been tempted to ask his dad how the CIA skirted the issue of conducting covert operations on US soil, but he already knew the answer. They hadn't. And tonight's operation would never be revealed—especially to Congress—unless it blew up in all their faces. Not a nice thought. Regardless of his political leaning, he had no desire to see the current administration mired in scandal. When the president looked bad, the entire nation looked bad.

"Let's get going," Nathan said. They climbed into Harv's Mercedes and headed for the I-405 south. With Julio in the backseat, Nathan spoke to Harv in Russian. "Cantrell told me she has a green light to eliminate us."

"Are you serious?" Harv answered, also in Russian.

"Yes."

"Is she going to do it?"

"She said she'd resign first."

"I hate to admit this, but I like her," Harv said.

"Yeah, me too." They drove in silence for a few minutes. Still in Russian, Nathan asked, "What could Montez possibly know that's so

dangerous? And what could've gotten so personal between him and Kramer? Certainly more than just a clean coal negotiation?"

"All good questions, Nate, but until we grab Montez, we'll probably never know. Right now we need to be more concerned for Nichole Dalton's girls. They could be in the safe house, probably are. We need to be extra careful. We have to worry about friendly fire penetrating walls and a potential hostage situation."

"Like you said, we'll just have to be extra careful."

They arrived on the outskirts of San Diego after midnight. Sparse traffic enabled Harv to drive eighty miles per hour most of the way. Not much discussion took place. Nathan knew they'd be facing another dangerous set of unknowns. Except to its occupants, a safe house was anything but. All safe houses—by definition—survived on anonymity, and many of them employed secondary measures when their locations were blown. Booby traps. Fortifications. Secret escape tunnels. You name it.

He'd heard Montez's voice on the other end of the call Julio made from the warehouse. Montez ordered Julio to kill Nichole Dalton, and if he was willing to be that cold-blooded, he probably planned on killing her daughters as well. He hoped they weren't already dead.

By now, Cantrell's people would be crawling all over the warehouse and questioning the two wounded mercenaries. If either of them knew the location of the safe house, all bets were off. They might arrive at a raided location with the CIA crawling all over the—

"Damn it." Nathan spoke in English now.

"What's wrong?" Harv asked, following suit.

"Our vehicle. Montez won't be expecting his man to arrive in it."

"We should've thought of that."

"Options?"

"We'll have to park at a safe distance and approach on foot."

Nathan pivoted toward Julio. "What's your procedure when you approach the safe house?"

"We're supposed to call just before we get there."

"I have an idea," Harv said. "We disabled their vehicle. He had to use

ours. If Montez asks, he found it by using the remote switch on the keychain. It was parked down the street.”

“That might work.” He turned toward Julio. “You got that straight?”

“Yeah.”

“Play along and you’ll live through the evening. If you don’t, the world won’t miss you.”

“Who *are* you guys?”

“We’re the guys asking the questions.”

Julio didn’t respond.

“Are the two little girls in there?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about dogs?”

“No.”

“Are there any motion sensor lights on the outside?”

“No.”

“How many men are usually in there besides your boss?”

“Two.”

“Is anyone else in there, like someone your boss *tortured with a knife*?”

“I don’t know.”

“Easy, partner,” Harv said.

Nathan looked out his window before asking several more questions, all related to the safe house’s layout and Montez’s resources. He specifically asked about night-vision equipment, and Julio said his boss didn’t have any. He felt a little surprised at the lack of security measures and supposed Julio could be lying, but didn’t think so. Montez obviously thought his lair remained safe.

That’s about to change, old friend.

They drove past Mission Bay and took I-8 east to I-805 south. Apparently the safe house wasn’t within the actual city limits of San Diego. Julio had them take Bonita Road east to San Miguel Road. From there they turned south on Proctor Valley Road before making a final turn east on Jonel Road. The surrounding area looked to be mostly rural, dominated by large, flat acreage parcels with lots of vacant land. Newer homes were interspersed with older ranch properties. He’d never been to this area of Bonita before. The absence of streetlights on Jonel Road worked in their favor.

He addressed Julio. “How much farther?”

“Maybe two hundred meters.”

“Which side of the street?”

“The left.”

The pavement ended and Jonel became a dirt road. “Harv, pull over and kill the headlights. Let’s break out our NV.”

“What’s our plan?”

“Julio said he’s got a wounded man with him. Harv, you’re tall, but not as tall as me. You’ll play Julio and Julio will play the wounded man. I’ll cover you while you approach on foot. You’ll be helping Julio walk.” He paused for a moment, thinking. “Montez said the door will be unlocked. If Dalton’s girls are in there, they’re probably not being constantly watched. They could be restrained, or in an isolated room or closet.”

“We need to be careful not to shoot through walls,” said Harv.

They secured their NV visors and turned the devices on. Their world turned bright green. The ambient light from San Diego’s glow and surrounding houses gave the NV monoculars more input than they needed. They both turned the gains down a bit.

“We’ll make one pass with the headlights dark and return to this location.”

Harv began a slow drive down Jonel Road. They passed a horse pasture and several corrals on the right side. After thirty seconds or so, he asked Julio, “Which one?”

“Next house on the left.”

He studied the property as they rolled past. The access, also a dirt track, looked to be about seventy yards long. He saw the rear end of a light-colored van near the house. Three rows of mature citrus trees lined the left side of the driveway and extended all the way to the rear property corner. They’d provide good cover from that direction. Several smaller trees, probably jacarandas, partially obscured the house from view, but he saw several windows glowing brightly. He looked behind the Mercedes to gauge the wind. Dust from the tires drifted lazily to the northeast. Maybe three miles per hour. That reinforced his plan to use the citrus trees as cover. He’d be downwind from the house—important if there were dogs. His trust in Julio’s report was far from absolute. After another quarter of a mile or so, the road came to a dead end. Harv executed a U-turn and cruised past the house in the opposite direction.

He pulled to the shoulder at the point where Jonel became paved again and kept the engine running. They donned the radio gear, body armor, and

belly packs. Next, they checked their suppressed SIGs and strapped Predator knives to their ankles. Time to make the call to Montez.

Nathan had their captive lean forward from the rear seat. “You try anything cute and you won’t finish your sentence. Do you doubt me?”

Julio shook his head.

“Tell him you had to take our vehicle because we slashed your tires. Keep it short.” Holding the suppressor against Julio’s head, he scrolled down to the number Julio had supplied earlier, hit send, and pressed the speaker button.

The voice on the other end held no emotion. “Where are you?”

“We’re almost there, but I got to tell you something.”

“What?” Montez’s impatience crackled through the line.

“The guys that shot us up, they slashed the van’s tires. I had to take their car.”

“What about Hector and Pablo?”

“They’re in the trunk.”

“What make and color is your vehicle?”

“A blue Mercedes.”

The cell signal ended.

He and Harv got out and huddled in front of the idling Mercedes where Julio couldn’t hear them. “Pull in the driveway and park about thirty yards from the house,” Nathan whispered. “I’ll parallel your position through the citrus trees to the north and advance to the van’s position. Tuck your SIG into the small of your back. When you reach the porch, I’ll rush forward from the van. I’ll knock Julio senseless and we’ll storm the house. I’ll take the left.”

“I can’t wear my NV visor.”

“I’ve got you covered. The trees are right next to the driveway. Even though Julio said there weren’t any, there could be motion sensor lights mounted on the eaves. If they snap on, knock Julio cold and we’ll accelerate the attack. If things turn south, we’ll back off and let Cantrell’s people handle it.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“If things *do* go to hell, we can’t let anyone leave. I’ll cover the north and west sides, you take the south and east. If anyone bolts, we shoot to kill.”

“Cantrell wants Montez alive.”

“Only if it’s tactically sound. We can’t chase anyone without the risk of someone else escaping, especially Montez. Give me ninety seconds before

you turn around. I'll be in the citrus trees by the time you reach the driveway."

He opened the rear door and shoved Julio onto his side. "I'm cutting the tape from your hands and feet. If you've got any ideas about attacking my partner, forget them. You won't see me, but I'll have a laser painted on your back the entire time. Play along and you'll live to see another day. Now get into the front seat and keep your mouth shut. Harv, give him a hand."

Julio wasn't going anywhere—his grunts of agony confirmed it. Just relocating from the backseat into the front took considerable effort. This man couldn't run even if he wanted to.

"Okay, Harv. Ninety seconds."

CHAPTER 33

Montez smiled when Dalton finished spilling his guts for the video camera. Pure gold. Dalton's admissions would ensure Montez's continued security into the foreseeable future. He tucked the thumb drive into his vest pocket, turned off the camera, and closed the laptop. Julio should be knocking on the door any second now. He checked his watch.

Nathan flipped the NV monocular down to his left eye and jogged down the shoulder of the road. One hundred yards from the citrus trees, he angled across a grassy field and positioned himself about halfway down the driveway. He saw the green glow of the Mercedes's headlights sweep through a 180-degree arc as Harv executed a U-turn. He ducked low as lateral light reached for him.

While Harv rolled down the driveway and killed the engine, Nathan worked his way into the row of trees to a point parallel to the sedan and focused his NV monocular on the gravel driveway. Nothing. He didn't see any trip wires or other deadfalls. The eaves above the front door didn't appear to have any motion detector lights. A porch light to the left of the door looked to be the only exterior fixture—currently dark.

"You're good to go," he whispered.

"Copy."

A small gust of wind rustled the trees, then died.

Harv climbed out, crossed in front of the sedan, and opened Julio's door. Hunching over to disguise his height, Harv put his right arm around the wounded man and began a slow shuffle toward the house. In the gloom, with the dark backdrop, it looked believable.

Nathan worked his way down the middle of the trees to the east until he was opposite the van. Keeping the van between himself and the house, he

advanced. "I'm in position at the van."

"Copy."

The house seemed awfully quiet and totally silent. Not unusual in itself, but Nathan's internal antennae went active. He focused on the windows to see if anyone cracked the curtains. No one did. His sense of caution climbed another notch.

Harv and Julio closed to within ten yards of the door.

A gust of wind moved past him.

Eight yards.

He inhaled through his nose. Deeply.

And caught an odor.

A sour smell. Like a septic tank.

Six yards.

He breathed the air again. Caught another whiff.

Three yards.

Shit. Not a septic tank—

"Harv. Bolter! *Bolter!*"

Harv let go of Julio and sprinted back up the driveway.

Seizing the opportunity, Julio used his freedom to hobble toward the front door.

Nathan yelled, "*Get down!*"

Harv dropped to the gravel just as Julio grabbed the doorknob and pushed.

The house ignited.

A fireball shot through the front door, turning Julio into a flaming bowling ball.

From a prone position, Nathan squinted as the man tumbled across the gravel and smashed against the side of the van. Simultaneously, every window blew outward, spewing glass and flames. The roof seemed to bulge for an instant before releasing from its walls. In a macabre ballet, burning plywood and shingles flew fifty feet into the air.

"Harv?"

"*I'm okay!*"

"Roll left!"

Harv scrambled laterally as a sheet of smoldering plywood landed where he'd just been. He saw Harv pop to his feet and dash into the citrus trees.

Burning debris rained out of the sky, starting satellite fires in the grass field to the north.

Nathan kept his head up as the last fiery chunks descended. In a running crouch, he formed up with Harv.

“Dalton’s girls,” Nathan growled.

“There’s nothing we can do for them.”

“I should’ve shot Julio before he reached the door.”

“Nate, there wasn’t time.”

Screaming came from behind them. Turning, they saw what was left of Julio, blackened and smoldering, wailing in agony as he attempted to crawl away from the van. The orange glow from the inferno revealed all Nathan needed to see. Parts of Julio’s clothing were still burning and the rest had fused with his skin. If he lived until help arrived, he’d go through living hell and probably wouldn’t survive. His entire body had sustained third-degree burns and looked like charred steak.

Nathan toggled his laser, painted the red dot on Julio’s form, and squeezed the trigger. It took three suppressed shots to end the screaming.

A flare of illumination blossomed in his peripheral vision. Across the road, porch lights had snapped on. Nathan figured they had less than thirty seconds to clear the area before every neighbor within a half mile came out to investigate the explosion and fire. Without a doubt, 911 had already been called.

He brushed a smoking shingle from the hood of the Mercedes before climbing into the passenger side. “Let’s beat feet outta here, double pronto.”

“No argument here.”

Gravel shot forward as Harv backed down the driveway. “How’d you know?”

“I smelled propane and put two and two together.”

“Well, thank heaven for your keen sense of smell and your advanced mathematics.”

“That heat wave was intense. I thought I’d caught fire.”

“Yeah, me too. I think our hair took some damage. I can smell it.”

“How are your eyes?”

“I think they’re readjusted now.” Harv backed onto Jonel Road, threw the sedan into drive, and stomped the accelerator. A huge dust cloud fanned out behind them as their Mercedes sped away. He looked over to Nathan. “Where to now?”

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Let’s hope we’re not too late.”

CHAPTER 34

Nathan removed his tactical gear and face paint before reloading his SIG. In the unlikely event they got pulled over, they didn't want to look like cat burglars. He steered from the passenger side as Harv did the same, except Harv didn't need to reload his weapon. "We'll start at the beginning of El Camino Real and head north up the hill. Ms. Dalton thought it was past the first stop sign, on the right side of the road. We're looking for a property with a white rail fence, an electric gate, and a big tree stump. There can't be too many properties with those exact details."

"Should we update Cantrell?"

"Yeah, probably, but screw finding a pay phone. We're done jumping through hoops."

"She won't like it."

"Too bad." He pulled his cell, made the call, and put it on speaker.

"Cantrell."

"It's Echo Five and I'm not on a pay phone."

"Say nothing and—"

He cut her off. "No time. Target location self-destructed. Threat still loose."

"Destination?"

"We have an alternate location."

A long pause. He could almost hear Cantrell's mind working. "Do not, I repeat, *do not* proceed to that location."

"We're already on our way."

"Abort, Echo Five. Abort—"

He ended the call and turned off his phone.

"What the hell was *that* about?" Harv asked.

"We struck a nerve, that's what."

Cantrell heard the call end. She redialed but got thrown into voice mail. What the hell did they think they were doing? She picked up the hard line on her desk and hit a preset button.

Former CIA Director Samuel Kallstrom sounded awake but tired. "It's oh-three-thirty in the morning, Rebecca."

"Your boys have gone rogue. They're on their way to your son's West Coast house as we speak."

"And that surprises you?"

"You assured me they were good soldiers. Team players who followed orders. We're about to lose containment."

She heard her former boss cough away from the receiver. "You lost containment the moment Montez attacked McBride. You've got the crime scene at Bullfrog Bay, the Long Beach warehouse, and several of Montez's men in custody. That's a hell of a lot more than you had several days ago. Give them a chance to complete the mission."

"McBride's got a personal vendetta against Montez. What if he kills him? You're still on the hook for Operation Echo if Montez has a sleeper system in place. You testified before Congress."

"I've got lung cancer. What're they going to do? Throw me in jail? The president would never allow it."

"So where does this leave us?"

"Did you ask McBride not to kill Montez?"

"Yes."

"Then he won't."

She needed to play an ace. The CIA was *her* agency now, not his. "This is bigger than Nicaragua. The scandal could bring down the president. I have a green light."

He coughed again and she felt a pang of guilt.

"Rebecca, listen to me very carefully. Under no circumstances are you to do that."

"With all due respect, I don't report to you anymore. I report to the DNI."

"I recommended you for the director's chair, cashed in every favor I owned."

She sighed, deliberately softening her voice. She'd lost the high ground. "You don't need to call in any favors. I already told McBride I wouldn't do it."

“Thank you for that. Are any of our people watching Dalton?” he asked.

She looked at her computer clock. “No. He refused, said he didn’t need them. He thought involving us would compromise the operation. For what it’s worth, I agreed with him. He used his own men and assured me they were up to the task, but I haven’t heard from him in more than thirty-six hours. McBride and Fontana are on their way to your son’s house, but I doubt Dalton would go there. Especially if Nichole knew its location, which is likely. Montez would extract that from her easily.”

“If Montez has Dalton, it’s already too late. Dalton’s tough and smart, but he’ll never hold out very long against Montez, especially with his daughters at risk. It’s a good bet Montez knows everything.”

“Will he blow the whistle?”

“He kept Nicaragua a secret. At this point, I don’t know, but it’s a safe bet he’ll want more money. A lot more.”

“I’m not onboard with that.”

“We may have no choice.”

She waited.

“Our best hope of containment is already on the move.”

“They’re rusty at best, sloppy at worst. They’ve already made some serious mistakes. It was their screwup that led Montez to McBride’s house.”

Kallstrom said nothing.

“Your boys have six more hours, but I’m putting my San Diego team on standby. That’s the best I can do.”

“You won’t regret it.”

“Make a pot of coffee, Sam.” She ended the call and leaned back in her chair.

Nathan and Harvey arrived on the outskirts of Lomas Santa Fe thirty minutes after leaving the safe house. At this hour, the streets of the neighborhood were deserted.

“There might be security guards watching the house, probably are. We could be facing a friendly fire situation.”

“I don’t consider anyone who shoots at us as *friendly*.”

“You know what I mean...”

They rode in silence for a few seconds.

“Let’s think about our plan,” Harv said. “Once again, we don’t have any intel on this house, or the surrounding area. Given the neighborhood, it’s a good bet it’ll have a state-of-the-art security system. Cameras. Infrared beams. Motion sensors. You name it.”

“Good thing we know how to beat them.”

“There could be tactical dogs.”

“If there are, let’s try not to kill them.”

“Last I looked, we’re fresh out of tranquilizer guns.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.” Nathan paused, thinking. “I wish Cantrell had told me what Duane Dalton’s role is.”

He turned left onto El Camino Real. “All we can be sure of is that Dalton’s a fairly major player, and he’s working in some way with the CIA.”

“He could’ve been in the safe house when it blew.” Nathan shook his head. “You realize that Montez set a trap to kill his own man. Maybe Julio said something in code. If he did, it cost him his life. It’s damned cold-blooded to kill your own man like that, even for Montez.”

“Don’t humanize Montez too much, Nate.”

They fell silent for a minute.

“If you’re right about Julio alerting Montez,” Harv said, “he wanted to take us out as well. Nearly did. Which might give us an advantage if he thinks we’re dead.”

“We shouldn’t assume that.”

“If Montez believes his safe house was compromised, then he’ll also assume this location could be compromised as well. There could be a similar booby trap here. Getting cooked alive isn’t exactly at the top of my bucket list.”

“Relax, Harv. I’ve got everything under control.”

“I hate it when you say that.”

“You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

“You call this living?”

“Just admit it, you love this.”

“I’ll have to take the Fifth on that.”

Nathan focused on the landmarks along the road now. “Nichole Dalton said the house is past a stop sign.”

A few minutes later they found the stop sign Nichole had mentioned. The cross street was Linea Del Cielo. They drove down a gradual grade,

focusing on the right side.

“There’s a white fence,” Nathan said. “This could be it.”

“Looks promising.”

“Keep going, we need an electric gate.”

“I don’t see a big stump.”

“The gate’s too far away. Kill the headlights and pull over past the driveway. I’m gonna take a look.”

Nathan wasn’t out of Harv’s Mercedes more than ten seconds before hearing an approaching car. He cursed inwardly and bolted up a steep slope. He had to lie flat on his stomach to avoid being touched by the headlights and peered through a low bush as a San Diego County sheriff’s cruiser rolled to a stop next to Harv’s Mercedes. *Unbelievable. Friggin’ unbelievable.*

He saw the cruiser’s passenger side window roll down. “Sir, is everything okay?”

“Thanks for stopping, Deputy. I needed a drive to clear my head. Had an argument with my kid. He came home drunk.”

“You live around here?”

“Yes, sir. Just a mile or so away.”

“Please show me your driver’s license.”

“No problem.”

He couldn’t see Harv, but the deputy shined his flashlight into the Mercedes. Good thing they’d removed their tactical gear and face paint following the safe house explosion. “My name is Harvey Fontana. I own First Security, Inc.”

“The company with the radio ads?”

“We offer a twenty-five percent discount to all military and law enforcement personnel.”

“I might give you a call, we have an old system. Have you had anything to drink tonight?”

“Absolutely not, Deputy.”

“All right, Mr. Fontana. Have a good evening.”

“Thanks again, Deputy.”

The cruiser continued north on El Camino Real and disappeared around a gradual bend in the road.

Nathan slid down the slope and approached the electric gate. No stumps of any kind. He searched the immediate area for wood chips produced by a stump grinder, but didn’t find any evidence of that either. Plus, he could

clearly see the house a hundred yards up the driveway. This didn't look like the place.

"Good job with the deputy. I took a close look, and this isn't the place. Let's keep going, but carefully. I don't think we've seen the last of our law enforcement friend."

"He'll definitely cruise through here again."

Farther down the road they found their house. No doubt about it. White rail fence. Electric gate. Interlocking pavers. And the stump was hard to miss.

"We're in business," Harv said. "Let's find a place to park."

Driving by, he studied what he could, but Nichole Dalton had it right. The house couldn't be seen from the street.

Farther down the road, they both saw it at the same time, a place to park at the entrance to a small community park. The closed gate prevented access, but they could park on the shoulder without drawing too much attention. And Harv's big Mercedes would look perfectly natural in this neighborhood. When the deputy patrolled through here again, he couldn't miss it, and finding it unoccupied would raise suspicion. Short on options, they decided to risk it.

They put on all their tactical gear and applied fresh face paint to the exposed areas of skin. Satisfied, they nodded to each other and climbed out. Harv locked the sedan and placed the keys on top of the left front tire. They both knew an untimely jingling of keys could blow a stealthy approach—especially with dogs.

"Nate, you still have those quarters in your pocket from the pay phone?"

He removed them and tossed them into the bushes.

"Let's mask our scent," Nathan said. He reached up and yanked a small branch from a eucalyptus tree. Harv did the same. They crushed the leaves and rolled them like dough in their hands before rubbing the pungent leafy mix all over their clothes and exposed skin. It wasn't perfect, and certainly not adequate against trained tactical dogs, but better than nothing. Too bad some road apples weren't available. They never used deodorant on missions, and they'd both showered with scent-free soap prior to the Long Beach raid. Dogs were always a concern. Their keen sense of smell didn't miss much, especially human traces.

Nathan kept his voice low. "Let's cross the street. If anyone drives by, we can hop that rail fence and duck behind the hedge. When we get to the

west property corner, break out your thermal imager and take a peek. It should see any dogs or guards. I'll be on the NV for infrared beam sources and tripwires. If there're dogs patrolling the property, we won't need to worry about trip wires or beams unless they're higher than the dogs. What do you think, four or five feet AGL?"

"That's where I'd place them if I used dogs."

"Ten-yard separation. I'm on point."

Over the next five hundred yards, they crossed several driveways, snaking up to huge estate homes. The driveway just west of their target was shorter and wider and flanked with mature cypress trees. The rail fence they'd been following turned ninety degrees to the north and paralleled the colonnade of cypress. They'd reacquire the fence on the opposite side of the driveway.

Nathan inhaled deeply through his nose, but didn't detect anything other than eucalyptus, which tended to mask all other odors. "I'm going to cross the driveway and hop the fence," he whispered into the lapel mike. "We'll advance on the inside and use the hedge for cover. I'm almost there. Twenty-five yards to the property corner. Switching to NV. Lasers on."

"Copy."

The lasers would stay dark until they pressed the activation buttons on the butts of their weapons. He reached up to his visor, pivoted the NV monocular down to his left eye, and powered it up. Once again, the nighttime world around him turned bright green. He adjusted the input to a slightly lower gain and slowed his pace. At the property corner, the rail fence converged into a Y intersection. A second fence, presumably the western boundary of the target property, joined the obtuse angle and ran in a northerly direction. At the convergence of the fences, he crouched down and held up his right fist, putting Harv on hold. He conducted a slow sweep of the area on both sides of El Camino Real.

Nothing moved. All quiet.

The absence of wind made their job more difficult. It was eerily quiet. Every snapped twig or crunch of leaves under their boots would be detected if dogs were present.

He motioned Harv up to his position and whispered, "Thermal sweep."

To prevent bleed light, Harv kept the rubber eye shield pressed firmly against his face and scanned through an arc covering everything between themselves and the property's driveway.

“Affirmative,” Harv said. “Ten o’clock, plus thirty.” Harv moved slightly left to get a better look. “Body down. Not bright enough to be alive.”

“Anything between us and the signature?”

Harv made another sweep. “Negative, nothing showing.”

“We’ll advance up the property line until we’re parallel with the signature. Ten-yard separation.”

“I’ll stay on the thermal imager.”

He followed the rail fence, taking slow, deliberate steps, avoiding the thickest areas of dead leaves. With a little luck, he might hear an approaching dog crunch through the dry ground cover before it lunged for his throat. So far, he hadn’t seen any signs of canine activity. No worn trails or droppings. Through sporadic breaks in the landscaping, he caught glimpses of what looked to be a mansion. All of its second-floor windows were dark. He couldn’t see the ground-floor windows along the north side of the house, but the glow they produced revealed a large, open area, presumably a paved parking area surrounded by trees.

A hand signal brought Harv up to his position. They knelt. He nodded toward the body several yards away. “Good guy or bad guy?”

“Probably a good guy. Montez could be long gone.”

“I’m gonna check him.”

He approached slowly and crouched down. The image in his NV scope revealed a single bullet wound to the back of the head. He didn’t bother checking for a pulse. This man wasn’t Hispanic. He looked African-American and wore black SWAT-type clothing with tactical body armor.

“Dead body found,” he whispered. “Single shot to the back of the head. Never saw it coming. If there were any dogs, it’s a good bet they’re dead too. We—”

They both heard it.

Car doors closing—up at the house.

Then an engine started. Someone was leaving.

The vehicle’s headlights snapped on, turning the surrounding area painfully bright through his NV scope.

“Harv, form up.”

Within seconds, Harv joined him at the dead man. “That could be Montez.”

“Let’s move.”

The twin headlight beams swept through the trees as the vehicle turned

around and started down the driveway. They both took off at a dead run.

They weren't going to make it.

They had to cover more than a hundred and fifty yards. An Olympic sprinter couldn't do it, especially over this terrain.

Ignoring the low branches whipping against his face, Nathan dug deeper for more energy and angled toward El Camino Real to gain speed from running downhill.

He stole a glance to his left and saw it. A light-colored van, probably white, was halfway down the driveway already and he still had seventy yards to cover.

"*You got a shot?*" Harv asked.

"No."

Fifty yards.

"Harv, beeline for El Camino Real. If the van turns right, you might get a shot. Dalton's daughters could be in the van. Tires only."

"*Copy.*"

In a full sprint, Nathan brought his SIG up and toggled the laser, but the beam couldn't penetrate the low-hanging branches. What if it wasn't Montez? It could be a neighbor. Or a friend. Or relative. Anyone could be in that van. It could even be Director Cantrell's people. He couldn't risk killing an innocent, even it meant letting Montez get away.

Thirty yards.

The van slowed to negotiate a hairpin turn in the driveway.

Fifteen yards.

As it rounded the corner, the face in the passenger's window turned.

And looked directly at him.

In the green image of his NV scope, the face smiled. A face he knew as well as his own. A face from the depths of hatred and insanity. A face he'd vowed to remove from its skull if ever given the chance.

"It's Montez. Passenger seat."

"*I'm almost to the road.*"

In a gesture of brazen mockery, his former tormentor blew a kiss goodbye.

You son of a bitch. He'd only get one shot.

It had to count.

He skidded to a stop, took a deep breath, and painted the laser on Montez's window—

And didn't pull the trigger.

A second face had materialized.

A young girl. In the backseat. One of Dalton's daughters. He couldn't risk it. And the foliage along the driveway kept him from targeting the van's tires.

"Hold your fire!"

"Copy."

Five seconds later he heard the van screech onto El Camino Real. With a sickening twist of his stomach, he knew they'd never reach Harv's Mercedes in time to follow.

And just like that, Montez was gone.

CHAPTER 35

Montez caught only a glimpse of the dark figure sprinting toward the van. Whoever he was, he wasn't going to make it. A third bodyguard? Not likely. A few jolts of the stun gun to Duane Dalton's exposed nerve endings verified there'd only been two bodyguards and two dogs patrolling the property. Arturo had eliminated all four threats with ease.

So who *was* that man back there? Could it be the same man who'd taken down his assault team in Clairemont? This guy was big—not just big—huge. And probably military or former military. Just like at Bullfrog Bay. The same person? The more Montez thought about it, the more likely it seemed.

His trap to capture or eliminate his pursuers was set, but would it work? He pulled his cell and called a phone number he'd extracted from Dalton.

“Harv, double-time back up here. We’re going inside the house. Let me know when you’ve got me on the TI.”

“Copy.”

The bastard had blown a kiss. What an arrogant jerk. *Let's see you do that again after I've burned your lips off with a cigar torch.* He'd been so close. Now Montez could be going anywhere in the world, and being a master at disguise, he'd disappear without a hitch. And to make matters worse, they might've just signed the death warrant for Nichole Dalton's daughters. Cantrell had told him not to approach this house. Had she known Montez was here? No, Montez would've been intercepted and taken into custody. So what was Cantrell's concern? Why did she—

“*I've got you. The edge of the driveway at the hairpin.*”

He clicked his radio and heard Harv crunch up the slope through the leaves—all stealth abandoned. “What happened?” Harv said, winded from his sprint.

"I saw one of Dalton's girls in the backseat. I couldn't see the other."

"You made the right decision."

"I had him. The son of a bitch blew me a kiss as he went by." He kicked the ground, fouling the driveway with dirt.

Harv motioned toward the house. "We might find Dalton's body in there."

"If so, I hope his girls didn't witness any of it."

"You want me to go in?"

"Hell, I've come this far."

"I'm still alive," Montez said.

"This isn't a secure line. No names. What do you want?"

"I want you to call off your dogs."

"They aren't *my* dogs. Don't you get it? I'm not calling the shots anymore."

"Then I suggest you call in a favor."

"Why would I do that?"

"Self-preservation," he said. "I have no desire to see you mired in scandal, or anyone else, for that matter. I'd like a certain amount of money deposited into my account. Tonight."

"Then what?"

"Then I disappear and you won't have to look over your shoulder for the rest of your life."

"That door swings both ways. Suppose I agree, which I'm not sure I do. What guarantee do I have you won't resurface someday?"

"My word."

Montez heard the sarcastic laugh on the other end.

"That's it? Your word?"

"Need I remind you I've kept your dirty secrets for fourteen years?"

"They're not *my* secrets."

"Is that all you care for your country?" Montez asked. "If anyone should be distrustful, it's me. Do you take me for a fool? I've been planning against this betrayal for a long time. Did you really think killing me would protect anything?"

“It wasn’t my doing.”

“It doesn’t matter who gave the order. You’re a smart man. I’m offering you the lesser of two evils.”

“Who are *you* to talk about evil?”

“Oh, I see. You eat the steak but refuse to be blamed for the death of the cow.”

“Nice try.”

“It’s not negotiable. Your lapdog just spilled his guts, literally and figuratively. I’m minutes from mailing a special video package of his admissions to all the world’s major media outlets.” He waited through several seconds of silence. “Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

He heard venom in the voice. “How much?”

“Twenty million.”

“That’s more than we agreed. A lot more.”

“Once again, not negotiable. Any contract we had was rendered null and void when your people tried to kill me. Twice.”

“I already told you, they’re not my people. I’m not responsible for that.”

“But it would have saved you a bundle. Coincidence?”

“Believe what you want.”

“I believe the political health of your nation is at stake. And if that’s not enough to move you, it’s about *your* health as well. You could go to prison and I don’t need to remind you what happens to people with soft hands in general lockup. How long do you think you’d last with the sodomites? If I were you, I’d start lifting weights and befriending white supremacists. And I hear the food is terrible.”

“I don’t take kindly to being blackmailed.”

“And I don’t take kindly to being the target of assassination squads. You have ten seconds to decide before I hang up.”

“I can’t move twenty million dollars all at once.”

“I’d better find five million dollars deposited tonight. You have two days for the rest.”

“I’ll start making the transfers. Don’t ever contact me again.”

“That depends entirely on you. Good-bye, Senator.”

Nathan left Harv in place guarding the driveway while he conducted a quick search around the perimeter of the house. He approached several expensive vehicles—including a Bentley—but none of the hoods were warm. Fifty yards to the west, a pool area with several large gazebos connected to the driveway via granite slab sidewalks. Whoever owned this property was clearly wealthy. The landscaping alone probably cost more than most people's homes.

In his earpiece, Harv's voice broke the near silence. *"Another body, east side of driveway. Plus one dog. Same MO. Looks like another bodyguard."*

It explained why they hadn't seen any tactical dogs. Montez or his men killed them. "Meet me at the front door. I doubt anyone's still here, but let's stay sharp."

The double front doors hung wide open. Most of the ground-floor lights were on. Harv powered off his TI and tucked it into his waist pack. Nathan did the same with his NV visor.

"Why'd they leave the doors open?" Nathan asked.

"Maybe they left in a hurry. We could've been spotted."

"Maybe."

"I don't smell propane or natural gas," Harv whispered.

"Me either. I'll take the left."

They rushed inside and couched down, both sweeping their weapons across the room.

All clear. Silent as well. No background music or TV noise. Nothing. The house felt abandoned.

Wall-to-wall with ornately carved antique furniture, the living room looked like a time warp. Mahogany-paneled walls were adorned with huge oil paintings, some of which he recognized. Possibly one reason why Montez hadn't rigged explosives. Even being the monster he was, he remained respectful of personal property. The Bonita safe house had been worthless to him, but this? He'd probably spent a good amount of time coveting it. No doubt Montez believed destroying this furniture and art would've been a crime against society. The irony almost seemed laughable.

"I've seen museums with less inventory," Harv said, looking around. "What's this stuff worth?"

"Millions, maybe tens of millions."

Harv scanned the room. "I don't think anyone's here, but we should clear the house."

“Take the upper floors. Fifteen-second check-ins.” Nathan covered Harv’s advance to the marble staircase before heading into the kitchen. He’d start there and work counterclockwise through the ground-floor rooms.

The bathroom off the entry looked fit for Saudi royalty. As he cleared the kitchen, den, billiards room, and two guest bedrooms—each with its own full bath—anger and hatred flared at Montez’s escape. He forced it aside and concentrated. Only one room left, next to the library. Probably a private office.

Its door was closed.

CHAPTER 36

“Harv, I need you down here.”

“*On my way.*”

Ten seconds later, Harv pounded down the stairs. “Upstairs is clear. Took me awhile. There are six bedrooms. Each with its own private bathroom and walk-in closet.”

Nathan looked at the closed door. “We need something long enough to sweep above its sill. See if you can find something in the kitchen.” He got down on all fours and sniffed. He detected tobacco odor, probably from cigars. It didn’t smell like cigarettes. No light came from within the room.

Harv returned with a kebab skewer

“That’s perfect.” Using a light grip—just strong enough to keep it from slipping out of his fingers—he inserted the skewer under the door and slowly worked it across the sill at a slight upward angle. “I don’t feel anything.” He handed Harv the skewer. “I’m going to crack the door. Check the entire jamb, head to toe.”

He turned the knob, listening for anything other than the telltale click of the privacy latch disengaging. “I’m going to crack it half an inch.” Extremely slowly, he pushed the door inward and stopped. He placed his foot at the base of the door and kept pressure against it.

Following his lead, Harv carefully ran the skewer down the jamb from top to bottom. “Nothing,” Harv said. “I didn’t feel anything. I think we’re good.”

“I’m going to open it half an inch at a time. If anything’s attached, it’s probably looped around the handle, or door stopper.”

When the door was open eighteen inches or so, Harv stuck his head through. “I can’t see anything, it’s too dark.”

“Do you see a light switch on the wall?”

“Affirm.”

“Let’s risk it.”

Harv reached in to his left and flipped the switch. “Oh, man...”

A bloody tableau greeted them.

Like Bullfrog Bay.

In the middle of the room, atop painter's plastic, sat a leather office chair soaked with fresh blood. Crimson footprints surrounded the grisly seat. The desk held the instruments of Duane Dalton's torment. A bloody hunting knife. A stun gun. Pliers. A carpenter's hammer. And several dozen bamboo skewers with bloodstains halfway down their lengths. Montez had used them as punji sticks, probably driven in with the hammer.

Montez, you piece of shit.

"You okay, Nate?"

"No, I'm not okay. Why would I be *okay*?"

"Easy..."

"He's been three steps ahead of us the entire time. No matter what we do, he slips through our fingers." He grabbed a Tiffany table lamp and hurled it across the room. It pulled free from its plug and shattered on the far wall.

"Son of a *bitch*!"

"Nate."

"*What?*"

"Stay focused here. This isn't over."

"Isn't over? *Isn't over?* Take a look around. He's long gone and so are Dalton and his daughters. He'll be disposing of the bodies within the hour. We'll never find him in time. It's over. We lost. The girls are as good as dead. Let's just face it. We lost!"

Harv grabbed him by the shoulders and forced him to make eye contact. "It's not over. Do you hear me? It's not over until I say it's over."

Nathan's voice lowered. "Harv, pull your head out and look around. He's gone."

Harv touched the side of Nathan's head, making him resume eye contact. "That's bullshit. You're no quitter. This is *not* over. Now, why don't you use that finely honed intuition of yours and tell me where the hell he went."

Nathan looked away again. "I can't. I'm too angry."

"Just breathe. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. Do it. *Now!*"

He unclenched his jaw and closed his eyes. Harv was right. This meltdown served no useful purpose. Relax. Let the hatred go.

“Keep going,” Harv whispered. “Deeper.”

He tilted his head back, inhaled deeply, and felt it—a growing calmness—like being immersed in warm water. His hatred drifted away like smoke on the wind.

He heard Harv’s voice. Distant, then edging closer, smooth as silk.

“Look around. Absorb the scene. Every detail. Where did Montez go?”

As he looked around the room, images from his mind’s eye began appearing like a slideshow. He closed his eyes and let them flow, starting at the beginning. Glen Canyon Dam. Lake Powell. Bullfrog Bay. The marina. Stiegler’s houseboat. Chain-link fencing to weigh Kramer down through a live drowning. Kramer’s underwater terror...

What was the connection? What did they all have in common? It’s got to be here...*Come on, what’s the connection?*

Water.

Water!

He opened his eyes and scanned the room. There, on the far wall, an enlarged photograph of a huge motor yacht. He pointed at it.

Harv focused where he pointed.

He looked at his friend and knew they both felt it. Electric and vivid.

Harv raced around the desk and began tearing through the file drawers. One of the drawers was locked. He grabbed the hammer and used the bloodied claw end to force it past its locking mechanism. It flew open and banged against the stops. Harv rifled through the files.

“Nothing about it in here.”

“Are you sure? Check the *M*’s for marina and the *Y*’s for yacht.” He looked on top of Dalton’s desk. “Harv, there’s a file on the desk.”

Harv grabbed it. “This is it. *Lady of the Waves*. She’s moored at...the Bahia Hotel’s marina.”

“Let’s go.”

Three minutes later and breathing heavily from their all-out sprint, Nathan and Harv piled into the Mercedes.

“How long ago did Montez leave?”

“I’d say no more than fifteen minutes. If Montez believes no one knows

where he's going—which is likely—he won't risk getting pulled over for speeding. Something we need to think about ourselves. Let's get this face paint off too."

"We definitely don't want to get pulled over. Use your best judgment. You know where the Bahia's marina is?"

Harv started the engine. "It's right across the street from Belmont Park."

"Damn, I didn't take a close look at the photo."

"I did. I'll know the yacht when I see it. There can't be too many seventy-footers down there. The marina's not that big. We'll find it, no problem."

They drove in silence for a few moments. "Nate, you need to know something."

He waited.

"The file on the desk. The owner of the yacht is Senator Alan Kallstrom. I saw the registration."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"So Dalton and Montez were in a home owned by the son of our old boss? What are the odds?"

"Senator Kallstrom's also a member of CDT with your dad."

Nathan shook his head, speechless.

"You're not thinking what I think you're thinking, are you?"

"On second thought, let's risk getting pulled over. Punch it, Harv."

CHAPTER 37

Harv broke every traffic law on the books getting down to Mission Bay. Fortunately, not a single cop saw any of it.

“Crap,” Harv said.

“What?”

“I forgot there’s no exit onto I-Eight west and we just passed Sea World Drive.”

“Don’t worry about it. Take Rosecrans. We’ll take Sports Arena Boulevard to West Mission Bay. It’s not much of a detour.”

“Lots of traffic lights.”

“We’ll just have to risk running them. The delay won’t be too bad. And Montez isn’t in a big hurry.”

“Do we know that for sure?”

“Blowing a kiss good-bye seemed awfully cocky. I’m willing to bet he thinks he’s home free.”

Harv’s Mercedes screamed down the Rosecrans exit and ran the red light at Hancock Street. The light at Kurtz turned green before he got there. He ran several more lights along Sports Arena Boulevard. The street changed to West Mission Bay Drive once they passed under the I-8. The late hour allowed Harv to reach ninety miles per hour as they crossed over the San Diego River. At Sea World, he pushed the Mercedes to the limit of its traction as he navigated the tight loop that would keep them on West Mission Bay.

“We’re less than a minute away.”

“Good driving, Harv.”

“Can we see the marina from the road?”

“I think so.”

“Let’s make one pass. If we can see the yacht, the reverse is also true. We’ll cruise by slowly, but not too slowly. We’re just a late-night driver in no hurry to get home.”

Harv slowed as they approached the Bahia Hotel.

At a pedestrian crosswalk, Nathan looked over his right shoulder toward the marina. He saw it right away—a large motor yacht, just pulling away from the marina.

“Is that our yacht?”

“Yes.”

“Damn it. We’re too late again.”

“Where can he go? We can call the harbor patrol and have the boat intercepted. I’m pretty sure SDPD has jurisdiction over Mission Bay.”

Nathan reached down to remove his shoes. “Make a U-turn and pull into the Bahia’s parking lot.”

“You are *not* going to—”

“He’s not getting away this time.”

Harv made an illegal U-turn at Mission Boulevard. “Nate, this is crazy.”

Nathan didn’t respond.

“You’re recovering from a nasty concussion. This isn’t Tahiti. That water’s cold. And you’ll be out of communication. You can’t take your radio.”

He pulled the Predator knife from his ankle sheath. “This is all I need, but to make you happy, I’ll duct tape the SIG to my left calf. Don’t worry. I’ll shake the water out before I shoot anyone.”

“Well, that’s comforting. Do you realize how dangerous this is? That yacht’s got a huge screw. It’ll suck you down and chew you up like hamburger.”

“Not if I’m careful. I’ll grab the safety rail or the mooring cleat on the rear deck and tuck my legs up.”

“I have no desire to push your wheelchair around for the next forty years, assuming you live through the mutilation and don’t bleed out on the swim back. Come on, Nate. This is reckless at best, suicidal at worst.”

“And?”

Harv shrugged. “So let *me* do it.”

“I’m the stronger swimmer and you hate cold water.”

Harv turned left onto Gleason Road. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“Just keep the yacht in sight for as long as possible. If it heads for open ocean, drive out to the jetty.”

They raced past a four-story hotel on the left. The right side of the road featured diagonal parking with a strip of grass paralleling the sandy shore of Mission Bay. The water looked like hammered pewter. Nothing a little mind

over matter couldn't overcome.

"This is becoming a habit."

"What?"

"Jumping headfirst into ops without any intel or plan. Montez can't escape. Where can he go? Even if he makes it into open water, the Coast Guard can easily intercept him."

"Harv, everything you said is true. I won't deny any of it, but there are children involved. What's the first thing Montez will do if he thinks he's cornered?"

"They may not be on the yacht. You could be risking your life for nothing."

"Think about it. Would Montez try escaping like this *without* hostage insurance? I saw one of the girls in the van." He pointed. "Park right here, next to this little building." Nathan pulled off his shirt, but left his pants on. "There's some wind chop. He'll never see me through it. Plus, I'm going to swim most of it underwater."

"Listen to yourself. You're not superhuman. I'm seriously thinking about pulling executive override."

"Harv, we agreed to never implement EO except in the direst circumstances. If you call this off, I'll honor your decision, but you're forgetting another promise we made."

"What's that?"

"We promised Cantrell to keep this under the radar. We can't do that if the harbor patrol or Coast Guard gets involved."

"Is that really why you're doing this?"

He taped the SIG securely to his calf. "You know it isn't."

"Is there anything you'd like me to say at your eulogy?"

"I'm sure you'll think of something."

"Plan B?"

"If I can't get aboard, or I'm blown trying, we'll fall back and call the harbor patrol. Like you said, where's he gonna go?"

Harv took Nathan's cell. "Better get swimming. The yacht will be rounding the corner any minute. If he heads in the other direction, toward Crown Point, we're screwed. I'm calling the harbor patrol if he does."

"Agreed, but I think he's heading for the open ocean to dump the Daltons. Alive."

"Good hunting, partner."

CHAPTER 38

Harv watched his friend wade into Mission Bay and begin swimming. At this time of year, the seawater temperature near the shore would be in the high sixties, max. But if the cold shocked or bothered Nathan, it sure didn't show.

Harv got out of the car, crossed the street, and hunkered down in the cover of a small group of palms. This position offered a clear view of where Nate would attempt to board the yacht. The hotel rooms directly behind him raised some concern, but at this early hour of the morning he doubted anyone would be up. He didn't smell any cigarette or marijuana smoke, and didn't hear any late-night partiers. If a police cruiser happened to swing through, he could easily duck deeper into the landscaping.

He brought his field glasses up and spotted Nate. He'd already swum twenty yards. Pulling executive override wouldn't have gone over well and he knew Nate would resent it, probably for the rest of his life.

He took a deep breath and tried to relax.

A shiver raked Nathan's body as he began a breaststroke in order to maintain the best possible forward speed while keeping a low profile. A crawl would be faster, but not stealthy. Because he possessed a low body fat ratio, his buoyancy was more negative than most. He found he couldn't keep his head above water and maintain a good pace, so he made three strokes per each breath of air. He felt the resistance of his pants, SIG, and Predator on his lower legs, but boarding the yacht unarmed wasn't an option.

During the next three strokes, he tried to clear his mind of all distractions, especially the cold. Something bothered him, and it wasn't the approaching yacht or even the knowledge of whose home they'd been in. It was something else entirely. Something important.

What is it? Think, Nathan.

Trying to understand this odd burst of intuition, Nathan reviewed how they'd gotten here. First, he rewound to Senator Kallstrom's house. It seemed his unease began there.

What did you see? Clear your thoughts and go back.

He took a breath and began his next three breaststrokes.

Inside Kallstrom's house, Harv went upstairs while he worked the ground floor. There hadn't been any sign of a struggle, but that wasn't unexpected. Duane Dalton probably agreed to turn himself over to save his family. The furniture looked normal, albeit expensive, but it didn't reflect any sign of a struggle.

We ended up in the small study. The door was closed. We checked for booby traps.

Visually, he moved to his sprint toward the driveway. Montez blowing that infuriating kiss good-bye from the van's passenger seat. The van. A white Ford van. A minute ago, he'd spotted a similar white van as Harv turned into the Bahia. It was backed into a stall with its rear doors facing the grass.

Nathan surfaced, took a gulp of air, and submerged for three more strokes.

Once again, he rewound back to Kallstrom's residence, to the closed study door. Inside the study, he'd destroyed an expensive Tiffany lamp. Rage overwhelmed him and while everything became a blur, Harv helped him control his anger. Then what? He calmed down and looked around the office again. This led him to connect many of Montez's recent tactics to water. He opened his eyes and pointed at the photograph of the yacht. Harv understood immediately and broke into the file drawer, but the file wasn't there. It lay on top of the desk. Had Nathan subconsciously seen it before thinking about Montez and water? *Before* pointing at the photo? He wasn't sure. Why did it matter? What was it about that damned file? Its owner?

He took a deep breath and went under for three more strokes. When he broke the surface again, he looked left and saw the yacht rounding the corner.

To his surprise, it was cutting through the water far slower than he'd anticipated.

He ducked below the surface for three more strokes.

A visual of Kramer sinking to the bottom of Lake Powell invaded his mind. Fueled by anger, he stroked harder before resurfacing for air, something Kramer hadn't been able to do. The horror and fear the man

must've felt had to be the worst imaginable. Knowing death was the only escape. How long had he held his breath before inhaling water? A minute? Longer?

Montez, you lousy piece of shit.

Calm down. Think back.

Kallstrom's mansion.

The study.

The photo of the yacht.

The file sitting on the desk.

The images wouldn't go away...

Harvey followed Nate's swim through the field glasses. It was hard to judge how much farther Nate had gone. He stole a look at the yacht. It looked to be doing two or three knots at best. Why so slowly? He did a quick calculation. Three knots was roughly four or five feet per second. It was going to be tight, but he thought Nate would have a reasonable chance of getting hold of the rear diving deck. Part of him wished Nate would miss and return to shore unharmed—chilled to the bone, but otherwise intact.

Wait a minute.

He refocused the binoculars on the spot where he'd last seen Nate. He was nowhere to be seen. Had he started another underwater swim? Harv focused on the area where he guessed Nate would surface next, but he detected nothing except wind-chopped water.

Come on, Nate. Where the hell are you?

Harv heard them before he saw the source. Footsteps. Coming from his left. He watched a man appear in dark clothing, hands in pockets, walking down the center of Gleason Road. *What the hell is he doing out here at this hour? And alone?* He ducked deeper into the cover of the hedge.

Silently moving forward, the man with the stun gun smiled.

Since the yacht had passed his position, Harvey wasn't worried about being seen from that direction. He needed to check this new arrival, make sure it was only someone taking a late-night stroll. He looked behind before moving away from the cover of the palms, crouching low to take advantage of a boxed hedge. The guy looked harmless enough, but the timing felt wrong.

The man in the street doubled over, dropped to his knees, and began labored coughing. Harvey stared for a few seconds, wondering if he should offer assistance. The man didn't look well at all.

He turned to check his blind spot again and caught the faint odor of tobacco a fraction of a second too late.

Shit!

A hideous electric charge ripped through the left side of his neck and short-circuited his muscle control. He recognized the crippling sensation from his Taser training.

His nervous system exploded in fiery agony as hundreds of on-off electrical pulses shot through his spinal column. An instant before falling to his side, a single thought glowed, then faded in his mind. *Oh, Nathan. I'm so sorry I let you down...*

Juan Montez de Oca, former colonel of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, plunged the stun gun against the man's neck and pulled the trigger. He delivered a full five seconds of juice with a glorious result. The man went stiff, issued a grunt of pain, and keeled over. Tall and Latino, this was almost certainly one of the two men associated with the helicopter from Bullfrog Bay.

Harvey Fontana, I presume?

Arturo ended his phony coughing and ran over. Within seconds they had their captive's wrists and ankles secured with duct tape.

Montez scanned the area. All quiet.

He kept his voice low and addressed his captive. "How are you feeling? Not well, I trust. Well, we'll be sure to let you recover a little bit before our discussion. We have much to talk about."

“Up yours.”

“I think not.” He removed the man’s sidearm and tossed it several feet away. “We’re going to become good friends, you and I. As a matter of fact, I’m going to become your *best friend*. From now on, you’ll be totally dependent on me. For everything. I’ll control when you eat, drink, sleep, use the bathroom, *and* your level of discomfort, of course. Breaking you will be a challenge, of that I have no doubt, but I’ll break you. I always do.”

“You’re shit under my boot, Montez.”

“I see you know my name. How interesting. We’ll be discussing that soon. Arturo, please tape this man’s mouth.”

Montez watched in fascination as the man whipped his head back and forth, making it impossible for Arturo to plant the strip. With casual indifference, he gave Fontana a second jolt to the side of his neck, shorter this time. That did the trick. Arturo had no trouble applying the tape.

He dragged the bound man deeper into the landscaping. “Your friend is out in the water, no? He’s planning to board the yacht? Good. I have three men standing by with shark gaffs to bring him aboard. I’m afraid he’ll be somewhat damaged from the retrieval, but with a little luck, his wounds won’t be immediately fatal. I’ll need to speak with him as well. I must admit to a certain amount of curiosity about the two of you.” He turned. “Arturo, please bring the van.”

His man jogged down Gleason Road toward the main entrance to the Bahia.

“I’m curious to know if it was you or your friend who survived the assault at the Clairemont house. You don’t look so much like a McBride, so I’m guessing it was your partner. I must also confess to a certain amount of admiration for him. Armed with only a handgun, he defeated four of my men. I’m also planning to interrogate someone named...Holly?”

This hiding spot offered excellent concealment, but he didn’t intend to stay long. It would be just his luck to have a couple of drunk Americans stumble by. Arturo would arrive with the van soon and they’d leave this area. He looked across the water at the yacht. The other man, McBride, would be in the custody of his men by now, and they had strict orders not to kill him. Montez’s only regret at the moment was that he wouldn’t be there when the Daltons took the plunge. Montez looked up as headlights swept the opposite side of the road. Arturo, returning with the van.

Several hundred meters distant, the headlights went dark. Arturo was

well trained. Montez watched his man pull over to the curb, climb out, and hurry toward the rear of the van.

CHAPTER 39

The rear doors of the van opened.

“Lights out, dirtbag.”

Crouched just inside, Nathan Daniel McBride swiped his Predator across the man’s throat.

He sheathed the knife, jumped out, and sprinted toward Harv.

The man standing over his friend reacted quickly and pulled a handgun.

No!

Harv’s body illuminated in the flash from the discharge.

So did the shooter’s face.

Montez.

Montez saw Arturo clutch his throat, fall to the grass, and curl into the fetal position.

What the hell!

A huge, shirtless man appeared and sprinted toward him with a gun in his hand. Montez didn’t have a clear shot—the small palms screened the advancing man.

But Mr. Fontana was a different story.

He took aim at Fontana and pulled the trigger. The bound man reacted quickly, twisting away, but not in time. The armor piercing bullet slammed into his shoulder, just inside his body armor. *Finish him? No.* Battlefield tactics 101. A wounded man is tactically better than a dead man. With his escape toward the street cut off, Montez charged the sliding glass doors of a hotel room, firing as he ran.

“Harvey!”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Montez charge the glass doors of a hotel room, shooting as he ran. Three deafening shots cracked the air. The tempered glass shattered.

Montez burst through and disappeared into the blackness beyond.

Nathan drew his knife and spent a few precious seconds cutting the tape that bound Harv’s wrists. He saw blood flowing from a shoulder wound and ripped the tape from his friend’s mouth.

“Nathan. How did you—”

“Where’s your SIG?”

“Montez tossed it over there.” Harv angled his head to the left.

Nathan retrieved Harv’s suppressed weapon.

Harv grimaced. “Take your phone. My front pocket. Go get that son of a bitch.”

“You can count on it.” Nathan cut his own SIG free from his ankle and handed it to Harv. He wanted Harv’s dry gun. Then, crouching low, he began his pursuit.

He knew broken glass awaited his feet, but he hurdled the hedge and stormed into the room anyway.

Hundreds of tiny glass shards shredded his bare flesh. The carpet helped a little, but not enough. *Forget about it. It’s just pain. Not life threatening.* He reached down and swept the bottom of his feet, dislodging the largest pieces.

He sensed motion in the bed to his right, but ignored it. Straight ahead, the room’s front door loomed. Wide open. For some reason it was jammed open, allowing orange light to slice across the carpet.

Nathan stopped, sensing a trap. A quick trip to the closet gained him a shirt on a hanger. He tossed it out the hall door so the shirt bloused wide, keeping its form.

Montez’s gun boomed. The sound hammered every building in the area like a mass wake-up call.

Certain the shot had come from the left, Nathan crouched down and peered around the corner at knee level.

Montez.

Nathan couldn’t risk shooting from this distance, even with the laser sight. There were too many unknowns for a stray bullet.

His feet stinging and slick with blood, he took off in pursuit.

Montez ran at a full sprint, knowing he'd finally come face-to-face with the mysterious Mr. McBride. He cursed himself for the shot he'd just wasted. He had no spare magazines for an extended firefight. Not that he'd want to challenge McBride to gunplay. His adversary was skilled *and* smart. He'd obviously stopped swimming and turned back for shore. Montez wondered how McBride had known. It didn't matter. Right now, only speed counted. He needed to gain some separation.

Nathan ignored the increasing pain on the soles of his feet and concentrated on the reward of catching Montez. Keeping him in sight might become a challenge. There were too many places to hide inside this hotel complex, too many places to set up ambushes. Blind corners. Bushes. Trees. Fences. Walls. You name it. Each one offered a bushwhacking opportunity. He'd have to guard against running head-on into the muzzle of Montez's pistol.

Montez's shots had been loud enough to wake the dead. No doubt the police were already on the way. And if Harv had called 911, fire and medical were also on the move. If he were Montez, he'd want to clear the immediate area—in a big hurry.

The spots mounted on the eaves of the hotel rooms provided plenty of light, even at 0300 hours. He estimated Montez had a fifty-yard head start. Manageable, but it would be better to halve the distance. At twenty-five yards he might be able to stop and take a wounding shot. The laser sight would make it easier, but taking careful aim after a prolonged sprint wouldn't be ideal.

But damn it. The fire in his feet was worsening, verging on unbearable. Grit had already worked into the puncture holes, joining dozens of tiny glass shards that he hadn't been able to dislodge.

Work through it. Mind over matter.

Up ahead on the right, he saw an area that would become a problem if Montez diverted in its direction. It looked to be a series of dimly lit walkways through tropical landscaping, small in scale but rife with hiding places. If Montez went in there, all bets were off.

Then he heard it. A distant police siren. How long before it arrived? Two minutes? He didn't know. But the approaching siren changed the dynamics. He no longer thought Montez would waste time setting up an ambush in this area. If he were Montez, he'd want to put as much separation between himself and the Bahia Hotel as possible. So be it. He'd match him stride for stride. Endurance would be the key.

But his feet were becoming more than a problem—much more—a crisis. How long before the pain overwhelmed him? Harv was right, he wasn't superhuman and couldn't simply disconnect the pain. Or could he?

CHAPTER 40

Grunting, Harvey peeled the duct tape binding his ankles with his left hand. His right arm wouldn't respond, and he hoped the nerve bundle wasn't irreparably damaged.

He sensed a presence behind him.

"I called nine-one-one."

He looked toward the hotel room. A woman in a white bathrobe stood in the broken-out sliding-glass door.

"Ma'am, it's best if you stay in your room."

"I was an ER nurse for eleven years."

"I can't ask you to get involved."

She stepped over the broken glass. "You're dressed in SWAT gear. Are you a police officer?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not."

"Good guy or bad guy?"

He managed a smile. "Depends on whose side you're on."

"I'd better control that bleeding for you."

"There's a trauma bag in the trunk of my car. I'll get it."

Ignoring the fire in his shoulder, Harv hurried toward his Mercedes. Halfway there he pulled his phone and made a call.

Nathan couldn't close the distance. His feet were slowing him down, and Montez appeared to be in good physical shape.

Twenty yards farther ahead, the driveway forked. If Montez chose right, that would take him past the main entrance, with more light and the potential of being seen. Predictably, Montez veered left toward Gleason Road and disappeared from sight.

That forced Nathan to slow down and check the blind spot before

continuing. Putting on the brakes made his feet even worse, but he had no choice. He crouched down and moved forward through a small landscaped area near an entrance gate. No sign of Montez. Gun first, he sprinted to the corner of the structure and used the cover of a large palm to peer toward West Mission Bay Drive.

Damn it. Montez continued running at full tilt, now more than a hundred yards ahead. And the police siren sounded closer. Not police. Fire department. He heard the distinctive blast of an engine's air horn. Fire was better, they wouldn't have guns. He knew something of procedure and believed they'd have to stage away until SDPD arrived. If Montez also knew that, he might take time to set up an ambush. Steeling himself, he began running again.

Nathan's foot pain had reached critical mass. Some of the cuts had clearly opened wider during the run, making the pain crippling. Frustration flared and with it, anger. And a long-suppressed memory of being bullwhipped in front of a crowd of weeping women and children. The blind hatred at being helpless to stop it had consumed his soul, like fire on flesh. It was then that the *other* first emerged, subverting his conscious self and quite literally saving his sanity, and probably his life.

The *other*.

He sensed its malevolent presence threatening to surface. He felt himself yield, needing its help. But at what cost? Despising himself for being weak, he closed his eyes and gave in to fourteen years of built-up frustration, shame, and rage.

And wondered if he'd just sold his soul.

CHAPTER 41

Deep in the Nicaraguan jungle, Nathan hangs at the brink of insanity. All he has left is hatred. At everything. At earth. At sky. At all things, living or dead.

Crack.

Sixteen.

The bite of the lash becomes venomous. Each crack of the whip hardens his hatred. He clings to it like a life raft—separating him from an ocean of infinite agony.

Eight feet of braided catgut strikes again.

Crack.

Seventeen.

Oblivious to his torn feet, Nathan pursued Montez across the empty expanse of West Mission Bay Drive.

Its siren and air horn blaring, a fire engine rounded the corner from Mission Boulevard. Its engine roared. A second, more distant siren joined the din. Probably police.

The whipping continues at ten-second intervals.

Crack.

Crack.

Crack.

Time drifts. The other had taken him away...for how long? How many lashes had he taken? He lost count at twenty-eight.

He opens his eyes and catches a glimpse of Montez leaning against a

tree with his arms crossed. Montez yawns in mock boredom and nods runt boy over. They speak in hushed whispers for a few seconds. Maybe runt boy needs a rest, his arm must be tired from the exertion.

Nathan feels liquid running down his legs. He hopes this is the end.

Nathan saw Montez reach an expanse of grass and veer toward a loose group of palms. Closing the distance, he easily kept Montez in sight. His prey was silhouetted against the multicolored lights of the amusement complex beyond.

Time drifts again.

Montez's calm voice brings him back. "Why don't you just tell me your name? What possible harm could it cause? Why go through all this needless suffering?"

He doesn't respond.

Montez snaps a finger.

He closes his eyes, expecting a blinding crack. It doesn't come.

The waiting is so horrible.

The rope suspending him jerks. He opens his eyes. Runt boy is untying the knot. He's lowered just enough to stand on his toes. A cruel trick. His shoulders are out of the sockets. They have been for hours.

Montez strolls over and throws powder on his torso. He grits his teeth against the blinding sting.

"We're going to take a lunch break. Can we bring you anything? A club sandwich and beer?"

"Fuck you."

"Such language."

Time drifts again.

A slap across his lacerated face brings him forward. He opens his eyes. Montez. Inches away. Holding something. Leaning his head back.

A canteen? Water. He's drinking water.

His tormentor spits the liquid onto his legs and feet. His welts erupt in fresh agony.

He hears himself again. Laughing. No, crying.

Maybe he could end this. Definitely worth a try.

He winks at Montez and grins.

Montez grabs a handful of his hair and yanks his head forward. “What are you smiling at?”

Fighting to stay conscious, he bites his tongue and feels blood flow into his mouth. With all his strength, he spews the red load into Montez’s face.

Montez wipes his face on his sleeve, hisses something, and hurries toward the shed, where he disappears. A few seconds later, he reappears with something in his hand. A radio?

No, not a radio.

Below a sickening smile, the stun gun disappears from view.

Crackling white agony.

His scream penetrates the jungle wall. All birds go silent.

Merciful blackness. The other returns faithfully, taking his place.

Time drifts again.

Where is he? What’s happening?

The answer arrives in force with another jolt.

He wrenches his head back and forth as he screams.

And screams.

And screams...

Feet forgotten, Nathan reached deeper for a final burst of speed. He flew over the parking lot’s west curb, up a narrow landscaped area, and relished the feel of damp grass. Cool air filled his lungs in full, deep breaths. As the *other* receded, Nathan’s senses became heightened—razor sharp. His muscles worked in perfect harmony. He felt free, like a cheetah on the savannah. Total exhilaration. He knew his body well. Its limits. Its reserves. He was far from spent.

CHAPTER 42

Montez glanced back. Unbelievable. McBride had managed to close the distance separating them. How could that be? The man was barefoot. His feet had to be shredded from the broken glass back in the hotel room. He couldn't have traversed that mess unscathed. How was this possible?

One thing became clear. He wouldn't be able to outrun this man, not over the long haul. Arturo was dead, and his other men remained on the yacht, out of contact. Which left him completely alone. He'd have to set up an ambush. A fatal shot would be best, but he'd settle for any direct hit.

Nathan sensed Montez's growing unease. By the time his prey reached Mission Boulevard, Nathan had nearly halved the distance separating them. But if Montez entered Belmont Park, the degree of difficulty grew exponentially. There were hundreds of variables in there, all of them to his disadvantage.

Decision time.

He'd have to risk it. No choice.

Like a baseball player sliding into second base, he skidded to a stop on the damp grass, gained a knee, and toggled the laser. He took a deep breath, painted the red dot onto Montez's fleeing form just below the torso, and pulled the trigger.

Montez felt the bullet tear through his right thigh at the same instant he heard the suppressed shot.

He dodged and weaved on instinct as panic seized him. The shock

receded a bit when he realized he could keep going. But for how long? He pivoted and fired a blind shot at his pursuer, hoping to slow him down.

McBride must be using a laser sight, something he wished he had.

He limped toward the park's entrance, knowing blood loss would soon become critical, especially with his heart rate elevated. He needed to reach the cover of the park before a second bullet found him.

Nathan saw Montez shudder for an instant, but remarkably he didn't go down. A second later, Montez fired in his direction. The report hammered the air and echoed off every building in the area. It wouldn't be long before the police arrived—they were already racing toward the Bahia. He didn't like the idea of Montez being arrested and taken into police custody. That wouldn't do.

He watched Montez limp across Mission Boulevard and hurry through a gate leading into a narrow parking lot.

Maybe he should've shot to kill. *Forget about it, stay focused.*

Nathan pumped his arms for more speed and looked for approaching cars. None. He sprinted across the northbound lanes of Mission Boulevard, across the narrow divider, then across the southbound lanes. His feet slapped hard on the pavement, his first reminder that despite the momentary pain relief, he'd have to face reality soon.

He inwardly cursed as Montez disappeared under the roller coaster and entered Belmont Park. To avoid being ambushed, he'd have to slow his pursuit. Maybe having the police on scene wouldn't be so bad after all. He'd rather see Montez in police custody than not in custody at all.

And with that thought, the pain in his feet returned in force. The adrenaline rush of the flashback had worn off. Reason had replaced the *other*, just as therapy had taught him. Fighting against lost hope, Nathan dug deeper and once again, tried to disconnect the pain.

When was the last time he'd been in Belmont Park? A couple of years? A lot can change. He knew there was some sort of artificial wave machine for surfers, an Olympic-sized pool, shops, food stands, rides, and various other attractions. At 0300 hours, all of them would be closed and the park abandoned. Did security guards patrol the place? Probably did. Were they

armed or just radio cops? If there *were* guards, they'd already be on the way to investigate Montez's gunshot.

Breathing heavily, he crouched to lower his profile, slowed to a jog, and scanned the perimeter fence and roller coaster beyond. The white support system of posts and trusses offered no place for Montez to mount a hidden attack and the roller coaster had an antipersonnel fence around its perimeter to keep people away from the tracks.

Gun up, he moved into the park proper. He couldn't do anything about the ambient light, which seemed overly bright. From any number of hiding places or alcoves, Montez could see his approach. And in this kind of battle, the man who sees his opponent first usually wins. Quickness would be the key.

But with these feet? He tested them, gauging his agility. The one saving grace? The bleeding had slowed, probably because the puncture wounds were plugged with sand and grit. Slipping on bloody feet at the moment of truth could get him killed, or worse.

The thought of being subjected to Montez's sadism all over again wrenched his stomach. He'd eat a bullet first.

Five yards past the entrance's threshold, he bent low at something that caught his eye. Fresh drops of blood. It appeared Montez had suffered more than just a graze and could never outrun him now, which meant an ambush became certain.

Seeing no more blood droplets in the immediate area, he followed the fence on his left until he arrived at a convex mirror. It was mounted on a building next to some kind of seated free-fall ride, presumably to allow the ride's operator to see people on the opposite side. Nothing in the mirror now, no sign of Montez.

He took a few seconds to evaluate the light sources that would produce shadows, even if Montez were hiding out of eyeshot. Ahead and to his right, the carousel offered a good hiding spot. He noticed several video cameras mounted on the roof of the building directly in front of him, but doubted they were monitored feeds. He took a few more seconds to study the map of the park in front of the covered carousel, memorizing all the exits. Six in all, tied into the main walkway. Two to the east. Two to the south. And two toward the west. He didn't know if any of them were gated.

Precious seconds were wasting. He needed to regain a visual of Montez. Keeping Harv's SIG aimed toward the carousel, he advanced to the building

where the convex mirror was mounted. It looked to be a ticket sales booth. Staying on the move would make him a more difficult target, so he crept forward along its wall and scanned the concrete in front of a low set of stairs leading up to the carousel.

And found more blood drops.

Montez fought back the onset of new panic. What had started as an inconvenient burning had expanded into a nasty blowtorch wound. And the dripping blood, which hadn't decreased in volume, created an easy trail to follow. He knew McBride would be expecting an ambush, but wouldn't know from where. Would he get more than one shot? Probably not. He'd better make it count. And there'd be no taking prisoners at this point. He needed to kill or disable McBride and clear the area. Time wasn't on his side, but even with ample time, where could he go? He didn't know how far he'd make it on foot with a wound like this. Half a mile? Less?

He looked down at the small pool of blood forming under his pant leg. Even if he used his shirt as a tourniquet, there was enough blood soaking his pants to keep dripping for a while. How long before the blood worked its way down and pooled in his shoes?

Knowing McBride had to slow his pace, Montez moved to the south, hobbling down the main path of the park. Fortunately, he'd scouted this escape route a week ago and thought it unlikely his pursuer knew the layout of Belmont Park as well as he did. He had a variety of pre-scouted ambush spots at his disposal, he just had to pick the right one.

That's when a brilliant idea came. He'd turn his disadvantage into an advantage.

He looked over his shoulder and worked his way deeper into the park.

CHAPTER 43

If I can hear them, he can hear them.

Approaching sirens. At least three, probably four. Nathan considered removing the suppressor and popping off a shot to draw the police in here. No, not yet. Involving the police ran the risk of a friendly fire situation. At this point Montez had to be hurting as badly as he was. Probably worse. And weakening from blood loss.

Time to relocate again. Watching for shadows or movement behind the carousel, he advanced to some steps and crouched behind a concrete trash container. He peered around the corner to the south. No sign of Montez or any security guards. Or anyone. The park was deserted. A spinning-type ride occupied the left side, with an arcade, retail shops, and food vendors on the right. Ten feet away, he saw two more blood droplets in the middle of the walkway. And something more.

A lot more.

A partial bloody footprint.

Outstanding.

Montez's leg wound had soaked his pants down to his shoe. He'd definitely gone this way. But how far?

Old-fashioned streetlamps provided plenty of light toward the interior, but the perimeter storefronts allowed deep shadows in their darkened alcoves. A bullet could come from any one of them. No wonder Montez had chosen this place.

He ran in a low crouch along the base of a carnival ride's platform and stopped at its entry stairs. He stole another look to the south, but again, saw no one. He studied his new surroundings for a few seconds. More crimson footprints led the way down the concrete walkway. From the spacing, it seemed like Montez was doing his best to run. The temptation to run after him had to be checked. That's exactly what Montez wanted. *Slow down. Think. Use the environment. What's available? What's the best way to advance deeper into the park without getting ambushed?*

Satisfied, Montez ducked between a couple of souvenir kiosks in the middle of the park's main walkway. McBride would have to expose himself to advance up the same route he'd just traversed. To his right, a concrete wall protected some sort of vomit-producing thrill ride. On his left, bumper cars. This location gave him a clear, uninterrupted view of the park's main walk. Tactically sound. McBride would be an easy target.

His grimace from the mounting leg pain turned into a smile when he saw McBride dart from one side of the walkway to the other and duck behind a trash container.

Got you.

The trash bins.

They offered a solid tactical opportunity. Spaced every twenty to thirty feet and made of three-inch thick concrete, they created perfect leapfrog stations. He'd dash from trash bin to trash bin and work his way down the interior.

He looked over his shoulder the way he'd come. No one. But the approaching sirens grew louder, definitely closing from more than one direction. He couldn't afford a prolonged chase in here. Time to up the stakes and force Montez's hand.

Everything hinged on his belief that Montez felt more pressure than he did.

He sprinted forward to the opposite side of the walkway and ducked behind the next trash bin. The renewed pain under his feet caused by starting and stopping felt like running on a bed of nails, but it couldn't be helped. Leaving himself exposed for more than a few seconds, especially in this well-lit area, invited a bullet. He saw Montez's bloody footprints continue down the concrete, but lost sight of them fifteen yards farther on. He peered over the top of the trash bin. All clear. The park remained deserted. Where were the security guards?

A split second before making his next move, his answer arrived. A security guard rounded the corner at the south entrance of the park and

jogged directly toward him.

He couldn't stay in his current position without a high risk of being seen, but ducking into the courtyard to his right meant losing sight of the main walkway and potentially losing Montez for good. Not an option.

He watched the security guard for a few seconds and decided to stay put. The guard had obviously heard Montez's gunshot and was hustling over to investigate. With a little luck, the guard would turn right and take a shortcut past the southern end of the roller coaster. If not, maybe the guard would run past his hiding place without looking back. Was the guard armed? If so, the situation might escalate. He didn't want to deal with an armed, and likely nervous, rent-a-cop.

Montez watched McBride poke his head out from behind the trash bin, then quickly pull back. Had he been seen? It seemed unlikely. This hiding place offered deep shadow. No way he'd been seen. He peered around the corner in the opposite direction and saw what had made McBride duck.

A security guard.

Running right toward him.

He raised his gun.

Nathan watched the security guard turn right at the mini-motorboat ride and head for the east perimeter. He didn't know how long the guard would be gone, so he used this opportunity to advance to the next trash bin.

His new threat areas became the souvenir kiosks in the middle of the walkway and a blind corner on the left side. Scratch the blind corner, the security guard would've seen Montez.

He craned his neck above the trash bin and saw the bloody footprints continue past the kiosks, but he couldn't see how far. The low angle didn't allow him to see much beyond the kiosks, and he wasn't about to stand up for a better look. He began to wonder if Montez had bolted all the way through the park. Montez could be getting into a prearranged escape vehicle in the

southern parking lot. That could've been his plan all along—to take a pursuer down a difficult gauntlet riddled with multiple ambush points in order to buy enough time for an escape out the south end.

He couldn't wait any longer.

Following the bloody footprints, Nathan sprinted in a low crouch past the souvenir kiosks.

Something flashed through his mind as he ran.

A scene in a movie he'd recently watched.

One that featured a trail of footprints.

Which movie was it?

The Shining.

Montez adjusted his position to follow the guard's exit from the main walkway. As he did, he heard motion behind him. McBride must've raced past his position toward the south entrance. He readjusted his position to get a shot from behind. He poked his head around the corner, trained his weapon on McBride's back, and smiled.

The bloody footprints suddenly ended.

Right in the middle of the walkway? Impossible.

Montez couldn't fly, but he could—

Backtrack!

Nathan hit the deck and rolled to his left, seeking the cover of a small landscaped alcove.

Steeling himself for a bullet, he inwardly cursed.

Montez couldn't believe it. Without warning, McBride dropped and rolled into cover. What tipped him off? The bloody footprint ruse should've

worked. He'd fully expected McBride to freeze in confusion and turn around. But it didn't happen. The man obviously had a quick mind *and* swift reactions.

Now what? The blood pooling in his shoe reflected the desperation of his situation. He didn't have time for a prolonged engagement.

And that security guard could return at any moment.

He needed a new plan. Fast.

The bullet never came.

He flattened himself against the wall inside a small alcove and took a deep breath.

Stephen King, I owe you one.

Now what? There wasn't time to wait for Montez's next move.

And the security guard could reappear any second. SDPD too. One of their A-Star helicopters was probably on the way.

He scanned the concrete for drops of blood toward the south. Nothing. If Montez had hopped on one foot to disguise his blood trail, there'd still be drops of blood going that direction.

He needed options.

Think, Nathan.

Think.

And then it came to him.

A sickening chill hammered Montez as he realized what was happening. *No. Not now!*

His cell phone had chirped to life.

He'd forgotten to mute it. In the near silence of the park, it sounded like a blaring car alarm. He quickly switched gun hands and reached into his pants pocket. He needed to silence the damned thing before it rang a third time.

Without hesitating, Nathan pocketed his phone and sprinted toward the ringing sound, his approach silent.

Gun first, he approached the souvenir kiosks from the opposite side of the walkway. He knew he'd scored a direct hit when the ringing ended in the middle of the third chime. It hadn't lasted long enough to be forwarded to voice mail.

Montez.

But there were three kiosks, which meant two places to hide between them.

Which one?

If he guessed wrong, it could be fatal. Going with instinct, he rushed the first gap and caught Montez peering around the opposite side.

Bingo.

Three steps later, he drove the butt of his gun onto the base of Montez's skull and had the satisfaction of seeing his former tormentor collapse to his knees.

The small handgun clattered away into the walkway.

And now, you're mine.

CHAPTER 44

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t my old pal, Monty Goose.” Nathan felt the *other* stir, like a bull testing its steel enclosure. Keeping his face hidden in shadow, he retrieved Montez’s pistol from the walkway before kicking his captive onto his side. He patted him down for additional weapons. Nothing. But in Montez’s inner vest pocket, he found a thumb drive.

“W—who are you?”

“You don’t recognize my voice? Then take a look.” He moved his face into the orange light slicing into the gap between the kiosks.

“You!”

“Yes, me.”

The expression on Montez’s face told all. Nathan had thought he’d take pleasure in the man’s shocked recognition. Instead, he felt sick to his stomach. Conflicting emotions assaulted him, unbidden.

Loathing of the vicious thing inside him.

Fear of being two people locked in the same body.

Shame at the knowledge.

But, worst of all, hatred. Acidic and crippling. He owned a hatred so strong, it had permanently etched itself onto his soul. And all because of this *sadistic shithead*. The temptation to unleash the *other* and grant it vengeance was strong.

“But—but you’re—”

“Dead?” He yanked Montez close and squinted. “Do I look dead?”

“But they found your body at the camp.”

He slapped Montez’s face. “Do I feel dead?” He drew his Predator knife and brought it up to eye level. “Shall we get started?”

“Wait!”

“For what?”

“My men are holding a man and his daughters. An important man. I’ve given them orders to kill all of them, and I’m the only one who can call it off.”

He moved the knife to the side of Montez's face and pressed the tip into his cheek. A bead of blood formed.

"Please, stop. I'll call it off."

"Where's your cell phone?"

"Pants."

Feeling revulsion, he reached into Montez's pocket.

"Listen up, Monty. Cooperate and you'll earn a few brownie points. And trust me, you're going to need them. Tell your men you killed me, but you were shot in the process. Order them to return to the marina immediately without killing anyone. Tell them to sit tight until they hear from you again, no matter how long it takes. You got that?"

Montez nodded.

How much time did he have? The sirens he'd heard earlier had gone silent. Were the police already here, entering Belmont Park right now?

"Put it on speaker and make the call. Do you normally speak Spanish?"

"No."

"If you're lying—"

"I'm not. I make my men practice English as much as possible."

Montez had grown calmer. Perhaps blood loss was taking a toll.

"Make the call."

Montez complied, and Nathan listened to the brief conversation for anything sounding like code. As far as he could tell, Montez did exactly as told. Nathan took the phone back.

"You don't have to torture me. I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"Of that I have no doubt."

"Hurting me won't solve anything."

"I strongly disagree. I have a bullwhip in my closet with your name on it. But first, we're going to walk out of here."

Nathan forced Montez onto his stomach, put a knee into his back, and yanked Montez's Windbreaker up. Using his Predator, he cut a twelve-inch strip from Montez's black sweatshirt, rolled it into a rope, and forced it into Montez's mouth. He tied the gag tight, nice and uncomfortable. He cut a four-inch strip to use on Montez's bullet wound as a pressure bandage. Montez grunted when he wrapped it in position. He used a third strip to secure Montez's hands behind his back.

He slid his Predator into its sheath, pocketed the two handguns, and

hauled Montez to his feet. Montez refused to walk when prodded.

“Either you walk out of here, or I bash your skull and drag you by your ponytail. I’m good either way.”

Montez nodded.

“Good boy.”

He looked in both directions but saw no sign of the security guard. The stinging in his feet returned in force, the latest adrenaline rush having worn off. If he could just hang tough a little longer.

He visualized the park’s map in his mind and recalled that the most direct exit path from his current position followed the bumper car ride to the west and turned south along the building housing the giant indoor pool. He gave Montez a firm shove in that direction.

“Let’s go.”

CHAPTER 45

Nathan and his captive were in roughly the same shape, barely able to walk. He needed a vehicle. Harv would probably be in an ambulance by now, unavailable. The idea of hot-wiring a car didn't work either. Most automobiles couldn't be hot-wired in the old-fashioned way, and many others employed obnoxious alarms and hidden tracking devices.

He cycled through his options again, then stopped.

Grangeland. She'd have Nichole Dalton in Dr. Reavie's care by now.

He dragged Montez into the shadows of the building on his left and forced him to sit against the wall. He pulled out his cell.

"Nathan? What's your situation?"

"I'm fine. How's Nichole Dalton?"

"She's in surgery right now."

"For how long?"

"I'm not sure. Probably a few hours. She needs hundreds of sutures."

"I need you and your vehicle right away."

"Where are you?"

"Belmont Park in Mission Beach. Know where it is?"

"Yes, it's in the sedan's nav. I'm on the I-Five heading south. I just passed the Garnet exit."

"How did you—" He answered his own question. "Harv."

"He called right after you took off after Montez, thought you might need an extra gun. He also said he heard a shot and didn't want to risk calling you."

"Is Harv okay?"

"A retired nurse is helping him. He's going to be fine. Do you have Montez in custody?"

He closed his eyes.

"Are you still there?"

"Montez needs medical attention."

"You didn't—"

“He’s got a bullet wound to the leg.”

“How will I find you?”

“Head to the south end of Belmont Park and turn right into the parking lot. Go straight ahead. We’ll be at the boardwalk near a freestanding building. I think it’s a public restroom. Cops in the area responding to reported gunshots. Call Harvey and update him.”

“I will.”

“My feet are in bad shape from broken glass.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

He called Cantrell next.

“Echo Five?” she asked.

“Affirmative. Echo Four is down. Pay phone not available. Target apprehended alive.”

“What’s Echo Four’s condition?”

He heard the concern in her voice for Harv and appreciated it. “Stable.”

“Your location?”

“Not on an open line.”

“Preserve target at all costs. I repeat, preserve tar—”

He ended the call before she finished and hauled Montez up from the ground. Thankfully, the lighting was considerably less intrusive back here. He wondered if Belmont Park employed more than one security guard. With a little luck, he’d be clear of this place in the next ten seconds with no one the wiser.

That’s when he saw it—a bright beam from a police cruiser swept across the parking lot. Keeping his prisoner controlled became critical. Without a doubt, Montez would prefer to be in police custody.

The beam swept back the opposite direction, but its brightness had grown.

He forced Montez into a small U-shaped alcove deep with shadow and listened as the police cruiser arrived. A split second later, the cruiser’s red and blue strobe light illuminated the plaza. Predictably, its obnoxious spotlight beam invaded the exact path he needed to take. Even from twenty feet away—and without seeing its source directly—the blinding light destroyed his night vision. He’d need at least thirty seconds for it to return. He turned his head and closed his eyes. Just breathe. In deep, out slowly—

Then he heard a chilling sound.

Quick, hard-soled footfalls.

And the distinctive jingle that accompanies a security guard. From behind, the way he'd just come.

Montez's bloody footprints.

He reached into his pocket, pulled the SIG, and huddled over Montez. Nathan clamped his free hand over the gag and jammed the suppressor under Montez's chin.

The same security guard he'd seen earlier stomped into view, but surprisingly, he didn't seem to be following footprints. The guard ran past his hiding place and rounded the corner. Things would've turned ugly if the guard had looked in his direction.

He eased his weight off of Montez enough to gain his feet.

The next thirty seconds stretched into an eternity.

Catching him completely off guard, Montez drove his head back and smashed him squarely on the chin.

His vision grayed, then winked out.

He tightened his grip on the SIG in case Montez made a move for it.

Blinded from the impact, he struggled to keep his balance and swung the pistol like a club.

And missed.

His vision returned in time to see Montez limp around the corner toward the police cruiser.

He took off in pursuit.

Montez stopped fifteen feet from the SDPD officer and dropped to the ground. He watched Montez bring his knees up to his chest and force his bound hands over the top of his legs. With his hands free in front, Montez stood up and yanked the gag out of his mouth.

"Officer. Help me. *Please, help me!*"

The officer's response was immediate. He pulled his sidearm and yelled, "Get on the ground now! Both of you. On the ground. Now!" He looked at Nathan and yelled, "Put the gun down, *now!*"

Nathan bent down and placed Harv's SIG on the concrete. He didn't want to be shot and didn't want the officer's attention focused solely on himself.

Montez closed the distance, continuing his phony tirade.

The officer looked at Montez and continued his verbal command to get on the ground, but Montez—less than three yards away—took a final step and leaped forward, driving both of them into the fender of the cruiser.

Nathan picked up the SIG and saw the situation go from urgent to critical. Twenty-five yards distant, the unarmed security guard ran forward, yelling, “Don’t move! Don’t move!”

Montez used his momentum to drive the officer’s head onto the hood of the cruiser; the impact produced a loud bang. Even with bound wrists, Montez managed to yank the officer’s sidearm free. He pistol-whipped the dazed cop and turned toward the security guard.

The guard continued running. Either he didn’t see that Montez had grabbed the officer’s weapon, or he was trying to be a hero. Either way, it sealed his fate.

Montez brought the gun up and fired twice, the reports thunderous.

Nathan squinted as two impacts appeared on the security guard’s chest.

With an expression of disbelief, the guard dropped to his knees and looked at the spreading bloodstains on his uniform.

Nathan ducked behind a white column of the entry facade a split second before Montez fired. The bullet ricocheted off the painted concrete and whistled away.

He peered around the edge of the column. Montez had his bound wrists up at his mouth, untying the knot.

The officer had recovered enough to make a grab for his weapon.

Montez reacted fast. He thrust a knee up and caught the officer squarely in the chest.

Remarkably, the officer kept his feet and made a second attempt for his sidearm. Within seconds, they were locked in a macabre embrace. Dazed and weakened from two head blows, the SDPD officer was losing the struggle.

In five seconds it would be over. Montez would kill the officer and use his cruiser to escape.

Tapping into pure rage, Nathan ignored his wrecked feet and charged.

Montez looked up from his struggle and jerked free of the officer’s grasp. Before Nathan got there, Montez had the officer wrapped up as a human shield.

He stopped advancing when Montez put the gun against the officer’s head.

“Don’t come any closer. I’ll kill him. I swear I’ll do it.”

Nathan kept Harv’s gun up and toggled the laser. A bright red dot appeared on Montez’s forehead. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

“Don’t come any closer. I’ll kill him.”

“Go ahead, kill him. I’ll sacrifice that man before I’ll let you escape.”

The officer’s eyes grew.

Nathan took a step forward.

“I’m leaving,” Montez yelled. “The officer’s coming with me as my hostage.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Don’t come any closer. I’ll kill him. *You know I’ll do it!*”

“I want you to do it.”

“You’re insane.”

He took another step. “Think maybe *you* had something to do with that?”

“I’ll do it. *You know I’ll do it!*”

“Don’t bother.” He made eye contact with the officer and issued a slight nod. The officer closed his eyes and returned the nod.

Nathan moved his laser to the officer’s chest—

And pulled the trigger.

CHAPTER 46

In the next instant, three things happened simultaneously.

Nathan's subsonic round shuddered the officer.

The officer jerked his head back.

And Montez pulled the trigger.

The shot missed the officer's head by millimeters, but his eardrums would pay a heavy price.

Before Montez could squeeze off a second shot, Nathan sprinted forward and slammed his entire weight into both of them. All three ended up sprawled across the hood of the cruiser.

Montez's grasp on the officer slipped.

Nathan drove his forehead into Montez's nose and had the satisfaction of feeling it collapse.

The gun clattered out of Montez's hand and slid down the hood toward the grille.

Struggling to catch his breath from the bullet's impact on his ballistic vest, the police officer fell sideways. Nathan tried to grab his uniform, but missed. The man fell to the sidewalk and cracked his head on the concrete.

He grabbed Montez by the throat and clamped down. "I should kill you right here and now."

"I made a deal for your life," Montez said through clenched teeth.

"So I heard." Nathan threw his former interrogator to the ground and kicked him in the stomach. Hard. Montez coughed and curled into the fetal position. Using his pistol, he hammered the back of Montez's head.

Nathan bent over, checked the officer, and found him semiconscious with several facial cuts, but otherwise okay.

"I can't stay," he said. "I promise to clear this up. You have my word."

"W—Who are you?"

He grabbed the lapel mike from the officer's uniform and pressed the transmit button. "Officer down, south parking lot, Belmont Park. Officer down." He re-clipped the mike to the officer's uniform. "Don't try to get up."

Backup's on the way."

The dispatcher came back immediately. *"Unit with last transmission, please repeat. All other units stay off the air."*

He didn't respond. Didn't need to. Every unit on that frequency had just heard the officer-down call and would be screaming to this location.

Winching from the sting of his feet, he hustled over to the prone security guard and rolled him over. Dead.

Precious seconds were ripping by with no sign of Grangeland. He had no choice. He returned to the cruiser, used the officer's cuffs to secure Montez's hands behind his back, jammed him into the backseat, and slammed the door shut. Montez stirred to consciousness but had nowhere to go. Designed for prisoners, the cruiser's rear compartment would afford Montez no means of escape.

He retrieved the officer's weapon and holstered it for him. He didn't like abandoning a defenseless cop or taking his cruiser, but he had to clear the area. Either that or yield control to the SDPD. They'd both be taken into custody, where Montez would be given a chance to lawyer-up. Not an option.

Once in the cruiser, he turned off the light bar and headlights, and sped toward the south entrance to the parking lot. A glance to his left confirmed his suspicion. Three police units were racing along West Mission Bay Boulevard toward Belmont Park, probably from Harv's location. He figured he slipped away with less than thirty seconds to spare.

"Do you really think you'll get away with shooting a police officer and stealing his vehicle?" said Montez from the backseat.

"I'll be asking the questions from now on."

"You sound pleased with yourself."

"Would you like to be gagged again?"

Montez didn't answer.

A thought came to Nathan. *Grangeland*. She'd be driving into a gauntlet of SDPD's finest. He used the recent call feature on his phone and hit send.

"Nathan?"

"Change of plans. Keep going south on Mission Boulevard past Belmont Park. Make a right at the very end and find me. I've still got Montez. He killed a security guard. Look for a parked SDPD cruiser. Where are you?"

"Westbound on Sea World Drive. Seems like every cop in the city is

converging to your location. I've been passed by two code-three cruisers doing over a hundred."

"Call if you have any trouble finding me."

He estimated he had four minutes before she arrived. Probably the same for an SDPD helicopter. By now, Dalton's yacht would be on its way back to the marina. He hoped Dalton would survive his wounds. The man had surrendered himself to this sadistic madman to save his family. Whoever Dalton was, he couldn't be all bad.

At the end of Mission Boulevard, he turned right, drove several hundred yards, and pulled into an isolated parking stall facing the channel.

Why not use this time productively?

Pistol in hand, he climbed out. His feet still stung, but not as badly now. He stepped gingerly around the cruiser and got into the backseat next to Montez, making sure to leave the door open. He didn't want to lock himself in. The dome light stayed dark.

"Well, Colonel Montez, you really look like shit."

"Tell me something, McBride. Why didn't you give me your name down there? What harm would it have caused? Why not just do it and avoid the pain?"

"Because it was all I had left," Nathan whispered, almost to himself. He shook his head, marveling at how smoothly Montez had taken the initiative from him. "If you go off-topic again, Monty, I'm going to hurt you badly. Do you understand? Let's get right to it. Who are you working for and what's Dalton's role?"

"You really don't know?"

Nathan sighed. "I warned you." He pulled his Predator and jammed the tip into Montez's cheek. He applied a gradual increasing pressure, forcing Montez to hold perfectly still or risk a lengthy incision. A rivulet of blood oozed from the small cut. "A few more pounds of pressure and the blade goes through to your cheekbone. I'd really hate to see your face ruined...like mine."

Montez said nothing.

"Well?"

"I only learned the truth tonight. I thought I was working for Dalton, but he was only a middleman."

"A middleman? For whom?"

"You won't like the answer."

“Try me.”

“The CIA.”

CHAPTER 47

“Yeah, right.”

“It’s true.”

“So I’m supposed to believe you were working for the United States government?”

“Believe what you want.”

“Why would the CIA need a worm like you involved with a clean coal negotiation in Hungary? That’s horse crap. You’re lying.”

“The clean coal thing was only a front.”

“For what?”

“Counterterrorism. Holding and transfer of enemy combatants. Rendition.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been interrogating prisoners.”

Nathan felt his blood pressure rise. “I don’t believe you.”

“I can prove it. The thumb drive in your pocket? Dalton confessed to everything.”

“You tortured him. Of course he *confessed*.”

“He held out for quite a while, made a heroic stand.”

Nathan let the knife sink a fraction of an inch into Montez’s cheek. “Spare me your sick musings. You were going to dump Dalton in the ocean. Alive. Like you did to Kramer. You could’ve killed Kramer first. Why drown him like that?”

“I’d put up with Kramer for years. He was a small, cruel man who lorded every ounce of power he had over those around him.”

“Sounds like *you*. So you’re claiming Dalton works for the CIA?”

“He did. As a contractor. He owned a small, private company called Ironclad Management.”

“And Kramer’s shell company, Energy Solutions?”

“Was hired by Ironclad. A subcontractor.”

“Which dealt directly with you.”

“Yes. Kramer brought me the interrogation subjects. Terrorists. Captured by your military or CIA, then taken to a safe house in Hungary for safekeeping until it was time for their interrogations on Tobago. The clean coal venture allowed us to use Hungary as a depot. Everything was done with private jets. That’s where I came in. Kramer simply handled the arrivals and disposals.”

“Then what did Dalton do?”

“It’s all on the thumb drive.”

Nathan pushed the knife. “I’m asking *you*.”

“I already told you. Dalton was a middleman, reporting to a United States senator. A member of the mighty Committee on Domestic Terrorism.”

Nathan literally felt his heart pound. His father would never be party to this.

He moved his Predator to Montez’s right eye. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not, I swear.”

“Which senator?” He drove the knife’s tip into the lower eyelid and felt the blade pierce skin. “*Which one?*”

“Alan Kallstrom.”

Nathan pulled the steel back, letting himself breathe again, then felt shame. Sudden and deep. How could he have suspected his own father? Familiar hatred began boiling. Hatred for being manipulated. For being paranoid. Hatred of his own nature. *What have I become that I would suspect my own father of working with this animal?*

“McBride...” Montez said slowly. “You’re Senator Stone McBride’s son? And you thought I was referring to *him*?” He smiled. “Close to your father, are you?”

Nathan’s voice took on a sudden calmness. “There’s someone I want you to meet, Mr. Montez.”

Montez looked around in mock curiosity. “We seem to be alone.”

“We *are* alone, just the three of us.” He waited, allowing his meaning to sink in. Montez had seen the *other*. Many times.

Montez’s expression changed to fear, and he began speaking rapidly. “If you torture or kill me, Dalton’s confession in your pocket will be distributed to every major news network. Your country will be mired in scandal for decades. World opinion of America will plummet to an all-time low.”

“Like I care.”

“What about your precious patriotism? You told me many times you’d never betray your country, no matter what I did to you.”

“A lot can change over the years,” he lied.

“I don’t believe you. I heard what you said to the police officer. You still fancy yourself as an honorable man.”

“Believe what you want. You can contemplate it while screaming in agony.”

“You won’t kill me. You won’t risk it.”

“You’re right, I won’t kill you...right away.”

“I’m not afraid of you, McBride.”

He leaned forward. “You will be.” He let that soak in for a few seconds. “You’re forgetting how well I know you. You told me many times you didn’t trust anyone but yourself. I’m betting this is the only copy.”

“One week ago, your government tried to kill me and sweep my operation under the rug. I’ve been preparing for this betrayal for years.”

Nathan smiled. “It’s much worse than that.”

Montez squinted, looked confused.

“My government wants you alive.”

Montez’s entire body tensed.

“That’s right. Alive and kicking. Once the CIA’s finished with you, you’ll be in diapers, drooling in a mental ward and listening to elevator music.”

Montez’s face changed, took on resolve. “I enjoyed seeing you suffer, McBride. Do you remember when you broke down and cried like a little boy?”

“I warned you what would happen if you went off-topic.” Nathan grabbed him by the ponytail and forced his head back against the seat. Starting at the top of Montez’s right temple, he drew his Predator down his cheek and stopped at his chin. The incision began oozing blood.

Montez hissed in protest, but held still.

“Did you enjoy that?”

“It changes nothing.”

“Oh, I disagree. I’m already feeling better. Shall we make it a matched set?”

Montez said nothing.

“It’s a little cramped in here. Let’s step outside where we have more room to work.” He sheathed the knife, grabbed Montez by the collar, and

yanked him across the seat. “I should’ve brought rubber gloves. Lord only knows what diseases you’ve got.” He hauled the man clear of the cruiser and dragged him over the curb toward the riprap-lined harbor channel.

He heard it then, the distant thumping of a helicopter’s main rotor tearing through the air. He looked toward Lindbergh Field. How much time did he have? Two minutes? Less?

To his surprise, he didn’t care.

“You tortured me in front of women and children. What kind of a *sick fuck* does that?”

“You should know.”

“We’re *nothing* alike.”

“I should’ve let my man bullwhip you to death. Twenty or thirty more lashes would’ve done the trick.”

“You had a nice head of hair, Monty. Until now.” With his left hand, he snapped the rubber band securing Montez’s ponytail and grabbed a handful of hair just above his brows. With his right hand, he positioned his Predator on the left side of Montez’s forehead and forced the knife across, cutting a deep channel, five inches long. Montez moaned as blood began oozing down his face.

“Professional question,” he growled in Montez’s ear. “Have you ever scalped anyone?”

Headlights appeared. From the left.

Nathan looked up as a sedan bore down on him.

A police cruiser? No, it didn’t have a light bar. Grangeland. Her timing couldn’t have been worse.

It came to a stop behind the cruiser he’d stolen. He heard two car doors open and close. Two doors? Maybe it wasn’t Grangeland. An undercover SDPD unit? He shrugged off any concern and turned his attention back to his prisoner.

“Nathan. Don’t do it.”

Holly?

How could that be Holly? She’s in Sacramento.

Silhouetted against the headlights, she and Grangeland approached the

curb, but stopped short. "Nathan, don't do it."

"Holly. How—What are you doing here?"

"I never left. I asked your father and Harvey not to tell you."

Montez grinned through a face covered in blood from his cheek and scalp wounds. "So *this* is Holly. Julio mentioned you, from the Clairemont house. Quite a looker. And good with a gun, I hear."

Nathan's voice held venom. "Shut up, Montez."

"Tell me, McBride. Is she a tiger in the sack? I'll bet she could handle an entire NBA basketball team, plus that cane."

"Nathan, *don't*. It's what he wants."

In two labored motions, he cut deep parallel channels along the top of Montez's head that connected to the slit across his forehead. He could now tear a huge rectangular piece of Montez's scalp back.

Grangeland took a step forward. "I don't blame you for wanting to hurt him, but let us prosecute him for murder."

"This doesn't concern the FBI."

"Is that all I am to you now? The FBI?"

"Grangeland, no, I—I didn't mean it like that."

Holly softened her tone. "She's right, Nathan."

"Don't—"

"Don't what? Deny you your revenge?"

"This isn't about revenge."

"You've never lied to me. Are you going to start now?"

He squinted, but said nothing. The truth? Was it absolute? Black or white? Where did it blur?

"So that's it," she continued. "I'm too late. You made up your mind a week ago. Then go ahead. I won't stop you. But you'll have to kill him in front of me and Grangeland."

He clenched his teeth.

"Go ahead. I want to see it. All of it. I want to see you tear his scalp back. I want to see you cut his throat. Listen to the gurgling of his lungs. Everything. I want to see the *real* Nathan McBride in action. I guess the man I thought I knew doesn't exist."

"Holly, *don't*—"

"Don't what? Tell you the truth?"

"What do *you* know about the truth?" he yelled.

Her voice softened. "I know that giving in to hatred won't heal you. Just

the opposite.”

“You know what he did to me.”

“Yes, I do.”

The temptation to tear Montez’s scalp back and slit his throat overpowered all else. It raged like a thirst, a thirst he knew well. He would’ve sold his soul for a drink of water during his crucifixion. With every crack of the whip, every jolt of electricity, and every slice of his flesh, he’d sworn to get revenge some day. He’d dreamed of this moment thousands of times. That day had arrived. Montez must die. And why shouldn’t he? After what he’d done to Kramer. The Dalton family. The bastard tried to kill Harv. Shot him when he was defenseless. Human life had no value to Montez. None.

He gripped the knife tighter.

It would be so easy. So satisfying.

But what about Holly and the life they’d started together? Was he going to throw that away? Was killing Montez worth sacrificing that future? Her future?

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Nathan, love is stronger than hate.”

Conflicting emotions assaulted him again. His desire to kill Montez had never burned so strongly. How could they blame him? How could anyone on the planet blame him? He thought back to Director Cantrell’s visit to his hospital room. She’d asked him to consider the bigger picture when and if the time ever came. He owned Montez’s life. Was it satisfying enough to know he *could* kill him? Was having the power of life and death over this monster enough? It didn’t feel like enough, not by a long shot.

He could almost hear Harvey telling him this wasn’t a CIA sanctioned mission and he didn’t have a green light to take out the target. Thorny would say the same thing.

And what if Montez *wasn’t* lying about the thumb drive? About having other copies? Killing him could cause serious harm to the country. Did his lust for revenge overshadow all else? How many good people would be destroyed by killing one bad person?

The fork in the road branched in two directions.

One toward light.

The other toward darkness.

With clenched teeth, he tilted his head up, closed his eyes...

And asked God for help.

He saw them then, in his mind's eye. Autumn colored leaves. Descending like harbingers of truth. The leaves fell by the hundreds. Then by the thousands. Surrounding him in random but beautiful patterns. They brushed his skin, healing savaged flesh from a past that no longer controlled him, no longer held his fate.

He loosened his grip on the knife.

Love is stronger than hate.

A lot stronger. He'd been so misguided all these years. Bitterness? Hatred? Revenge? Deep down, where only the truth lived, he knew they weren't just words. They'd become prison bars. He thought about the words inscribed on the FBI seal—words that Holly honored. Fidelity. Bravery. Integrity. And they weren't merely words. They were tenets of the truth, a truth he'd lost sight of. He could never face Holly again if he gave into his dark nature. Hatred and rage might be permanent parts of his soul, but they didn't have to control him.

He slammed the door on the *other* and threw the knife aside.

"You're a coward, McBride."

Grangeland stepped forward, brushing Nathan aside with her body, and delivered a solid haymaker to Montez's bloody jaw. "And you're unconscious."

Nathan backed away, allowing Grangeland to take over.

Holly hugged him. "It's over, Nathan," she whispered in his ear. "You don't have to fear him anymore."

"I didn't mean the things I said. I'm sorry."

"I know you didn't."

Her words echoed again. *You don't have to fear him anymore.* He held her, unsure if she meant Montez or the vicious thing inside him. Perhaps they were the same, cut from the same dark cloth. It didn't matter.

Holding Holly, he felt something he hadn't known in a long time...

He felt safe.

CHAPTER 48

Nichole Dalton heard a voice. A man's voice.

For a split second she saw Montez's grinning face and bloody gloves.

She remembered being rescued by a tall man with long scars on his face and body.

Nichole, can you hear me?

She opened her eyes but couldn't focus. Her chest and stomach stung. Where was she?

The plastic surgeon. She'd been taken to a plastic surgeon's office. She remembered lying on her back and feeling cold, remembered feeling an IV inserted into her arm. There'd been classical music in the background. And some kind of chemical smell, alcohol maybe? She couldn't remember anything beyond that.

"Nichole, can you hear me?"

She turned her head and saw Dr. Reavie.

He took her hand. "I've got a couple of girls who want see their mother."

"You found them! They're safe?" She tried to sit up. Fiery pain made her wince. She didn't care.

"Don't sit up. I'll elevate the bed for you. You're recovering from anesthesia. Everything went well. You have more than a thousand sutures, though."

"My girls!"

"They're right here."

Nathan felt insecure in a wheelchair, but it beat the alternative—a pine box. He watched the two girls rush to their mother's bedside and hug each other. Nichole's joy overpowered her pain. She closed her eyes to the tears

streaming down her cheeks and held them.

And in that moment, nothing else in the world mattered.

Grangeland wiped a tear. So did Holly. No warm-blooded human being could watch this and not feel torn to pieces. He felt Holly take his hand and give it a firm squeeze.

“Come on,” he whispered. “Let’s give them some time alone.”

He wheeled himself to the door and turned back.

Nichole Dalton made eye contact and mouthed the words *thank you*.

He nodded and slipped out.

Grangeland insisted on pushing his wheelchair the rest of the way through Reavie’s office and he reluctantly agreed. Holly couldn’t do it. She walked with a cane. A few hours ago, his feet had been numbed, scrubbed clean, and sutured closed. None of the cuts had been especially large or deep, but there’d been a lot of them. The local anesthetic had since worn off, and truth be told, he was grateful for the wheelchair. But wrecked feet or not, he wasn’t going to miss this reunion.

In the parking lot, the cobalt beginning of a new sunrise spread across the horizon.

He spoke softly, just above a whisper. “Seeing Nichole and her daughters like that? It makes it all worth it.”

Grangeland stopped pushing and Holly took his hand.

They were silent for a moment, staring at the eastern sky.

“I owe you an apology, Grangeland. I didn’t mean what I said.”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s not okay. I really care what you think of me. Both of you.”

“I feel the same way about you,” Grangeland said.

“My feet hurt.”

Holly half laughed. “At least you’re not sporting Grangeland’s pink sweater anymore.”

He’d almost forgotten about that. After cleaning Montez up and hauling the semiconscious man into the sedan, Grangeland had given him the sweater, the only thing she had stretchy enough to fit. He’d worn it into the emergency room.

He grinned. “I don’t know, I kinda liked the way it felt.”

“Don’t ever repeat that,” Holly said.

He looked to Grangeland, as if to invite a dissenting vote.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’ll have to agree with my SAC on that.”

CHAPTER 49

A week later, compliments of US taxpayers, Nathan and Harvey arrived in Washington via Director Lansing's Lear. At Reagan National, they rented separate cars and went separate ways. Harv wanted to retrieve his family from Thorny's safe house and see a museum or two.

In his own rental car, Nathan sighed and concentrated on driving.

Overall, it was a nice afternoon. Not too humid. High clouds drifted toward the east.

Driving up the George Washington Memorial Parkway toward Langley, he tried to make sense of things, but there were still some missing pieces. He hoped to get some answers, but wasn't holding his breath. He didn't expect to learn much more than he already knew.

Following Cantrell's instructions, he stayed on the GW Parkway and took the exit ramp directly north of CIA headquarters. He drove up a gentle slope and stopped under the guardhouse canopy. It felt a little strange telling the guards he was here to see the head honcho, but from their reactions—or more accurately, lack thereof—they'd obviously been prepped for his arrival. Most people stared at his face when they first met him, something he'd accepted over the years. He never took it personally, but sometimes getting no reaction felt worse. Those people tended to treat him like a leper.

The entry guards directed him forward to a small parking area just outside the red vehicle barriers. He turned off the engine and relaxed, wondering how many video cameras were recording his every move. If possible, he planned to keep this meeting cordial. He hadn't requested it, Cantrell had. He had little doubt she could be a formidable enemy and he didn't want to spoil the rapport he'd developed with her, if he could call it that.

Ten minutes later, she arrived in a convoy of three white sedans. He climbed out and felt the telltale tingling itch of healing flesh on the soles of his feet.

As quickly as he'd stepped out, he found himself surrounded by four

nicely dressed agents with bulges under their coats.

The passenger window of the middle sedan rolled down, revealing Director Rebecca Cantrell.

“Hop in.”

“I’m impressed,” he said as he took a seat and belted in. He made eye contact with each agent. “For a second, I thought you boys were going to tackle me.”

“They just needed to be sure it was you, not someone wearing a Nathan McBride mask.”

He pointed to his mug. “Kinda hard to copy, don’t you think?”

“But not impossible.”

“Where’re we going?”

“I thought we’d do a late lunch at the Congressional Country Club. It’s only a few miles away.”

“The Congressional Country Club?”

She shrugged. “It’s a private golf course, that kind of country club.”

“My treat?” he offered.

“Sure, why not.”

“Are you always escorted like this?”

“Pretty much. A lot of things changed after nine-eleven.”

They drove in silence for a few minutes.

“I know you’re curious about Ironclad, and rightfully so. You’re probably wondering why, out of all the unsavory interrogators in the world, Montez was offered the job.”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

“Well, first off, Montez is not the only interrogator subcontracted for this kind of work during the past decade. I know that’s not a pretty thought, but—”

“I know the score, I get that. But still...Montez?”

“Like I said in your hospital room, he never blew the whistle on our involvement in Nicaragua. He’d proven himself trustworthy. Yes, I know how that sounds. But he was also completely deniable, which is not unimportant.”

Nathan acknowledged the point.

“Also,” said Cantrell, “although I hate to say this, he was extremely good at his job.”

“Look,” Nathan said, “I’m not armchair quarterbacking anyone here. I

understand both sides of the enhanced interrogation argument and both have merits. I'm just wondering why it all fell apart so dramatically."

"When the new administration took power, one of the things the president was briefed on was Ironclad's function as a rendition operation. Well, needless to say, the president was...how can I say this delicately? *Concerned*. He didn't like the setup for a number of reasons. Although he never came out and said it, his primary reason was damage control. He was worried about fallout if the operation leaked. He didn't want Ironclad smearing his presidency, then or ever. I'm not making any judgments on the president's decision, that's not my job. My job is to implement his foreign policies, whether I agree with them or not."

"Did the CIA fund Ironclad?"

"Not exactly. As you know, the Kallstroms are independently wealthy. Not just wealthy, downright rich. They personally funded the resources to set up and operate Ironclad. Private jet charters for moving prisoners, a fake office in Hungary, shell companies, like the ones supposedly studying clean coal, arranging safe houses and subcontractors to deal personally with interrogators like Colonel Montez. You name it. It allowed the president total deniability."

"So with Montez, in terms of transporting prisoners to their interrogation, dealing with Montez, then disposing of them, it was Kramer, pretty much alone?"

"Correct. Kramer set everything up and handled the day-to-day operations. We, the CIA, logistically supported him through an insulated contractor, Duane Dalton."

"Wouldn't it have been easier to just kill Montez when the president pulled the plug?" he asked.

"Normally, yes, but as we discussed in the hospital, many operatives like Montez have sleeper systems in place to protect themselves in the event they die, or even disappear for X amount of time. Blackmail traps set to release damaging info to the media. We sent a man down to Tobago to capture him alive. Unfortunately, that mission failed and Montez went on the offensive."

"So Montez started with Kramer because that's the only person he'd had any contact with?"

"That's right. Think of Ironclad's structure like an onion. Kramer. Dalton. Senator Kallstrom. Former Director Kallstrom. In that order. Montez

never knew anyone but Kramer and Kramer's knowledge never went deeper than the onion's second layer, Dalton. That's why Montez needed to find and interrogate Dalton."

"Let's hope Montez was telling the truth about his thumb drive being the only copy of Dalton's confession. Senator Kallstrom could be facing a bigger threat than mere legal proceedings."

"It's possible, but we're ninety-nine percent sure."

"So, Montez..." Nathan sought the right words.

"Yes, he caved easily under interrogation."

"How did you break him?"

"Actually, it was Harvey's suggestion. We sent five of our biggest operations officers into his cell with a tube of KY and a box of condoms."

"Did they have to, you know..."

"Not even a little," said Cantrell. "Montez became downright loquacious, I'm told. Of course, we followed up with a whole suite of drugs and sleep deprivation to confirm everything he told us. But no, we never had to get rough."

"Doesn't surprise me. I don't imagine many interrogators would be as equally skilled on the other side of the equation."

"That's generally true, but not always. You're the exception to the rule."

"I was never a professional interrogator."

"But you *are* field qualified." Cantrell took the I-495 north onramp. "Needless to say, a lot of powerful people are really glad you didn't kill him, including the president. You and Harv have been the topic of numerous high-level intelligence discussions. You guys have new friends in high places now."

"I'd use the word *friends* loosely." He watched the suburban countryside fly past. "Did Montez's rendition work ever yield anything?"

"Tons. That's why it was kept active for so long."

He waited.

"All right," she said at last. "You've earned it. We uncovered a plot two years ago with information that came directly from a Montez interrogation. You're aware we have tighter security at all our major airports and that it's become increasingly difficult to repeat what happened on nine-eleven. Not impossible, but far less likely."

He wasn't sure he agreed.

“What about private charters?” she asked.

“Private charters?”

“Rental jets. Hypothetically, a wealthy family—we’ll call it Family X—decides to take a trip to Europe. They charter a private jet. At many smaller airports all over the country, they can literally pull their vehicles up to the plane and load their own luggage. Let’s say they want to leave from San Diego, but the private charter company is based in Los Angeles. With me so far?”

He knew where this was going.

“So the private jet flies down from Los Angeles to a smaller airport in San Diego. An SUV drives out to meet the plane. Three brothers and two cousins pile out of the SUV. They look unassuming. Clean-shaven. Casually dressed. Except for their accents, they don’t seem out of the ordinary. They load their suitcases into the luggage compartment and climb aboard. The captain orders his fuel tanks topped off for the flight to the East Coast. But the suitcases don’t contain clothes and toiletries, they contain eighty pounds of Semtex each. Nearly half a ton in all. Once they’re airborne, they overpower the pilot and copilot and fly directly to the stadium for a sold-out Chargers football game.”

“That’s only a two-minute flight from Monty.”

“Right. There’s no time to intercept the jet once it deviates from its flight plan and goes radio silent. They fly it into the stadium and detonate the Semtex a split second before the jet hits the seats. The concussive shockwave, coupled with thousands of pounds of burning jet fuel and twisted aluminum shrapnel, has catastrophic results. We estimate the death toll would be ten to fifteen thousand with double that number seriously burned and wounded. Men, women, *and* children.”

“Are you telling me Montez uncovered a plot like that and you prevented it?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. We took down a cell of five men and two women in Cleveland, along with half a ton of Semtex. They were planning to hit the Browns season opener. Montez wrung it out of one of the planners, whom one of my agents had captured during a joint operation with the Yemeni army. The cell was twelve weeks away from implementing the plan I just outlined.”

He shook his head. “Incredible. Did the president know about it?”

“Of course.” She softened her tone. “Nathan, you of all people know

what goes on behind the scenes. None of this will ever be revealed to the public. For obvious reasons, it can't be. We've also uncovered numerous locations of cells in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, and elsewhere. In many of those locations IEDs and suicide vests were being manufactured. We discovered a plot to bomb the US embassy in Kuwait and a comprehensive plan to infiltrate the highest levels of Afghanistan's fledgling government. We'll never know how many civilians and service members we've saved over the years, but it's thousands of lives."

"Like I said," Nathan told her, "I understand both sides of the enhanced interrogation argument. I get that." And he did.

"I've read the details on some of your missions, none of which will ever be revealed to the public either. How many lives have you and Harvey saved? You guys cleared the way for a SEAL team to seize a chemical weapons stash in Bosnia. You took out a rogue Russian general who'd been about to sell shoulder-launched missiles to Hamas. Can you imagine al-Qaeda terrorists lurking at the ends of our nation's airports with Stinger-type weapons? Even though *Marine One* constantly uses different routes to ferry the president back and forth to Andrews, eventually they'd get lucky and be in the right place at the right time and shoot it down."

He *could* imagine those scenarios. All too well. "What now?"

"My suggestion is take a vacation. You and SAC Simpson. Go someplace tropical and lounge around. Drink margaritas and play shuffleboard on a cruise ship. Go scuba diving. You've earned it."

"Yeah, that sounds about right. Will you promise me something as a personal favor?"

"That depends."

"Don't kill Montez."

She raised a brow. "That's quite a request."

"If you include the dead mercenaries from Montez's Long Beach warehouse, Harv and I have killed sixty-two people. We've got enough blood on our hands."

"I'll agree to that. Or more accurately, I'll *recommend* it. But Montez may wish I hadn't."

"You're a good woman, Rebecca. I wasn't sure when we first met, but I am now."

She smiled. "Thank you. It means a lot coming from you."

"Why do I get the feeling I haven't seen the last of you?"

“Be careful what you wish for.”

CHAPTER 50

General Hawthorne's C-20G turned final into Leeward Point Airfield, Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, just after 1400 hours. Nathan found himself gripping the armrests a little too tightly as the wheels touched down.

"Nervous?" Harv asked.

"A little."

"Yeah, me too."

Thorny hung up the phone and turned toward them. "We're all set. Rear Admiral Patricia Maas has agreed to meet us in person, so has Captain Brett King, the station's commander. Maas is the commanding officer of Joint Task Force Guantanamo, so we'll be in good hands. The JTF deputy commander, Brigadier General Gabriel Porras, will also be meeting us at the terminal. Porras is Army. JTF Gitmo is under a separate command from the rest of the station."

The jet's thrust reversers deployed and the pilot applied power.

"A separate command?" Harv asked over the engine noise.

"Yes, it's comprised of mostly naval personnel, but it has servicemen and women from all branches. There are other marines on the station, but their primary assignment is to guard the perimeter fence."

Thorny must have sensed his apprehension. "Relax, Montez won't be able to see us. We'll be behind a two-way mirror."

Nathan looked out the window at three Jeep Cherokees sitting on the tarmac near a vehicle entry gate. The jet came to a stop and the doors to the Cherokees opened. Four people dressed in combat uniforms climbed out and walked toward the jet. Three were in naval working uniforms, the other in a desert army combat uniform, no doubt the JTF's deputy commander, the army brigadier.

The copilot opened the fuselage door and warm, humid air flooded the interior. It reminded Nathan of his vacation in Puerto Rico. It had the same feel.

Thorny exited the jet first. All four Gitmo officers issued crisp salutes.

Thorny returned the gesture. “Everyone at ease. This is an informal visit. Who’s the senior officer here?”

“You are, General,” Porras said.

Thorny grinned and it lightened the tension. “You’d be surprised how many get that wrong.”

The station commander, Captain Brett King, stepped forward. “Welcome to Gitmo, General.” Introductions were made all around.

Admiral Maas spent a fraction too long looking at Nathan’s scars, but recovered quickly. Porras looked and acted all business and clearly wasn’t happy about hosting a couple of unknown spooks. Understandable, but unwarranted. Porras had no way to know he and Harv weren’t here for a clandestine Big Brother spy mission.

“Once we’ve crossed the bay,” Maas said, “it’s about a ten-minute drive over to Camp Delta.”

They piled into the Cherokees. Naturally, he and Harv ended up in Brigadier General Porras’s vehicle. Nathan exchanged a look with Harv, who took the front seat. Thorny rode with Rear Admiral Maas and Captain King, while the third Cherokee hosted the two aides. No doubt they’d exchange a story or two.

A minute later, Porras drove directly onto the waiting ferry. It looked like a scaled-down mix between an aircraft carrier and a landing craft and probably accommodated fifteen to twenty vehicles. Not surprising, the three Cherokees were the only vehicles boarding. Eight marine MPs, armed with M4s, were stationed at various points around the perimeter of the ferry. He wondered if they were normally there. Probably weren’t. No doubt Captain King was playing it safe for the twenty minute journey across open water.

Everyone got out of the vehicles for the ride. The MPs tried not to stare, but most of them would never get another chance to meet the commandant of the Marine Corps again. Thorny made it a point to return their salutes and shake hands with each of them. Nathan smiled at seeing his friend acknowledge the service of enlisted personnel—one of the many traits of a good leader.

Nathan walked over to the rail and looked across the expanse of water. He thought back to Kramer, what it must’ve been like for him at the end, and how close Duane Dalton, his ex-wife, and his two girls had come to suffering the same watery fate. He shook his head.

At the windward landing all three vehicles drove off the ferry. Ten

minutes after that, they crested a hill and could see the checkpoint preceding the camps. The view of the Caribbean looked awesome. The bluish-green water along the rocky shoreline nicely contrasted the arid landscape. There was no shortage of cactus around here. Heck of a location for a detainee camp, but it made logistical sense.

Admiral Maas's Cherokee received a salute from the MPs as it passed through the checkpoint. Their vehicle was also saluted. Camp Delta sat directly ahead, a series of linear buildings surrounded by high fencing and guard towers. Essentially, a prison. At the bottom they passed a parking lot and followed Maas's vehicle to the left. Nathan looked at the detention camp. All quiet. No one could be seen, guards or prisoners. He hadn't realized it until now, but he had no idea what to expect. San Quentin? Soledad? This looked nothing at all like those California prisons. It almost had the informal feel of a juvenile detention facility.

So why did his unease continue to grow with each passing minute? Duane Dalton survived. Nichole and her daughters were reunited. Operation Ironclad remained secret. And Montez would spend the rest of his life in prison. So why the trepidation? He relaxed his hands and took a deep breath. He had a role to play as a CIA operations officer. Acting like a nervous schoolboy wouldn't do. Besides, not that long ago he'd actually been a CIA operations officer. Not that long ago? It felt like a lifetime.

They followed Maas's Cherokee into a small parking lot on the right side of the road.

Porras cut the engine. "You've been briefed about procedures inside?"

"We're basically invisible," Harv said.

"That's correct. We're going into camp five. It houses the most dangerous detainees and also the detainees deemed to have the most valuable intelligence. It's a computer-controlled facility. The central mainframe even controls the showers. The man you're visiting doesn't fit the normal profile of who we usually see here."

Neither of them said anything.

"If at any time you have any questions, give me a very slight head nod. I'll pull you aside and address your concern. Clear?"

"Yes, sir," Harv said.

Admiral Maas led them across the street to where several MPs stood guard at tall fencing topped with razor wire. The MPs came to sharp attention at seeing JTF's commanding officer approach. Nathan watched their eyes

grow when they saw a four-star accompanying her, along with JTF's deputy commander and the station commander.

The building beyond was screened from view by green canvas attached to the fencing. They walked down a concrete corridor and found several more MPs guarding the actual entrance to the building. No IDs were needed. And just like that, they were inside.

Nathan was amazed, the place was spotless. In the central core, a glass-enclosed control center had a clear line of sight into all the cell blocks. They walked through a common area containing stainless-steel tables and seats that were bolted down to the polished concrete floor.

Admiral Maas addressed them quietly. "We house one hundred detainees here. We work on a positive reward system. Detainees who cooperate and don't cause problems are moved into less-restrictive accommodations and are given more privileges. Each cell is monitored twenty-four-seven with cameras. Guard response time to any given cell is measured in seconds. Follow me, please." They followed her down a short corridor to a door. "This is one of our interrogation rooms. It has a two-way mirror."

The room looked plain, nothing fancy. A table and some chairs.

"Armed guards are always present during detainee interrogations," Maas said. "And of course, an interpreter. Very few speak English."

Nathan saw a camera mounted on the wall above the two-way mirror.

"Does anyone have any questions at this point?"

Thorny said, "Not a question, a comment. You run a tight ship, Rear Admiral Maas. I'm damned impressed."

"Thank you, General. I never directly interact with the detainees. We try to create a stress-free environment. Having a woman present isn't conducive to that, especially a woman in a command position. Brigadier General Porras is largely responsible for the successes we've had here. He's well versed in the Muslim culture and traditions. All of our people who interact with the detainees are."

"I wish we lived in a world where none of this was necessary," Thorny said.

“Maybe someday, General. This way, please.”

She took them around a corner to another door. Inside, two levels of seating offered eight to ten people ample room to observe the questioning. A small speaker mounted above the mirror allowed the occupants to hear the sessions. Admiral Maas spoke quietly to an MP before closing the door. Not surprisingly, the room became dark. Nathan had a ton of questions, but kept quiet.

“This is a soundproof room, but I recommend we keep our voices low.”

In a way, this felt harder than directly interacting with his former tormentor. Somehow, it seemed...what? Cowardly? No, *cowardly* wasn't the right word. Underhanded? That didn't fit either. He had no reason to be afraid of Montez. Perhaps this was one of those human experiences that words just couldn't describe. He calmed his thoughts and relaxed his hands. Harv gave him a questioning look and he made sure to nod when Porras wasn't looking.

The next ninety seconds stretched into a timeless ether of conflicting feelings.

The door to the interrogation room opened and a rather short and ordinary-looking man—dressed in a bright orange jumpsuit—was escorted in and ordered to sit down. His manacled hands were placed on the table and secured to a steel ring. Shaven to the skin, he showed no signs of the long black ponytail he'd once prized. Five-day-old stubble was all that remained. His eyes appeared sunken and hollow. Lifeless. He looked broken, like a death row inmate.

Suddenly his eyes flicked upward. Montez seemed to look right through the mirror. Of course, in reality, he could only see himself.

Like the image, Monty? Do you see yourself clearly now?

“Is this your man?” Thorny asked, completing the act.

“Yes, General,” Harv said. “He looks different without his hair and the stapled cuts on his face and scalp, but it's definitely Colonel Montez de Oca.”

Nathan stared. Couldn't avert his eyes. Conflicting emotions assaulted him. Surprise. Satisfaction. Anger. Disgust. And unexpectedly, sadness. He actually felt pity. The once-proud man, brilliant in his own way, had been reduced to a common prisoner with a bleak and hopeless future. What goes around comes around? He'd never really believed it until now. Did evil beget evil? How many people never realized it until too late, until facing the ugly moment of truth when they saw themselves for who and what they really were, monsters disguised as human beings.

Nathan winced at the flashback of the savage whipping he'd endured, at the casual way Montez had yawned during the worst of it. He hated what he'd discovered about himself. There was no rationalizing or justifying it. And no amount of psychobabble could explain it. The *other*. Was that vicious part of his soul born that day, or had it always lived inside him?

Maybe it didn't matter.

Now it was Montez's turn.

Nathan wondered if this manacled man sitting before him was evil in the truest sense of the word. Maybe, maybe not. That judgment was reserved for God, not Nathan McBride. But one thing was certain. Montez would have the next forty years to contemplate it.

Holly's words echoed again. *You don't have to fear him anymore.*

Seven simple words with such deep meaning.

CHAPTER 51

The following day, Holly picked Nathan and Harvey up at Lindbergh Field. Thorny had graciously offered his jet for their flight home and refused to accept no for an answer. A C-130 was leaving Gitmo for Andrews that same afternoon and his former commander insisted on taking that jump-seat ride they'd talked about. Besides, you didn't argue with a four-star, especially Thorny.

After an emotional parting with Harv in Rancho Santa Fe, they headed over to La Jolla. His Clairemont house was out of commission until repairs from the firefight with Montez's men could be completed.

His giant schnauzers, Grant and Sherman, were overjoyed to see their alpha human—and the newest pack member.

Too tired to expend any effort, Nathan and Holly warmed up some frozen spaghetti. He broke the rule and gave Grant and Sherman a piece of bread from the dinner table.

They left the dishes in the sink, settled onto the library sofa, and enjoyed a comfortable silence petting the dogs. When they'd first met during the Bridgestone case, they'd taken a two-hour ride into the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Holly had made a favorable impression on Nathan that day, being frank and honest and never needing to engage in small talk to fill voids in the conversation. Something he found refreshing. And rare. Nothing had changed about her since then. Well, not nothing. It pained him to see her walk with a cane. The bombing had aged her unfairly, made her look weak. Life can be so cruel to good people.

When he spoke, his voice was just above a whisper. "Have you ever wondered how different your life would be if, years ago, you'd made a single different choice?"

"You mean a career choice? Since the bombing of my field office, I've thought about it a lot."

"Are you where you want to be?"

"Yes. Are you?"

“The pivotal choice in my life was joining the Marine Corps. It sounds clichéd, but I needed to be my own man.”

“Your father didn’t approve?”

“He never believed I was serious about the Corps as a career. But I was, Holly. I loved it. I enjoyed the structure and stability. The sense of family. I think I’m genetically predisposed to the military. When I look back on it, it was the first time in my life I’d been truly happy. I didn’t want to do anything else.”

“If you had it to do all over again, would you make the same choice?”

“That’s what I’ve been struggling with. My gut says yes. But what if, on my twenty-second birthday, I *hadn’t* walked into the recruiter’s office and applied for OCS? What if I’d never become a sniper? Not many officers become scout snipers. Would I’ve still been recruited by the CIA and become an operations officer? The answer scares me.”

“Why?”

“Because deep down, what I did for a living?” He put a hand on his chest. “It’s who I am.”

“Aren’t you being unfair to yourself? I mean, just because you—”

“Killed people? I had a job to do. We did, Harv and I. There’s no sugarcoating it. It’s what we did. And we were really good. We took pride in our missions, in getting the job done. But it’s hard to feel good about killing people. I’ve really struggled with it over the years. Harv too.”

“The fact that you’re having this inner debate speaks volumes about you. I’d be concerned if you *didn’t* question it.”

“I appreciate you saying that.”

“I mean it.”

“I know you do.” He lapsed into a long silence. “Seeing Montez in Gitmo...I felt pity for him.”

“And that surprises you? Not me. I knew in my heart what kind of a man you were when you tossed the knife aside.”

“I’m glad you were there.” He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

“Hey, you. Upstairs. Now.”

Holly rinsed the plates and put them in the dishwasher while Grant and

Sherman studied her every move. “You’re guys are good company.” She pulled a couple of cheese sticks from the refrigerator and scored some points.

Half an hour later, she went upstairs to check on Nathan. With the dogs at her side, she stopped at his bedroom door.

What she saw brought a smile.

For there lay Nathan McBride—sleeping soundly—*in his bed*.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photograph by Carla Martinez, 2010

A native of San Diego, Andrew Peterson won his first pellet gun shooting competition at a young age, launching an award-winning competitive career in marksmanship and eventually earning the classification of Master in the NRA's High Power Rifle ranking system. A trained architect, he began writing fiction in 1990 and sold his first short story, "Mr. Haggarty's Stop," to *San Diego Writers Monthly* two years later. His Nathan McBride novels have allowed him the opportunity to visit veterans' hospitals around the country, and he has donated more than two thousand books to wounded warriors and troops serving overseas. He and his wife, Carla, live in Monterey County, California.

Visit Andrew's website at www.andrewpeterson.com, and follow him on Twitter at [@APetersonNovels](https://twitter.com/APetersonNovels), and on Facebook at www.facebook.com/Andrew.Peterson.Author.