



AMERICAN MUTT

SCOTT FALCON

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AMERICAN MUTT

SCOTT FALCON

Rand  **Wilde**

American Mutt, a novel
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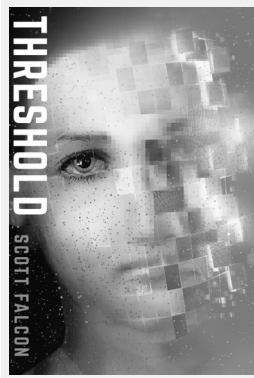
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The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.

— Thomas Jefferson

1. SUNLIGHT

The *Blood of Tyrants*... was embossed on the card, followed by the number 38. The team leader picked up the card from the table. "Tonight," he said, his eyes absorbing the words, absorbing their meaning and weight, absorbing the end of one type of life and the beginning of another. If there would be another after tonight.

He felt his heart thump against his rib cage—closed his eyes, centering himself—and exhaled a breath of resolve. *A righteous passage? A threshold to cross. A christening of sorts. But no God will be there to save us. Not tonight.*

A slight nod, then an I'm-good-with-that wry smile. He placed the card back on the table and checked the magazine in his SIG Sauer, a 9mm with an anchor logo on the side. He checked the targeting of the green laser attached to the light rail, then holstered the weapon.

Tonight my training will have to be enough because tonight we will commit federal crimes.

A few blocks away, a white van drove through the upper-middle-class suburban neighborhood.

The leader placed a breathable synthetic skin hood over his head, his smile disappearing behind the veil. The hood was

designed to fit his face perfectly with cut-outs for his eyes, nasal passages, mouth and ear cavities. The breathable hood overlapped the suit that covered his entire body, including his fingers and toes. No trace evidence to be left.

An eight-man crew stood behind the leader, methodically covering their second skins with black tactical clothing, including gloves and boots with smooth rubber soles. Once dressed, the men affixed gear belts with extra magazines to their waists, attached their headsets, and tested the comm systems. They slammed magazines holding composite bullets into their BCM RECCE-16 dark bronze carbines and slung the rifles over their backs.

“Nathan Control, this is Gadsden One. Ready for vitals check. Over,” the leader said.

“Read you Gadsden One. Checking vitals,” Nathan Control confirmed.

An extended wheelbase black van was parked on a Washington, D.C. residential street with its headlights off. Inside the van, computer monitors displayed the vitals of eighteen operators active in the field—heart rates, blood pressures, oxygen levels. At the top of the computer screen, the names of the teams: *Gadsden* and *Knowlton*.

“Vitals confirmed, Gadsden Team. Vitals confirmed, Knowlton Team,” Nathan Control said over the comm.

“Copy,” the team leader said, then paused, hearing a vehicle outside. He held up a closed fist, and all the men froze.

The moon was full but muted behind cloud cover, dark was the night. Headlights of the approaching van penetrated the mist, shimmering beams reflecting off the rolling and churning moist night air. The van slowed in front of the stucco box house. The engine stopped, the headlights remained on, piercing light into the gap of the living room shutters. On both sides of the van was a logo: *J.P. Jones Painters*. Two men wearing white jumpsuits were inside.

The leader pointed to two of his men, then to the hallway, and the men left the room through the arched doorway, then moved to each side of the darkened living room window. One man inched open a wooden shutter, just enough to see the two dragon eyes of the van intruding.

Two men in jumpsuits got out of the van, looked over the house, then opened the rear cargo door.

The leader motioned to the six remaining men, who filed out of the room and moved through the house.

Outside a clatter of metal on metal, the men in jumpsuits removed something from the van.

Inside, the two men in the living room drew their carbines to ready and racked the bolts. They exhaled long and slow. The leader and his men made their way to a door off the kitchen, entered the three-car garage and got into three black SUVs.

The men in jumpsuits carried toolboxes from the back of the van and approached the front door. The electric motors of the three-bay garage doors hummed, and the doors opened. The men in jumpsuits stopped and put down their toolboxes.

Inside, the two men slid from the living room window to the front door. One man held the doorknob. The other man stood five feet away and leveled his carbine. They listened.

The big-block engines of the SUVs turned over and growled. The white reverse lights of SUVs illuminated. Outside, the men in jumpsuits reacted to the noise and turned toward the garage. The man at the front door counted down: three—two—one. He swung open the front door. The men in jumpsuits snapped their heads toward the door and stuck up their hands.

“Lower the RECCE, you’re violating my civil rights,” one of the men in jumpsuits barked.

“Yeah, mine too,” the other man added.

“B-Team doesn’t have fucking rights. Where’s your headset?” the man holding the carbine said.

“Truck. We’re just painters tonight, remember?”

“Get your comm on now. Then paint every square inch of this place. No prints left,” the man at the front door said. “Command is mobile now.”

“Copy that,” the reluctant painter said.

The three black SUVs moved through the neighborhood, then veered off in different directions into the murk.

Former Speakers of the House of Representatives were members of the “cot club.” The name described politicians who bedded down on a cot in their offices in the Longworth House Office Building every night while the House was in session. There was a quasi-palatial official suite in the Capitol, but some complained it reeked of cigarette smoke from a prior inhabitant. The current Speaker, Susan Arnold, had no intention of joining the cot club. She lived in a 7,350 square-foot Federal-style red brick on 31st street in the Georgetown section of Washington D.C. Five bedrooms and bathrooms, thick panel solid timber hardwood floors, a lower level gym, theater, and a wine cellar.

It was 2:45 a.m. when the operator in the back of the black SUV said, “Loudspeaker quiet,” a confirmation that the home security system guarding the Speaker of the House had been successfully hacked.

“Primary out route one confirmed Gadsden One. Secondary out route also confirmed,” Nathan Control said.

“Out routes confirmed Nathan,” Gadsden One said. “Let justice be done though the heavens fall,” he said to himself.

The rear of the mobile command truck was wall-to-wall communications and surveillance equipment. A computer monitor displayed a layout of the residence. Thermal images of warm bodies glowed hot on the second floor.

“Adult thermals second floor, Gadsden One,” Nathan Control said.

“Copy, Nathan. Two thermals, second floor,” Gadsden One confirmed.

The first three-man team of commandos—or operators, as they referred to themselves—Gadsden One, Two and Three, entered the residence from the rear.

That first step inside, a chasm crossed, the first of several federal crimes that would take place on this night nearly simultaneously.

Their entry was swift and silent and smooth—hand signals—not a word was said. Once inside, Gadsden One whispered into his comm, “Nathan, be advised, Gadsden One, Two, Three, internal on target.”

“Penetration of residence confirmed, Gadsden One, Zero time, mark,” Nathan Control said over the comm.

“Zero time confirmed,” Gadsden One replied.

The operators wore heads-up displays that allowed them to see their locations within three-dimensional blueprints of the residence. They saw two adults on the second floor in a prone position, likely asleep in bed. The team proceeded through the thirty-foot-long kitchen; white shaker cabinets, brass knobs and handles, a large slate gray granite island, Thermador stainless steel appliances. One operator walked through the dining room, glanced once at the oversized painting of Jacqueline Kennedy above the fireplace, and opened the front door. Operators Gadsden Four, Five, and Six entered the residence.

Willows surrounded the back yard. A lush grassy mound in the center of the yard glistened in the moonlight. On the mound stood Gadsden Seven. His two partners, Gadsden Eight and Nine, staked out the front of the residence.

Inside the residence, Gadsden operators One through Six proceeded up the staircase to the second floor, one slight creak of a wooden stair, then another, at each sound, the team froze and listened. The Speaker, still asleep, turned to her side but did not wake. Gadsden One, Two and Three entered the Speaker’s bedroom, and without hesitation, taped the mouths of the Speaker

and her husband with duct tape. As the Speaker and her husband lurched from their beds, the needles found their arteries, injecting a solution that caused unconsciousness in seconds. The operators removed a black body bag from a backpack.

Gadsden Three opened the Speaker's left eye. Gadsden Two removed a device from his tactical vest and scanned the eye. In the Command truck, a computer monitor displayed an image of the Speaker's pupil. Gadsden Three removed a fingerprint scanner from his vest and scanned the Speaker's thumb. Another monitor displayed the thumbprint.

"Susan Arnold confirmed, Gadsden One. Proceed Arnold transport. Repeat. Proceed Arnold transport."

"Copy, Nathan. Proceeding with transport, over."

The operators slipped the Speaker into the body bag.

"Ninety seconds counting," Nathan Control said over the comm.

"Copy," Gadsden One said.

The men carried the Speaker out of the bedroom.

"Time for SSE, Nathan?" Gadsden One said.

"Negative on SSE, Gadsden One. Complete transport and exit residence."

"Copy."

The extraction from the Speaker's bedroom took two minutes. An operator lagged behind. From his backpack, he removed what looked like a mini leaf blower connected to a small canister. He turned it on and sprayed the room with a cloud of fine dust. The team moved the body bag through the kitchen to the back door. Gadsden One paused, removed the calling card from his pocket and placed it on the kitchen island. *The Blood of Tyrants* - 38

Minutes earlier, several blocks away in the Foxhall neighborhood of Washington, D.C., the landscaping lights went dark in the backyard of a renovated 6,350 square-foot colonial. Heinrich Tenner

snored deeply, long labored inhaled and garbled exhaled. His penchant for Davidoff cigarettes had given him a low-grade case of emphysema but his gold Dunhill lighter still stood tall on his nightstand next to his bed like the trusty companion it was. His wife lay next to him wearing earmuffs. The Knowlton team stood at ready over the bed and counted down by fingers: three—two—one—go. The duct tape went on, and the needles plunged into the carotids. After a few seconds of struggle, all was quiet, and the team rolled the governor of the World Bank into the body bag. On his kitchen counter lay another calling card: *Blood of Tyrants - \$*.

Across the country, the estate on Harcross Road in Woodside, California was one of the largest properties available on the San Francisco Peninsula. The marketing brochure in the kitchen boasted its *exceptionally rare 32 acres, minutes to Menlo Country Club, award-winning formal gardens* (specific awards not noted), *surrounded by rolling grassy hills with native oaks and redwoods, orchards, and potential for cattle or horses*.

The circa 1933 Pennsylvania Tudor consisted of a 7-bedroom main residence, a secluded oversized pool, and a multi-room pool house. On the market for a cool 21 mil. Apparently, the executive vice president of the largest social media company on the planet, Glenn Woo, wanted to move uptown to posh Pacific Heights.

The rolling grassy hills surrounding the property proved useful to the nine special operators of the Tallmadge Team. Minutes earlier, they had approached the main house at the exact time of the abductions of the speaker and governor. The tech-exec was a light sleeper and sat up in bed. The men in black were on him within two syllables, which sounded something like, "What the." Remaining behind in his kitchen was another calling card: *Blood of Tyrants - METHOD*.

Lawrence Brenton served several years in Congress before he was defeated by a younger Democrat, an aggressive Ivy leaguer, left of his left, which was far left. So be it, he became a wealthy lobbyist. Political insiders on the hill considered him to be one of the leading experts on state legislatures, for which expertise he gained the nickname Local Larry. But some insiders thought his curriculum vitae to be odd. What was an expert of small local politics doing in D.C. as a multi-million-dollar lobbyist, and who was paying him?

Local Larry was an old school, cigar smoke closed door meetings with power brokers kind of guy. But he liked to blow town twice a month, flying private of course, to his contemporary post-and-beam on the ocean in Newport Beach, California. It was there the midnight ramblers dressed in black, the Revere Team, snatched Local Larry, who had fallen asleep on his living room couch. The operators entered from the beach. Another card was left behind: *Blood of Tyrants - Convention*.

Attack dog pundit faux news anchor, Donald Sturitz, was in the middle of his five-year contract, the largest deal CNN made to date. More rancor than anchor, Sturitz became the Sean Hannity of the left. While Hannity split time on his show praising his conservative politic favorites and berating those on the left, Sturitz praised no one and became the master of the dark attack, king of gutter political ranting, and his base audience loved him for it. Sturitz created an edge, an element of humor Hannity lacked. Sturitz relished the inflicting, the rusty dull blade that needed force to go deep. He taunted, he ridiculed, he derided. Only politicians with the thickest of skins dared appear on his 7 p.m. prime-time hour.

CNN juggled the onslaught of censure issues and slander lawsuits, but the ratings kept rising for his show, and with them, ad revenue. His view of America was dark, darker, the darkest.

Sick dark. He scorned, he mocked, and he divided, all with his screechy, shriekish laugh. The devil on crack. Sardonic Don. Don Rickles on Oxy, he was sarcastic, satiric, and ironic. He became known as Donic.

In the last year, Donic had become paranoid, noticeable if you watched his show, daily. There had been three attempts on his life. One Southern nut case packing an old Colt .45 revolver screamed Confederate Army slogans while he unloaded at Sturitz on Columbus Circle in broad daylight. A poor shot evidently, the hot dog vendor with a flesh wound, but Sturitz was unharmed. Another attempt, this one by an Angel Dad, who beat Sturitz good and bloody outside the Time Warner Center. Sturitz stayed overnight at Mount Sinai. The attack only made Sturitz more brazen on the air. The third attack was a rumor within the CNN New York office. No police report. Sturitz missed three shows.

Two bodyguards protecting Sturitz's brownstone in the Upper West Side was the norm. Part of his CNN contract. The black van was parked one block away. Inside the van, aerial footage from the drone circling over the residence displayed on the operator's pad. The thermal infrared camera on the drone only detected a single guard outside. Heat signatures inside the residence revealed one adult female and one adult male lying prone in different bedrooms, indicating a high probability of the target being present.

"Single guard," Ethan One said into his headset. "Alarm disable confirmed. Targets separate rooms."

"Why one guard?" Ethan Two said.

"Unknown," another operator responded. Hold for further."

"Copy."

Outside the brownstone, the Ethan Team exited the van. Ethan Seven, dressed in a trench coat, approached the guard and tipped his hat. The guard nodded at Ethan Seven as the dart found his neck. The guard collapsed, Ethan Seven caught the guard's limp body, and pulled him into the bushes.

Six Ethan operators stood in the hallway on the second floor of

the residence. Ethan Four, Five and Six were outside the bedroom door of the female non-target. The other team, Ethan One, Two and Three, were thirty feet down the hallway at the other bedroom door. Ethan One nodded, Ethan Four nodded back, then the finger count: three—two. The operators rushed through the bedroom doors. The pundit's wife had no time to react. She was neutralized according to plan. Neutralized, not dead.

Ethan One saw the king-size bed was made, not slept in... but on. On the bed was one of Sturitz's security guards, AR-15 at his side. The team paused for half a beat. That was too much. The guard rolled off the bed and swung his rifle around toward Ethan One, who was on him in a flash, but not before the guard got off four rounds from the rifle on full auto—crack, crack, crack, crack—the rounds shredding the plaster on the wall and ceiling.

Ethan Two swung his carbine like a baseball bat into the side of the guard's head, blunt force, out cold. The guard rag-dolled to the floor.

"We gotta Charlie Foxtrot. Negative on target. Security guard down," Ethan One said into his headset.

"Abort," came over the comm.

The Ethan Teams ran down the stairs and exited the side door of the residence. They hugged the perimeter wall. The van screeched to a halt out front. The men jumped in the rear of the van, and it sped away, turned a corner, pulled over then stopped.

"Ethan Team, continue to proceed to evac. Stand by," Nathan Control Two commanded.

Breathing hard in the back of the van, Ethan Team waited.

"Ethan Team. A new twenty. Brownstone. Target still possible at new twenty. Stand by."

"Should we full abort, Nathan?" Ethan One said.

"Stand by, Ethan One."

Fifteen minutes later, Ethan Seven navigated the drone until it displayed the residences on each side of 3 Sutton Place. Through the speaker on the pad broadcasting audio from the drone, a dog barked.

“Negative lights on adjacent. Dog barking,” Ethan Three said.

“Proceed to alt twenty. Repeat, proceed to alt twenty. Target at second location,” Nathan Control Two said over the comm.

Several blocks away was the brownstone of Madeline Cironnia, former A-list actress. The traffic jam on her face of lift-nip-tucks piled up into an under-construction zone. Her latest offers had been roles to play variations of aging Zoloff queens for Netflix pilots, no acting required.

The man standing guard outside the Cironnia brownstone was a tenured CNN security guard. The man’s body-guarding skills had peaked years prior, but he was trusted with many company secrets, embarrassments that never saw the light of day. Inside, asleep in the master bedroom, was the man’s boss, Donald Sturitz.

Madeline apparently had not gone to bed yet, a bout of insomnia fueled by what was in the mirror at the edge of the pink granite countertop in the kitchen. Her pupils dilated even further when she whipped around, negligee twirling, and stared at the foreboding military insurgents in her kitchen. Ethan Four moved like a cat, covered her mouth, and Ethan Five delivered the just-a-slight-prick. The intruders gently laid her down on the kitchen floor. Ethan Five pulled her negligee down to cover her waist.

Sturitz’s bodyguard was milling around smoking a cigarette when the man in the trench coat and hat distracted him. The card on the kitchen island; *Blood of Tyrants - CUDA*.

Four of the five public figures had at least one thing in common: recent investigative exposés asserting some level of corruption—political, journalistic or corporate. The reports revealed evidence no other media outlet had discovered or knew existed. The reports revealed hard evidence. Evidence that came from the public figures’ own confidential files or those of their cronies. Sources unnamed. Journalists and pundits stated that evidence presented in the exposés was hacked, stolen, or both. Attribution?

Russia, China, other nation-states, our own government?
Unknown. What was known was that the exposés were published
by a single media outlet, the controversial investigative journalist
website.

PublicFigure.com

CHAPTER 2

It was a perfect fall morning at the Ventura Coastal Little League Field. This was fall ball. The Mediterranean climate of Southern California meant baseball could be played any time of year. Fall ball was a three-month stretch of league play, kind of a bonus time in addition to the conventional spring baseball season for the little guys.

The players were scattered around practicing hitting, running, fielding, throwing and pitching on this very special field. This field, this ballpark, was like no other. Millions had been spent on the construction of these hallowed baseball grounds, and all from a single donor. That donor had intended to make it the best of the best, a miniaturized version of Wrigley Field, complete with brick walls, ivy and the hand-operated scoreboard in center. The kids loved the park and it made them feel special.

Observing the antics was a man wearing sunglasses and a hoodie. He sat in the top row in the farthest left seat of the bleachers along the third base line. He lifted his head and inhaled deeply, taking in the waft of fresh-cut grass that brought him back to an earlier Americana time and place. The hooded man smiled as he felt something. That sense of someone watching him. A sense he'd honed years ago. He scanned the field again. An old

man standing inside the third base line assisting with the day's activities was staring at him.

The old man was Satchel, in his seventies or eighties...or who knew. No one knew if Satchel was his real name, but when questioned about the origin of his name, Satchel said, "Cuz I ain't playing no trumpet like Satchmo, so they dun called me Satchel. I gots a satchel full of pitches, ya never knows what's comin' out."

Satchel stepped over the third-base line. He was smiling broadly at the man with the hoodie in the stands. It was a smile of acknowledgment. One of gratitude. Mutual respect. The man in the stands smiled back. Of course he did. Satchel was one of his favorite people.

From his perched view in the stands, the hooded man's attention turned to the parking lot on the far side of the field. An SUV pulled up, and a woman got out. She helped a boy out of the back seat. The hooded man removed a pair of small binoculars from his jacket and glassed the woman. She was in her late twenties, auburn hair, deep tan, athletic, wearing a stocking cap and sunglasses. The hooded man tracked her as she made her way to the registration table, handed in her paperwork, hugged the boy, walked back to her truck and left.

The stands were packed with parents, and the hooded man made way to allow a woman to sit next to him, the last available open seat.

"Thanks," the woman said. "Which one is yours?"

"Oh, I don't have a boy here," the hooded man said. "Just like watching. Helps me think."

The woman smiled, an I-don't-really-get-that-but-I'll-be-polite smile.

The hooded man turned to the sound of commotion on the ground. A heavily tattooed man, early thirties, lock-gripped a young boy's arm, and they were arguing. A league volunteer, a woman, approached them.

"Sir, you don't have to take it out on your son," the volunteer said.

A quick inhale, and the tattooed man said, "This here is a public park, no?... chamaca. Parks be free, for res-si-dents, si?"

"Yes, sir, the park is free, but there's a fee for all players to be in the fall ball league. Uniforms and such," the woman said, shuffling back a half step.

The volunteer turned and looked up to the hooded man sitting in the stands to see if he was watching. He was and he rose, making his way down the stands. He placed a phone to his ear, acting like he was making a phone call, and took a picture of the tattooed man below him, who did not catch the action.

The tattooed man grabbed the boy by the collar and shoved him towards the parking lot.

The hooded man reached ground level and stepped through the archway that led to the bullpen area behind the dugout. He approached the volunteer and placed a hand on her shoulder, an it's-okay-let-me-deal-with-this pat.

Jackson Rand, drew back his hoodie and removed his sunglasses. Jackson was six-foot-one, mixed-race, mid-length flowing dark hair, early thirties, athletically fit with a grizzled-more-than-the-age face, and small scars on his forehead, cheek and chin.

The tattooed man snorted like a bull about to charge. "You a cop, homie?"

Jackson showed no emotion. "Is there an issue?" he said.

"No issue for you, maricón."

"I was just explaining to the gentleman about the Little League fee," the volunteer said.

"This your son?" Jackson asked.

"Ain't no bastard, who the fuck're you?"

Jackson noticed an MS on his neck. "What's your name, son?"

"Tony," the boy said.

"Hey, Tony." Jackson high-fived him. "You wanna play some baseball today?"

The tattooed man gripped the boy's collar.

Jackson locked eyes with tattoo man for a fraction of a second.

Tattoo man's head rocked back, a look of pent-up rage. He took his hand off the boy's collar, shifted his stance. Jackson smiled and kneeled in front of the boy.

"Tony, what position do ya like best?"

"Catcher," Tony said.

"Catcher?" Tony nodded. "Do you know about the league promotion we got going today? Kinda a deferred payment deal for all catchers. How's that sound, Tony?"

The boy smiled and looked up at the tattooed man.

"Part of your tax, homie," the tattooed man said, taking a half step with his lead foot, towering over Jackson.

Jackson rose to his feet in a slow, deliberate move, ending inches from the tattooed man's face, passed Tony's hand to the volunteer.

"Nice to meet you, Tony. Let's get you registered," the volunteer said.

"Deferred payment," Jackson said. "You pay later."

"Suck my dick, marrano." The tattooed man broke off the stare and walked away. Jackson's shoulders loosened slightly, a slight exhale, his silent DEFCON ratcheting down a notch.

Jackson's cellphone rang. "Hey, Tina."

With panic in her voice, Tina said, "We gotta major problem here. Did you see the news?"

The historic and quaint downtown area of small-town-feel Ventura, California used to be post-card beautiful and included the San Buenaventura Mission founded in 1782, the Bank of Italy building with its columns and gargoyles, and the classic white stone City Hall, built in 1912 and the birthplace of the Perry Mason novels. The lamppost-lit Main Street was an eclectic mix of architecture, including Victorian, Neoclassical, mission-style, Craftsman, Cape Cod, Mediterranean architecture and more. Main Street featured locally owned bars, pubs, shops, thrift stores,

and antique stores—no chain-stores or fast food, a real throwback in time.

In 2015, *Men's Journal* called it the best place to live in America, *the sleepy city of 106,000 located midway between Santa Barbara and Malibu, remains refreshingly unpolished, like a 1961 Ford pick-up that's been well kept*. The city used to be all those, except now in place of the vintage truck were what had become known as *sanc-tees*, sanctuary tents for the homeless. The despair of Los Angeles had moved north.

Toward the east end of Main Street sat an old Victorian house that had been converted into offices. The top floor offices looked over the Pacific and the Channel Islands. The eastern-facing windows had a direct view of the colorful mix of the Main Street thrift store shopping crowd who were navigating the encampments. At night that view would change to the robust nightlife raucous rock-and-roller partying crowd bouncing off the half-light zombies buzzed on one street-grade intoxicant or another.

The house was now the headquarters for an Internet-based news organization that was notorious for breaking stories about political corruption, sources undisclosed. The website already had ruined the political career of several demagogues of both parties, and was recently blamed for the suicide of a congressman in the 28th District of California after it published evidence of the fabrication of evidence to implicate a political opponent in a phony criminal case.

The site's founder was also under investigation for releasing what some of his critics claimed was classified information. Rumors of illegal wiretapping by his confederates also swirled, and he had been implicated in plots to steal documents from private residences—documents that ended up on his website, though no charges were filed due to lack of hard evidence. The site had risen quickly in readership, second only to Drudge, and put WikiLeaks to shame in terms of scoops. That site was Public-Figure.com. Its founder was Jackson Rand.

The bullpen, a tightly packed area of cubicles and worksta-

tions, was put together using Herman Miller Resolve workstations that featured organic-styled boomerang-shaped desks, adjustable partitions and domed canopies on casters. The designers of the systems intended to foster *a more naturally human experience of work by enabling people to feel comfortable, valued, and connected in their workspaces*. Rand's web developers weren't sure about any of that, but they dug the open-air feeling and look. Scattered around the bullpen were flat-screens displaying major news stations, FOX, CNN, Fox Business, BBC, and others.

Earlier that morning, the editors were banging away on their keyboards on a day like any other, when, within seconds of each other, the news stations went into alert mode. On Fox, the screen flashed a *Fox News Alert*, and the programming cut to reporter Catherine Hanson, fortyish, dark short hair, who was covering the Capitol in Washington, D.C. "We are getting reports just now that, days before a controversial vote on raising the debt ceiling, a procedure crucial to avoid a default on the monstrous national debt, the Speaker has not entered the Capitol today and has not been reachable. Our sources are reporting that a security detail was dispatched pre-dawn to the residence of the Speaker in Georgetown. I believe we have our Michael Foster in front of the residence. Michael, can you hear me?"

Across the street from the home of the Speaker, Fox reporter Michael Foster, mid-thirties, black, was adjusting his earpiece. Behind him were a dozen government vehicles, two FBI field office evidence response team trucks, an FBI mobile Command Center vehicle, and several Capitol Police cars. The home was barricaded with yellow crime scene tape, and police were moving in and out of the residence rapidly.

"Yes, Catherine. As you can see behind me, something has happened here. We have an active crime scene. My sources inside the Capitol Police are telling me that the Speaker is missing and there may have been foul play of some kind," Foster said.

"Missing? Uh, what does that mean exactly, Michael?"

"Well, from what I was told, her husband was awakened by

Capitol Police, who somehow entered the residence. Mr. Arnold was very groggy, and once lucid, told the police that men entered his bedroom in the middle of the night."

"Yes, Michael stand by. We are getting a report that the Capitol Police are announcing now, in a short statement, that they believe the Speaker of the House was abducted from her residence sometime last night and further details will be available at a press briefing shortly. And this comes, of course, just three weeks from the presidential election. A shocking development," Catherine Hanson said.

Tina Takata, half Asian, half Caucasian, senior editor for PublicFigure, stood motionless in the center of the bullpen, her eyes bouncing from one newscast to the next. She yelled out to her staff, "Okay, new headline. Add link to full bio of Arnold too. Let's go, people."

The writers and developers in the PublicFigure bullpen went into overdrive, and within minutes, a photograph of the Speaker appeared on the home page of the website, with a link to her extensive biography.

"Jesus, she's on our Sunlight List," a developer said.

"No shit," another writer said. "Whatta we have on her that we haven't cleared for publication yet?"

Jackson Rand stormed through the front door.

"Tina, do you have her on the home page yet?" Jackson said.

"It's up," Tina said.

"I'm gonna tweak the home page real quick, so save it, and hold up editing, I'm on point. Come see me if you get more details."

Jackson walked into his workspace that was more like a computer lab than an office, with a mix of television monitors and computer screens stacked high and wide. Bookshelves covered the wall space. On a shelf in front of the books was an old baseball glove, a Wilson A2000, well worn. A small frame on another shelf held a photograph of Keith Richards. Next to the photo was a bottle of Bracero Anejo tequila, half full, and next to it, a small

metal trident pin also known as the Budweiser. On the floor near the corner were two used chrome Supertrapp exhaust pipes and a motorcycle helmet. Jackson sat down in his Aeron chair and, in a flurry of keystrokes on his mechanical keyboard, brought up the HTML editing screen for the home page and started making changes.

Tina rushed in. "We're going to be people of interest number one by the Feds, the Secret Service, DOJ and who knows what the hell else. How are we going to protect our sources and the newest stuff on the Speaker?"

"Who's our source on her exposé?" Jackson said.

"You know. The deep anon."

"So that's what we'll tell them."

"They'll go after another contempt charge," Tina said.

"Take care of my dog while I'm gone."

"That's not funny. Should I call the lawyer?"

"I already did."

The west end of Ventura has been mostly Hispanic since the mid-1860s. A mishmash of single-story quasi-industrial block and stucco structures, machine shops and dilapidated buildings in need of repair. Next to a family-owned Mexican cafe was a building that housed a welding business before it failed.

To keep the homeless out, the owner surrounded the building with a chain-link fence and boarded up the windows with plywood. It was dark and damp inside the old welding shop; rusted machines littered the space and cobwebs hung down from the rafters. Birds found their way in and fluttered around until they escaped or dropped dead.

Spider webs enshrouded a doorway adjacent to the main floor area that led to a small office. An old dented battleship-gray metal desk sat in the center of the office room, rusting, layers of dust

coating it. An old Coca-Cola machine stood against the wall, long past any functionality.

Next to the machine was a three-foot-square metal plate on the floor with eyelets to hold padlocks. The plate concealed a wobbly staircase that led down to a basement. A basement, any basement, was rare in California due to their propensity to flood. The basement was ten-by-fifteen feet, walls of cinder block, cellar darkness. Darkness until the wall switch was flipped and the basement lit up like daylight in the desert. There was electrical power and lots of it. The welding operation had beefed up the electrical panel to power heavy equipment on the main floor, and it was that panel that Cinder Stowe had modified to power what has hidden in this cavernous enclave. Racks of computer servers.

Cinder, the woman Jackson had viewed through the binoculars at the ball field, sat in the middle of her horse-shoe configuration of technology, computer screens surrounding her. All of her machines routed to an array of servers across the planet. Any trace of the connections led to anonymous servers in Finland. At the end of each session, the work files were saved on the dark web, encrypted of course, and purged from local hard drives through a variety of proprietary bleaching processes. Her clandestine research, all of her communications, and black-hat hacking originating in this dark refuge, were untraceable.

Red Nick was Cinder's call sign on the dark web. Most thought it was a play on the term Red Neck, a guy named Nick who was from the South. Or a far-left radical named Nick who loved the irony. It was a play on her name spelled backward, Rednic. Cloaked in anonymity, Red Nick ran a deep web-based network of researchers and hackers located in several countries. She paid them in Bitcoins. Red Nick became a thing of dark web legend.

Fearing that Jackson Rand would connect her dots someday, she communicated to the PublicFigure editorial team as Deep Anon. Red Nick-Rednic-Deep Anon-Cinder Stowe was an infor-

mation broker. A very special information broker. A sleuth information broker that could manage black hats.

Cinder lived for the rush. The max adrenaline main-line rush, the no-one-could-have-pulled-this-off-but-me rush, when the source's work product made international news, and a corrupt CEO or a celebrity pedophile or a banker or a Congressperson or despot was exposed and hauled away in handcuffs. Which to her chagrin, was a rare occurrence even though corruption was at an all-time high since the United States became a one-party system welfare state.

There was the rush, the justice-served rush, and then there was the money. Cinder was well-paid for her unique services. She paid her black hats exorbitant fees in turn, which was why they did what they did. So there was the rush and the money. The money from her highest paying and most consistent client. The website known as *The Famous*, *The Infamous*, and *The Notorious*—*PublicFigure.com*.

But under the cool-in-control demeanor coupled with a cold and calculating math mind, was something else. Behind the hazel eyes, a fire burned, a torch of an unquieted need. The need for revenge. The bittersweet taste of revenge yet to pass her lips, yet to be consumed, digested, and dissolved. She carried the burden of a nagging secret and every day repeated the same mantra. *Someday soon*.

Today's justice-served work would have to wait. On the five screens surrounding Cinder were data sets for five individuals. Commissioned work. Works in progress. Susan Arnold, Heinrich Tenner, Glenn Woo, Donald Sturitz, and Lawrence Brenton. When the news flashed on one of her screens about the disappearance of the Speaker of the House, Cinder quickly turned up the volume and sat up in her chair.

The coverage of the disappearance of the Speaker was interrupted with a news alert about the disappearance of Donald Sturitz, the CNN pundit. Cinder swallowed—tried to swallow—her throat tightened, her saliva turned to cement, hardened on the

way down, and plowed into her intestines like a wrecking ball. She grabbed the top of the monitor with both hands, her eyes intense, absorbing every word.

She slammed back into the chair and typed furiously, bringing up article after article from news sites about the kidnappings. She switched to the dark web, typing in dozens of search terms, including *Speaker of the House, Susan Arnold*, and *Donald Sturitz*. She was looking for chatter within the last hour.

She went into terminate-local-mode: Save all data to encrypted cloud system—local deletion—bleach drives—disconnect external hard drives and remove. She opened a pilot's suitcase and threw in dozens of static flash drives, flipped open the sides of the computer cases and extracted all the RAM modules and hard drives.

She powered down all of the computers. In the pilot's case went three laptops and six satellite phones. She lifted the latch on a rusty water heater in the corner, revealing a safe. She spun the dial of the combination lock with finesse and opened the safe door. She was in execution mode now. Flat out. Methodical. Focused.

She removed three stacks of one-hundred-dollar bills, several dozen Krugerrand coins, and several flash drives. She threw all the items in the suitcase and closed it. Remaining in the safe were a pistol and ten magazines. She removed the gun and placed it on the desk. From a desk drawer, she removed a Kydex holster, slipped it on her belt, then holstered her weapon.

She put on a Safari-type jacket and placed the magazines in the lower bellowed pockets. She pulled up the handle on the suitcase, stood it upright, and rolled it away from the computer setup. She sprayed lighter fluid on the keyboards, chairs, and desk, then lit them on fire.

She pulled the suitcase up the stairs, rolled it out of the building to her old Range Rover, and placed it in the trunk area, then returned to the cellar and doused the flames with a fire extinguisher.

Once the fire was out, Cinder left the building and drove away. She kept her Range Rover at the speed limit and proceeded along Main Street through downtown Ventura. She glanced at the PublicFigure building and kept going, continuing past the West Main street area, the tents of the illegals and the aimless and the hopeless. Dodging the staggerers; the hungry, the high, the homeless. She flipped news stations in rapid-fire.

A reporter with another alert blurted, "Yeah, Bret, I'm in Washington, outside the residence of Heinrich Tenner, the current Governor of the World Bank, and our sources here tell us he was taken in the middle of the night as well. There is now no doubt that some type of coordinated attack, or kidnapping, uh, I should say we have no information at this time that any of these victims were murdered, uh, it seems they have been extracted from their homes at about the same time."

Cinder hit the brakes. She saw a car closing in from behind, pulled over, and stopped. Breathing heavy, her hand darted to her waist, feeling the butt of the pistol. An instinctive move to make sure it was still there. The car passed her. She rolled down the window and coughed, then spat out the window.

The Range Rover pulled into the parking lot of the Little League park. Casey, her son, came running up.

"Hey Mom, you're early, but it's okay, my tryout is over. I did good," Casey said. The ten-year-old ran up and hugged Cinder.

"Can we go to Ben and Jerry's like you said?"

"We're going on a little adventure."

"Again?"

CHAPTER 3

The editors and web developers stood around a single television screen in the bullpen of the PublicFigure offices, watching the news. Another *Fox News Alert* flashed, and the reporting cut back to Catherine Hanson.

Jackson watched the news with one foot upon his desk. His gaze was elsewhere, not on the screens, distant, his phones kept ringing. He held a baseball in his hands and was tossing it back and forth. The reports on his monitors continued... "These may be unrelated events, but it kinda reminds me of the initial plane report on 9/11, then we knew," Catherine said.

Two employees rushed into Jackson's office, a web developer and an editor.

"Did ya see this one yet? Damn, Jackson, I mean... Dude, all three of these people are on our top ten Sunlight List. What the fuck?" the web developer said.

"Yeah, I'm watching."

"What does this mean, Jackson? I mean for us?" the editor asked.

"Means we can expect visitors pretty soon," Jackson said.

"The feds again, right? They gonna want some answers pronto about our content and sources and methods and all that shi..." the web developer said.

“Lockdown mode,” Jackson said.

“They gonna be walking in here with SWAT shit, dude,” the web developer said.

“Only for web developers. You better Kevlar up then,” Jackson said.

The editor and web developer looked at each other with he’s-fucking-with-us-right? expressions.

The television coverage cut back to Catherine Hanson. “We have our correspondent, Tamara Blarren, in our local San Francisco office with us who is reporting from Woodside, California. Tamara what do you have for us?”

Tamara was standing outside the large estate in Woodside, California. “Hi, Catherine. We have just received confirmation on the ground here from our media source at Facebook, and this has been confirmed by the local sheriff’s spokesperson, that their executive vice president of marketing, Glenn Woo, was reported missing by his wife this morning. The police, as you can see behind me are investigating this, now anyway, as a crime scene, once they connected with the D.C. and Manhattan counterparts, where a similar M.O. was happening there, Catherine. The details are scant at this time, but it seems we have some type of synchronized thing going on here. We’re just not sure what exactly.”

“Jesus, Jackson, the fourth is also on the Sunlight. Somebody’s tracking us... our work, I mean. Are we in danger here?” the editor asked.

“What? Some terrorist group? You think like Al-Qaeda or an ISIS cell? Using our Sunlight List as a hit list or some shit?” the web developer cut in.

The editor covered her mouth, eyes so wide she looked like an Edvard Munch painting. She walked backward, then turned and walked down the stairs, holding the railing. She passed Tina rushing up the stairs. The phones kept ringing in a staccato of cell-phone ring tones, “All Along the Watchtower” by Hendrix or Beethoven’s Fifth, interrupted by corporate VOIP line tones, all

echoing throughout the building. Nobody was answering the phones.

"There're two black ones parked outside with the smoked windows," Tina said.

"They're gonna Branzburg our ass on this one. Or maybe just Roger Stone us and load it all up in a big van, handcuff first, ask questions later," the developer said.

"Anything on local drives we need to be worried about?" Jackson asked.

"Not sure, I think since all the previous Spanish Inquisitions went through, we should be really clean," the developer replied.

"And Deep Anon?" Jackson asked.

"I mean, even if we gave them the access protocols, the legacies," the developer said. "I don't think..."

"Deep Anon is a team of hackers, probably in Russia or China or Scandinavia somewhere, off the grid," Tina said.

"A team probably. But teams have a leader. We always suspected Deep Anon hacked us. Maybe more than once," Jackson said.

"You think..." The developer stopped.

"Deep Anon was the person that broke in here last year?" Tina said. She turned to the developer. "Nothing stolen, shut down security that was impossible to do."

"Dude, maybe somebody from the disbanded hacker's haven in the old brewery building. The place with the tunnel. They all vanished after the raid. Some of those dudes were surfers."

"What's that have to do with anything, and they weren't all dudes by the way," Tina said. "Jackson, you said you suspected that the burglar that hit us last year was not a burglar, but a hacker doing recon."

"Shit, maybe Deep Anon is one of the kahunas on the dawn patrol at Rincon," the developer said.

"You're high and we know nothing about Deep Anon. And guess what? That's a damn good thing right now. Since we don't

know any facts, the who, the whats and the wheres, for real... we can't perjure ourselves if grand juried," Tina said.

"We all gonna be talking to the Man," the developer said.

"Yeah? And whatta you gonna say to the Man?" Tina said.

The developer looked at Jackson, who held up five fingers and smiled. "On the advice of Jackson's bass-ass lawyer, I refuse to answer on the fifth grounds cause I could say shit you could fry me with and I have the right to remain silent."

"You are such a smart ass, and that is not taking the fifth," Tina said.

"Will give you a cheat sheet," Jackson said, laughing.

"Dude, yeah. Cliff-note us," the developer said.

Twenty days before the next presidential election. President Cheryl Cannesco was a shoo-in to be re-elected, fourteen points ahead of Republican Trig Mason and forty-two points ahead of young independent socialist candidate Oteb Rotteba. President Cannesco spoke from the oval office condemning the kidnappings as an act of terror, the full force of the United States will—do, be, act, track, and other things—regurgitating the speech writer's playbook. The Republican nominee used the crimes as evidence that a change in leadership was needed... ad nauseam.

Oteb Rotteba, aka Oty, denounced while he bounced, hipped and hopped. Parades of his spurious coastals, auteurs of rectitude, and sell-it-zealots cheered him on.

Twas nights before choosing
 and all through the lands
 Vitriol and wrath ignited the chans
 From bulletin to image board
 from Twitter their spatter
 Off with their heads
 because it don't matter
 Awaken the great one

Combust and behold
Down the hole we go
He's white I am told
The rabbit he runs
He hollers and moans
Down this way and that
Raged on the QAnon clones

Years of sanctuary laws had turned San Francisco into a tent city sewer. The choices of housing in the city were split among Johnson Outdoors, AMG and Newell Brands, the leading brands of new tents and choices in the used market, the body fluid-soaked tent market aka poly-pee-pods. But not in the tony section known as Pacific Heights, or by its other name, Billionaires Row. Years ago "Gold Coast" had been labeled the most expensive neighborhood in the United States. The mansion, built eighty years ago, was over 18,000 square, owned by one of the richest men in the world, the international money trader, master of arbitrage, Alec Proditores. His father, Benito, now deceased, was at one time the richest man in the world, or would have been if all of his assets had been known. He was a master at hiding his wealth. What was known put him in the upper echelons of the Forbes Four Hundred for thirty years. Alec got half, Joshua, his younger brother the playboy got a quarter, and his socialite sister Alexa, the other quarter of the empire.

The twelve-foot-long fireplace crackled in the expansive dark wood library. Alec sat, cigarette in hand, watching the news about the upcoming presidential election taking place in three weeks. He rolled the cigarette between his fingers between drags. He tapped his alligator loafer ever so softly on the exotic black tiger-wood floor. On the table next to him, a decanter and a brandy snifter and thick file folders, dossiers. Dossiers of photos, deep background research, and personal histories. Dossiers of past rela-

tionships, asset searches, and secrets. Dossiers of five people. Susan Arnold, Heinrich Tenner, Glenn Woo, Donald Sturitz and Lawrence Brenton.

A knock, then Charles Shelling, GQ-type, handsome, entered through the four-inch-thick African blackwood double doors.

On the television was third-party candidate Oteb Rotteba. Proditores muted the volume.

"Lot of ground to make up in three weeks," Shelling said.

"Too much without an act of God," Proditores said.

"Sir, no one can reach Lawrence Brenton," Shelling said.

"Brenton..."

"Our sources tell us they don't think a lone wolf investigative journalist pulled this off. They doubt the Islamists also. Maybe Rand inspired some alt-right ex-militaries. And how would Rand know about Brenton? He's below the radar, not in the spotlight."

Shelling picked up a remote and switched one of the televisions to the Internet, then to the website PublicFigure.com. The home page displayed photographs of the kidnapped victims.

Alec Proditores put out his cigarette.

"Before we speak to Mr. Rand, inspiration or not, I want everything on him," Alec said, his voice lower.

"Yes, sir, we're already doing that. Also, we checked again. You're still not in the PublicFigure database."

"I'm aware of that salient fact."

"I mean they have thousands of profiles of every public figure in the world. All the Forbeses. Even Chinese and Russians."

"Except my brother and me."

"Yes, except you and Joshua. It's so strange."

"I think not an error of omission."

"Something else then?"

"Something else."

It was decided the field office of the FBI in Washington, D.C. on

4th Street NW would be the headquarters for the new task force. Its Command and Tactical Operations Center would coordinate efforts with the Strategic Information Operations Center at FBI Headquarters in New York and the United States Secret Service Joint Information Center. It was also decided that there would be two satellite task force command post locations, one in New York and the other in the Los Angeles Field Office. The person assigned to run the Los Angeles office task force was Special Agent Benjamin G. Palmer, mid-thirties.

Palmer was an Iraq war veteran with Delta Force. After several tours, Agent Palmer joined the Special Activities Center (SAC) of the CIA. SAC had two divisions; the tactical paramilitary unit known as the Special Operations Group, SOG, which focused on high-threat military or covert operations, and the Political Action Group, PAG, which focused on covert political action. Palmer had joined SOG. Several years later, Palmer came to a crossroads in his life and career—either run for Congress in his home state of Arizona, District 4, his hometown of Prescott, or pursue a career in law enforcement.

A face with strong features and charisma to go with it, a political future with potential, but he decided he did not have the temperament to play the political game. He became disillusioned with American politics; not only did he disagree with the policies of the controlling party in Washington, but the rampant corruption had caused a loss of faith, so his choice had become clear; hunt down and capture criminals. He'd risen quickly through the ranks of the FBI, landing on the West Coast.

In a brief statement to the press in Los Angeles, Special Agent Palmer said, "We have hundreds of FBI Agents, analysts, and other employees working side-by-side with hundreds of our law enforcement partners, including the United States Secret Service 24 hours a day to locate our civil servants and bring the perpetrators to justice. We will update you daily through our press office here in Los Angeles, and our office in Washington, D.C. will do so as well. We have no other comments at this time."

Palmer and his counterparts in Washington and New York had under their command an elite hostage rescue team, a special weapons and tactics (SWAT) Team, an evidence response team, an underwater search and evidence response team, a hazardous materials response team, special agent bomb technicians, crisis negotiators and hundreds of field agents across the country. In the task force command center, Palmer addressed over one hundred FBI employees brought in from the Western states. Whiteboards were rolled in behind him, and two assistants stood by the boards to take notes.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you are now working exclusively on this task force named Midnight Minute. Every minute counts. Live by that. At this point in time, we know that four people have been abducted. Repeat, abducted. Our initial assessment is a highly coordinated snatch and grab, similar in execution to the Blackwater playbook in the Middle East. Contrary to some of the bogus reporting on cable news, notably CNN, ala the Boston bomber debacle on that network, we have no evidence of any murders. Nada. We do have evidence of kidnappings, of abductions,” Palmer said.

Five monitors behind Palmer displayed aerial views of the four homes.

Palmer continued, “These are the crime scenes at this time. Two in D.C., one in Manhattan, one in Woodside, California. In four of the cases, a spouse was injected with a strong, I mean very strong sedative, by hypodermic needle directly into the carotid artery. All four spouses recovered hours later. All security systems were professionally disabled, including video and audio. We have no legitimate ransom demands at this time. We have no terrorist groups taking credit. We have no chatter before or after the event until these crimes went public. We are doing full forensics as we speak, but we have no fingerprints, but early reports are that there *is* DNA at the scene. Will advise on that. Question one: Why these individuals?” Palmer turned to the two assistants.

One assistant wrote the following on the whiteboards:

- *Susan Arnold, Speaker of the House*
- *Heinrich Tenner, Governor of The World Bank*
- *Glenn Woo, Executive VP of Marketing for Facebook*
- *Donald Sturitz, CNN anchor*

“What is their connection to each other or to the perpetrators? Question one begets motive. What are the motives of the unsub in these cases? Question two: What mistakes did the unsub make? Question three: Are there any witnesses? You will be door knocking. The spouses all reported individuals in black clothing wearing masks. A big clue there, right? Or not. Question four: What is the structure and hierarchy of the unsub organization? We have four crimes, committed in four locations at precisely the same time in the same way. This is militaristic. These are highly trained operators. We’re tracing cellphone activity, but we’re not confident of any cellphones being used in these crimes. Question five: The calling cards.”

The crowd stirred and mumbled, surprised by this news.

“Yes, in each case, a calling card was left,” Palmer said. He nodded to the assistants and the four monitors changed the display from the houses to four different calling cards.

- *Blood of Tyrants - 38*
- *Blood of Tyrants - \$*
- *Blood of Tyrants - METHOD*
- *Blood of Tyrants - CUDA*

He continued, “Four similar cards, each with a unique categorization if you will. What do these mean you? What are these perpetrators saying to us? Does Blood of Tyrants mean that they are Americans or want us to think they are Americans? We all know this saying, this quote, right? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. Yes, that’s right. Thomas Jefferson in a letter to William Smith in 1787. The full letter is in your packet.

“And what about the other words? What do they mean? Is this a right-wing paramilitary group? Maybe, but the governor of the World Bank is considered to be conservative politically. So how

does he tie in? So there you have it. At this point, we have not established that the four victims knew each other.

“Question six: What is this not? It is not a murder, at least not yet. If these were hits, then the victims would have been taken out at the strike points. I have heard some of you mumbling about a videotaped beheading. I don’t want to hear any more of those comments. We suspect something else is going on here.

“With regard to the issue of the tie-in to the list on the website PublicFigure, their Sunlight List. As in *Sunlight is corruption’s best disinfectant*. We’ve placed Jackson Rand, the founder of this website, under surveillance. We’ve secured the other individuals on that list. We have no evidence that there was any attempt to abduct other individuals on this guy’s list. We’re doing background on Rand. He is about to be interviewed. I leave for that interview shortly, which I am doing personally. That’s it. Get to work. Do your jobs. Find these people.”

The crowd of FBI agents dispersed. An agent, a clean-cut, approached Palmer.

“This guy Rand. His middle initial?”

“Q,” Palmer said.

“Yeah, the Q? Don’t you think that’s...”

“...It stands for Quinn.”

“Uh huh.” The agent was waiting for more, didn’t get it, then asked, “The Q, just a coincidence, you know, the QAnon thing?”

“Quinn is on his birth certificate.”

The agent shuffled his feet. “You know, we ran him before? When the district attorney wanted him for illegal taps and other probables. He’s a vet.”

“I know. So?” Palmer stopped packing his materials.

“You think he’s connected to some alt-right ex-vets or just an inspiration to the unsubs?” the agent asked.

“Those are questions we need answered.”

“I read your work. As a profiler. What’s Rand’s profile indicate?”

“He’s complicated.”

CHAPTER 4

Jackson Rand walked from screen to screen in the editor's bullpen of PublicFigure.com, viewing the latest research by his team. He sat down at an open workstation, launched an editing screen, made changes, saved them, and relaunched the home page of the site.

"Looks okay?"

"It's rockin'," the web developer sitting next to him said.

Palmer and another FBI agent entered the office foyer. Jackson straightened in his chair and swiveled towards the agents. His eyes locked on the eyes of Palmer, who froze, stopping in mid-stride. Jackson did not look away. Behind Jackson's non-blinking eyes, he felt the familiar heightening of his senses. A slight smile leaked out, Palmer noticed, then broke off the stare.

Jackson motioned to Tina, I-got-this, and approached the agents.

"Mr. Rand, Special Agent Jesse Garcia. This is my partner, Special Agent Ben Palmer," Agent Garcia said.

"Gentlemen. We can talk in there," Jackson said, gesturing to a small conference room.

"Will your attorney be joining us?" Palmer asked.

"No, she does copyright and IP work. So she's not up to speed

on kidnapping government officials yet," Jackson said, playing the sarcasm straight.

"We understand you have a criminal attorney also," Garcia said.

"That was before. When overzealous prosecutors didn't like my politics. This is not about politics, is it, Agent Garcia?" Jackson said.

Garcia pursed his lips, not liking him already. The agents slid business cards over to Jackson.

"Mr. Rand, we're part of a new task force in charge of investigating the kidnappings," Agent Palmer said, in a business-like tone. "We've reviewed all of your online content regarding these victims. Very in-depth, and in some cases, devastating to their reputations."

"As long as it's based on fact, let the heavens fall, right?" Jackson leaned in and said. "But here's the thing, why don't you guys ever prosecute these corrupt politicians?"

"That's DOJ, not us. We just investigate," Palmer said.

"And nothing changes... well that's not quite accurate, is it? Foreigners voting. Although that's not really a change. More of a runaway train. Country is bankrupt, eroding at the seams. Wait, that's not a change either, is it, Agent Palmer?"

Palmer tried to hide the smile. He did it well, and Garcia didn't notice the effort. Jackson did.

"We didn't come here to listen to political diatribe, Mr. Rand. So let's cut to it. Have you, or anyone in your organization, had contact with any individual involved in the kidnappings?" Garcia said.

"So to the real chase here, our sources," Jackson said.

"We're getting to that, but first, we want to know if you had any contact or knowledge," Garcia said.

"I haven't set up the spotlight and rubber hose deal to grill my people quite yet," Jackson said, turning to Palmer. "But, if you have a five-gallon in your trunk, we can figure out some aquatics together. I heard it can yield results."

Palmer shook his head, the slightest of movements, and Jackson wondered if it was an involuntary reaction or not.

"Are you willing to provide us with all the information you have on the victims?" Garcia said.

"I know your subpoenas are in process, so I guess we'll wait for that. So we can respond accordingly." Jackson checked both agents for a reaction. "Look, I don't mean to give you guys a hard time. Well, maybe a little. But I'm on your side. Kinda."

"And your sources?" Palmer said.

"You haven't threatened to put me in front of a grand jury yet," Jackson said.

Palmer placed his hand on Garcia's arm. "Can you tell us anything today that can assist us in this investigation?" Palmer said.

Jackson was distracted by Tina, who was waving at him from outside the conference room. She pointed to the television monitor in the conference room. Both cellphones of the FBI agents rang. Jackson grabbed the remote, turned on the television.

Palmer answered his cell. "We're watching, will call back."

Catherine Hanson of Fox News was on the screen.

"This just came into our news bureau. We believe this video, uh, the video, our sources tell us that the best information we have is that this is indeed from the kidnapper," Catherine said.

Jackson and the agents stood.

The video played—a medium shot of a Caucasian man sitting in an office chair. The light subdued, but his face clearly visible. The man was thirtyish, clean-shaven, full head of dark hair combed straight back. He was tall, slim but toned, like a long-distance runner or mountain climber. A face of bold Scandinavian-type features, high cheekbones, pronounced nose, piercing blue eyes. The camera angle positioned slightly below the man.

Behind him a concrete wall, gray-brown and discolored, water stains, fine stress cracks. Against the wall sat a two-by-four and plywood worktable that spanned the frame. On the table were flat-screen computer monitors all powered off except one that was

out of focus. The man smiled. Not a smile of happiness or joy, a smile of acceptance, a smile of resolve, the smile of a man seeing things clearly, a so-be-it smile, a we-must-begin smile.

"My name is Hale. I have come to you as the leader of Quartus Optio. You will forgive me if I speak bluntly," Hale said with a slight accent, Australian or New Zealander.

"Okay, so here we go," Garcia said.

"Who's this guy?" Palmer said. He stepped closer to the screen. For a moment, a confused look came over Palmer's face, as if he recognized the man. Jackson glanced at Palmer for half a second.

Hale continued... "Threats to the original ideas that formed this nation, by any group, any individual, any organization, can no longer be tolerated. There must be security in our sovereignty or sovereignty cannot exist. And without sovereignty, there can be no nation. Our forefathers knew this when they founded this country, and it remains true today."

Hale paused, apparently deliberating his words.

"We are a free nation, a government of laws. Not of men, not of people. What country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? The right of resistance. The right of resistance to tyranny."

He paused again.

"We are convening with the following persons of interest: Ms. Susan Arnold, Mr. Heinrich Tenner, Mr. Glenn Woo, Mr. Donald Sturitz, and Mr. Lawrence Brenton. I assure you that, while below a carpetbagger's luxury, they are alive and in good health. Until next time," Hale said.

"Brenton? Who the hell is Brenton?" Garcia said.

The video cut to views of the captives milling around in their individual rooms, rooms similar to suites in a hotel. The video ended. Fox News coverage continued, and Jackson muted the audio.

Garcia sat down, stunned. Palmer dialed his cell phone.

Garcia turned to Palmer and said, “Quartus Optio? What is that? Some kind of cult?”

Jackson intensified his glare on Palmer, dissecting any minute change in facial expression, any tell, the slightest sensation that might fertilize a coming lump in the throat, any reveal as to what was behind the eyes.

Palmer did not move. Jackson caught, for a fraction of a second, that Palmer held a breath. Those milliseconds expanded, slowed, widened. In that space of molasses time, knowledge could zigzag, guilt turn to innocence then back to guilt. Kill or not to kill instinct triggers could bounce back and forth. From the collision of opposing storms, a single ray of light—Jackson knew what Palmer was thinking—*Is he lying? Is he hiding something? Is this tradecraft?*

A voice spoke on the other end of the call, and Palmer broke off the stare-down. Jackson knew Palmer remained confused, in a no-man’s-land between past and present.

“Yes, I saw it. What’d we have?” Palmer said into his phone.

He motioned to Garcia to hold on for a moment. “Got it, yeah. Mr. Rand, is this DVRed? Can you rewind that, please?”

Jackson used the remote to rewind the news footage. Palmer took control of the remote while still on the phone. He stopped the video when Hale first appeared.

“I see it now. Not sure from here. We are heading back now,” Palmer said.

He hung up the phone.

Palmer pointed to a monitor behind Hale. It was grainy, but if one focused solely on the monitor, what was on it became visible.

The home page of PublicFigure.com.

The FBI agents left the building. Jackson turned to Tina. “I’m gonna disappear for a while. Get all hard copies off-site, all

content older than 24, cloud-only, nothing local. Set up order for new computers, don't ship yet."

"Done," Tina said.

Jackson exited the back of the PublicFigure building. He leaned the twenty-year-old, black and brushed nickel Harley Road King off of its kickstand, threw his leg over the custom leather seat, fired it up, cruised away, low rumble sound, potato, potato, potato.

Jackson, wearing his hoodie, walked around the outfield perimeter of the Little League field. Just knowing this field was here, even when empty, gave him hope. Sometimes he compartmentalized hard to feel it. A lifeline to an ideal? Here, only here, he went calm to peaceful. Knowing this place too would eventually mutate, too much Americana not to pay the price of homogenization. Or maybe some other fate like a bronze Southern general in a town square endured.

Sometimes he would talk to the field. Sometimes he was sure the field listened, even responded. He heard the cadences of the game. Then it thanked him. A thank-you but hidden within it, a sense of doom when the last word trailed off, faded away. When this field was built he knew the structure may remain, but the spirit would soon be snuffed, muffled, censored, replaced by new moralities; politically correct inclusiveness, for the people, a change we can believe in, one world free. Spoken by mouths failing to hide the resentment, the entitlement, the unrequited rage. Slogans that slipped by like a late-breaking curve. The pitch seemingly going one way, but its hidden agenda got you in the end.

For him, a vault. Impenetrable. Locked up. To be defended against the decay to come. But reality would ripsaw through his heart, so he tugged with all his will to stay in the present. Live in the higher place, right now, while it lasts. But if left to stray, if the thoughts were allowed to run outside their bollard fences, the pain would surge up from inside the marrow of his bones, come to a boil. Steamroll his heart.

Baseball had been his everything in his youth, was going to be his future, a future he remembered collided with a present that changed him. He leaned against the left-field wall, staring at home plate, far away. He saw himself in the on-deck circle, seventeen years past.

Omaha, Nebraska, the location of the baseball college world series, game three, the final game. The University of Miami, the away team was up six to five against Florida State, the home team. Bottom of the ninth. Two outs, tying run at third, winning run at second. He stood in the on-deck circle. Donut on his bat, swinging as hard as he could, warming up. His body heated, perspiration drenching his already-wet tan Seminole uniform with maroon trim. A hot Monday night, steamy, Nebraska humid. The stadium full. Television cameras covering the action. National telecast. Lights sparkling the sweat dripping into his eyes. The crowd noise deafening.

He didn't hear the scouts lining the lower seats, their mouths moving, drowned out by the white noise, the hum of the crowd, only muttering to the other pro scouts seated shoulder to shoulder. *Were they talking about me? Which team would make an offer in the off-season?* His senior year spotty, moments of glory, moments of mediocrity. *If only this is my moment, my storybook moment. Win the college world series, the team swarming me, ripping off my jersey, the crowd cheering. The orphan kid that got into the school because of his ability to hit for high average, now hero, national hero.*

A line drive hitter, his, a Billy Williams sweet swing. But this was not his time. He was not up to bat. There were two outs. He would have to watch, the spotlight on Brett Bryant, the lead-off hitter. Bryant, a slasher, in the mold of Tony Gwynn or Rod Carew. Lots of singles. And a solid single was all it took to win the championship for the Seminoles. So he saw himself in the on-deck circle, only to watch. They were pitching to Bryant. First pitch, a high heater, hard to catch up to. Bryant took it for a ball. The next pitch, low and away, another heater. Bryant held off. Ball two. The catcher looked to the dugout. Morris, the Hurricanes manager,

held up four fingers. Intentional walk. They were putting Bryant on.

Jackson felt it now, standing in the Little League field, thinking back, his heart pounding his chest like a drum, or a fist, clenched and slamming against his rib cage, then working its way up his throat, cutting off his breath. He could not breathe. He could not breathe. Breathe, breathe. Exhale, mouth wide open exhale. Instant nausea. Time slowed to a crawl. The stadium rumbled, he felt the vibrations of Mother Earth, under his feet. His feet would not move. He blinked once, twice. Somebody was waving to him. It was blue, waving. Get up here, next batter.

You're up. It's me. Bases loaded, two down. A million times in Little League he dreamed, he dreamed this dream. This blur. Slow moving. He took a molasses step. Stopped. *What's holding my feet stuck to the turf? My cleats. No, nothing. Walk, Jackson. Fucking walk to the plate like you have every day, never thinking about it except the logo on the pitcher's cap. The logo. Focus on the logo.* Ten days later, he stepped into the left side of the batter's box. Ten seconds left like ten days. He couldn't feel the bat. *Something's wrong with my hands. Somebody drugged me numb. Swing the bat, Jackson.*

"Play ball," blue yelled.

The catcher crouched, the pitcher leaned in for the sign.

I'm not ready. I can't feel my face.

An aspirin tablet zoomed in low.

"Steerike," the umpire barked.

Jackson looked back. *That was a balk, an illegal pitch.* The umpire returned the look and said, "O one."

Jackson stepped out. *You fucking idiot. What're you doing? He spat, took practice swings. Breathe goddamn it. You can hit this guy. Quick bat. Quick bat. Don't think. Logo on his hat, then pick up the ball. Bat to the ball. Quick bat. Don't think, don't think. Quick bat.*

Look for the low outside fastball, turn on the inside pitch. Be ready. Be ready.

Low inside. Strike two. "Damn it."

O 2 count. He'll waste one. Always does on O 2. Won't risk in the

dirt, tying run on third. Back door deuce, off the plate. Don't bite, let it go. He's in his stretch, logo, I see the logo, here comes the deuce.

A flash of white.

What just happened? I was late. Was I late? Late on high heat. Did I just swing at that? Why is the other team rushing the mound?

Jackson opened his eyes, head down, hands on knees, staring at the dirt, the dirt of the warning track, the dirt of the warning track at the Little League field. The cursed nightmare he relived a million times, the voice, not his, some other voice, echoing down low, *loser* it said. *Loser*. Jackson spat.

A wad of dark green soggy tobacco landed in the dirt beside Jackson.

"Whatta you thinkin' der, boy. You et sumthin' foul, did ya?" Satchel said with a golf-ball-sized wad rounding out his cheek.

"Hey Satch. No, nothing," Jackson said.

"Nothin' hell. Dat durn demon be sapping you, yessir. Devil be in yerself inside deep an holdin' on. You best jist be der wit these youngins, sure as be, I knowed where'd you been."

Jackson climbed the stairs and took a seat next to Satchel. In front of them two teams were taking the field for a practice game. Laughter, coaches yelling out instructions.

"Tell me again why you love this game so much, Satch. Tell me."

"See dis heea be my baseball," Satchel said. Dis here, same ball.

Satchel pointed to the field, the kids, the ballpark, his arthritic index finger a crooked dagger.

"Same field. Same rules. Safe or out. Win or lose. All dis here. But only in dis places. See, in dese here fields. All equals."

Satchel held a baseball in his hand, rolled it back and forth, his fingers long like talons of a huge raptor, engulfing the ball.

Jackson smiled, nodded.

"In dis place, the lord do decree. Yesir, in dis heea place, all equals."

The two men watched the choreography of baseball. Listening

to the cadence. The woosh of the pitcher's uniform, the crack of the bat, the screams of the players, the slide of the runner, the "Yer out!" from the man in blue. The scrimmage ended and to the side of the third-base line, a coach was soft-tossing practice balls to a boy who was hitting them into a Bownet.

"Tell me again about that fastball you used to throw," Jackson said.

"Dat be da midnight rider, yessir. Dat a hunert years Negro ball two memories long past," Satchel said.

"The matchboxes on a stick. Knocking them off. Urban legend?"

"Legend be right boy. Legend be damn right. Dat youngin der. He needs to fire them hips mo," Satchel said.

Jackson patted Satchel on the knee and stood up.

Casey took his turn. Hands high, bat wagging around, he flailed at the plastic balls, fouling off or missing them, missing, fouling, missing, ending the swings with all his weight on his front foot.

Casey slammed his bat on the plate, and the coach, beyond Jackson's hearing, expressed some calming words. Thirty feet behind Casey, Jackson nodded to the coach, who acknowledged Jackson. More soft-toss, more frustration. Jackson caught the coach's attention again and gave him a mind-if-I-chime-in gesture. The coach waved Jackson over.

Jackson picked up a whiffle ball. "Hey buddy, what's your name?"

"Casey."

"Casey, like the mighty Casey of the Mudville Nine?" Jackson said.

"Who's that?" Casey said.

"Maybe I'll tell you a story sometime about old Casey. I'm Jackson. Would you mind if I tried something with you? Five minutes."

Casey's shoulders relaxed, and he set the head of the bat on the ground.

"So Casey, what are your favorite positions?"

"Uh, short, pitcher, center, third, second base, uh..."

"Great. Okay, let's pretend you are playing short."

Jackson took the bat out of Casey's hand.

"Get in your baseball ready shortstop stance."

Casey bent his knees slightly and bounced up and down.

"Perfect. Now let's pretend the ball comes to your right."

Jackson held a whiffle ball two feet to Casey's right. "Go get it."

Casey shuffled to his right.

"Good. Here it comes to your left." Casey moved to his left.

"Now right. Now left. Left again. Right. Right again. Left. Left. Left."

Jackson moved the wrong way.

"See I got you there. But here's the thing. You have to be balanced, weight 50-50, ready to pounce either way. Your athletic stance. That's how we start at the plate. Take this now." Jackson handed Casey the bat.

"Take your stance, weight fifty-fifty. Good. Feel athletic. Good. Now, look at the net, like it's the pitcher, and get ready to hit."

Casey lifted his hands up high and was wagging the bat around whirlybird.

"Okay. Stop. So, let me ask you this. Where do your hands need to be right before you hit the ball?"

Casey lowered his hands and pushed them back.

"Yes, you knew that naturally. Didn't need to think about it. So why not start your hands there, or close to there. Let me show you."

Jackson positioned Casey's hand in front of his back shoulder and held the bat straight up in the air.

"You see how the bat feels lighter when it is straight up?" Jackson bent the bat sideways, and Casey felt the weight of the bat head.

"Yeah, that's pretty chill. Are you one of my coaches, Mr. Jackson?" Casey said.

“Just a fan. Now, when you are about to load, I mean right before you swing, I want you to push your hands straight back and stride six inches and stop there. Good, that’s the load, like lock and load. Then you only have to think of two things until this process becomes thoughtless, instinct. Keep your head still while you swing and take the knob of the bat to the ball. Let’s try.”

Jackson tossed balls to him, and Casey’s swing was simpler, more compact, the practice balls rocketing into the net.

“This feels totally different, Mr. Jackson. Totally. But I’m hitting it good.”

Casey became fidgety, was jumping up and down. He sped up his motions. He was excited. A smile erupted where there was none ten minutes earlier. Jackson waved the coach back in, stepped back, and observed with his arms crossed, smiling.

From the parking lot.

An interested observer.

Watching every move.

Cinder.

Satchel was still in his seat in the left field bleachers observing. He gazed across the field to Cinder.

Under his breath, he said, “Shapeshifter.”

Jackson entered the law offices of Farrell and Fletcher in Ventura. An old craftsman structure, interior woodwork maintained religiously to the Green and Green original. The receptionist showed Jackson into Mary Fletcher’s office. Mary was late-thirties, hair up, UCLA law grad.

The flat screen on the wall had the news on. A reporter said, “It didn’t take long for the *Who is Hale?* movement to start. It has spread virally on social media, and there is even a website already. Is he a criminal, a vigilante or a cult hero?” Mary muted the television. On her computer screen was a still image of the PublicFigure home page.

"So Tina sent you the revision history," Jackson said.

"Yes. Hi, Jackson. So this page was launched this morning, about twenty minutes before the Hale broadcast," Mary said.

"Yeah, and minutes before my first interview with the Fed boys," he said.

"An act of recklessness without me present. What were you not thinking?" she said.

"My meeting was recorded. Do you want to hear it?"

"I did not hear that. Did you obtain authority to tape it?"

"I didn't hear that either. So, obviously, I'm not Hale. And also obviously I was not there at the time of the broadcast. At most, an inspiration. I don't think that's a crime," he said.

"Where did you obtain all this info on these people?"

"Deep source. Unknown to my team."

"Unknown. Like deep throat?"

"Not the same. Woodward knew who deep throat was. Remember Hal Holbrook?"

"Yeah, yeah. So you or Tina or anyone else has never seen this source in person or know their identity?"

"I have not met the source."

"Do you know how to find or contact this source?"

"Communication channels to the source seem to have been terminated right after the event. Terminated by the source. She went dark."

"She?"

"She, he, it, them."

"So you can safely say under oath that you do not know who the source is?"

"The source provides information to an encrypted database on the deep web. My staff disseminates it, follows the source's instructions on how to verify the data, the information. When it checks out, we publish."

"And you have never met or spoken to this source?" she said.

"I have never had direct contact with the source."

Mary paused, looking for tells of untruths.

"Now you sound like a lawyer. Be careful; some may interpret it as shifty," Mary said.

"Shifty as in shape-shifting myself in seconds into a guy that looks like Michael Rennie with a hip accent, then back again."

"Who the hell is Michael Rennie?"

"Day the Earth Stood Still."

"Keanu Reeves and Jennifer..."

"No, that one sucked. The black and white one, the original."

"Back to the moving Earth. We're expecting a search warrant and a subpoena. What're they going to find in your offices that we need to be worried about?"

"My web developers watching too much porn when they should be developing. My editors watching too much news when they should be editing."

"And?"

"And data going back 24 hours, then scrubbed."

"But stored in the cloud?"

"Yes and no. Encrypted in the deep web. And once the upload is ready, only I have access to the next step and beyond. None of the staff can reveal anything, waterboarding, black site sensory deprivation..."

"Got it. So we'll fight the subpoena, but that battle will be lost eventually in court. You'll have to go in front of a grand jury. You'll take the fifth, of course."

"The high five."

"Then the DA will compel, and a judge may order you to reveal everything you know about your source, the content, these captives, or he or she may send you to jail. We are talking about the Speaker of the House here. Jesus. We'll prep your testimony when it comes to that. There's something else."

"What's the else?" Jackson said.

"The DA is already demanding a blood sample."

"DNA?"

"I have a source with Homeland. Evidently, they found significant DNA at one or more of the homes."

Jackson picked up a crystal ball paperweight on Mary's desk, examined it, looked at her through it, rotating the crystal creating multiple refracted images of his eye. Mary grabbed the crystal and set it back on the stack of pleadings.

"We need to see eye to eye. Your real eyes," she said.

"Do I have to give them my blood?"

"It's called a compulsion order. Usually, if you are under arrest, about to be charged, or the police have a court order. They don't have time to make a case against you yet, so my bet is they are pressing the District Court for that now. You exclusively blasted derogatory content about four of the victims and Hale is a big fan, so you're a person of interest."

"Or a target."

"They aren't gonna find your DNA at any crime scene, right?" Mary said, her voice rising a notch.

Jackson straightened in his chair. Lowered his voice to a whisper. "Not mine, no."

CHAPTER 5

The Detained.

The bedroom in her suite contained a double bed, a nightstand, a chair in the corner, and a telephone that was operational 24/7 answered by a staff member. Opposite the foot of the bed was a dresser that was stocked with clothes in her correct size. Next to the dresser was a stationary exercise bike.

Does that mean I'm going to be here for a long time? Susan Arnold wondered.

Connected to her bedroom was a full bathroom with a tub-shower combination, sink-vanity, and a recessed shelf stocked with towels and linens. The medicine cabinet was stocked with standard necessities, Q-Tips, cotton balls, Band-Aids, feminine items and more.

The bedroom connected to a living room and kitchenette combination. In the living room was a couch and two leather chairs, a coffee table, a desk in the corner with a stack of legal pads and pencils. *Writing what to whom?* she thought.

Next to the desk was a bookshelf. On a shelf were several books: a bound copy of the *Constitution of the United States*, *A People's History of the United States* by Zinn, *The Federalist Papers*, *The American Civil War* by Keegan, *Essays* by Emerson. Two novels, *Atlas Shrugged* and *Seven Days in May*.

There was a small kitchen table and one chair. The kitchenette was stocked with blunt stainless utensils, fresh produce, various unopened bottles of wine, plus a bottle of Colonel E.H. Taylor Jr. Single Barrel Kentucky straight bourbon whiskey. Apparently Hale did not have any problem with getting his detainees a little tipsy.

The large glass window exacerbated Susan Arnold's fear. The window was seven feet wide and four feet tall, located on the longest living room wall. On the other side of the window, under low light, was a leather chair, similar to an Ekornes chair, and a rosewood side table. Even from the edge of the glass, one could not see the ends of the room on the other side.

She wondered if that was where she would meet her end, an execution room, a videotaped beheading. Dead people walking in Holiday Inn Express comfort, some sick joke of American middle classness culminating in a bloody execution in Technicolor for all the world to see.

She remembered a flash of a silhouette appearing over her while in bed, her real bed, then nothing. The next thing she remembered was waking up in the next room wearing pajamas. *That was the day before yesterday*, she thought, but she lost track of time since there were no windows to the outside. She felt she was underground, but was not sure.

When she awoke in her Courtyard Marriott Spaces to Relax, Recharge, and Reset prison, a person wearing a mask brought her breakfast, then lunch, then dinner. She asked the person questions each time, and each time received no answer. The person, who Susan was sure was a woman, placed the food tray on the kitchen table, removed dirty dishes, and left. Of course, the door, the only visible exit, remained locked. That door was made of stainless steel and appeared to be heavy and solid; it closed with a low-decibel thud.

In her first hour, her screams went unanswered. She picked up the phone and asked for help, but the person on the other line only responded with a question, the same question; Are you in

good health at the present time? When Susan said no, the person asked Susan to describe her ailment. When Susan did not answer that question with anything that made sense, the person ended the call. This conversation repeated until Susan accepted that the telephone was there for a single purpose, and no other Q&A was productive.

Susan Arnold sat on the couch, arms clenched tightly around her chest, wide-eyed, staring at the ceiling.

“Oh, what the hell?” she said. She stood and turned towards the kitchen.

She looked up at the camera in the corner and gave it the finger, then walked into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of Merlot. She yanked open the first kitchen drawer, slammed it shut, opened a second drawer, picked up a wine opener, and went to work on the bottle. She found a wine glass, filled it, and plopped onto the couch. She stared at the dim room beyond the glass window. She drank half the glass. After a minute, she noticed the room was getting lighter. She looked at the wineglass, inhaled in a rush as a wave of paranoia swept over her—*was it spiked?*

The room on the other side of the glass became brighter, and her face turned ashen, pallid. The light of the room centered on a chair and a table. There was a leather eight-and-a-half-by-eleven inch notepad on the table.

He stood tall and erect, at-attention erect. Mind anticipating the conversation to come. Rehearsing. He wore a charcoal gray shirt, buttoned all the way up. It was made of a thicker material than a typical dress shirt used for business, dense weave, made of poplin cotton. Two chest pockets. Pressed. No wrinkles. Meticulous. Black leather belt with a stainless steel buckle. Wool slacks pressed with a center crease. He wore no jewelry. Shell cordovan cap toe boots. Well-worn, a polished shine bright as a mirror.

Hale made his entrance. He stopped and turned his head. A turn that was slow, deliberate. Owning the moment. Owning the room. Owning the building.

She noticed his bony features and his larger-than-normal deep-set eyes. But she was too nervous to really take him in, get a sense of him. If she had, she would have seen a self-realized man. Self-knowing. Self-confident. Wise through tribulation. Comfortable in his own golden skin, the thinnest of crow's feet wrinkles under his eyes.

But it was the eyes that made Hale unique. A slight slant to the eyelids, not Asian, but something. And something behind those eyes. Unknowable. Eyes that tuned their lasers to the target. Affixed them on the woman in the other room. A penetrating, intense focus on Susan Arnold.

Susan froze. Her body. Her breath. Hale held the moment. Breathed it in. Then he sat. Both feet flat on the floor, shoulder-width apart, hands on his knees.

Susan was silent, blinking quickly. The wine in the glass sloshing, held by a shaking hand. Hale noticed. She let out the needed exhale, a breath she was unaware she was holding. She placed the glass on the coffee table. Took some effort to release her claw grip on the glass.

"Who are you?"

"Madam Speaker, you may address me as Hale."

Susan Arnold's fingernails gripped the couch. Her words made their way to her tongue; at the last fraction of a second, she stopped them. *I am the goddamned Speaker of the United States House of Representatives. And you're a criminal telling me what I may or may not do. Fuck you.*

"What's your full name?" she asked.

Hale did not answer.

"Why have you kidnapped me? What are your intentions?"

Hale leaned forward an inch, eyes focused on hers, readings hers, reading what lurked behind. "To understand the consequences of yours," he said.

"So you kidnapped me, committed a federal crime. To discuss policy with me? I don't think so," Susan Arnold said. "What, are

you, an alt-right terrorist? You don't appear to be Middle Eastern."

"So by implication, I'm either one or the other."

"You're a terrorist. Are you going to cut my head off on video?"

A large flat-screen television illuminated above the window.

She gasped. Then an image of the U.S. House of Representatives seal appeared. It was a blue circle with yellow borders. In the center was the eagle holding thirteen arrows and an olive branch in its talons. Hale observed the Speaker looking at the seal.

"Thirteen should be thirty-eight, don't you think?" Hale said. "Do you know Heinrich Tenner?"

"Tenner? IMF? No, the World Bank. No, I don't believe I do. Why?"

"Do you know Donald Sturitz?"

"Yes, of course. I've been on his show. Why?"

"How well do you know Lawrence Brenton?" Hale asked.

"Who?" Susan Arnold asked.

"Your first lie," Hale said.

The light faded to black.

Heinrich Tenner, the governor of the World Bank, the mathematician, and former engineer, was on his knees examining the intersection where the glass met the wall on the lower edge of the large rectangular window. Hale's area, the other side of the glass, was dimmed, a low warm light. Tenner noticed that the glass appeared to be very thick, in excess of one inch. He knocked on the window, a hard sound, felt its weight, its sturdiness, impenetrable and unbreakable. The room on the other side of the glass slowly illuminated. Hale appeared, seemingly from nowhere, seated in the chair.

"Hello, Dr. Tenner. My name is Hale."

Tenner lurched, then backpedaled to the couch, crumpled into it, stunned.

"Let's begin," Hale said. "The debt ceiling vote in a few days in the United States Senate. Any comment?"

"The debt ceiling? I'm with the World Bank. I don't deal with the debt ceiling of America."

An image appeared on the large television monitor above the window, comparing the value of the U.S. dollar with the Euro at the end of yesterday's trading. The dollar dropped significantly.

"The United States has a national debt of over forty trillion dollars. Any assistance... if that's what you mean... is far beyond the capabilities of the World Bank... Or any single bank," Tenner said.

"It is the lack thereof that I find interesting. A substantial portion of the debt service is paid with new loans. The bulk of which are foreign to the United States," Hale said.

The image in the monitor changed to a trading statement from Barclays of London. It was in the name of the Heinrich Tenner Trust.

Tenner stood up and walked to the screen for a closer look. He examined the statement.

"It's a blind trust. A requirement to be governor of the bank. I don't control it. I don't even know what's in it or any trading activity," Tenner said.

"You will notice that in the last thirty days, all the assets in this trust; the currencies and equities, moved to precious metals, mostly gold."

"I repeat. I don't have control of it. It's a blind trust, administered by a trustee at HSBC. Do you understand the meaning of *blind*, sir?"

"Clearly, Mr. Tenner," Hale said. "Clearly."

The light faded around Hale.

Donald Sturitz was lying on his bed. He was fully dressed, staring at the ceiling.

"Mr. Sturitz, please take a seat on the couch in the living room," Hale's voice echoed throughout the suite.

Sturitz shot up to a seated position.

"Who are you? Where am I?" Sturitz said.

"The living room please," Hale said.

Sturitz walked to the living room and sat on the couch.

"Do you consider yourself a pundit, a journalist, or something else?" Hale said.

"I'm a CNN anchor, which I assume you know. You fucking drugged me. Where's my wife?"

"Your wife is in good health, as is Ms. Cironnia."

Hale leaned in and glared, let the moment hang.

"An anchor? A term that arose around 1952 describing the most prominent member of a panel of reporters or experts. I believe that term anchorman was used to describe Walter Cronkite's role at the Democratic and Republican National Conventions, where he coordinated different viewpoints and reporters. What do you coordinate, Mr. Sturitz?" Hale said.

"I'm a news anchor. And opinion. And entertainment."

"I was referring to something else entirely. You switched careers as a young man, did you not?"

"I've been in media for over twenty-five years."

Sturitz rubbed the back of his neck and shifted in his seat.

"And prior?"

"Prior, I worked for various companies."

"Graduated in computer science, correct?"

Sturitz blinked three times.

"I studied many things. Everyone does in college. Where did you go to school?"

"Have you stayed current on technology, Mr. Sturitz?"

"I own lots of devices, yeah, so what?"

"In the last ten years, have you done any private consulting unrelated to your work at CNN?"

"No. I have a contract with CNN that prohibits outside work."

"Your first lie."

The light faded around Hale.

"Hey, I want a telephone," Sturitz said.

Glenn Woo was finishing a bottle of wine, leaning against the kitchen counter. He noticed the light brighten in Hale's room and walked to the window. Hale was seated.

"Mr. Woo, you may address me as Hale. How many eyeballs does your stimuli reach each month? I am referring to only the stimuli used by your method," Hale said.

"Are you a terrorist or a corporate or government criminal?" Woo said. "And your wine is crap. You must be government. I have friends in the CIA that are going to track you motherfuckers down."

"How many eyeballs?" Hale said.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Methods," Hale said.

"Methods for what?"

"How many impressions across all the eyeballs?"

"Facebook reaches billions. That's public knowledge. We're a public company."

"Private agendas. Methods," Hale said.

"Our agenda is to grow users. There it is. The secret's out. We use all types of marketing strategies and methods."

"Your agenda, Mr. Woo. The Methods program."

Woo's eyes moved back and forth rapidly. He felt a clenched fist rise up his throat. He took a large gulp of wine.

Hale smiled.

"Do you know Donald Sturitz?" Hale said.

"The CNN guy. No, don't believe I do. Not personally."

"Your first lie."

The light faded.

“Wait. Why am I here?” Woo screamed, panic in his voice.

Lawrence Brenton was asleep on the couch in the living room when the light rose in Hale’s room. Hale walked in with a file folder in his hand and sat down.

“Mr. Brenton,” Hale said.

Brenton stirred, then shot awake and rolled off the couch, caught himself and stood.

On the screen above the window was the word *Convention*.

“How is your local work coming along?” Hale said.

“Who are you? Did you drug me? I want a lawyer,” Brenton said.

“Why, did you commit a crime with the state delegates to amend the Constitution?”

“No. Hell no. Who the fuck are you?”

“We have observed that your local lobbying budget has escalated in the last year. Did you disclose all your donors?”

“My LDs are filed every quarter, so yes. They’re public fucking record. Why am I being held here?”

“As a percentage of your total funds, have you observed how many donations by a single source?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your first lie. Are you working on performance-based compensation?”

“I take a salary from my company. It’s on the LD.”

“The big bonus, Mr. Brenton. The big bonus,” Hale said.

“Are you with the FBI? Or the CIA?” Brenton said.

“Interesting choice to go with the state convention delegates instead of the legislatures. Fewer people to deal with by magnitudes, wouldn’t you say? Not since 1933, I believe. Are you familiar with metadata, Mr. Brenton?” Hale said.

“Yes, of course. What the hell are you talking about?” Brenton said.

"The man that controls the delegates in thirty-eight states can control the destiny of the United States Constitution, Mr. Brenton," Hale said.

That shook Brenton. He raised his arms and crossed them around his chest, stepped backward, held a breath. Hale noticed the involuntary defensive gestures.

"You got the wrong guy here. I just do local political lobby work. Small time," Brenton said.

"The second lie from the third most powerful man on the planet," Hale said.

The light faded.

CHAPTER 6

Los Angeles Barrio. Jose Jorge Zepeda rose from shot-caller to unquestioned leader in the greater Los Angeles Area for Mara Salvatrucha, aka MS-13. Zepeda's reign of terror brought an end to the "no chief" structure of most MS-13 cliques. He also terminated paying taxes to La Eme, the Mexican Mafia.

He wore his typical blue tee shirt, LA Dodgers baseball cap and Nike Cortez sneakers. He was sitting next to a twelve-year-old Hispanic girl and handed her a loaded bong. He lit the bong with a gold lighter, and the girl inhaled. Zepeda was fully-tatted up, face, neck, arms, chest. He was wearing a chrome 1911 pistol on his belt and a gold chain-link style necklace with the letters MS dangling from it. Two Truchas entered.

"Blanco es aquí," the Truchas said.

"Bring his chele ass in," Zepeda said.

A very white guy entered. He was wearing a sports jacket and was blinking rapidly. Beads of sweat ran down the side of his head, he wiped them away. It was not hot in the room. The white guy handed a large manila envelope to Zepeda.

"Dame the fucking bong back bitch and open this," Zepeda said. The girl opened the envelope.

"I was to inform you that this person intends to publish your

profile with all this information at noon tomorrow. His office address is in there as well," the very white guy said.

"So this dude wants to make me famosa?" Zepeda said. "I'm already famous, right bitch?"

The girl nodded.

"Won't it bring more heat down on you?" the very white guy said.

"You sound like a fuckin' TV show, chele."

"What you gonna do, Jose?" the Truchas said, standing behind the very white man.

"Shut the fuck up," Zepeda said, then he started to laugh. He drew his 1911 from its holster and pointed it at the very white guy.

"This package was supposed to be an act of good faith from your law firm," the very white guy said. He started to back up, two hands landed on his shoulders, the tatted-up hands of the Truchas.

"Not excused yet maricon, the Truchas said.

"Maybe I green light the blanco messenger, ¿Qué piensas?"

"No Jose, No ensuciarse por favor," the girl said.

"Let the motherfucker go. You making him shake. El es un camarada," Zepeda said.

The hands lifted off the shoulders of the very white guy. Zepeda threw an envelope, one-inch thick, to the very white guy, and he caught it.

"Para mi consigliere," Zepeda said.

"Thank you. It will be delivered to the firm," the very white guy said as he turned and left the room, panic in his movements, on his face.

"Gracias a Dios para... crooked kikes," Zepeda said, notching up his voice.

The hills above Ventura, California. A post-and-beam-mid-sixties-modern inspired by Eichler Homes, but more square footage, a view of the Pacific. Exterior walls of glass, supported by matte charcoal black steel beams. Woods, metals, muted colors, a nine-by-six-foot Miro with jagged blues, blacks, and reds, jumping off the canvas. Metropolitan magazine Eames' hip. Austere. Van der Rohe, some Frank Lloyd Wright infused into the residence by the owner, Jackson Rand. The designers, several designers, and architects had gone through the revolving door working for their perfectionist boss.

The morning sun's rays darted through the broken pale marine layer and flickered across Jackson's face. Asleep in bed, he stirred, rolled to his side, onto a large bone, pulled the covers over his head. The tibia was the prized property of his female cattle dog-border collie mix, named Roberto, with on O. She sat on the foot of the king-size bed. She was the opposite of asleep, ready to go. Energy pent up, tail wagging, panting tongue, jonesing for exercise.

Main Street, Ventura, two blocks west of the PublicFigure building. Two gang bangers sat in an old van. In the back of the van, a forty-something-year-old gritty guy, a security alarm mercenary, worked on several pieces of electronic equipment. A last few keystrokes in a flurry and he waited. Lights flashed on his equipment.

"Should be nixed," the alarm contractor said.

He closed two laptops and starting packing up. The driver flipped an envelope toward him, and it flopped on the floor of the van.

The two gang bangers, Smoker and Gato, Mara Salvatrucha members, walked down Main Street. Gato carried a duffel bag. They turned into an alley, then left into another alley behind the commercial buildings fronting Main Street. Smoker pointed to the back of their target building. They slid ski masks over their heads.

Jackson was jolted awake by the unique klaxon sound of the alert from his smartphone that indicated a silent alarm went off in his office. Rem to wide-eyed in half a second.

“Roberto, off the bed with that bone,” Jackson said.

Roberto chomped down on it and bolted airborne, landing skillfully on three legs, always favoring her fourth that caused her to walk or gallop with a slight limp. Two seconds later, the bang of the doggie door in the kitchen slammed open. Jackson looked at his phone.

“Fuck.”

He started to dial, stopped, thought about it, canceled the dial.

The FBI caravan rolled down the 101 freeway led by three black SUVs with their light bars ablaze, sirens wailing. Behind the SUVs were two Lenco BearCat FBI armored SWAT trucks. Behind those were three more FBI SUVs. In the back seat of the lead vehicle were Agents Palmer and Garcia. Garcia dropped the magazine of his Smith and Wesson MP 9mm into his hand, racked the slide, caught the ejected round in the same hand holding the magazine, and racked the slide two more times to check the weapon.

He slammed the magazine into the pistol with a click, racked the slide to chamber a round, dropped the magazine again, added the round in his hand into the magazine, inserted the magazine again, then holstered the gun.

The teak garage door rolled up. Road King inside. Jackson mounted his sled and fired the twin V, the Supertrapps roared their deep decibel potato, potato, potato. He revved her, double-

checked that his pistol was shoved down into his waist holster, kicked the bike into gear, and was off.

Gato pried open a ground floor sliding window. Inside the offices of PublicFigure, the gang bangers surveyed the first-floor area, then made their way up the stairs.

Jackson killed the engine and glided to a stop on Main Street, two blocks away from the PublicFigure building. He ran up Main Street, building in sight. *No FBI, no squad cars, no SWAT van. This is something else.*

Agent Palmer looking out the window saw the freeway sign, Ventura next three exits, then California Street. The caravan slowed. The blinker signal, tick-tick, tick-tick. He pressed his palms together, stretching his forearm muscles.

“He’s not going to resist. Probably still at home anyway,” Palmer said.

“No suicide by cop today, huh? Still don’t have intel on that gap in his service record. Don’t like it,” Garcia said.

Gato removed two Vulcan M-11 9 mm subcompact machine pistols with extended magazines from the duffel bag. Then he removed ten yellow sticks, each an inch in diameter and twelve inches long. They were wrapped in two bands of electrical tape. Printed on the side of each stick, Ammonium Dynamite.

Jackson entered a side door, stepping onto the balls of his feet,

making no sound. He removed his SIG and drew back the hammer, stood still, and listened.

The FBI caravan moved along California Street and turned right onto Main Street in downtown Ventura. All the vehicles turned off their light bars. The SWAT boys readied their weapons. On the side of the road were three Ventura police cars and a SWAT van in wait. The Ventura crew moved in behind the caravan.

SIG at the ready, two-handed grip, Jackson moved through the ground floor hugging the walls. *Too quickly. Slow down, Step once, listen twice.* One room, then the next.

He stopped, inhaled deeply. *Faint but something.* Inhaled again. *Body odor. Cigarettes. Street noise. Too much street noise.*

He did a quick-look-and-pull-back into the kitchen area. Window open.

Intrusion.

Jackson felt his throat tighten and that pre-battle lump down deep. *Breathe. Focus. Call 911? Yes, probably should.*

Jackson squatted and placed his SIG pistol between his thigh and calf, removed his cell. His elbow bumped the garbage can. A slight rocking of the can. *Damn, that's mistake one. You're leaking. Stop it. Tighten up.*

He paused again.

Froze.

Listened.

Key jingling outside. Keys scraping into the lock. Jackson laser-focused on the back door. "Tina. Shit."

Upstairs, the gang bangers heard the keys too, froze.

Jackson rushed to the door, opened it, pulled the Starbucks straw from Tina's mouth, replacing it with his hand, keeping her quiet. "We may have an intruder. Stay right here. If you hear any commotion, leave out this door and call it in."

Tina nodded, eyes as big as the cover on her triple mocha frap.

Jackson lowered Tina to the floor.

Upstairs, the intruders screwed silencers onto their machine pistols.

A black and white sped up behind the motorcade, cranked sideways, fishtailing, a block from the building. Another Ventura black and white sped ahead two blocks, its light bar announcing game-time, sharp turn, too sharp, screeched to a stop in the middle of the street, blockade in place.

The FBI SWAT vans, their horse-power-amped-up engines growling over each other, braked hard, squealed, one last lurch forward, and stopped in front of the building. Stormtroopers on scene.

Another Ventura SWAT truck pulled around to the rear.

In the street in front of the building, doors flailing, the agents and officers hit the pavement. The SWAT team huddled behind the vehicles. Show of force – check.

Jackson heard the commotion outside. He looked down for a moment, knowing what it was. He lowered his pistol. Glanced up. *The second floor?*

Standing facing the front door, Agent Palmer dialed his cellphone.

Jackson's phone rang.

Smoker and Gato heard the commotion and the ringing phone. Bloodshot eyes darting, they moved to the head of the stairs, weapons ready.

"We're at your office. Don't see your bike. Gotta warrant for your office. SWAT surrounding the building. We're coming in," Agent Palmer said into his phone.

Two FBI agents approached the front door with a battering ram. Another agent knocked on the door.

"FBI Open the door!" he commanded.

"I'm here, Ben, don't break the front door," Jackson said into his phone. He holstered his SIG and pulled his biker jacket down, ensuring it covered the pistol.

"Did he call you Ben? Disrespectful, arrogant punk," Garcia said.

The gang bangers peeked to catch Jackson walking towards the front door. They lifted their Vulcan machine guns.

Jackson turned his head a fraction, never looking up the stairs. His training of extending his peripheral vision caught the odd shape along the wall line on the second floor. Jackson unlocked the door.

"Gato, he's letting his workers in. We take them too, homie," Smoker said.

"Sounds like they all fuckin' got here at the same time," Gato said.

"Shut the fuck up and get that thing ready," Smoker said, pointing to the dynamite. His nostrils flared, the veins throbbing in his neck. "Don't light it yet."

Jackson opened the front door. Agent Palmer and Agent Garcia entered, handed Jackson the search warrant.

"Fuckin' feds. Motherfuckin' Five-O dude," Smoker said. He backed away.

"We get down on fuckin' marranos," Gato said. "Then we Butch Cassidy the motherfuckers."

"You light it first," Smoker said.

"No shit, dumb ass. I light it, then throw it, then we come out blazing."

"If we light it, then throw it, then do the Bolivia thing, we pancake this motherfucking place and us with it, homie, no?"

"Well, what the fuck then do I do with this thing now?" Gato said.

Turning to Palmer, Jackson said, "Am I under arrest?"

"Not today," Palmer said.

"The day is young," Garcia said.

"Open up the back door, please. You'll need to step outside and keep your staff out until we are done," Palmer said.

His back facing the stairwell, Jackson placed his hand on Palmer's shoulder to stop him. Garcia jerked around and lifted his hands towards Jackson. Palmer stopped him. Jackson encircled his own wrist with his index finger and thumb, removed his hand,

extended his index finger, then pointed upstairs. Palmer knew what those hand signals meant. Jackson shook his head, a not-sure-who-is-up-there. They backed away from the stairwell.

"Silent alarm. May have an uninvited guest," Jackson whispered to Palmer.

"All agents, unsub possible second floor, stand by," Palmer said into his comm.

Ventura SWAT entered the back door. Tina rushed ahead of them to the front of the building, and Jackson grabbed her.

"You two get the hell out. Any idea who or how many?" Palmer said.

"No, just a silent. I never got eyes on."

Jackson shielded Tina, then stepped forward, a quick glance up the stairwell. A face darted out, a blur of color. Tats, lots of tats on the face. Smoker took one step down the staircase, squatted—*rat-tat-rat-tat-rat-tat*—fire erupted from the muzzle of his machine pistol.

The FBI returned fire. Bullets shredded the drywall along the stairwell.

Mayhem.

His ears ringing, Jackson's hearing instantly impaired. The echoes of the massive decibel attack on the eardrum, inches away from dozens of 9mm and .556 NATO rounds exploding within seconds. Sporadic bursts, the FBI returning gunfire. He was back in the battle zone, in the fog of war, the fog of chaos.

"Second floor, repeat, second floor," Palmer said into his shoulder mike.

Clouds of dust, exploding pieces of plaster, shards of glass.

A SWAT agent spun—a cloud of pink mist—the wall splattered with syrupy red, a mortal neck wound. Agent down.

Jackson pushed Tina past the doorway into the corner, past the aim of dragon's breath from the top of the stairs.

Garcia ran to the fallen agent, returned fire, dragged the body out the front door.

"Jackson," Tina said, her voice trembling.

She slumped holding the right side of her chest, blood oozing between her fingers.

"Tina. God damn it," Jackson said.

He caught her limp body and eased her to the ground.

"Ben, I need cover fire. Chest wound," Jackson said.

"Maintain your position," Palmer said.

"No time."

Jackson pulled back the hammer of the SIG, single-action now, moved just short of a view of the shooter. He exhaled once, two-hand grip, moved cat-like sideways to his left, nothing... then Smoker's face, in a fraction of a second he leveled the iron front sight, Bang! Center forehead hit. Jackson moved back to cover.

"Hit," Jackson said.

"Hold fire," Palmer said.

For a moment, a deathly silence.

Rat-tat-rat-tat-rat-tat from Gato's machine pistol.

"Second tango," Palmer called out.

The gunfire stopped. For a moment.

In one fluid motion, Jackson picked up Tina and fired his SIG, shooting without looking, *bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang*, towards the top of the stairs, driving Gato back and out of sight.

He carried Tina under his free arm, kicked open the front door, made it out.

The agents riddled the stairwell with bullets.

Outside two uniforms took Tina from Jackson's arms. Tina's mouth was wide open. No words were coming out of her mouth, but blood was.

"Tina," Jackson said, dread in his voice. He placed his hand on the wound on her chest.

Gato took two steps down the stairs and fired. Seven agents saw his feet, his body hidden by an overhand, and returned fire with carbines.

Gato retreated.

"Hit, I think I hit," an FBI Tac Team agent said.

“Clear the building, repeat, all agents clear the building,” Palmer said.

Sirens in the distance.

A paramedic van screeched to a halt in the street, next to the building.

Jackson carried Tina, her eyes rolling back.

“Listen to my voice, Tina, stay with me,” Jackson said.

Two paramedics ran up to Jackson and assisted with the carry. Jackson hopped into the back of the van and held Tina’s hand.

“Hold on, Tina, we’ll be there in seconds.”

Tina was in shock, turning white, eyes bulging. The paramedic van sped away.

Palmer and Garcia emerged and took positions behind the SWAT truck in the street. Hellfire rained down into the street from the second-story window. Bullets ricocheted off the windshields, the pavement, thud impacts into the bodies of the black and whites, bounced off the SWAT trucks. Echoing down the streets building to building.

“Unit two, second-floor window,” Garcia said.

An FBI Tac Team agent held the launcher to his shoulder. The gas grenades streaked towards their target. A vacuum thud sound, *Faoompht, faoompht*. The projectiles crashed through the second-story glass window. *Rat-tat-rat-tat-rat-tat*, the return fire from the window, then the gas flowed out the window.

A quiet. Just for a couple of seconds.

Then...

BOOM.

The roof of the top of the building lifted three feet. A fireball. The entire second floor of the building expanded sideways into a million pieces of wood, of steel, of paper, of smoke, of dust.

The force of the explosion knocked Palmer and Garcia onto their backs.

“Jesus Christ,” Palmer said.

Debris rained down on top of them.

"Brought in by the perps?" Garcia said. "Or did Jackson set this up to destroy evidence?"

"Not sure," Palmer said.

The two agents watched the building burn.

"We have a dead agent, Ben. Let's take Rand at the hospital. I want this fucker in cuffs."

CHAPTER 7

Ventura Community Memorial Hospital. Jackson exited the elevator, still covered in Tina's blood. He proceeded down the corridor, a long walk. He turned into a waiting room, and seated were Tina's mother and father, both in their late fifties. Jackson embraced them. Other staff members of PublicFigure arrived, filing out of the elevators and into the waiting room.

"She's in surgery," Jackson said to one of his web developers. "Doesn't look good."

Jackson turned and saw Palmer and Garcia at the end of the corridor, too far for Jackson to hear. He observed their animated, heated discussion.

"On what charge?" Palmer said. Hands open, spreading wide, a what-exactly gesture.

"Precharge detention, forty-eight hours," Garcia said. Pointing his index finger down the hall towards Jackson.

"We have no proof he blew that building to destroy evidence. At least not yet. His own person was shot," Palmer said. A hand on Garcia's arm, they stepped farther away.

"We have legal standing here, and in light of the five missing vics, we take in anybody and everybody on the basis of acting on intelligence. And something else."

"Yeah?"

“Why did this guy call you Ben?” Garcia said as he turned towards Jackson.

Jackson was gone.

The Hall of Justice, Los Angeles. The legendary Hall of Justice was a relic of a building, the oldest surviving government building in the Los Angeles Civic Center, an area of government buildings, both county and federal, that covered several blocks along Temple and First Street in downtown LA. Beaux-Arts architecture with facades that were identical on all four sides, the structure exterior was made from granite with huge columns encircling the upper floors. The upper section of the building featured stonework, bucrania ox skulls, acanthus leaves, and terracotta panels and a cornice cap.

Agents Palmer and Garcia walked briskly through the opulent grand lobby adorned with marble columns and a gilded coffered ceiling. As they walked, Garcia thought of the notable arrestees who had visited this landmark of justice, including Bugsy Siegel, Charles Manson, and Sirhan Sirhan. He’d read about the autopsies done in the basement years ago—Marilyn Monroe and Robert Kennedy.

The agents entered the district attorney’s section of the building and were shown into the DA’s office. Harris Riggs sat at her desk that was overflowing with case files; a black woman in her mid-forties, meticulously tailored Brooks Brothers chocolate brown business suit and white Faconnable dress shirt.

“Right now it’s like we are chasing a ghost. What do you have?” DA Riggs said.

The agents sat down in the two large red leather chairs in front of her desk.

“We need a warrant for Rand’s residence,” Palmer said.

“The judge already denied that. So what do you have on Rand other than what he has published that connects him to Hale?”

"His Sunlight List was Hale's road map."

"Road map? Navigate me this. What's your probable cause other than his website content? Do you have any witnesses? Do you have any reliable informants? Do you have any evidence that he has committed a crime? Do you have any evidence that connects him to Hale, a person we have zero information on?"

"He must have been supplying information to Hale," Garcia said.

"And your evidence is?" DA Riggs said.

"Probable cause," Garcia said.

"Let's say I present your warrant. You want wiretaps too. There is a little section on the warrant where we fill in the thing called evidence of a crime that can likely be found at the location. I'm not getting caught in another Comey-type debacle."

"Well, that would be anything tying him to the locations, the planning. What about all the corruption stuff on the captives that only he published? It's our theory that he motivated, or conspired with Hale to commit federal crimes," Garcia said.

Tilting her head, DA Riggs put her pen to her mouth. "So you're saying probable motivation?"

The agents shifted in their chairs.

"I think I am getting this now. A new legal theory related to the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution. So I tell the judge, your honor, you might be familiar with that pesky thing we have to comply with, you know, that probable cause stuff. But, it's not that, thank God, it's this new thing. Like one of those new *new* things. We just created it. Or, I should say two brilliant legal scholars carrying guns created it. Check this out, judge; it's called probable mo-ti-va-tion. So we're going to kick down some doors. I mean this guy blogged bad shit so we are going in like stormtroopers. Just sign here, please."

"So..." Garcia said, a help-me-out-here look. "It's conspiracy rather. I should have said that."

"So who tried to kill him and blew up his office?" DA Riggs said.

"They appear to be gang members, Mara we think. It is likely unrelated," Palmer said.

"MS? Uh huh. We know this guy Rand has a lot of enemies," DA Riggs said. "Here's something else. His website in the background of the Hale video. I have a report here from your cyber-crime division. Kinda like that Wayback Machine website, only better. This report tells me that particular home page of the PublicFigure website was launched online just minutes before you two guys interviewed Rand. Minutes. Which means the Hale video was taped between that launch and when you guys got in front of Rand. Like almost live. Or maybe live."

"Yeah, seems so," Garcia said. "So we can't place him with Hale at that time, but it does not exonerate him from conspiring or even being involved in the kidnappings themselves. That's what we think we're dealing with, a conspiracy of the alt-right."

"He could have..." Palmer said. He paused, thinking. "Let's assume Rand is the mastermind. He knows who his people are about to kidnap, so he makes an HTML file ahead of time. So Hale is taped before, maybe days before. Before the kidnappings occurred. He uses the background to throw us off. It's misdirection."

"That would be clever, but you have no..." DA Riggs said, waiting for the agents to fill in the last word.

"Evidence," Garcia said.

"What do you have on Hale?"

"We have a profile. They're finishing that up now," Palmer replied.

"Then go arrest the profile. Meeting over."

A staff member dropped Jackson off on Main Street in downtown Ventura. He leaned against his bike. Two blocks away, the fire department was still working on getting the last of the fire out at

his office building. For the past few hours, he'd had no time to think.

The baseball field was empty when Jackson rode his cruiser to a stop in the parking lot. Today he wanted to sit in the bleachers, the outfield. Alone. The field in front of him. No one to distract him. A rare moment. Jackson walked to the left-field bleachers and sat down. On the floor was the old baseball that Satchel held in his hand. He picked it up.

"Hey Satchel," Jackson said to the ball. "Need to see the next pitch coming."

Later, Jackson rode past his house and slowed. Two men were waiting out front in a pickup truck. He acknowledged them, did a U-turn, doubled back, pressed the remote that was in the small leather handlebar bag, the garage door opened, and he pulled the bike into the garage. The men got out of the truck, removed two large duffel bags from the truck bed, and walked into the garage.

In the kitchen, Jackson was on his back with Roberto, two front paws on his chest. The two men entered the kitchen—Mick, Hispanic, and Addy, black, stubbled faces, both ripped. Roberto greeted the men, knowing them well. Mick and Addy, old buddies of Jackson's, ran a small private security company based in Santa Barbara. They laid the bags on the barn-wood kitchen table. Jackson pulled out three Coronas and handed off two.

"We cleared the place before you got here. Gene and David are our eyes outside, thermals on perimeter. So, your office, a whiskey tango foxtrot, dude," Addy said.

"How's your assistant? Took one in the chest? That's so fucked. So what's the prog?" Mick asked.

"It's bad. Not sure yet. Out of surgery, now a waiting game," Jackson said.

"So, has AQ targeted you? Maybe an ISIS cell? Did'ya burn a Koran on video or what, dude?" Addy said.

"Punks were Mara," Jackson said. "We need expanded cameras, new infrareds, new power supplies, jammer detectors. What else?"

"Bangers? Can't shoot for shit. You're daylight here, man, why not go midnight? Your glass house digs are rad, Jackson, don't get me wrong, but can these panes stop a .30 cal boat-tail? Let's get real," Mick said.

"You brought the one-way film for the windows, right?" Jackson said.

"10-4, bud, in the rig outside," Addy said.

"If the FBI shows with a search warrant, just stand down. They're inbound soon, today, tomorrow, soon," Jackson said.

"Palmer?" Mick asked.

Jackson nodded. "When you wrap, take Roberto to your ranch. Problem?" Jackson said.

"No problem, *Senorita Roberto*, *mi casa el perro casa*," Addy said, kneeling to rub Roberto's belly.

Hours later, Addy and Mick finished up the security enhancements, and Jackson was lying on the living room floor. Next to him was a thick folder overflowing with papers and photos. Jackson sat up and picked up a dossier and opened it. First was a news article from 2010 about the former INTERPOL President Jackie Selebi, who was found guilty of corruption by the South African High Court in Johannesburg for accepting bribes of one hundred fifty-six thousand euros from a drug trafficker.

Jackson paged through a report from the EIA, the Environmental Investigation Agency, about ivory poaching in Africa. He skimmed the report highlighting that China was the world's largest destination for ivory. Next, he came to a summary of the National Ivory Action Plan and year-old meeting notes from the CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, including a report that alluded to rampant corruption, a lack of prosecution and widespread organized crime. The report went on to summarize the significant challenges in tackling elephant poaching and ivory trafficking, particularly in Kenya and Uganda.

The report continued, describing leading violators of poaching and illegal trade in ivory—China, Thailand, and the Philippines,

and their exit from an international initiative set up to curb the mass slaughter of elephants. They represented forty percent of the number of worldwide reported ivory seizures, and over fifty percent of the total weight of ivory seized worldwide in the last decade.

Jackson flipped through page after page until he found what he was looking for, a report marked Confidential from the World Wildlife Fund about a vigilante group known as SAP, Snipers Against Poaching. SAP had become notorious in certain parts of Africa. The small group of skilled outdoorsmen camped in places frequented by poachers and ambushed them, killing them with extremely long-range shots from high-powered rifles. The poachers' bodies were photographed, published on the Internet, then left for the hyenas and lions. Some of the postings included photographs of the bodies after the predators and scavengers had their way. Gruesome. Gruesome and powerful. A powerful message to aspiring poachers. Jackson smiled. *These fuckers had balls.*

Jackson found a photo he had studied before—a photo provided to him by a source at the NSA. A photo he was not authorized to have. The photo had been taken at a market in Nairobi, Kenya. Only a partial view of her face was visible. The person was of significantly smaller stature than the men in the photo, merchants, African market shoppers choosing fruit and vegetables. The person was not wearing a hijab on this day, but a scarf and a safari hat.

The photo had been taken just days before an African politician died. A politician rumored to have been involved in the illegal wildlife trade. Killed while he stood on his front porch, smoking a cigar at his country estate near Nairobi. By a bullet strike to center mass, fired from a .300 Win mag, long-range. Expert-marksman long-range.

Jackson examined the photo of the person at the market and smiled. The photo was grainy. But he knew.

It was a woman.

A woman he needed to find.

Now.

The old Range Rover was parked behind a small out-building, a one-bedroom guest house, adjacent to an olive tree grove near Ojai. In the living room kitchen combo, Cinder watched Casey oiling his Wilson baseball glove and smiled, a concerned mother's smile.

"Are you coming to my game tomorrow? It's opening day," Casey said.

"I'll be watching," Cinder said.

"When are we going home? I need to get my uniform."

"We'll pick it up later tonight."

"I really want you to be there. I have a new swing, you should see."

"I saw. That man you were working with the other day... did you know him before?"

"That's Coach Jackson. Yeah, no, he's kinda new, I think. He really helped me hit." Casey pounded his glove in excitement.

"I want you to stay away from him."

"No way, Mom. You don't know baseball."

The FBI Field Office, Los Angeles. The white mid-rise commercial structure on Wilshire in Los Angeles was known as the Federal Building, and housed one of the largest field offices of the FBI.

Agent Palmer entered a conference room. On the large central monitor was an image of Hale. Another monitor displayed demonstrators chanting "Who is Hale?".

Agent Garcia was already seated. Across the table was Interpol Officer Marc Le Mare. Interpol, the world's largest international police organization with one hundred ninety-four member coun-

tries, had a significant presence in the greater LA area. While Interpol officers did not have the authority to arrest people, their value was their investigative resources and extensive international network.

"Who is Hale?" Le Mare asked in a French accent.

"Not funny," Palmer said. He turned off the television with the demonstrators, then sat.

"You think he's a foreigner?" Le Mare asked.

"Don't know. You have anything on face recognition?" Palmer said.

"No matches and I'm assuming the same here?" Le Mare said.

"Affirmative," Garcia said.

"What about Quartus Optio?"

"Nothing previously. A take-off on Tertia Optio obviously. We're looking at that," Palmer replied.

"The motto of your Special Activities Division, SAD," Le Mare said.

"Not ours, that's CIA," Palmer said, a distinctive corrective tone in his voice.

"Of course," Le Mare said, playing along, letting the awkward silence hang.

Le Mare stroked his goatee. "Quartus? Starts with Q."

Garcia jumped in. "Another fucking Q to deal with. Yeah, we have analysts looking at that."

"This is different. Extreme action, not rants. Surgical. Precise," Palmer said.

"Maybe there is a real Q. All along. He was waiting," Le Mare said.

"And he struck. It's possible, but our thinking is this Hale is something very different," Palmer said.

"International chatter that your people see?" Garcia asked.

"Lots of chatter, but tangential," Le Mare said.

"So you got nada?" Palmer asked.

"Pretty much. Forensics?" Le Mare said, acting as if the question wasn't loaded, knowing the answer.

"Thousands of DNA samples," Garcia said.

"Thousands?" Le Mare said.

"The perps contaminated the scene. We think they used some kind of blowing device to spread thousands of hair and skin fragments into the air at the scenes," Palmer said.

"These folks you're chasing...a certain adeptness in their actions?" Le Mare said.

"Yeah, like they robbed hair salon garbage cans and blew the shit all over the place. We got DNA out the ass," Garcia said.

"Seems this Hale fellow is... has a sense of drama and...a sense de l'humour déformé," Le Mare said.

Turning to Garcia, Palmer said, "I think what our friend is saying is that Hale is fucking with us."

"Washington is pulling all the stops. Search bigger than Bin Laden," Garcia said. "You let us know what your people need."

"The background?" Le Mare said. "Could it be green screen?"

"We're looking at that," Palmer said.

Palmer slid a folder across the table to Le Mare. It was the preliminary profile on Hale. "Initially thinking Australian or New Zealander. Now our people landed on British. Best guess is raised in the Yorkshire area based on the dialect. Military trained. Highly intelligent. Probably college or beyond. Organized. Experience with technology. Probably saw combat. Based on his age, most likely Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, maybe Operation Shader. The Brits claim to have nothing on anyone even close to the guy in the video."

"Which means, if he's a Brit, former MI6, his file is classified. They have to come clean on this," Le Mare said.

"Executive branch is working their channels," Garcia said.

"Above your pay grade?" Le Mare said.

"Something like that. I've reached out to some of my old contacts. Nothing yet," Palmer said.

"We have dispatched incident response teams to all locations, as you know. Our secretary-general has made this our top priority.

We have an Interpol yellow alert internationally for all five, of course. And the cards?" Le Mare said.

"Working it. Any thoughts on this cuda thing?" Garcia asked.

"Not a real word obviously. Parallel computing, barracuda? Killer fish? Aggressive. Or muscle car?" Palmer said.

Garcia crossed his arms, leaned back. "Computing probably. Quantico is running thousands of permutations on all five words. Funny thing, though. Why would a Brit use blood of tyrants? The tyrants in that phrase refer to the Brits."

"Maybe a falling out with MI6. Off the rez?" Le Mare said.

"It's possible," Palmer said.

"What about forensics on the video itself?" Le Mare said.

"Not much to go on except he watches the news."

"Yes, and that. What of this guy Rand with PublicFigure? His list?" Le Mare asked.

"I assume you heard about the attempted hit?" Garcia replied.

"Yes. You've ruled out that it's Rand in disguise I assume?" Le Mare asked.

"Different height, bone structure, extremity dimensions. It's someone else," Palmer said.

"But if he is not the mastermind, he's still dirty," Garcia said.

"Person of interest. We're not sure how the hit on him plays into this. Or doesn't. The guy had lots of enemies before all this started," Palmer said.

"And on the hit... not just terrorists I presume?" Le Mare asked.

"MS bangers. This guy's site, the PublicFigure thing, has lots of dossiers on wanted terrorists and politicians and business-people suspected of financing terrorism. A theory floating around is that he was about to publish a series on the leaders of Mara LA," Palmer said.

"This guy uses deep sources and hacking to dig this shit up. We suspect ex-NSAers. We have an open investigation on that subject alone. We don't want another Snowden. We should get you that data as well. What do you have on him?" Garcia asked.

“Interpol has a file on him, but it’s incomplete. We would like to see your latest information. So you think he was in contact with Hale?” Le Mare asked.

“There’s something more than coincidence about the victims and his Sunlight List,” Garcia said.

“Like what?” Le Mare asked.

An assistant approached the agents and set a packet on the conference table.

“Like what we hope to find in his residence,” Garcia replied.

Palmer held up the papers so the first page was visible to Le Mare.

“Search warrant for his residence.”

CHAPTER 8

The Chateau.

“Please have a seat, Madam Speaker,” Hale said.

Susan Arnold, standing in the kitchen, dropped her wineglass.

“Damn it,” she said.

“I’ll have two more bottles sent in.”

“Why did you kidnap me?”

“Your node,” Hale answered.

“What?”

She rubbed one of her pant legs, the other leg bounced up and down. Hale observed her body language.

“Your NSA contacts are using Marina, Mainway, BullRun and other programs to analyze big data, the metadata in particular, of your political opponents. Not as egregious as the Brennan Clapper Lynch operation from years ago, but still illegal.”

“That’s more Fox News bullshit.”

“Not quite. I’ve seen the data. Analysis of your node is quite a storybook.”

“My node?”

“Your node, Madam Speaker. When one extracts your node out of the web of billions of people, your personal web comes with it—all relationships, timelines, communications, financial, social, all of it. It tells us stories. Stories that landed you on the

PublicFigure corruption Sunlight List. I'm sure you've heard the story about the father of a sixteen-year-old high school student raging at Target for mailing his daughter maternity products. He claimed the store was encouraging her to get pregnant."

"Let me guess. She already was. They knew that based on her buying habits," Susan said.

"The allegations on that website are just more sour grapes by the alt-right talk radio Nazis. If you're expecting any type of confession, ain't gonna happen. Screw you."

"I have no interest in your confessions. I'm well aware of all your transgressions, legal or otherwise. No, I leave that between you and a jury of your constituents. Or peers, if it ever gets that far."

"My metadata, as you call it, is undoubtedly classified, which means you're a criminal."

"I committed a federal crime by detaining you. We're in quite a different domain, Madam Speaker."

"What domain is that?"

"The domain of complex adaptive systems."

"You lost me."

"Are you familiar with the Santa Fe Institute?"

"I've heard of it. What does that have to do with me?"

"They study complex adaptive systems. You represent a part, a component in a system, of the whole," Hale said.

"What part? What system? You mean the American government?" she said.

"No, Madam Speaker. Your data reveals your part. You think you have a perfect understanding of your political agendas, public or secret, legal or corrupt. You are here so we can ascertain what understanding you have of the impact of your actions on the system, that is one. And two, we want to ascertain if you know what the whole system is and its ultimate behavior."

"Ultimate behavior?"

"The endgame, Madam Speaker. Do you know the endgame?"

The lights went out in Hale's room.

Heinrich Tenner sat on the couch motionless. Staring at the blackened window. The television monitor above the window began a montage of news videos—riots in the streets, runs on the banks. Tenner jumped to his feet.

“Hale!” Tenner said, a call of anger.

The light. At first, Tenner was not sure, then, yes, the light was increasing. Hale sat motionless in the chair. Staring at Tenner. The video montage froze on an image of a run on a bank.

“Let. Me. Out. Of. This. Place,” Tenner demanded.

“Weaken the U.S. financially, maybe to the point of no return, with massive social programs,” Hale said.

“I’m not an American politician. I had nothing to do with that,” Tenner said.

“No, not directly, of course. But it fits nicely into your phase one.”

“What phase?” Tenner said.

“What you see on the monitor.”

“Let’s discuss your phase two, shall we?” Hale said.

“You’re another conspiracy freak. Phase two of what? For what? You’re insane, man,” Tenner said.

“Power, financial power. It is always about power, is it not?”

“I do not control U.S. financial policy. What is wrong with you?” Tenner said.

“When your cabal denies loans to the United States, you do more than just influence it, yes?” Hale said.

“Cabal?”

“To avoid a default when trusted sources balk unexpectedly, what is a nation to do?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You are one of the brightest minds in finance. In the world, some say. So tell me.”

Tenner stood and paced behind the couch, like a chess master unsure of his next move.

"Currency issue," Tenner said, a tone of reluctance.

"Massive currency issue to pay the U.S. debt, which begets inflation which begets a plummeting dollar," Hale said.

"Inflation, yes, probably."

"A shift in power. In essence, a financial coup d'état. Phase two. We are in phase two, you see, my good man. You and your people have been masterfully keeping much of this out of the mainstream media. The corrupt media."

"You sound like Trump did years ago."

"No, he just disregarded the debt crisis, that was negligence. You are manipulating it. You, others, your handler."

"My handler? The United States is the strongest economy..."

"Let's move on. Are you familiar with metadata?" Hale said.

"Did you demand a ransom for my release?" Tenner said.

"No."

"What in God's name do you want?"

"Clarity. Was it during your time at the Santa Fe Institute, a very credible organization I might add, during your time there with Alec Proditors, that the two of you laid out the plan for a global bank, an ascendant bank?"

"I have run a global bank for years."

Hale looked for a tell. Hard to see from a distance. Tenner was good at this.

"But not an ascendant bank with unparalleled power," Hale said.

Tenner was unshaken.

"Powerful enough to assume the debt, Mr. Tenner."

The light in Hale's room went out.

Donald Sturitz was standing behind the couch. Hale stood behind the chair with his arms crossed.

"You're a master manipulator," Hale said.

"My politics are what makes my show. My audience loves my

rage. And they love to rage themselves, against their enemies," Sturitz said.

"And your future audience?"

Sturitz walked around the couch and sat.

"Those fresh minds, too young to vote," Hale said.

"Not my demographic obviously," Sturitz said.

"Not of your show on CNN. I am referring to your other work."

Sturitz broke off eye contact. He picked at his index fingernail with his thumbnail. Scratched his neck.

"My work is exclusive to CNN," Sturitz said.

Hale leaned in slightly, examining Sturitz closely, then said, "As a young man, you had jobs in the tech sector, used to write code, I believe. An earlier life. A life that was never quite left behind."

Not surprised by the allegation, Sturitz immediately snapped back, "I haven't had a job in the tech sector for decades. It's public fucking record, asshole."

Hale leaned back and smiled.

"I have a talk show, you dumb ass. I'm in the content business," Sturitz said.

"The content business? Yes. One could say that you are an expert in the content business."

Sturitz did not respond.

"Up to speed on the newest content technologies, are you?"

"I talk for a living."

"I am referring to TensorFlow, highly optimized C++."

Sturitz stirred uncomfortably. Rubbed his bald head.

"I suspect you leave the work in CUDA to others, overseas, your node indicated that. I am sure you know they're Chinese, Russian and North Korean. Not even American hackers."

"I have no idea what the fuck you are talking about," Sturitz said.

"CUDA. Mr. Sturitz."

"What's CUDA?"

“Another lie, Mr. Sturitz. You forgot about the metadata? Your frequent communications, however clandestine, with various developers, some of which are experts in CUDA, compute unified device architecture,” Hale said.

The monitor above the window lit up, and a video began. Ryan Fleming, a Republican candidate for Senator, was wearing a softball uniform. He was standing next to a dugout speaking to one of his players. The caption read: *Ryan Fleming, coach of his daughter's softball team, motivates a player in a slump.* The camera slowly zoomed in on his right hand, and it stroked the back of the player, consoling her, then crept up under the back of her jersey. The girl winced. The candidate placed his left hand on her shoulder in an attempt to calm her, and his right hand rose, then slid down below her belt. The video froze. The caption changed to: *She's warmed up now.* The video ended.

“Expert content,” Hale said.

“Had nothing to do with that,” Sturitz said.

“This video ran for sixty-eight hours on social media before being pulled. Your people made a mistake on this one. Yes, Congressman Fleming coached his daughter’s softball team. Yes, some guy was feeling her up. But this girl was not on his daughter’s team, not at that game. Oops. You guys got sloppy. They nailed getting his image in the deepfake down to his wedding ring but forgot to swap out the player. The beauty of your work here is that the man’s actions were subtle. Happened quickly. You leave most of the transgression to the mind of the audience like a skilled film director. The knife never touches Janet Leigh in the shower but the audience, when questioned after, swore it did. Brilliant work, Mr. Sturitz. Except for an error so simple it was overlooked by your minions,” Hale said.

“You have no proof of my involvement.”

“Your metadata reveals your connection.”

“Fuck you, Hale or whatever your name is. Fuck fucking off. What do you want with me?”

“This deepfake is understandable. A candidate you do not

support. What is not so easily understood is why you created similar deepfakes targeting both Democratic and Independent candidates. That is far more curious. It reveals a more diabolical endgame and I have yet to ascertain if you know what it is."

"An endgame?" Sturitz said.

Glenn Woo was in the kitchen. He noticed the light. Hale entered the other room and sat down.

"Mr. Woo," Hale said. "Do you know Donald Sturitz?"

Woo moved to the window and examined it.

"I've met him, so what?" Woo said.

"Thank you for that answer. But just met him? Is that an accurate characterization of the relationship?"

"I've met him. He's famous. So what? I watch his show like a million others. What's your point?"

"The metadata, Mr. Woo. Please remember the metadata."

Hale waited. Woo walked to the couch and sat.

"Your background in advertising is impressive, Mr. Woo. I believe it was years ago, you gave a speech and commented on a canon of advertising strategy."

"What speech?"

"Step one, mold their perception, then elicit congruent attitudes. Trigger social pressure..."

"Yes, yes. M, E, T. I know the rest. Methods. A well-known acronym in the advertising industry. Liquor companies used to use it, dozens of other Fortune 500 companies."

"Yes. That is true. Habituate the message, optimize, drive their momentum."

"You forgot the last one."

"I did? Careless of me. What's the last one in the acronym?"

"Sustain."

"Sustain their compliance," Hale said.

"Yes," Woo said.

"That last one is the capper, is it not? Sustain their compliance. Like almost without them realizing it, would you say?"

"I would not say."

"I see. Would you say sensory stimuli below an individual's threshold of conscious perception?"

Woo flinched, then blinked several times. Hale observed the reaction. Waited for an answer.

"Subliminal advertising has been illegal for years," Woo said.

"Yes, on television, in magazines," Hale said.

Woo looked away. Hale did not.

The light faded.

Reporter Darren Dane was on the street in Fort Myers, Florida.

"All the candidates continue to call for the hostages to be released, Martha. I'm on the street with some of the voters. These people are feeling it here in South Florida, just seventeen days from the election. Oty Rotteba has closed some of the gap on the president but is still too far out to be anything but a spoiler. This state, as everyone knows, comes down to the Hispanic vote, so the president should win this state going away over Republican Trig Mason. The old Cubans down here are traditionally GOP, but their children that are voting age are breaking democratic, some with the independent Rotteba, but mostly going blue."

Behind Darren were the voters, a mixed crowd, holding signs *Oty's the One, Cannesco Can Still Do it, Mason's the Man*.

Tanner Carlsbad was working the big map on the magic wall in the Fox studio.

"Our latest polls are showing Cannesco at forty-eight percent, Mason at thirty-seven percent and Rotteba, the spoiler, at ten percent and five percent undecided. It's clear, Martha, that if Rotteba drops out, particularly if he directs his supporters to vote for the president, our internal polling shows that about eighty percent of the Rotteba voters would vote democratic, that is if he

isn't in the race. That would put the president at fifty-six percent, and probably at an unbeatable three hundred plus electoral votes," Carlsbad said. "Let's go now to Pam Krissy in Charlotte, North Carolina following the Rotteba campaign. Pam, is there any word from within the campaign that Oty will drop out of this race if the race tightens between the president and the republican Mason?"

Pam Krissy was at a rally. Behind her, the stage, empty podium, supporters in the stands with signs, *Bonfire Demublicans, Fire Both, People Party, Rotteba, Oty's the One, Break Thru Wall, Tear Down, Tear Up, Rottebica.*

"No, not at all, Tanner. In fact, what they're saying is that what is going on in the country with the financial collapse, interest rates soaring, loss of jobs, health care a continued debacle, that voters may not tell the truth in these polls and will turn their back on both big political machines. As you know, Rotteba is an open border candidate, and an advocate for decriminalizing all undocumented immigrants, there's a lot of resentment of the establishment in his far-left base, at least that is what I see swirling around out there. The bottom line, Tanner, don't believe these polls. What is certain is that there are a lot of unhappy Americans, and how that translates to voting, we're not sure. Not yet anyway," Krissey said.

"Let's go now to Jesse Ruiz in Philadelphia at a rally for the Mason campaign. Jesse, what's going on there?"

"What we're seeing, Tanner, are cracks in the establishment, the GOP bases. There is so much disconnect in the country that we're seeing bases weakening, voters stating they are staying home or unsure if they will switch parties," Ruiz said.

CHAPTER 9

It was opening day for the Ventura Coastal Little League Fall Ball season, a three-month stretch of additional baseball made possible by the great weather of Southern California.

During games, Jackson sat in his usual high perch behind home plate on the third-base side. Hoodie and shades. Anonymous. Observing. His spot in the stands that he would come to for the laughter, for the innocence, for the solace. His spot where nostalgia would liquefy his eyes.

Today, however, a special day. All the age brackets were in the ballpark at once, the pee-wee tee-ballers, or as parents and coaches loved to refer to them, the herding cats division. Then there were the minors, the majors, the intermediates, the juniors and the big kids, the seniors up to age sixteen.

The juniors and seniors were here for the grand celebrations, the fanfare, the music, the games, the food trucks and food tables, not so much the speeches or the introductions or the vendor booths. Mostly the food. Definitely, the food, because they did not play in this ballpark. They played on a ball field a few hundred yards away with regulation distances.

The pitching mound at Wrigley West was only forty-six feet. The tee ballers got to play on this field for special games. But they had their own little tiny field. The heart of Little League, the

players for this field, were the minors, majors, and intermediaries, ranging from ages five to thirteen. Mostly boys, but some girls did play, which added an interesting dimension and great fun.

The tee-ballers, what was not to love? Their uniforms three sizes too big, dragging in the dirt. And the ones that fit, or close to it, still droopy, reminded Jackson of the old-timers, Satchel's days, even back to Ty Cobb days, with their pancake gloves and their baggy pants, bellowing and flapping as they ran the bases.

Baseball. The crack of the bat hitting the ball. It had changed through the years, now alloy bats. They sounded different to Jackson, hollow. He longed for the crack. The crack of ash wood hitting a hardball. Hitting it solid. Pure. Flush. Hitting right through the ball. Driving it. That sound. That sound of baseball in the spring. America. Little people playing real baseball in a green field America.

Satchel made his way up the stands, sat next to Jackson and patted him on the back.

"You dun real good hea, real good, boy," Satchel said.

"It's a great day, the best, huh?" Jackson said.

Satchel removed three six-by-four-inch miniature flags from his overalls. They were white with a large blue W on them.

"One, I keepin' it fer safe keepin'. One, dis one's fer you. Dis one hea's fer your son. You give dat one to yer son when you git one, and let's God be to his ears he loves baseball. Baseball keep him on da straight an narrow."

"Fly the W. I love it. Thanks Satchel."

"I give dis ta you cuz you be a winner, Jackson, building dis hea place. Like a durn church. God's hea on dis day, he's watchin dis day. Dese hea flags, cuz you a winner. You dun forgit dat otha tin, it long gone, you hea? I still see dat in yer bleedin' eyes. You gotta piss out dem demons, boy. Ya hea me, boy? You a winner right hea. Dis yer W. You keep dat one. The otha's fer down da road."

"I appreciate that."

"You keep it in yer pocket. Every day, boy. Satchel slapped Jackson's knee. Now I gotta gits back to work."

Satchel climbed down the stands. Jackson rubbed the flags.

"Fly the W," he said.

Jackson eyeballed a city council member at a vendor table. She reminded him of the time he first met her, just over two years ago.

It was a city council meeting. He was making an unusual offer to the city of Ventura. He told the members he would finance the construction of a new Little League field, all the costs, both soft and hard. That gave them pause right away.

He had two conditions. He saw the looks on their faces, the ok-here-comes-the-catch looks. Outrageous interest paid by the city. Huge development fees on top of the construction. Some kind of kickback, somewhere, somehow. Something.

No, he assured them. He was thinking, *Jesus you people love to talk, just shut the fuck up for a minute*, but he said, "Please let me explain."

One, his donation would be totally anonymous. His name would not appear anywhere, and they would agree in writing not to reveal the source of funding. Second, he would be the lead designer, with the help of very qualified architects, of course. He would also supervise construction. His commitment to the city—it would be the best Little League field ever built. And the city would own it. The city would control any cash flow generated. Total win for the city, is what he told them. But the real winner would be the players.

It would not be unique, however, not exactly, Jackson disclosed. A field had been built years before, one similar to what he had in mind. That field was in Freeport, Illinois and was called Little Cubs Field. It was inspired by Wrigley Field in Chicago where the Cubs played. He required the city to agree to the name Wrigley West. Some on the city council tried to talk

him into building a miniature version of Chavez Ravine, where the Dodgers played, but that was a deal-breaker. He explained the magic of Wrigley field. A timeless ballpark in a changing world.

He went on to explain that he planned to build this Little League park, this ballpark, their ballpark, even better than Little Cubs Field. With walls all around it, red brick walls like the real Wrigley. Green ivy on the red brick walls. Real dugouts, actually dug out, lower than the main field. Bullpen phones. Foul poles and flags. Bleachers in the outfield. The big hand-operated center-field scoreboard. And out front. Out front would be a handmade, larger-than-life, art deco marquee, *Wrigley West, Home of Ventura Little League*, it would read.

Some of the city council folks did not believe Jackson, and yelled out, "Are you nuts? This will cost several million dollars." But Jackson smiled. He told them an exact number down to the dollar. They asked him how the hell he knew that.

He proceeded to roll out the blueprints and removed a large three-ring binder from his oversized saddlebag-type satchel, and showed them the construction docs, the bids, the civil plans, the utility plans, the landscaping plans, the parking plan, the works. The city council chamber became quiet. Stunned. In closing, he said, "And just think how much money the city can make renting Wrigley West out in the offseason. Have you thought about that?"

Minds raced.

As Jackson was leaving, a member asked him why. "Home," he said. "It's home."

Jackson turned his attention back to the ceremony which was wrapping up. The teams were dispersing from the field. Jackson focused on the intermediary team, and spotted Casey, number 7, looking around, looking for someone.

Jackson made his way down the stands as he maintained eye

contact on Casey. A woman, older Hispanic woman, waved to Casey and he waved back. They got into her car and drove off.

Jackson got in his Ford F-150 Raptor and followed the car through Ventura, passed through the rural town of Casitas Springs, past the *Home of Johnny Cash* sign, into the forest, drove through Ojai into the Topatopa Mountains. The car turned off onto a dirt road, and Jackson lagged back, paused for a few seconds and followed the dust trail to a turnoff. The car headed up an incline, rising a couple hundred feet to a mesa, stopped at a gate of an avocado farm. The woman got out, unlocked the gate, drove through, then relocked the gate and continued into the orchard.

Jackson parked, put on his leather jacket, and started walking. Following the road between the trees, he walked for a good mile. He came to a small farmhouse. Water well, windmill, two barns. Behind the farmhouse, another building, small, cottage-like. Behind it, a Range Rover and the car he'd followed. From his hoodie pocket, Jackson removed his ten-by-forty Zeiss binoculars, found a good vantage point, turned his smartphone to silent, and glassed the area.

Twenty minutes later, the woman exited the back of the cottage alone, got into her car. Jackson moved back into the avocado orchard while she passed, then resumed his position and glassed the cottage. *All windows covered from this angle.* Jackson moved through the orchard to a hundred yards from the cottage, casing the perimeter. Nothing unusual. He tightened the circle and kept moving. Something metallic in the trees. Caught the sunlight. He glassed it. Pale gray circle object on a pole. He moved in. It was a three-foot-diameter satellite dish. The ground had been recently disturbed. *She put this dish here within the last few days.*

Door slammed. Jackson moved closer. Casey out back. *Bong.* Jackson moved towards the sound. *Bong.* Something hitting the

side of a barn. Casey was throwing a rubber baseball. Jackson kneeled down, watched, thinking how to play it.

Approach Casey first, he knows me, ask him to go tell his mom I just want to talk. He'll vouch for me.

Knock on the front door, palms up, nothing concealed, nothing to fear.

Third option. No cell to call. No message to text. No email to send. No third option.

Jackson walked towards the cottage. *Wait, there's a third option. I disable the dish. She comes out to troubleshoot. Palms up, I just want to talk. We'd be on equal ground out in the open. No Casey. Don't involve the boy.*

Jackson walked back to the satellite dish and examined the connections. *Disable it temporarily. Don't break it.*

Off to the side was a ladder. Jackson leaned it against the pole and climbed. A coax cable was connected to a diplexer box. He started to unscrew it.

"Get down and keep your hands above your shoulders," Cinder said, standing fifteen feet away.

"Ms. Cinder Stowe," Jackson said.

"Get down or I'll put two in your back and one in your head."

"The Mozambique drill. Where'd you get your training?" Jackson said. He climbed down.

"Hands on your head."

Jackson clasped his hands behind his head and turned around. Cinder held a pistol with both hands, ready stance, centered on Jackson's chest. Jackson's eyes did not look down at the gun that could end his life in an instant. He was captured, but not by the gun, but by something else.

Her face. That pissed-off fashion model face, sans makeup face, that said don't-stare-at-me-I-am-not-your-fucking-object face. That don't-stare-at-me-don't-say-a-word expression. Then it occurred to Jackson, she was trying hard to look plain, even ugly. She was failing miserably. Like the B-side of a hit single, but if you

actually listened to the B-side. It was better. She was the *I am the Walrus* to the A-side *Hello Goodbye*.

"I come in peace," Jackson said. "My name is Jackson Rand, and I just want to talk. I won't turn you in."

"I know who you fucking are. You're Hale. You deceived me and put my son in jeopardy. Now walk. Hands come down, you die."

Cinder pointed the muzzle of the CZ pistol to a path leading away from the cottage.

"Okay," Jackson said.

He turned toward the path, then paused. It was her hair. Cut short, a bit jagged, not lying flat, wild-looking. It had a silky sheen to it and caught the sunlight in different ways when she moved her head, almost like a prism. Then the eyes. This close, he could see her eyes clearly. Blue eyes anyone could see, but this close, he was captivated by them; they appeared purple. Purple eyes a dazzling contrast against her dark hair, almost black. Black like something inside her.

"Move," she said.

"I run PublicFigure.com. I'm an investigative journalist. I know you're our deep source. You're safe with me."

"Walk."

Jackson proceeded down the path. Cinder stayed behind him, ten feet.

"Where we going?"

"Shut the fuck up and walk."

They came to the end of the orchard. And the end of the mesa. Below them was a steep slope, two hundred yards down. Jackson stopped at the edge and turned around. He focused on her eyes, an intense penetrating stare. She noticed, and it caught her for just a moment. She fought off any tinge of curiosity rising. Jackson thought he saw a glimpse of a change in expression; then she snapped back to game-face. Jackson took a half step forward. *She is enraged that I found her. Sure. There is that. But, behind those violet eyes is a burning flame, an eternal flame of revenge not realized. I see it.*

"Stop," she said.

"No one knows who you are, I assure you. I have not, nor will I, give you up, ever. You're the most prolific hunter of secrets of the duplicitous demagogues. You completed every assignment every time and were paid exorbitantly. Every time except one," Jackson said.

"How did you find me?" Cinder said.

"What you didn't give me."

Jackson waited for a reaction. Her gaze burned. Burned that flame from deep down and right out her laser eyes. Right through him. Cinder regripped the pistol. She widened her stance ever so slightly. Jackson noticed. He looked closely at her throat. She swallowed. Nerve hit. Cinder cocked the hammer back on the CZ.

"Who else knows about me?"

"I told you, no one. Not even my people."

"You mean your mercenaries."

"My editors."

"You're the hunted now," she said.

"You were reckless to move into his orbit, Cinder," Jackson said.

Bang!

Cinder fired a round at the ground, twelve inches next to his foot. Jackson did not flinch. Cinder's eyes widened. Her lips tightened. His coolness surprised her.

"Don't call me by name. You know nothing about me," Cinder said.

"I'm not your enemy," Jackson said.

The aim of the muzzle moved from the ground back to Jackson's chest.

"He burned me down. One of my people got shot," he said. Jackson took a step closer to Cinder.

"Stop."

"He has some type of endgame."

"I don't care."

"The only assignment where you failed. Produced nothing."

"Maybe there was nothing to find."

"Or maybe it's because someone else is targeting him. For some other reason."

Cinder's eyes dove deep into his—searching—then broke off, a look of concern on her face.

She wants to ask me what I know about her, but she won't.

"You received corroborating evidence of corruption and crimes. That's in the past. We're done," she said.

"The past. Yes. I'm concerned about what will happen in the future. The near future."

"Got nothing to do with me."

"Except it does. Joshua Proditores."

Cinder's head jerked back, a fraction. Her posture stiffened. The muzzle nudged forward an inch.

Lowering his hands slowly, Jackson said, "Joshua is a rich clown. It's Alec you're after. Why?"

Jackson took a half step.

"I need to know everything you know," he said.

"Mom! What are you doing?" Casey screamed. Cinder flinched.

Bang!

The gun went off.

Jackson, hit in the right side, spun around by the impact.

Knocked backward.

Fell to the ground.

Disappeared over the cliff.

“Mom, Goddamnit,” Casey said. “Mr. Jackson?”

Casey ran towards the cliff but before he got to the edge, Cinder scooped him up off the ground.

The energy field of the bullet was like being hit with a bat. No pain, at least not yet—blunt force power. Jackson was airborne ten feet over the edge of the cliff.

I must have been tight. Must have tightened my muscles prior, to have it throw me like it did. Did the bullet exit?

All those thoughts in a microsecond, mid-air, mind faster, time slower. Then...

Get ready for the hit.

The glancing blow on the rocks, tumbling. *Look down. Catch the fall. Spinning. See now, must see below.*

Jackson spread his arms and legs wide to resist gravity, catch branches, rocks. Stop the fall.

Burning. Moving the right arm out. Now the pain. The horrible burning sensation. Hot. Hot pain. I have been fucking hit. Again.

Pump it. Pump the adrenaline. Stop the fall. Slow down, or I'm dead. Broken bones dead. Blunt force dead. Broken at the bottom of the canyon dead. Bleeding out dead.

More burning while tumbling. Hot needles fire burning. Wound expanding. Pounding. Burning.

Dull blunt thud impact to the stomach. Bent over wet-rag.

Jackson hit a tree protruding at a forty-five-degree angle from the wall of the canyon. Body, organs, limbs abrupt stop. Breath forced, gone.

Can't breathe. No oxygen.

Turning white. With great effort, he lifted a leg over the tree branch. Slid down to the bottom of the canyon.

Another shot. The final kill shot. Is it coming? Is she taking aim?

He muscled a turn to look up the face of the jagged rock wall. The edge not visible. Nothing but wall and trees and rock and canyon and forest. No Cinder.

Assess now. Is there an exit wound? Think there is. Process, remember your training. Feet, check, both there, can move them, check. Legs, must have broken legs. Knees cut open, bending legs hurts like hell. Don't think they're broken. Arms, in one piece. Head, cuts. Definite concussion. Bad. Will pass out soon. Need to stay awake. Feel my head. Damn, fingers broken. SIG still in holster. Strong Kydex.

Burning. Gunshot, bleeding like hell. Gotta stop the fucking bleeding. Now. Don't have long to stop the loss. Stay awake. Fight it. Body wants to succumb. Shock. How many times have I been in shock? Tissue perfusion.

Your training. Gonna lose oxygenated blood to vital organs. Bleeding out. Hemorrhagic shock. Compensating on autopilot. Feeling heart rate now. Rapid. 100 beats per minute, more. Soon will shunt blood from non-vital areas to vital. Vasoconstriction. Blood vessels in the skin will constrict, moving blood to the core. Compensated shock now, blood will work hard to maintain enough blood pressure to oxygenate the brain and my vital organs.

"Stop the bleeding or I'm dead."

CHAPTER 10

The old Range Rover crept along a street in West Los Angeles in traffic. Casey in the back seat. Boxes stacked throughout the vehicle.

"You killed him. I hate you," Casey said, kicking the back of the front seat.

"He was going to take you away," Cinder said.

"Liar. He was just one of the dads."

"That man has no children."

"How do you know? Then what was he doing at baseball? You're lying again."

"Stalking you. He was gonna hurt you. He's a pedophile."

Casey kicked the back of the driver's seat again. "Liar. You always lie to me."

"Stop that. It's for your own good."

"I hate you."

Traffic came to a complete halt. Bumper to bumper Carmageddon, but this was different. Something worse. People were agitated, yelling at each other, pounding steering wheels. Cinder turned on the radio.

"Yes, Jesse, at every major bank. The ATMs at some banks, most banks from what we hear, are no longer working. The trading on the New York and NASDAQ has been halted. Just

prior, the DOW dropped over four thousand points. There are runs on banks across the country."

Boom.

A fist hit the hood of the Range Rover. The man kicked the bumper of the car in front of Cinder. Enraged. Mobs on the move. *Ka-shh.* Cinder cranked her head to the side to look. The plate-glass window of the storefront window shattered, shards splintering across the concrete sidewalk. Looters the new normal.

Jackson's residence, Ventura Hills. Surrounded by yellow police tape. FBI Vans and Trucks parallel parked, stacked up, down the street.

In Jackson's home, the fingerprint crew dusted hard surfaces, applied the clear tape and removed prints. The search crew opened, examined, lifted, removed, and examined everything and everywhere in Jackson's house. The DNA team went to work in the kitchen.

"Gun safe in the bedroom closet," an FBI agent said.

"Drill it," Garcia said.

On the table, next to the search warrant was a DNA compulsion order. Agents Palmer and Garcia, wearing nitrile gloves, were standing in Jackson's study-home office. Garcia studied the large bookcase that spanned the wall behind Jackson's desk. He held a thick folder in his hand.

"Dossier still not complete. Guy was paramilitary, but something tells me you knew that," he said.

"Told you he was a vet before we went in," Palmer said.

"Three years are missing. Three years."

"Yeah, I saw that."

"Is that the three years when he called you Ben?"

"I'm just doing my job here."

"The guy is gone. Who're we looking for?"

"It's in the dossier."

"Bullshit it is. Who are we hunting exactly?"

"A man that calls himself Hale. You know Rand is not Hale. We all know that. Is he involved? I don't know and neither do you."

"The guy's dirty. I can feel it. And you fucking know it," Garcia said with an ice-cold stare.

"He is tenacious," Palmer said.

"Tenacious. That's what you got? I'm tenacious too," Garcia said as he threw the dossier on a table. "I've requested DOD to unseal the file."

"Good. So when we have that we will know more."

"Where's the dog? He has a dog."

"No dog. He knew we were coming, so maybe a friend. We're not gonna find anything here."

"You were gonna add *because he's too smart*."

"Because he's too smart to leave evidence in his house."

"We'll have his bank records in an hour. They're sweeping all his digital."

"Burners. He'll be using burners."

Zzzz Zzzz, the drilling of metal in another part of the house.

"We got five of his staff being interviewed today, twelve more tonight at Wilshire," Garcia said.

"I think we will get anonymous source ad nauseam."

"When the fuck do we get them all in front of a grand jury?"

"Suspect we'll get the same story. Don't think they know who the source is," Palmer said.

"Maybe not, but Rand sure the fuck does."

"And he's in the wind."

"Hey, check this out," an agent said.

The agent entered the room and gestured to Palmer and Jackson, who walked into the master bedroom walk-in closet. The gun safe door was open. The safe was stocked, twelve various AR-15s, three pre-64 Winchester bolt action rifles, six shotguns, twenty pistols of several types. Thousands of rounds of ammunition. High-capacity magazines. Optics, laser sights, two Kevlar vests,

shooting accessories. And the big dog in its own rack, an M82A1 .50 caliber sniper rifle.

"Well, well. Looks like your typical elk hunter gear. Not," Garcia said. "Tag it bag it. Let's see how many weapons violations we can pull out of here. Print everything first."

"Yes, sir," the agent said.

"Maybe we get lucky and get our arrest warrant on a weapons charge."

Jackson was not sure how long he had been unconscious when he opened his eyes. He was lying between the rocks and sagebrush. He knew he could not let himself drift off again. It would be fatal. He first checked his alertness. It was decreasing. First signs of nausea were occurring. He felt his pulse. It was up. His heart was working overtime now in survival mode. His blood pressure must be falling. He was cold. He knew what all these signs meant. Blood loss. Blood loss on the way to death.

He pulled open his Perfecto biker jacket and pulled up his sweatshirt. Bullet hole. Oozing blood. He leaned to his left and slid his hand under his shirt and up his back. His head went back violently, instinctively. The burning pain zigzagged its way through his torso and rocketed up his spine and down to his feet. "Uhhhhh." The moan came out before he thought to be silent. *But unlikely she is hunting me, she has Casey to deal with, who was freaking out that she shot his batting coach. How the hell is she going to explain that to an eleven-year-old?*

Jackson quickly discounted the being hunted concern. That was old training kicking in. This was different. No ongoing fire-fight. Not here, not with a nearly two-hundred-foot vertical wall as far as he could see.

His hand slid up his back, the blood a lubricant. Larger bullet hole than the front, oozing more blood. Not good. What was good was that it was an exit wound. No bullet ricocheting

into organs. Had that occurred, he would have been dead by now.

He removed his Swiss army knife from the pouch on his belt, the knife part of his everyday carry, and he opened the blade. He removed the flashlight from his belt pouch and inserted it into his jacket pocket. Then he removed the belt from his jeans and set it down. He dug around and found his wallet in the interior pocket of his jacket and removed his driver's and concealed carry license. He placed his driver's license over the rear wound and pinned it down under his belt. He pulled it tight around his bare skin.

The pull was excruciating, and Jackson winced. *Cowboy the fuck up.* He inserted his carry license between the belt and his skin over the front wound. He cut the bottom ten inches off his sweat-shirt and cut that into two strips that he wrapped over the belt and tied them snugly.

This would have to do. *Next, call for rescue. Mick and Addy.* Jackson found his smartphone in his jacket. Smashed and bent. *Fuck. No good. Next, navigation plan. Compass on smartphone, that's out. Watch.* Jackson looked at his watch. It had taken the fall, still working. He pointed the hour hand to the sun. Halfway between the hour hand and the twelve o'clock mark is south.

He struggled to his feet, leaning on the rocks for support. He made his first landmark in the distance. He was east of Ojai. He assessed that civilization would be west and slightly to the north. *Find a walking stick.*

Every move hurt. His bullet wounds, internal organs, arms, hip, legs, angles. They all screamed hospital, serious triage. *Gotta move. Do it. Do it now. Clock is ticking, tick bleed, tick toc more bleeding. Keep going.*

Jackson stumbled along the canyon floor for twenty minutes, finding a walking stick along the way. Every fifty paces, he stopped and listened for sounds of human activity—car noise, voices, something. *Nothing so far. Dehydration now.* He found the remnants of a stream. Not much water, brown water, but it was wet. The decision was drink what was most likely rich in bacteria

or exacerbate his condition with dehydration. There was no decision, not really. He drank what he could get down. Deal with vomiting later if it rears its bile-surgings head.

Jackson heard movement, rustling of brush, leaves, branches at his nine o'clock. *Probably deer, raccoon or coyote.* He froze, labored, kneeling down slowly, a double hit of burn and dull pains. *Coming closer now.* He saw a flash of yellow through the trees. More color. *No animal. Human movement.*

Jackson moved to his right, adding camouflage. He held his walking stick in one hand and his SIG Sauer pistol in the other. Closer now. He got a clear view. It was a girl. *Teenager. Thirteen or fourteen maybe.* Panting, out of breath, filthy, moving through the forest. Jackson holstered his gun.

"Hey, don't be afraid," he said.

The girl froze like a spooked animal. Jackson moved to allow himself to be seen, and raised his hands, palms facing her. The girl's face turned ashen. Her arms and hands were trembling. Her eyes darted left, then right, not sure which way to run. *This girl is terrified. Running from something. Something that wants her dead.*

"I'm hurt. Can you help me? It's alright, I won't hurt you," he said.

He opened his biker jacket to expose the blood that now covered his right side down to his boots. The girl crouched to a ready position, like a sprinter, studying Jackson, assessing his face, his clothes, his identity, his intentions, his threat. She touched the base of her neck. The fear on her face turned to confusion. Confusion mixed with curiosity. She picked up a one-inch thick branch.

"Quién eres tú?" she said.

"Mi nombre es Jackson. Cuál es su nombre?" Jackson said.

"De donde viniste?"

"I came from back there, Fell. I fell. Uh... Caerse. I fell and injury. Uh, la herida," Jackson said, pointing to his wound.

The girl looked back. Looked back at something she wanted no part of.

"Tu no coyotaje," the girl said.

"Coyotaje. No, señorita. No. American. Tu amigo," Jackson said.

In the distance. Voices. The girl muttered to herself, a pained stare.

"Americano?"

"Yes. Si. Por favor. Juntos. Rapidaemente. Por favor."

"Mi nombre es Anna."

Jackson put out his hand. More voices. The girl grabbed it and Jackson put his arm around her. They started walking.

An hour later they found a trailhead rising up the canyon, so they took it. As Jackson and the girl struggled along, they rose higher and higher, the voices trailing off, remaining somewhere on the floor of the canyon. The girl stopped, panicked. To her left, a mile or so in front of them and below was a small ranch at the edge of a clearing. The sight of that building made the girl shiver, cower. Jackson put a hand on her shoulder.

"Coyotaje?"

"Si. Si. Asesino. Viador," the girl said.

"Esta bien," Jackson said. He opened his jacket and showed her his pistol. The girl jumped back.

"Protect you. Mi proteger," Jackson said.

Jackson pointed to the girl and smiled. "Esta bien ahora."

They reached the mesa, and Jackson rechecked his bearing, then sat to rest.

"We should hit Koenigstein Road that way," he said.

Arm in arm they made their way through the scrub brush. After a few minutes, they spotted a paved road. Jackson felt her hesitation as they approached the road. The girl stopped.

"Yo comprendo. Wait here. Esperar," Jackson said.

The girl moved back from the road out of sight. A pickup truck cruised by and Jackson flagged it. They kept going. Then a Porsche, flying up the switchbacks, blew past them also. The 911 slowed, then kept going. For the next few minutes, it was quiet.

Jackson watched two cyclists come up the hill, pumping hard

on mountain bikes. They were decked out with the French-style Tour de France outfits, bright colors. He waved them down. They stopped and looked him over.

"What the fuck, man? Are you all right?" one cyclist said.

"Had an accident. Can I borrow your cell for thirty seconds to call for help?" Jackson said.

"Yeah, bud. Should I call 911 for you? You look like death, man. What happened? You're bleeding out, guy," the other cyclist said.

"No, I have a friend close. He'll be here faster. It's cool." Jackson grabbed the cellphone and dialed. "Addy? Rand. Need evac. Bring medkit. Got a bleeder. Koenigstein Road east of Ojai."

"Copy that. Three zero mikes," Addy said.

The cyclists gave Jackson a swig of water and went on their way. He kneeled down next to the girl, pulled a pen and blank index card from his chest pocket, wrote on it. "Mi amigos coming soon."

Forty minutes later, the Humvee appeared. Anna helped Jackson to his feet, and Jackson flagged the vehicle, Addy pulled the truck to the side of the road. Mick got out and helped Jackson into the back seat, gave him water, lots of water. While Anna looked on, Addy cleaned the wounds, poured Betadine solution on the bullet holes, placed QuikClot bandages front and back, and wrapped Jackson's torso.

A pickup truck crested a hill three hundred yards down the road, two men in the front seats. It stopped one hundred yards from the Humvee. The men got out.

The girl, full breath inhale, ducked behind the Humvee, her fingernails pressing into the truck, her head shaking. Mick noticed her feet bouncing up and down, up and down, almost running in place.

She recognized the two men. The men were Hispanic, dirty clothes, boots, unshaven. They approached.

"No, no, no, por favor," the girl said, panic in her voice.

Mick watched the men.

"That my niece," one of the men from the pickup truck yelled.

"Coyotaje, coyotaje, la banda," the girl said, her voice trembling, staggering to get the words out. Mick got it.

"Coyotaje," Addy said.

Mick and Addy loaded the girl in the back, and the Humvee did a U-turn driving right past the men.

"Hit the truck," Jackson said, barely getting the words out.

Fifty yards past the truck, the Humvee stopped. Mick got out, opened the back door, and removed an AR-15 carbine. Pulling the rifle up to aim, Mick pointed it at the men, who ran, then dove into the swale on the opposite side of the road.

A burst into the back tire of the truck, another burst to the front tire. Mick backpedaled to the Humvee, stopped, took aim below the gate of the truck, sent a dozen bullets on their way.

The gas tank erupted, then the boom, the truck was a fireball.

Addy's house, Midtown Ventura. Small bungalow with a large overhang on the front porch. Addy turned the sunroom behind the house into a mini triage center. Jackson was stretched out face-down on a worktable, shirt off, unconscious.

Addy's oversized military medical kit was open on the floor. Wearing nitrile gloves, he used a twelve-inch needle to inject local anesthesia into the entrance wound. An IV catheter was in Jackson's arm, hypertonic saline flowing from the bag hung on a stand. The girl picked up the bloody rags strewn around the floor and placed them in a trash can. Mick entered the sunroom carrying his smartphone, which was squawking local police scanner broadcasts.

"So no ER?" Mick said.

"I found this in his shirt," Addy said.

On the index card: No ER

"Figures."

"Turn that squawker off. I need to stitch the dude up," Addy said.

"Fucker's turning white, man," Mick said.

"We got massive blood loss here," Addy said.

"I'm thinking ER, like now," Mick said.

"Check his BP."

Mick wrapped Jackson's bicep with the aneroid sphygmomanometer and worked it.

"Ninety over fifty five."

"Fuck."

"Yeah, no shit."

"Get the epinephrine ready," Addy said.

"Only if his heart stops," Mick said.

"I fuckin' know that but if his BP keeps falling, it will, goddamn it. Pull it out."

Mick removed the auto-injector from the medical kit, ripped off the top to expose the two-inch needle. Anna gasped at the needle, backed up into the corner, held Roberto as protection.

"We need this, you're doing the Pulp Fiction deal," Mick said.

"Fuck you. Hand me more gauze and hold it there. What's his blood type? We need to call for blood units now."

Mick searched his cellphone. He's A positive.

"Make the call."

"Don't know where he is."

"Call him, goddamn it. His color is blanco, man."

"I see it. I'm thinking ER, dude."

"Call for units. Get me an ETA. Tell him cash."

"Copy," Mick said.

Later, the girl sat on the floor in a bedroom petting Roberto.

"Se llama el perro?" the girl said.

"Roberto. Roberto Clemente. What's your name?" Addy said.

Addy was standing over Jackson, who was unconscious lying on the bed.

"Anna," the girl said.

"Mexico?"

"Guatemala."

"Mama?"

"Muerto."

"Cartel or la banda?"

"La banda."

"Hambriento?"

"Si."

Mick walked in with a tablet. "He's on the news. Not sure he wants to be found right now," he said.

"Va a morir?" Anna said.

"No lo se`."

Small bedroom in Addy's 1950s bungalow, wood floors. Muted by the drapes, reds, and orange of the morning sun painted the wall opposite Jackson, in bed, asleep. Anna sat at his bedside, staring at him. The rays of sunlight crept down the wall and touched Jackson's face. Anna opened the drapes, Jackson opened his eyes.

"Hey there young lady, how are you?" Jackson asked. Stirring, running through the body status checklist. Finally moaned, "Oh yeah, I have been shot. Again."

"Muy bien," the girl said.

"Como se llama?"

"Anna, mi llama es Anna."

"Oh yeah, Anna. Help me up please," Jackson said.

Ventura County Medical Center. Baseball cap, sunglasses, fake full blond beard, Jackson followed in tight formation behind Mick down a corridor in the intensive care wing. Mick distracted the nurses, and Jackson slipped into Tina's room. Tina, unconscious, on a ventilator with an endotracheal tube. Cardiac monitor, electrodes, pulse oximeter, catheters snaking towards her. Jackson

held her hand, his head and shoulders sagging, he'd seen this before. Checked her BP on the monitor, eighty over forty. Then the electrocardiograph mounted on a rolling stand. Jackson studied the waves. Wincing, muscles limp in his face, fingernails gripped the bed sheet, *Brain damage. From blood loss.*

"I'm sorry, Tina," Jackson said. "So sorry. I didn't protect you."

"Sir, no, no, sir. You can't be in the ICU, scoot. Are you family?" the nurse said, charging through the doorway.

Jackson slumped into a chair in the lobby off to the side of the entrance to the ICU. Mick sat next to him. Jackson observed Tina's parents walking back into the ICU. A corner-mounted television was on Fox News, muted volume. Catherine Hanson appeared on the screen. The backdrop was a video of riots in New York, then Santa Monica. National Guard trucks rolling along Santa Monica Boulevard, clipping tents and encampments. The caption scrolled: *Martial law now in major cities.* Jackson looked up at the news as the coverage changed. Photographs of the five captives. Then his picture. The caption read: *PublicFigure website owner now a person of interest in the kidnappings.*

Mick's phone rang. He answered it.

"I'm with him. Got it," Mick said.

Mick handed Jackson a burner phone. Our NSA friend said your tip led to a hit.

Jackson dialed.

"Scotty. Jackson. On a burner." Jackson's eyes went up and to his left, visualizing the location. "Yeah, old Ventura, know the street, got it. Thanks."

Jackson hung up. Commotion in the ICU, nurses scrambling. To Tina's room. *Beep, beep, beep.* The alert of a code blue. Jackson and Mick rushed to the ICU entrance. A nurse and doctor rolled a large cart to the room, banging the doorjamb on the way in. Paddles out, the defibrillator.

Mick placed his hand on Jackson's shoulder, and they bowed their heads.

CHAPTER 11

Los Angeles FBI Office. Agent Palmer debriefed local FBI, whiteboard, television monitors. "The guys who hit Rand at the PublicFigure offices are MS-13. Part of a clique of the LA gang run by Jose Zepeda, who is under indictment, out on bail and has skipped. APB out on him. Why they hit this target at this time, unknown. Is it connected to the kidnappings? Unknown at this time. Interviews with Rand's staff have not given us any solid leads. Not yet," Agent Palmer said. He motioned to Agent Garcia.

"APB out on Rand. We know, check that, high suspicion, he's connected in some way, feeding intel to Hale. We're working through the digitals from Rand's house. Nothing yet. As to Hale..." Garcia said.

A full-body shot and close-up of Hale appeared on the monitors.

"Facial match gave us one hit. A useless hit, as some of you know," Garcia said.

Agents in the room murmured, snickered, whispered.

"He is not, repeat, he is not the dead actor or the son of the dead actor," Garcia said.

"Sir, can you clarify on that?" an agent said.

"We got a false facial. The guy from the old movies. Black and whites," Palmer said.

"Michael Rennie, the guy in *The Day the Earth Stood Still*," Garcia said.

The agents laughed.

"So we're tracking Klatuu and ET. When's Gort gonna show up? Get the tanks," an agent said. More laughter.

"No good on that score. Gort melts the tanks, sir," another agent said.

"Shut the fuck up. The Speaker of the United States House of Representatives is kidnapped," Palmer said. "No voice hits on Hale. Backtracking the video upload led to an untraceable dead end. It's like the video appeared from no definable source. We are dealing with high tech skill here."

"Tradecraft?" an agent said.

"Possible. Yes. Military. Definitely," Palmer said.

"Ransom demand?" an agent asked.

"Nada," Garcia said.

"What about Rand's military background?" an agent said.

"We have a database for all people he served with. Part of it is classified. We're working up the chain for access," Garcia said, glancing over to Palmer.

Palmer shifted position, cleared his throat.

"Your interview lists are in your packets. Hit the streets. Next briefing tomorrow o eight hundred," Palmer said.

The room cleared.

"Take a seat," Palmer said. He adjusted his suit, placed his hands on his knees and straightened his back.

Garcia sat down.

"K. You gonna finally do what you should have done as soon as this broke?" Garcia said.

"You know I had a stint, short stint with the Agency. Special Activities. Specifically, SOG, tactical paramilitary operations," Palmer said.

"So Rand was CIA in this paramilitary operation?"

"Sister division. He was with PAG, the covert Political Action Group. But, let's just say our paths crossed."

"Let's just fucking say you should have told me right up front. Jesus. So this guy has got covert skills. Lethal skills," Garcia said.

"That doesn't mean he's part of this Quartus Optio. We have no evidence of that. No dots connect."

"Yet. What does 'paths crossed' mean in spy speak?"

"Means any more than that is classified. Above your level."

"Fuck that. I investigate with one arm tied? Except for you, that is. I will seek clearance ASAP, goddammit."

"You are free to do that."

"So this ex-spook gathers up his right-wing Ruby Ridgers and goes vigilante. So does the CIA know who Hale is?"

"I reached out. They have no idea. They got nothing on Hale. They're running a parallel. So is the military. And Homeland. All Western countries. And Interpol. You know this, that every law enforcement, every uniform in the United States is on this one way or another. So far, chasing tails," Palmer said.

"Let me ask you this, did Rand go off the rails while serving? Was he kicked out, section 8ed?"

"No. The opposite actually."

"What does that mean?"

No answer. Garcia's jaw clenched, a heavy sigh, then he looked away, shaking his head.

Two hours later, Agents Palmer and Garcia briefed the local component of the Hale task force again.

"An arrest warrant was just issued for Jackson Rand. He is the best lead we have in this case. A search of Rand's residence produced documents considered by DOJ to be classified. He was last seen leaving the Ventura County Medical Center two hours ago. Our agent followed but did not detain at that time. It appears Mr. Rand was injured in some way and struggled to walk. He was accompanied by a Hispanic male, six feet, two hundred pounds,

mid-thirties. The two men got in a vehicle owned by Mr. Rand and lost our tail," Palmer said.

Jackson's photograph appeared on the monitors above the agents. Garcia took a step forward.

"Rand is thirty-four years of age. Mixed race. Best guess in part white, some Hispanic, some Asian, some something else. He is six feet two inches. Weight estimated to be one hundred ninety-five pounds. Wears a five-day beard. Tattoos or other identifiable marks unknown at this time. Rand is a vet with combat experience. In addition, we have information that this individual has tradecraft experience, and did a stint with the Agency. This a Type-A Tier One PONI fugitive, but DOJ wants this individual taken alive if at all possible. We can't gain intel from a bullet-riddled corpse. A list of known associates is in your packets," Garcia said.

The monitors changed to a flow chart of tasks. Palmer stepped forward.

"Social network team to coordinate with Washington and the NSA, technical support groups. Profile team to coordinate with Quantico. Teams four through twelve focus on who can provide support and where. Team thirteen, financial. Find a nexus people, find the man," Palmer said.

The Brentwood area of West Los Angeles. A Santa Barbara style estate, red-tiled roofs, green window trim, pool, gazebo. At the rear end of the manicured back yard was a guest house. Cinder, dressed in a black suit jacket, shook hands with a woman, mid-sixties. The woman glanced at the tattoo on the back of Cinder's wrist, the crosshair of a rifle scope, and held her hand for an extra beat.

"May I ask what that is?" the woman said.

"It's a new kind of peace sign. Peace in all four corners of the Earth," Cinder said.

“Oh, I... I see. I thought... anyway. Enjoy the guest house,” the woman said.

Cinder handed the woman the money and took the keys. Airbnb for a week.

Cinder talked the woman into allowing her to install a stake in the ground next to the guest house to support a two-foot diameter satellite dish. She ran the cable through a window left slightly ajar. Cinder took extra time to find the right place to hide, a hideaway with a pool. Solace to the pouting Casey, whom she would have to keep a very close eye on for the foreseeable future. He was traumatized, angry. Cinder carried in two large black bags, and Casey was sitting at the kitchen table, head in both hands.

“Wanna go swimming? It’s heated,” Cinder said.

Casey glared at his mother, went into the bedroom of the guest house, closed the door.

Cinder set up her laptops. Twenty minutes later, she routed through several proxy servers, gained access to the deep web and anonymous searches. *Quartus Optio. Hale*. Millions of documents but all related to public news information, editorials, op-eds. She searched *Jackson Rand*, the man she had just murdered. Prior research revealed Jackson never knew his father, and his mother died when he was ten. He bounced around foster care until he was seventeen. She discovered two photos from his military service, zoomed in on his patches. She created files for the men in the photos. She zoomed in on the photos, did not recognize the men. Two of them were Addy and Mick.

Cinder set up alerts of keywords. She searched for the existence of new law enforcement-related documents. Documents that if she could determine their location in the cloud, she could hack. Her algorithms ran deep web searches every millisecond. When she got a hit, she executed hacks using a myriad of tools, some of which she herself had written.

She checked on Casey. He was asleep. *Poor guy, rough day, really rough*. Cinder lay on the couch and watched the five laptops

scroll data, searching, penetrating. It was mesmerizing. Her silent, clandestine soldiers. She closed her eyes.

Cinder was dreaming of the savanna. Kruger National Park. Protected habitat on South Africa's northeastern border with Mozambique. The poaching capital of the world. Most slaughter occurred there. Blood trophies, elephants, rhinos, many others. Big cats. She dreamed of her tree stand. She'd built a seat and a rest for the .50 cal. On this day, she was glassing up to five miles of rolling savanna. Glassing, searching, protecting. Looking for shapes out of place. Movement. Movement that was not fauna. Not the black and whites of zebra. Not the flailing trunks of elephants. Movement out of place. Human-related shapes. Human movement. Man or vehicle. Poachers. This is where they hunted and killed and slaughtered and eviscerated and discarded. Discarded the remains of the animal not salable. The soul of the animal, discarded.

A blind eye turned by countless corrupt politicians, so SAP was formed by a select few. All legitimate efforts failed, and leaders came and went. Including her father, who had died twenty miles from this spot. Killed. Shot three times by .300 Win mag rounds. Long-range.

She was long-range today. She'd moved up from .270 Winchester, good up to about four hundred yards. She had taken on her father's 30.06 pre-64 Winchester rifle. A great classic gun. She was capable of punching it out to six hundred yards, but beyond that, the bullet started to drop drastically as it ran out of energy. She'd acquired the ultimate distance killer, a .300 Win Mag. A true Wimbledon Cup-quality caliber. A thousand-yard shooter. It had taken her a while to adjust to the .50 caliber, a monster of a gun. Heavy sniper rifle used in Afghanistan and Iraq. Used by the likes of Chris Kyle on occasion. A .50 cal capable of delivering its two-hundred-gram payload well beyond a mile. To her right was her spotting scope.

She was going on her sixth hour in the blind. Observed wonderful wildlife. But no targets. Until, with her naked eye,

something changed. *Did I see it? Or just think it?* Through the spotting scope, she saw the front of a camo Land Rover Defender nose out from behind the tall grass and shrubbery. She focused the spotting scope as the truck inched forward, seventeen hundred yards away. Two in the front seat and two halfway out the sunroof, both holding carbines with scopes. These were not game wardens. These poachers had escaped her before.

Cinder whistled to her partner on the ground, black man, wearing camo, in his forties. He brought the binoculars to his eyes. Then he used his radio to alert their other team.

Cinder moved to the .50 cal Barrett, adjusted the top turret on the Nightforce scope, then the side turret. She zoomed in. *Driver first. Then engine block. Then the two fuckers in back.* The man in the passenger seat picked up binoculars, and the truck stopped. She saw their mouths moving. *They spotted their kill, a bull elephant, big tusker, eight hundred yards in front of them.*

Cinder ranged the shot at one thousand two hundred yards. *Three foot plus holdover. Wind two clicks from the left.* She held two feet over the driver's head. Head, neck, shoulder. Any of those a kill shot.

She placed padding on her right shoulder. A gun that could break her shoulder if she tried to stop its energy with her clavicle.

Exhale. Ex..ha..le. Thump... thump...thump... Heartbeat.

Squeeze.

Let the energy come back.

Be surprised by the trigger break.

Let the big dog...

Boooooom!

The cannon of a gun exploded 25,000 ft-lbs of force, launching the 660 grain monster of a round out the barrel, the recoil slamming her shoulder back into the tree.

A big exhale, and back on the scope, downrange.

Pink mist.

A cumulus of pink.

Ding.

Silence for a few seconds.

Ding.

Cinder opened her eyes.

She was on the couch in the Airbnb. Her hungry scavenger algorithms found something to eat. The computer flashed the alert. It was a recent DNA result for Jackson Rand. One just run by the FBI. Their medical firewalls were not the best.

Hack this record? Not sure what for. It was recent though. Her deep dive hacking research work taught her to capture.

Always capture and store. Index and find relevance later. Build the database on the target. Many times the data will surprise you. Some of the most innocuous facts, pieces of data, when analyzed by her algorithms, produced integral links in an unforeseen chain.

Go grab it.

Mick and Jackson pulled over on Catalina Street, a neighborhood street east of downtown Ventura. They switched vehicles to Mick's Ram pickup.

Heading west on Main Street, the area had become a slum in the last years, caused by the city's homeless crisis. Vagrancy, aggressive panhandling. People defecating on lawns, in front of east Ventura storefronts. What had plagued San Francisco years earlier spread. People shooting up in public, the police overwhelmed, sources strained. Vandalism and theft. Private police became a new cottage industry for restaurant and store owners. The encampments of tent cities. The flood of illegal immigrants mixed with impoverished out-of-work Americans. Bad combination. Now termed *Dreamare*. American dream collides with nightmare reality. *For the people*, the politicians chant. For the pissed off people—*Dreamare*.

The Ram truck dodged the staggerers of Main Street and turned north of Ventura Avenue, passing National Guard trucks. Mick parked in front of the old welding shop. Mick and Jackson

found their way through the debris and cobwebs, Mick lifted the square metal plate, and they descended into the basement. Jackson looked over what he knew were the remnants of Cinder's hidden workspace. *Somebody left in a hurry.*

Jackson and Mick rummaged through the debris. Computer parts, cables, power cords, and strips, smashed computer parts. Jackson picked up a USB device, bent and cracked. A cable extended from the device and one side was cut.

"USB?" Mick said.

"This is an old NSA Cottonmouth-1. Air-gap bridging and RF link for data infiltration," Jackson said.

"Source?" Mick said.

"From her time with the NSA before she went underground," Jackson said.

"This chick was one of our spooks?"

"A woman of many talents," Jackson said.

Jackson lifted the cast iron door of an old boiler, large enough to heat a building. Ash and dust. As he closed the boiler door, he caught a glimpse of color, something towards the back of the combustion chamber. The remaining corner of a color photo. A partial face of a man. Jackson reached in and retrieved it.

"Know him?" Mick said.

"Of him. Younger brother. Joshua," Jackson said.

"Joshua?"

"Joshua Proditores," Jackson said.

The Ram truck pulled over on a residential street in Midtown Ventura. Addy and Anna were standing between two houses. Anna got in the back seat, and Addy waved goodbye.

"Cómo estás, Mr. Jackson?" Anna said.

"Need you to give me a hand with changing the bandage now and then if that's Okay?" Jackson said.

"Si," Anna said.

They took the 101 freeway south towards Los Angeles and took the Camarillo exit.

"Pull over here, buddy. This is as far as you go," Jackson said.

"Why aqui, Mr. Jackson?" Anna said.

"Because he won't be forced to lie about what he does not know," Jackson said.

Anna had no idea what that meant, but she followed Jackson into an industrial park. He came to a driveway of an office-warehouse area, approached a keypad and pressed in a number. The door opened.

"Que este?" Anna said.

"Safe house. Casa segura," Jackson said.

The warehouse was vacant. He went to the rear, an office area, another door, another keypad. The metal door opened to a stairwell. They walked down a hallway and turned into a kitchen.

"There's food here," Jackson said. "I'll be back in a few minutes. Stay here."

Jackson walked down the hallway to another door. In the room were several metal lockers with keypads. Jackson sat and dialed his burner.

"Jackson Rand for Mary Fletcher," Jackson said.

Mary Fletcher was at her desk in her law office.

"Jesus Jackson, they're going to arrest you," Mary said.

"Charges?"

"Possession of classified material. From the search of your residence."

"It's bullshit."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. I haven't seen anything. Are you coming in? So sorry about Tina. Horrible."

"She had nothing to do with any of this."

"I have more bad news for you, I'm afraid."

Jackson waited.

"They hit us with RICO, they've frozen all your assets. The accounts of PublicFigure.com. Stocks, trading accounts, banks."

"RICO statute? On what grounds?" Jackson said.

Jackson listened for a minute, then hung up. He leaned against the metal lockers, spat, then paced.

"Goddammit," he said under his breath.

Jackson stalked around the room. After a minute, he centered himself and opened a locker.

Three stacks of bills. Clothes on hangers. Two rifles. Two pistols.

Jackson removed a stack of bills. He closed the locker and left the room.

The light popped on, Hale was standing in front of his chair.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you all can see and hear each other. Please refer to your monitors," Hale said.

Above each window, the monitors displayed a five-way split screen of each captive's living room area.

"This will be our last discussion together. Our last discourse," Hale said.

The Speaker walked into the living room. Heinrich Tenner was lying on the couch and stood. Donald Sturitz was at the desk next to his living room, he stood. Glenn Woo took notice from the kitchen, and Lawrence Brenton walked out of his bathroom.

"Are you going to kill me?" Sturitz said. "Who is us? Who else is here?"

"I now have a clear, if not perfect, understanding of your individual parts. As in the discipline, the study of complex adaptive systems, one does not automatically obtain a perfect understanding of the behavior of the whole system. Each of you, in fact, others, not present, many others, have adapted over time, coerced to some degree, but adapted, correcting course along a timeline, some wittingly, some unwittingly, toward your own objectives. Your assumptions that your actions within your individual systems were independent were false.

"The system of crime prevention by way of gun control.

Systems of financial reform. Systems of social reform, through coercion I might add. Systems composed of specific political platforms and ideas. A system of cognitive understanding and behavior. You all were part of a network of systems comprising a whole. In fact, each of you and the others were like trees in a forest. You were brought here so we can see the forest for the trees."

"Are you letting us go now?" Arnold said. She placed her hands on the glass.

"Political development can be similar to organic evolutionary processes. Political systems are adaptive evolutionary processes. Living and breathing. There are some that see democracy at the end of its natural lifespan. In a rapidly changing violent world, social structure decline, hierarchal economic conflict, to be replaced by what?" Hale said.

"What do you mean by *individual trees, parts?*" Tenner said, unemotionally, a matter-of-fact tone.

"Maybe pawns on a chessboard would be a better analogy, Mr. Tenner," Hale said.

"What is the system you are referring to? This whole system?" Tenner said.

"A non-territorial center of governance, Mr. Tenner. You better than the others know that to be true," Hale said.

"The Global Freedom Society," Tenner said. "Proditores."

"Soon to be much more than a philanthropic slash political machine. Yes, the GFS," Hale said.

"And for it to be the whole system? Sounds like more right-wing conspiracy nonsense," Sturitz said.

"No conspiracy, just the mind of one," Hale said.

"Sounds impossible," Woo said.

"Impossible unless a tipping point is reached, then crossed," Hale said.

"What tipping point?" Susan said.

"American sovereignty, Madam Speaker. Bleed it, erode it, have it decay from within, piece by piece," Hale said.

"That's practically happened already. Almost," Woo said. "It's not my fault."

"Almost the keyword, Mr. Woo. At the brink, on the edge, minds disillusioned, desperate, then they are open to radical change," Hale said.

"I'm not sure I understand," Brenton said.

"The kill shot. One final act," Hale said.

"And what's that?" Susan said.

"It's clear to me now that none of you know that. Please correct me if I'm wrong," Hale said.

An awkward silence hung thick.

"I thought not," Hale said.

"Which means if we don't, you no longer have any use for us. People, he is about to execute us all. Hale!" Sturitz said, pounding the window.

The light faded.

CHAPTER 12

The Beverly Hills Hotel, aka The Pink Palace. Iconic old-school. Twelve acres of garden meticulous. Kodachromes of Hollywood legends basking at pool chic. Private if-only-I-was-a-fly-on-the-wall bungalows. On this day, *the* West Coast spring fundraiser gala, theme: *One World Free*.

The event, second only to the Met Gala in New York on the shaker-mover-be-seen list. Recent years had filtered the invitees by their hundred K ticket price. Billionaires, Davos crowd, international dignitaries, royalty, deer-in-the-headlight left of centers, part of the Trump withdrawal intervention twelve-step program. The most powerful attendees, a handful of pure globalists, were not authentically left-wing. Or Right. Or Center. They processed every decision by one true filter, self-interest.

The insertion target for Jackson Rand today was the iconic Crystal Ballroom, art déco, Venetian chandelier, the largest event room in the Palace. The ready-for-my-close-up expansive foyer was heavily guarded. There was a stage where live acts would perform later. No way to get to the dance floor without being screened.

With his face plastered on screens all over the world, Jackson chose full beard, beret, sunglasses, full tux. Black tux. *In case I bleed through*. The foreign film director look. He would fit in. Holly-

wood gave him some cover. Waltzing into a New York gala, he might draw stares. Here, freak show.

Jackson processed. Limos scoring fixes for paparazzi, too public. Pre-event party in the garden already underway. That garden, access to the outside, was guarded. The bar, looser. Quick reconnaissance of the green candy-striped Polo Lounge. *Unlikely she'd be here this early. Will she appear with Joshua Proditores or meet him here? She must have to really bite her tongue to hang with this second-rater. Lucky sperm club someone called it. Is she fucking him? No. I think not. She is playing him, playing hard to get.*

Earlier, Scotty, his NSA contact, gave Jackson something that made sense. Deep metadata that connected Alec Proditores to a high-end illegal taxidermist. Metadata connected the animal stuffer to the illegal wildlife trade and African poaching. And digging even deeper revealed a possible connection to the murder of Robert Stowe in Nairobi—Cinder's father. *She was lying in wait. In the bushes. For the right moment. Playing the French artist almost girlfriend of playboy Joshua to get close to her prey.*

Time to focus. Jackson approached the Maître D', well dressed, late twenties.

"May I show you a table sir or will it be the bar?" the Maître D said.

"Thanks. Looking for a friend," Jackson said.

He glided in, scanned the entire lounge, visible from his vantage point, with a single glance, expanded peripheral focus he had refined in another life. *Do not focus on one thing. Take in everything in a second.* No Cinder. He kept walking. Then into the garden area. *Wait, what did I miss?* Cruising back into the lounge, he positioned his head ninety degrees to the far corner booth. *Don't look directly.* The man in the center. Two men on each side of him. Dark gray tux, Jet black hair. *Too old, dying his hair. Closely cropped beard. Alec Proditores. Holding mini court. High crimes and misdemeanors in the Polo Lounge.*

I could kill him right now with the butter knife three inches from his right hand on the table. Or the fork. Or the spoon. Any object on his Polo

Lounge power table. Jugular vein. Over. On camera, but over. Jackson never broke stride, never turned to look face on. Alec Proditores did a quick glance up. No reaction. Proditores did not pause his sentence to his minions or co-conspirators.

Lie low, off camera. Jackson left the lounge. He surveyed the entrance to the hotel, walked out the front door and bummed a cigarette off a valet. "Damn no smoking rules." The valet nodded. Jackson filtered in behind the car guys. *Any Range Rover? Not yet.* He waited.

The line of limos was backed up into the street. *She's not going to valet. That would trap her like a wild animal volunteering into a boma.* Jackson saw the black Range Rover pass by on Crescent. *Parking in the residential interior.* He waited. Fifteen minutes later, between the hedge and the line of limos, she appeared. Hair down, fixed to cover as much of her face as possible without looking obvious. Large Ray-Bans. Full gown, silver-blue. Designer perfect.

For the first time, Jackson saw her lines clearly. Tall, slender, just enough curves. She was a different person today. Complete look-it-be-it-sell-it. She sold it. No longer the pissed-off-model-don't-talk-to-me. Today she was I-am-out-of-your-league-fuck-off. Killer. Jackson knew from his training not to stare at a target. No eye contact. Look away and still see. See everything. He knew he'd just fucked this up. He was staring.

He broke off the stare just in time to avoid eye contact. She was sizing up everything and everybody. Jackson turned his back. Cinder paused. A half step. She was processing the outline, the frame of the man behind the valets. She continued into the hotel.

Jackson waited a few minutes. *Did she linger in the entrance, by the front desk, standing off to the side? Yes, she would be there. Waiting for any tail to delay the follow? Find another way into the grounds. Work the perimeter.*

The pre-event crowd made their way to the top of the stairs for their glamour shots. Actors, executives, socialites, politicians, including Darci Paluzzoria, California Senator power broker,

master fundraiser. With Democrats in solid control of the Presidency and the House, Paluzzoria drove the Senate, and with it sweeping progressive legislation over the past ten years. Massive spending. She rejected the socialism tag but always laughed, the rebuke of an I-am-above-your-labels smirk.

The guests filtered to their tables and took their seats in gold gilt chairs. The uniformed staff poured red wine from crystal decanters. Joshua and Cinder appeared at the top of the stairs. Cinder squeezed Joshua's arm. He glanced over to her and smiled. Just as he looked back at the photographer, Cinder timed it perfectly, looking down at the flash. She took the lead and moved him down the stairs before another *POP*.

The host appeared on stage and gave an overview of the One World Free organization, its charitable efforts around the world, and directed guests to pursue the displays in the back of the ballroom. Pitched them for money. The pre-dinner entertainment appeared. A rapper who agreed to tone down for tonight's gig. Then dinner, dancing after. Different band. The main act. Singer-songwriter Kelsey Kate. Adele-esque ballads.

Backstage, Kate sat in the make-up chair as her band prepped for the gig. The roadies worked on the equipment on the stage, curtains drawn. Crew members shuffled back and forth from the eighteen-wheeler in the back. Using the cigarette trick, Jackson filtered in with the crew. The security guard bought the tux, he's-one-of-the-guests-obviously. He was in. Jackson found a partial view of the ballroom.

Main table: Alec Proditors. His wife, brunette, Eastern European features, diamonds. Off to the side was one of the permanent fixtures in Alec Proditors' entourage, the leader of his team of bodyguards. Karlov was a former Terrorelhárítási Központ officer, the Counter-Terrorism Centre and SWAT state agency of Hungary. Also at the table were Darci Paluzzoria and her husband. And Joshua Proditors; next to him was Cinder, drinking red wine. Jackson, even from a distance, saw the faint spark in her eyes. The spark of pent-up rage.

"So, Joshua," Alec Proditores said.

"Yes, brother, sorry. This is Helene Marceau, my friend I told you about from Paris. She's an amazing artist," Joshua said.

"An artist?" Alec Proditores said. "Ms. Marceau, what is your art form?" A coldness in the words.

A half a beat.

"Painting," Helene Marceau said. "Je suis peintre."

"Et que peignez-vous?" Alec Proditores asked.

"Paysages," Helene answered. She took a sip of red wine.

"What is that?" Joshua asked.

"Landscapes. I see," Alec Proditores said. "Quels sont tes sujets favoris?"

"Afrique," Helene said.

"Yeah, Africa. My brother loves Africa. You should show him your work sometime," Joshua said.

"Donc je vais quand le moment est venu," Helene said.

Alec Proditores nodded and smiled, took a sip of his wine. Slowly. Glanced over to Helene, then looked away.

Kelsey Kate appeared on stage to a standing ovation. She was one of the top recording artists in the world and a millennial favorite, a superstar. The music pounded out her beats, and dozens of guests had been drinking for an hour and a half; wine, champagne, open bar—they hit the dance floor. Joshua, sloshed by now, grabbed Cinder's hand and dragged her into the dancing tuxedos and gowns. In her other hand, Cinder held her phone.

As Cinder danced, Jackson noticed an admirer on the dance floor, actor Cole O'Farrell. The Irish actor was a living up to his reputation for his affection for single malt—he was a bit wobbly—and for his inability to resist the next supermodel face. O'Farrell kept turning his date to maintain his gaze on Cinder, then made his move. He cut in, handing his date off to Joshua, who accepted without resistance.

O'Farrell grabbed Cinder's hips, she gracefully removed his hands, but kept dancing, not wanted to garner any extra attention.

O'Farrell moved in close, but Cinder slipped away without

breaking rhythm with the Kelsey Kate R&B ballad. Cinder was a smooth operator, O'Farrell, not so much. Not smooth enough to see Jackson slip in on his left side when he turned right.

"Cutting in, thanks mate," Jackson said.

O'Farrell stopped dancing. Jackson cut in all the way, his back to O'Farrell, who gave a tip of the hat gesture and backed off.

Cinder did not stop dancing. Her body missed no beats. But her breathing did. And her eyes. Those piercing eyes. Jackson danced her away from Joshua and out of his view.

A security guard noticed Jackson cutting in the dance, spoke into his lapel microphone, and moved in for a closer look.

"Know you're a great shot. Let's chalk it up to a mistake," Jackson said.

The song ended. Clapping, the crowd excited.

"Stay with me," Jackson said.

The next song. A slow one. Jackson grabbed Cinder's hand.

"I know about Robert Stowe. Your father," Jackson said.

"I won't miss again," Cinder said.

"I need the metadata you hacked on Alec Proditores," Jackson said.

"I don't care. But everybody in this room will care about you if..."

"How long do you think you can pull off this French artist thing?"

"Long enough."

"You're not sleeping with that... person. Are you?"

"How did you find me?"

Jackson pulled her closer and whispered, "I am not your enemy. We need to trust each other now."

"Stay away from my son, or you can trust I'll give you a matching set," Cinder said, sticking her index finger into Jackson's side. Right where the bullet wound was.

Jackson moaned.

"Casey... he likes me," Jackson said.

Cinder jabbed her finger towards the wound again, and

Jackson grabbed her hand, held it for a moment. Eyes locked on. They stopped dancing. The crowd of dancers blurred around them, the swooshing of their feet sliding on the floor muted. The music muffled.

Jackson saw something. Something that became clear to him in an instant, a desire previously unacknowledged, a repressed wanting, long denied. In the flash of a single moment, a clarity personified, a rare if not impossible intersect of pheromone intoxicia and will. Equal will. Stronger will. Smarter. Standing right there.

But in her eyes, disdain remained. She does not know what I know now. Not yet.

Jackson slipped a piece of paper into her hand. Cinder pulled away and went back to her table.

Under the table, Cinder opened the paper. A quick glance at it. It was a phone number. Under the phone number Jackson had written:

Call me to meet. He's planning mass murder.

Jackson filtered outside with the band roadies. He removed a small device from his jacket pocket. A small blue light, on and off. He made a call.

"Scotty, yeah. Did you get it?" Jackson said.

"Yeah, we have her phone. You must've been pretty close," Scotty said.

"She held it in her hand the whole time," Jackson said.

Jackson walked down a service road behind the hotel and into the neighborhood. On a tablet, he watched the dot move on the map.

Palmer and Garcia stood behind the techs scrolling through the gala fundraiser footage. The tech zoomed in on Jackson's face on the dance floor.

"This is the guy the security guard called in about. Gone before our people got there," the tech said.

Jackson's face took up the entire screen. Palmer stepped closer to the screen and nodded.

"That's Rand. What the hell is he doing at a fundraiser when he is in the wind?" Garcia said.

"Zoom out," Palmer said. "Over. Over to the woman. Zoom on her."

"Send through both FACE and NGI," Garcia said.

Later, Palmer sat at his desk. The tech entered with Garcia.

"She's up now," the tech said.

Palmer clicked his mouse. Cinder's profile appeared on his screen, and he studied it.

"Constance Darlene Stowe. Former NSA tech. Quit eight years ago," Palmer said.

"Then lots of blank space," Garcia said.

Palmer sat back in his chair and looked at Garcia.

"Girlfriend?" Garcia said.

"She came in with Joshua Proditores. She looked shocked to see Rand," Palmer said.

"Keep reading," Garcia said.

"Father died in Africa. Unnatural causes, it seems," Palmer said.

"Related?" Garcia said.

"No clue at this point but the connection has to be her time at NSA," Palmer said.

"We have nothing placing Rand with NSA. Only with you," Garcia said.

"He was never under my command, Jesse. Give that shit up," Palmer said.

"Guess I am not needed here," the tech said.

"No, yes, you can go, thanks," Palmer said. "See what the NSA has on Ms. Stowe."

"In process," Garcia said.

"Also, see what they have on both Proditores brothers. Pull the red carpet list for the event."

"Already did."

"Let me guess, no Jackson Rand?"

"Affirmative. No C. Stowe either. That was Joshua Proditores plus one. Rules were no plus ones on this gig we were told."

"Little brother of mega-billionaire gets plus whatever he wants."

"Seems. Also, got the pre-lim on the DNA. No Jackson Rand at any crime scene."

"Of course not. If he's involved, he's feeding Hale intel, not doing wet work," Palmer said.

Presidential Bungalow 23. The most requested room at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Known throughout the political world, the business titan demand list, and popular with rich jet-setters. First floor, stonework, lushscape terraces. Five thousand square feet, three bedrooms, burled wood, not just BHH room service at your beck and call, but a fully stocked kitchen.

Then there were the fireplaces, a private swimming pool, yours alone, outdoor dining area with table settings of your choice. Marble baths, both indoor and outdoor showers done in white. Fresh flowers, Imelda Marcos footwear-capable walk-in closet, a walk-in safe. For the valuables, secret documents, personal cache of weapons walk-in safe. Surround sound system everywhere to make your mood. Mood after mood. And your private butler, on call.

Sitting poolside, Charles Shelling turned to Alec Proditores, showed him a photo of Cinder on his laptop.

"Joshua said her name was Helene Marceau. An artist from Paris, he met in Milan. Or maybe it was the race at Monaco. Her real name is Stowe, Constance Darlene," Shelling said.

"Stowe?" Proditores said, the name striking a chord, a chord with a sour note in it.

"Yes, probably after Joshua's money like the rest. We'll do a work-up on her."

"Play the video again."

The video on the laptop played of Jackson cutting in between Cinder and Cole O'Farrell.

"Stop. Back it up."

"Yes, I saw that too," Shelling said.

Proditores picked up the laptop and studied the face of the man cutting in.

"That's Jackson Rand," Shelling said.

"Yes, it is."

Perturbed, Proditores placed the laptop on the table.

"And why has the FBI found nothing on Hale?" Proditores said.

"Taskforce clamped down on leaks. Our source had trouble with intel in the last twenty-four. FBI is getting heat from the White House for answers," Shelling said.

"No doubt. Find this girl and bring her," Proditores said. "Without Joshua involved."

"Yes, sir."

Alec Proditores flicked his lit Dunhill cigarette into the pool.

"Do you want me to get that, sir?"

"The girl, Shelling."

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER 13

Cinder, sitting at the kitchen table in the guest house in Brentwood, watched Casey play a handheld video game. His innocent unknowingness of lurking darkness. Her gaze turned long distance. Several football fields zombie-eyed. Far away. Thoughts deep down. Then rising. And rising. Pulling back in, she looked at the laptop in front of her on the table. In her hand was the piece of paper. She opened it. Again.

Call me to meet. He's planning mass murder.

Cinder folded the paper, clutched it in one hand, rubbing her neck with the other. Rubbed her jaw. *Have I been grinding my teeth again?*

Zing zing. Casey's game knifed the quiet. Cinder jerked her head back, snapped around towards Casey.

"Why don't you read a book?" Cinder said.

"This is way more fun, Mom," Casey said, a what-are-you-thinking look on his face.

Cinder opened the paper in her hand again. She shoved the paper into the front pocket of her black cargo pants. Lifted the laptop screen. She scrolled the pages of data, the metadata. The data about the data. The metadata gathered over two years about a single node in the NSA's massive surveillance gathering

machines. Classified data. A single node and all the spider webs of connections. Meaning nothing until processed with the correct algorithms. The first of which she wrote during her short tenure with the NSA years ago. But refined and rewritten since.

The data revealed stories. Data analysis like this was sold to PublicFigure.com relating to dozens of people. But she sold nothing to them about Alec Proditores. The metadata revealed his vast global connections. That was to be expected. Undoubtedly countless shady business deals, pay-for-play bribes of leading officials cloaked in charitable donations. The Hinton Foundation, the Global Freedom Society. One World Free. On and on and on. Billions of dollars over the years.

None of which Cinder cared about. Early on, she confirmed Proditores' connection to the illegal wildlife trade. She proved his connections to the men who murdered her father. All of this and more she already knew. But as in many big data analytical processes, a single indicator could jump out, if you knew how to look, where to look. In an enormous bulk of data, most of which would overwhelm even the most experienced data engineer, it could be a single indicator that told a unique story. One not easily explained. Not part of a logical network of connections, communications, people, financial transactions, and the rest. A single indicator. The outlier. An outlier about a man capable of heinous crimes.

It was this outlier that Cinder knew Jackson Rand wanted. Derived from a unique algorithm she alone possessed. What Jackson did not know was that there were several outliers.

Cinder stood and walked over to Casey. "You need to come with me."

The Arts District in downtown Los Angeles, a gritty area of old industrial buildings, ranged from Alameda to the River on the

west and from First to Seventh Streets north to south. In 1796, Spanish Father Juan Crespi founded the area during an expedition and called it Our Lady Queen of the Angels. By the late nineteenth century, oranges and grapefruit were grown in the district. As Los Angeles became a city, rail workers moved into single hotel rooms, Little Tokyo and Chinatown developed nearby, and the mix was working-class and cosmopolitan.

By World War II, the citrus groves were replaced by factories, then the rail freight business gave way to the trucking industry. During the 1950s, manufacturing businesses moved overseas or were taken over, and many of the buildings became vacant, and the area declined.

Then the artists...struggling to pay rent in the city in the 1960s, flocked to this section of Los Angeles, colonizing the district. In the late 1970s, punk rock venues opened, and the district became a proving ground for Sonic Youth, the Fall, the Residents, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Beck, and dozens of emerging groups. After another decline, local entrepreneurs promoted the area as a trendy, art and music scene, and it officially became known as the Arts District, featuring murals on the buildings; a rebirth occurred with notoriety as an integral and eclectic part, very LA.

Some of the industrial buildings were renovated and turned into residential lofts, others kept rough, rented for other uses. Art studios, makeshift film post-production studios, hydroponic gardens. Myriad of buildings. Myriad of tenants. Myriad of secrets.

Cinder's focus was on an old brick building on Mateo Street. For several minutes she watched the comings and goings of the building. The sidewalks of Mateo, as most of the streets in the Arts District, were overflowing with the forgotten. Tents, some in use, others collapsed on top of their inhabitants who were asleep, drugged-out or both. Stacks of multicolored trash piles in the street, refuse and sludge.

Cinder scrutinized cars parked on the street, looking for occu-

pants out of place. If the building was under surveillance, the surveillers could be dressed as homeless. Unlimited cover opportunities in this city. Seeing nothing that spooked her, Cinder removed the paper from her pocket. She dialed her phone.

"I'll give you five minutes. Text you the address. Go to the back, up the fire escape. Top landing. Door will be locked. Come alone," Cinder said.

She was not planning to return to this building after today.

Cinder walked to the alley and up the fire escape. Entered a code into the keypad and pulled open the dented metal door. Inside, old tech company bullpen cubicles. The space expansive, over ten thousand square feet. Not painted in decades, paint and plaster peeling, exposed I-beams in the ceiling. Half the cubicles were in use. Grubby coders, web developers, who knew what else. They came here for the privacy and the pipes. The building featured a fiber optic feed, blazing fast Internet connections, a pay-as-you-go arrangement, and was home to proxy servers and other cloaking web equipment. A haven for hackers. Music escaped earbuds, Nirvana, Maggie Rogers, Rap, Metal. Skunky sweet layers of nebulous clouds curling above the tops of the cubicles. Cinder nodded to one of the day managers. They knew each other. She whispered into his ear, and he nodded, clearing her incoming guest.

There was nothing illegal about the building, except for the glaring fire and safety regulation violations. Nothing illegal about renting a desk and a shared fiber pipe. Lots illegal with certain keystrokes, like hacking government and corporate systems. Cinder liked the vibe but always kept her visits to the hacker sanctuary short. She plugged an Ethernet cable into the back of her laptop.

Jackson stood at the top of the fire escape wearing a hoodie and sunglasses. He held Anna's hand. The door beeped. He opened it, and they stepped inside.

"This is Anna. Long story. Can she just wait somewhere?" Jackson said.

Cinder looked them both up and down, unsure. Anna stared at the floor, then peeked at the cauldron of melting pot coders cascading across the space.

"Hey, Anna. The kitchen is over there, help yourself," Cinder said.

"Gracias," Anna said.

Jackson walked Anna to the kitchen. Casey was sitting on a couch with his back to them.

"Hey, Casey," Jackson said.

Casey jumped out of his chair, ran to Jackson, and hugged him.

"Oh my God, I thought you were..." Casey said.

"I know. It was a misunderstanding, I'm good, the bullet... Never mind," Jackson said.

Hiding the cell phone in his hand from Cinder's view, Casey slid it into his sweatshirt pocket. Jackson noticed.

"Jackson, uh...you scared me," Casey said.

"This is Anna. Anna, this is Casey. Can you guys hang for a few?" Jackson said.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Casey said, still stunned and confused.

"This way," Cinder said. She guided Jackson to a small windowless room and closed the door behind them. There was a steel table and old Navy-type aluminum chairs.

"How did you find me?"

Jackson paused. Sizing her up again. He slipped. For a moment. He went to the personal. Fighting a want. A want to know this woman. Just a glimpse inside.

"Your intel was too good. You had certain training. Certain skills. Knew where to look."

"Like you did when you were a covert operator for the Agency?"

"Not quite. But I still didn't find anything. You're good. Untraceable."

Cinder turned her laptop around to Jackson, opened it. A page of data filled the screen.

"What am I looking at?" Jackson said.

"Not just one outlier, dozens. They need more analysis. That's up to you. I'll give you the data if you leave my son and me alone for good," Cinder said.

"This is analysis... maybe only you can do properly."

For the first time, Jackson detected a trace of a smile. Then he did something without thinking. Without planning. Not like him. He touched her hand. She pulled it away. Pulled it away but with the slightest of pauses—as if for a fraction of a second, she hesitated so she could feel. Feel his hand.

"Don't do that," Cinder said, looking down at the table where the hands were a moment prior.

Jackson smiled. It was not returned.

"You have your data, that's it."

"Where's Casey's father?"

"Dead. Your five minutes are almost up."

Cinder spun the laptop back around and spent the next thirty seconds in keystrokes. Done. Then spun the laptop so Jackson could see the screen.

Jackson pointed to dozens of nodes on a single level in the web of connections.

"Who are these?" Jackson said.

"The reds are known gang members of MS-13 and the 18th Street. The blues are various members of white supremacist groups," Cinder said.

"So why is one of the richest men in the world, two levels away from these scum?" Jackson said.

"I don't know. You have what you want. Now you leave me alone."

"Can you put this, all of it, on a flash, please?" Jackson said.

Cinder removed a flash drive from her pocket, inserted it into the laptop, and copied the data.

"Where will you go?" Jackson said.

Cinder closed the laptop and stood.

"We're done," Cinder said. She opened the door, held it open, a please-leave expression on her face.

Jackson stood, sizing her up. So many secrets with this woman. Layers to peel back. The core was what he intended to uncover. Not here. Not now. Sometime. Sometime soon.

"It's about, or at least it should be about, what country Casey will grow up in," Jackson said.

"My son does not need a country," Cinder said.

Jackson's shoulders pulled back, the words shot up from way down, on their own, a tight fist of correction. The fist stopped just behind his teeth. He said nothing. She revealed. Something personal. To be continued.

Jackson retrieved Anna. Cinder hurried them to the back door and the fire escape.

"Come with us," Jackson said.

"Goodbye, Hale," Cinder said.

"He doesn't look like the Hale guy on TV, Mom, not even a little," Casey said.

At a whisper, Jackson said, "Is Casey using a burner?"

Cinder kicked Jackson's foot from the threshold, and the door slammed shut.

"Qui es Hale, señor Jackson?" Anna said.

Jackson and Anna left out the rear fire escape. They navigated the encampments on Mateo Street. Jackson stopped and turned around.

"What're we doing, Mr. Jackson?" Anna said.

"Un momento, Anna."

Cinder stood rigid at the kitchen doorway. She gave him the look. Casey reached into his pocket and removed the phone.

"Where did you get this?" Cinder said.

Casey jumped and spun.

"It was one of your old ones. In a bag. My friend Emilio gave me a battery, so I was just playing games on it."

Jackson scanned the streets. An ocean of homeless and drug dealers and buyers and garbage. And Karlov. Karlov with another man, rough, hardened features. The men made their way through the riffraff and glanced up as they passed Cinder's building. A block away, a black sedan pulled out and drove up Broadway. Cars behind the sedan were honking because the black sedan was driving so slowly. Karlov and the other man walked into an alley and disappeared.

"Time to move," Jackson said.

He grabbed Anna's arm and ran to the entrance of the building.

"Elevator, too slow," Jackson said.

Jackson and Anna ran up the old stairwell, their footsteps echoing off the walls. The entrance to the hackers' space was another steel door, no kicking in this door.

"Tell them you're here to see Cinder. You're her cousin. Uh... su prima, su prima," Jackson said.

"Si, si," Anna said

Jackson rang the buzzer and ran down the hallway and around the corner.

"Yeah," a young man said through the speaker next to the door.

"Hola señor. Come to see cousin. Prima. Se llama Cinder," Anna said.

"Cinder?"

"Si, Cinder, my cousin."

"Hold on."

Jiggling of the lock. Jackson rushed around the corner, and the door opened an inch. Jackson opened it the rest of the way. The nerd fell backward.

"Fuck me. Back off, man," the nerd said.

Jackson ran through the space, a slalom between cubicles and desks and worktables. Anna stood in the doorway. Cinder was sitting at a cubicle when he flew by.

"We gotta go, they found you," Jackson said, his words fading as he passed her on a dead run.

Jackson put both hands on the back door. He turned to a geeky guy drinking a Starbucks on a couch. "Is there a camera to see out the back?"

"What's up, dude? Are you supposed to be here, man?" the geek asked.

"Camera, damn it. Is there a camera out back?"

"Maybe, dude. Could be."

Jackson put his ear to the door. Scratching noises.

On the balcony, the man was working the back door lock, Karlov behind him.

Cinder was standing behind Jackson, twenty feet away with Casey and Anna, both saucer-eyed, watching Jackson.

Jackson stepped back from the door. Drew his SIG to the ready with both hands, feet square, knees bent. Exhaled.

"Whoa, dude," the geek said.

The door flew open.

Jackson's SIG punched out.

The man stepped in, Karlov behind him, not yet through the doorway.

Jackson's eyes locked on the pistol in the man's right hand. *Raise the weapon.* The pistol came up inches. *There you go.*

Bang.

Bang.

Jackson put two rounds center mass.

The man fell forward. Karlov ducked behind the doorway, protected by the brick wall of the building.

Jackson kicked the door closed. Locked it, turned, ran towards Cinder and the kids.

"Out the front," Jackson said. He grabbed Anna's arm, Cinder grabbed Casey.

Screams, people diving for cover, falling, scrambling, chairs knocked over, tripping as they moved away from the rear of the space. Chaos.

“Call 911,” a young woman screamed.

“I’m calling. Calling. Dial.” The woman punched in numbers then dropped her phone.

Jackson, Anna, Cinder, and Casey ran down the front stairwell, stopped at the front door.

Jackson inched forward to survey the street. He ducked back inside.

“Are you armed?” Jackson asked Cinder.

Cinder pulled out a pistol from a waist holster under her leather jacket.

“I’m gonna get the car. I’ll U-turn right in front. Be ready,” Jackson said. He bolted, reached the bluestone metallic BMW M5, and jumped in.

Screeching rear tires. Max engine revs. *VooRRR* echoing off the buildings. The BMW nose-dived, spun one-eighty.

Jackson leaned over, opened the passenger door.

A block away, the black Dodge Challenger peeled away from the curb. 707 horses. Full gallop.

Cinder opened the back door of the BMW. The kids dove in. Cinder jumped into the passenger seat. The rear wheels erupted in smoke before the front door was closed. Jackson checked his rearview. Challenger approaching fast.

“Seatbelts now,” Jackson barked.

He punched it. Gatling crackle of the Beemer dual exhausts. Quick right on E. 4th Place. Right foot, stomped to floorboard. Clutch in, hard braking, another right turn onto South Santa Fe Avenue. Marine and turquoise blue building graffiti blurring together as the M5 zigzagged traffic and pedestrians. Quick rearview, Challenger rolling left and right through the obstacle course that was the street, in pursuit.

“Hands on back of seats,” Jackson yelled, braking hard.

The BMW nose-dived again. Jackson released the brakes and slid through the intersection with another hard right onto Jesse Street. *Beep, beep*—he pounded the car horn.

“Out of the way,” he snapped.

Hard left back onto Mateo. Right on Industrial Street. Braking again. Checked intersection, zoomed through. Hard right on Mill Street. Past a black and white. The cop car hit its brakes hard. Lightbar and siren. U-turn, then braked hard to avoid the Challenger as it flew past it.

"We got two problems now," Jackson said.

"I know a place," Cinder said. "That next light, take a left."

Jackson blew the red light and evaded the incoming.

"Up there. The buildings are tight here. Dive into that alley. Keep going. Going. Stop. Turn right in here," Cinder said.

The BMW barely fit between the buildings.

"Go to the end and stop before you reach daylight. We'll leave the car," she said.

"We'll block them," Jackson said.

The BMW stopped, forming a barricade in the alley. Behind them, the Challenger went by the intersection backward, slammed into the LAPD black and white, then turned into the alley.

Jackson, Cinder, Anna, and Casey ran.

They stopped at the edge of a building. Jackson poked his head around the corner, ducked back. Hand and gun exposed only, gun pointed up at forty-five degrees. He fired a decoy shot. From his training, a shot to cause the awaiting sniper, the man with the gun trained on the corner where they hid, to flinch, just for half a second. Enough for him to make a move out in the open. Then get to the next cover position.

"Now run," Jackson said.

Hug the walls. Lessen the target. Hide the center mass. Hug the protector walls. The maternal protector walls. Instinct. Survival instinct.

Dim yellow-gray light. *Traffic sounds. Distant honking. People yelling. Crying out.* To no apparent listener. The sounds of the lost. Digging. A scraping sound behind them. The sound of running water, source unknown. Reverberations, pangs, and throes of the inner city. A loud scream. Then silence. Had Karlov found an innocent? In his way. Made haste? We must keep moving. Sirens.

More Sirens. LAPD flooding the area. *Woop woop*, the airship on a steep turn overhead. Close, then retreating. Then back again. Circling.

Fading light, magic hour golden light of the sun past the horizon of brick and concrete. In between the tall buildings, ambers and siennas, shadows.

Jackson removed his flashlight. He held the torch out wide around the brick edge of the building. To take the shot out wide from his body. If a shot was to come. Nothing.

They tried to catch their breath in the charcoal gray throat of the alley. Full sweat. Wet under the arms. On top of the stomach—cold wet—the cooling breeze of the oncoming night. Around them, decaying wooden pallets. Oil drums and putrefied garbage. Puddles. Stale water. Mixed with what? More encampments, the hollow eyes looking at them. Molded cardboard used as blankets. To keep out the cold. To keep out the heat. To keep out any reminders.

Jackson looked around *Entrail City*. That's what he called it because that is what it had become. From a distance, the building graffiti eclectic, often stunning. But zoom in. Closer. Closer in the bowels of it. Casey and Anna pinched their noses.

"We need to go," Cinder said. They ran.

They ran through the fog—ocean fog miles inland. A marine layer layering a fine mist of moisture in the air. A mat of moisture on the asphalt, on their skin. A wetness with a texture to it, some particulate matter that accumulated on you down here. Downtown in Entrail City.

They ran down another alley following Cinder's lead. Another alley. Another. Distant yelling. Gunshots cracked, echoed. Calling, pursuing.

"LAPD," Jackson said. "May buy us a minute or two."

"Another alley. Here," Cinder said. She opened a metal door. Empty warehouse. She closed the door behind them and locked it.

"This building has a basement. I have storage here. Walk don't

run. If we pass anybody, don't make eye contact, just keep going," Cinder said.

The underground garage had been converted into storage units. Old shipping containers from ocean freighters. Cinder removed a ring of keys and opened one of the units. They slipped inside.

CHAPTER 14

The container was used on ocean freighter cargo ships, forty feet long, over eight feet high and eight feet wide. The floor space of a small apartment but it was no apartment. When Cinder flicked the light switch, its purpose became clear. This was the workspace of a clandestine technology technician.

Ten-foot-long workbenches, handmade of wood, lined the exterior walls of the container. Bookending each workbench were shelving units packed with electronic gear, rappelling gear, camping, tactical, weaponry.

On the first bench was a StingRay II, a rack unit fifteen inches wide and deep by eight inches in height. The front panel was steel with pull-out handles on the side, two large red lights, several switches and inputs for coax and other cabling. The StingRay functioned as a cell-site simulator, then transmitted a powerful signal that covertly duped phones within a specific area into hopping onto a fake network. Jackson looked over the device. He knew what it was.

Next to it was a receiver/recorder daisy-chained into several laptop computers aligned in a row. There were several devices for audio surveillance, LR-5200-I receivers, neck loops/lanyards, charging trays, and speakers.

“The window to their worlds,” Jackson said.

"Wow, Mom, what is this stuff?" Casey said.

"With this, Casey, one can extract international mobile subscriber identities, electronic serial numbers, hack SS7 global networks..." Jackson said.

"Enough," Cinder said.

Anna picked up a dark blue cellphone from the workbench.

"Cryptophone," Jackson said. Jackson took it from her hand and set it down.

"I'm sure nothing here is something you haven't seen before," Cinder said.

Jackson surveyed the laptop computer array. They were running.

"The gear, maybe. What's running inside these, I suspect no one has seen," Jackson said.

"What inside, Mr. Jackson?" Anna said.

"Algorithms, my dear," Jackson said. "How many targets?"

The curious expression on Anna's face remained.

"Let's get you kids situated," Cinder said.

Cinder showed Casey and Anna to the rear of the trailer. Cinder removed blankets, blow-up rubber mattresses from a trunk.

"How about something to eat?" Cinder said.

She opened the door of a small refrigerator.

Noises outside. They all froze, listening. The sound of a door closing, footsteps, muffled conversations. People were moving through the basement. Clanking of metal. Checking the locks. Jackson covered Anna's mouth, Cinder covered Casey's. They sank down to the floor. Jackson placed his index finger over his lips, do-not-make-a-sound. The searchers moved through the basement for several minutes. Methodically. Then another door closed with a bang. Quiet.

"Stay still. We wait," Jackson whispered.

They stayed quiet for hours; finally the kids fell asleep, and Cinder adjusted an electric heater to keep them warm.

Her fingers. Perfect fingers. Strong hands but feminine. No nail polish. That would not be like her. Except maybe black. Black polish.

He studied her proportions. Black yoga pants, tight over her long legs, their shape obvious—toned and strong—but not bulky, all woman. He watched her change into a black fleece jacket, tight to the body, the shoulders worn from backpack straps, a jacket well-worn, an outer shell. It was the other shell that interested him, the one protecting her heart. A hardened shell. Marble hard shell. Black marble shell. A shell reflecting and protecting.

“Thank you,” Jackson said.

“For what?”

“For trusting me here.”

“Don’t trust you. We didn’t have a choice. I was protecting Casey. And her. Who is she?”

“There’s a ranch. Traficantes. Chulos. Outside Ojai. Looks like truckloads of girls. She was on the run.”

“When you were...”

“Shot and fell off a cliff,” Jackson said, instinctively touching his side.

Cinder turned and looked at Anna sleeping.

“You remember where it is?” Cinder said.

“I’ll approach from the eastern tree line,” Jackson said.

That surprised Cinder.

“It’s unrelated to your obsession with Proditores,” Cinder said.

“My obsession?”

Jackson waited for a response. There was none.

“Yes, it’s unrelated,” Jackson said.

“And you’re still going?”

“Needs to be done. There’re more. Girls.”

They were quiet for several minutes.

“Morning. Early,” Cinder said.

“Sun at our backs.”

“You have a team? Of course, you do.”

Jackson stood up and looked over a standalone computer

monitor. A USB cable connected to a laptop. He noticed the software running. Nvidia. Cinder shut the monitor off.

Jackson segued, "Anything to drink in the enclave?"

Cinder pulled a bottle of red wine from a shelf. Handed it to Jackson. Swiss army knife on his belt with a wine opener on it. Jackson opened the wine. Poured two glasses. Handed one to her. Slid down to the floor still holding her glass. Cinder paused. Then accepted it, and sat.

"So you examined his old photos. Proditores," she said matter-of-factly.

Jackson paused. *She knew I would eventually find her. Did her calculus conclude that she would be gone by then?*

"A deep dive. I came up with nothing. Nothing for months of research. Then..."

"The photo. Africa. I got careless. After my father died."

"You were emotional. Traumatized. In those times, we make mistakes."

"We?"

"People like us."

"We have nothing in common," Cinder said, then looked at Casey.

Jackson kept his eyes on her. She felt the look, like a ray of light with weight to it, pressing on her. Cinder brushed her hair back. Like that would make it go away.

"We don't believe in the same things," Cinder said.

"I don't believe in much."

"What? The crusader, darling of Fox News?"

"Lots of strutting and fretting. Nothing changes," Jackson said.

"Burning banks. Riots. Stepping over dead bodies on Michigan Avenue. Santa Monica Boulevard. More than nothing."

"Cause and effects. But it's not enough for some. Too many spokes still holding the wheel of the nation together for..."

"The global open power brokers?"

"For the founder of the Global Open Society?"

Cinder studied Jackson's face. He observed her surveying.

She's not looking at me. She's looking at my face, its structure. Like a structural engineer studies posts, beams, trusses.

"And Hale?" Cinder said.

"You look nothing like him," Jackson said, playing it straight.

A smile. A faint smile. A crack in the veneer. Then back to the natural state—deadpan and detached and dispassionate—analytical, surgical almost. Like an oncologist, after years of honing delivering death sentences to patients and loved ones.

"Hale used my research. You fed it to him," Cinder stated.

Jackson's head moved in slightly, an instinctive reaction to his focus in on her eyes. *Was this a head fake? A double head fake?*

"You're fishing. Maybe you fed him the same research you sold to me to give him a head start," Jackson said.

"And why the hell would I do that?"

"Yeah, you did say no country. But there may have been a time you demonstrated patriotism to this country," Jackson said.

"You think you know about me."

A momentary standoff.

She looked at Jackson again. Not like before. This time sizing up. Probing for the tell. None came.

"Maybe we should burn each other's blood," Jackson said.

"Burn blood?" Cinder said.

"Yeah, with a blowtorch. See if it sizzles or slides away. Truth revealed."

"Not following," Cinder said.

"The Thing. The John Carpenter remake. Kurt Russell. He's in the Arctic weather station when they dig up The Thing. It gets into the sled dogs, then the scientists and they are all locked in this room trying to figure out who is The Thing and who is still human. So Kurt has everybody give blood. Human blood just burns, but not The Thing's blood. The blood of The Thing has all the intelligence of The Thing, and it slides away from the flame."

"My blood burns," Cinder says.

"You are hot," Jackson said.

Jackson moved his foot towards her. She kicked it away.

"Forget it, I'm gay."

"No shit. That's great news. I'm actually a woman."

Cinder laughed. She slipped.

"See, a laugh, maybe you're human after all. Not The Thing."

"Didn't Kurt Russell freeze to death in that movie?" Cinder said.

"Or the Thing got him."

"The Thing got him," she said.

There was a long silence. They drank wine. Jackson refilled her glass.

"What about Casey?" Jackson said.

The question cut deep. A constant wound that would not heal. Guilt. Jackson noticed.

"He's a great kid. You've worked hard," Jackson said, trying to make up ground.

"Don't patronize me. I'm taking him away from all of this. Soon."

"In the wind. Then what?"

"Then, it's over."

She meant it. She tried to mean it.

"Then you'll pretend? No more dead rhinos. Tigers. Whales. Human chattel. You just stop?"

"After."

"Yeah, I know. One more target. Then the demons will vanish. Sure, then you can turn it all off and..."

She looked up at him.

"Bake. Real Martha Stewart."

She laughed again. Then stopped smiling.

"Don't get in my way again."

She set the glass down. Stood up. Started to walk towards the front. Jackson stood up. Stepped in her way.

Face to face. Close. Cinder stood her ground, looking to the side. Jackson waited. Waited for her to relent, at least a little.

Her eyes darted to his mouth for a fraction of a second, then looked away.

"You're not my thing," she said.

Cinder swept her arm up and against his shoulder. Jackson stepped aside.

"Froze to death," he said.

Later, the lamps were out. It was dark. Cinder lay on her side, against the opposite side of the container, facing the wall. Jackson closed his eyes. He was not sure how long he slept. Two hours maybe. Close to three.

He stood in front of the laptops, Cinder still asleep. He lifted one of the screens. He saw the wild card search for Jackson Rand. Scrolled the windows on the screen. He found what he was looking for. Documents including references to Snipers Against Poaching. He opened them. A document titled *Benefactors ISN*, then sections for ideas, strategies, and notes. She was researching who the anonymous benefactor was to the non-profit. The main financial source since its inception. Jackson looked at the metadata of the file. It had been created years before she was supplying research to PublicFigure.com. *She figured it out. Smart girl. She knew.* He closed the window.

Another laptop. Medical records. Jackson studied the laptops. A small window open in the corner of the screen. DNA information. Jackson looked closer. His name was on the report. He paused. He was very tired. Gunshot, driving, running, not your recommended rest and downtime agenda. He was off his game just enough to not feel Cinder wake up and stand, much less, move to three feet from his person. He turned around. It was the Cinder look.

"I'm shutting all these down. My best paying client got neutralized, remember?" Cinder said.

"DNA?" Jackson said.

Cinder turned away. Jackson grabbed her by the arm and turned her around.

"Why?" Jackson said.

"It was in the cloud. I could so I did," Cinder said.

"And what about SAP? You knew," Jackson said.

"I am not a member of SAP," Cinder said.

"Member? Not sure I would term it that way. Founder, yes, member, not doing yourself justice. But you knew. Is that why you wanted me to find you?" Jackson said.

"I never wanted you to find me."

"Shell company over shell over shell over trust, country to country and on. You traced the contributions back to me. So let's trade canned responses. I did not want my contributions made public to avoid the deluge of charity requests that invariably come with such a disclosure. That's the first point. The second point is that I never condoned the murders of poachers. The original name of the non-profit was Stop All Poaching, SAP. I never met any of the members personally. I just wanted to contribute to the eradication of poaching endangered species," he said.

Cinder shut down all the computers. Then sat at the worktable. She swiveled her chair away from Jackson. Jackson stared at the back of her head. Her long dark hair finally let down when she slept. Her shoulders forming a bit of a V like a man's shoulder, yet remaining very womanly. Athletic. Strong. Sleek.

"How did you make your money? Before PublicFigure, which does not make much?" Cinder said, still looking away.

"Internet," Jackson said.

"Uh huh," Cinder said.

"What do you like to do besides center mass shots on poachers from one thousand yards? And destroying people's reputations via dark secrets?"

"I could ask you the same question."

"Then ask."

"But I don't care what you like to do."

"Then tell me what you want to know. That is, what you don't already know about me."

"I know everything about you. Everything I need to know."

"I have a dog."

"I know."

"I love my dog."

"I don't care."

"Your son likes me."

"He likes everybody. He'll learn."

Jackson took his shirt off and removed his bloody bandage. The blood was dried. Deep dark reds and black. Anna gathered up the bandages and examined the entrance and exit wounds. The stitches held. Anna turned, with her eyes, asked Cinder for help. Anna waited.

"Vendas, Ms. Cinder?" Anna said.

Cinder's eyes moved to Jackson. Still resisting. She removed a medical kit from a shelf and opened it. Anna watched Cinder clean the wounds, dress them, and rewrap Jackson's midsection. Jackson's hands were outstretched an inch above Cinder's glistening dark hair. Jackson inhaled, absorbing her scent. He inhaled again. Cinder stopped wrapping.

"You finish it," Cinder said. She walked away.

"Thanks," Jackson said. There was no reply.

Jackson and Cinder spent the next hour packing gear into four backpacks. Two large ones for themselves and two smaller ones for Casey and Anna. Food, water, clothing, ammunition, cryptophones, surveillance equipment, climbing gear, IFAK medical kits. Cinder handed a set of Leitz binoculars to Jackson and he placed the lanyard over his neck.

Cinder slipped out of the container and surveyed the basement. It was quiet. No signs of movement. She returned.

"Anna, you stay here. I'm going to look around outside. I'll be back. You guys will be fine right here," Jackson said.

He grabbed a cryptophone and left.

Jackson climbed the metal stairs to ground level and moved through the dark corridors. Yellow-gray light around the corner. It was coming from ten-foot-high windows in the next corridor. An outside wall. He opened the door to the alley. Just your standard

alley dwellers dwelling. He smelled de-comp. Someone did not make it through the night in this alley. *The morning sun was going to bake that good soon.*

Jackson ducked his head back inside the building, deep breath, held it. Made his way to the street. A black and white cruised by. Standard beat. No lightbars turning. He ducked back into the alley entrance. He dialed the crypto.

“Addy. Find a clean ride. Clear your six. Call you in sixty mikes. Out,” Jackson said.

CHAPTER 15

The ground game of the three presidential candidates was in overdrive, thirteen days before the election. Boots on the ground, making the rounds, door knocking each battleground neighborhood, doing everything they could. Max social media spend all the way to the end.

Inside the campaign headquarters of the DNC and RNC, staffers feigned the power of positive thinking, masking growing paranoia. No so much with the Oty campaign.

In the last few days, the polls had been volatile as the Main Streets in any American town. The running averages in the major battleground states of Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Ohio showed a decline for President Cannesco to forty-four points and Mason to twenty-eight points.

The undecided vote doubled to ten percent, and Oty Rotteba jumped to eighteen points, a major move for an independent.

Bleak was the day, dreary overcast, low-hanging fog and mist. Cold enough for hypothermia if you got wet. Addy pulled the Humvee off the mountain road and stopped. Jackson in the

passenger seat, Cinder, Casey, and Anna in the back. Jackson was maneuvering the map on the tablet in his lap. Satellite view. Zoomed in on a remote valley. Zoomed further on shapes. Linear. Appeared to be manmade.

"Angular lines. Also, this foliage doesn't quite match. Maybe placed there," Jackson said.

"Yeah, camo from helos," Addy said. "This here, what's that?"

"Looks like another structure here. One way in, looks like."

"And out."

"But they'll have created rear egress. Escape plan B on foot. Somewhere back here."

Jackson pointed to a dense area behind the camouflaged structures.

Cinder leaned in, and Jackson showed her the aerial view.

"Three teams. Road team, five hundred yards in front. They wait for the assault team coming in from the rear. Another team from the southern hillside. Coming through the trees," Cinder said.

Jackson leaned back, a why-am-I-not-surprised look.

"I like this girl, Jackson," Addy said. "Other than trying to terminate your program with her little Czech gun."

"What're our resources?" Cinder said.

Jackson and Addy looked at each other and smiled. "We got a couple private security buddies that might be up for this one. What'ya think, Addy?"

"Mick's on it."

"We need to park these kids someplace in Ojai," Jackson said.

"Copy that," Addy said.

"Anna, how many girls at that ranch?" Jackson said. "Cunatos chicas rancho?"

"No se. Seis? I no go back, señor Jackson, por favor."

"No, Anna, you're not going back until it's safe. You and Casey wait for us to come back to town. Esperas," Cinder said.

"Si. Si señora Cinder. Esperamos. Con Casey."

"Mom, what're you and Jackson going to do at that place?" Casey said. His voice nervous, unsure.

"La chicas, Casey. Libera a mis amigos," Anna said.

"It'll be okay, honey," Cinder said.

Mountain road. Southeast of Ojai. A black suburban, smoked windows came to a stop. Mick got out. The other doors opened. Three guys, white, black, Hispanic. Another vehicle, Chevy Tahoe, cruised in, came to a stop behind the suburban. Four guys got out, one Asian, two white guys, another black guy. Late twenties to early thirties. Stubble, beards. Looked like ex-SEALs or Delta. Serious dudes, fit, training maintained. Lots of high fives. These boys knew each other. For a long time, lots of history. Wearing battle vests, 30-round magazines, tac gear, battle-ready. SIG P226s, MK23s, Bravo Company RECCE carbines, MK43s. All with the nicks and scratches of time in country, but recently cleaned, polished. Pros.

"This is an HR op. Jackson and Addy, Alpha team, humping it from the north. Jesse's bravo team. We're Charlie," Mick said.

He laid a topographic map on the hood of the suburban and compared it with a pad running Google Earth Pro. He pointed to a road.

"This is their in-out, here. We set up somewhere around...here. We have several M112s but we want to go quiet. No C-4 unless we have to. We don't want local Longmires cowboying after we blow shit up."

"ROE, Mick?"

"PID hostiles, then weapons-free. No collaterals. We have teenage girls under duress here. Jackson will give go sig from the flank. Watch your crossfire and backgrounds. Center mass only. Tight groupings. Nothing fancy, boys. This is an HR synced assault. One and done. Also, we have a female-friendly with Jackson. She will be armed, hold for ID info."

Mick and his three paramilitary buddies parked the truck seven hundred yards from the target, moved up the road on foot, two men on each side, weapons ready, the road cradled by ponderosas, eucalyptus, Moreton Bay figs. Some trees burned from the fires, dead, others still holding on to green life. The men screwed suppressors on the barrels of their carbines, checked their comms. Another four-man team traversed a hillside, steep incline, downed tree limbs, stumps, logs, underbrush.

Jackson, Addy, and Cinder, on the floor of the ravine, muddy, viscous sticking slosh. Slow going. Navigating thick brambles, dense, angry. Sharp daggers of the mangle cutting wrists, the open area between glove and jacket. Canyon gusts moving all directions in the shadowed sunken earth. Ashen daylight checkering between. Obscuring. Howling cold rejecting wind. Mist forming. Descending.

Mick and his men walked three paces, stopped, listened. Repeated. Glassed down the road. Mick and his partner moved left into the forest, made their way forward. The other two team members moved right and off the road. After a few minutes of methodical movements through the trees, Mick kneeled and glassed. Saw movement. Fist raised. Freeze. Listened. The other men followed his lead. Mick pointed ahead, then raised his index finger—one tango.

“Jackson, tango. Solo guard looks like,” Mick said into his lapel microphone.

“Copy. Confirm solo tango, Hold. Ready to take him quiet on my go,” Jackson said.

“Copy that,” Mick said. He braced the carbine against a tree. Steadied it. Held the red dot on the man, his target. Clicked off the safety.

Jackson kneeled down. He saw the lines of the structure a hundred yards ahead. Waited. The rear sentry, a man guarding the building, walked into view. Hispanic, mid-twenties. Smoking a cigarette, AK around his neck.

"Tango rear. Solo. AK," Jackson said. Cinder and Addy positioned behind Jackson, kneeling.

"Copy, Alpha," Mick said.

"Bravo team, what's your twenty?" Jackson said.

Jesse, big black dude, the look of an NFL linebacker, on the move with his three men hillside, stopped, kneeled.

"Visual on building, Alpha. Negative tangos."

"Copy Bravo, hold position," Jackson said.

"Copy."

Jackson glassed the man guarding the rear of the house. He panned the binoculars back and forth. A blue color caught Jackson's eye. To the left of the man was a tree. Hanging from the lowest branch were panties. Various colors. A thick burlap rope tied around the tree, five feet off the ground. Another rope tied to it, hanging down.

His jaw muscles tightened, "Coyotaje rape tree," Jackson said, the words deep, almost guttural. Broke his concentration for a moment. He spat. Gathered himself. The suppressor rose next to him. It was Cinder's rifle aimed at the guard. He placed his hand on the barrel and lowered it.

"I got this," Jackson said. He raised the 18-inch barrel of the AR-15. Leupold 9x3 scope mounted. He dialed back to 3x wide view. Reticle on the man's shoulder.

"Turn to me," he said under his breath. He exhaled. The man turned, broadside to Jackson. Clear chest shot. Thumb slid up slowly—to the safety—pushed down. Clicked it off, weapon now hot.

"Charlie, status?" Jackson said.

"PID affirmative. Target in sight," Mick said.

"Copy. Spotters ready to confirm. Fire when...on my count." Jackson said.

The muzzle of Jackson's rifle lifted.

"Three, two, one. Mark."

Ffff from the tubular suppressor. White smoke from the barrel.

Fffft. Recoil of Mick's .308 kicked back. The casing dinged off a tree.

Jackson brought the scope back on target. Nothing. Lowered the scope slightly to something on the ground.

"Hit," Addy confirmed.

"Hit," Mick's partner said.

The leaves on the tree behind Mick's target were limp, weighted down with blood splatter. Cinder glassed where the man stood moments ago. Green leaves with red.

"Take the brass," Jackson said. Jackson picked up his casing.

"Done," Mick said.

"Bravo and Charlie teams, move to position one, report," Jackson said.

"Copy."

"Copy."

Mick's team moved through the forest, traveled hundreds of yards. Then plopped down. Breathing hard.

"Charlie position one. Bravo position one."

"Copy."

Jackson kneeled, set the butt of his rifle on the ground. Closed his eyes for just a moment. *This was one of those times. In position. Next move, living and dying. It's true about time, time slowing.*

His heart thumped, thumped, thumped. *Every time. Colors brighten.* He opened his eyes wide. Sounds louder. He listened. Rustling of the wind in the trees. Muffled voices inside the building. His breathing. His heart. He inhaled deeply. Smells that weren't there before. Before time slowed. This air. Different. Faint decomp. The faint smell of sex. Burnt. Smells not supposed to be. But were.

Jackson glassed the building. Weathered slat wood sides, paint peeled off. Decades-old cedar-shingled roof. Smoke rising from the chimney. A scream. A young girl's scream. Then nothing.

"Damn it," Jackson said.

"They're in there," Cinder said.

Jackson turned around and looked at her.

"You ready for this?"

"Yes."

"This is close range. CQB. Right there. You see them. The eyes. Don't fucking freeze and think. You take time to think, you die."

"I got it," she said.

Inside the building. A large living room with a fireplace. A bed against the wall. A young girl lying face-down. Naked. Alive. Breathing heavy. Sobbing. Her hands outstretched above her head. Rope tied. Five Hispanic men, tatted, dirty. The chulos. Two sitting by the fireplace drinking. Two in the kitchen. One sitting on the floor next to the bed. The bed with the girl on it. AKs in the corner, leaned against the wall. Several of them.

"Wish we had Indian Springs. Reaper with heat eyes," Jesse said.

"Wish not, Bravo. Just execute in the present," Jackson said.

"Heard that," Jesse said.

"What about crossfire?" Mick said.

"Bravo four corner perimeter. Take cover. Cinder, you move to Bravo. Charlie breach front. Two on the windows."

"Negative. I'm going in with you," Cinder said.

Jackson looked at her, gauged the situation. "Stay close on my six."

"Positions two. Counting, three, two, one. Mark," Jackson said.

Jackson, Addy, and Cinder moved to the rear door. Addy placed a breaching charge on the door. Stepped aside. Mick placed a charge on the front door.

"Wait for my bang," Jackson said.

"Copy."

"Copy."

Jackson counted with his fingers. Three, two, one. Point. *Bang*. The rear door blew open. They rushed in.

Ffft. Ffft. Ffft. Ding. Ding, casings bouncing off the floor.

Knepads of the tac-team pounding the floor.

Cinder swung her rifle, centered it on target.

Overlapping *Fffts, fff-fffts, fffts-ff-fffts*.

Suppressed automatic weapon fire.

Thumps.

Bodies falling.

Pans crashing to the floor in the kitchen.

Glass windows shattering by rifle butts.

"Check the other rooms," Jackson said.

"Copy."

Jackson turned to Cinder. She was standing still, rifle pointed down at the man on the floor in front of her, smoke rising from the suppressor on her weapon. Eyes wide open, she exhaled, finally. Breathing heavy, slowly turned and looked at Jackson.

"You okay? You did good," Jackson said. She nodded. She was not okay.

"Clear." "Clear," from the back of the house.

Smoke filled the living room—smoke from the assault rifles. A silence hung for a moment.

"All tangos down."

Screaming—the girl on the bed.

Five pink-misted chulos.

Walls—dripping.

Floor—pooling. Falling through the slats of the old wooden raised floor. Into the earth below. Back to the earth. On its way to hell.

Screaming. "Cover her," Jackson said, pointing to the girl on the couch.

Cinder was already on it. Pulled a parka from the hook on the wall. Covered the girl.

"Dónde es chicas?" Cinder said.

The girl was shaking. Could not talk. Hugging Cinder. Blood between her legs. In shock.

"Where are the others?" Jackson said. "Dónde?"

"La chicas," Cinder said.

Cinder felt the girl's fingers move. Then her forearm. Cinder held her hand. A finger extended. Pointing to the hallway. Jackson

walked down the hallway. Pulled back the throw rug. A plywood panel on hinges. A lock, unlocked.

"Cinder," Jackson called out.

Cinder started to rise. The girl held her. Tight.

"No, no, no. Por favor," she said.

"It's okay. You're safe now," Cinder said.

Mick sat on the edge of the bed next to the girl. Helped her drink from his water bottle. Cinder pried the girl's hands off of hers.

Jackson threw back the panel. Steps. Into darkness. Stains on the steps. A rising rank smell escaping from the blackness.

Jackson and Cinder covered their mouths and noses with their shemaghs. Not enough. The smell. Putrid. Body order. Fecal matter. Other. Death, rats, human.

Jackson kneeled, removed his flashlight, ducked his head below the floor. Quick look. Waiting for the gunfire. None came.

Faint whimpering. Eight feet down the stairs to the dirt floor. Scattered puddles. Food wrappers, scraps of paper, refuse, cans, garbage. Plastic water bottles, empty, crushed. Noise from below. Jackson panned the dirt floor with his light, showing Cinder. Looking together.

Jackson called out. "The men up here are dead. Drop your weapons. Walk to the stairs, or we will shoot you too."

"Show your hands," Cinder said. "Manos."

Jackson slid the sling of his AR-15 around, removed his SIG pistol, ready for close combat. Turned on its light. Green laser.

Distant whimpering. Descended the stairs. Into the black. Cooler, damp. Stench knocked him back. Gag reflex. Held it together.

Wall next to the stairs supported by two-by-fours. Metal cabinet handles screwed in. Something to tie onto.

A filthy mattress. Empty tequila bottles. Scattered, broken glass. Now four steps down.

Jackson crouched, panned the light into the murk. Cinder, on the second stair. Whimpering sounds. Jackson paused. *This is*

death. Descending into someplace worse than hell. Hell on Earth. Can't breathe. No human can be in this place. Ever. Yet they descended.

Air thick. Stale. Tastes stale. Can taste the air. Dark, rancid cave air.
Reached the bottom.

Channel of light panning, white specks, reflecting. Fog. Whimpering. Far corner.

Cinder stepped into the hell behind him. Moved to the sounds, scraping, something scratching on the dirt floor.

Too dark to see, their guns aiming into the black.

Panned his gun light. A body. Female. Decomposing against the wall. Hollowed oversized eyes. Skin sunken and taut made her eyes bigger, owl eyes.

They kept moving. Into the dull opaque—into the murk.

Huddled together. Mostly naked. Some with panties, dirty tee shirts. Torn.

Hands hiding faces. Other hands pushed out. Keeping intruders away. Keeping the demons away. Keeping the devil away. Keeping the devil away in his own hell.

Cinder holstered her weapon—slid to her knees. Slid down, down to the half-lives.

Six of them.

“Jesus God.”

“God’s never been in this place.”

CHAPTER 16

Crawled out of hell. Out of hell to death. Five dead. Human traffickers. Pimps. Dead on the floor. The prisoner sex slaves spat on the corpses. Kicked them. Spat more, cried. One stared into wide open graying eyes. That one was dead on his feet, dead dish-ragged to the side of the La-Z-Boy, then plunked to the floor. She looked hard into the lifeless eyes. Snapped her finger you-gonna-wake-up? Spat again...into the bloodshot, sphincter muscles failed, black pupil dilated, sockets shrunken iris fixed eyes.

Blood splatter in some of the eyes gave them a two-tone effect. Two expressions in the face at once. Peculiar looks of the dead. Then the neck and jaw. They go hard. Rigor mortis, not yet. Limp still when the men dragged the corpses, by arms, some by legs. Black red lines on the floor, patterned, heels of shoes dragging. Belt buckle knifing floor blood.

The work of the .223 and .308 rounds at close range, exploding matter across the room, projecting from the three-inch exit holes, fabric torn off with the flesh and bone and skin and connective tissue and hair and blood, the red black dripping down the walls, slowing, coagulating, stuck on the walls and in between the tongue and groove cedar ceiling slats and on the windows and

splatter on the kitchen cabinets and the pots and pans, black red the work of full metal jacket brass.

Jagged pieces of them flying, other pieces turned to red vapor, the mist of death, no derangement the same, patterns of demise different, displacements of body parts, all instant. Collapsed, some backward, some turned about, some forward while viscous liquid darted the other direction. Dances unique. Now laid still. Had that in common. A bladder let go. Then a bowel. Discharge, they call it. Fetid. Fetid.

“Get ‘em out,” he said. “Get them out now.”

They got the bodies out into daylight. Lined up. *Gonna bake a while. Dead weight heavy to get to soft ground.* Jackson’s men walked the perimeter until they found a low sodden spot. *No proper burial for these just-cause kills. They overstayed their welcome on Earth. Now back to it.*

They carried the body of the girl, wrapped in a sheet, into the woods. In the barn, they found two shovels. Buried her first where sun broke through. Proper grave. Words said. Wildflowers placed. Flowers rested on her, on her place in the earth.

Then at another place in the woods, dug a pit. Mick checked the pockets of the dead. IDs, cash, phones, guns, ammo, belts, holsters. Stripped of anything worthy of the resource list. “Inventory all that shit,” he said. “Then dirt ‘em over so they don’t smell.”

Urine and fecal matter mixed with blood. In the California orange haze sun. *Need to plant these quick.* They dug. *Don’t talk to them. Don’t do that.*

The other man pointed the tip of the shovel into the chulo’s neck.

“See that rape tree over there? You can’t see anymore but you can fertilize. That tree and its acorns. You’re acorn food now, motherfucker.”

“Enough. Keep digging this shit.”

“Try to roll him so they’re face-up. Want ‘em to watch the dirt. Eat it.”

"These fuckers reek, man."

"They reeked before we popped 'em."

They rolled the five into the shallow grave.

"Time to say three words for the departed."

Jackson stepped outside. Saw the men two hundred yards away. Casey walked up behind him.

"What are they doing, Mr. Jackson?"

Jackson shook his head no. The gravediggers took their fingers off their zippers.

"They're saying a few words for the dead. Go back inside now," Jackson said.

He sent the boy back in the house.

The gravediggers peed into the graves, kicked dirt in.

"That felt good." The man said the few words then nodded to Jackson.

Six human chattel no longer. Cinder and Anna helped them get clean. At least the first go-around. Cinder washed each girl's hair. Their hair was lank, dirty, sticking together. Tears ran down the faces—tears of trauma then relief—tears of gratitude—tears of new life.

Jackson sat on the steps of the house and watched. She looked at Jackson, shook her head, an expression of her disgust of the evil brought on the innocent. While the perpetrators were dead, one by her own hand, Jackson saw another layer of rage building in her. Old rage from years ago, the senseless slaughter of spectacular wildlife, now, seen up close, the vanquishing or exploitation of young lives. *She was now a killer, like me. Is that good or bad?* He was not sure. *Was I wrong to involve her in this?* He did not know. He did know that he wanted her more than ever.

Jackson, Cinder, Casey, and Anna gathered clothes from around the house for the girls, then fed them. Mick and Addy remained behind, the other "security contractors" said their good-byes, their mission accomplished.

Jackson explained to the young women, girls still, that they would be able to seek asylum in the United States, that they were

different than illegals crossing the border in the dark of night. He told them if they had crossed that way, on their own, he would have turned them in. Turned them over to ICE, what was left of ICE, the organization that had been dwindled, defunded, and defanged by the open border politicians now controlling all three branches of government. He told them while nobody was being deported, not even MS-13 and the other Central American gangs, he would make them go back. But he wasn't because they were victims, not lawbreakers. So there was that. They did not understand what he explained, but Cinder did explain that they were safe, with good people who would not send them back.

Jackson told the refugees three more things. They were no longer sex slaves. At some point, he would tell them what America was. And what it wasn't. The third thing was that staying here, here in America, they must work, earn their privilege. First order of privilege business, cleaning the house and barn.

The girls helped wash the bedsheets, and clothes and towels, and whatever needed washing, all by hand, using well water out back. Then they cleaned the kitchen and the bathroom and the house and whatever needed cleaning, then they threw out garbage, lots of garbage. Cinder opened all the windows, it was breezy and cool, but nobody cared, they welcomed the wind and it washed over them.

Jackson worked on the generator, checked the fuel. It was working, providing the ranch house with electricity. Cinder delegated four of the girls to the barn. Jackson, Mick, and Addy wiped mud on their rear license plate, went to town and brought back a truckload of supplies, survival gear, more ammunition, bedding, clothes, food, bottled water. Jackson stayed out of sight of any CCTV cameras, stayed out of stores. They fashioned beds in the barn for the girls. Like a camp. Jackson intended to stay, their temporary safe harbor until he created a plan to discover Prodi-tor's endgame and expose it.

With electricity running, laptop on the kitchen table, Cinder

used a cryptophone to access the Internet. Spotty connection but workable. Mick and Addy packed up to leave. They hugged Anna, Cinder, Casey. Jackson walked them out. Mick put his arm around Jackson's shoulder and led him behind their pickup truck.

From the toolbox of the truck, Mick removed a whiffle ball bat and a bag of three balls, handed them to Jackson along with a folded piece of paper. "This is from Scotty. Cinder Stowe. Short stint with NSA as you suspected. Then Palantir. Left on dubious terms. Scuttlebutt is she hacked Palantir's Gotham core, stole it. Modified it to start her own contracting gig. Did some work for Academi. I called Erik, and he's pretty tight on her intel. DOD thinks she falsified her records by hacking them, falsified her U.S. citizenship to get a job at NSA. Thought to be living in the Ivory Coast. There is also the connection to SAP. You know about that. She may be a Swedish citizen. May have placed a Trojan somewhere in NSA servers that allows her to secretly troll NSA databases, unverified on that one. She wrote a unique algorithm to flag anomalies in data not even seen by Palantir, some of the smartest guys on the planet. I love this chick, but she is probably very hazardous to your health."

"Ya think? Tagged him once already. She's perfect for Rand. Just wear your vest in bed, dude," Addy said.

"Na, she gotta soft spot for our man here. This bad-ass chick don't miss in CQC. She's just playing hard to get," Mick said.

"Thanks for the intel and fuck you very much," Jackson said. "Stay left of the bang, my brothers."

"That's affirmative. You gonna be safe here?" Addy said.

"I'll see Palmer soon. My terms."

"Be American, brother."

Jackson smiled, nodded. Mick and Addy drove off.

Cinder got the girls bedded down in the barn, took one of the bedrooms in the house with Casey. Jackson sat in front of the stone fireplace, the fire dying out. He wiped the rim of the bottle of tequila, took a long shot. He called three of the chulos' cell

phones before he got an answer. All Mexican phone numbers, except one in Texas.

He dialed. A man answered. Jackson asked for the jefe, the boss. Another man said, "Que?" Jackson told the man the coyotajes, the chulos, were all dead and he would be too if their paths crossed. He told them the house had been taken over by local law enforcement. He removed the batteries from all the phones and threw them in a bag.

He figured the jefe would send someone to investigate sooner or later, but a raid, unlikely. Jackson focused on letting his body go limp. Concentrated on relaxing, the wounds burning now. Rotated to the side, winced. *Fucking shot again. Least it went through.* Exhaled. Tried to spit into the fire but he had no spit. House quiet. He was alone. Finally. Sleep was about to be his. Jackson staggered to the second bedroom and closed the door.

Pitch black, a moonless night. Jackson awoke in the sightless dark. *How long did I sleep?* He checked his watch. Just over two hours. Then he heard it. Something outside. Jackson picked up his pistol and rolled to the side of the bed. Moaned. That hurt. A pecking sound. *Tick, tick.* Then scratching. He stood and listened; *Something is moving around outside.*

He cupped his gun light to shield its beam, just enough to make his way to the back door. The door that was leaning against its frame after being blown out. The girls. He forgot about the girls in the barn. It must be them being scared. Wandering around in the night. He walked into the living room and tripped on something. The girls, all of them, were asleep on the living room floor. *Guess the barn wasn't working for them, poor things.* He counted. All seven, including Anna, on the floor. *Check.*

"Que es, Mr. Jackson?" Anna said.

Jackson put his hand out, it's-okay-stay-there. Then the ticking

again. *Tick tick*. From outside. Not the girls. Jackson moved from window to window looking.

"Shit," he said. *I see nothing*.

Jackson scooted the back door open enough to slip outside. He kneeled, SIG at ready. Hit the light. Nothing. Moved to the corner of the house. Something scampering away. Hit the light again. At the edge of the tree line. A wild turkey. Then another. They darted into the darkness. Jackson smiled, then went back to bed.

The yellow beam of daylight reached Jackson's eyes. He opened them. Noises from the kitchen. Jackson pulled on his pants and found Cinder in the kitchen making coffee. Casey at the kitchen table. The smell of the coffee was superb.

"Yes, I love you. I'll drink half the pot," Jackson said.

"Good morning."

"Did you sleep?"

"Yes, and you?"

"I will tell you," he said.

Jackson sat at the table across from Casey. Glanced at the girls, who were sprawled out on the floor, covered in blankets, just now stirring.

"I got up in the middle of the night. To a sound outside. Guess what it was?" Jackson said, looking at Casey.

"A bear or a mountain lion?" A wave of fear crossed Casey's face. "More bad men?"

"No. A wild turkey. More than one."

"A turkey?"

"After breakfast, let's see what we can find around this place. What'ya think?"

Cinder was listening now.

"Like what?"

"I bet someplace in this house, the tool shed, maybe the barn, is a bow."

"Mom, can Jackson and I hunt the turkeys today?"

"I don't know about that." A tone of hesitation.

"Please, Mom."

"Let's see what we can find first, while your Mom is cooking for you."

Jackson got up, and Casey followed him.

They opened the tool shed outside. Rusted rakes, shovels, a spade, a trencher, a thatcher, pitchfork, a cultivator, hand tools, saws. No bow. In the barn, an old wooden ladder led to a loft. Jackson helped Casey climb, then followed him. Farm supplies, old cans, rope, an old saddle, bridle gear hanging. Some old wooden tool chests. In one, Jackson found a compound bow and arrows and a couple of turkey calls. A few years old, but it looked functional. Casey's eyes lit up.

"The pull on something like this might be too heavy for you, but you can be my spotter, my hunting partner. Sound good?"

"Can I try? What are those wheel things?"

"Those are the cams. Sure."

Jackson lifted the bow out of the box and showed Casey how to hold it.

"The bow sight is here. You pull with your index and second finger here. You have to pull to the break, then it will give, get easier, then you can get the string all the way back."

Casey tried. He could not budge the string.

"Here, let me show you." Jackson pulled the bowstring back, and the upper and lower limb bent.

"It gets harder and harder, then..."

He pulled the bowstring all the way.

"You see?"

"Cool."

"Do you like Thanksgiving?" Jackson said.

"I only saw real Thanksgiving on TV," Casey said.

Casey ran from the barn into the house.

"Mom, guess what we found!"

Cinder, still in the kitchen. "Let's talk about it."

Jackson entered with the bow and several arrows.

"We'll try later when the sun is falling. Is that Ok with you, Mom?" Jackson said.

"We'll talk about it."

After lunch, Jackson led the seven girls and Casey outside to the area between the house and the barn. He was carrying the whiffle ball gear. Casey held four paper plates in his hand.

"Okay, let's set up the field."

"Beisbol?" Anna said.

"Si beisbol," another girl said. She understood.

Casey laid out the bases.

"I'll teach you, don't worry," Casey said.

Cinder stood in the doorway, watching. Jackson kept sneaking peeks at her.

"Casey and Anna, you get three more players, you can pick 'em. Then I get the other three. You guys bat first."

Jackson got his team positioned, one girl at shortstop. One at first base, the other in center field. "Okay, Casey, show 'em how it's done."

Casey stood at the plate. Woosh, woosh, the wind separated from the quick swing of the slender plastic bat.

Jackson pitched to him, and he missed.

"Strike one."

"No way," Casey said. He bore down. "Give me a pitch to hit."

Jackson threw one over the plate, and Casey whacked it to left field and started running.

"Uh...I don't know your name, throw it to second." They all cheered and laughed. Jackson caught Cinder smiling, but she quickly looked away.

Between innings he approached her.

"You should teach them to defend themselves, not play silly games," Cinder said.

"You can do that tomorrow. Today, let them laugh."

"I see that. Maybe tomorrow."

It was magic hour, an hour before sunset. Jackson checked his compass, and he and Casey hiked into the forest.

"There's a path back here. Let's take it for a few hundred feet, then we'll head south and loop around."

"Okay, Jackson."

"We walk a couple of paces, stop, listen. Look for movement. Turkeys make very little noise even moving through fallen leaves, so we have to spot one."

They stepped and paused, stepped and paused, then they spotted a flat area and moved into the trees.

"Okay."

They stalked through the forest for fifteen minutes. one step, stop, one step, stop. Nothing. Jackson removed a turkey call from his pocket. *Cluck, cluck*. They listened. Nothing.

"Let's get higher."

They climbed a hill to a ridgeline, moving into bigger timber.

"We need to find where they roost. Wait for their afternoon fly-down."

They went to one knee. Listened to the forest. The wind in the treetops. Fallings from the pines. Quiet. Peaceful. Beautiful. Browns and siennas and greens. They sat for a long while, twenty minutes.

"So tell me that story, Mr. Jackson," Casey said.

"Which one?"

"The mighty Casey one."

"I'll tell you the first half of the story now, then I'll tell you the rest tonight when we make a fire. How's that?"

"Sure."

"Here goes... The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville Nine that day;

The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play.

And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,

A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game."

"Where is Mudville, Mr. Jackson?" Casey said.

"It's back East," Jackson said. He continued.

"A straggling few got up to go in deep despair. The rest
Clung to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast;

They thought, if only Casey could get but a whack at that—

We'd put up even money now, with Casey at the bat.

But Flynn preceded Casey, as did also Jimmy Blake,

And the former was a hoodoo, while the latter was a cake;

So upon that stricken multitude grim melancholy sat,

For there seemed but little chance of Casey's getting to the bat.

But Flynn let drive a single, to the wonderment of all,

And Blake, the much despised, tore the cover off the ball;

And when the dust had lifted, and men saw what had
occurred,

There was Jimmy safe at second and Flynn a-hugging third.

Then from five thousand throats and more there rose a lusty
yell;

It rumbled through the valley, it rattled in the dell;

It knocked upon the mountain and recoiled upon the flat,

For Casey, mighty Casey, was advancing to the bat. So, we'll
have to wait until tonight to hear the end," Jackson said.

"No, I want to hear about the mighty Casey. Did he hit a
homer? I bet he did," Casey said.

A gobble from the forest.

"They're in here somewhere," Jackson whispered.

"Yeah, I can hear it."

"Hear that?"

"What?"

"Sound of running water, way over there. Let's move that way,
real slow and quiet."

"Okay."

Jackson and Casey moved out.

"A clearing along water can be good," Jackson said.

"Okay. Have you hunted turkey before?"

"Yeah, up North. As a boy. See the opening down that hillside? Let's get close to that and call."

"Okay."

They found a log and kneeled down behind it. Jackson called again. *Cluck cluck*.

"It's a hen call. We'll see if old Tom shows up."

They waited. And waited. And waited and watched the sun fall. The sun no longer visible, they said goodbye to it and it fell over the horizon. The light was changing fast, casting and beaming into the trees above them and the hills behind them—the lemon yellows and bananas and daffodils and butterscotches. Then the golds and apricots and ambers and papaya oranges, warming everything they saw except under the forest canopy which was dark and foreboding as mist rolled in.

They waited and smelled the damp air and the earth and the fallen leaves and the pines and the heavy vanilla tree sap. They waited. Then *gobble gobble*.

They heard the turkey five more times before he came into view in the low fading light. In a small opening in the timber just above a slow-moving stream in front of them. Casey handed Jackson an arrow. Jackson nocked it and waited. Then pulled the bow back beyond the break and peeked out above the log.

"See him?"

"Yeah, I see him."

"Here we go."

The turkey stopped. Spooked. Head turning one way, then the other. Head bobbing up and down, up and down. Then his beak pointed right at Jackson. Which meant he couldn't see the hunters. Jackson's movement was slow and deliberate. The compound bow lifted and stopped, sighted on the big gobbler.

Ffft, the arrow cut the mist.

"You got him!"

Casey held the flashlight and watched as Anna and another girl plucked the feathers from Old Tom. Anna handed Tom to Jackson, and he cut Tom's head off with a large knife.

"Yuck," Casey said.

"Say a prayer of thanks for Tom," Jackson said.

"Thanks, Tom," Casey said. "Sorry you're dead. Well kinda."

Inside, two girls mashed potatoes in a large pot on the kitchen table. Another one cut the ends off the green beans. Cinder and another girl made cranberry sauce. Another girl added logs to the fire. Another washed glasses in the sink. Then they foraged for sour oranges growing in a clearing.

Jackson and Casey cleaned the turkey, then rubbed it down with butter, then made the sour orange marinade, then placed the big bird in the juice and covered it with aluminum foil. They built a support made out of scrap metal and erected it in the fireplace, and set Old Tom to roasting. From the tool shed and barn, they gathered stools and buckets, and fashioned other things to sit on, then made the table in the house, lit candles, and set out the food.

All seated, Jackson stood over the turkey with a large knife. He took his time to look at each face, the sunken eyes with dark rings, the rachitic bodies, he held his gaze on Cinder, her truths yet a mystery, then he looked at Casey and smiled. "These seven young women are about to give thanks in their new homeland. Hundreds of years ago, on this continent, our forefathers called out a special day to give reverent thanks. As they were back then, we, today, are grateful for the freedom of our new friends, their safety, this food, our great country, what's left of it, and for whatever faith each of us has in a power beyond our understanding."

Not all understood the words. They didn't need to. They all clapped. Some cried. Got up and hugged Cinder and Jackson.

Cinder tried to translate. "Estamos aquí para dar gracias..."

"Si, si," the girls said, and they clapped.

So they ate their meal together. As they ate, Jackson knew they would all remember this day, these moments, to the end of days. Cinder nodded to Jackson. He smiled at her.

After dinner, outside, in front of the old barn, Jackson and Casey made a fire. The girls joined them, and they watched the flames rise and the embers disappear into the blackness.

"Ok, now?" Casey asked.

"Ok, girls, this is a baseball story, Si?" Jackson said.

"Si," they said.

"This is a story about the mighty Casey and his Mudville Nine. Ok, so when we left Mudville, the mighty Casey was advancing to the bat," Jackson said, and he continued the story.

"There was ease in Casey's manner as he stepped into his place;

There was pride in Casey's bearing and a smile on Casey's face.

And when, responding to the cheers, he lightly doffed his hat,
No stranger in the crowd could doubt 'twas Casey at the bat.

Ten thousand eyes were on him as he rubbed his hands with dirt;

Five thousand tongues applauded when he wiped them on his shirt.

Then while the writhing pitcher ground the ball into his hip,
Defiance gleamed in Casey's eye, a sneer curled Casey's lip.

And now the leather-covered sphere came hurtling through
the air,

And Casey stood a-watching it in haughty grandeur there.

Close by the sturdy batsman the ball unheeded sped...

'That ain't my style,' said Casey. 'Strike one!' the umpire said."

"He's gonna strike out, I know it," the real Casey said, sitting by the fire.

"Shhh," Jackson said. "Wait. So back to Mudville...

From the benches, black with people, there went up a muffled roar,

Like the beating of the storm-waves on a stern and distant shore.

'Kill him! Kill the umpire!' shouted someone on the stand;

And it's likely they'd have killed him had not Casey raised his hand.

With a smile of Christian charity great Casey's visage shone;
He stilled the rising tumult; he bade the game go on;
He signaled to the pitcher, and once more the spheroid flew;
But Casey still ignored it and the umpire said, 'Strike two!'

The real Casey's eyes were like saucers in the firelight. Cinder smiled at him.

"'Fraud!' cried the maddened thousands, and Echo answered 'Fraud!'

But one scornful look from Casey and the audience was awed.

They saw his face grow stern and cold, they saw his muscles strain,

And they knew that Casey wouldn't let that ball go by again.

The sneer is gone from Casey's lip, his teeth are clenched in hate,

He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate;
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,
And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow."

Jackson looked to Cinder and she half-smiled a he's-about-to-be-disappointed-again look. Then Jackson winked as he leaned in, eyes glaring at the kids, then to the real Casey...

"Oh, somewhere in this favoured land the sun is shining bright;

The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light,

Somewhere men are laughing... and children bask in fun;
On this day, joy in Mudville—mighty Casey hit a home run."

Casey cheered, "Casey won the game, mighty Casey won the game," he said.

The girls clapped. Cinder looked at Jackson, not able to hold back her smile. Jackson smiled back and nodded. She mouthed the words, thank you.

Later that night, Cinder got the girls set for the night in Jackson's bedroom, a slumber party. Jackson relegated to the couch in the living room. The children asleep, Jackson and Cinder sat by the fire. They watched the flames, said nothing. The flames rising orange and crackling. Jackson stoked the fire, kept it going. He took a swig from the tequila bottle, handed it to her. She drank it.

"What you do makes no difference," she said.

"Maybe not."

"Why pursue Proditores? He'll beat you in the end. Men like him always do."

"This is different. He needs something big, maybe something catastrophic. To capsize it. Like a rogue wave right when he has it all broadside."

"You believe that?"

"I know that."

"How?"

"Because all his moves, the constitutional amendments, the debt, illegal immigration, socialist politics, are not the things in and of themselves. America can survive those in time, maybe. But he wants something else."

"I just want to kill him."

"I know. But your blood thirst for revenge may leave your child motherless. Parentless."

"They won't catch me. They won't find us after."

"I found you."

No quick response to that.

"Maybe I found you," he said.

He reached out and laid his hand on hers. She let it rest there for a moment. A short moment. Then removed hers.

"I don't want a relationship."

"You can trust me."

"I don't trust."

"But you want to."

"No, I don't."

"Look at me."

He lifted his hand to her chin. She did not turn, slowly removed his hand. They sat for a while.

"If things were different. I'd fuck you. Then leave. That's all there'd be," she said.

"That's cold."

"A cold life."

"Mine or yours?"

"You believe in quote *country* unquote. I don't."

"Not anymore maybe," he said.

She did not react or respond, just stared into the fire.

"You believe in don't tread. I see that," he said.

"What century do you live in? They all tread anyway. Everywhere."

"Not all. Many stand on that line."

"I have my own lines."

"A highway with guard rails."

"Yeah, maybe." She smiled at that.

"We both have intel. On each other," he said.

"Some. You haven't told me anything. The truth."

"And you?"

"You know all you need to know. We both want Proditores for different reasons. That's enough," she said.

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Maybe you talk too much. I'm going to bed."

"Alone?"

"No, not alone."

Jackson started to get up. He paused.

"Casey?" he said.

"Casey," she said.

"He's a great kid."

"You told me that already."

"Just saying."

Cinder got up. Picked up her laptop, returned to fireside, sat, and opened the cover.

"The metadata. Alec Proditores' connections to street gangs," she said.

"Street gangs? Makes no sense. A billionaire and street gangs. What, some type of local disruption, maybe political agitation at rallies. He's been causing problems for years."

"So maybe used them for a hit on you," she said.

"Fucking reckless."

"I don't think that's what this is, or all that it is," she said.

That got Jackson's attention. He shifted his position, directly facing Cinder.

"What does it look like to you?" he said.

"I'm not sure, but there are other nodes, connections. It looks like some type of synchronization or distribution network."

Jackson turned, looking into the flames.

"I need to find out before..." he said.

"Before I get to him."

The next morning, Jackson sat at the kitchen table writing. He walked outside, where Cinder was teaching the girls self-defense. She looked at him, and he nodded, one notch warmer than the usual nod.

"Gather round, girls. So Cinder is going to translate," Jackson said.

"Here is what we talked about last night. So, I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic."

"Entonces, juro solemnemente que apoyaré y defenderé la Constitución de los Estados Unidos contra todos los enemigos, extranjeros y nacionales," Cinder said.

The girls repeated it.

"That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion."

“Que soportaré verdadera fe y lealtad a los mismos; que tomo esta obligación libremente, sin ninguna reserva mental o propósito de evasión,” Cinder said.

The girls repeated it.

“And that I will faithfully... The United States, so help me God.”

“Y que cumpliré bien y fielmente...Estados Unidos, así que ayúdame Dios.”

The girls repeated it.

Casey walked out of the house.

“What are you doing, Mom?”

“Jackson wanted to start the girls on their new journey, kind of,” Cinder said.

“So are they Americans now?” Casey said.

“It’s a start,” Jackson said.

“Ok, cool. What’s for breakfast?” Casey said.

Jackson walked to the truck and started the engine.

CHAPTER 17

Agent Palmer walked under the yellow tape surrounding Jackson's home. He operated the combo lock on the front door, entered, walked through the entire house, every room, found his way to Jackson's home office.

He sat at Jackson's desk. Thinking. On the bookshelf behind the desk, a framed photo of an aerial view of the Wrigley West field. Next to the photo, a round medal. He stood up. Special Operations Group was engraved on the medal. In the center, an eagle and a submachine gun. *Tertia Optio* was engraved on the bottom. He knew this medal. He owned one himself.

His phone beeped. A text. On the wall adjacent to the desk, a television. He clicked the remote. Fox News, Catherine Hanson.

"This is a Fox News Alert, we just received another video from the man known as Hale, the kidnapper of the Speaker of the House, and four others," Catherine said.

Hale appeared. Standing. Black pants, black turtleneck sweater. Hands on hips.

"You will forgive me if I speak bluntly. Threats to our way of life grow every day. Threats to our original idea by any group, any individual, can no longer be tolerated. Our forefathers knew this then, and it remains true today. Sovereignty is eroding from within. From the mouths of charlatans to the ears of the unedu-

cated, the uninformed, the misinformed, discord is perpetuated. We do not pretend to have achieved a perfect nation, but we do have a system, and it is the best in the history of humankind. The politician spews but does not observe. The economist allocates but does not calculate. The businessman persuades but does not disclose. The journalist broadcasts but predetermines the news. Surely none of these transgressions is a surprise."

Hale looked away from the camera for a moment. To the floor. Then back to the lens.

"What these acts have in common is division. The un-American cares not about any specific issue. Any cause. Any politic. Any morality. Any one nation. Unless that nation is too strong. Division itself is the goal. In the end, something else is afoot. That is why I chose to act."

The video ended. Catherine Hanson came back on screen. Palmer hit the pause button. His phone lit up. He didn't answer it. He sat back in the chair. On the desk was a crystal paperweight. Four inches tall. The top was the shape of a five-pointed star. Inside, floating, an American flag. The old type. Colony days. Agent Palmer picked it up. Examined it. Set it down. Picked it up again, turned it over. Engraved on the bottom was *Fragile*. He set it back down. "The crystal or the contents?"

His cellphone kept ringing. He answered it and listened. "He said the un-American, not un-Americans with an S. The. Was it a grouping or was he directing the comment to an individual? No, I don't think he was talking about the Speaker. She was the politician, then the economist, that's Tenner, then Woo..."

Palmer kept listening.

"No, Rand is not un-American, but if he's involved, he's a criminal, maybe a domestic terrorist. I'll be back within the hour. Get all our people in."

Palmer hung up. He picked up the paperweight, looked at the bottom then... Froze. He felt it. That animal instinct, primal, sensing but not seeing, a presence.

"Why didn't you tell them? You knew."

Palmer spun around. Jackson was pointing his SIG at him.

"Keep your hands..." Jackson said. "Hello, buddy."

"Tell them what exactly?" Palmer asked.

"You know who Hale was referring to. You're playing games with your people. Why?"

"I need to think this thing through."

Jackson moved closer. Sat across the desk from Palmer.

"Palms down on the desk," Jackson said.

Palmer set the paperweight down and placed his palms on the desk.

"I need your help."

"I have an arrest warrant."

"What charges?"

"Several."

"Trumped up."

"You need to come in."

"I am in. Here. Right now. You didn't tell Garcia about us."

"Not everything. Classified."

"Right."

"How deep are you? In this?" Palmer said.

"How complacent have you become? No more *where we all go...*?"

Palmer's head moved back slightly, a slight squint. That stung a little.

"You said truth, exposing corruption and tyranny using the press is the fourth option to effect change, the *Quartus Optio*. Now it's violence, abductions, murder?" Palmer asked.

"Nothing changed. Maybe Hale thought the fourth should be direct action. *Actum*."

"*Actum*? How about *Terrorismo*?"

"That's Italian, not Latin. So you think Hale is a terrorist?" Jackson said.

"Who is Hale?"

"It appears that he's a patriot."

"Who, not a debate of what. He wasn't with the agency," Palmer said.

"Are you sure?"

"You are acknowledging that you have contact with Hale, an admission of aiding and abetting at least a dozen federal crimes."

"I did not say I have contact with Hale."

"Where is this going?"

"I told you."

"You need my help. To do what?"

"What did Hale say? Something else is afoot."

"What?"

"It's all grand design. All of it. Global Freedom Society. One World Free."

"Proditores? Are you on that again?" Palmer said.

"You knew who Hale was referring to."

"He's a madman."

"Hale or Proditores?"

"How about both? Where's this all going, Jackson?"

"That's what we need to find out."

"I'm talking about you."

"This is not about me."

"I think you're in trouble."

"My country's in trouble. Our country's in trouble."

"So what, now you're going to save the nation? As a vigilante? You've lost it."

"People like you and me are supposed fight tyrannical demagogues."

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but that doesn't change that I still have to arrest you."

"You know what? The Constitution shredded?"

"You sound like your PublicFigure site."

"Bullshit. My site does not do op-eds or fake news. We report verified facts."

"Anonymous sources."

"Sometimes, but we verify. As I said, nothing changed."

"So now you're a vigilante."

"You have nothing that proves that. Again, this is not about me."

"Then what's it about, Jackson? Tell me."

"The impotence of the nation-state," Jackson said.

"There you go again. You're delusional. Don't tell that to the DA when you're arrested, they'll use it in court," Palmer said.

"Are you going to fucking listen to me?"

"No."

"Listen to me or I will shoot you."

Palmer smiled.

"Two in the chest and one in the head. Just like Iran."

"Fuck you. That was... You're not going to shoot a man who saved your life," Palmer said.

The men stared at each other. Stare-down.

"Can I lift my hands now?"

"No, listen to me. This is all building to something," Jackson said.

"A conspiracy theory right out of the Sean Hannity show."

"Hannity sees the pieces coming together on this, he does. Like what we did."

"That was different."

"But it's the same game plan. Weaken it. Weaken it. Then at the right time, when the ground swell rises, kill shot."

"The kill shot?"

"He needs something else. Something catastrophic to push it all over the edge."

"Proditores?"

"Yes, Proditores. All roads lead to Alec Proditores. Are you not paying attention?" Jackson said.

"So why didn't Hale kill him and save us all this trouble?"

"Maybe he will."

Stare-down. Again.

"Kill shot? So what's your conspiracy madness for this kill shot?" Palmer asked.

"Not sure yet. Some kind of event, an attack."

"What's Hale think it is?"

Jackson smiled.

"You'll have to ask him if you ever find him."

"I need to arrest you. You need to come in, or you'll get shot."

"In the back?" Jackson said.

Agent Palmer paused. Then he said, "You can't stay in the wind forever."

"Come in and trust the system, right? The system is the problem, Ben."

"I'm with the fucking FBI now, Jackson. What do you expect?"

As soon as those words were airborne, Palmer wanted a magical genie to put them back in the bottle. And he knew what was coming next.

"Be American, brother," Jackson said.

"I can't do that. I mean, go off the reservation. The blood of tyrants, refresh the tree. I deal in evidence and proof and the rule of law," Palmer said.

"Proof? Have you walked around Ventura, or LA, or Bloomington fucking Indiana lately? It's all the same," Jackson said.

Palmer slumped, no argument there.

"Keep your hands on the desk."

"Let's say, hypothetically, I was to be able to contact Hale. And he released all the hostages unharmed?"

"You'd get leniency, I can't guarantee amnesty."

"You have no proof I committed any crime."

"It's the DA's call," Palmer said.

"Fuck the DA. She's a communist. I'm making a deal with you. Only you."

Palmer's jaw muscles went hard.

"You get three corrupt public figures, two other jokers, all breathing air."

"Then what?" Palmer asked.

"Then, you owe me."

"Then what?"

"Then, when the time comes, I'll tell you what."

"This is fucked up, Jackson."

"Yes, it is. To be clear, I admitted nothing but you agreed to something."

"I agreed to nothing," Palmer said.

"Say it. If the hostages get released, you owe me."

"Ok, Jackson, if the hostages get released, I owe you."

"Good."

"I owe you, and I'll arrest your ass."

"One more thing."

"No."

"You stay at my desk for thirty. No calls for thirty mikes."

"Twenty."

"Twenty-five," Jackson said. He stood and walked towards the door.

"One more thing," Jackson said.

"No. I am fucking American."

"Be American first."

"One more thing," Palmer said.

Jackson stopped.

"Who is Hale?"

"An illusion," and Jackson was gone.

Jackson moved through the woods like a silent hunter. The ranch was in sight. He froze, he the predator, sensing. Listened. He saw movement. Anna outside, near the barn. Then Casey. He continued. At first, one of the girls jumped back when she saw him emerge from the forest. Then, realizing who it was. Anna and Casey ran up to Jackson and hugged him.

"I'm back. Your Mom inside?"

"Yeah."

Jackson entered through the back and saw Cinder at the kitchen table on her laptop. He sat down across from her.

"Ben Palmer told me that he will help if Hale releases the hostages."

"Special Agent Ben Palmer with the FBI? Your CIA paramilitary buddy from SOG?"

Jackson should have been surprised she knew that, but he wasn't.

"You met with the FBI, and they let you go?"

"Not exactly. He was in my house."

Eyes reading eyes.

"Is Hale done with the hostages?" Cinder said.

"Is he?" Jackson said.

They examined each other examining each other. Each facial muscle, the lips, breathing, body movement, the eyes. Both motionless, except for their eyes.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," she said.

"Guess so."

"And you think you need Palmer for what?"

"He can access intel, drones, satellites, the NSA. I mean, legitimately. Could be useful. Plus, I think he suspects something is coming. I told him nothing about you."

"They know nothing about me, not for many years."

"When you worked for the NSA."

She did not blink. She was good at this.

"Let me ask you... Where were you born?" Jackson said.

"What does it matter? You first. Three questions. Where were you born?"

"Chicago," he said.

"Correct," she said. "Close to your parents?"

Jackson winced, barely noticeable. A pain inside, deep. He channeled all reaction to his stomach, below the table, out of sight. His abdominals contracted against his gut.

"Yes, my mother, she died when I was young."

"Correct. You never knew your father?" she said.

"Correct. That's three. I know about your father, what about your mother?"

"I don't talk about her."

"You didn't answer my first. United States or Sweden?"

"Born here," she said.

Jackson knew that.

"Boulder, correct?"

She looked for his tell. Thought she noticed a slight movement of his lips right after the question. *He's baiting me.*

On the screen of the laptop in front of Cinder, the screen that Jackson could not see, a window was open. In the window an old photograph of a woman in her twenties at a polo match in Santa Barbara. A window cascaded behind it, another photograph, taken later with a young boy. Jackson as a young boy with his mother. Same woman.

"No. Not there. I just skied there with my father. Your mother, what did she do?"

A dagger. Jackson knew he showed her, not sure what, but something.

"You have dug deep I see," Jackson said.

"It's what I do. You know that more than anyone."

"She died."

"I'm sorry. We share similar losses."

Cinder moved her cursor to the X at the top right of the first window. Clicked it. Closed the next window. Another window was exposed. Grainy image of a small article in the Acorn, Thousand Oaks Edition, about the death of *Terry Rand deemed a suicide.*

"My mother did what she had to do. She was a survivor, for me. Until she wasn't."

Cinder clicked the window closed.

"I didn't mean..." she said.

Awkward silence.

"You'll never get close to Proditores again. Neither one. You should help me stop him or just disappear with Casey," Jackson said.

Cinder looked out the window at the kids playing.

"These girls need medical attention," she said.

"We can't risk being on cameras, you too. Not until this is all over," Jackson said.

"What about them?"

"I have a friend. Trust him with my life. He'll look after them, Casey too. He has a woman that can cook and whatnot, I think. He lives out in the sticks near Santa Paula. We get them checked out, meds, whatever they need. Then we set them up with Satchel. With your help, we figure out how to get into his estate. Maybe his office building. I need more than hacking, I need to get inside."

"Inside his house?" Cinder said.

"Yes, his estate in Beverly Hills. Inside his home office."

Jackson drove the old Chevy Suburban down Highway 150 east of Ojai through the mountains. Cinder and eight kids packed in.

"What about the plates?" Cinder asked.

"Not reported as stolen. Won't be for a few days," Jackson replied.

"How do you know that?"

"Because Palmer is too busy to go to his cabin in the Los Padres Forest for days or longer."

"You stole an FBI agent's truck?"

"I told you, he owes me."

"Remind me never to do you any favors."

"Don't worry; I don't want your old Range Rover."

"Good."

"I just want the kid. Love the kid. Got a great swing. Can I have the kid?"

That got her to laugh.

"How about eight?" she said, looking at the kids packed in the back.

"Need one more for a ball team."

"Have at it."

Cinder peered down the steep incline on the switchbacks.

"Watch the road, it's a long way to the bottom."

"We be cool in the family truckster."

"Truckster? Yeah, Chevy."

"I'm driving a Cha chevy."

"The other Chevy."

"Speaking of Christmas vacation. Do you do eve or day?"

"What?"

"Eve or day? I like one on eve, the rest Christmas morning."

"Yeah, sure."

Are you Jewish? I mean, that's cool if you are, Jackson said.

"Or maybe you are Hindi or Muslim."

"No, I am not any religion, nor am I any of your business."

"Yeah, I kinda got that," he said.

He drove. She sat and watched the landscape. He looked over to her, then back to the road. Then back at her.

"White lights or colored light?"

"What?"

"On the tree."

She shook her head. He poked her. She swatted at his hand but was too slow. He poked her again, and she swatted. He caught her hand in midair.

"White or colored lights?" he said.

He let go of her hand.

"Colored. Jesus."

"Right, his birthday. Good. Me too. See, I'm inclusive."

"You're what?" she said.

"Inclusive. All colors."

"Yeah, you're really politically correct."

"I hate politics. All hypocrites die death by fire." "I hate politics. All hypocrites die death by fire."

"All you do is politics. That, and kidnapping people."

He didn't bite.

"Favorite Christmas song?"

"Jingle bells," Casey yelled out.

"That's a good one. I have a big first place. Far and away," Jackson said.

"That's it? It's called 'Far and away,' Jackson? I never heard of that," Casey said.

Jackson laughed. Cinder laughed.

"No, buddy. Far and away, my favorite song. 'O Holy Night.'"

"How that sound, Mr. Jackson?" Anna said from the back seat.

"Here we go.

"God no," Cinder said.

"O holy night the stars are brightly shining, it is the night of our dear Savior's birth," Jackson sang. "Come on, with the world crashing down, we need this."

He didn't get any takers. He continued singing... "Long lay the world in sin and error pining, Till He appeared, and the soul felt its worth, A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices. For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn."

He paused. "Here comes the killer tear-up part, ready guys?"

"Yeah," they all yelled.

"No details. Get ready," he said. "Fall on your knees, O hear the angels' voices, O night divine, O night when Christ was born, O night divine o night, O night divine..." and so they sang.

Jackson caught Cinder mouthing the words. She saw she just got busted. Looked out the window.

"Okay, Mom, Jingle Bells now!" Casey said.

"Please God no," Cinder said. "Where are we going?"

"We'll pick this up later, guys," Jackson said to the crowd of elves in the back seats. "He doesn't have a phone. He'll probably be where he always is."

They drove through historic downtown Santa Paula, much of it built around 1885, population about five hundred. They passed the old steel sculpture, The Warning, which commemorated the heroism of the Santa Paula residents at that time when the St. Francis Dam collapsed on March 12, 1928, killing over four hundred people. The sculpture is of two men riding old Harley motorcycles.

Casey looked on with fascination as they passed the monument. They drove by the seventy-foot-high Moreton Bay fig tree on the corner of Tenth and Santa Barbara Streets. The California Oil Museum, several authentic Mexican restaurants, old-style, real families cooking real food.

They headed east on Highway 126 towards Ventura. They pulled off the highway and parked on a residential street. Jackson removed the binoculars from the console of the truck.

"You guys stay here. I'll be back in a couple minutes," Jackson said.

Jackson walked down Dean Street and turned right. Dean Street bordered the northern end of Camino Del Real Park, which spanned several acres and included his Wrigley West ball field. Jackson walked between two houses, through a back yard, and into a wooded ravine.

He traversed the ravine, reaching the bottom, about fifty feet down. He continued and climbed the other side, to a good view of the park. He glassed. From end to end. Every dog walker, parent, transient, homeless, vagrant, person lying in the grass. He could not be sure any of the park dwellers were not undercovers. *Too many.* A bag lady by the bathroom. *She could be FBI or of a any number of agencies. How cliché' would that be, using a bag lady? And in her bag, automatic weapons, classic Fed stakeout. Would they stake out this park for days? Surely they know my connection to it.*

Jackson hiked it back through the ravine and reached the Suburban truck. Kids getting antsy.

"Let's go to the park," he said.

"Yeah!" they all cheered.

"Cinder, you stay in the ravine. Keep an eye on the kids. Stay out of sight. I have to go to the ballpark to find Satchel."

"All right."

They all rolled out of the truck and walked down the street. Jackson put on a pair of sunglasses and pulled the bill of his black baseball cap lower.

"Great disguise," Cinder said.

"No kidding. Listen, if you see any of the locals on the move, talking into their lapels..."

Jackson handed her the keys to the truck.

He stayed low in the ravine until he got to the area behind left field. He made his way up the hillside. No one behind the left-field bleachers. Kind of a dead area behind the park except for teenage smokers, slackers, drug addicts, the homeless or the occasional lovers' lane. Broad daylight, nobody around.

Jackson climbed up the back of the bleachers until he saw the field clearly. No games. Someone in the third-base dugout. Jackson glassed it. There was Satchel. Broom in hand, sitting down, taking a smoke. Old stogie. *Good man.*

Jackson climbed down the bleachers and hopped over the left-field wall. Satchel stood up, noticing the man entering the ballpark. After a few seconds, he recognized Jackson and smiled. They sat in the dugout.

"Yeah boy, Carmela she hep wit da youngins. You doin' some risky shit, I reckon."

"I only know I need to go do this thing," Jackson said.

"Some say der's a storm a-comin'. I say, comin' no, most folks gittin hammered on rightcha now. In dis hea town, Everydurn-where you durn turn round. Look on over dem walls der, jist in dat park. Whatch you see? Dem zombies staggerin' and fallin' and sheeat. Like phantoms in a vampireland. Durn shame."

"I got some money for food. Here," Jackson said.

Jackson pulled out a wad of cash. Grabbed Satchel's hand and plopped the wad in it.

"Ain't no politics gonna set dis hea right, nossir. You do whatcha gotta do boy, but stay above dirt and don't be gittin caught by Johnny law, ya hea?"

"I gotcha, Satch. I appreciate you helping."

Jackson and Satchel sat back. Satchel breathed in the air.

"Grass lookin jist 'bout right, yessir," Satchel said.

"It looks just like the real thing, Wrigley in May, Satch."

"Cut it jist right fer good roll. Almost like da real ting? Hell no,

boy. Old Wrigley bunch a durn crabgrass, used to be. Sheeat. Dis hea, dis better, sure as sheeat. Cept no real Cubs. Wait till last yea, I heard dat.”

“Let’s play two. Satch. I’ll bring the kids over.”

“I reckon so.”

CHAPTER 18

O pulent Bel-Air, California, Nimes Road area. After the death of his father, Benito Proditores, Alec went on a shopping spree his father would not have approved of. He bought the largest estate in the Beverly Hills-Bel Air area for cash, then starting buying up the surrounding estates to wall himself in. The main house, a gilded-age inspired châteauesque villa built decades ago, was over ninety-thousand square feet of living space. The spaces included indoor swimming pool, movie theater, media room, bowling alley, technology room, gymnasium, and more.

The four-story estate, known as La Bacara, was built in phases starting in 1925. During construction, a brick kiln was built on the property to produce thousands of bricks per day. Limestone, marble, and granite were imported from Indiana and other parts of the world. Construction of the main house required a labor force of over six hundred workers and fifty stonemasons. A wood-working shop was also built on site. The original owner toured the world to purchase decor, furniture, carpets, rugs, tapestries, and linens for the estate.

The original architect was the prominent New York architect Robert Morris Hunter, who worked for the Vanderbilts and other tycoons. Hunter was inspired by French Renaissance chateaus

including the Biltmore, the Waddesdon Manor in England, and estates in Normandy. La Bacara included several towers with steeply pitched slate and copper flashing roofs, dormers and turrets. Detail on the exterior included limestone columns, chimneys, gargoyles, lookouts, flowing tracery, and hand-carved stonework.

The first floor of the main house, over two acres of floor space, included twenty-four bedrooms, thirty-two bathrooms, fourteen fireplaces, a four-thousand-square-foot commercial kitchen, two satellite gourmet kitchens, and three elevators. Extensive marblework in the entrance area led to arched hallways spidering off to the main library, private offices, interior gardens, banquet hall, dining rooms, living rooms, and a music room with a sixty-foot-high barrel-vaulted ceiling.

The dark exotic woodwork throughout the house was intricate, unique, and irreplaceable. The baroque mahogany detailing of the library contained over two hundred thousand volumes in thirty-six languages, reflecting Proditores' globalist allegiances. Books included masterworks in philosophy, the classics, physics, science, architecture, Greek and military history, and hundreds of other topics.

Proditores named several rooms at La Bacara, including the large guest suites. Names such as the Popper bedroom after philosopher Karl Popper, the Hegel Room, the Engel Room, the Preve Room, the Epicurus Room, the Rousseau, and others. The estate included an art gallery, now home to the Proditores Collection, valued at over one-billion dollars. Original works by Picasso, Pollack, Kandinsky, Dali, Warhol, Matisse, Koons, Miro, Basquiat, and de Kooning. The estate staff included several armed guards both inside and out.

Other buildings on the grounds added another twenty-thousand square feet of living space, servants' quarters, carriage and pool houses, bachelor wing, music building, and security team offices, living quarters and equipment rooms. There was an area

that included several old buildings that were fenced off and not in use.

The acreage was forested with transplanted sequoias and redwoods. Garden parks by theme included sculptures, stone gazebos, vined trellises, a walled garden, a shrub and rose garden, fountains, and a botanist conservatory sectioned by plant groups, flowers, exotic plants, and orchids. There were stone walkways and private sitting areas, and a Japanese garden influenced by the extensive time Proditores' father spent in the Orient.

Water features were abundant—a lagoon, a winding stream, filtered and aerated, and fountains of varied styles, lit for stunning night light shows. In the center of the rear garden was a statue of a Greek Goddess wielding a whip and dagger, Nemesis.

The scents of the gardens and forests were intoxicating—fern-like acacias, evergreen Norfolk pines, Mimosa trees with wispy light pink flowers, birch, cedars, glossy green carobs with their thick trunks and rough sinewy bark, and the purple and pink orchid trees bursting with color.

Blue lilacs lined the stone pavers, yellow and orange poppies followed the yellow brick road, salvias feeding the hummingbirds and butterflies, white round morning glories, the vibrant rainbow-colored tubular penstemons, and the wildflowers. Acres of wildflowers blooming and painting the garden with life colors. Glorious and alive. The wastelands of Los Angeles did not reach these grounds.

To say that Proditores expanded the original basement of the estate would qualify as an understatement. In the last five years, he expanded the catacombs of the basement into a fortress that included one hundred and twenty-thousand square feet underground, over three acres of floor space, a secretive doomsday shelter complex. Some billionaires built bomb shelters under their houses. Proditores designed the vast fully enclosed tunnel structure to withstand a nuclear war, which he professed had a fifty-fifty chance of occurring in the next ten years.

Other calamities were calculated into the design of the five-

star resort-like shelter, such as biological or dirty bomb attacks, direct airliner hits, chemical agent attacks, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, shockwaves, alt-right protest marches, and zombie apocalypses. Proditores coined the development “the disaster reflexivity,” named after his theory of economics.

The disaster complex below the estate was designed to be self-contained for at least three years and included luxury living quarters, kitchens, recreational areas, a gymnasium, a technology command center with connections to world leaders, food storage, fisheries, gardens, a swimming pool, hydroponic vegetable gardens, freezers including human cadaver storage, extensive utility infrastructure including HVAC, plumbing and electrical systems, a shooting range, and a hospital including surgical rooms.

Jackson and Cinder were parked on Beverly Glen south of Sunset. Two people pushing shopping carts stacked with garbage passed by on the other side of the street heading south, past the manicured hedges and the wrought iron gated entrances.

“How we getting in?” Cinder asked.

“I’m already in,” Jackson replied.

Cinder turned to him, her eyebrows crunched. A jade-green Porsche 911, from the eighties, approached from the north, slowed, the driver nodded to Jackson.

“That guy looks just like you,” she said.

Jackson smiled. “Yeah, kinda.”

The Porsche did a U-turn and parked behind the Suburban. The man climbed out of the 911 and got in the back seat of the SUV.

“Hey, Jackson,” the man said.

Cinder looked at the man closely. Not a twin, but could pass for a double in a movie if Jackson were the lead actor. Stunt double maybe.

“Is this your brother or what?” she said.

“Don’t have a brother. He’s just a handsome friend.”

The man took off his black and white waiter's uniform. Underneath he was wearing a tee shirt.

"Here ya go," the man said.

Jackson handed the man an envelope. The man handed Jackson his car keys and a different envelope.

"Everything copacetic?" Jackson said.

"When you were on the news, they pulled me in to check. Verified it was a coincidence, just looking kinda like you. That was that. Five-by-five, dude. I'm done, right?"

"Affirmative. See ya."

"Left of the bang, brother," the man said.

They all got out of the SUV, and the man slid into the driver's seat, then drove away. Jackson opened the door of the Porsche for Cinder, she got in, then he got in the driver's seat.

"Ok, I'm waiting," Cinder said.

Jackson turned to Cinder, a what?-isn't-seeing-a-close-to-a-double-of-someone-an-everyday-occurrence look.

"So, I found this guy. That guy. He's been working inside the Proditores estate for special events and whatnot for like six months. Now I'm gonna be him."

Jackson opened the envelope the man had handed him. It contained a parking pass, an ID, a detailed explanation of duties for events, catering, certain locations marked within the complex, the kitchen areas.

"A double?" Cinder said. "Or maybe a triple. You are quite the chameleon."

"A triple?" Jackson smiled without thinking about the comment. "A double, yes," Jackson said. "But you're the one with the reptilian calculating eyes, my dear."

"Did your clone do anything while inside? Well not exactly a clone, he's much better-looking than you are," she said.

"Of course, he is. A bit of tradecraft, reconnaissance let's say."

Cinder opened a tablet on her lap. Several photos of socialites and the new star of the *Beverly Hills Housewives* show, Alexa Proditores, sister of Alec and Joshua.

“So tell me about her,” he said.

“She got a quarter of the inheritance, but Alec has full management control of assets that remain in the Proditores businesses,” she said.

“Socialite billionaire,” he said.

Cinder’s nostril’s flared, fingers wrapped around the fist of the other hand and compressed it. “Yeah, today’s event is a wrap party for cast and crew and three dozen of her pretentious, precious metal privileged friends. Her 90210 society slavish sycophants. Blow job Barbie loves lots of press. Insatiable suck of the spotlight. At one point in her lucky sperm club life, she may have had some brain activity. Daddy demanded an education. In the end, guess Tammy Trust Fund found it too much heaven to handle. Between her nicks and tucks and too many pricks and fucks, still gets to use big brother’s villa for max TMZ. Her deal is that she has to do a pitch for his One World Free utopia scam when the cameras are rolling. Like she cares. Her brother could be Hitler or Jesus as long as she gets the dish of the day.”

“Wow, so, I guess you’re not romping on Rodeo with Alexa anytime soon. I get us in, we hit the office and see what we can find.”

“I got Joshua drunk once, and he told me about his brother’s old-school habits—no email, texts, little of significance discussed on cell or sat phones. Always paranoid about being bugged. Uses legal pads, then burns them in his office. You need to look for anything written by hand in his office.”

She removed a laser light from the suitcase.

“What about Joshua?” he said.

“Best I can tell, he’s still in New York bingeing.”

“Alec?”

“Still in San Francisco. He stays away from the TMZ crowd.”

Cinder removed a makeup bag, a black dress, and high-heels from the suitcase. Jackson started the car, the old flat-six engine growled to life, and he drove to the guard gate of Bel-Air, flashed

his parking pass, the guard recognized him and let him pass. They continued into the enclave.

Jackson pulled into an area designed for staff parking.

"Get out, I need to get dressed," Cinder said.

Jackson got out of the car and put on the waiter's uniform. They studied a map of the massive estate. Jackson identified a rear entrance, their meeting place.

"You look like a Beverly Hills housewife. No, not really, more like a runway model. You need to put a lot more makeup on to blend in with this crowd. Push your lips out and lots of mascara. Do I look like a waiter?"

"You look like that guy in the 40-Year-Old Virgin movie."

"I'm thinking Bradley Cooper in that cooking movie. The chef one. Burning something."

"Burnt. You look like burnt toast."

Jackson adjusted his clothes. Looked Cinder up and down. Tight dress. Black. Stunning.

"Asphalt Jungle," Jackson said.

"Don't think I saw it. Not sure my father even saw it. You need to focus."

"I'm focused. Focusing."

"Let's do this," Cinder said.

Jackson meandered through the out-buildings of the hundred-acre estate, the old shut-down structures from decades long ago waiting for their turn of remodeling and revitalizing and reprieve to join the celebratories visited by the chosen. He left the quiet and lonely area and glanced left at the valets, who were in rapid motion in the driveways, juggling the Bentleys, Ferraris, other classics, Barrett Jackson-types.

A large black snake of limos waiting their turn twisted out of the property into the neighborhood. They kept walking toward the rear of the estate, under the archways of the garage area, around to the back. Cinder stayed back. He found his entrance, the main servants' entrance. It was guarded by a wild-looking man, six-three, wearing a business suit, bulge off his right hip.

“Hey. Back to work, right? Needed to go pay my child support, so...” Jackson said. He flashed his ID while he looked at the ground sheepishly.

The guard opened the door.

Jackson entered the commercial kitchen. Cooks hustling and bustling. Trays of food being prepared for the party. Jackson found the entrance to the ballroom and peeked in. Three bars, wine and champagne bar, vodka bar and a cosmopolitan bar. Food displays included caviar, canapés of crab cakes, satay chicken, Chinese dim sum, and other assorted goodies. Guests were dancing, a live band, one of several scheduled for the event, playing pop, lounge and cool, samba soul and Ultra Chilled. Things were cranking up. In the center of the dance floor, having too much fun, dancing with three twenty-somethings at the same time—Joshua Proditores. The New York binge fest had moved west ahead of schedule.

Jackson referred to his map of the house and wound his way back through the stainless steel chef’s heaven kitchen. He picked up a tray of steaming crab cakes when he caught the attention of one of the chefs.

“Alexa is demanding again like twenty minutes ago,” Jackson said, a you-know-what-she’s-like gesture.

He got the nod he was hoping for and continued to the butlers’ pantry, then zigzagged three times and found a servants’ entrance in the rear. He opened the door, and Cinder was there, right on cue, wearing sunglasses and a beret.

“Joshua’s here,” Jackson said.

Cinder paused, then kept walking.

They continued through the mansion and came to a set of fifteen-foot-high dark wood doors, the entrance to the wing of the estate that included Proditores’ home office. The doors were locked.

“There’s a back way in. Through the ballroom,” Cinder said.

They came to the foyer in front of the ballroom, the rich and famous milling around, laughing, drinking, gawking at each

other. Cinder flanked Jackson, who was still carrying his tray of crab cakes. They entered the ballroom, Cinder eyeing for Joshua.

It was no ordinary wrap party. No ordinary crowd. Hosted by no ordinary woman. Alexa had agreed to pitch One World Free after dinner to satisfy her older brother. Before and after that, the party was her domain and she created a theme, one that all of the Bel-Air and Beverly Hills crowd could relate to, *Guilty Pleasures*. Five smaller banquet rooms branching off the main banquet hall included The Lust Lounge, a room created for the event to include a twenty-foot round bed, red lighting, and a mountain of pillows. Shoes at the door, please. There was The Gluttony Grotto, everything chocolate—strawberries, lava cakes, tarts, chocolate cream pies, cookies, truffles, and a chocolate milkshake bar; handmade to order while you wait. The Envy Enclave, where the guests get to go hip or nasty, wearing leathers for their close-ups by fashion photographers.

Cinder slipped to the side and filtered into the crowd. Jackson served his appetizers and tried to keep an eye on Cinder in the crowd, three hundred film crew, and socialites large.

Karlov entered the office suite through double doors. It was dark, he flipped a wall switch, and the crystal chandelier illuminated the room with amber light. The expansive suite was designed with dark hardwood walls, intricate carvings on the columns and faces of the bookshelves, and was furnished with antiques. In front of a twelve-foot stone fireplace was a living room ensemble with a leather couch and chairs, and coffee table with leather-bound books and sculptures. Karlov quickly toured the suite, checking everything as untouched. He checked the locks on the drawers on the eight-foot-long burl walnut desk.

On the dance floor, a man turned, almost bumping into Cinder, Joshua Proditores. Cinder jump-stepped right, followed with a dance move between a couple, quick glance back, Joshua did not see her. She reappeared between The Lust Lounge and The Envy Enclave. She stopped in front of an exit door.

Jackson spotted Cinder and followed her through the door to an area with two bathrooms. Guests milling around.

"I'll follow you," Jackson said. "Walk, I'll be ten feet behind you."

Karlov walked to the double-doored entrance of the office suite, stopped, changed direction, and exited the room by a single door in the far-right corner. He locked the door behind him and continued down the hallway.

Cinder moved down the arched hallway, artwork lining the walls. She turned right. Jackson lost sight of her for a second.

Fifty feet in front of her was Karlov, speaking into his lapel microphone. Cinder stopped, feigned coughing, looked down.

"Excuse me, which way is the ladies' room?" Cinder said, never looking up.

Karlov paused. "The other way," he said, Hungarian accent. He didn't recognize her.

"You can't be in this area," he said.

He placed a hand on her back, gesturing her back to the ball-room. He leaned down to get a better look of her face.

Jackson came around the corner, still holding his empty tray, lifted the tray to block his face as he approached Karlov and Cinder without breaking stride.

Karlov took a step, stopped. Turned around. "Hey, where you going?"

Jackson stopped. Did not turn around.

"Turn around," Karlov said. Jackson froze.

"Guess I got lost, need to get back to the kitchen," Jackson said.

Jackson changed his grip on the tray, two hands on one side. Started to turn, slowly, stopped halfway, waited. Until he sensed Karlov a step behind him. Karlov reached for Jackson's left shoulder to turn him when the twenty-inch heavy silver tray whipped around, the disk finding its mark on Karlov's left temple, stunning him, cutting his head. He crumpled into the wall. As he was going down, Jackson took one step back for a

better angle and leverage, and landed a roundhouse kick to the same temple. Karlov collapsed to the floor.

"See if that door opens, up there on the right," Jackson said. The door opened to a conference room. Empty.

Cinder and Jackson dragged Karlov into the conference room. Jackson opened a closet door. Office and conference supplies on shelving, serving trays, glasses, and pitchers, legal pads.

They dragged Karlov into the closet.

"I'll tie him, you get in the office," Jackson said.

Cinder removed a key from her pocket and unlocked the back entrance to Proditores' office suite. She removed a mirror and a small light from her pocket, several lasers in an array. She opened the door just enough to get her gloved right hand into the room, holding the mirror. In the reflection, she spotted the security camera in the far-right upper corner. She switched on the laser and with her left hand, flooded the camera with light. She stepped into the office, maintained the laser beams on the camera, opened the legs on the laser light body, and set the light on the coffee table. They were in.

Lemon oil mixed with the rose scent of the dark wood walls filled Jackson's nostrils. The suite was dark, filled with shadow, furniture visible only in silhouettes against the faint light from the covered windows behind the desk. Jackson opened the floor-to-ceiling curtains. The orange Los Angeles smog haze sun rays beamed through the leaded beveled glass windows and blanketed the room with muted crystallized reflections. He heard the faint sounds of the celebration through the vents. Jackson stepped around to the business side of the ornate desk and sat in the oversized red leather chair. He reached for the center drawer, locked. All drawers locked.

The wastebasket, empty. On the desk, paperweights in crystal, gold, and silver. A dozen custom pens in a Baccarat cup. A Tiffany lamp. An executive-style phone. A writing blotter with leather siding. Jackson held the blotter up, turned around to the windows, looked for impressions made by pens. Nothing legible.

He placed the blotter back on the desk. Cinder used the rolling ladder and climbed the fifteen-foot book casing, and installed a camera the size of a dime in the shadowed corner of the top shelf.

"We gotta go," Cinder said. "I'm set. They'll come to check their camera soon."

Jackson ran his fingers underneath the desk, no buttons or switches. He kneeled and examined the underside of the desk. Nothing. He sat back in the chair. An exhale of frustration. Turned the blotter upside down. Nothing.

"Let's move," Cinder said.

Jackson placed the blotter back on the desk and stood up. He stepped around the desk, and Cinder placed her hand on the back doorknob. Jackson stopped. He leaned over the desk from the front and ran his fingers under the leather siding of the blotter. He touched a piece of paper wedged in between the siding and the blotter backing. He removed it. Its edges were curled. On it was written, *EPA*. Jackson replaced the paper.

Cinder gestured him out first and backed up with the laser in hand, maintaining its array on the security camera. Back in the hallway, they walked by the conference room. Heard the sounds of Karlov kicking something and continued.

"Wait, I forgot the curtains," Jackson said. They stopped.

"Damn it," he said.

"They'll sweep the room, find my camera," Cinder said. "I'll go back in, meet you at the car."

"First, I need to make sure Karlov stays quiet for a while."

"Give me your lock pick, then go."

Cinder handed Jackson the pick, turned and left.

Jackson entered the room where he left Karlov, took one step. Karlov, a small pocketknife in his bound hand, the last cut needed on the plastic handcuffs to free his hands, launched to his feet. The two men collided and rolled onto the twenty-foot conference table, Jackson slammed to his back.

Holding, holding, the knife arm coming down, Karlov with the look of a muscle-bound Russian boxer.

He's too strong. The knife-wielding hand coming down. Jackson deflected the arm, knife just missing his neck, sticking into the wooden conference table.

Knee into his crotch, Karlov moaned once, Jackson threw him off.

Karlov grabbed the back of Jackson's neck, both crashing into the conference chairs, a crumpling landing, odd angles.

Jackson kicked Karlov away, over the back of a chair, and he tumbled backward, rolled to his feet, almost inhumanly fast, boomeranged back like a linebacker coming in for the blitz tackle.

At the last moment, Jackson sank down, bending both knees, the low angle upward, the base of his palm snapped up into Karlov's nose, breaking it, blood erupting.

The Hungarian wrecking ball of a man, two hundred fifty pounds of him, collapsed limp, slammed into the conference chairs, Jackson kicked him in the head, knocking him unconscious and Karlov plopped onto the Persian rug.

Jackson entered the hallway, the sound of the party still going on. No Cinder. Jackson retreated to the back door of the office. It was locked. Ear to the door. Nothing. Jackson picked the lock, closed the curtains, then returned to the area just outside the ballroom. Guests milling around, laughing, talking. He peeked into the ballroom. No sign of Cinder.

Jackson made his way back to the commercial kitchen, which was still bustling with activity. He continued to one of the back doors, exited the mansion, following the same route he used earlier. He passed the old buildings no longer in use and continued to where they left the Porsche.

The car was there, but no Cinder. Jackson started walking back towards the mansion, then veered off towards the acres of gardens. He removed the cryptophone from his pocket and dialed Cinder's cryptophone. It rang. No answer. He hung up. Then his phone rang. No caller ID.

He answered, listened.

Breathing.

Then the call disconnected.

"Fuck," he said.

Jackson entered one of the gazebos in the gardens giving him an elevated view of the property, the outer buildings of the estate, the mansion. He observed the standard Beverly Hills hedonism in garden hideaways, party favor consumption. Then movement to his right, the older buildings. Roped-off area. Someone emerged from the center building. Then another person, then three others. That got Jackson's full attention. He was looking at a discombobulated Speaker of the House.

"Hello," she called out. "Help me."

The Speaker turned around, and the four others gathered around her.

Two guests, a swank-looking couple, tux on him, sequins on her, both drunk, stumbled by the Hale Five.

"Hey there, you, do you have a cell phone?" Heinrich Tenner said.

The woman stopped, sloshed the margarita in her hand, and said, "Out of battery, sorry."

The man turned to his date and said, "Kim, that woman there looks a lot like Susan Arnold."

"Hey, come back here," Susan said.

The woman shoved the man forward, and they staggered on.

The Hale Five walked towards the sound of the mansion activity, past the valeted stable of luxmobiles, and ended up at the front entrance. First, the mingling guests stared at the Five. Then they recognized. Some took photos. Others called 911. Jackson walked to within view of the entrance.

Sixty seconds later, sirens in the distance, closing. Closing fast.

Glenn Woo and Donald Sturitz sat on steps of the entrance. Guests surrounded the Five. Sturitz accepted a Big Gulp size boat drink, blue umbrella, from a woman and downed it, one chug.

"Do you have a cigarette?" Sturitz said. She did and lit him up.

Two Beverly Hills black and whites screeched to the main gate, then gunned it to the front entrance of the mansion, slid to angled

stops. Four uniforms stormed out of the cars, drew their weapons. Surrounded the Hale Five.

More sirens. Lots more.

Jackson dialed his cryptophone. Special Agent Palmer answered.

"Who is this?" Palmer said.

"Does Proditores have connections to the Environmental Protection Agency, anything unusual there lately?" Jackson said.

"What the hell? Who cares? Where are you?"

"I'm looking at the Speaker and the others."

"You're with... All five? Where?"

"Proditores estate. Beverly Hills. I went to a party and guess who showed up?"

"Stay right where you are."

"I think one of Proditores' people abducted Cinder Stowe. I need you to search the entire grounds of the mansion right now. Don't let anyone leave, staff, guests. None of them. Ben, you gotta seal this place off now."

Jackson walked down Nimes Road, passed a dozen black and whites and unmarked, sirens blaring, lightbars flashing. Jackson crossed the street to St. Cloud Road. He disappeared into the neighborhood.

CHAPTER 19

Jackson walked along Santa Monica Boulevard, tents, vagrants, and zombies. He arrived at Cyber City Coffee and Crumbs. He passed the transient test at the door and was allowed in. He sat at an open LED monitor. Paid for his online time and searched variations; *Proditores*, *Global Open Society*, *GOS*, *One World Free* and *EPA*, the *Environmental Protection Agency*.

He came up with lots of hits; campaign contributions, conferences, the GOS platform on the environment. None of the search results seemed out of the ordinary. *Proditores* had been active in countless environment issues for years.

Jackson tried dialing Cinder's crypto. Nothing. No ringing this time. The phone was dead. The screens in the cafe were lighting up with the news of the release of the Hale Five. Released on the estate of billionaire Alec *Proditores*, who had yet to be reached for comment.

The *Proditores* Estate. Five ambulances sped out the front gate on their way to Cedars-Sinai Hospital, escorted by a convoy of police and FBI vehicles. The Hale Five on their way for a full medical workup.

FBI lab technicians were flowing in and out. Agent Palmer stood at the entrance to the center building where the hostages had emerged. He gloved up and entered the building, walked down a concrete staircase to the lower level.

The door to the first suite was open, techs already working inside, fingerprinting everything. It was the austere suite occupied over the last few days by Speaker Arnold. Palmer looked over the darkened glass window. The window that the Speaker had identified where all of her conversations with Hale took place.

Palmer examined the glass. An FBI tech was using a flashlight and a magnifying glass to analyze it. Palmer walked back into the hall where the window should be on the other side. It was a solid wall, no window. He returned to the suite to check his bearings. The darkened glass window was not a window. It was a solid piece of glass inset into the interior wall.

"It's just glass," the tech said.

"What'ya mean it's just glass? The Speaker stated that Hale appeared in the next room. Through this window. On the other side," Palmer said.

Agent Garcia walked in.

"Same setup on the other rooms. Just glass, no windows," Garcia said.

"What the fuck?" Palmer said. "Were they just dropped off here?"

"No. They all stated they never left their rooms once since they woke up. Never. Not once. Never traveled. Nada. Initial assessment is that this is where they've been the entire time," Garcia said.

The tech smiled.

"What are you smiling at?" Palmer said.

Palmer examined the glass. "Is this an LED monitor?"

"No, sir, it's glass," the tech said.

"Glass, just glass?" Palmer said.

"Not just. Special glass," the tech said.

Palmer and Garcia looked at each other, a you-gotta-be-fuckin-kidding-me look.

"Special how?" Palmer said.

"It has an emissive electroluminescent layer in it. A thin film of an organic compound that emits light. When it's electrified," the tech said.

The tech stood and pointed to a thin strip inside the glass. "See that? This is where the current comes from. It sends the current into the interior layer that's between two electrodes. There is no backlight like an LED. This baby emits billions of individual lights in an active matrix control scheme. There is a thin-film transistor backplane with direct access...uh...it switches each individual pixel on or off."

"English please," Garcia said.

"This here is an 8k, maybe higher display. Maybe 16k. Lifelike big time. Would love to watch the NFL on this puppy."

"Where's the signal coming from?" Palmer said.

"Unknown right now. I mean there's not a signal now so there's nothing to trace. There has to be a controller around here somewhere that feeds this. But it's not on now. We're looking. Unlikely the controller records anything."

"Hale sends his signal in here and he..." Garcia said.

"Could be any fucking place," Palmer said.

The tech nodded. "That's affirmative sir."

Jackson walked out of Cyber City onto Santa Monica Boulevard. Something... something hit him. He turned around and walked back into the coffee shop. He found another open computer station and searched the letters *EPA* on the Internet. Pages of Environmental Protection Agency listings. Then he switched to the Motley Fool website. Typed *EPA* into the stock ticker symbol search box. *Enspara Technologies*. Jackson navigated to their website.

Based in Culver City, Enspara was a penny stock company in the business of food additives. More specifically, indirect food additives. Additives introduced to food indirectly in the manufacturing process. They pioneered new methods to add vitamins and nutrients to cereals and other packed foods. Their latest innovation involved adding nutrients to cookies, the product targeting children.

Jackson navigated to the Board of Director page. No Alec Proditores listed. Then he navigated to the press release page. Scrolled back through time. Venture funding, sources he never heard of. *I wish Cinder could work this. Where is she?* Jackson wrote down the address of Enspara in Culver City. He shut the screen off and walked out into the street.

Jackson dialed his crypto. Palmer answered.

"Did you search the mansion yet?"

"No, we're in the buildings where the hostages were held. We need a warrant for the mansion. Proditores is not letting us into his main house."

"Cinder is in there somewhere. Maybe the bomb shelter."

"What bomb shelter?"

"I need you to meet me. In Culver City."

"What for? Turn yourself in."

"Something is connected here. I'm not sure of the dots yet."

"You are not the FBI, Jackson; you are a federal fugitive."

"Did the hostages get released unharmed?"

"You know they did."

"After you find Cinder Stowe and make sure she's safe, meet me. I'll text you the address."

Palmer covered the phone and whispered to Garcia, "It's Rand. Get the tracer."

Garcia nodded and dialed his phone.

"What's in Culver City? More of your hostages?" Palmer said.

"I don't have any hostages. You owe me."

Palmer turned away from Garcia.

"Shit. What about Culver City?"

"Forget the tracer, this is a crypto. Glenn Woo was preparing a massive campaign about food. Food safety. Government's responsibility for ensuring safe food for its citizens," Jackson said.

"How do you know that?" Palmer said.

"There's no issue on the national scene. There's no food safety crisis, not really. A campaign solving a crisis that does not exist. Yet. Alec Proditores is doing something with this Enspara outfit."

"What the fuck is Enspara? So some Facebook guy is working on some Got Milk this or that or whatever and Proditores owns like, a thousand companies? Tell me where Hale is. We know he beamed in his signals. He was never at the Proditores estate with the hostages."

"Really?"

"Stop fucking with me."

"The hostages were held on the Proditores estate? That's kinda rich, don't you think?" Jackson said.

"And you just happened to be there."

Garcia waved his finger across his neck, giving Palmer a no-good sign on the trace. Palmer nodded.

"Find Cinder Stowe and pull up what you can find on Enspara in Culver City," Jackson said.

The call ended.

Culver City, California. The taxi pulled over on Pico Boulevard. Jackson got out and walked down a side street past a contemporary office-industrial building, blue and gray sign *Enspara Technologies*. Jackson kept walking. He wound his way through alleys on foot, passing gang bangers loitering about, vagrants, the homeless, until he found the back of the building. It was surrounded by a chain-link fence and a gate. Inside the fence, an eighteen-wheeler was backed into a loading dock, two more parked to the side. Jackson continued to Pico and waited. He had circled the building.

The sound of running water.

"I know who you are," Joshua Proditores said.

Cinder's head was slumped, blood dripping from her bruised mouth, her blackening eyes closed, fluttering. She was tied to a metal chair, still wearing the evening dress, now torn. The chair was at the edge of the grotto-type swimming pool. The swimming pool in the Proditores doomsday bunker two stories below ground level.

Joshua poured more tequila into his margarita. Unscrewed the top of an amber glass cocaine bottle, no coke in the bottle. He poured out several square pieces of felt, each one smaller than the size of an eraser on a pencil. He pulled Cinder's head back, forced open her mouth and shoved several into the back of her mouth. He poured his margarita in her mouth and held her mouth shut. Cinder swallowed, then began to cough. She woke up.

"Joshua," she said.

"I know who you are."

"I know who you are too."

"And who am I?"

"You're a trust fund junkie. Or I should say a junkie with a trust fund."

He slapped her then yanked the top of her dress down. She was not wearing a bra.

"Finally, I get to see those."

Cinder laughed, spat out blood.

"That's the only way."

Joshua's smirk fell to the floor, replaced by flaring nostrils. He adjusted his belt. Stood up.

"Why are you here?" Joshua said.

"Because your mercenaries hit me from behind."

"They're not mine, they're my brother's people."

Joshua paced back and forth. "Karlov is dead."

"Good to know."

"You're a murderer now," Joshua screamed, weakness reverberating in his voice.

"Where's your brother?"

"My brother? He's gonna kill you."

"You mean, have me killed."

"No, I mean he might do it himself when..."

"When what?"

"Maybe I should just do it."

"You don't have the balls."

Joshua's eyes went wide. He lunged at her, grabbing her shoulders. Face to face. Cinder smiled.

"You bitch."

"Least you got *something* right."

Joshua went around behind her and pushed her chair up on two legs, teetering over the edge of the pool. Cinder looked at the bottom of the pool, fifteen feet deep.

A black SUV slowed in front of Enspara Technologies, continued for one hundred feet, pulled over and parked. Jackson watched the passenger window roll down, but from his angle, the vehicle's occupants were not visible. He looked around for the cavalry. It was quiet. After a minute, he approached the vehicle from behind, stopped. Still quiet. He walked around to the passenger window. A man, late twenties, clean-cut, FBI trainee-type was sitting in the driver's seat.

"Get in," the trainee said.

Jackson got into the passenger's seat. The trainee tilted the screen mounted on the dashboard. Jackson worked the touchscreen. Pages of documents cascaded on the display. Information about Enspara Technologies. He scrolled, stopped on one.

"That one came from the NSA," the trainee said.

"Related address? Pico and Union. Ground Zero for 18th Street

gang. Enspara is only five years old. Why locate dead center gangland?" Jackson said.

"Maybe it's not Enspara. Maybe something else," the trainee said.

Two men appeared from the front entrance of Enspara. Sirens in the distance.

"I gotta go. I was never here," the trainee said.

Jackson got out of the vehicle, and it sped away. Jackson ran.

Splash. The metal chair with Cinder hit the water, began to sink. Cinder struggled to free her hands. Kicked her bound feet. Opened her eyes underwater as the chair turned over and she saw Joshua standing at the edge. The chair came to rest on the bottom of the pool. She rotated her shoulders, trying to get leverage on the ropes. Bubbles escaped from her mouth, expanded as they rose to the surface.

Thirty seconds.

Forty.

Forty-five.

She felt a tug, and the chair slid across the bottom of the pool, rising up the incline towards the shallow end. A rope was tied to the chair leg. Dragged her to the shallow end.

She kept sliding, holding the oxygen that remained in her lungs. She was rising, sliding, sliding. *Try not to inhale. Inhale and you'll drown.* Her shoulder pierced the surface of the water. Finally, her head.

Huge breath. Coughing, coughing, coughing.

Two men pulled the rope the the rest of the way and lifted her chair upright.

"You asshole," Cinder said.

"Take her," Joshua said.

The men picked up the chair and carried her to a steel cart, an industrial type used in a warehouse, five by three feet with heavy

plastic wheels and a push handle. The men lifted her, still tied to the chair, and set the chair on the cart. They wheeled her through the vast underground shelter. Past a luxurious recreation area with modern leather furniture and flat-screen televisions, past a game room, library area, dining area, then a cherrywood contemporary kitchen. Past the kitchen, the cart turned left. Two large stainless steel doors. One of the men opened the doors.

They wheeled her into the twenty-foot-long walk-in freezer. Closed the doors. Cinder's breath turned to fog.

CHAPTER 20

South Los Angeles. South Central. Rampart. Gangland. In this area of Los Angeles, this notorious area, there were physical boundaries, natural boundaries like freeways, causeways, rivers, and train tracks. Any map would show you those. But not the invisible boundaries. Not those. If you were a member of the wrong gang or criminal organization, a lost pedestrian, an interloper, any of the above, not knowing the invisible barriers could easily cost you your life. If you didn't have the right answer when asked where you were from, you died. The homeboys held it down tight.

Used to be colors. In the 1970s. Red or blue, wearing those colors, did not mean you were patriotic. Flags, signature indicators for the Crips or Bloods. Things had changed. Expanded, evolved, splintered, grown, metastasized. The Crips, Bloods, and Mexican Mafia Sureños were not single gangs, but dozens, hundreds of "cliques" based in different parts of the city. The gangs proliferated among the poor, uneducated street punks, often fatherless. Warring escalated not only against other gangs but into clique feuds within the same gang. A subcultural moral code of merciless retribution.

The barrios of Los Angeles. 1980s. Populated by illegal immigrants who fled El Salvador's civil war, a long and murderous

battle. Then the influx from Honduras and Guatemala. Enter MS-13, Mara Salvatrucha. Mara translates to gang. Salva, for Salvador, trucha literally means trout, the slang meaning for alert or street smarts. The 13; M is the 13th letter in the alphabet.

Tens of thousands of gang members roamed LA, including the 18th Street gang. Originating near 18th Street and Union in the Rampart district of LA, it was the largest in Los Angeles with cliques nationwide. 18th Street exploited its surroundings with robberies, assaults, and murder. Other cottage industries included human trafficking, prostitution, drugs, extortion, kidnapping, and welfare fraud. Dozens of other gang cliques claimed territory in South Los Angeles, many of them answering to Sureños (Southerners), the Mexican Mafia with a stronghold in state and federal correctional facilities.

Jackson walked along Union Street north of Venice Boulevard. Not your typical high-tech location. Head on a swivel. *Need three-hundred-sixty-degree awareness when walking in a war zone.* The homeless stayed clear of this hood. Prospective gang members, the busters, would green-light the homeless, the ringers, on these mean streets to pass part of their initiation. Ignoring the Just Say No's dressed like tramps, bucked cracker jacks with nine mikes right in their tents, copped their dirty, took pics of the bloody corpses. High time entertainment for the chequos, the mid-level bangers, who assisted the O.G.s during the jumped ins as the recruits auditioned to become real homeboys.

G rides partrolled the streets, four bangers loaded. Low riders cruising. On the street, headhunters, the street whores, mud ducks eye-balled by the chulos. pimps, sporting flash colors, multi-tasking their skunk bitches in front of their cantons. Bomb squaders peddling to beamers. The locals, the allowed, space basing right on the steps, shaker baking, and lighting up squirrels. The thirst monsters, robbing, pillaging whatever, to payrollers for their daily fix.

The G ride Benzo U-turned, slowed next to Jackson, in this place, a toghes disco or marrano. Jackson stopped walking.

Turned broadside to the gangmobile, eyeballed the driver, a glare that spoke. Jackson placed his hand on his right hip. *I'm carrying, gun-upped, fuckers.* Shook his head back and forth. *Ain't no civilian, chill out your homies, tiempo malo for a head up, move the fuck on. Vamonos.* The vatos talking. Arguing. They looked him over again. The vato in the back seat looked back at Jackson. Spat out the window. A black gun barrel rose between his legs. The man kissed it. The car kept going, hopping away. Jackson exhaled. *Would'a got two of them, then AK rounds spraying this lovely neighborhood and me with it.*

Jackson noted the addresses of the buildings as he walked, getting closer to his target address. A tall man wearing a stocking cap covering long gray hair exited the front door of a building down the block and began to walk towards him. As Jackson approached the man, he scoped that he was white, in his sixties and distinguished-looking, not the everyday pedestrian in this area. The man gave Jackson an intense look as he passed by. *He's worried about something.* The gray-haired man crossed the street, got into a late-model Lincoln Town Car, and drove away. Jackson snapped off a photo of the man behind the wheel, then another of the rear license plate.

Jackson approached the building the man had just exited. It was the address he was looking for. Large unmarked old industrial warehouse of a building, maybe a hundred years old. But it had a new door. Windows on the ground floor were recently replaced, new iron bars installed, bolted into the brickwork. Jackson tried to open the front door. It was locked. He continued down the block until he saw a walkway between the buildings; he turned in then walked towards the back of the industrial warehouse. He noticed two low riders parked in the alley. Behind the fencing, backed into the loading dock, was a nondescript white step-van with its back doors open.

Two Hispanic men appeared on the loading dock, shorts down to their ankles, tatted up. Each carrying several twelve-inch

square boxes with Amazon labels on them. They loaded the boxes into the van and disappeared back into the building.

Jackson jumped the fence and photographed the labels on several boxes. He heard the men returning, and he made it to a walled dumpster area at the rear of the yard without being seen. Once the men went back into the building, Jackson hopped into an open dumpster. Rummaged through the trash. Broken-down shipping boxes, empty food containers, bagged trash. He cut open one of the trash bags and dumped it out. Kitchen trash, empty soda bottles, rotting food. Underneath it, apparently fallen out of the trash bag were several dark green disks, small, about 2 millimeters in diameter. Jackson picked one up, examined it, and placed it in his jeans pocket.

Jackson was waiting on Union Street when Addy pulled up in an old Chevy Blazer. Jackson hopped in.

"We're going to Satchel's place." Jackson ducked down as a police car sped by with its lightbar flashing and siren blaring.

Satchel lived outside Santa Paula, in an old run-down Queen Ann house. As the Blazer approached, Jackson noticed the green Porsche was not there.

"Can you leave me the truck and call for a ride?" Jackson asked.

"Yep," Addy said.

Jackson got out. Casey, Anna, and the girls were playing whiffle ball with Satchel in the front yard. Casey ran up to Jackson.

"Hey, is Mom with you?" Casey said.

"Have you heard from her?" Jackson said.

"No. Where is she?"

Joshua Proditores opened the freezer door. Cinder was wide-awake. Eyes dilated, moving rapidly in no apparent pattern. Skin white. Shivering. The two men lifted her back onto the cart and wheeled her to a room, a bedroom setup. They lifted her chair, set it down in the middle of the room.

"I'm thirsty," Cinder said.

"I bet."

Joshua leaned in, examining Cinder's eyes. He smiled. "Wow, you look like you're tripping out or something. Have a nice time."

He kicked the chair over, slammed the door behind him.

Click, the door locked.

Cedars-Sinai Hospital. Palmer stood at the foot of the bed of the Speaker of the House. Susan Arnold was surrounded by her staff people and two nurses.

"So he spoke to you through the window?" Palmer said.

"Yes."

"Please step me through each conversation the best you can."

Palmer's phone rang. He checked the caller ID.

"Please excuse me for a moment, Madam Speaker," Palmer said. He stepped into the hallway.

"You were picked up on a CCTV on Union Street," Palmer said.

"Did you find her yet?" Jackson said.

"Not yet," Palmer said. "We ran her, she's ex-NSA."

"Do you have the video?"

"I've seen it, yeah. It's you."

"Not me, did you do a face recog on the old guy with gray hair that walked by me?" Jackson said.

"Don't have time for your nonsense. You have to come in now. You and I are even."

"Did you get the warrant yet?"

"Our people are going through the mansion now. I will be headed back there soon."

"Did you get below ground yet?"

"The place is a castle so will take all day. I want you to hear me. I'm an FBI agent and you're a fugitive. You run, you get shot. Tell me where Hale is, and you may get out of this mess alive," Palmer said.

"He's nowhere."

"I know you think he's some kind of hero, some twisted version of a patriot, he's not. He is a vigilante criminal who soon will be spending the rest of his days in Supermax."

"Find Cinder Stowe. I think she's still there, if she's still alive. Get that face recog," Jackson said, then he hung up.

"Damn it."

Jackson climbed over the back wall of a Bel-Air home. He saw the Proditores estate. Three dozen government cars, SUVs and equipment trucks were parked on the property and on Nimes Road. The international press flooded the place and camped outside the walls, filming every coming and going through the guard gate. Several hundred crew people, camera trucks, generators. Jackson glassed the rock-star scene with binoculars. He zoomed in on the FBI Mobile Command Center truck, the Los Angeles Field Office Evidence Response Team truck, the Bomb Squad truck, the Tactical Response Unit, several SWAT trucks.

Several black SUVs were parked a block away. Smoked-out windows. Jackson walked between the special agent vehicles and the walls of the homes. Checking each door handle. There were ten vehicles, then a FOX News truck, then more blacked-out trucks. On the fourteenth try, he found the FBI sedan whose driver made a rookie mistake in the haste of a world-news

moment. He or she left the car unlocked. Jackson hopped in and popped the trunk. He put on an FBI hat and Kevlar vest; closed the trunk.

He walked right onto the property. No problem. Too much chaos to be checked thoroughly. The hostages were already gone; this was just a search with too much press milling around. There were dozens of agents and secret service in the mansion, the staff nervous wrecks making efforts to protect antiques, statues and artwork. Jackson approached a uniformed staff member, an elderly woman.

"I'm assigned to the basement unit. Can you direct me?" Jackson said.

Jackson continued on. Behind him, commotion. A paramedic team ushering a gurney.

"Who's that for?"

"One of the guests ODed. Downstairs."

Jackson followed.

The paramedics were guided into the doomsday shelter and to the room. The door was open. Two FBI agents were speaking to Cinder, who was sitting on the floor, full deer-in-the-headlights look in her wide-open eyes. She was covering her ears. The agents made way for the paramedics, one man and one woman. Jackson entered the room and stood back.

"Hey honey, it's okay, we're here to help you. Let's take you to the hospital. Will that be okay with you? Tell me your name?" the paramedic said.

Cinder did not answer. Jackson tried to make eye contact. Cinder did not seem to be focusing on anything. The paramedic placed her hand on Cinder's arm.

"Tell me your name. Can you hear me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

To her partner, she said, "Dilated pupils. Rapid pulse." The paramedic turned back to Cinder. "We're going to help you onto this gurney right here. Will that be all right?"

"We need to interview this woman," one of the agents said.

"Did you speak with her before we got here?" the paramedic said.

"Yeah, she said nada."

"She's having some type of psychic break."

"Honey, did you take something? A drug? What did you take, ma'am?"

Cinder did not react to the question. The paramedics pried her away from a chair leg and got her on the gurney.

"Strap her down," the agent said. "This woman is being detained by the FBI starting now."

"Is she under arrest? She's going to Cedars for eval, Agent."

The paramedics wheeled Cinder out.

Cedars-Sinai Hospital. More international press. Out front, in the lobby. Bedlam. The Hale Five still in their rooms. Jackson stood off to the side in the Emergency Room. Assessing. He waited fifteen minutes, then approached the desk.

"The girl they brought in from the party, the big house. How's she doing?" Jackson said, still wearing an FBI vest and hat.

"Yes, Agent. She's here. Can I see some I.D. please?"

"Left it in the equipment truck in all the excitement. Just wondering if she's Ok."

"She's being taken care of, I assure you."

"Ok, thanks."

The elevator opened. Palmer and Garcia exited. Jackson turned away in time to have his back to them, and he walked away.

After showing the receptionist their I.D.s, Palmer and Garcia walked into the ER medical treatment area. They continued to Cinder's room, gestured to the two FBI agents standing guard to leave the room. Cinder stared at the ceiling, smiling, then turned and looked at Palmer and Garcia.

"Ms. Stowe, what were you doing at the Proditores residence today?" Garcia said.

"The water. Drowning." Cinder smiled.

"Ms. Stowe, did you take any drugs today?"

No answer.

"Ms. Stowe, do you know Hale?" Garcia said.

Cinder looked at Garcia and smiled.

"It's an illusion. Like ma..g..ic," Cinder said, laughing.

"What's an illusion? Hale's an illusion? Who is Hale? Where is he? Do you know Hale?" Garcia said, leaning over her.

"He's unknowable like waves in the air."

"What?"

Cinder moved her fingers through the air like a fan.

"Wa..v..es."

"Ms. Stowe, do you know a person called Hale?" Palmer said.

"Hale? H..a..le.. is not a person," Cinder said. "Don't you see?"

"No, we don't see," Palmer said.

"Yes, you don't see. Because you can't see what is not real. Can't you see?"

Garcia whispered to Palmer, "This chick is tripped out, man."

The nurse walked in.

"We need to draw her blood, Agents. You're not clear to question her yet," the nurse said.

"Give us five minutes. She doesn't appear to be dying," Garcia said.

The nurse started to shoo them out. Palmer's cell phone rang.

"Agent Palmer... Damn it, Rand. Where are you?" Palmer said.

"I'm at the back of the mansion. There's a guy dressed in black. Using a silencer. He's picking them off. Get here quick," Jackson said, then hung up.

"Cuff her to that gurney," Palmer said. "We gotta go now." He dialed his phone.

Garcia flipped out his cuffs and cuffed Cinder to the gurney.

"Shooting at the Proditores estate," Palmer said.

Jackson was sitting with the ER patients waiting to be seen. He watched Palmer and Garcia run through the ER doors and out the entrance. Jackson removed the FBI vest from under his chair and

put it back on. He walked into the ER medical area. He spotted two uniformed LAPD officers standing in front of a curtained area. He went the other way.

The ER was busy, overcrowded as usual, patients on gurneys waiting for their time to be wheeled into a private curtained area. Jackson walked between the patients on gurneys, he was wearing a doctor's smock and surgical cap. He ducked into a curtained area. An old man was half awake, moaning. He rummaged through the man's clothes bag and found a stocking cap. He put it in the pocket of his smock.

"Gonna get you the help you need right now, sir," Jackson said.

He wheeled the man out into the hallway. Jackson moved to the next area, a woman lying on her side. He removed a sweater from her clothing bag. She turned over, and he smiled.

"Be with you shortly, ma'am," Jackson said.

He moved sideways through the patients' area. He found Cinder, dazed, lying on her gurney, cuffed, staring at the ceiling. He reversed course to the previous patient and wheeled him out into the hallway. He rolled Cinder's gurney sideways into the adjacent area and put the stocking cap and sweater on her.

At the rear of the ER, Jackson emerged, rolling Cinder out the door on her gurney. A nurse walked past.

"Nurse, help me with her. This patient is being moved," Jackson said.

An ambulance pulled up, the paramedics got out and walked into the ER.

Jackson said, "Thank you, nurse. I can take it from here."

Santa Paula. The ambulance pulled up to Satchel's house. Jackson opened the back door and wheeled Cinder out.

"Why are we here, Jackson?" Cinder said.

Casey ran up to the ambulance. Satchel followed.

"Mom, are you okay?" Casey said.

"Hello," Cinder said. "I love you."

"Love you too, Mom."

"Satch, we need a hacksaw," Jackson said.

Cinder lay in bed with Casey next to her. Satchel walked in with a glass of water.

"What a glorious day," Cinder said.

Jackson was standing at the door. "Glorious," he said.

Middle of the night. Jackson awoke to the sound of footsteps. Eyes wide. Hand automatically slipped under his pillow to the SIG. He quickly turned towards the bedroom door. Cinder was standing in the doorway. She moved towards him and lay down on the bed.

"I've been awake all night," she said.

"You were drugged," he said.

"Been hallucinating. Still high..."

"High as a dual-line parafoil."

"A what? Yeaaaa. Wow."

Cinder hugged him. He slipped the pistol back under the pillow.

"You won't harm Casey. Or me."

"Never."

Jackson put his arm around her.

"Kinda cold."

Jackson pulled the blanket out from under her and covered her.

"Feels good. Kids asleep?"

"Think so."

"What happened?" she said.

"Talk about it later."

She unbuttoned his shirt and ran her hand over his chest.

"This is too intense for sex. I'm tripping."

She lifted her right leg over his and hugged him tightly.

"You're good," he said.

"Yeaas. Shit. I am so fucked up. Can I...?"

"Can you what?"

"Trust you."

"Yes. Don't you know that by now?" he said.

"Don't trust easy."

"You don't trust period. I get it, though. We kinds share that."

"But a small deep part of me does. Want to. Sometime. Somewhere. I push it down and seal it over. Problem is I know who you are," she said.

"Who am I?"

"Dark past. Secrets. Contradictions."

"And you?"

"My past is...different."

"Different secrets and contradictions."

A slight smile she could not hold back. They were quiet for a moment.

"Can I ask you a question?" he said.

"In a vulnerable state," she said.

She moved her hand down his shirt, over his stomach. Jackson squirmed. Just a little.

"Have you ever been in love?" he said.

"Yeah. I love my son."

"Were you married?"

"Never. Can't marry."

Jackson smiled.

"I get that."

"I want to get naked," she said.

Jackson sat up and helped her off with her clothes. Then he removed his.

Cinder hugged him.

"I'm too intense to kiss. Just want to feel."

"It's fine. I love this. Just this. Please ignore the...uh...down there."

Her hand went lower. Jackson's muscles tightened. All over.

"This is real," she said.

Then moved her hand back to his chest.

"Spoon me," she said.

Cinder turned over, and Jackson spooned her.

"You feel good," she said. "Let's not talk."

He felt her skin. Touched her. Warmed her.

That was enough.

CHAPTER 21

The next morning, Jackson sat at the kitchen table with Satchel. The kids were outside, Cinder asleep in bed. Finally.

"Day of reckonin' boy," Satchel said.

"Something like that."

"Like a bad bellyache, meat dun foul but ya still ates it. Nasty. Take days to puke it all, see straight again. That be what's happenin' wit her. You dun can't be fixin' it all, Jackson. No how no way. You best head north where all dis sheeat won't be trailin' yer ass."

"Not yet."

"Figured as such lookin' atchya. John Waynin' gonna git you six feet, boy."

"Not yet."

"Jist tellin' ya. Whatch'a gunna do wit all dese youngins? Them need mommas."

"Will think about that later."

"Uh huh."

Cinder walked into the kitchen. Jackson stood up and hugged her.

"Hey you," he said.

"Hey."

"Hmm hmm." Satchel shook his head and smiled. "Ain't sayin' nuthin'."

"And nothing happened," Jackson said.

"Don't look like nuthin.' Looks like sumpin'."

"You want some coffee?" Jackson said.

"Black."

"Slipped you a mickey, girl. Sure as forty-two stealin' home."

"Not sure what that means but yeah, something. I'm back to the living though," Cinder said.

"Trying to discredit you," Jackson said.

"Joshua's not the killer type. B type, the weak one."

Cinder examined the photo of the gray-haired man driving the car.

"Not sure that's enough for face recog," she said.

"Can you still access the system?"

"Not sure. Don't you have a contact at NSA?"

Cinder opened her laptop.

"Here's the plate on his car," Jackson said.

The kids came in.

"Hey Mom, you feeling better?" Casey said.

"Yeah. C'mere."

"Mr. Satchel, what's for breakfast?" Casey said.

"Be startin' the biskets, then fixin' lots a good eatin'," Satchel said.

"Gracias," Anna said.

Satchel laughed. "You kids durn skinny. Old Satchel gonna fix yous up."

Cinder worked on her laptop.

"I can't access the FBI apps or NSA. This will take some time," she said.

"We don't have a lot of time. Election in eight days," Jackson said.

"You think Proditores wants to re-elect Cheryl Cannesco?" she said.

"She's been in his pocket, but she's always been a reluctant. One foot in," he said.

"Never Trig Mason."

"He'd have Mason taken out before he'd let a Republican win again."

"Oty?"

"The sleeper. The real Constitution shredder."

"He's like thirty-five points behind a week out."

"Dat boy's got da juice. I cin it in dem eyes," Satchel said. "He be a ringer, durn straight."

"Ringer?" Cinder said.

"Poser," Jackson said.

There was a silence while Cinder worked her laptop. Then she stopped. Sat there.

"What?" Jackson said.

"I didn't..." She looked at Jackson, then away. Eyes evasive, pushed her hair back. "I overheard things. Pieces of conversations."

"Alec Proditores?"

"Yes. I couldn't get detail but... Like he was preparing. For something. Lots of moving parts going, call after call at the dinner table. He avoided Joshua hearing."

"Like what?"

"Don't know. Could be just another big business deal, an acquisition maybe? A hostile takeover of a company."

"Or takeover of something else," Jackson said. "Need to get in that building. Something's wrong there."

"You goin' against da man," Satchel said.

Cinder packed her backpack. Jackson carried his backpack to the Blazer, threw it in the back seat. Casey walked out of the house.

"You gonna take care of my Mom?" he said.

"Sure will. Be back soon," Jackson said.

He kneeled in front of Casey. Jackson removed one of the W flags from his pocket.

"This is for you. I have one. Now you have one. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do anything you believe in, really want. Whenever you're in a pressure situation, you take this flag from your pocket and rub it. Give that pitcher the evil eye. Then pound with cruel violence your bat upon the plate. Remember the Mudville Nine, and that you are the real mighty Casey," Jackson said.

"Thanks, Jackson. What's the W mean?" Casey said.

"It means you're a winner."

Satchel watched from the window and smiled.

The sun retreated. Orange bath of warm light in cold gangland. Jackson and Cinder observed the back of the building. No cars. No trucks. Quiet. They moved to the side of the building. Cinder looked up. The second-floor window looked original, old. Cinder climbed a drainage pipe and pried open the window. She was in.

The second floor was storage. Old plaster walls swelled from water damage. Exposed ceilings blackened from mold. The uneven sodden floor creaked as she stepped. The place smelled musty, dank, and damp. Needles, syringes, beer bottles. She moved to the next room, an old plaster ceiling, bellied in waves, crumbling yellow. Smell of human excrement. Dead rats scattered. Smell of death. Overturned rusted chairs, paint peeling. Old steel desks, from the 1940s, dented, rusted. Something flew by her head and she ducked down. It disappeared into the darkness beyond. Species unknown. She spotted a stairwell.

Cinder opened the back door and let Jackson in. The back half of the building was cleaned and painted. A wall splitting the building front from back had been constructed recently, separated by a steel double door. Recent installation.

They were standing in a grocery store, or a condensed version of one. Wooden racks built in the canter of the space were filled with fresh produce—lettuces, kale, Brussels sprouts, apples,

oranges, broccoli, tomatoes, carrots and more. A large shelving structure held breads: sourdough, white, wheat, bagels, Thomas English muffins. Another shelf with various types of cookies, the freshly baked type, and the packaged versions. There was meat: steaks, ground beef, chicken, in a refrigerated section, extension cords snaked to a series of electrical boxes with outlets that appeared to have been recently installed. There was a dairy section that contained cartons of milk, yogurt, butter, cottage cheese. A long freezer unit was against the wall, stocked with frozen foods—pizzas, lasagna, pot pies, Popsicles, Häagen-Dazs, Ben and Jerry's.

Cinder picked up a bundle of Swiss chard. Smelled it.

"It's fresh," she said.

Jackson opened a freezer door. It was cold. Closed it. Leaned against the produce section. In the corner. A tripod. He walked toward it, noticed a black plastic device hanging from the tripod, a rod with a round tip extending from it. He examined it and shoved it in his pants pocket. He opened double doors leading to the front half of the building. Shipping and received supplies and worktable. Empty, unused Amazon boxes, packing tape. Two folding tables with laptops on them. He opened one. Still powered on. Password-protected. Cinder walked into the space.

"See what you can do with this," he said.

Cinder sat down. Removed a black zipped case from her black fleece jacket, removed a USB drive, powered down the laptop, inserted the drive, and powered it back on. Jackson sat down. Confused.

"What this is not is food for the poor," he said.

"I'm in," Cinder said.

She launched a command prompt screen, straight code and typed. Fast.

"Recent video files," she said.

A video file opened on the laptop. A Hispanic man was speaking into the lens in Spanish and the view zoomed to his wrist. A plastic rod with a round tip extending from underneath

his shirt, on the palm side. He walked back to the produce section and picked up a head of lettuce, then placed it back down.

A noise from the back of the building. Heavy chain rattled against a metal fence. The *clank clank* rattle of the diesel engine, then clank clank, engine slowing as the tranny shifted to neutral, then the shrill of the brakes in need of repair as the eighteen-wheeler came to a stop in the alley.

A stairwell in the front corner of the first floor. Cinder closed the laptop and she and Jackson scurried like mice up the stairs. The back door opened and clanked against the brick wall.

Voices inside downstairs. Jackson and Cinder moved towards the rear stairwell to hear. Voices in Spanish. Lots of men. *Beep beep beep whirrrffftt* of the truck in reverse.

"Detener," a man yelled outside. The diesel engine shut down with a grumble.

"Cargarlo todo. Vamonos." Sounds of dollies bouncing off the wood floor downstairs.

"They're cleaning out the food," Jackson said.

The men threw the produce into large plastic tubs, then carried them to the front of the truck trailer.

Jackson and Cinder sat upstairs, listening. Waiting. Too many men to confront. Six or eight men, maybe more. They heard the voice of the leader.

"Hola. What you doin' here?" the leader said.

"Velasco, what's all this?" the man said, his voice echoing from downstairs. The voice of a white man, older.

"No concern of yours, señor," Velasco said.

"I saw labels here yesterday. Labels addressed to destinations in the United States."

"Ah, si, si. We sent some food to our amigos, different places. All this food. To help the people, señor. You go back to your lab and cook some more, si?"

"No si. Somebody broke into my truck," the white man said.

Jackson peeked down the stairwell. The white man was the gray-haired man he saw on the street yesterday.

"Did you call Five-O?" Velasco said.

All the men laughed.

"You go. Te vas ahora. Your ass is not supposed to be here," Velasco said.

The gray-haired man walked into the back of the trailer. "What's all this?" he said.

Velasco followed Grayhair into the truck.

"Presta atención." Velasco exposed the butt of the Glock in his waist holster. "You get the fuck out of here, amigo, ahora."

Velasco dialed his cellphone. Grayhair climbed down off the back of the trailer and walked back into the alley. Jackson and Cinder climbed down the gutter on the outside and ran to Union Street. Across the street, Grayhair was getting into his Lincoln Town Car.

The Lincoln drove up the ramp onto the 110 Harbor Freeway heading east. The Blazer followed three cars deep. The Lincoln veered off on the 5, the Golden State Freeway heading north. The Lincoln continued north out of Los Angeles, through Burbank several miles, then moved into the right lane. The Blazer followed.

The Lincoln exited on Penrose in Sun Valley, and turned right. An industrial area, rough, old, high crime. The Lincoln made several turns and stopped at the gates of a junkyard, the sign read Car Crush Dismantling and Junkyard. Several junkyards rolled into one; auto parts, appliances, metal scrap pits, a maze of discarded demise. Smell of burning rubber. Wafts of the spoiled, rotten. Machine smells. All blending, cocktails of stagnants, the stale insulting the senses.

The gate opened, seemingly by itself, Grayhair did not roll down his window, the Town Car drove in, the gate closed behind it. Jackson pulled the Blazer over across the street. He glassed the front of the junkyard. Several security cameras.

"Cameras," Jackson said.

"This place will have lots of them no matter what that guy has to do with it," Cinder said.

"Yeah, these places can lose souls for decades."

"Forever."

Jackson put the binoculars back in the console. He drove to the front gate. Pressed the intercom.

"Need Chevy parts. Starter. Also, maybe an alternator."

"Drive to the check-in building on your right. It says check-in. You gotta check in first. No guns," the man said over the intercom.

"Check-in, no guns. Got it," Jackson said.

The Blazer drove to the Chevy parts yard and stopped. Jackson and Cinder got out. Walked to the back of the yard and kept going. Ten minutes later they spotted the Lincoln parked next to an eighteen-wheeler trailer with the cab attached. It was set five hundred feet back in the yard, which was surrounded by ten-foot chain-link fencing with concertina razor wire in rolls mounted on top. Jackson and Cinder found their way back to the Blazer, drove out of the yard, and parked a block away. They waited.

Nighttime. Jackson and Cinder kneeled at the chain-link fence. Barking of large dogs in the distance. Jackson cut a hole in the fence, they crawled through, used two zip ties to hold the holed section of chain link to the edge of the hole. More barking. They moved in the dark, blue-gray moon shadows, one place of cover to the next. Glassed the Lincoln, the trailer. To the left of the trailer, two hundred feet away, another trailer.

Cinder inhaled. "Chemical smells. More than one."

"Yeah, me too," Jackson said. "Noxious. Faint but chemical."

"Like it permeates the earth around here. Meth?"

"Drines, tanes, phines, phenyls. Burnt. Something."

"That guy didn't have meth dealer written on him," Cinder said.

"Did you see Breaking Bad?"

They moved to the back of the trailer. Listened. Faint noises inside. Cinder put her ear to the metal. *Mozart*.

"What now?" Jackson said.

He drew his SIG. They moved around to the other side. A single door with steps. Jackson moved the door handle slowly. Locked. The music inside stopped. Jackson and Cinder froze. Fifteen seconds. Thirty. Forty-five. The door opened. Grayhair in the doorway.

"Are you DEA?"

"No," Jackson said.

"What do you want?" Grayhair said.

"Talk."

"Put your gun down and come in. Both of you."

"I think I'll keep the gun but promise not to shoot you unless I have to."

Grayhair waved them in.

"Sit," he said. "Don't worry, it's safe in here. At the moment."

It was a laboratory, a spare-no-expense laboratory. Three baby blue three-by-two-foot Eppendorf variable-speed refrigerated centrifuges were mounted on the stainless steel twenty-foot workbench, also racks of 50-milliliter polypropylene screw-top disposable centrifuge tubes. Four HY-4 liquid mix orbital horizontal shakers, two-by-two-foot square with both analog and digital readouts, tubes snaking throughout the lab like spiderwebs, tube mixers, timers, water baths, a row of amber bottles with Repipet dispensers ranging from five to thirty milliliters.

Flasks of all shapes and sizes, vats, glass beakers, separatory funnels, heating mantles on the twenty-foot-long table, mixers, two fume hoods leading up to a ventilation system. Distilling kit with ground glass joints. Vacuum desiccators which looked like two glass casseroles, one on top of the other, used to dry lysergic compounds without burning them. One wall was storage shelves

for solvents, reagents, ethyl acetate-distilled in glass, granular sodium sulfate, chloroform-distilled in glass containers, ethyl acetate, acetate, methanol, and hydrochloric acid.

Jackson directed Cinder's attention to three vats marked Lysergic Acid.

"The analogs in pure form, of course," Grayhair said.

"Somehow I don't think you're curing dementia in here," Jackson said.

"Yet the possibility exists. Enspara is working on that."

Jackson looked closely at Grayhair's face.

"I know who you are," Jackson said.

"Yes, you do. Your site did quite the expose' on me several years ago," Grayhair said.

Cinder tried to recognize the man, but to no avail.

"He's known as the acid king. Leonard Packard. Paroled a while back."

"Why did you let us in?" Cinder said.

"My work is done here. I've been deceived."

"By Proditores?" Jackson said.

"Proditores?" Grayhair said.

"Alec Proditores," Jackson said. "You are financed by Proditores."

"No. The money came from a non-profit out of Africa."

"Same thing," Cinder said.

Jackson examined Packard's face. *Is he lying?*

Jackson stepped back, unsure.

"LSD?" Cinder said. Her head dropped. She turned to Jackson, a now-I-know-what-happened-to-me look. "*Joshua.*"

"The purest ever made. For the purpose of microdosing. Sub-perceptual doses. The suffering. We're starting in the Congo."

"The Congo?" Jackson said.

"A transformation in the quality of life for those who need it the most. Also, the violent."

"A humanitarian objective?" Jackson said.

Packard nodded. Gestured for them to sit.

"Microdosing has been going on in Silicon Valley for years. Increases in creativity, the flow state. But its real benefit is two-fold. Reducing depression and anxiety, that's one. The most important is affecting those prone to violence as a way of life. What is being done about the atrocities in the Congo? We have all seen the images of boys missing both hands," Packard said.

"More than images," Cinder said.

"My work can transform monsters," Packard said.

"The shipments I saw..." Jackson said. "Addresses to American cities. Postboxes in high-crime areas."

"Boxes with Amazon labels. I saw them too. After my lab was robbed. Undoubtedly by the same men I saw in the back of the shipping location," Packard said.

"Gang bangers," Jackson said.

"But Proditores doesn't need money from drug dealing or being involved with gangs," Cinder said.

"I never met Alec Proditores. I have nothing to do with him. My project... People that I have known for years. People that care... Somehow some men, the worst of us, learned about our project. Robbed my lab," Packard said.

"Robbed?" Jackson said.

"Full doses. Millions of them."

Jackson's eyes narrowed, head flinched back. He stood up and walked through the lab. Cinder put her hands on her knees, looking over the equipment. "Millions of full doses."

Jackson removed the plastic plunger from his pocket and handed it to Packard, who examined it closely. Packard opened a cardboard box with layers of sheets of blue disks separated by serrations. He removed a single disk and inserted it into the plunger. Then pressed the button on the device and the disk flew across the lab.

Packard examined the device "What is this?" He worked to reinsert the disk into the device.

"An insertion device," Jackson replied. "The back of the building. It was a mock-up."

A look of fear fell upon Packard's face like a dark curtain.

"And the videos," Cinder said.

"What videos?" Packard asked.

Jackson gasped, eyes darting back and forth. He placed a hand on the table. A sudden coldness struck him to his core.

"Training videos. You're not safe here," Jackson said.

"You're just a replaceable part," Cinder said.

"More like an obsolete part now, I'm afraid," Jackson said.

"Or liability," Cinder said.

Beep, beep. A red light lit up in the upper corner.

"We have company," Packard said.

He turned on the surveillance screen. Four Hispanic men were approaching with long guns. One of the men removed a backpack and set it on the ground, removed a pressure cooker. Jackson moved to the front of the trailer and felt the ridge of a panel.

"Yeah, that leads out, and you can get into the cab from the back." Packard opened the panel.

"Follow me," he said.

Jackson and Cinder followed Packard to the cab. Packard slid into the driver's seat. Jackson rolled down the back window, drew his gun. The diesel turned over several times, then it started. Gunfire from outside. Bullets piercing metal. Packard jammed the gearshift into first, and the big truck lurched forward. More gunfire, bullets hitting metal. A man ran alongside parallel with Jackson, raised his AK-47, Jackson dropped him.

The eighteen-wheeler plowed over debris and car parts in its path, the hitmen in pursuit on foot until the truck sped away. A black pickup truck screeched to a halt, and the men jumped in the back.

Up ahead, the big rig wound through the junkyard maze, stacks of flattened cars, rainbow colors, and rust, acres of it. Half-mile square. The pickup's engine growled, racing through the yard until the driver spotted the lab truck heading for the front gate. Another pickup blocking the way. Two men jumped out with long guns and opened fire on Packard's eighteen-wheeler.

Packard cranked the wheel ninety degrees and headed down the appliance section of the yard. The trailer ignited. Jackson handed the Blazer's keys to Cinder.

"Get out now. Take the Blazer to Satchel's. I'll meet you there. Get the kids ready to leave," Jackson said.

"And then what?" Cinder said.

"Then we leave, someplace safe," Jackson said. "Packard, stop here."

Packard hit the brakes hard. Jackson touched her hand.

"Go," he said.

Cinder jumped out, the eighteen-wheeler roared on. On fire.

"This is not your battle," Packard said.

"There're lots of enemies in this battle," Jackson said.

Packard checked the rearview. The pickup fishtailed around a corner of stacked washing machines, three hundred feet back.

"Slow down. I'll take out the driver," Jackson said.

"Be well, my friend," Packard said. He hit the brakes. Jackson jumped out. The big rig continued on.

Jackson ran across to the other side for a driver shot. Ducked behind a stack of metal. He took aim. *Lead the driver.* Fired. Bullet hole, windshield, blood splatter in the front seat of the pickup, then it careened into a stack of flattened dryers, fifty feet high, men launched from the bed of the truck, into the junk, into the air, to the ground. Launched.

Jackson ran through the yard. Climbed a fence. Next to the yard, used car lot, *Jose Joe's Holy Rollers* it read on the sign, the logo a cross. Ocean of cars, trucks, SUVs. Two men stood outside the sales office, one Hispanic, twenties, the other a white guy, Gilbert, wearing glasses, looked like a meth addict on reprieve. Both men wore large crucifixes around their neck. Gunfire from the junkyard. Jackson approached.

"Where'd ya'll come from?" Gilbert said, ducking down.

"Looking for a new ride. Need one today. What the hell is that noise? Sounds like gunfire," Jackson said.

"Sure the hell does, we're just..." Gilbert said.

"Seeing smoke now. Some shit going down. Maybe 18th and Mara shopping on same day, bro," the Hispanic salesman said.

"Maybe could be, what's best deal for 2k cash?" Jackson said.

"I gotcha, man."

The thrice-painted \$29.95 black paint job Crown Vic sedan grumbled out of Jose Joe's onto Fleetwood Street.

"This an old cop car?" Jackson asked.

"Feds car. Got a big V8 in it, yessir. Head that'a way, git her on the pike," Gilbert said. "She runs real good on them flat roads."

Gilbert opened the driver's door for Jackson, and hopped in the passenger seat.

Jackson drove the old Crown Vic through the side streets.

An explosion rumbled a half-mile behind them. Gilbert jumped, the seat belt catching him, his head snapped to the rear, and he saw the glow of the fireball.

"Holy mercy, sounds like by the junkyard. Ya think some gang bangers blowed each other six ways from Sabbath or what?" Gilbert said.

Jackson pulled the sedan over. Up ahead were road signs. North to the 118 West and Simi Valley or south to the Golden State 5 freeway and downtown Los Angeles. He removed the blood-stained W flag from his jeans pocket, rubbed it. Looked up again at the signs. One heading to Satchel's house, the last stop before disappearing. The other, back to LA, into the fray, the hunted to the hunters.

In the rearview mirror, Jackson saw the fireball. Gilbert looked at the flag in Jackson's hand.

"Sumthen telling me you got sumthen to do with that back there," Gilbert said.

Jackson, not listening, stared at the road signs, one, then the next. Back to the flag.

"Whatcha got going back there, sir? Ain't none of my business. Judging no transgressions on this day, no sir."

Cars rolled by in both directions. From the other direction, a police car with the lightbar flashing and siren howling. Then another police car.

Jackson put the flag back in his pocket.

"What's your name?" Jackson said.

"Gilbert."

Jackson pulled a roll of cash from his jeans and handed it to Gilbert.

"Gilbert, you see that fireball behind us?"

"Yessir."

"You might want to take the rest of the day off."

Gilbert nodded.

"Like now," Jackson said.

"May the Lord be with you on your travels," Gilbert said.

"More like the devil," Jackson said.

Gilbert stuffed the roll of cash in his pocket and got out. As the Crown Vic screeched away, Gilbert yelled, "What about your title?"

The Crown Vic zoomed up the ramp to the Golden State south.

CHAPTER 22

Underground parking garage at 312 N. Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles. Above, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Central District of California. Jackson stood in shadow next to a pylon. It was just after 5:00 p.m. and the garage elevators were busy, people flowing out to their cars. Jackson watched. Waited. The elevator door opened again, full of people. They flowed out, saying their goodbyes, heading towards their vehicles. Jackson spotted her. District Attorney Harris Riggs.

DA Riggs clicked the remote, and the Mercedes sedan beeped. She opened the back door, laid her Mulberry Hampstead bag on the back seat, closed the door, and stepped to the front door. Jackson was standing in front of her, next to the left front wheel. DA Riggs gasped, stepped backward and fumbled with her purse.

"Don't," Jackson said.

DA Riggs froze. Jackson leveled his SIG Sauer 9mm on her stomach.

"Walk towards me," he said. She did.

"Keep your hands out of your purse. Walk past me and get in the passenger seat, leave the door open." She did. Jackson slid in next to her.

"Now, slide over to the driver's seat," he said. She did.

"Do you have a laptop in that bag?"

"Yes."

"Drive. Smile at the guard and wave."

"Ok," she said. She drove.

"Keep both hands on the wheel at all times. Which pocket is your cell in?" Jackson said.

"Lower right jacket pocket."

Jackson found her cell, turned it off. Placed it in the chest pocket of his shirt.

"We're going downtown. Get on the 110 south, then get off on 18th Street."

"Where're we going?"

"Just told you."

"You're making things worse for yourself."

"No doubt. Drive."

DA Riggs pulled off the freeway. They continued to Union Street.

"Pull over here," Jackson said.

"This is gangland," she said.

"No shit. Now get out. Grab your laptop and put it in your bag." She did.

"What are we doing?"

"We're walking down that alley," he said.

They entered an alley between two buildings. At the end, they turned left into another alley and arrived behind the building where the store mock-up was built.

"Climb this fence. Slowly. When you get over, stay put. Remember, I was in the military," he said.

"Yes, I know. A SOG unit. Paramilitary," she said.

She climbed the fence, and he followed.

The back door to the building was locked. They went around the side. "Give me your purse." She did. He slung it around his

neck and gestured to the DA to climb. She climbed, he holstered his sidearm, he followed her. They got into the second floor.

"There, down those steps," he said.

"What is this place?" she said, scanning the building.

They walked down the steps to the mock-up area. Riggs walked around the wooden shelves and display stands. Small pieces of green remained, kale, lettuce. Jackson removed her handgun from her bag, replaced it, then removed the laptop. He tossed the bag to the corner of the room. Jackson removed a flash drive from his jeans, with it the W flag pulled out from his pocket partway. The flag dangled from his pocket. Jackson looked down at the flag, then to Riggs.

He stuffed the flag back in his pocket and held the laptop out to her.

"Take it, turn it on," Jackson said.

She stepped forward, took hold of the laptop, and turned it on.

"Set it on that counter over there. Open this drive," he said, handing the flash drive to her.

The laptop booted up. Riggs navigated to the flash drive directories. There were five, labeled, *Arnold*, *Brenton*, *Sturitz*, *Tenner*, and *Woo*.

"Click on Woo," he said. She did. There were several MP4 files.

"The second to last one," he said. She clicked the file. A thumbnail image appeared of Glenn Woo sitting on the couch in the captive's suite.

"Where did you get this?" Riggs asked.

Jackson stood motionless. Motionless from her perspective. Inside, he felt his muscles tighten, he fought to hide it, his eyes never leaving hers. She blinked first.

"A deep source," he said, a definitive tone, unwavering.

"You know this implicates you in a conspiracy, 18 U.S.C. Section 351," she said.

"A journalist acquiring from a source, I don't think so."

"You can get life for this, but something tells me you know all this."

Jackson shoved the flag back into his pocket. "Blood of patriots. Then so be it. Play it," he said.

Riggs clicked the triangular arrow on the thumbnail image. The Hale tape played. Glenn Woo was on the screen.

"So you want campaign secrets, is this what this is all about? You work for Cannesco, or is it Mason? But he wouldn't have the balls. It's Cannesco. She's always been a paranoid conspiracy nut case," Woo said.

Woo rose, not getting a response. He paced. Picked up the cocktail glass on the coffee table and downed the last of the bourbon.

"Tell your boss he may not have to worry. Some of the stuff Rotteba had me working on is just fucking nuts. Not relevant. Not even on the map for voter issues. I guess his advisers stopped reading exit polls. He even had me do dozens of ads on food safety. Drinking water issues. Like he was running for the mayor of Flint fucking Michigan for God's sake. Huge strategic mistake allocating resources to promoting issues that don't even register. His ridiculous left-wing extremist cronies are clueless how to close the last three weeks of a national campaign, like Clinton skipping Michigan and Wisconsin," Woo said.

"Why would Rotteba want you to work on food and water issues?" Hale said off-camera.

"Hell if I know," Woo said. "So what is it you want? Tell me so I can get out of this hell hole."

"What was the gist of these advertisements? Were they straight ads, subliminal or both?" Hale said.

Woo stopped. "I already told you, the subliminals... Ok, I regret doing those. You want contrition, you got it, so sue me. Or kill me, or just do the fuck what you're going to do anyway, you fucking terrorist."

"The gist?" Hale said.

Woo slumped into the couch.

"Your government can't even guarantee wholesome food or clean water to their constituents. America is the new Flint,

Michigan. Oty's the One ad nauseam. It was a standard 'are you better off' but with a twist. We got a civil war going on, and he wants to talk about FDA policy. I mean banks are getting fire-bombed, not Kroger for God's sake, at least not yet. What else you wanna know?"

The video ended.

Riggs turned to Jackson. "So you got this from Hale? Obviously, you got this from Hale. You were there?"

"Look around this room, what do you see?" he said.

"Racks, shelves, freezers, empty. What?"

"What's it look like?"

"I don't know. Tell me. I don't know, an empty mini-mart?"

Jackson removed the insertion device from his pocket and handed it to her.

"What's this?" she said.

"It goes around your wrist, under your shirt. It injects tiny pellets."

He removed his phone from his shirt pocket, used his thumb to scroll, handed it to her. It was a photo of the acid lab.

"A lab? So, I don't get it," she said.

"In the back of a junkyard. Huge place. It just blew up. It was Leonard Packard."

"Packard?"

"The acid king."

"On parole. He's making acid again? What a surprise," she said.

"Claimed for some Third World experiment. Reduce suffering, violence."

"He was an I-am-the-world's-enlightenment savior. Timothy Leary reconstituted. What's this have to do with this place and Woo?"

"All pawns," Jackson said.

"How so?"

"Are you familiar with the concept of complex adaptive systems?"

"Santa Fe Institute kinda stuff?"

"Exactly. The parts don't indicate the whole system."

"What system?" she said.

"This place is the final part for the whole system to work," he said.

"What part?"

"This part. A terrorist attack that will happen within hours."

"Who would do that? Mason? Rotteba?"

"Rotteba is another pawn. Ultimately a pawn sacrifice."

Riggs walked around the mock-up again.

"Without firing a shot. Without one bomb. Without one commercial jet," Jackson said.

"How?"

He handed her the injector.

"Food," he said. "Millions of hits of LSD into the food supply of America."

"God."

"They'll be talking to him soon," he said.

He removed the flash drive from the laptop, placed it in his pocket, walked to the corner, and picked up the purse. He handed it to the DA. He removed her phone from his shirt pocket and handed it to her.

Ten minutes later, sirens outside coming from all directions.

Jackson flipped his gun around and handed it to her.

"Do something to stop it," he said.

Police cars raced to the front of the building.

Jackson and Riggs were standing out front.

Jackson raised his hands.

Eight days before the presidential election.

The Hertz Arena, Miami, Florida. Cheering crowd of twenty thousand. Backstage, Oty Rotteba stood for photos high-fiving with campaign volunteers. The voice of the announcer echoed from the hall. Music blaring, the Beatles, "All You Need is Love." Oty danced past the vendors hawking buttons and t-shirts and hats and bobbleheads and bumper stickers and signs, *Oty for Oval, One World Free*. Rebecca Redland, CNN reporter following the campaign, was on camera trailing Oty through the vendor area. Oty made his way to the podium,

"Oty has just over seven days remaining, and you wonder, John, what he'll say to his supporters tonight. He's made an unprecedented run lately, gaining a lot of ground. Some polls have him as high as twenty-four percent of the vote and only two points back of Republican Trig Mason. There's a possibility that no candidate hits the magic two seventy mark in the electoral college. Which, John, if Oty can win California, taking it away from the president, it's possible."

"As an independent, even he said it's almost impossible to win the electoral college. He's trailing President Cannesco by sixteen points. You have to wonder if Oty is stealing more votes from the Democratic incumbent or the Republican nominee," John Kane said, from CNN Election Central.

"That's right, John. No independent has won the presidency since George Washington," Redland said.

The graphic behind John Kane showed the race polling at forty percent for Democratic incumbent Cheryl Cannesco, twenty-six percent for Republican Trig Mason, twenty-four percent for independent Oteb Rotteba and ten percent still undecided.

Oty took the stand to a standing ovation. The crowd broke out in a chant, "One World One People One World Free." Oty pumped his fist in the air to the beat of the chant that echoed throughout the hall.

"And it is right. All you need is love and one world free. Hello, Miami," Oty yelled.

The crowd applauded and cheered.

“We are making a difference. Our voices are getting heard. We are all God’s people. Regardless of where you were born or how you got to this great land.”

“What about the polls?” a voice called out from the crowd.

Oty paused. Smiled. “There’s only one poll that counts. Seven days from today.”

The crowd erupted again.

CHAPTER 23

Halloween. Seven days before the presidential election. Terrorism is generally thought of as the use of intentionally indiscriminate barbaric violence to murder political enemies and or instill terror or fear among masses of people to achieve some religious or political objective. So it is for two things, murder or instilling fear. Can be both. It was the second component of the definition where the power resided. Instill terror or fear. What greater fear than that of the unknown? The bump in the night. One jolted awake from a deep sleep, a noise, foreign, abnormal, a noise from another part of the house, far away, but inside.

Under the bed. The closet. Something fell. Or did it? The shadows. There in the shadows. Was it my eyes playing... there, I saw it again. In the shadows.

Night. Black murk moonless night. Storm outside. Banging, the tree limbs. *Something there, outside. Someone moving. Someone looking in. Someone outside looking in. Flickering lights. Flickering. Lights go out.*

On this day. *Something's just off. Feeling of dread... Something terrible is going to happen, I can feel it. Ominous. Unsure, unknown, faint, but there. Something. Someone.*

I can't trust. Someone is after me. I can't trust. Not anymore. I can't

trust anything. Not even...not even...what I eat. Does this taste right? Can I trust what I eat?

Is there something in there? Is there something in this? Is there something in me?

What is happening to me? What is happening to us? Oh my god. Oh my god.

Many nights, cognac in hand, smoke from the Cuban rising into shapes and messages in the firelight, Alec Proditores thought about the failings of terrorism to achieve the political ambitions of the terrorists. 9/11, even that, resulted in hundreds of thousands of Muslim jihadis being shot or blown to shreds by coalition forces, even more territory being occupied by so-called infidels. Failure for the terrorists, no political objective reached. How many Americans worried about flying soon after the attack? Not many. *Can't happen to me. Can't happen around here. Gunman kills fifty in a town square halfway around the world. Seen it before. Where's the remote? What's on Netflix tonight?*

Terrorism. Murder and or fear. Murder of whom? Fear of what? The boogeyman? One news cycle. Maybe two. What's for dinner?

Terrorism the definitive act, then over. No.

An adjuration. To what? To whom? To nothing.

Hesitation, irresolution, doubt, distrust, division.

Abstaining.

Repudiation, renunciation, relinquishment.

Estrangement. Desertion. Alienation.

Apostasy.

Rejection of the father. Lost. Lost in the dark.

Whole. Wholesome. The good. Goodness. Foods. Natural Foods. Green fresh. Earth's bounty. Bountiful. Beautiful. The bouquet of floral. Scent of orange, lemon, rosemary, rose, lavender. Aroma of mint. Sage. Garden purple sage.

Whole Foods on Santa Monica Boulevard, West Hollywood, California. A day like any other. Two staff members in charge of the front of the store, mainly to keep the vagrants away from the

entrance, also the drugged-outs from staggering in and dying in the cereal aisle, seizures, vomiting, then stillness. Not this man. The workers paid no attention to the man who walked in, the look of a legitimate customer, his walk brisk, confident. He wore a sports jacket and an open-collared shirt. He appeared to be mid-thirties. He was deeply tanned with unremarkable Caucasian features.

His first stop, the produce section. He carefully examined several heads of lettuce, selected one, put it in his shopping cart. Then carefully examined broccoli, cauliflower, Swiss chard, Brussels sprouts, cantaloupes, the Fuji apples, avocados, the organic kale. Kept adding to his basket. The dairy section. Almond milk, unsweetened version. Cheese section, American, Swiss, Jack, Philadelphia cream cheese in the silver foil wrapper. The bakery, cookies, freshly made, two dozen for \$7.99. French bread. Sourdough. Bagels. Onion bagels. Bread aisle. Gluten-free. Thin plastic wrapping white bread, wheat, multigrain, a two-centimeter slit would go unnoticed.

He patrolled every aisle, never wandering, methodical. Examining, infecting, replacing, choosing. Moving on.

One hour later, another man walked into Ralph's Grocery in Los Angeles. He was dressed differently than the Whole Foods man, different build, different height, weight. But his face was the same. Exactly the same. His methodology the same. Started in produce, examined, infected, replaced, chose, moved. Cookie aisle, Oreo, Pepperidge Farm, Chips Ahoy!, Famous Amos. Left his half-full cart in the liquor section. Bought nothing. Strolled out. Three days hence, when examining the security recordings, knowing what to look for, glimpses of the rod darting out. The rod darting out from under his sleeve. The rod darting out from under his sleeve and a flash. The rod darting out from under his sleeve and a flash of blue. Freeze frame. Tiny blue disk.

Vons Grocery in Calabasas. Ralph's in Westlake Village. Same man appeared. On the same day. The same face, different bodies. Like Photoshopped faces in real life. Across the country,

the man appeared in Kroger, Safeway, Publix, Giant Eagle, Wegmans, Costco with fake IDs, Save Mart, WinCo and Albertsons. The frozen, and the cooled. Frozen dessert, ice cream, Popsicles.

The man's shopping list was long and varied. Orange juice, breakfast cereal, candy. Ground beef, chicken, steak and seafood. The heat of cooking would reduce the effects of lysergic acid diethylamide, but not eliminate them. The breakdown of the molecules that occurred was offset by multiple doses of four hundred micrograms. Several four-hundred-microgram doses. Not fatal, supposedly, but a Timothy Learyesque twelve-hour trip. Twenty hours for bodies weighing sixty pounds. Hundreds of Jacks and hundreds of Jills were about to blend cartoon with real life for what seemed like a trip lasting forever. Emergency room freak-outs into the following day, some children, religious experiences, wandered into forests, neighbors' yards, dancing, frolicking, singing.

Restaurants. Tens of billions spent per month. Eating out. The man appeared at the Stonefire Grill in Thousand Oaks. The salad bars in Toppers Pizza, and Pizza Hut. Ponderosa Steakhouse. Similar buffet restaurants around the country. The same man.

The man did not appear in McDonald's or Burger King. He visited their suppliers in the middle of the night. The same ghost man. Stole nothing. Disturbed nothing. Several whole ground beef suppliers and distributors. French fry suppliers to Carl's Jr., Arby's, Wendy's.

Forty-eight cities, thirty-one smaller towns ranging from twenty-five to two-hundred thousand residents.

Seven days before the election. Halloween day. By midday on the West Coast, the man, the men, the people with the same face, had vanished.

Early afternoon on the East Coast: *Holy shit, am I having a stroke? I need to sit down. I need to pull over. Jesus. Holy fucking shit. I'm getting off. I'm starting to get off. I'm starting to get off on something.*

Somebody spiked something. Or am I dying? I think I'm having a stroke. Or a heart attack.

Oh my God. Oh my God.

8:30 a.m. CST. Bloomington, Indiana. Population eighty thousand. Irregular limestone terrain, rolling hills, streams, a university. A very American small city. 7:30 a.m. Kip Wilde, age ten, sat down for breakfast on a day like every other fall school day. His mother fixed him eggs, turkey bacon, orange juice, placed three different choices of cereal in front of him; a granola box locally made sold at his school's fundraiser, Raisin Bran, and Honey Nut Cheerios that his mother just purchased at her weekly run to Kroger on College Avenue. Kip chose the Cheerios, filled his bowl, and poured in the almond milk.

Fairlane Elementary School. First class of the day was science. Kip was in his seat, classmates filtered in. He rubbed the sweat off his forehead. *Thump, thump, thump*. He placed his right hand over his heart. He removed a water bottle from his backpack and took a drink. He rubbed his arms, skin sensitive, tingling, crawling. He looked out the window at the saturated colors of the trees and skies. The leaves on the trees shimmered, started to vibrate, yet it was a windless morning. Exhale, exhale. He placed both hands on the front of his desk to keep the room from oscillating.

"Earthquake!" he screamed.

Susan, a classmate, turned and said, "What?"

"I feel it," he said. Kip rose from his seat, hands on his desk.

"Mornin' everyone, please get seated. We are on chapter six in your textbook," the teacher, Mrs. Walker said.

Kip watched the mobile of the planets in the corner expand and contract. He walked over to it.

"The flux factor," Kip said. "The flux," he screamed. "I see the flux like we talked about. And water, to keep it in. I see it."

"Kip, please take your seat," Mrs. Walker said.

"You said the equilibrium temperature on Earth is zero Fahrenheit, but it's like seventy on average, right? I see the greenhouse, it's swirling around. The water vapor and the gas keeps the heat in. I can see it right there," Kip said.

"He's losing it," Susan said.

The class laughed. But not all the students. Several were rubbing the sweat off of their faces. Must have eaten Cheerios for breakfast.

"All the aliens need is flux and water so if we find that... I see them."

"You see aliens now? Such a dweeb," Susan said.

Mrs. Walker noticed Kip was drenched.

"I see them too!" a student yelled out.

Motioning to a girl in the front row, "Lydia, go ask the nurse to come to the class. Right now," Mrs. Walker said.

"Damn, I feel..." Kip moved to the window. "Do you hear those birds? Incredible," he said.

Lydia walked into the nurse's office. A girl was sitting in the corner, screaming.

9:00 a.m. PST. Portland, Oregon. Jeff Swenson was staring at the magnets on the refrigerator. Just for a moment, he lost track of time. Rubbed his eyes. Put the Dawn bottle under the sink. The open house was starting in thirty minutes. He sprayed Binaca in his mouth. Peppermint. Licked his lips, sprayed more breath freshener.

"Wow," he said.

He smoothed his hair back. Removed a sheet from the paper towel roll and wiped his face. "Jesus," he said. He walked to the front door, opened it, and stepped outside.

"Fuck me," he said.

He braced himself against the brick with one hand. "I'm having fucking flashbacks," he said.

Jeff walked back inside and sat on the living room couch. "Okay Jeff, inhale, inhale," he said.

He got up, went back to the kitchen, sipped his mocha java.

"That tastes amazing. Dude, I am getting off... I am getting off... or maybe I'm dying."

9:45 a.m. MST. Phoenix, Arizona. Lynn Vadecka was pumping, pumping, pumping the pedals of the stationary bike. Spinning class at CycleBar. She stopped pedaling. Eyes wide, mouth open. The room was spinning, she tumbled off the bike.

9:50 a.m. CST. Olympia Fields, Illinois. Garrett Jones was walking his German Shepherd along the side of a tree-lined suburban street. He stopped and sat down, hugged his dog. Then lay down on the asphalt, watched the clouds.

Atlanta, Georgia, Kacy Mills was washing clothes. Took off her blouse, sat, and watched the clothes spin in the dryer. She picked up her cellphone.

"Nine one one, what's your emergency?"

"I think I'm having a heart attack," Kacy said.

The morning events were sporadic, dotted across the country, just starting to show up in tweets, social media.

"I am immersed in a preordained dance of spirit immaculate birth, a secret revealed, woken, embracing you."

Another, "Swallowed into emptiness stillness still, then awak-

ened from a dream no, in the dream, am the dream, there is no dreaming, no reality, no time, awareness now, everything, then even that, whispers, nothing.”

Another, “I have been drugged, and I’m dying.” As the lunch hours came and went across the country, the calls to 911 increased.

7:00 p.m. EST. Many dinners consumed, salads, desserts. The calls and reports hit local news. Panicked parents in emergency rooms, car accidents. A local reporter on the beat in Wilmette, Illinois followed a man spinning around.

“Sir, sir, what happened to you? How are you feeling?” the reporter said.

“A player, an actor in your film, melodrama of your life where fact and fiction merge, where there is no separation, no separation of yourself from the room, from the house, from the world beyond, no self to be taken away, coalesced with the marmalade skies,” the man said. “The world is breathing again.”

7:30 p.m. Fox News Alert. Tanner Carlsbad was on the screen. Catherine Hanson appeared. “This is a Fox News Alert. Catherine what are you hearing now in this story?” Tanner said. Catherine adjusted the microphone in her ear.

“Hi, Tanner, yes. We are getting reports from our local affiliates, all over really, all over the country, it seems hundreds of cases where...”

She stopped, listening to her feed, then continued.

“Yes, we have reports of all-out panic attacks. The best I can describe it is that they may have consumed something, inadvertently it seems, that has affected them. In many cases...in bizarre ways. Some of these attacks, or experiences I should say, people are frightened by what they are seeing, or their surroundings. We

have reports of children being affected, many of the emergency room cases are children also, Tanner. With dilated eyes, panicking. These reports are coming in from dozens of states.”

“Wait a minute. If it was an E. coli thing. They are usually local. Or salmonella. Or at least regional where the tainted food source was distributed,” Tanner said.

“Yes, that’s true Tanner, but we are getting these cases, uh, coming in, from New York, all the way to California, it seems,” Catherine said. “These cases, in some of them, people are saying they see an overlay or outline of geometric shapes, some swirling patterns, dizziness, sweating, intense colors, sounds. It seems the sensory functions are affected. Static objects appearing to move, the thing, the thing we heard about like back in the sixties such as walls appearing to breathe.”

“Sounds like these people are tripping out on something,” Tanner said.

“That is a close guess, it would seem,” Catherine said.

“But where’s this coming from?” Tanner said.

“We have reached out. Our staff here at Fox has reached out to the CDC, that’s the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Washington, and we don’t have much information yet. They are looking into it. By the way, I should say that we are getting similar reports, now being reported on CNN, and the other networks. This is a nationwide story that is making headlines, it seems everywhere?”

“Are there... Catherine... have you heard of any reports in other countries?”

“Not at this time, Tanner.”

“I’m just looking on Twitter. *A tourist in your own space void of time*, it says. Here’s another one; *No past, forgetting everything that has come before, then being assembled, rediscovered, one piece at a time. New. Without baggage. Connected entirely, from the core to the entire universe, everything all at once.* Almost spiritual in some cases.”

“Spiritual maybe, but certainly in some altered state,” Catherine said.

“Induced by what?” Tanner asked.

“Unknown at this time.”

CNN. An investigative reporter was on the screen and said, “What we have here are thousands across this country, uh, tripping... whether they like it or not. We do not, I should say at least not yet, do not have any reports of deaths. Bizarre behavior, for sure. Waves of weirdness whipping around. A toxin in the water, or the food or the air. Bizarre. This is certainly still a very fluid situation with well, ur...their body fluids. We are waiting for the first lab results from the hundreds, or maybe, the thousands, who have been hospitalized today. Bank tellers giving away money. Police officer removing his gun belt, leaving it in his patrol car and walking away. People screaming on their front lawns. Euphoria. Paranoia. Fear. What we can report, at this time, I think it’s fair to say, America is hallucinating.”

CHAPTER 24

Countdown to Civil War. One day after. Cars screeched to angled stops in front of the emergency room of Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. Car doors left open. Ambulance sirens blazing, incoming, stopped, blocked from getting to the ER entrance by dozens of parked cars and SUVs. Paramedics rolled gurneys with patients strapped down, navigated between vehicles with engines still running. Lots of screaming. Others laughing, others crying.

Inside the ER center, wailing children, hysterical parents. Double doors of the ER entrance opening, the next patient, door starting to close, then opening again, one after another, then another, then another.

Hundreds of hospitals and urgent care centers, city after city, town after town. Across the country, on this day.

One day after.

Jewel-Osco Grocery, Homewood, Illinois. Jake Washington, store manager, waved to his checkout clerks to obtain their attention, then gave them the cut-my-throat gesture, signaling them to close

their cash registers. Two employees ushered out the last of the customers and locked the front door.

"We have been ordered to dispose of all the produce, all of it," Jake said. "All, dairy, cheese, deli, meat, and frozen sections. Dumpsters out back. Do it now."

"What about the canned goods?" an employee asked.

"Leave that, ditch all the bread too," Jake said.

"Jesus, Jake, whatta we tell them when they come back in?"

"Tell them more canned food will be here soon. Only canned food. Tell them that and no running is allowed in the damn store."

The national news, Fox, CNN, MSNBC, PBS, Univision, others, every thirty minutes broadcast updates to the tainted food list. The latest: Romaine, cheddar cheese, milk—cow and almond, soy too, cookies, wheat bread... The list continued to grow.

Fairlane Elementary School, Bloomington, Indiana. The guard in front of the school wore a Day-Glo vest. He flagged every car to keep going. One stopped, the driver, a woman, rolled down the passenger seat window. The guard approached.

"School closed, Ma'am," he said.

"Yay!" the little girl in the back seat said.

Mom nodded. "Thank you," she said. "When are we reopening?"

"Not known at this time, Ma'am," the guard said. "They will be sending out text alerts."

The car pulled away. Mom turned on the radio. The talk show host said, "If you or anyone in your family has consumed LSD, stay calm, hydrate, stay indoors, have a family member stay with you..."

Two days after. The pantry dilemma. A father stood in front of his pantry, shelves lined with soup, cereal, pasta, canned goods, bags of rice, Orville Redenbacher's popcorn, the microwave kind. He pulled out the box of Honey Bunches of Oats.

"When did we buy this?" he said.

"I bet the Lucky Charms are safe. They're lucky, Dad," the child said standing behind him.

"Quiet," he said.

He removed the loaf of Dave's bread, thin-sliced 21 whole grain.

"Honey, when did we buy this bread?"

A Mom stood in front of her refrigerator, a double-door style with the freezer door on the left, both doors wide open.

"We don't know when it started. Bob, we don't know," she said.

"Mom, I'm hungry," a child's voice said from the room adjacent to the kitchen.

"I know, sweetie. I'm thinking."

"Honey, the canned goods are good. They can't get in those. How about soup for breakfast?" Bob asked.

"Dad, no. Nobody eats soup for breakfast. Yuck."

"The milk and the OJ, I don't know. None of this, Bob. How the hell do we know?" Mom said.

Bob opened the door to the pantry. "Honey, we got some Cattle Drive Gold chili we got at the Costco. Says it's BPA-free."

"Dad! I'm not eating chili for breakfast."

"Hon, you think these BPAs is causing this ruckus? This chili says it don't got any so...," Bob said.

A little hand reached underneath Bob's arms and grabbed a Snickers bar.

"Hey, check and see if the Snickers got BPA in it," Bob said.

A homeowner hauled a large black garbage bag to the street. A street in a middle-class neighborhood in middle America. Rows and stacks of garbage bags in front of every house. The homeowner dropped the bag and gazed down the tunnel of bags, shook his head. "Fucked up," he said. His neighbor set his garbage bag down and walked over.

"Canceled the NFL games. All of them," the neighbor said.

"No shit," the homeowner said. "Damn it. Those bastards killed my football? Islamic terrorists can't kill our football. How ya looking on canned goods?"

"Good. We gonna head over to the Piggly Wiggly in a bit. We're thinking cans and bottles should be good to go. So you didn't get doped yet?"

"Na. Jerry did across the street I hear, and his Heather. Think they're still over at the hospital from what I hear."

"Shit."

"Yeah, no shit."

"Like a nine-eleven deal again."

"Hear they got the Doritos?"

"What about the Pringles? They being in the can, ya know?"

"Can is cardboard."

"Yeah, like they could'a stuck through the thing."

"Yeah, we're hearing they used some type of plunger deal."

"Plunger deal? Damn, them bastards."

"Can't trust nothin' these days. And snack food's important, ya know, for balancing the diet. Can't eat the Doritos? God damn. Ya think they hit all the flavors?"

"Dunno. The Buds are good. Can't get no plunger in a Bud."

"The cans or bottles?"

"I figure neither."

"Probably so, probably so."

The neighbor looked at his watch. "Kinda early... but?" he said.

"Shit, we got nothing else, ya know. Ain't going to work. What the hell?"

"Bud's got nutrients. Some, uh, minerals. The regular one, ya know."

"Probably so. The regular, yeah. Light beer from Miller probably less."

"Yeah, the Miller Lite... see they take out the minerals and some of the vitamins that make the calories, so I'm thinking the regular. Stock up on that."

"Stock it up, dude. Miller High Life, the champagne of beers. That'll work."

"Miller time, dude? Or Bud time?"

"Ain't trusting no Corona 'bout now."

"No A-rab beer neither."

"What's an A-rab brewskie?"

"Don't know but ain't trusting it. Ain't drinking it."

"Don't think them A-rabs drink much beer."

"Don't know. Ain't buying none nohows."

"I'm just saying. Better get over to the Piggly."

"Ya think the Chick-fil-A is OK?"

"Dunno. KFC too. Heard the Popeye's got hit bad somewheres."

"Damn. Wonder if they got the spicy or the mild Bonafide."

"Dunno."

The homeowner kicked the garbage bag.

"How much you figure these bags costing us? Losing our grocery items."

"Shit, dunno. Sally's throwing out like two weeks. Even the tri-tip."

"Tri-tip? Damn. That's some prime cut there. You was gonna grill it 'er smoke 'em?"

"Probably grill 'em up. Dry rub. My roadhouse deal."

"Dry rub? Damn. Hm...mm. Yer roadhouse with the chilis in it? Man, that was some real good sauce. Real good. With the dry rub."

"Yep. Tri-tip with the dry rub and the roadhouse. Was figurin'."

They looked down at the bags.

"In the damn bag. You figure grilling burn up that stuff or what?"

"I'm figuring so. Searing first. That done kill anything. Then the insides, what? One six five?"

"Maybe get 'er to one seven five. Since that stuff."

"Probably so. Kill the active ingredient."

"Probably do it."

They stared at the bag.

"Fuckers," the homeowner said.

"Fucking with the tri-tip," the neighbor said.

"Can't trust nothin' no more."

"Nothin's right."

They stood there for twenty seconds.

"One seventy-five?" the homeowner said.

The neighbor nodded. "You step up them chilis a notch er two in yer roadhouse, ain't gonna be no active nothin'. Light the damn grill with that shit."

The homeowner laughed, looked back at his house. "It's got some kick to it, don't it?"

"Surely does."

The homeowner flicked the twisty-tie holding the garbage bag closed. "You gotch yer meat thermometer, still?" he said.

The neighbor nodded. "Shame to waste good tri-tip."

"With the dry rub."

"I heard that."

Fox News broadcast, Tanner Carlsbad at his desk. Behind him broadcast a video montage of protesters in Washington, D.C. flooding the National Mall, from the Lincoln Memorial to the

Washington Monument, to the Capitol Building. Protesters in front of the White House.

Tanner said, "So the Cannesco administration does an end-around taking away their Second Amendment rights causing violence, riots, and a huge black market to explode. Millions of otherwise law-abiding citizens now criminals. They are angry. Defiant and angry. The country in a deep recession with unemployment skyrocketing, Hospitals closing, going bankrupt. Non-citizens now voting, fifty million people walking around in this country are here illegally, and thousands flow in daily, still. Going on for years. And now. And now no one can trust the food. That is, if—and it's a big if—they even have food. They can't trust the food on their own table. This is where we are, folks. This is your new America. This is the new civil war."

Tanner tapped his pen on his desk.

"Here's the latest LSD update. Snickers. That's right. Fox News can now confirm we have multiple reports of tainted Snickers bars."

Greg Baxter, thirties, beard, dressed in J. Crew, stood in the doorway of the Whole Foods store in Austin, Texas. He was in line, a line he had been standing in for two hours. He got his first glimpse of the inside of the store. To the right, the produce section. Barren. Nothing on the shelves or kiosks. The lights off. The line led to a center aisle that was restocked with canned food. He looked at the bread aisle, the shelves also bare. People in the line murmured to each other. Quiet. Sullen. In shock. Many of them checked their phones repeatedly. Texts from friends. News sites. Updates. The latest. The latest. The latest. Answers fleeting.

Greg looked up. Something caught his eye. Commotion. Commotion from people reading their screens. Lots of phones ringing. A symphony of custom ring tones. People were grabbing their mouths. Stomping their feet. Yelling out to the store

employees managing the lines. Greg looked at his phone. He clicked his Drudge app. Headline: *Reports of tainted canned goods from multiple cities.*

"Fuck," Greg said. "Now what?"

Austin limestone two-story, pitched rooflines, thirty-two hundred square feet, half-acre, built fifteen years ago. Two kids, dog, SUV neighborhood. Greg sat at his kitchen table just off his chic concrete gray quartz island. Across from Greg was Elly, his wholesome, five-workouts-a-week wife, and their son Ulysses, seven years old. In front of Greg were nine cans.

Three of Amy's soup: organic carrot ginger, hearty French country, chunky vegetable. Three cans of vegetables: corn, green beans, black beans. Three fruits: fruit cocktail, pineapple, peaches. Greg picked up the can, opened it, and went to work on the soups.

"I'm gonna test each soup. Two tablespoons each. Wait forty-five minutes. Then you can have them," Greg said.

"One hour," Elly said.

"One hour, how's that sound, Ulysses?"

"I'm hungry. Soup kinda sucks, Dad."

"One hour," Elly said.

Elly stood and walked to the island. Cut up a cucumber. Laid the slices out on a plate and handed it to Ulysses.

"Grown by our neighbor. This is safe," Elly said.

"Rabbit food," Ulysses said. "Can we just go to In-N-Out?"

"God, no, honey. There are reports of tainted fast food all over the news."

"Ten-can limits now at Whole Foods," Greg said.

"Same at H-E-B," Elly said.

Later that night. Greg jolted awake in bed. Elly woke up.

"Oh God, what's wrong?"

Greg ran to the bathroom, flipped on the light, looked in the mirror, up close, his eyes. Elly walked in.

"I think I was dreaming. I thought I was overdosing. Greg splashed water on his face. I'm fine. Not high. Not high."

Elly leaned back against the doorway, both hands on her head.

"I can't believe this is happening," she said. "I can't believe it. Can't believe it. Can't believe it. We should have planted that garden, I knew it. I told you."

Chipotle Mexican Grill, Congress Avenue, downtown Austin. The restaurant was closed. Dark. Two men outside. The brick clanged off the window, reverberating, sending shimmering moonlight reflections striping the ski masks worn by the men. One man picked up the brick, threw it again, harder. The plate glass shattered. The men kicked out the glass. Sirens called out into the night. The men rushed in and filled their backpacks with meat from the freezer.

The Scottsdale Police Department was overwhelmed during the night. 911 calls backing up. They took forty minutes to respond to the burglar alarm set off at Olsen Firearms on Tatum Boulevard. When the first black and white rolled up, the perpetrators were gone. Over five hundred guns stolen from the shattered glass cases, CZs, SIGs, Glocks, Smiths. Thousands of rounds of 9mm ammunition. Over one hundred long guns. In the wind.

Morning of the third day. Scottsdale, Arizona. Four hundred plus stood in line at the Scottsdale Gun Club. The store would be opening early today. The parking lot of the Home Depot on Hayden Road would be doing just as much business as the gun club today. Dozens of cars with their trunks open. Dozens of pickups with blankets covering the contents of the truck beds. Both men and women milling around talking. A flea market of private gun sales, the legality of which was no longer a concern.

The morning of the third day, the president of the United States declared a national emergency. She spoke to the nation from the oval office.

“My fellow Americans. A terrorist attack has been launched against the United States. I am here today to tell you the facts as we know them at this moment. Federal, state, and local governments are working to set up emergency food distribution centers in all affected areas...”

The third day, the looting began and escalated. Grocery stores overrun by mobs, firebombed. Los Angeles Metro was hit the hardest, overwhelming the public services and hospitals. The governor of California sent in the California National Guard, and President Canned deployed the 7th Infantry Division and the 1st Marine Division under the Insurrection Act with Executive Order 12804, federalizing the California National Guard and authorizing federal troops to help restore law and order. Four thousand soldiers of the 7th Infantry Division from Fort Ord and over two thousand marines of the 1st Marine Division from Camp Pendleton arrived in Los Angeles to reinforce the National Guardsmen already in the city. The 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion implemented the first military occupation of Los Angeles by federal troops since the Rodney King riots.

Angry protesters surrounded police cars and National Guard vehicles, demanding food. A dusk-to-dawn curfew was instituted by the mayor of Los Angeles. An EAS was activated, the Emergency Alert System.

Paradise Valley, Arizona. Sprawling adobe home. Three-car garage, one double door, one single. The whirring of the Genie, and the double door lifted. Kyle Henricks was packing the back of his Ram pickup. He unzipped a long-gun case, checked the bolt

action of the pre-64 Winchester model 70, 30.06 rifle, slid it into the case, and zipped it.

Kyle's wife, Rita, stepped into the garage wearing her robe.

"What's the fine without a permit?" Rita asked.

"Don't know, don't care," Kyle said.

"They won't arrest you, will they?"

"Don't know, don't care."

"Where're you going?"

"Mountains."

"For what?"

"First thing with meat on it."

"Elk or deer or javelina?"

"First thing with meat on it."

Kyle closed the tailgate.

"Bring those smokes?" he said.

She slid a pack of Marlboro Reds from her robe pocket and handed them to him.

"Be back."

Kyle got into the driver's seat.

"Keep that Smith with you like I said, you hear?" he said.

"Yeah. I'll miss you. Maybe a little," Rita said.

He backed the Ram out of the garage, skillfully reversed it into the street, the truck roared away.

Kyle drove east through Phoenix. He passed a large tent in the parking lot of a high school. A large banner on the tent read *Global Freedom Society*. The volunteers were handing out bottles of water and cans of food. Cars were backed up for blocks.

The sun was falling on the third day. The Bronx, New York. Felix Park stood with his hands up behind the counter of his neighborhood market. Felix lived above the market with his family. Ran his

market for the last twenty years. One man stood still holding him at gunpoint. The other man filled the shopping cart with canned goods. The remaining canned goods left in the store.

"The money too," the man holding the gun said. "The money." The man pointed the gun at the cash register.

The other man was picking up two cans at a time in each hand when one slipped out, clinked off the top of the metal shopping cart and fell to the floor, rolling towards the gunman, who glanced down at it.

In that moment, Felix reached his right hand behind his back. The gunman looked back at Felix and saw the glistening stainless steel 1911 in a blur. The .45 fired, hitting the gunman in the chest, driving him back into the empty store rack. Felix held the trigger down, moved the muzzle to the other man, who dropped three cans to the floor. Felix reset the trigger and fired again, hitting the man in the shoulder, spinning him around like a top.

The man collapsed against the glass door of the dairy section, the empty dairy section. Blood painted the glass. The man slumped to the floor, half his shoulder deformed blood mush. Something—bullet fragment, bone fragment, something—had clipped his carotid. Blood fountained two feet in the air above the convulsing man—his cowboy boots kicking up and down on the yellowing vinyl tile floor—the grout channeling red.

Felix dragged the bodies out onto the sidewalk, stepped over the bodies and from inside the store, drew the fourteen-gauge steel accordion gate closed and slammed the lock together.

He sat in the second-story window looking out on the street. Looting, running, people firing from cars driving by. Rage of the city. Two men stepped over the dead bodies and looked inside the store. They rattled the steel gate. Felix stuck the barrel of an AR-15 rifle out the window. The men looked up, then ran away.

At grocery stores around the country, crowds gathered, waiting

for canned goods to be restocked. The phone banks for members of the state and federal legislatures, members of Congress, were flooded with calls and threats on their lives. An alert was transmitted for them not to go outside. Residential addresses of Congresspeople were circulated on social media and mobs formed. Bullets shattered windows. The Thousand Oaks, California office of the twenty-sixth member of Congress was fire-bombed and burned to the ground.

Alec Proditores was sitting in his library in front of a fire drinking five-hundred-dollar brandy. Five hundred per snifter. Watching the news. Several lab tests had confirmed a pure form of lysergic acid diethylamide, LSD. Doses averaging several hundred micrograms. Labeled a terrorist attack. No group had yet claimed responsibility with any credibility. New reports, one after another, of people tripping. Variety of foods. Hundreds of locations. CCTV videos of the men in masks, men who looked the same, but weren't. The same mask doing the same thing with the same result.

Charles Shelling stood adjacent to Proditores.

"Terrifying," Shelling said.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Proditores said.

Proditores exhaled smoke, turned to the window and said, "One bright sunny morning in the shadow of the steeple. I shall bring forth my people," he said.

"Sir, how is your United Nations speech coming along?" Shelling said.

"It will be a speech of healing, global unity, compassion, and humanity."

CHAPTER 25

Florence, Colorado was an old mining town in the sandy foothills of the Rocky Mountains. On a barren expanse of land sat a group of low-profile concrete and brick fortified buildings. Behind the imposing fences topped with concertina coiled razor wire, was a place where dread lived, and dread died—only if the body died.

A place that consumed all who passed behind its twelve-inch-thick concrete walls reinforced with steel bars and steel doors. A place that watched with its cameras and listened with its sound detectors and detected with its motion detectors—and at all times, day or night, guarded with its snipers ready to kill from their circular tower perches.

At ground level, roving patrols of marksmen, skills honed by constant training to hit center mass of moving targets with high-caliber automatic weapons. They scanned, observed, and waited, always there, always there.

The United States Penitentiary Administrative Maximum Facility, known as ADX, provided a higher level of custody than any other maximum-security prison in the United States. Think Unabomber, Zacarias Moussaoui, Ramzi Yousef, Richard Reid, Terry Nichols, and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. The Supermax Control Unit prison was known as the Alcatraz of the Rockies. This insti-

tution was part of the Florence Federal Correctional Complex that was controlled by the Federal Bureau of Prisons, a division of the United States Department of Justice.

Lockdown. Always in lockdown. The default mindset of the staff was that every inmate intended to turn the guards into cadavers on concrete slabs. On concrete slabs. Slabs of poured soundproof concrete—like the walls of their cells, the ceiling, floor, desk, sink, and even their stone-cold hard bed—slabs of binding agent hardened rock, sand and gravel.

If prisoners got out of line, the “Goon Squad” was always ready with tear gas, nightsticks, steel boots, and riot gear. Supervision was round the clock. Lockup was twenty-three hours per day. The one odd hour was a five-by-five-foot outdoor cage, often snowed in. Humanity died here. That was the idea.

The Control Unit. For the worst inmates. That was where Jackson was sent to await trial. Deemed a threat to national security by the United States Attorney General, Jackson sat in his cell at the small concrete desk. A floppy pen on the table. Floppy to prevent it from being used as a weapon, also near useless as a writing instrument.

Jackson had time to think. Lots of time. If there was any silver lining to being locked in solitary twenty-three hours a day, that was it. He replayed the events. One by one, a fifty-thousand-foot view of the recent past. While each part was controversial and divisive, it was the accumulative effect that was the endgame, an endgame no one saw coming; not the media, not the government. An endgame where the whole was greater than the sum of its parts.

A brilliant strategy by a true puppet master. Diabolical, but brilliant. The Hale Five had not seen the endgame, blinded by greed or zealotry or both. The tipping point event carried out like the Thomas Crown affair bank robbery. The perpetrators did not know who was pulling the strings, who was the Steve McQueen behind the lights. If caught, and many of them surely would be, being low-life street criminals, they would turn. But turn on what, turn on whom? They could not turn on

what they did not know. And the acid king acting under a ruse, initially blinded by his own cause to enlighten a dark world, was gone. The trails of color dancing behind fingers of a waving hand no more, just darkness.

Jackson sat on the floor, head back against the wall. He thought about the first part, the semi-automatic magazine ban. Pulling off an amendment to the United States Constitution using state legislatures. Supported by nearly fifty percent of the legitimate voting population. It was another head fake. Its brilliance was that it deepened the divide further, in one swoop, between supporters and detractors the size of the massive crevasses north of Flagstaff, Arizona. Tens of millions of Americans instant criminals. Almost a tipping point. But only almost.

He replayed the second part in his mind's eye. The national debt debacle choking off lending to the country. Recession, unemployment, and soaring interest rates. Then inflation and the collapse of major corporations, the collapse of the dollar, and with it the value of retirement accounts. But of course Proditores hedged it all and made billions more. The goal of the second part was the collapse in the confidence of capitalism as a system, the American institution.

Jackson reflected on his battles with the useful idiots known as the mainstream media, their compliance a precursor to the Proditores plan, going back decades. They provided perfect cover, their propaganda machines droning on, diligent robot slaves.

Enter Donald Sturitz and the third part. A man with an uncanny talent to comprehend big data and create messaging that would inflame tender nerves. Did Sturitz know all the players above him? Did the rabid starving bulldog care where the bloody bone in front of him came from?

When slanting the news became impotent, it became time to fertilize minds, to prime the subliminal pump. Woo's empyreal ghost target, the chasms of the unconscious mind. In the fog of mind war, the messaging seeped in, slipped between, unseen, unfelt, unknown. Raw, tender minds, vulnerable, hurting, afraid. Dreams not remembered, dreams submerged, dreams alien to the host. Dormant. Lurking. Ethereal.

Then the attack on a primal need. Beyond politics. Not on their

screens, or devices. In their face. In their immediate. In their now. A visceral threat. Boom.

The endgame timed to perfection. The last part followed naturally. The collapse in confidence in leadership, the collapse in patriotism. A permanently divided and disillusioned nation, whom to turn to now but an outsider?

The ringer.

The ringer and a new America.

Or America lost.

Los Angeles FBI Office. Agents Palmer and Garcia sat in the task force room by themselves reviewing dozens of pieces of footage of the men walking through grocery stores, the masks, the payloads. An FBI tech entered the task force room. He picked up a remote control and clicked it. The screen changed to President Cannesco, who started speaking.

“My fellow Americans. After much research, fact finding, and soul searching, I have concluded that my administration has trampled on the Second Amendment. The amendment that we just modified using the state convention method. We... I made a huge mistake banning magazines for semi-automatic pistols. We are going to reverse, or I should say, roll back, that amendment to the United States Constitution. Once that is accomplished, I shall resign. I have been the worst president in the history of the country. I will also reveal several acts of corruption that I expect to be prosecuted for after I leave office.”

The video stopped. The tech turned to the agents and smiled.

“What the fuck? Wait, this is a deepfake right?” Garcia said.

The tech navigated to another window on the monitor. An image of a teenage boy appeared on the screen.

“Ok, yeah, deepfake, let’s see it,” Palmer said.

The image changed to a split-screen. The boy spoke, and his words were repeated by the president.

"See, we can take a video, pull out the audio, and recreate it in the surrogate's voice. That's easy. The video technology was the graphics breakthrough a few years back. Making a virtual clone say the words. What you see here is a virtual clone using Nvidia's old technology," the tech said.

"Yeah, so how does this apply because..." Palmer said.

"Because the captives saw Hale live, in real-time, having real conversations, no time for a programmer to render a deepfake on a video file, right?" the tech said.

"Yeah," Garcia said, a lack of confidence in his answer.

"The insert in the glass where the captives were. It has a new kind of technology, making it 3D. It looks like you are looking into the next room, that's one thing. The second thing is that it displays, it projects a new type of GAN we've never seen before. I mean, this is our conclusion based on our examination of the glass and what we obtained after the subpoena of Nvidia."

"GAN?" Garcia said.

"The new generative adversarial network technology from Nvidia. That's why they thought Hale was in the next room. It looked totally real."

"What?" Palmer said.

"And there's more," the tech said.

"More?" Garcia said. He straightened up taller, leaned back, and crossed his arms.

"So, a third thing?" Palmer said.

"Yeah, the third thing is the capper. I said 3D? I should've said like 5D," the tech said.

"What?" Garcia said.

"Ok, so you got 3D with depth, 4D, the fourth dimension, which is time. This system linked them all together in some new real-time way. I am just making up the 5D term, but the bottom line is it looks like you are looking at another person on the other side of clear glass, just having a conversation. See, we think, I should say, we speculate, where this is going is that the rendering happened in real-time. We think this technology... I mean Nvidia

confirmed that this is not out yet, but may have been hacked by someone. That this new GAN could render in real-time, like a hologram, but better.”

“Real-time?” Palmer said.

The tech smiled. “Yeah, incredible, right? No delay.”

“Stop fucking smiling. So, Hale could be...” Garcia said.

“Rand,” Palmer said.

The tech moved back a step.

“Hale could be a new type of generative adversarial network projection in real-time,” the tech said.

“Is there a way to tell who or what the original was?” Palmer asked.

“Since we figure these were live broadcasts, I mean to the captives, once Hale was done speaking to a captive, the thing faded out, shut off. That was it,” the tech said.

“So there’s nothing to trace?” Garcia asked.

“Are you telling me there is no way to prove it was Rand? I mean technically?” Palmer asked.

“We’re working on that, but probably not, just based on the glass,” the tech replied. “And of course, no prints. This guy is too smart for that.”

“But now we can prove that it could be,” Garcia said, looking for confirmation.

“As I said, this is what we think was happening. Proof, uh, we are talking to Nvidia about that, but we are pretty sure it could have been pulled off,” the tech said.

“You tell the DA *pretty sure*. Get us, me and him...” Garcia said pointing to himself, then to Palmer, “...some fucking proof.”

“Thanks, agent. You can go now,” Palmer said.

The tech walked out like a dog that just peed in the house.

“You gotta be fucking kidding me?” Garcia said, then stormed out of the task room.

Palmer sat by himself for several minutes. He un-muted the news coverage on the television above him. It was Catherine

Hanson speaking over images of Hale, then images of the men in the masks in the grocery stores.

“A law enforcement source tells us Hale is a suspect, a possible second attack on the country. Others are blaming Islamic terrorists, others blaming the United States government and law enforcement for allowing this to happen. Some are asking for Hale to emerge to save them from terrorists, these new .org sites, WhoisHale and IamHale, are getting millions of hits a day.”

The video coverage switched to crowds in the street wearing tee shirts with font variations of *I am Hale* on the chest. Dozens of demonstrators carrying signs, both homemade and preprinted:

Who is Hale?

I am Hale

Attorneys were required to make arrangements with the unit team at ADX to visit inmates. Attorneys must allow sufficient time for prison administrative verification, and distribute attorney visit memoranda including their state bar number, state of licensing, date of birth and social security number. The legal staff verified the information with the National Crime Information Center and the state bar. Once all the information was submitted, the attorneys were to contact the unit team at least three workdays prior to their planned visit.

Jackson Rand’s criminal attorney, Debra Kline, forties, hair back, business suit, was a senior partner with Clark and Addison, the most notorious criminal law firm on the West Coast. She entered the visiting area of ADX. Jackson was seated on the other side of the six-inch glass wearing an orange Special Housing Unit jumpsuit. He wore leg and arm shackles chained to the concrete ledge extending from the window. Debra sat down.

“They found Packard’s body,” Debra Kline said.

“Nothing corroborating our story there. Of course, they killed him. Smart,” Jackson said.

"And Glenn Woo. Apparently, he took his own life."

Jackson's shoulders slumped. "Apparently?" he said.

"Ruling it a suicide at this point. The FBI has combed the building where you took the DA, and they have not been able to find your flash drive. Obviously, it was not on you when you surrendered, so where is it?" she said.

"Is Riggs confirming that she saw the Woo footage about the food campaign pieces?"

"She is on record saying she saw something. Keyword something. Woo denied it before he died. Now..."

"Yeah." Jackson stood up, the chains binding him to the concrete rattling.

"So, where is it?" she said.

Jackson turned to her. His eyes sizing her up, giving no tell, no indication of his thoughts.

"Its existence would get the FBI one step closer to connecting all the dots if they can tie Woo to Proditores in some way, but it would put you one step closer to life in prison, tying you to Hale. No one is taking the Proditores angle seriously. At least not yet. There've been reports of spikes in the sales of the same LSD. On the streets," she said.

"Mexican mafia robbed Packard, so they have a supply. How many people were dosed?" he said.

"Somewhere in the thirty or forty thousand range. That we know of. They know Hale was a projection. Do we have to worry about them connecting you to this Nvidia technology?"

Jackson looked up at the cameras, then back at Debra.

She nodded.

"It's impossible to build a defense in ADX," Jackson said.

"Holding you here is illegal. I hope to have a ruling next month on that. It was an issue with the Tsarnaev case. They're considering charging you under 18 U.S.C. Section 2331."

"Subsection 5?" Jackson said.

"Yes. Domestic terrorism. Acts dangerous to human life and a violation of criminal laws, to intimidate or coerce a population.

Influence the policy of a government. Or affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping. Or aiding, abetting counseling, commanding, inducing or procuring."

"Well, which is it?"

"All the above, both the kidnappings and the food attack."

"And the others?"

"Witnesses at the Arts District building corroborated our self-defense argument. I think the rescue of the girls will work in our favor, even though..."

Jackson paused for a moment maintaining his center, then said, "Let's get back to our last discussion."

"The evidence," Kline said. "We're waiting for discovery. They claim to have evidence that Nvidia technology was used at PublicFigure.com. That for one."

"No shit," Jackson said. "What a surprise. Nvidia powers some of the world's fastest computers, including a supercomputer at the U.S. Oak Ridge National Lab. That proves nothing. What about latent evidence at the crime scenes?"

"We have seen nothing that indicates they can physically tie you to the kidnappings. They know you were in Ventura at the time. You could have done the Newport Beach one. I mean at least been there," she said. "But that's circumstantial."

"But no evidence. No DNA?"

"Not that we have heard about. I need to know what we are really dealing with here. What's our exposure?"

"You mean, what exactly am I guilty of?"

She nodded.

Jackson sat down and faced her, the stern look of a confident man.

"The government's case against me? It's a bluff."

The black SUV stopped in front of Satchel's house in Santa Paula.

It was quiet. Agent Palmer exited the vehicle and knocked on the front door, heard nothing. Went around the house, looked in the windows. No movement. He got in his truck and drove away.

Palmer entered Wrigley West field. Satchel was standing on the narrow platform in front of the manual scoreboard in left field. They sat together in the left-field bleachers.

"I was in the service with Jackson, you know," Palmer said.

"Uh huh," Satchel said.

He pulled a half-smoked out of the chest pocket of his tattered blue jean shirt, struck a wooden match on his heel, and lit the cigar.

"The woman that was with him, did you meet her?"

"Woman?"

"Cinder Stowe."

"Uh-huh."

"Was she at your house?"

"You bin der, ain't dat right?"

"I was just there, yes."

"See no woman?"

"No."

"Guess der ain't no woman der, I reckon."

"Do you know where she went?"

"She goed some place, I reckon, if she ain't in da place ya bin lookin'."

"Do you know where she is right now?"

"I know where you an me's at. Don't see no woman hea. You?"

"No, not at the moment."

"Der ya go, young fella."

They sat for a while.

"You like baseball?" Satchel said.

"Sure. Red Sox fan."

"Uh-huh."

"Play, did ya?"

"Yeah, little league, high school."

"Jackson? Dat boy cout'a gun to da sho. Got heself hurt, he did."

"Yeah? He never told me that. Told me about playing though. How long have you known him?"

"Since he a youngin, I reckon."

"You know he's in jail?"

"Durn shame. He be leavin dat place soon, I reckon."

"Not sure about that. I'd like to help him," Palmer said.

"Dat boy usually needs no help, he don't."

"It might help him if I can find Cinder Stowe. And Hale, of course."

"Uh-huh."

"Boys never find dat Hale fella?"

"Not yet. You know anything about him?"

"Nice lookin' fella. Saw him on da tee vee. Talks good, he do. Be in da movies, I reckon. Got da shimmer."

"The shimmer? Did you know him?"

"Well der be knowin', den der be knowin'. Knowed Early Wynn from Alabama. Everybody knowed Early like hi how are ya. See, dat boy Early, he be slingin' it, yessir. Almost as good as old Satchel. He dun pitched for da White Sox an dem Injuns. Faced him when he be wit da Sox, uh huh. See, I cout tell ya he be slingin' on every pitch. Every durn pitch. Folks don't look real close, but I looked real close on dat Early, an I knowed."

"How did you know?"

"I knowed his nose. Plain as day. Same place on his face every durn time. No sir, Early's nose stayed put on hese face, see?"

"His nose?"

"He be windin' up, when dat old glove, beat leather like a durn dead ass cat, it be covering dat big snoz, it be da hook, da deuce be coming. Dat ol' glove? It be jist unner, but I still see dat beak, he be slingin da slida. Da leather not touching, full nose lookin' atchya, hea be comin' da heater."

"I see."

"See, dat Early, dis be da ringer. He got him a doozy floata, dat

fella did. When dat old glove low, be a knuckler, da floata. Hea's da durndest..."

"What's that?"

"I knowed dat goddurned floater be comin'. Slow like a wetback weedin' late on a Texas scorcha, but durnit, I still git no wood on it. See, I a pitcher, but back in dem days, we all hit. I liked ta hit, yessir. Durndest ting, dat floater. But I knowed it be comin'. Yessir, I knowed."

"Ok. So..."

"Reckon ya only knowed dat Hale fella like hi how are ya."

"Hi how are ya?" Palmer asked.

"He dun throwed you a floater."

CHAPTER 26

On Halloween day, Oteb Rotteba, the charismatic, independent green socialist, young, articulate, vibrant candidate without the backing of either political machine, was behind by twenty-eight points. Still a spoiler—maybe—but no realistic chance to win. The day after Americans found LSD in their Cheerios, Oty gained five points. The second day, another three points. By the third day after Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds, pundits thought they were hallucinating when he jumped another eight points.

Two days prior to the election, he fell back a point. Was he starting to fade?. So it seemed. Brad Scallari, social media whiz campaign manager for the Oty's The One campaign, had been trying to reach the campaign managers for the Cannesco and Mason campaigns. The call, known as the "what to do" call, had been made from one campaign manager to the other going back decades. Brad planned for his call to go something like this:

"I have enjoyed racing with you as campaign managers together. What I suggest about two nights from now is that within fifteen minutes of the AP calling the race for Oty, President Cannesco will call him to congratulate him. Or within fifteen minutes of the AP calling the race for the reelection of the President, Oty will call the president to congratulate her. Like, in that

kind of window before she takes the stage. What'ya think?" Brad Scallari was planning to say.

Brad kept getting voicemail. Even into the day before. Hmm. Frustrating. Blow off. Brad's line for the day to staffers was "Too late for polls, keep pushing."

The night before Election day, Election day eve, Brad slept twenty minutes, up for two hours, got another twenty minutes. That was about it. The morning of election day, Brad headed into campaign headquarters in Culver City, California at 5 a.m.. The headquarters consisted of two floors of a loft in an old industrial building and included a makeshift war room. Brad was relentless, feeding the East pundits sound bites by 5:15 a.m. PST, 8:15 a.m. EST; Fox, CNN, MSNBC, ABC, CBS, The Post, the Times, Politico, dozens of second tiers. About every hour Brad popped into the digital director cubicles. Packed with coders, monitors edge to edge.

"Guys, how we looking?" Brad said.

He patrolled each computer station, stats, we're overperforming here, underperforming there, and on it went. Then the scenarios matrix section. Hundreds of what-ifs, updated in real-time as data started to trickle in, the exit polls. A swordfish station of several monitors was running predictive analytics on the battleground states; Florida, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and the others. Brad rolled his tongue around the inside of his mouth, flexed his stiff shoulders, rotated his head, leaned on the back of the tech's chair, and scrolled the data like a hunterkiller machine from *The Terminator*.

What Brad experienced throughout the morning of election day was thinly veiled optimism, like the clichés of a Little League coach for the next Bad News Bears. From top to bottom, from intern to assistant campaign manager, they game-faced, hiding the weight sliding down their throats, like a track athlete's iron shotput about to plunge through their stomach to the floor. Except in the digital director area. These guys and gals were mathematicians, their minds calculating, no time for cheer-

leader antics or pep rallies. Neutral. Aloof. Immersed in their data.

On the main campaign floor, the election coverage teams, from channel to channel, were hawking the inevitable: Mason, the Republican challenger was too far behind, even though turnout would be record lows because of the attack. They discussed how many illegals would actually vote, how many millions. Talk shifted to the new agenda for the second term of the president, what the majorities would be in the House and Senate after tonight.

5:00 p.m. EST: Battleground polling, the major networks. Ten-point spread in favor of the President. Oty, gained, still too far behind to win.

5:15 p.m.: The first real exit poll data.

The pundits said, "Not definitive, the race is tightening more than we thought, so instead of calling this at 8 p.m. for the president, we may have to wait until 11."

This was the time that the copywriters for the network election teams go into overdrive writing their scripts and preparing their graphics for the call of the election in a few hours. Fox News predicted Cheryl Cannesco would be reelected, but was hours away from any official call.

6:45 p.m.: Florida started to come in. Nobody on the floor of Oty's campaign headquarters quite understood what they were looking at. The numbers kept ping-ponging. Not just back and forth between the president and Mason, but among the president and Mason and Oty.

"What is that? What's happening here? Must be one of our strong districts skewing the numbers," they said.

Brad wanted to run to the digital section; he dialed down his run to a brisk walk. Nobody was saying a thing. He caught glimpses, however. Techs turning to one another and traces of smiles breaking out.

"What's happening, people?"

"Too early," they said.

7:10 p.m.: Broward, Miami, Dade, southern Florida.

“What’s in? What’s not? Jesus, look at that.”

Brad briefed Oty. Gonna be a longer night than we thought.

7:30 p.m.: Campaign floor. People out of their chairs milling around, pacing. Murmuring, talking, whispering. The patient was on life support. The supposedly DOA patient, the flatline of the electrocardiogram was no longer completely flat. There was a single bump. A long pause, another bump.

7:45 p.m.: A combination of Virginia and North Carolina and Pennsylvania, a race that was tight, merging. No horse in a lead, a lead that kept jockeying. States that Oty, a coastal candidate, was supposed to get creamed in, getting closer. Then early indicators from the Midwest, apparently flyovers didn’t like having acid fed to their fourth graders.

8:45 p.m.: Florida a dead heat. Don McAllister, campaign counsel and head of the campaign’s election protection effort, asked his assistant to look into plane flights to Florida to prepare for a possible recount. His assistant asked what they were supposed to do if he demanded recounts in other battleground states, a situation Don had not thought of in this election. Not even once.

Oty parked himself in front of a wall of televisions. Five networks running at the same time. A staffer sat at a desk with a switch box that allowed him to switch the audio that played on the main speaker system for the entire floor. It was like the red zone coverage on NFL Sunday.

9:00 p.m.: An Oh-my-God-it’s-full-of-stars moment. Actually, OMG-I-can’t-believe-we’re-still-in-this-thing.

By 9:00 p.m., the predictions of a shoo-in reelection vanished. Channel surfing revealed lots of confusion and head shaking. Obvious uncertainty. Where is stable Earth? Feet wobbly, on shifting ground. Then a word was spoken on CNN, propaganda central. The home of Donald Sturitz, who was back on the air. He said it first.

Upset.

Unlikely upset. The dread, sacrilegious, the taboo. Scoffed at. The pundit next to Sturitz said, "These numbers, uh, aren't lining up with the exit-poll numbers for Oty. Can these be right?"

9:15 p.m.: A staffer turned up the volume on the Fox television.

Tanner turned to Walter Chrisman and said, "The last independent to be elected president was..."

Walter cut in, "George Washington."

Tanner said, "Yes, that's correct. And here we have this socialist, this radical with a lead in Florida? He's out Trumping the 2016. He scratched off his lottery ticket and one after another the numbers match, and he is waiting, just sitting there, waiting to scratch the Powerball number, the last number for the big one. He's got the first five, he's won some money no matter what, like credibility. He's got that. But the three-hundred-fifty-million-dollar jackpot. One more number left to scratch off."

"Powerball is not a scratcher game, but I get it, Tanner," Walter Chrisman said.

9:30 p.m.: "Looks like. Jesus, looks like North Carolina's falling our way. Do you believe? God, now Pennsylvania's starting to move."

Oty, frozen in his seat for forty-five minutes. Staffers spoke to him. He did not respond, a trance, eyes darting from one television to the next.

Then a report on CNN. It was a blurb from the New York Times. "We now have the odds at fifty-one percent that an independent will be elected president. Still could swing back, but the numbers are shocking the world right now."

9:45 p.m.: The phone banks were singing. As soon as an unanswered call dropped, another lit up. Staffers were missing call after call. The volume of the room ratcheted up. Brad went back to digital.

"Tell me guys, give it to me," he said.

"You better sit down, Brad. Hydrate."

"Yeah, hy-fucking-drade, Brad."

"What? What're you seeing? Tell me," Brad said.

"Florida. By 10:30 Eastern."

"You...are...telling...me that we win fucking Florida in under an hour? Jesus fucking Christ."

"It's quite possible no one gets 270."

"Yeah, so..."

"I know," Brad said. "If no candidate receives a majority of Electoral votes, the House of Representatives elects the president from the top three. Each state delegation gets one vote."

"And..."

"And Cannedscot gets reelected by the House."

"Yep."

10:00 p.m.: "You wanna take any calls, Oty?"

"No, not yet."

"K. All the networks want a comment, of course."

"Course. Tell them the people may be taking back their government."

"Ok. You sure? That's... Like not... like original to us. I could say that, of course."

"Ok, yeah. Then tell them we have faith in the American voter to vote their heart."

"Uh. Ok. But that's not... I'll figure out something."

On Fox, Tanner Carlsbad walked over to the Decision Desk. "You guys have some surprises here, huh?"

"Yes, we do," they said.

Oty's ballroom was now filled with supporters. In a corner, activist Liam Shapiro, wearing sunglasses indoors, was holding court with a gaggle of reporters. He pointed to reports of election returns on the monitors, then scolded them for bias, walking and talking repudiations of their so-called journalism profession.

10:30 p.m.: Brad Scallari called out for more supporters with high-def smartphones and cameras to head to the ballroom. Florida was just called for Oty, then North Carolina, all the Electoral votes for those two battlegrounds now in Oty's column.

10:45 p.m.: On the Fox broadcast, Tanner Carlsbad paused, listening to his earpiece.

He said, "This is interesting, we may have seen something like this before, but our people have been speaking to some of the exit-poll folks who are getting unexpected numbers, huge percentages of refusals, it seems. Much higher than predicted. They may not have taken that into account. Could there be a flaw, here, Walter? Which would explain what we are seeing here tonight?"

Watching the televisions, Brad Scallari turned to Oty. "We need to do a once-over on your speech," he said.

"I'm good, I think," Oty said.

Brad looked back at the television and smiled. The speech no one really thought you would be making. Brad turned around to see Paul Erikson, wealthy founder of a hedge fund and security company, close friend of Alec Proditors.

"Hey man, if you wanna see the next president deliver his acceptance speech, you better get over to the ballroom," Brad said.

Oty stood and shook Paul's hand.

They stood together as Wisconsin fell. "The New York Times gave Oty a ninety percent chance to get to 270."

11:45 p.m.: Oty sat in a lounge area, a private room adjacent to the ballroom. Music blaring from the ballroom. Brad approached.

"We're at 264, Oty," Brad said.

"264. What's still on the board for us?"

"Michigan, Arizona, others. Both blue and red walls are falling. It's an anti-administration, anti-establishment wave. The disenchanting Republican voters are not landing for Cannesco."

"Makes sense," Oty said.

On the networks, some tears.

Comments: "How do I explain this to my teenager?"

Responses: "Maybe she likes Oty and is happy. He is the youngest candidate. Maybe she relates to him. Free this and that."

Tanner said, "How the hell did this outsider with a fraction of the funding pull this out? Trump had the Republican base. Oty had only the youth vote, Sanders-like. Our staff got a call from my contact in the Cannesco camp. She's not going to speak tonight. Might have been sedated and heading back to the White House."

Paul Erikson put his arm around Oty. He watched the dark suits enter, one by one.

"Mr. President-elect, the Secret Service is here," Erikson said.

Brad handed his phone to Oty.

"It's the call, Mr. President-elect."

"Senator Mason or President Cannesco?" Oty said.

"The other call," Brad said.

Oty nodded, stood more erect.

"Hello Alec," Oty said.

CHAPTER 27

Two days after the Presidential election. The new presidential advisory committee Chairperson Alec Proditores stepped to the podium at the United Nations. “For more than a century, isolationists have rejected a world view, one in which all the people of the world have a right to dream. These extremists have turned a blind eye on humanity. But, those of us that have a more global view have made progress. It was not until the recent events of the past several months that the truth has been laid bare. I immigrated to this country decades ago from a failing nation. A failing nation with a flawed system that collapsed unto itself. This country’s new civil war, the suffering, the disillusionment, is the result of another nation-state broken by a flawed system.”

The Street. The looters, streaked with blood, chanting among the shatter. Looting, mindless, herding, then discarding their bounty. Then discarding themselves. Deranged and afraid.

Proditores continued... “America has arrogated exceptionalism for centuries. This ideology has not only become a destructive force in the world, its self-destructiveness now exposed. The dam has broken, waves of freedom seekers are flowing in greater numbers. The phrase “advances in human freedom, the great achievement of our time” promoted by past American leaders, is a dog whistle. Who are these leaders to decide for the world’s people what is meant by freedom and democracy?”

The Street. Stores burning, the languor of shopkeepers, effigies of their former selves, emotionless, static. The vanquished, sidewalk refugees now on their way to no end.

Proditores continued... “These postulates spoken by ideologues are a contradiction to the principles of a Global Freedom Society where everyone is free. A One World Free. Who would have thought eighty years ago, when Karl Popper wrote *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, that it would be the United States itself to be the greatest threat? The position of the sovereignty of the United States to take precedence over international obligations must end.”

The Street. Caravans of the new nomads walking—along barren roads—loping and trodden. The lurches of the sightless, borrowing time.

Proditores continued... “America is no longer a sustainable

model for national success. Its capitalist structure has devolved into recession after recession, each one worse than the last, resulting in a bankrupt nation, its masses desperate. Nations can no longer be led by warmongers, interventionists, conquerors, nation builders, terrorists. Now their war machines are being defunded. In a world where we are all one, only one war can exist, the war against ourselves. No longer can we allow a blatant disregard for social justice. The persecution of the marginalized. No longer can we allow voter suppression. Nations whose leaders reject the idea that all residents should have a right to vote.”

The Street. Gunfire echoed off the buildings in Manhattan. Calling out above the hum and rumble of the city. Sharp, penetrating.

Proditores continued... “Now their voices are being heard and counted. No longer can we support a nation in the Middle East that is destructive to all its neighbors. No longer can we support a nation whose leaders lose the popular vote. The people have prevailed.

“No longer can we support a nation that proliferates gun violence and murder. Now the people have begun to be protected.

“No longer can we support a nation where its people are denied medical care and are cut off from what should be a global care system, compassionate, caring, and nurturing. We must if we are to survive, recognize a new Global Society, open and free. Recognize that we are One World. One World Free. A Global citizenship.

“Systems based on the sovereignty of nations do not assure peace and support for all people. Only new, morally based global institutions can create equilibrium, Global Freedom Society insti-

tutions. The enduring belief that national sovereignty will solve all ills is now exposed as antithetical to prosperity.

“Rather, this belief is at the heart of suffering as we see playing out right now in every city, every town, every village. The illusion of unity of the states is now exposed for what it is. The world needs rules and standards of behavior, and America’s unilateral arrogance needs to be replaced by multilateral cooperation.

“We are all children of God, all children of the same Earth.”

the street the bleak running godless streets away from all recent
pasts unknown somethings to unknown futures running dragging
falling searching no more waiting for life to be taken their waking
world fading

Proditores continued... “No single state can be entrusted with the safeguarding of universal principles. As NATO is an international military alliance, we need an international political alliance, a new global institution, the Global Freedom Society. The U.S. economy, now a debacle. But yet a solution lies before us.

“We must merge all the national debt to a newly formed Global Freedom Society Bank. That debt serviced by a percentage of GDP. For the United States, immediate solvency and responsible contribution to the free world. If we care about universal principles such as social justice, freedom, and morality, we cannot leave them to the fate of market forces. Rather, only well-managed institutions can protect them.

“We need a new global central bank, a merging of the banking conglomerates for the common good. The unbridled pursuit of

self-interest must come to an end. Pursuit of the common good must prevail.

“With the formation of a truly global law enforcement organization, financed by the military of each nation, knowing that interventionist activities of the United States will no longer be needed, a massive reduction can and should take place in military spending. And those funds will be allocated to helping those in need and providing new social services to increase the quality of life.”

the street its bodies of decimation patternless random some
stacked matted eyes

 muted naked and pale their ivory bones
 emergent ashen skies gray foreboding like a funeral sky not
day or night colorless and drab places
 now nameless and repeating

Proditores concluded... “We need to heal the world. A global health care system is already underway, to be financed by a small percentage of every nation’s GDP. At last, we will heal all the people.

“We need to educate. Our young are our future. We have formed One World University. In the next few years, we will have hundreds of schools around the world, on every continent, rich or poor.

“As a global society, saving our planet from pending ecological disaster may be our most important mission and our most challenging. The nations of the world must be held responsible and must support a new Clean Green World Treaty.

“The position of the sovereignty of the United States to take precedence over international obligations is the new *Animal Farm*. That farm now burns. A compassionate global coalition will help its people rise from the ashes.”

The delegates rose.

Standing ovation.

the street the dogs hungry starving the dogs
the dogs running

The Conference Building of the United Nations faced the East River between the General Assembly Building and the Secretariat. Within the Conference Building was the Security Council Chamber. On the wall in the chamber, an oil canvas mural painted by Norwegian artist Per Krogh, a phoenix rising from its ashes. An informal gathering of world leaders, Alec Proditores sat in the center of the group. Agent Palmer entered the chamber and was stopped by security guards.

“I want to have a word with Mr. Proditores,” Palmer said.

The guards spoke briefly, then turned Palmer away, escorting him out of the chamber.

Palmer turned and looked back at Proditores, who glanced over, continuing his discussion without hesitation.

CHAPTER 28

Six months later.
ADX prison, Florence, Colorado. Security Housing Unit.
Corridor control.

“Confirmed,” a guard yelled.

The five-inch thick blue-gray steel door slid back, metal rollers on metal rumbling.

Wrists shackled behind his back, Jackson walked through the door followed by two guards. He exited the one-story red brick building, walked past the pole, the pole with the American flag waving from it twenty feet up. He stopped and looked up at the flag, then turned to see his criminal attorney, Debra Kline, approaching.

Inside Debra’s car, Jackson looked back at the prison.

“They’re dying to recharge you if they can find anything they can go to trial with,” Kline said.

“Anything new about Hale?” Jackson said.

“No, he’s not surfaced again, which is consistent with their narrative.”

“Did you do what I asked and check in on Satchel?”

“I did. Went to the ballpark. No one there could tell me a thing. I couldn’t find anyone there that even knew him,” Debra said. “I’m sorry. I could not find any records of a man by that

name owning property in Santa Paula either. Maybe he left after you were arrested."

Jackson rolled down the window and inhaled. The air cool, the scent of evergreen.

"And Proditores?"

"Now heading a committee to advise the president how the United States can work with the Global Freedom Society, which now owns a significant portion of the national debt."

Jackson sat back in his seat, stared ahead.

"He won."

The rental car came to a stop in the parking lot of Wrigley West field, now a minefield of garbage. Dozens of ragtag tents littered the lot. Jackson got out of the car and was rushed by beggars. He guided their hands off of him. As he approached the front entrance of the ballpark, he noticed a black SUV pull into the parking lot. He continued into the ballpark and made his way into the stands behind the third-base line.

A spring Little League game was in progress. A coach blew a whistle, play stopped, and the kids ran off the field to their dugout. Jackson looked up at the scoreboard in left field. The boxes that displayed runs scored in each inning were all blank, appeared not to be in use. Both sets of bleachers in the outfield were being used as beds, dozens of people lying down, apparently sleeping.

Jackson sat down. Next to him was the mother of one of the players.

"Did they stop using the scoreboard?" Jackson said.

"Oh, no. Nunca mas. No need it anymore," she said.

Jackson cocked his head, confused.

"Eres nuevo. No mantener puntuación. Uh... No scoring."

She pointed to one team, then the other.

"No perdedor. No loser ahora."

"No scoring? No losers?"

"Si. The kids, jugar, de ida y vuelta."

The man sitting on the other side of the woman was listening.

"They play for a while, then the other team gets to bat, and it goes back and forth. That's about it," the man said.

"Si, un poco aburrido," the mother said.

"A little boring?" Jackson said.

"Si." The woman smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

"What do they call this new game?" Jackson said.

"Well, baseball. I guess it's the new baseball. The coaches said the new sponsor calls it *baseball for all*. Guess they thought the name was catchy," the man said.

"Béisbol para todos," the woman said.

"Baseball for all?" Jackson said.

He walked out of the ballpark.

The city of Ventura an encampment. The dream sought illusion. Future echoing the past. The soul of the city dead. Tomorrow drowned in today. What today.

He sold or gave or discarded that which he no longer needed, his home gone in physical, in aspiration, in want. The Public-Figure website dormant, to be continued. His possessions stored, he gathered his friend, trusted and true, never wavering. How happy the not knowing. So he gathered Roberto his dog, packed his truck. So it was, and he set out, took to the road. The South in war and turmoil, much of the rest.

He went north.

He fought. He lost. Like a fist in his chest heavy, a cannonball, rusting and corroding and sinking into his gut. Shackled again, trudging on. Remains, the charred bones of his Atlas, embers smoldering, a flameless torch of nation lost. Haunted ghost voices, nagging moans, voices of the centuries.

He went north.

He wandered, truths found only in thought, surrounded by the disenchanting, the disenfranchised. Town to town, some affected more than others, all changing. He saw strength and compassion, acceptance and vindictiveness and confusion and rejection and melancholy. The hordes desperate, some eager to work where work was sparse or nonexistent. Bread lines a ritual.

He went north.

He avoided the cities, their martial law, uncivil warring, against the government, against those opposed, against those who violated, against those not welcome, against all solvers no solutions, against themselves. He avoided the cities.

He went north.

Idaho. Towering and bold and stalwart. A small county. A small town. Five miles out, a ranch. The last of his past would reap a small ranch, true, untouched. An island of land and structure, its ocean the forests natural. Towers of pine each reaching, swaying together in sun and wind and rain, a rightly cruel season turning quick to the unexpected, sudden without notice, unbridled cold, then more until spring, amidst it all. Protecting amidst it all. In this spring, trees and a pond and good soil and a ranch house of log and timber and a barn and a shed and a stable and outbuildings, this place his sovereign, home anew.

The small town north affected, crowding, encamped, but less so. Had all been traveled and trodden, everywhere? But here less, he could go no further. This place to become, he did not know. This place backlashing from days prior, backlashing of the new day, not resting. Not accepting. But the lost came from places unknown. The lost here searching and hiding. Backbone remaining rigid and rugged, he would go no further.

Encompassed by the Wilderness, his ranch a creek warmed by underground geothermal springs. Old-timers said a place like Heaven on Earth. To him the end of eternal longing—the parturition of the inalienable. His nascence. His renaissance.

The high country mountain ranges, the Sawtooths, Boulders, White Clouds and Smokeys, peaks of ten thousand feet, scores of

alpine lakes ringing their valleys. The rivers; the Salmon, Payette, Boise, and Big Wood. Snow melts flowing life lush abundant summer forage for the pine martin, mountain goat, coyote, and fox. The mule deer and elk running. Predators of lynx and black bear and mountain lion and gray wolf. Above, soaring songbirds and hawks and osprey and owls and eagles. The eagles.

In this land, returning to their birthplace on their eight-hundred-mile journey, the Chinook salmon and Steelhead. Populations of westslope cutthroat trout and rainbow trout and bull trout and mountain whitefish darting and dancing and flashing in the sun streaks of glistening green stream.

Days of settling in, watching for black trucks, Roberto romping in the forest, wondering of Cinder and Casey and the girls. *Had they applied for asylum? Or is asylum a dead concept? Now everybody just gets in.* He concluded the latter.

Alone in the homeland, its forests rapture, forests that had stood through fire and drought and storm, yet remained, remained since the beginning of it.

An eagle plummeted to prey, then vanished like a phantom. *The forests, a place of worship, of reckoning, redemption and rebirth, the origin and all that came after, remain, they remain. Whatever I am, I am here, in this place Elysium, I shall endure.*

A small herd of elk one day, rumbling suddenly, his body fixed only to watch, to watch, then see. See the guardian. Sensing each other, the bull fixed, behind, hidden, listening, waiting, watching, sensing. He, a man, understood. Not seeing the majestic. In the presence an understanding.

It had always been and would always be with one man, with one man to endure then to welcome. Welcome those, not a place alone—the inviolables—within those who were and are and will be.

Those who stood and marched and died before. Then anew. Then anew. To those who enter without duty shall be returned to wait in turn.

Never lost, never lost. Someday anew. Someday.

A general store in town, non-payers crowding. A boy at the front door on a step stool patrolling with his eyes for the sleight of hand, the slip into a pocket, a back turned to him, hands in front. The merchant, a Hispanic, waving them out and more came in. Jackson filled a basket with supplies, stepped to the counter.

"Are you here to buy?" the boy asked the visitors entering the store.

"Si, si," the visitors said.

"People, buy something or salir, por favor," the merchant said to those with wandering eyes.

Jackson smiled, placed his items on the counter.

"Sorry, sir, they come... New illegals. Some pay, some steal."

"Fucking wetbacks, get the fuck out," the man behind Jackson said.

The man was tall. Taller than Jackson. Built. A small *AB* tattooed on his neck.

Jackson turned, eyed the tat, eyed the man, turned back around.

"Whatta you looking at, half-breed?" the tatted man said.

Two Hispanic men moved through the aisle behind the tatted man, bumped him by mistake. The tatted man shoved one of the men to the floor.

Jackson turned. Eye-to-eye standoff, an awkward few seconds. Jackson paid for his items and walked out of the store.

Jackson finished connecting a satellite dish to the roof of an out-building while Roberto looked on. In the ranch house, he worked on a laptop, Internet access achieved, logged into an email account, an email account that one other person had access to. An email account that they shared.

He checked the draft section of outgoing messages, messages

not yet sent, messages never transmitted and therefore not intercepted. A new one from yesterday, the subject line *20*, the message body: *Precious cargo okay. What's your 20?*

That brought a broad smile to his face. He clicked the compose button, typed a new message, saved it to the draft folder.

He would wait.

He would wait.

Jackson visited the store often, the proprietor and his wanderers like gypsies. This store, the only general store for this town of less than two hundred legal residents. For other supplies, a trip of fifty miles through the mountains. On this day he backed his pickup truck to the entrance of the store. The old proprietor was in a heated conversation with a customer or non-customer, a man.

"I have no work for you. No trabajo. I'm sorry. Dinero solamente," the merchant said.

The man left, knowing he would return tomorrow and try again, the store owner old and weary.

"I want to help these people, but I can't stay in business by giving my merchandise away. I came from Mexico twenty-five years."

"American citizen?" Jackson said.

"Yes. Yes, sir, I am. But that man. Hundreds of the others. Go get in the damn line like my Maria. My son is looking for work, he born here. This is what the government has done. Lied to these people. Lied to us."

Jackson nodded. "How long you owned this business?"

Two weeks later, behind the general store, Jackson hugged the old proprietor. Wished the old man and his son farewell, stepped back inside the store. The store he had just bought. He turned the

closed sign to open and unlocked the front door. A man, fifties, wearing a cowboy hat, entered.

"Hey there," the man said. "Who might you be?"

"Name's Jackson."

"You helping old Jorge today, are ya?"

"Nope. Bought his store."

"I'll be damned. Good for you there, fella. Welcome to our used-to-be fair town."

"Beautiful place. So what'll it be today for you?" Jackson asked.

"Here's my list."

"Ok. Will help you get that stuff together. Own a ranch 'round here?"

"Going back three generations. Twenty miles out. You?"

"Bought a place near the Salmon."

"Welcome neighbor."

"Thanks. I'm gonna sell you what you need, no problem. Happy to do it. But this place is now a buying club."

"A what?"

"It's a buying club, a membership store."

The man stepped back, put his callused hand to his beard on his skeptical face.

"Ok, like the Costco in Boise? So what's this cost me for this here little place?"

"Nothing. It doesn't cost anything. Free. Prices stay the same. Everything's the same."

"I don't git it."

"Everything's the same except you have to be an American citizen to buy here. Or at least be in the country legally...before the flood gates opened, and be able to prove it."

"Yer kiddin? I'll be damned. I'm a vet, so I ain't got no problem with yer new club deal, but that's gonna cause all kind a ruckus around these parts, at least during these times. Damn. Is that legal, is it?"

"Next time bring me something if you can. Copy of a passport,

veteran's card, birth certificate," Jackson said.

"Kind of a pain in the ass, ain't it?"

"Just once. But not today, I trust you." Jackson grabbed a legal pad. "So what's your name, sir? You're my first member."

Jackson signed up several members over the next few hours, while many walked away frustrated. Jackson glanced across the street. The AB tattooed man was headed his way. Jackson moved to the doorway.

"Store's been changed to a members-only club. You need to be a legal citizen to shop here, sir, or have a legal visa."

"Fucking A, bubba. Keep the spics out. Damn right. Ain't no skin off my back."

"Nothing to do with race, or color."

The man looked at Jackson closely.

"What was your momma? Where was your daddy from?"

"I'm the owner."

"I'm fucking blanco, dude, no spic in me. No offense."

"Are you an American?"

"Born in goddamn Oklahoma."

"Bring something next time, here're the docs that will work."

Jackson handed the man a flyer.

"So no spics, niggers, chinks, or Injuns, 10-4. Then how'd you get in? Just kiddin'."

"Spics, niggers, chinks, Injuns, camel jockeys, towel heads, wops, micks, even dumb ass white trailer trash rednecks can shop here. As long as you qualify and don't break any law. Or any store policy."

"What the fuck are you saying?"

"I'm saying here's the form. Fill it out. Or don't."

The tattooed man ripped the form out of Jackson's hand, spat on the floor. Jackson did not move. The man walked away, under his breath, "Half breed nigger spic."

Jackson watched the man walk down the street, Crumple the flyer into a ball and toss it.

May you meet your fate sooner than later.

CHAPTER 29

Agents Palmer and Garcia entered the district attorney's office. DA Riggs was at her desk watching the Nvidia demonstration on a computer monitor. She froze the demo. On another screen was a dossier of Cinder Stowe.

"Sit down, gentlemen," Riggs said.

"How are you, Madam DA?" Garcia said.

"Your tech people have nothing with this Nvidia thing that I can do anything with," Riggs said.

"Well, we know that Hale could be Rand," Garcia said. "It's our position that Rand is Hale."

"We don't have hard evidence, however, to support that at this time," Palmer said.

"Others inside the Bureau have stated that they believe Rand is Hale. As you know," Garcia said.

"What's the evidence beyond a reasonable doubt? Hell, what's the evidence with doubt?" she said. "We had to charge this guy to keep him incarcerated, but I couldn't go to trial with what you guys gave me, which was dick."

"We're still investigating," Garcia said.

"No shit, really? That's a fucking relief," Riggs said.

Awkward pause...

"On the attack, uh, yes. It's our assessment at this point in time

that the LSD was distributed by Latin gangs in the North and white supremacists in the South," Palmer said.

"We got you the DNA from the stores. The Mara perps, that's moving forward," Garcia said.

"On those we have indicted so far, your people can't find them. If they're still breathing," she said.

Shifting his position in his chair, "We will," Palmer said. "And we'll get some of them to turn."

"Yeah, great. I can't wait till one of these gang bangers actually turns and tells us about another banger that is in El Salvador someplace. Or Mexico. This is a fucking mess," she said.

"We're working up the food chain. The upper layers of Mara, 18th Street and the Aryans," Palmer said.

"The layers? The food chain? Uh-huh. What I'm concerned about is that these layers will be fish food before the chain is broken," Riggs said.

"Circling back to Rand, we have nothing that connects him to MS-13," Palmer said.

"Except the hit on his life. So there's that, of course," Garcia said.

"Of course. There is that." Riggs glared at the agents, letting more silence hang.

"You're not happy," Garcia said.

"Happy? Elated. I was elated when I reviewed this goddamned thing."

DA Riggs clicked her mouse, and the Nvidia GAN video played for a few seconds, then she paused it.

"Could be anyone. Am I correct on this, Palmer?" Riggs said, impatience radiating from her voice.

"Technically, yes," Palmer said.

"Technically? How about legally? Can it legally be anyone? What about physically? Could it be anyone physically? What about spiritually? How about racially? What about age? Here's one, what about gender?"

"Well, technically, yes," Garcia said.

"Stop saying that," Riggs said.

She turned the monitor so the agents could see the Nvidia demo.

"So, Ms. Stowe here... She used to be a patriot, or at least so says her classified recently partially unsealed file that I got no thanks to you two. She did a stint with our NSA. You gentlemen are aware of this salient fact, yes? Maybe she became disenchanted for some reason? Created her own agenda."

Both agents shifted around in their chairs like school children needing to go to the bathroom.

"Well, yeah, we had that in our files as well," Garcia said.

"Then, she leaves NSA and is off the grid for a while. Years a while. Some of her file is, yes, you guessed it, redacted. Seems there are issues with this woman. Her father killed in Africa. Then these poachers start dying. May have been involved in that. No direct evidence, however. Seems she lost faith in government and took things into her own hands. Her hands, which allegedly are very accurate with a .300 Win Mag. But let me back up. With the NSA, she worked on big data analysis, tech stuff. Very skilled. What can you tell me about her work prior to the NSA, agents? Agent Palmer, do you have any intel on that?" Riggs asked.

"Not at this time," Palmer replied.

"Not at this time?" Riggs said. "So we have a highly skilled coder, computer engineer, with tradecraft, that loses faith, quits the NSA, goes vigilante. Who does that profile sound like?"

"A profile of..." Garcia asked.

"This Nvidia technology, it's so good that it could be anybody driving this Hale aberration, correct?" Riggs asked.

"Yes, that's correct," Palmer said.

"Anybody?" Riggs said, asking again by raising her eyebrows.

"Yeah, I suppose," Garcia said, hesitation hanging in his voice, like ok-I-am-about-to-get-slammed-here.

"Even a woman?" Riggs said.

Garcia gasped, mouth fell open, his posture stiffened. "A

woman? You really don't think that this woman is the mastermind?"

Palmer looked at Garcia, then his head snapped to Riggs.

"Doesn't matter if I think that or don't think that. I can't prove a damn thing. Country's still in a civil war. Where did the Special part of your title come from?"

Garcia leaned in to the desk, and pointed to the computer. "This woman?"

"Where is she?" Riggs asked.

Clearing of throats.

"We've been focusing on the gangs and..." Garcia said.

"We've not been able to locate her at this..." Palmer said.

"Find her. Now."

The black SUV stopped in front of the old welding shop in Ventura.

"Let's take a look before we bring in forensics," Agent Palmer said.

"Looks abandoned," Agent Garcia said.

The agents got out of the vehicle. Palmer noticed a piece of gray coax cable on the ground. He picked it up.

"It's recent," he said.

The agents did a walkaround of the perimeter and spotted a two-foot-diameter satellite dish on the roof.

Inside, they opened the steel cover to the basement. They continued down the stairs. They pushed open the battered metal door to the small room. Examined the rubble, debris, much of it charred from a fire. Green stained moldy concrete walls. They pushed open another door that led to another small room. The room was empty, save a small metal chair. Palmer shined his light on the floor. The dust was disturbed.

"Three places," he said. "Like a tripod."

CHAPTER 30

Two dozen protesters milled around outside the general store. Some carried handmade signs; *Racist, No Borders, Deport the Racist, Haters Not Welcome, No Humans Are Illegal*.

Three young men stood on the other side of the street, watching the protesters. One wore a *Who is Hale?* tee shirt, the other two wore *I am Hale* shirts.

Jackson looked over the crowd, smiled at the Hale fans and mouthed *I am Hale*. He walked towards his store, through the crowd, to the front door of his store and placed his key in the lock of the door, and said, "Or not."

He paused, then turned around and scanned the crowd. Protesters chanted and heckled, "Racist, fascist." Jackson smiled, then looked to his left, a view of Main Street.

He watched them come. About fifteen of them. They wore black ski masks or bandanas covering their noses and mouths, or goggles or stocking caps, anything to obscure their faces. Many of them carried weapons; clubs, baseball bats, golf clubs. They walked at a brisk pace. The black maskers had spotted their prey. Jackson entered his store and closed the door behind him. He walked to the back of his store, picked up a rifle, paused, set it back down, and picked up a shotgun.

The militants moved through the protesters and stood in front

of the store. Their leader held a bottle with a rag extending out of it. In his other hand, a lighter. The masked mob encouraged him. The chanting of the protesters increased. They stomped the ground. Faces appeared from the windows of the other buildings on Main Street, watching. Watching the moment when the water bubbles and steams and churns, right before it boils. The leader pumped his arm, the arm holding the Molotov cocktail. Chanting, heckling, pounding of feet, militants jumping up and down. The leader with the black ski mask lit the Zippo lighter. He lit the rag. He drew it back like a pitcher.

Ffft.

The leader jerked backward as the rubber slug found its target, his breastbone. As he fell, the Molotov cocktail smashed onto the street. He landed on his back and rolled away from the flames. Through the flames, the leader saw the image of the man who shot him. Jackson Rand stood there with a shotgun in his hand. He appeared from nowhere, like a ghost.

The militants turned towards Jackson, who was pointing the shotgun at them.

“You can’t get us all,” a militant said.

Jackson pulled back his leather vest, revealing his SIG 226 in its holster. On the other side of his belt were three magazines in pouches.

“Fifteen on board, one in the chamber. Forty-five waiting their turn,” Jackson said. He leveled the shotgun on the leader, who was still on the ground.

“Get up.”

Two militants helped the leader to his feet.

The doors of the shops along Main Street opened: the diner, the tack and feed store, and the rest. They emerged, walked out into the street; the merchants and shopkeepers and workers and residents of the town who had gathered and waited. One hundred in all. They surrounded the militants. The chanting by the protesters stopped. Stopped completely. It was quiet, the only sound the faint crackling of the flames of the burning kerosene in

the street. The mob was outnumbered. No pounding of feet, no screams of slurs.

"In there," Jackson said, pointing to his front door.

"What?" the leader said.

"In there. All of you. All of you hiding your faces," Jackson said. "Drop your weapons where you stand."

The townspeople took a step forward. First one militant dropped his baseball bat, then another, and another. The masked militants entered the shop. All of them. Jackson followed them in and closed the door.

"Sit down on the floor," Jackson said.

"There's fifteen of us. Let's take him," a militant said.

Jackson slid his shotgun into the corner and drew his SIG.

"Do it now," he said. "Sit."

They sat. All of them. Jackson pulled the mask off of the leader. He was panting, still out of breath.

"You'll have a welt on your chest, but you'll live. Catch your breath."

"The rest of you. Take your masks off."

Jackson waited.

The militants revealed themselves. First one, then the others. Teenagers to early thirties, five of them women.

Jackson observed the faces looking at him, seeing him up close for the first time.

"You're not white," a young black woman said.

"Yes, I am," Jackson said.

"You look Hispanic," a young man said.

"Yes, I am," Jackson said. "I am also the great great great-grandson of a slave."

"Then why are you a fascist racist like the rest?" the leader said.

Jackson smiled.

"You think race," Jackson said. "I void race."

"Void race?"

"Yes, void. You are familiar with void, are you not? You

demand people think like you. Like you, but are void of ideas. Void of ideals."

"You discriminate against immigrants with your new fucking buying club, you fascist," a man said in the back of the group.

"It's all about timing, isn't it? Depending on the time and place, we're all immigrants in this country. Except for Indians," Jackson said.

"And men like you exploited them, conquered them," another man said.

"Do you live in America, in Idaho?" Jackson said.

"Fuck you," the man said.

"He does," another man said. "So what?"

"Is anyone here from the Shoshone or Bannock tribe?"

No answer. Some faces started to relax.

"I thought not. Then what are you doing living on these lands?" Jackson said.

No answer. Then... "Fighting fascism." His buddies agreed.

"With fascism. Fascism and hate and violence. Then what?"

"Then we kill all the alt-right racists," a man said.

"Yeah, I get that. And once you eliminate everybody that does not think like you, what will you have?" Jackson said.

"A better place," a woman said.

Jackson didn't react. He placed the SIG back in his holster.

"What are you saying?" another woman said.

"The idea. The original idea."

"I'm leaving," a man said in the back.

"You are all free to go," Jackson said.

The man in the back stood. Then the man next to him.

A woman in the front row was looking to her left. Against the wall was a sign. The new sign for the front of the store. The sign read: The American Mutt Club.

"I'm staying," a woman said. "At least for a while."

Two hours later, ten of the militants walked out of the store. Four of them were carrying small yellow flags with snakes on them. The protesters had dispersed and an elderly couple stood in

front of the store. Jackson helped a couple load supplies into the bed of their pickup truck.

"Aren't those the people...?" the woman said.

"Yes, ma'am. They were here to burn the place down," Jackson said.

"Oh my. I heard about those activist types calling you a racist," the woman said with a question in her voice, looking hard at Jackson's face.

"Well, honey, he don't look like no racist, now do he? Just what race is he gonna be racist with?" the man said.

Jackson smiled.

"You look fine to me, son," the woman said.

A man in a suit, no tie, cowboy hat, approached Jackson.

"Hey Congressman," Jackson said.

"Hello Jackson," the Congressman said. "I got six businessmen, store owners in the county now, that want to go with this buying club concept. Like, uh... Buy American, be American to buy, I guess. They want to talk to you."

"Not just American. Be here legally to buy."

"Oh yeah. I get that. Gonna cause lots of problems though."

"Probably so," Jackson said. "Probably so."

Jackson closed the store for the day. It was raining. Jackson looked to the sky, let the water run down his face. He walked down the street of the town, Roberto by his side.

He smiled at the remaining protesters, who were wet and tired and spent. The waifs had thinned out.

On the other side of a park, extending beyond the town, was a field, weeds and grass and dirt. Four spots worn down long ago formed the shape of a baseball diamond. Jackson walked out to the center of the diamond, turned back towards what would be home plate. The rain subsided. He wiped the water from Roberto, who did the wet-dog shake. The sun peeked through the clouds.

Jackson started to feign a pitching wind-up when something caught his eye. A Range Rover parked along Main Street on the other side of the park. Someone running. Jackson smiled.

Casey ran up to him and jumped into his arms. Casey removed the small white flag with the W on it and waved it.

"I didn't know if I was going to see you again, Jackson," Casey said.

Jackson removed his W flag from his jeans.

"That means we're on the same team still," Casey said.

"Yes, buddy, it does."

"Do they have a baseball team here? What is this place?"

"This place, buddy?"

He saw Anna and the girls running towards him. Cinder was on the sidewalk, watching.

"This place? We'll call it Muttville, buddy. We'll call it Muttville."

THE END

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I thank my father, a bomber pilot in World War II, may he rest in peace with my wonderful mother, a school teacher, who exposed me to books at an early age.

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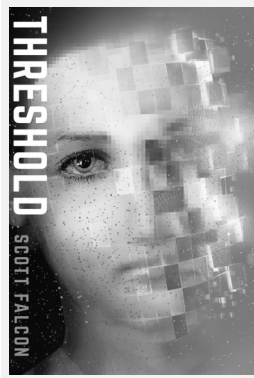
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Scott Falcon is an American author of thrillers. Learn more at ScottFalcon.com.

- Indiana University graduate: Beta Gamma Sigma.
- Assembled a team to build the website PublicFigure.com before handing it off to Jackson Rand.
- Moved to Ventura, California to write novels.
- Quenching a thirst for subject matters: tyranny, corruption, Americanism, crime, artificial intelligence, technology, sociopaths, and natural selection.

Other Novels Coming Soon:

- THRESHOLD, a techno-thriller
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