

AMERICAN OPERATOR

OTHER TITLES BY
BRIAN ANDREWS
AND JEFFREY WILSON

Tier One Series

Tier One
War Shadows
Crusader One

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Nick Foley Thriller Series

Beijing Red
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The Traiteur's Ring
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War Torn

AMERICAN OPERATOR

A TIER ONE THRILLER

ANDREWS & WILSON

 THOMAS & MERCER

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*To the men and women of the Central Intelligence Agency.
“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall
make you free.”*

PART I

A good teacher is like a candle—it consumes itself
to light the way for others.

—*Mustafa Kemal Atatürk*

CHAPTER 1

Ankara, Turkey

May 4

1330 Local Time

Amanda Allen had a secret.

Keeping it was exhausting.

So far, she'd kept it hidden from her boss, the US Ambassador to Turkey, and from her father—the two most important figures in her life. In the beginning, she'd reassured herself that with time, the burden would grow lighter. Now, four months into her assignment, she wasn't so sure. *I'll give it a year and reassess*, she thought, smiling and nodding while the men talked. Not everyone was cut out for this line of work. If her decision to lead a double life didn't work out, there was always law school. One call from her father and she'd be in, wherever she wanted to go.

Nepotism . . . America's safety net.

The afternoon sun hung high in a cloudless bright-blue sky. Ankara was bustling, almost as if the entire city had silently agreed on taking a late lunch today, and now everyone was hurrying back to work en

masse. Since arriving in Turkey, she'd frequently heard people refer to Istanbul as the country's beating heart. If that was true, then Ankara was its calculating mind. Ambassador Bailey had told her that a hundred years ago, the population of the city had numbered only seventy-five thousand. Today, Turkey's capital was home to over five million people. The city didn't feel like home yet to her, but hopefully that would come with time.

Give it a year . . .

She stood with her hands clasped behind her back as her two male companions spoke on the sidewalk outside the charming Aegean seafood restaurant they had just left, which was walking distance from both the US embassy and the Turkish Ministry of the Interior. It was a struggle to stand quietly, patiently—her father had raised her to be a strong woman and encouraged her to speak her mind—but she forced herself. Women's rights had advanced further in Turkey than in many of its Middle Eastern neighbors, but that still put it a half century behind the West. And now, secularism was at risk as Muslim conservatives, led by President Erodan, sought to weave Islam back into law and erase the little bit of progress that had been made.

Amanda listened and tried desperately not to interject as her boss, Ambassador Charles Bailey, engaged in an animated conversation with Halil Demicri. As the acting Director of Migration Management for the Ministry of the Interior, Demicri oversaw Turkey's immigration and asylum programs. The publicly stated mission of his office was to develop "people-oriented policies" for foreign victims of human trafficking who were trying to "harmonize" with the country. However, thus far there had been little discussion of human trafficking, or harmonizing, or even *people-oriented* policies. Instead, Demicri had spent the entire lunch talking about an entirely different kind of migration-management problem—the Kurds.

"If what you are saying is true, Mr. Ambassador, then why does your country continue to support Kurdish separatists in Syria?" Demicri said

in his British-accented English. He had reminded them at least three times that he'd earned his degree in international relations in Britain.

"In America, we have an expression, Director Demicri, and maybe you've heard it," Bailey said, "which is that you're comparing apples and oranges. We concur that groups like YPG and PKK are pursuing a terrorist agenda inside Turkey, and we condemn this. However, Kurdish people pursuing cultural recognition, freedom from persecution, and a voice in their local governance are another matter altogether."

Demicri snorted an incredulous laugh. "How can you say such a thing? They are one and the same people."

"Now, Halil," Bailey said, switching deftly to the familiar. "How can *you* say such a thing? Am I to interpret from your comment that you believe that every Kurd is a member of PKK? Take care with your words, or I might misconstrue your statement to mean that Turkey classifies all Kurds as terrorists."

Demicri's cheeks reddened. "Be careful with *your* words, Ambassador, or I might misconstrue your statement to mean that the United States is actively supporting the Kurdish terrorism agenda."

Well, isn't this going just wonderfully, Amanda thought. *Probably time to play peacemaker.*

"Gentlemen, if I could—" she started to say, but not only did Bailey interrupt her, he waved a hand at her to be quiet as if she were a child. Now her cheeks were the ones turning red. Just because they were in Turkey did not mean she forfeited her rights and status as an equal, most especially when operating within their State Department roles. Later, when they were alone, she would tell him so.

The other Amanda Allen, however, the one supporting an entirely different American agenda, was delighted with this conversation. For all its divisiveness, the meeting had been incredibly productive. Demicri had dropped lots of names and been aggressive in trying to control the topics of conversation. Her brain was swimming with details she had not been able to write down but needed to remember for her report to

her other boss—what was said and unsaid, her impressions of Demicri, and as much detail as she could collect about the security protocols employed to protect him. When it came to intelligence collection, no detail was insignificant. She was itching to wrap this meeting up; the sooner she could put her observations to paper, the better.

“Clearly this is a sensitive, but important, matter for Turkey,” Bailey was saying as Amanda tuned back in. “I think by both of us voicing our concerns today, we’ve made some headway.”

Demicri nodded, a political smile plastered on his face. “Honest dialogue, even when contentious, is an important part of any *strategic* partnership between our two countries. Please convey to the Secretary and President that my government draws a clear distinction between law-abiding Kurdish citizens and Kurdish separatists using terror to pursue an agenda of political unrest and murder. Turkey considers both its native Kurdish population and those seeking asylum from persecution in Syria important and valued minority populations. But we will not tolerate the United States backing any group bent on destabilizing Turkey.”

Bailey was gearing up to reply, but this time Amanda shot him a look as she began to speak, daring him to try cutting her off again. “Director Demicri, the United States recognizes that Turkey has opened its borders to more than two million Syrians over the past decade of fighting. We understand this has been a heavy burden, both politically and financially, and we thank you for your generosity and compassion when it comes to refugees.”

“That’s right,” Demicri said, nodding vigorously, his face lighting up for the first time. “You need more on your staff like her, Mr. Ambassador. She understands the sacrifice Turkey has made. It is important for the United States and NATO to understand that for Turkey to remain committed to this strategic partnership, we need financial support from the West. Otherwise, we will have no

choice but to explore ways to strengthen our relationships with *other* regional partners.”

There's that phrase again, she thought. *Strategic partnership.*

The subtext in Demicri's message was impossible to miss. Either the US stepped up its financial commitment to help Turkey crush the Kurdish separatist movement, or Turkey would start looking to Moscow instead of Washington for support. Amanda would argue that the process had already begun when Erodan met with Russian President Petrov back in April.

“I understand,” Bailey said, his tone now placating rather than hard. “I promise you that Turkey's security and stability are of the utmost importance to the State Department and the Warner administration. I'll pass along your concerns and express the financial hardship Turkey faces.”

“Please see that you do, Mr. Ambassador,” Demicri said, then turned to smile at Amanda. “Ms. Allen, your observations were very insightful. I look forward to our next meeting,” he said, shamelessly looking her up and down.

She ignored his lecherous gaze and forced a smile. “It would be wonderful if Azur Basar from the Ministry could attend our next meeting. Her reputation as a champion for women's—”

She stopped midsentence.

Something was wrong.

Her stomach was tight—a feeling she'd come to depend on during her training at the Farm. She shifted her gaze beyond Demicri, aware that he was asking her if something was the matter. Across the street, amid a row of taxis, a black Mercedes sat idling, its driver behind the wheel.

“Is everything okay?” the Ambassador asked.

She ignored Bailey and looked left, her gaze flicking toward the intersection.

The man with the magazine looked out of place. The street was crowded and moving, but this guy was standing perfectly still—not reading, just staring at her. Behind him, parked on the northwest corner, sat a white high-top van with no windows in the rear compartment. The magazine man glanced over his shoulder at the van and then fished a phone from his pocket.

“Oh shit,” she said and grabbed Ambassador Bailey by the sleeve of his suit coat.

Her intention was to run, but a massive pressure wave sent her airborne. The heat hit her a heartbeat later, like she’d opened an oven door while her face was too close to it. She never heard the boom. She didn’t remember flying through the air or hitting the ground. Somebody closed the oven door, but the right side of her face still felt hot. And wet maybe. Her face hurt, but not nearly as bad as the throbbing pain in her head. When she opened her eyes, the imagery was nonsensical. The white van parked in front of her was pointing toward the sky, climbing a perfectly vertical hill. Booted feet approached, belonging to men running on a wall, their bodies clinging impossibly at a ninety-degree angle. Nothing made sense. Then, something clicked and her proprioception came back. She was lying on her side; that’s why the world was askew. She coughed, and the right side of her chest exploded with pain; it felt like someone had just driven a flaming sword between her ribs.

She blinked.

I have to get up.

She tried to push herself onto her knees, but it was as if the earth had somehow turned up the power of gravity. No, not gravity. Something was driving her down, a weight from above, not a tug from below. She saw a black boot beside her and realized that it must belong to a man pressing his other foot into the small of her back. With great effort, she turned her head the other way and gazed into the face of her make-believe boss—Ambassador Bailey. His body lay only inches from her.

At first she thought he was dead, but then he blinked, and a tear spilled from his eye, traveled over the bridge of his nose, and dropped to the dirty sidewalk. She saw there was a boot on his neck. Then she saw the muzzle of the rifle against his temple. He opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by a flash. The accompanying crack was barely audible—muffled, like a gunshot a thousand yards away. She watched in horror as Bailey's head deflated, his face a balloon squished between two elevator doors, its contents evacuating in a dark pool of blood. Yet he still stared at her—his right eye open, the pupil dilated. A spent casing bounced off the pavement between them, spun in slow motion, and then came to rest by the tip of her nose. A 7.62 rifle-round casing. Was it weird that she knew that detail?

Other muffled gunshots reverberated.

A voice screamed inside her head, *Get up! Run! Escape!* She agreed with the voice. She wanted to do all these things, but she was pinned to the sidewalk by the boot. A boot that pressed with the weight of an F-150 parked on her back. If only she'd been carrying a weapon. Why didn't they let her kind carry weapons on assignment? A voice laughed at this. Would it have made a difference?

Don't be ridiculous, Amanda.

As she waited for the terrorist's bullet to come smashing into her temple, a deep and profound sadness engulfed her.

I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry I let you down.

This would devastate him. He wouldn't understand. And worse, he'd never know the truth. She knew how the CIA operated. Despite his prominent status, they would keep him in the dark about what she had really been doing for the United States. They would paint another picture: a selfless young diplomat murdered while trying to make the world a better place.

I guess I don't have to worry about keeping my secret anymore.

The ground began to shake.

At first she thought it was her—her body shaking uncontrollably—but then she smelled the dust and sulfur. The ground shook a second time. Then a third.

More bombs . . . The evil bastards weren't finished yet.

She looked up out of the corner of her eye just in time to see the rifle butt coming down. A sharp pain erupted in the back of her head, and then she felt herself being dragged under—dragged against her will into a deep, dark, and inescapable pool.

CHAPTER 2

Sun Gardens Resort on the Adriatic Sea

Dubrovnik, Croatia

May 5

0040 Local Time

Spotter scope raised to his right eye, John Dempsey watched the inbound luxury yacht *La Traviata*—barely visible on the western horizon of the Adriatic Sea. The air smelled clean tonight, and he could taste a salty tang on the cool, lazy sea breeze. On the balcony, he stood tall, proud, and motionless—an orarian sentinel. He wore a full beard—four months' growth—and his dark hair was as long as he'd ever kept it, long enough to gather into a ponytail, but he preferred to manage the unruly mop with a backward-facing ball cap. His body was strong, rested, and energized. His impending fortieth birthday seemed ten years removed, rather than ten days. His mind operated with a clarity of thought and purpose he could not remember since the day he had decided to become a Navy SEAL two decades ago.

Despite the new life he lived now, he was still doing what he'd been trained to do as a Tier One SEAL. As the head of the Special Activities Division of the covert task force known as Ember, Dempsey's job was to find and dispatch the world's most dangerous criminals, spies, and jihadists. He was a terrorist hunter, a clandestine warrior, a shadow soldier.

He was an American operator.

His current tasking was to disappear Moammar al-Fahkoury—a rising piece of shit in the terrorist underground who seemed to have fashioned himself as an entrepreneur. Although Ember had been watching al-Fahkoury for some time now, they didn't fully understand his operation. For lack of a better description, they'd branded him a “maven” of terrorism. al-Fahkoury was the business equivalent of a savvy and deeply connected information broker—someone keenly aware of trends, new methodologies, and opportunities—hired by death dealers wanting to tap his knowledge and connections. The Director of National Intelligence—and former head of Ember—Kelso Jarvis, had decided al-Fahkoury had been in play long enough.

Ember had been tasked to bring him in.

Dempsey lowered the scope and glanced inside the hotel room at Elizabeth Grimes's lean, muscular frame stretched prone on the dining room table. She had one knee pulled up and her cheek pressed against her sniper rifle as she scanned the horizon through the open sliding glass door. A part of him would have preferred to be on sniper duty rather than quarterbacking the op, but he was only average on the .300 WinMag, as the M91A2 was known in the SEAL Teams. How Grimes would perform was still an unknown. According to Shane Smith, Ember's current Director, her marks at sniper school had been shit hot, but this was her first mission manning the long gun. There was a world of difference between plinking targets and exploding heads. Not everyone was cut out to be an angel of death. Was Elizabeth?

Looking at her, body and weapon merged as if a single organism, he wondered why she'd wanted to go down the sniper path. He thought he knew, but they'd never actually talked about it. The brutal terrorist sleeper attack on the Midrachov in Jerusalem a year ago had affected all of them, but Grimes most profoundly. The AK-47 round she'd taken to the chest had almost killed her. In fact, technically, it had. She'd been flatlined when they'd reached the OR at Jerusalem Medical Center. He remembered her head lolled to the side; her skin gone gray; and her glassy, lifeless eyes. He remembered telling Dan Munn that she was dead and how the SEAL-turned-surgeon had whirled to face him and growled, "She's dead when I say she's dead." By God's grace, Munn's will, or possibly a combination of both, Grimes had pulled through.

On the outside, there was no mistaking Grimes 2.0. She'd always been fit, but over the past year she'd packed on at least fifteen pounds of lean muscle. In fact, that fifteen pounds was probably more like thirty because she'd lost fifteen pounds during her stint in the hospital. She'd cut her postrecovery convalescence short with the most aggressive PT program he had ever seen. The gray tank top she wore tonight advertised the results: defined, muscled arms propping up a lean triangular torso. Her recently trimmed auburn hair was pulled back in a stubby ponytail, except for a too-short strand she had tucked behind her left ear. She was focused—locked on. She should probably be the least of his worries, but she wasn't.

"What the hell are we doing?" Grimes murmured, barely audible.

His stomach went sour at this double-edged sword of a comment. Was she referring to Ember and this op, or was she referring to the wedge between the two of them that had formed over the past year? Dempsey treaded cautiously. He didn't do emotions well—they were just too much damn work, and history had proven there was no return on investment.

"What do you mean?" he asked, keeping his voice neutral.

“I mean, it’s been a year, JD.” She sighed, her eye still on the scope. “A year since Operation Crusader. Amir Modiri is dead. Justice was meted. We fulfilled our charter.”

“Yeah, what’s your point?”

“That this is mission number, what, twenty-two, since Crusader? And here we are, chasing down another random dirtbag. This is not Ember. There are plenty of other groups—groups specifically chartered for these activities—that should be out here instead of us. This is not what Ember was conceived for.”

“Snatching al-Fahkoury is not the type of op you give to the B-team. This is a direct action mission—exactly what Ember was conceived for.”

She disengaged from her rifle and looked at him. “How is taking al-Fahkoury related to surveilling Trugga two weeks ago in Nigeria? Or Mali Haswani in Qatar before that, or Din Tuluk Amin in Malaysia before that?”

“They’re all terrorists, Elizabeth,” he said, his irritation rising. “That’s what we do—we find and stop terrorists.”

She shook her head. “They’re all *unrelated* terrorists. Can’t you see it? Jarvis is running Ember ragged chasing flies. Go here, check on this guy. Now stop, pack up, and go over there and check on that guy. Hold on, change of plans, go watch this other new guy instead. Okay, now shoot him. Thanks. Hurry up, pack your bags, time to surveil the next guy . . . It’s ridiculous.”

“That’s what counterterrorism is,” he said, exasperated. “That’s how it works in the IC.”

“That’s how it works for the intelligence community as a whole, but that’s not what *we* do—or not what we used to do. It’s not why Ember was conceived.”

He sighed. “Okay, fine, I’ll play along. Tell me, what is it that we should be doing?”

“We should be tasked to longitudinally prosecute whoever is the greatest threat to US national security until that threat is dead and

neutralized. Just like we did with Modiri and VEVAK in Iran. I didn't sign on to swat flies, JD. I signed on to slay dragons. What happened to our autonomy? What happened to our focus? We should be hunting tomorrow's bin Laden, tomorrow's Modiri . . .”

“How do you know this guy's not the next bin Laden? In five years, al-Fahkoury could become the type of guy you're talking about. Are you suggesting we leave him in play and wait and see if that happens?”

“al-Fahkoury is definitely *not* the next bin Laden,” she said, screwing up her face at him. With a huff, she turned her attention back to her scope. “Never mind.”

He watched her for a beat. On the one hand, he understood her frustration. When you were operating at the tip of the spear, sometimes it was hard to see the big picture. Maybe al-Fahkoury wasn't the next bin Laden, but taking him out of the game made the world a safer place by removing a well-oiled cog from the global terrorism machine. Like it or not, “swatting flies,” as she'd called it, was part of an operator's job description. And besides, if there was another mastermind of proxy warfare like Amir Modiri out there, then Jarvis *would* give Ember tasking to take him down. If there was one thing in the universe that Dempsey had learned he could trust with unwavering confidence, it was that no matter how complex the problem, no matter how convoluted the details, the DNI saw the threat and knew how best to prosecute it.

He shook his head, not sure what else to say to her, and forced his thoughts back to the mission at hand. Intelligence indicated the meet was scheduled to happen at sea—a prerequisite demanded by the other party. They didn't know who al-Fahkoury was meeting on the inbound yacht, but the mere fact that al-Fahkoury was not controlling the logistics was informative. Dempsey had already concluded that the unknown party in this meet-up was a “money guy.” Of course, the

money guy himself wouldn't *actually* be on that yacht; that's not how they operated. Money guys hovered above it all, conducting their nefarious business via proxies and lieutenants. Arm's-length separation and layers of obfuscation were the name of the game—these were methods the bad guys had figured out a long, long time ago.

Never do your own dirty work.

The half-moon hanging in the clear night sky provided enough light that he could see the Bilgin 156 luxury yacht without night vision. Even without the moon, it wouldn't have mattered. These guys were operating without stealth in mind—purple mood lights illuminated the main deck, and the green-blue glow of the yacht's Jacuzzi emanated from the stern. Dempsey was surprised he couldn't hear bass speakers thumping. It never ceased to amaze him how often men's carnal desires undermined their OPSEC.

"*La Traviata*, crossing one nautical mile inbound," said a voice in Dempsey's earpiece. The voice belonged to Richard Wang, Ember's resident "all things cyber" boy wonder who was camped out in a room two levels below them. Dempsey pictured the young cybernerd genius tapping away on his computer: a large-diameter parabolic dish sitting beside the sliding glass door, a pile of energy drink cans strewn across the carpet, and a cold mocha cappuccino on the desk.

"Yes, Bronco, we can all see them," Dempsey growled. "But when are you going to have comms up so we can hear them?"

"Damn, you're grumpy tonight," Wang came back.

"He's always grumpy these days," Dan Munn chimed in from a third location—a corner room on the second story with a view of the beach and the access road leading to the marina. Munn had been tapped to lead Charger team—a three-man assault force rounded out by Ember's two new SAD recruits. The plan was to intercept al-Fahkoury's convoy on the access road prior to its reaching the marina parking lot. Taking al-Fahkoury on land was more covert, simpler, and less dangerous for

the Ember assault team than conducting a maritime operation. Once they'd positively confirmed the target ship, they could leave it in play. Yachts weren't submarines. They were easy to track and hard to disappear. Plus, it would be interesting to see what the yacht did in reaction to al-Fahkoury's no-show. What communications would follow? Where would the yacht go next? Disappearing al-Fahkoury right before the meeting would incite a reaction, and every reaction was an opportunity to collect intelligence . . .

Shit, Dempsey thought, *Ember has me thinking like a spook all the time now.*

"FleetBroadband, just like I suspected," Wang announced in a victorious tone.

"Say again?" Dempsey asked.

"They're using FleetBroadband on AlphaSat," Wang continued. "You know, if I wanted to be rich, all I'd have to do is quit this rodeo and become a private IT contractor for these dumbasses."

"Get to the point, Bronco," Dempsey growled.

"We've got an arrangement with Inmarsat Maritime. FleetBroadband is their satellite internet service, and AlphaSat is the satellite covering Europe and the Mideast," the kid explained. "And by 'we,' I mean the NSA and me, and by 'the NSA and me,' I mean the NSA."

"And what arrangement is that?"

"That Inmarsat Maritime's encryption protocols are not as awesome as they advertise."

"I take that to mean you're in?"

"Of course I'm in. They've got five computers and a half-dozen mobile phones on the shipboard Wi-Fi network. What a bunch of knobs. I'm just going to turn all their phones into live mikes," Wang said, chuckling. "In principle, we should be able to listen in wherever anybody goes. Even belowdecks. Hell, by the time I hijack all their shit, we won't even need the directional mike I dragged up here."

Despite himself, Dempsey cracked a smile at that.

“Stable, this is Charger One. While we wait on Bronco, has there been any chatter or movement from the primary target?” Munn asked, referring to the al-Fahkoury contingent staying at a guesthouse a few miles away.

“Nothing significant, Dan, or I would have reported it,” Ian Baldwin—Stable—answered from his workstation in Ember’s Tactical Operations Center in Virginia. Dempsey pictured the tall lanky mathematician turned Ember Signals Director standing behind his two young analysts, Chip and Dale, monitoring feeds from the satellites tasked for the op.

“That’s a good indicator that despite the boat’s arrival, they’re probably not meeting tonight,” Dempsey said into the thin mike boom beside his mouth.

“I *did* predict the meeting would occur after sunrise, if you recall,” Baldwin said.

“We all remember, Stable,” Dempsey said.

“That prediction was based on what again?” Munn chimed in.

“I’ve tried to explain how the algorithms work, Dan,” Baldwin said, using his only-mildly-exasperated voice and eschewing code names as usual. “It’s just math.”

Dempsey shook his head. It wasn’t that Baldwin was undisciplined or sloppy; rather, he was so supremely confident in Ember’s comms gear and their encryption protocols that he made a habit of chatting in the clear. On the one hand, Dempsey got it. He’d been more than used to playing by big-boy rules in his Tier One unit, but on the other hand, it just bugged him. Call-sign protocol was born from blood, like so many of the operational methodologies they employed.

“Stable, this is Mustang. Let’s try to keep it tight tonight. Call signs only,” Dempsey said.

After a cool beat, Baldwin came back: “Copy, Mustang.”

“I’ve got good visuals now,” Grimes said to Dempsey, her right eye glued to her scope. “One tango walking the port rail . . . two dudes on the stern, one smoking and one holding a rifle. They look like security.” He watched her switch the high-tech scope from night vision to thermal. “On thermal I’ve got two, no, three tangos on the bridge—ship’s captain perhaps sitting in the middle and two others facing him. Belowdecks I have four tangos. Wait, hold on a second—”

The tension in her voice and the way her body stiffened told him something unexpected had caught her attention.

“Make that five bodies belowdecks. Two of the five appear to be captive.” She switched her headset to hot mike, and Dempsey heard her talking beside him and then half a beat later echoing in his left ear. “Stable, this is Mustang. Thermals suggest we might have hostages on the boat. Do you have any intel suggesting this meeting could be a prisoner swap?”

“There’s been nothing in the previous comms between the parties to suggest that,” Baldwin said. “Some of the data suggests a transaction is scheduled for this meeting, but we assumed it was financial . . . I suppose we could revisit the raw data with this new insight in mind.”

“Translation—the Professor doesn’t know,” Munn growled, interpreting for the team. “What do you see, Mustang?”

“Two seated bodies on thermal,” Grimes said. “Look like they’re bound to chairs.”

Grimes adjusted her scope and then looked up at Dempsey.

“Want me to take a look?” he asked.

“Yeah, please,” she said, rolling onto her side, away from the rifle scope.

His eyes flicked to the scar below her armpit—still thick and red, but healing up nicely. He leaned in from the other side of the table to peer through the scope.

“I see your five tangos belowdecks—three walking with weapons slung on shoulders, and two seated hostages, side by side . . .” As he studied their postures and the shapes of their thermal signatures, his heart sank. He clicked the zoom detent up a notch on the scope. “And they both appear to be female.”

Damn.

Hostages . . . the one and only complication guaranteed to throw their entire operational playbook into the garbage can. He straightened and began to pace. Disappearing al-Fahkoury was the mission objective, not hostage rescue. Hitting the yacht had never been part of the plan, yet his brain had already started working the problem anyway. Revised mission scenarios began populating his mind.

No, he thought, cutting himself off. We can't let the mission get derailed.

“Listen up, everybody,” he announced on the comms channel. “I realize this changes things emotionally, but it doesn't change the mission. Stay on task. al-Fahkoury is our objective.”

“Hold on,” Munn barked. “Are you saying we're going to do nothing? We can't just let these assholes keep those girls and float away.”

“I'm not saying that, but I'm also not saying we're going to change the OPORD, either,” he said, trying to soften the blow. “We need to analyze the situation. I need options and risk assessment.”

“Hang on . . . They're moving the girls,” Grimes said from beside him, back on her rifle scope. “Five glowing bodies coming up a ladder well . . . the two women, two armed escorts with rifles, and a third dude . . . They're passing through the middeck salon, heading aft to the party deck and the hot tub, I presume.”

“Bronco, do you have ears?” Dempsey asked.

“Good ears,” Wang said, ditching his trademark sophomoric banter and now all business. “They're talking fast . . . laughing . . . That's not Arabic . . . I'm not sure what language they're using.”

“Stream it to me, Bronco,” Baldwin said calmly.

Dempsey raised his spotter scope and focused on the party deck. The women stood with stooped postures, heads down, arms hugging themselves. The man in the hot tub tipped his head back as if laughing at something.

“They’re speaking Chechen,” Baldwin reported.

“Chechen?” Wang asked, his voice tight. “That’s weird.”

“Stable, can you translate?” Dempsey asked.

“None of us speaks Chechen, but we’re running the stream through a real-time translation program. Don’t expect better than seventy percent accuracy.”

“Fine, just give me the play-by-play,” Dempsey barked.

“They look cold. Maybe they need to be warmed up,” Baldwin said, relaying the translated audio from the yacht with a several-second delay. “But they don’t be having swimsuits . . . That is okay. This we can fix . . .”

Through the scope, Dempsey watched as one of the laughing guards began to rip the clothes off the woman standing on the left.

“No, not that one, the pretty one . . .”

The guard shoved the woman to her knees, while the girl on the right swatted at the other guard pawing at her clothes—choosing instead to undress herself voluntarily.

Smart and brave. Better to get functional clothes back than shredded rags when this is all over, Dempsey thought as she climbed into the hot tub, covering her topless chest.

“Stable, can you get facial recognition from the bird?” Dempsey asked.

“The satellite is overhead now, so the angle is bad,” Baldwin said. “Perhaps Elizabeth could—”

“Sending imagery to Bronco now,” Grimes said, leaning into her scope, her body visibly tense at the scene unfolding. The scope was

wirelessly connected to the tablet on the table beside her and would send digital pictures she snapped to an encrypted file on Wang's computer.

"Got it. Relaying . . ." Wang said.

The girl in the hot tub was sitting opposite her tormenter, as far away as possible. To Dempsey's relief, the heavily muscled dirtbag in the tub was not making a move toward her, just laughing, smoking, and drinking. If he had to guess, Dempsey would peg this jackass as the ringleader.

"Don't tell me we're letting this happen, Mustang," Munn said, his voice a wet fire.

"I could put a fucking round right through his fat face—even from here," Grimes murmured.

"Stay on task, people," Dempsey said, working to keep his voice calm despite feeling the exact same aggravation as Munn and Grimes.

"Well, well . . . looks like I have a match," Baldwin said, his voice taking on the air of a man perusing the jelly aisle at the grocery and finding the last jar of fig preserves.

"Just give it to us," Dempsey said.

"More than ninety-seven percent that is Sarah Bonney in the hot tub. The other woman has her back to us. If she turns, Elizabeth, be sure to get a picture."

"Roger that, *Stable*," she said, emphasizing his call sign to remind the Signals Chief he was slipping again, but Dempsey suspected Baldwin was oblivious to the subtext.

"Sarah Bonney—the British aid worker?" Wang asked.

"Yes. She's a pediatric surgeon. She and an American nurse, one Diana Curtis, disappeared from a refugee hospital run by *Medecins Sans Frontieres* in Tunisia nearly two months ago."

"Ten bucks says the other woman is Diana Curtis," Munn chimed in.

"A sound bet, statistically speaking of course," Baldwin came back.

“I remember that kidnapping,” Dempsey grumbled, ignoring their banter. “Didn’t AQIM claim responsibility?”

“Yes, Al Qaeda Islamic Maghreb issued a statement the next day,” Baldwin said. “The attack left three wounded and two dead. CIA analysts tracked the group to a camp south of Ajdabiya. A joint French commando and US SEAL team hit the site forty-eight hours later, killing a few dozen terrorists, but Sarah and Diana were not found among the dead.”

Dempsey silently cursed Baldwin for identifying these women and sharing their story. Names made it real. Backstory made it real. Staying on mission had been a bitter pill for him to swallow before, but now it was going to be gnaw-off-his-fingers impossible.

“So these girls definitely changed hands at least once,” Dempsey said, rubbing his beard. “I’m not aware of regular contact between AQIM and any Chechen terror groups, though.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you,” Baldwin replied. “This is strange.”

“We can’t leave them, JD,” Grimes said, talking off mike. “We just can’t. Let me take the leader out.”

With a word, she could send the asshole in the hot tub straight to hell, and probably the pair of guards, too. But even if Grimes was perfect on the WinMag, she wouldn’t be able to headshot *everyone* on that boat. The bad guys who survived would cut anchor and run—killing the girls later and then dumping the bodies overboard. On top of that, the al-Fahkoury op would implode. al-Fahkoury would squirt, and it would be months, maybe years, before they got another shot at him.

“What are we gonna do?” Munn asked in his ear.

Dempsey said nothing as he watched the ringleader badger the girl in the hot tub into drinking champagne while the other woman rocked on the deck, hugging herself.

Son of a bitch.

“What is your tactical recommendation, Charger One? You’re the strike lead.” Dempsey knew Munn would see this as a test, but even a test would reveal where the man stood in his development as a team leader.

“Rescue op. I want to go get them, like right fucking now.”

“Understood,” Dempsey said. “But I didn’t ask what you *wanted* to do. I asked for your tactical recommendation.”

He hated the cold-ass son of a bitch he had become. He hated how knowing the big picture had made him a spook—a *Jones*, they would have called him back in the SEAL Teams. At times like these, he wished he was still a door kicker. It was so much easier to hate the higher-ups for making the unpopular call than to have to make the hard call himself.

“If we hit the yacht now, al-Fahkoury will squirt,” Munn said in a tight, strained voice.

“That’s right,” Dempsey said. “But we have satellite coverage. We can track the yacht, notify the Italians, and they can sortie a rescue. It’s not a lost cause, people. So unless anybody can convince me of a way to rescue the hostages without jeopardizing the al-Fahkoury op, we stay the course.”

Grimes lifted her head and turned to look at him. He met her eyes. She didn’t say anything; she didn’t have to. He hated himself for making this call, but it was the right call.

“I have an idea,” Munn said, his voice suddenly hopeful. “Let me come up and pitch it to you.”

Of course you do, Dempsey thought, shaking his head. He glanced at his Suunto watch. Assuming Baldwin was right, which statistically he invariably was, they still had more than six hours until the sunrise meet. “All right. Come up and tell me what you’ve got.”

“We have a positive ID on the other hostage,” Baldwin suddenly announced. “Eighty-one percent confidence level she is Diana Curtis,

mother of three from Canton, Ohio. Dale has just informed me her husband is a pastor. This was her first trip outside CONUS—a mission trip coordinated through her church.”

“Wonderful, just what I *didn't* need to hear,” Dempsey mumbled to himself as he began to pace. Whatever Munn’s plan was, he hoped it had legs. Because despite the risk, despite the orders, Dempsey knew himself. When it came to making the hard choices, his heart always found a way to fuck things up.

CHAPTER 3

Dempsey glanced at his watch as al-Fahkoury's three-vehicle caravan pulled into the marina parking lot.

0730—right on time.

The driver's window of the lead Mercedes slid down, and June Latif—one of two new Ember recruits—walked up to talk to the driver. *This*, what they were doing right now, was the revised plan—Munn's plan—and it was insane. Insane enough that it might actually work. At least that's what Dempsey told himself. To grab al-Fahkoury *and* rescue the hostages on the yacht, they had no choice but to insinuate themselves into the middle of the bad guys' party. What Latif was doing right now, trying to convince al-Fahkoury that the plans had changed and that they would be playing escort on the water taxi, was the riskiest and most critical phase of the op. Latif had to succeed; otherwise, Ember would have no choice but to intervene prematurely, which virtually guaranteed an unsatisfactory outcome. While Latif negotiated, Dempsey forced himself into the slouch of a weary ditchdigger or toll-booth operator, body language that screamed, *I'm just a hired gun; they don't pay me enough to care.*

“It would appear that they have agreed to the terms,” Baldwin said in his ear, summarizing the rapid-fire exchange in Arabic between Latif and al-Fahkoury’s driver. A beat later, the rear passenger door of the middle vehicle, a black Land Rover, swung open, and al-Fahkoury stepped out. The terrorist was much younger than Dempsey had expected—no older than early thirties. Unlike so many of his jihadi counterparts whom Dempsey had hunted over the years, al-Fahkoury had eschewed the stereotypical gray tunic for hipster wear. His jet-black hair was coiffed David Beckham style, his beard short and meticulously trimmed. With his Persol sunglasses, expensive black loafers, and gray suit coat over a black T-shirt, the man didn’t look like any terrorist Dempsey had crossed swords with before. Was this the new face of terror—a millennial mastermind waging war from an app on his mobile phone?

al-Fahkoury didn’t even spare Dempsey a glance as he strode past, briefcase in hand, toward the marina below. Latif fell into conversation with one of al-Fahkoury’s men and even managed to get the stern-faced bodyguard to smile at a joke. The former Green Beret officer had transitioned seamlessly into his role at Ember. And for missions like this one, Junayd Abd al-Latif, the only son of parents from the United Arab Emirates, was the perfect fit. Dempsey fell in at the back of the entourage, but immediately one of al-Fahkoury’s goons slipped behind him to control the rear of the human caravan.

Three minutes later, the entourage reached the dock. The Damor water taxi had lines reminiscent of a thirty-one-foot Boston Whaler. Like the Whaler, this boat sat high in the water with a closed bow and tall pilot house. From amidships to the stern, it featured a generous open-air seating section, perfect for relaxing or fishing. The layout was ideal for what they had planned. Dempsey glanced up at the pilot house and resisted the urge to give a nod to Munn, who wore a faded blue fishing cap and manned the helm as the boat captain. al-Fahkoury paused on the dock, taking measure of the boat before boarding. Dempsey

capitalized on his hesitation, stepped aboard the *Damor*, and took a corner position near the stern on the port side. Latif followed suit, taking up a mirror image position on the starboard side, and in doing so, they assumed tactical control of the vessel. Like two sentries at the corners of a courtyard, they now owned the space and could not be flanked by al-Fahkoury's men. This was a tactical gaff on al-Fahkoury's part, and the expression on the young hipster terrorist's face showed he recognized as much as he climbed aboard.

Not surprisingly, al-Fahkoury entered the pilot house and sat in the middle of a U-shaped bench seat on the port side. Munn gave the terrorist a cordial nod from where he sat with one ass cheek on the lip of a swiveling captain's chair. al-Fahkoury nodded back, then propped an ankle on a knee and held his black case in his lap. Two of his bodyguards took bookend positions, one on each side, but remained standing, rifles held at the ready. The third goon stood between Dempsey and Latif—a position that would not work well for him shortly. The remainder of al-Fahkoury's security detail stayed on shore—two men walking back toward their vehicles and one remaining on the dock.

Luca Martin, a former Marine who was playing Captain Dan's deckhand, cast off the lines and then hopped onto the bow as the *Damor* pulled away from the L-shaped pier. Martin scooted backward along the narrow gunwale outside the cockpit, nodding and smiling deferentially at everyone he passed on his way into the pilot house. Dempsey grunted and shook his head at the "lowly deckhand." Then he shifted his attention to the bay, scanning the surrounding water for other boats that might be converging on their position or the yacht. So far, things had gone smoothly—a little too smoothly—and now was about that time in an op when Mr. Murphy liked to throw him curveballs. Who the hell knew what either one of these terrorist organizations was planning? If Ember had unwittingly insinuated themselves in the middle of a trap laid by one party for the other, then they were screwed.

As long as we shoot first, he told himself, it shouldn't matter.

The five-minute ride from the marina out to the yacht went by in aching slow motion. Dempsey had to fight back the need to be at combat ready when his cover required he look bored and nonthreatening. God, how he hated this spooky shit.

“Okay, boys,” Grimes said through his earpiece from her sniper nest position back at the hotel. “Here’s the roll call. al-Fahkoury is HVT One. His three guards are Tango One, Two, and Three, moving aft to forward. HVT Two is the boss from the hot tub earlier. The two shooters who’ve taken up position on the stern platform of the yacht are Yankee One and Two, port and starboard respectively. Yankee Three is the guy standing beside HVT Two on the party deck. In the bridge you’ve got the skipper and Yankee Four and Five. The two shooters with the hostages belowdecks are Yankee Six and Seven.”

As Munn closed on the bigger vessel’s stern from the starboard side, Dempsey forced himself to look away from the yacht, scanning for waterborne threats as he protected their “guest.” The plan worked only if everyone made the proper assumptions—the bad guys on the yacht assumed that he and Latif were part of al-Fahkoury’s security detail, while al-Fahkoury and his goons believed they’d been sent to escort him by HVT Two, a man Baldwin had identified as Malik from parsing pirated comms Wang had obtained during the night. Once the shooting commenced, Ember would exploit the precious few seconds of confusion before it became clear to both groups that they were unwanted party crashers.

Munn turned the bow of the *Damor* west and eased the starboard beam along the diving platform of the yacht, which presented the *Damor*’s stern toward the beach and Grimes in her balcony room in the cliffside hotel. Dempsey noticed that Munn was taking his sweet time docking, giving Grimes plenty of opportunity to set up her shots. Martin moved back to the gunwale and threw the bow line to one of the Yankee shooters on the yacht’s stern. The line landed limply on the

deck at his feet. Grudgingly, the man released his weapon and bent to pick it up. Then he helped Martin ease the Damor alongside.

“Martin, you’ll need to drop flat when the shooting starts to clear my lines,” Grimes said, her voice tight. “Okay, here we go . . .”

Dempsey gripped his rifle and tapped his finger on the trigger guard, forcing himself to look anywhere but the yacht.

“Three . . .” Grimes said, starting the countdown.

Martin called for the yacht-shooter-turned-line-tender to take up slack.

“Two . . .”

The man on the platform barked something back in Arabic.

“One . . .”

A bullet streaked inbound, invisible but accompanied by a faintly audible whistle.

The line-tending shooter toppled over, hit the edge of the deck with a wet thud, then fell into the water. Dempsey turned to look aft. Everyone else froze in confusion, except Martin, who dropped low, and Latif, who charged forward into the pilot house. Someone hollered in Arabic. Then came another whistle, and Yankee Two’s head exploded in a geyser of red and gray.

“*Ahtami! Ahtami!*” Dempsey hollered, still playing his role by ordering everyone to take cover. The man beside him, one of al-Fahkoury’s goons, clutched at his neck after a .300 Winchester Magnum round from Grimes’s death machine tore the front of his throat out. Dempsey felt wet spatter on the side of his face as he took a knee.

“Lines are bad on Tango Two and Three,” Grimes said, referring to the guards flanking al-Fahkoury inside the pilot house. “Moving on to Yankee Three.”

“What is happening?” one of the guards screamed in Arabic.

al-Fahkoury was on his knees, his case clasped to his chest.

“Take him below,” Latif shouted, pointing to the hatch at the front of the pilot house that led to the small sleeping cabin in the bow.

The two bodyguards reacted immediately, pulling al-Fahkoury up and then pushing him toward the hatch. As they turned, Latif moved behind the guard on al-Fahkoury's left and raised his rifle just as Dempsey sighted on the man to al-Fahkoury's right. Latif nodded and they squeezed their triggers, delivering simultaneous headshots. al-Fahkoury whirled to look at Dempsey, his face ashen with shock and dismay.

Dempsey put the iron sight on the terrorist's forehead and smiled. "Mr. Jones, will you escort our guest belowdecks, please?" he said to Martin.

al-Fahkoury's eyes went wide with fear and recognition as he put together the pieces about what had just happened.

"My pleasure," the former Marine said and took al-Fahkoury by both arms, deftly whipped a nylon zip tie around the man's wrists, and then shoved the terrorist headfirst through the hatch and down into the Damor's berthing cabin.

"All right, fellas, let's do this," Dempsey said, whirling toward the yacht.

Munn wore a grin on his face but had fire burning in his eyes. He knelt, opened a compartment under the pilot console, and pulled out three tactical vests and an assault rifle. He tossed vests to Dempsey and Latif. The trio quickly kitted up and then moved in tactical crouches toward the stern while Martin stayed behind to guard al-Fahkoury.

"Two shooters moving aft on the yacht—Yankee Four and Five. HVT Two and Yankee Three are retreating, moving forward," Grimes called out. "My lines are bad. I only have one shot, the skipper on the bridge."

"Take him," Dempsey said. "Before he hits the throttle and breaks our connection."

Dempsey heard glass shatter as he climbed off the Damor onto the yacht's deck.

“Skipper is down. Four and Five are still amidships in cover positions. No shot.”

“Boarding now,” Munn replied, then, turning to Latif, said, “Call out to these guys. Sound panicked.”

“Help!” Latif shouted in Arabic. “There’s a small boat. They’re shooting at us.”

Dempsey took a knee and fired several two-round bursts into the open water. Munn squeezed off a burst as well.

“*Eijal! Eijal!*” Latif shouted. *Hurry! Hurry!*

“Yankee Four and Five just broke cover,” Grimes said.

Dempsey pivoted inboard. One of the two shooters stepped into view, charging around the hot tub and scanning over his weapon but confused about where and whom he should be targeting. Dempsey dropped him with two rounds to the chest. A heartbeat later, the second shooter appeared, and Grimes dispatched him with a headshot.

“Yankee Four and Five are KIA,” Grimes announced. “Three and HVT Two are moving through the topside salon. Recommend you pursue before they get belowdecks.”

“Charger Three, how is the package?” Munn asked.

“HVT One is secure,” Martin answered.

Munn nodded and then fell in beside Dempsey. They moved as a pair across the stern deck toward the sliding glass doors leading to a luxuriously appointed salon. Latif followed a stride behind. Ahead, two figures were fleeing, HVT Two in the lead, trailed by his lone remaining bodyguard.

“*Musaeada!*” Latif shouted, calling for help in Arabic, his voice tight with fear and panic.

The ploy had the desired effect, with Yankee Three hesitating just long enough for Munn to get off a shot. Munn’s bullet hit the bodyguard center mass, sending him stumbling. Dempsey followed a split second later with a headshot, dropping the guard. Alone and with nowhere left to run or hide, HVT Two froze. Raising his hands in the

air, the man identified as Malik slowly turned to face the assaulters who had just taken control of his yacht. Instead of fear, however, rage contorted Malik's face.

"Who the hell are you?" he said in English, a slight British accent masking something thicker underneath.

"On your knees," Munn commanded.

Staring daggers, Malik complied.

"I have movement belowdecks," Grimes reported on the comms channel. "One of the shooters is in the stairwell. Get ready . . . No, wait. He stopped . . . He's heading back to the stateroom with the hostages. He's securing the door . . ."

"Cuff this guy," Munn said to Latif, who pulled a pair of plastic flex-cuffs from his pocket. "Then we'll head below and take the others."

Dempsey turned to Munn. "We're gonna need to breach that room. How do you want to—"

A flash of movement in his peripheral vision cut him off. He looked right as the kneeling prisoner's hand snapped out with lightning speed to grab Latif's wrist. Malik twisted, spinning on his knees and jerking Latif off balance toward him. Latif went for his rifle with his free hand, but Malik was too fast and drove an elbow into the side of the young operator's head.

Dempsey surged into action, bringing the barrel of his weapon around for a kill shot. He squeezed the trigger, but Malik spun low, dropping under the line of fire, his body fluid and powerful like a wrestler on a mat. His left palm found the floor and his hips pivoted as if on a fulcrum, and he snapped a kick at Dempsey's leading leg. His heel connected—driving deep and hard into the meat of Dempsey's thigh, just barely missing his knee. The blow knocked Dempsey off balance and sent him pitching forward. As he tumbled, combat training took over. Instead of trying to catch himself, he rolled through the fall and scrambled into a combat crouch.

At the same time, Malik popped to his feet and snatched the pistol from the front of Latif's kit. Latif, still dazed from the blow to his head, didn't even react. Both men, Malik and Dempsey, brought the muzzles of their weapons to bear on the other, with Dempsey juking right as he squeezed the trigger. Malik's pistol discharged. Dempsey felt the bullet streak past his left cheek as his own round found its mark. He squeezed the trigger again and watched as his first bullet tore through Malik's jaw and the second blew out the center of the man's throat. The entire sequence had transpired in less than three seconds but felt a hundred times that long.

"What the fuck was that?" Munn said, surging toward the fallen shooter. Munn put another round through the man's forehead, then turned to help Latif.

The former Green Beret had taken a knee and was shaking his head. "What just happened?" he said through his breath.

"You got schooled, brother," Munn said. "That's what happened."

Munn glanced at Dempsey, jaw set and eyebrows up. Dempsey answered him with a curt nod, reading his friend's mind: the dead man was no lowly proxy for a money guy, the way they'd assumed. Moves like that were a product of experience and advanced combat training. Malik was somebody of consequence, but figuring out who that somebody was fell onto Baldwin's to-do list now. Dempsey had a more urgent problem to deal with—the hostages.

"Everyone okay?" Grimes asked in his ear.

"All good," Dempsey said. "HVT Two is KIA." He turned to Latif. "Take a few breaths, clear those stars, and tell me when you're ready."

Latif did as instructed, pressed to his feet, and said, "Let's do this."

Dempsey turned to his team leader. "How do you want to do this?"

"Mustang, Charger One," Munn said to Grimes. "Gimme the skinny."

"I hold four warm bodies in a stateroom. The two hostages are bound to chairs, and the two armed shooters look to be taking cover behind them," Grimes reported.

“Which side of the ship, port or starboard?”

“I have a broadside view of the yacht and no depth perspective to work with at present,” Grimes said. “It’s hard to tell with thermals, but if I had to guess, I’d say starboard.”

“This sucks, dude,” Munn said to Dempsey. “We have to stealth approach through the corridor, we’re not positive what side they’re on, they’re using the girls as human shields so we can’t just hose them down on the breach. The bulkheads on commercial vessels are thin. There’s nothing to stop them from cutting us to ribbons in the hall, especially if we kick in the wrong door. This is fucking dangerous, JD.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a dangerous job,” Dempsey said with a thin fatalistic smile. “You don’t have to tell me. I’ve been doing this every day for twenty years, and I didn’t take a ten-year hiatus to play doctor and dole out pills to kids with VD.”

Munn flashed Dempsey a quintessential *You’re such an asshole* smirk. “All right, then. Here’s the plan . . .”

After briefly conferring, Munn took the lead as he, Dempsey, and Latif approached the oval hatch at the end of the salon. On the other side of the hatch, a narrow stairwell led to the sleep quarters below. Dempsey sighted over Munn’s shoulder as they descended, careful not to make any noise. The stairway opened into the middle of a narrow corridor stretching parallel to the keel. He counted six stateroom cabin doors—three port, three starboard—and a single door at the end of the passage.

“That room at the end of the corridor appears to be a bathroom,” Grimes said, reading his mind. “Third door on your right, I think that’s where they are.”

Munn looked at Dempsey, eyebrows raised in query.

Dempsey gave a single nod.

Let’s do this.

They advanced, slinking silently over the carpeted passage in a low crouch. As they moved toward the third stateroom on the right, Munn’s

warning from minutes ago played in Dempsey's head: *The bulkheads on commercial vessels are thin. There's nothing to stop them from cutting us to ribbons in the hall, especially if we kick in the wrong door . . .*

The passage creaked behind him, spiking his heart rate. He stopped and glanced over his shoulder. Latif, who was frozen midstride, wore a pained look on his face, and Dempsey imagined Ember's newest member silently cursing the floor supports. The next three seconds would tell if they would be punished with an enemy strafe through the walls that cut them all down. When it didn't happen, he signaled for Latif to take it slow and turned back to Munn. The doc had maintained his stealth, advanced past the target door, and now stood with his back pressed against the bulkhead. Dempsey moved into position on the other side of the door.

"No changes with thermals," Grimes said softly. "I hold the three of you in the passage and the four warm bodies in the stateroom. The yacht has drifted, and I have a better angle. Confirm starboard side."

In Dempsey's mind's eye, he could see her stretched out on the table, her body one with the sniper rifle as she watched their heat signatures through the scope.

"It's not a wide stateroom," she continued. "The hostages are seated facing the door, chairs nearly pushed together, shoulder to shoulder. Both shooters are kneeling behind them, aiming around the outside shoulder of each woman—the left shooter is far left; the right shooter is far right."

Dempsey double tapped the corner of his jawbone next to his ear canal to send a "double click" acknowledgment via the bone-conduction, wireless earbud. Then he gave Munn the hand signal to set a breacher charge. The former SEAL surgeon silently went to work. After the charge was set, Munn looked up and grinned. It was a grin born from a thousand operations, in a thousand shitty places, where the two of them had narrowly avoided meeting their maker a thousand different times. It was a grin that said, *I love this shit, and it's definitely going to kill me*

someday, but I don't think that day is today. And it was a grin that said, *By God, whatever it takes, I'm going to rescue the hostages on the other side of this door.*

Dempsey grinned back.

He held up three fingers and began counting down. On one, Munn detonated the charge. The cabin door exploded, sending shards of melamine and foam core insulation everywhere. Screams filled the air as Dempsey followed Munn through the door and into the room while Latif covered them from the passageway. The scene was just as Grimes had described. One shooter was crouched to the left, holding an assault rifle, using his hostage as a human shield while he squinted and tried to clear his vision. The right-side shooter was armed with a pistol but had taken a different tack. While clutching the woman's torso from behind, he had his cheek pressed against her left ear and the muzzle of his pistol jammed under her chin.

Two loud pops echoed to Dempsey's left as Munn dispatched his target with a double tap to the head. Dempsey fixed his aim on the center of the other terrorist's forehead but didn't pull the trigger. *Not yet*, he told himself. *Work the angle.* He had zero separation between the hostage's and the terrorist's heads. He needed a straight line; every eighth of an inch mattered.

"Let her go," Dempsey said, his voice cool and collected. "If you let her go, I won't shoot you."

"Get out, or I kill her," the man threatened in heavily accented English, his eyes darting back and forth between Dempsey and Munn.

"Everyone else is dead. Malik is dead," Dempsey said, taking a cautious step forward and drifting slightly inboard to get a perfectly straight line. "There's no one left to help you. There's nowhere to go."

"I kill her, I kill her, I swear," the shooter said, sweat pouring from his brow.

Dempsey's gaze ticked to the pistol pressed under the woman's neck, checking whether the shooter's index finger was on the trigger

or the guard. Seeing it on the guard, he exhaled, stilled his targeting dot, and squeezed the trigger. His M4 roared, spit fire, and the bullet punched a hole in the center of the shooter's forehead. The terrorist pitched backward; his pistol clattered to the floor.

The hostage on the left, the older of the two women, promptly passed out, going limp in her restraints and sliding partway to the floor. The woman on the right met Dempsey's gaze, smiled, and then began to tremble uncontrollably in her chair.

"Clear," Dempsey hollered.

"Clear," Munn replied.

He moved quickly behind the hostages, confirmed that his bullet had ended his target, and then kicked the pistol to the corner out of reach.

"Hostages are secure," Munn reported over the comms channel.

"Sarah Bonney and Diana Curtis?" Dempsey said, looking at the younger of the two women as Munn knelt to revive the other hostage.

"Yes," she said, a tear spilling onto her cheek. "I'm Sarah. Are you Navy SEALs?"

A nostalgic smile spread across his face. When he'd been with Tier One, they'd had a mantra they used in situations like this, words he hadn't had the joy and privilege of saying in what felt like an eternity: *We're Navy SEALs, and we're here to take you home.* Those days were long gone, but as he crouched to cut off her restraints, he said the next best thing: "We're American operators, and we're here to take you home."

CHAPTER 4

Somewhere . . .

Without explanation or provocation, they beat her.

In the aftermath, she writhed on the floor and wept.

Amanda had never been hit before. Not really. Sure, there was the infamous Allen “spanking incident” when she was six, when her father had lit up her backside after Amanda had defied instructions and run away to play unsupervised in the neighborhood. But this was something entirely different. A man had bludgeoned her with closed fists and kicks, and the acute pain and trauma delivered by each blow redefined in her psyche what it meant to suffer. The pain was only compounded by the trauma she’d suffered from the explosion during the attack in Ankara. In television and film, heroes got pummeled with obscene regularity only to recover moments later with a wince and a glib wisecrack. That was a fantasy. A half hour or more had passed since her bludgeoning, and she was still a wreck on the floor. The pain made it difficult to think clearly, and a primitive reflex had usurped her wits during the event so that she’d cowered like an animal and begged for mercy.

Yes, she would be compliant.

Yes, she would do whatever they commanded her to do . . . so long as the man with the broken front tooth and the dead eyes didn't beat her again.

The two places that hurt the most were her abdomen and her left eye socket. The baseball-size hematoma on the side of her face made it difficult for her to ascertain by touch if the bones of her face were broken. Probably. Her abdomen, however, concerned her more. She had no medical training, but she'd watched enough *Grey's Anatomy* to know that the stuff on the inside—stomach, intestines, liver, pancreas, kidneys—was all pretty important.

Right now, her list of wants and needs was short—not being tortured and beaten again was the top entry, with not dying a close second.

She stopped crying, and eventually she was able to lie still in a heap of misery. More time passed—she didn't know how much—and she managed to sit up. She coughed, cleared her throat, and spit a gob of bloody phlegm onto the floor beside her. She probed the side of her face, wincing as she did. She moved her jaw around and decided that maybe her face wasn't broken after all.

To call the space she was in a room would be an exaggeration; it seemed more like a large plywood closet. The floor was dirty and stained. The dark reddish-brown spots were dried blood, she knew, and the rest, she presumed, had been made by other bodily fluids from previous *guests*. The windowless walls were bare and unpainted. The only light came from a single low-wattage bulb dangling overhead. A dingy metal bucket stood upright in the corner to her left. She was thirsty—so very, very thirsty—and she debated making the short crawl to the bucket to check it for water. But the fly buzzing near the rim told her it wasn't worth the effort. It wasn't a water pail.

She swallowed, tasted blood in her mouth, and started to sob again.

God, my brain is mush . . . I suppose getting blown up and hit in the head repeatedly will do that to a person. I probably have a TBI.

She'd been through a mini-SERE module at the Farm, but the purpose of the training had been familiarization, not preparation. Her diplomatic post was supposed to keep her insulated from scenarios where she'd need to utilize "survive, evade, escape, and resist" methodologies. Yes, she worked for the CIA, but she was not an operator; she was just a Collection Management Officer, whose job was to serve as a bridge between the intelligence "collectors" in the field abroad and the intelligence community back home. Sometimes that meant running her own assets in the host nation, but that activity was not supposed to be dangerous. She wasn't meant to be in situations like this. She wasn't meant to be in places like this.

Footsteps sounded outside. Dread instantly settled over her like a lead blanket. Next, she heard fingers fiddling with the padlock on the metal latch on the outside of the door. She scrambled into the corner.

It's too soon, she pleaded silently. *Too soon for the man with the broken tooth and dead eyes to come back.*

She hadn't told him anything the first time, but he hadn't asked her any questions, either. It was her welcome beating—a little something to set expectations and establish the ground rules. But they would ask her questions. They would try to extract information from her. And they would succeed. Everyone broke eventually . . . everyone.

She heard the lock being pulled from the latch.

Her body began to tremble.

The door swung open and bright light bathed the cell, making her squint. A backlit figure stood in the doorway—medium height, narrow shoulders, wearing a head scarf. This was not the man with the broken tooth and the dead eyes; her visitor was a woman. Amanda's heart rate immediately slowed. The woman stepped into the cell and handed her a bottle of water.

"Drink," she said in Turkish-accented English.

Amanda reached up and took the water bottle. With clumsy fingers, she unscrewed the plastic cap and raised the spout to her lips. She

took a tentative first sip; warm water wet her tongue. The taste was odd and coppery, but it was drinkable. She drank a third of the contents while keeping her gaze on the woman. Her stern, cold expression did nothing to warm Amanda's spirits.

"Do you speak English?" Amanda asked between sips. She'd worked hard to become fluent in Turkish, completing the Defense Language Institute immersion course before posting to Ankara. Once in country, she'd hired a private tutor to accelerate her understanding of dialects and colloquial speech. The hard work had paid off, and she was nearly fluent in the spoken language now. She didn't reveal this information to her captors. Their assumption that she was monolingual was one of the few exploits she had available to her.

The woman did not answer. Instead, she kneeled and leaned in to inspect the hematoma on the side of Amanda's face, grasping Amanda's chin between thumb and forefinger and turning it to the side to get a better look.

"My name is Amanda Allen," she said. "I'm an American citizen."

The woman said nothing.

"I work for the US State Department in Turkey."

The woman ignored her as she took out a penlight and shined it in Amanda's eyes—

Checking for pupil dilation, Amanda thought.

"Open your mouth," the woman said.

"What?"

"Open your mouth."

Amanda did so and the woman looked inside.

"You have a broken teeth?"

"No, I don't think so. Are you a doctor?"

"Lay down," the woman said, avoiding eye contact.

Amanda did as she instructed. The woman pulled up Amanda's shirt and checked her rib cage and then palpated her abdomen. When the exam was finished, the woman got to her feet and turned to leave.

“Wait,” Amanda said, sitting up quickly and wincing for it. “What’s your name?”

The woman stopped at the door, turned back, and stared down at Amanda with callous judgment, as if she were a pathetic creature.

“Will you help me?” Amanda asked. “Please.”

“Drink” was all the woman said, and then she closed and locked the door behind her.

Amanda’s spirits sank. Was the woman a nurse or a doctor the terrorists had conscripted to check on her? Or maybe the woman was a member of whichever terrorist organization had taken her. ISIS had found some success recruiting women into their operational ranks. Was ISIS behind the attack in Ankara? Her instincts said no. The Islamic State specialized in terrorizing civilians. Its modus operandi was to inflict maximum carnage in public places, thereby inciting fear and chaos. This operation had specifically targeted the US Ambassador and a Turkish Interior Minister. It was politically motivated.

She suddenly felt ill.

A beat later, she vomited. The heaving sent searing pain across her flank and rib cage. *I must have broken a rib*, she thought, buckled over and panting. On hands and knees, she stared at the little puddle of vomit in front of her. It was mostly water. A third of the precious water they’d given her was now wasted, and it made her mad.

I’m going to have to drink slower . . . spread out my sips and pace myself.

When the nausea passed, she eased back onto her haunches and then gingerly leaned against the wall. Staring at the locked plywood door, she resisted the compulsion to zone out. She needed to keep her mind active. Observation, data collection, analysis, and the communication of information and disinformation—these were the weapons of her trade. Despite the pain and the weariness, she had to put her skills to use at every opportunity.

If that woman comes back, I need to try to make a connection, get her to care about me. I need to collect as much information as possible: Where am I, who took me, and why?

That last piece of information was the most critical. They'd killed the Ambassador but taken her. Why? It didn't make any sense. Her mind was sluggish, but eventually the gears began to turn: Scenario one, her kidnapping had been an opportunistic decision. She was young, Western, and reasonably attractive, which made her a valuable commodity for human trafficking. Scenario two, they knew who her father was, which made her a valuable ransom candidate. In both scenarios, their objective would be the same—trade her for money. Every terrorist organization needed to raise capital. It was the most logical explanation for why she, and she alone, had been spared.

But there was a third scenario, one she was afraid to even contemplate.

What if they had taken her because her official cover had been compromised? Because they knew she was CIA?

What if *she*, not the Ambassador, had been the target of the operation?

CHAPTER 5

National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC)

Liberty Crossing

McLean, Virginia

May 5

0230 Local Time

Kelso Jarvis sneezed and barely got the handkerchief up in time to cover his face. “Excuse me,” he said as he made his way down the corridor toward the briefing room.

“Bless you,” said his Chief of Staff, Petra Felsk. Several others traveling in his wake, including his Deputy Director of Intelligence Integration, Catherine Morgan, echoed her.

“Damn cold,” he grumbled and stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket.

From a SOPMOD M4-carrying Tier One operator to a watery-eyed bureaucrat with a hanky. How the hell did this happen?

This self-deprecating sentiment was a gross simplification of his evolution, however. Jarvis was not just any old watery-eyed bureaucrat.

He was the Director of National Intelligence—the highest ranking official in the US intelligence community, responsible for overseeing the budget, operational priorities, and collection activities of the nation's sixteen separate intelligence agencies. The CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, NSA, and intelligence departments of each branch of the US military all worked for him, making Kelso Jarvis the second most powerful man in America. Which was why not a day went by since he'd accepted the appointment that he didn't wake up contemplating whether today would be the day he quit.

“The late-spring bugs are the worst,” said Reginald Buckingham, the Director of the NCTC, walking on Jarvis's left. “My personal theory is that they've had all winter to fly under the radar and cross-pollinate with all the other germs. They wait until all the regular cold and flu bugs have run their course, then they strike, catching everybody by surprise.”

“It's just a cold, Reggie,” Jarvis said, suppressing the urge to hack up a throatful of phlegm, “not some virus conspiracy.”

Despite the bleary-eyed hour, everyone in earshot laughed.

God, he hated that—the sycophantic fawning that his presence spawned. The jibe wasn't that funny, but because he was the DNI, they laughed—laughed at the Director of the NCTC, a man they would never laugh at under normal circumstances. This was how pecking orders were reinforced. Jarvis had no choice but to capitalize on these innocuous little opportunities whenever they presented themselves. Not because he wanted to, but because he had to. He was the chief. He was the boss. Every little test of his authority needed to be acknowledged and deftly dissuaded. Yet he also needed to engender loyalty, honesty, and respect from his subordinates. Reggie Buckingham was a smart, capable Director. As such, Jarvis would never berate, undermine, or question the man's decisions or abilities in a strategic or operational setting. When it mattered, Jarvis built his people up—leaving occasions like this, when it didn't, to knock them down.

His persona as DNI was different from his persona as Director of Ember, just as his persona as Director of Ember had been different from his persona as a Tier One SEAL unit commander. Quality leadership was like a finely tailored suit, he knew, not a one-size-fits-all garment. What motivated a Navy SEAL operating downrange was very different from what motivated a junior CIA analyst in Langley, which was in turn very different from what motivated a senior “career” civil servant in DC. And Jarvis, while not a psychologist by training, was very much a lifelong student of human psychology and had spent his entire professional career reading people and fine-tuning his actions and behavior.

Jarvis entered the conference room and took the seat at the head of the table. After the doors had shut but before everyone else had found their seats, he said, “I know it’s late, and I know everyone is exhausted, but your attendance here speaks volumes. Make no mistake, what happened in Ankara was not just a random act of terrorism. This was a premeditated attack against the United States and against Turkey, our most important NATO ally in the region. US Ambassador Bailey, Turkish Minister Demicri, and dozens of innocent citizens are dead. On top of that, we have an American who is missing and presumed in enemy hands. Every minute counts, people, so bring me up to speed. What are the new developments since the last brief?”

“Unfortunately, sir, we still have more questions than answers,” Buckingham began. “No credible source has taken ownership of the attack.”

“Has a ransom demand for Amanda Allen been made yet?” Petra asked, seated at Jarvis’s right.

“Not yet.”

“Do we think this was ISIS?” Jarvis asked.

“Our data suggests that ISIS activity in Turkey peaked with last year’s New Year’s Eve nightclub attack in Istanbul. We’ve witnessed a declining taper since then as the multiple active campaigns against

ISIS—ours, Iraqi, Kurdish, and Russian-backed Syrian offensives—have fractured the caliphate and hampered their command and control.”

“So are we ruling out ISIS?” Catherine Morgan interjected.

“Not categorically, but operating and loitering in Turkey has become a lot more difficult for ISIS over the past twelve months.”

“What does Ankara have to say on the matter?” Jarvis asked. “Have we talked to anyone at Turkish National Intelligence?”

“They’re being extremely tight-lipped,” Buckingham said. “Not a lot of sharing going on by Turkish MIT at the moment. Relations are strained, and we know it’s being driven from the top. Recent personnel changes aren’t helping, either. Some of our best allies in MIT have been sidelined or pushed out. Thankfully, Ankara Police are still talking to us—at least until Erodan shuts that down, too. Someone at OGA must have called in a favor with the Ankara Chief of Police because this evening we got street-cam video footage of the attack, which is how we confirmed Amanda Allen survived the blast and was abducted.”

“Did anyone pop on facial recognition in the video?” Petra asked.

“We’re still working on that.”

“If it’s not ISIS, I would start with the Kurdistan Freedom Hawks,” Jarvis said. “TAK has been active with recent attacks in both Ankara and Istanbul.”

“Yes, sir, that’s true, and TAK is high on our list of suspects. We’re also looking at PKK, YPG, and other armed activist factions pursuing Kurdish autonomy,” the NCTC Director said. “As you are undoubtedly aware, two years ago, PKK launched the Peoples’ United Revolutionary Movement with the stated aim of overthrowing the Turkish government. By our count, there are no less than nine factions who count themselves as members, including several Marxist-Leninist and Communist terror groups. Even though the individual factions’ specific ideological objectives differ, they all agree that the Erodan regime needs to fall. Seventy

percent of attacks in Turkey last year were promulgated by these PKK-affiliated groups.”

“Both TAK and YPG have disavowed links to PKK,” Catherine Morgan said.

“Intelligence suggests otherwise,” Buckingham replied with a tight smile.

“The newly completed wall along the Syrian border has been a major impediment to the movement of Kurdish personnel in and out of southeastern Turkey,” Petra said, looking from Buckingham to Jarvis. “And the Turkish military has been conducting offensives across the border into Syria, directly striking Kurdish rebel strongholds in Afrin and Manbij. Yesterday’s attack in Ankara could be an act of retribution.”

“CIA has a well-placed asset in PKK—Barakat, I believe is his name,” Jarvis said, looking to Morgan. “Have we heard anything from him?”

“We’ve not had a report for six weeks,” she said, her eyebrows rising with apparent surprise at her boss’s by-name knowledge of this asset. “In fact, this is the longest he’s ever gone dark. CIA is worried about him.”

Jarvis scanned the room, looking for a familiar face from Langley. Not seeing one, he said, “Is everyone here yours, Reggie?”

Buckingham did a quick scan of his own and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Why is no one from Langley here?”

“Well, it’s late. But we’ve been dialoguing with them from the beginning,” Buckingham said and folded his arms across his chest. “I realize this meeting doesn’t feel interagency, but I assure you we’re talking to all the right people.”

“Amanda Allen is CIA,” Jarvis said. “Everyone here knows that, right?”

He got nods back from around the table, but no comments.

“Who’s looking for her on the ground?” he asked.

“Langley is on it,” Buckingham said. “Ground branch is looking for her.”

“That’s not good enough,” Jarvis said, both annoyed and flabbergasted. “Whoever took Allen is going to move her out of country. It might have happened already. This needs to be a coordinated effort so we can bring all the resources of the intelligence community to bear.”

“Agreed,” Buckingham said. Then, after an uncomfortable beat and an obvious effort not to look at Catherine Morgan: “But to be completely honest, sir, we wanted to see which direction you wanted to take things. My predecessor was let go for overstepping his bounds. Given the highly political and sensitive nature of this event, we weren’t sure if you wanted CIA or DIA to take the lead? Or maybe you’d prefer to task that black-vapor task force of yours. NCTC has stepped on all kinds of toes the past couple of years, and I don’t want to keep making the same mistakes.”

Jarvis resisted the urge to scowl. He resisted the urge to sigh, to curse, to condemn, or to use sarcasm. Reggie Buckingham had just been brazenly honest with him and highlighted the exact reason Jarvis had started Ember in the first place—institutional paralysis perpetuated by bullshit rice-bowl mentalities and supersize bureaucrat egos. The oblique reference to his predecessor’s firing by Catherine Morgan during her short tenure as acting DNI was not lost on Jarvis, either. That single act of perceived retribution against his predecessor for protecting Ember had left a mark on Buckingham’s psyche. It was astonishing to Jarvis that the Director of the NCTC, one of the top posts in the counterterrorism community, had chosen to handcuff himself rather than face professional admonishment.

In his peripheral vision, Jarvis noted Catherine’s jaw set in hard, silent discord. “Your predecessor was put in an impossible situation, Reggie,” Jarvis said calmly. “I’m going to try not to do that with you.”

Buckingham nodded but offered no other reply.

“All right, folks, let’s take a ten-minute break,” Jarvis said, pulling out his handkerchief to wipe his runny nose. Then, turning to Buckingham, he quietly added, “Reggie, why don’t you give CIA Director Barrett a call at home. Tell him that the DNI was disappointed that neither he nor any of his deputies were in attendance at this meeting.”

“Yes, sir,” Buckingham said, nodding and red-faced.

“And ask your people to give me, Petra, and Catherine the room for a few minutes.”

“Roger that,” the NCTC Director said and turned to make it happen.

When the room was theirs, Jarvis exhaled loudly and looked back and forth between the two women he considered to be the brightest and most capable people on his staff, his gaze ultimately settling on Catherine. “What’s our exposure with Allen?”

“She’s green,” Morgan said, not missing a beat. “She’s only been in the position four months. From what I can gather, she’s smart and early feedback was positive; Clandestine Services had high hopes for her. She’s read into most of our operations in the region.”

“How big is her stable of collection assets?”

“Pretty big. Her predecessor was Mike Hughes. Do you know Mike?”

“No,” Jarvis said.

“Well, he left behind some big shoes to fill. Mike was very aggressive in Turkey, spending most of his tenure developing assets. If she was a hard study and committed her network to memory, it could be a problem for us if they break her.”

“That’s assuming her cover was blown and she was the target of the operation,” Petra interjected. “I find that scenario unlikely.”

“So you think she was a target of opportunity?” Morgan asked.

“Not even—I think she was an acquisition of opportunity,” said Petra. “A spur-of-the-moment decision.”

“There’s been no ransom demand yet. Do we think the assholes that took her know who her father is?” Jarvis said.

“The story broke; it’s all over the news. If they didn’t know before, they most certainly do now,” Petra said.

“Has the Chief Justice made a statement yet?” he asked.

“No,” said Petra and Catherine in unison.

He nodded. “Good. I want to be in control of the narrative. Petra, can you reach out to Justice Allen and set up a meeting with him tomorrow—er, I mean, this morning? We also need to get someone from the Joint Hostage Recovery Task Force in the loop here. Make sure it’s someone good.”

“Understood. Will do,” Petra said.

“Regardless of the optics, we have to get Allen back. Whoever did this murdered the US Ambassador in broad daylight in downtown Ankara. They’re obviously intent on making a very loud statement on the global stage, and I’ll be damned if I let them execute Allen on YouTube,” Jarvis growled. “It’s just us now, so I want your unfiltered opinions. Who do you think took her?”

“My money is on TAK,” Morgan said. “They have been the most active terrorist group in Turkey over the past five years, and their MO is bombing police and civilian targets in major cities. Just a month ago, they released a statement reiterating that, and I quote, ‘all the cities of Turkey are our battlegrounds,’ and that their ‘actions will be more intense than in the past.’ They’ve also stated that the recent Turkish offensives in Syria against Kurdish settlements would not go unpunished.”

Jarvis nodded, then looked to Petra.

“My money is on PKK,” she said.

“Why?”

“They have the most resources, and they have an active intelligence collection apparatus inside Turkey. Despite publicly renouncing the use of terrorist tactics, I think they’re escalating. And that’s not to say this attack wasn’t executed by TAK or one of the other factions, but I believe PKK is driving this bus.”

“The common thread I’m hearing from both of you is *escalation*. Erodan is going after the Kurds—no ifs, ands, or buts about it—and the Kurds are fighting back. Still, how TAK or PKK could pull off an attack like this is perplexing to me . . .” Jarvis rubbed his temples. “It would have required dedicated advance ISR—with spotter teams and assets running interference. Maybe PKK has evolved to that level of sophistication, I don’t know, but we can worry about the how later. Right now, we need to focus on two things: one, finding and rescuing Allen, and two, figuring out who is responsible and what they’re planning next. Because mark my words, something else is coming. I can feel it.”

“Agreed,” Petra said. “So we have a decision to make. Do we let CIA manage Allen’s recovery effort, do we take over and put together a joint task force, or do we simply use Ember?”

Tasking Ember was the most expedient solution. It was the easy answer to a difficult problem, but that didn’t make it the right answer. Jarvis sighed with frustration. “Honestly, my immediate inclination is to pick up the phone and conference Shane Smith into this meeting right now. But . . .”

“*But* to ignore the systemic dysfunction we’re witnessing between CIA, DIA, NCTC, and State would be a failure of leadership—a failure of *our* leadership,” Morgan said.

He met her gaze. Was this the new Catherine Morgan talking or the old one? He knew how she felt about Ember. This was the very woman who one year ago had informed him that her first act, were she confirmed as permanent DNI, would be to disband America’s

premier black-ops task force. In an ironic twist of fate, the President had appointed Jarvis as DNI, not Morgan. Instead of firing her, Jarvis had made her his Deputy Director of Intelligence Integration. Since she'd been the one complaining most loudly about silo operations and compartmentalized activities within the IC, he'd decided to put her in charge of implementing policies and structures to address interagency dysfunction. Thus far, she'd made very little progress.

Now wasn't the time to rebuke her, so he simply said, "You are correct in saying that a failure to try to bring order and improvement to the current system would be a failure in leadership. But leadership is also about recognizing the difference between emergency surgery and rehabilitation. This is emergency surgery, and Ember is our crash team on standby. I'm sorry, but we don't have a choice. I'm tasking Ember."

He slipped his hand into his pocket, retrieved his mobile phone, and sent a secure SMS to Shane Smith:

Where is Ember SAD right now?

The response came almost instantly.

Croatia. They just nabbed al-Fahkoury and rescued two hostages.

Good. Have you heard about Turkey?

Yes. Do you have tasking for us?

Wrap up, head to Incirlik, and find Amanda Allen.

Roger.

We'll send you all the intel we have, but you have authority to requisition whatever resources you need.

Roger that, standing by.

Jarvis set his phone on the conference table and looked from Petra to Catherine and back again.

"It was the right call to make," Petra said with a nod.

"I know," he said as a grim foreboding washed over him. "But for Amanda Allen's sake, I just hope we're not too late."

CHAPTER 6

Luxury Yacht La Traviata

Adriatic Sea

Twenty-Six Miles Southwest of Dubrovnic

May 5

1130 Local Time

Dempsey stood on the bow of the yacht, scanning the blue depths of the Adriatic as they cruised in open water.

Five minutes, he'd told them. Just give me five minutes of solitude.

And they had.

He inhaled deeply and let the energy of the sea recharge his soul. Most people feared the ocean. Few beachgoers ever waded beyond waist-deep, and never at night. When he'd gone through BUD/S, the instructors had made his cohort watch the movie *Jaws* before a five-mile swim in the shark-infested waters around San Clemente Island. The message wasn't to fear the ocean. It was that, for a SEAL, the sea was an ally. It was escape. It was victory. Get to the surf, fin out beyond the break water, and the ocean would swallow you up and conceal you from enemies seeking to destroy you. The nostalgic allure was so powerful, he

suddenly felt a compulsion to slip over the railing and disappear, leaving the hamster wheel of missions, responsibility, and killing behind.

It would never happen.

Some dumbass has to run in the hamster wheel, he thought with a chuckle. *Might as well be me.*

“SDV is en route from the *Illinois*,” Munn said in his ear from the bridge, where he was once again at the controls playing skipper. “Five mikes.”

“Check—Charger Three, bring up the package.”

Two double clicks in his ear told him Latif had heard him. Dempsey scanned the horizon looking for a periscope, which he knew was nearby playing peek-a-boo with the rolling waves. The USS *Illinois*—a Virginia-class fast-attack nuclear submarine—was waiting for their arrival. He felt the yacht slow to idle as Munn eased off the throttles. Belowdecks, Martin had been seeing to the rescued hostages, who, despite being a little dehydrated and undernourished, were in physically good condition. Psychologically, however, the women had a long road ahead.

Latif had been assigned to watch al-Fahkoury while they transited. After “the event” with Malik, Dempsey had given Latif the babysitting assignment on purpose—as a show of confidence, but also to make the point never to underestimate an enemy, no matter how benign the perceived risk.

With one final deep breath, Dempsey said goodbye to the sea, turned on a heel, and marched aft. He gave Munn a ball-cap salute as he walked past the bridge and the salon toward the party deck. He circled the hot tub and stepped over Malik—whose body was wrapped like a mummy in a bedspread from the main cabin, held in place by paracord. Dempsey pursed his lips and stared at the corpse. Two decades fighting jihadi terrorists and he had never encountered one who’d transformed like this dude. The speed, the way he’d capitalized on a moment of inattention, the look in his eyes. Malik had executed his escape attempt like a professional soldier. Which was why Dempsey

had made the call to hand the corpse over instead of sinking it when they scuttled *La Traviata*.

Dempsey bent at the waist, grabbed several strands of paracord, and dragged the corpse across the party deck and down a few short steps to the stern platform at the very back of the yacht, the dead man's head conking each tread as he did. Once on the platform, he shoved the body against the hull so it wouldn't accidentally roll overboard. Behind him, he heard commotion and looked up to see Latif leading a hunched and shuffling al-Fahkoury toward him. The terrorist's wrists and ankles were bound, and he wore a black hood over his head.

"How's our new friend doing?" he said to Latif.

"He has little to say," Latif answered. "Nothing, in fact."

"Well, what a good little soldier of the jihad," Dempsey said, climbing the half flight of steps to join them. He patted the terrorist on the shoulder, and the man recoiled. "We need to get our friend all set for his swim."

Latif looked up at him, brows arched. "We're not going to . . ."

"Yeah, we are," Dempsey said, flashing the Green Beret a sly grin. "So he'll need a HEEDs bottle."

Latif shook his head and chuckled. "Okaaaaay, but what if he runs out of air?"

"Then I guess their corpsman will just have to revive him."

Latif gave him a *You're a sick bastard, you know that?* look and then marched off to get the emergency breathing apparatus Dempsey had requested. Dempsey turned his attention back to the sea and scanned for signs of the SDV—the minisub used by SEALs to travel to the target while their host submarine loitered off the coast in deeper water. If he squinted, he thought he could just make out a shadowy silhouette fifty yards off the stern.

"You should have visual on the SDV any second, JD," Munn said in Dempsey's ear.

"Check," he said.

“They’ll ask for John. You authenticate ‘India’ and make the handoff.”

Latif returned holding a HEEDs III emergency-egress compressed-air bottle, just as Dempsey was maneuvering al-Fahkoury down to the stern platform. A stream of bubbles surfaced just off the deck, and a beat later, two SEALs in full combat load and dive gear broke the surface. One kicked back a few yards and raised his assault rifle while finning in place. The closer SEAL emerged with a Sig Sauer P226 pistol pointed directly at Dempsey’s chest; after a beat, he raised his mask.

Dempsey recognized the man instantly.

At six foot six and 230 pounds, Master Chief Shawn White was one of the largest SEALs Dempsey had served with. His muscular physique and leading-man good looks had earned him the handle Hollywood in the Teams. White was one of only a handful of African American SEALs from Dempsey’s generation. He and White had served on different teams most of the time, but they had operated together on several occasions early in their careers and had hung out socially.

Shit, Dempsey thought, adjusting his ball cap, *this could be a problem*.

“Howdy, I’m John,” Dempsey said, changing his voice to incorporate a little Texas twang while subtly rolling down his sleeves. The serpentine scar that wrapped his left forearm was the one defining feature that would betray his former identity. After the explosion in Djibouti when the surgeons were putting him back together, the face guy had tweaked his nose, but no amount of work could hide the damage done to that arm.

White spat out his regulator. “Authenticate?” the SEAL boomed in his deep, distinctive voice.

“India,” Dempsey said, resisting the urge to rub his shaggy beard. Thank God for the beard and his long hair.

“You have something for us?” White said, all business.

Like a highlight reel in his head, memories of kicking ass side by side on their first deployment flashed through Dempsey's mind. He felt an overwhelming urge to wrap his one-time brother up in a bear hug and trade war stories. But he couldn't. The SEAL named Jack Kemper, the man Dempsey had once been, was officially dead and buried. Setting his jaw, Dempsey pulled the plug on the memories and simply said, "Yeah, party boy here," and then, kicking the corpse at his feet, "and his friend."

He turned and waved a hand at Latif, who guided al-Fahkoury to the edge of the platform. Dempsey took the terrorist by the arm, jerking him roughly to get his attention.

"Listen very carefully. You're about to go for a swim. I'm going to put something in your mouth." Latif handed him the HEEDs bottle—a miniature scuba device only slightly taller and wider than a can of soda, with a black rubber mouthpiece sticking out from one side. Dempsey shoved the bottle under the hood, finding the man's mouth and forcing the regulator in. "Breathe through your nose until you hit the water because you'll only have maybe twenty to thirty breaths in this thing." He felt the terrorist shudder and shake his head. "And bite down hard. If it falls out, no one will know you've drowned until they get you inside the lockout chamber. And no one will give a shit, quite frankly. So don't struggle, and try to breathe slowly."

Watching from the water, White screwed up his face in disapproval. He stowed his Sig and held up a second octopus backup regulator intended for buddy breathing.

Dempsey met the SEAL Master Chief's gaze and flashed him a look that said, *I know, I know . . . just having a little fun with this piece of shit.*

A beat later, White's expression changed and recognition flashed in his eyes. "Do I know you?"

"I don't think so," Dempsey said, his grin fading.

"Yeah, okay," White said, but he looked like he'd seen a ghost. "You remind me of someone I know, er, well, used to know."

“There’s a lot of motherfucking Joneses out there who look and talk like me,” Dempsey said, amping up his twang and running his tongue between his lower lip and teeth, “if you know what I mean.”

White’s expression softened, and he actually chuckled at that. “Amen, brother.”

Dempsey seized al-Fahkoury by the shoulders and felt the man trembling in his grip.

“They tell me this guy’s important, so look after him. His friend is just luggage and won’t require any air.”

On cue, Latif dragged the mystery corpse down to the edge of the platform and rolled it unceremoniously into the water. The second SEAL finned over, grabbed the corpse, and disappeared under the water.

“Remember,” Dempsey said in al-Fahkoury’s ear through the hood, “breathe slowly.”

Shaking his head, the SEAL Master Chief finned backward a yard, donned his mask, and popped his regulator into his mouth. Then he gave Dempsey a wave signaling he was ready. With a twinge of evil satisfaction, Dempsey shoved al-Fahkoury off the edge of the platform and into the water. The terrorist submerged briefly then kicked furiously to the surface, trying to keep his hooded head above the water. Dempsey watched White wrap thick powerful arms around the man, pull the terrorist beneath the water, and disappear into the deep.

A beat later, an empty black hood floated back up—the perfect metaphorical exclamation point for this unorthodox prisoner exchange at sea. Dempsey and Latif looked at each other and busted up laughing.

As they made their way back to the bridge, Latif said, “Did you know that guy?”

“Nah,” Dempsey said. “Why?”

“I don’t know, just seemed like the two of you might have been buds . . . once upon a time.”

The corner of Dempsey’s mouth curled up. “Once upon a time . . . maybe.”

He sent Latif down to check on Martin and ready the liberated hostages for their impending EXFIL before wandering to the bridge to caucus with Munn.

“How’d the handoff go?” Munn said, turning to look at him.

“Slick,” Dempsey said. “But, dude, you could have warned me.”

“Warned you about what?”

“Master Chief Shawn White, that’s what. Hollywood was the fucking welcome wagon.”

“No shit?” Munn said, grinning. “Well, I’ll be damned. How is he?”

Dempsey shook his head. “You’re such a dick.”

“Did he recognize you?”

“It was touch and go there for a minute . . . maybe.”

Munn clasped a hand on Dempsey’s shoulder. “Seriously, bro, I didn’t know. If I had, I would have warned you or had Latif manage the handoff.”

“It was bound to happen sooner or later. It’s a small community.”

“Yeah, it is,” Munn said. “And there’s only one Hollywood.”

They shared a nostalgic smile, and then Dempsey said, “Is the helo inbound?”

“Yeah, it will be here in twelve mikes. And then Adamo wants us for some new tasking.”

Dempsey nodded, then looked around at the beautifully appointed pilot house with a knot in his stomach. “Are we set to scuttle this bitch?”

“All set,” Munn replied. “We’ll do it remotely from the air once we’re clear. I have it set to blow in series so she goes down bow first. Fucking shame, though,” Munn added with a theatrical sigh. “I could get used to having one of these. Hell, if I can keep it, I’ll even let you call me Captain Dan and drive your tired, ugly ass around wherever you want to go.”

Dempsey laughed. “Someday, maybe, but it won’t be on a boat like this. We’ll be lucky if you and I can tool around in something like that *Damor*.”

“When that day comes, a Damor would be just fine. So long as we have a cooler of beer and some trawling gear so we can go deep-sea fishing together, I’ll be happy.”

“Hooyah,” Dempsey said with a tired smile, and then he turned to go help ready Sarah Bonney and Diana Curtis for their journey home.

CHAPTER 7

Ember's Executive Boeing 787-9, N103XL

Incirlik Joint NATO Airbase

Adana, Turkey

1945 Local Time

“So now we’re a QRF?” Grimes grumbled, folding her arms and looking from the image of Simon Adamo on the monitor in the Virginia TOC to Dempsey with an expression that said it all: *See, see what I told you? This is exactly what I was talking about. We’ve become just another quick reaction force. They’ve turned Ember into a glorified flyswatter . . .*

Dempsey met her gaze but kept his expression neutral.

“Ember is not a QRF *de facto*, but it is a QRF *de jour*. In other words, Elizabeth, Ember is whatever the DNI needs us to be,” Adamo replied with the annoying tone he used when he was exercising his authority while trying not to sound like he was.

“I think what Elizabeth is trying to say,” Dempsey said, chiming in for the first time in the brief, “is that we shouldn’t even be having this conversation right now. We should be interrogating al-Fahkoury and trying to determine the identity of the dude he was meeting on the

yacht. Ground Branch is perfectly capable of extracting Allen, yet you're retasking us to do it. Lately, Simon, it seems like you've got us hopping all over the place. Just when we start digging into an assignment, you pull us off and we have to start from scratch on something new. I think the distinction Grimes is making is important. There's a helluva difference between a *task force* and a *quick reaction force*." Dempsey glanced over at Grimes.

The look she gave back said, *Finally, you get it.*

Adamo pushed his glasses back up onto his nose, index finger and thumb extended in a gesture resembling a finger pistol. "If I'm being completely honest, I don't disagree with the two of you, but there is another factor that I don't think either of you are appreciating . . ."

"Which is?" Grimes asked.

"That the DNI is under an incredible amount of stress. Ember is his Excalibur. Given the choice, he will always task Ember because we're the better blade. So let's table your concern for now and focus on executing our new tasking."

Dempsey resisted the compulsion to argue. The truth was, seeing the former CIA man sitting at Shane Smith's desk and playing Ember Operations Officer irritated him. Probably a product of his twenty years in the Teams, but Dempsey automatically tended to lump people into one of two categories: operators and support. In his mind, Adamo was support—like Ember's Signals and Cyber Division personnel, for example—and was not someone forged for a leadership position. Dempsey worried the former CIA Staff Operations Officer had neither the instincts, the field experience, nor the stones to make the tough life-and-death decisions with the speed and confidence that Smith—as a former Delta Tier One operator—possessed in spades. But with Jarvis's departure to become the DNI and Smith taking the reins as Director of Ember, they were stuck with Adamo as Ops O.

When no one said anything, Munn broke the silence. "Guys," he said, putting on his peacemaker face, "Amanda Allen is out there, right

now, alone and in the suck. If I were in her shoes, I would be praying to God that the DNI was sending a shit-hot team to extract me. *We* are that shit-hot team. I agree with Simon. Let's table the OPORD gripe fest until after we get her back."

Dempsey and Grimes both nodded and returned their attention to Adamo as he briefed them on the intelligence collected thus far. Baldwin's assessment was that Allen had been smuggled into Syria by one of the terrorist factions either working directly for or in collaboration with PKK. Also known as the Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK had been founded with the goal of pursuing Kurdish political autonomy in Turkey. With the fall of Iraq and Syria and the subsequent formation of Kurdish-occupied regions claiming autonomy in those countries, Turkish President Erodan's fear and paranoia about a breakaway Kurdish state in the east had reached a crescendo. Turkey had effectively declared war on the Kurds, and now the United States was officially embroiled in the conflict.

"Why would PKK smuggle Allen into Syria?" Grimes asked. "Seems like a terrible risk."

"I agree. The Turkish-Syrian border ain't what it used to be. The wall changes everything. Border traffic is tightly controlled now. Every crossing is via checkpoint manned by Turkish security forces," Munn said, voicing Dempsey's thoughts while Latif and Martin just sat with their mouths glued shut, taking it all in.

"Valid points," Adamo agreed calmly. "But the heat on PKK inside Turkey is tremendous. There is an argument to be made that smuggling Allen into Syria is actually the lower-risk alternative. Assuming we're right and PKK is the instigator, their leadership does not want to get caught holding an American hostage. This is probably the same reason they have not claimed responsibility for the attack. PKK holds Washington culpable for allowing Erodan to forge and cement his dictatorship in Turkey, but they do not want American special operations

elements showing up in country working hand in hand with the Turkish military, thereby speeding their own decimation. If I were overseeing the op for PKK, I'd move Allen to a safe house inside Kurdish-controlled Rojava. I'd stash her somewhere in Afrin, Manbij, or Tell Abyad—somewhere Turkish MIT didn't have eyes watching my every move.”

“That actually makes sense,” Dempsey said, surprised to hear himself agreeing with Adamo. “But it doesn't address Munn's point, which is, How the hell do you smuggle a blonde American female—whose face is plastered all over the news—across the Turkish-controlled border without anyone noticing?”

“We know PKK has infiltrated Turkish Intelligence. We know they have moles inside both the government and the military. It is possible they utilized this network to facilitate the crossing. Bribes could have been paid to look the other way.”

“So what's the endgame?” Grimes asked. “Why kill the Ambassador and take Allen? Especially if what you're saying about PKK is accurate and they have no intention of taking credit for this attack and kidnapping?”

“From the moment we got the tasking, I've been thinking a lot about that question,” Adamo said. “I don't have an answer, only theories.”

“Well, let's hear them,” Munn chimed in.

“All right,” Adamo said, pushing his glasses up on his nose again. “Theory one is that they took her for financial reasons—they saw this as an opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. Kill the Ambassador to make a statement and sell back his Chief of Staff to make money. We have to presume they know who her father is and therefore could set a high asking price.”

“Who's her father?” Dempsey asked.

Grimes looked up, an eyebrow raised. “Seriously, JD? You've never heard of Supreme Court Chief Justice Henry Allen?”

Dempsey shrugged but felt his face flush. “There are millions of people named Allen in this world. Why would I assume that Amanda Allen is *his* daughter?”

Grimes laughed, enjoying his embarrassment. “I guess I thought we were all expected to keep up with current events in this job. It was all over the press and cable news when the Chief Justice’s daughter was assigned to the embassy staff in Turkey a few months back . . . just saying.”

Dempsey shook his head. “Been a little busy fighting terrorists lately, if you haven’t noticed. I guess some of us don’t have time to watch TV whenever we want.” But he couldn’t help chuckling at himself.

“What’s theory two?” Latif asked, speaking up for the first time and looking at Adamo.

“Theory two is that PKK somehow pierced Allen’s official cover. They want to know what the CIA knows about their clandestine operations, so they took Allen because she is young and green and they thought they could break her and extract valuable information. When they’re done with her, instead of trying to ransom her back to her father or the State Department, they’d probably auction her off to the highest bidder. There are plenty of bad actors who might want to take a crack at a CIA asset with knowledge of the identities of regional double agents and CIA assets.”

A chime sounded, and Adamo’s gaze shifted from his laptop camera to somewhere else. After a beat, he said, “I’m moving out to the TOC. Smith and Baldwin are ready to jump in.”

The big-screen TV in the Boeing’s conference room went dark momentarily, and then the feed shifted to a split image: the Ember TOC videoconference camera on the left and a satellite image on the right. The sat image was a crisp bird’s-eye view of a small compound comprised of two buildings surrounded by a low stone wall. The imagery zoomed out, revealing that the compound was connected by a quarter-mile-long dirt road to a major highway traveling north of a city.

“Hello, everyone,” said Baldwin in a cheerful professorial tone. “This compound lies in Syria, about twenty-four kilometers from the Turkish border at Elbeyli.” The screen shifted to a grainier picture of a man and woman talking in a tan desertscape. “The man on the right is Abdul Haq. He was a Regional Commander in PKK in the 2000s, but when the Syrian civil war broke out, he left Turkey to join YPG, also known as the People’s Protection Units. YPG is the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces fighting to liberate northern Syria from ISIS. We suspect, however, that Haq maintains close ties with his former colleagues in PKK.”

“Who is the woman?”

“We haven’t made a positive ID, but we believe that is Mutla Birarti, a former YPJ Commander who migrated the other direction, from YPJ into PKK.”

“What is YPJ?” Latif asked.

“YPJ is the Women’s Protection Units, which is basically the sister unit of YPG. They are closely allied, collaborating and fighting together in all capacities.”

“My God, how many friggin’ groups are there fighting in Syria?” Latif said. “How the hell do you keep them all straight?”

Baldwin laughed. “I’m not going to lie—we have a spreadsheet.”

“What are we looking at here, Baldwin?” Dempsey said, starting to lose his patience.

“This picture was taken in Syria, not very far from al-Bab. The image is only a few weeks old, and it indicates that PKK sent Mutla Birarti to make contact with YPG, leveraging an old association. At the time, we could only speculate about the reason for the meeting, but recent comms intercepts indicate Birarti may have been involved in the Ankara attack. If that’s true, then this meeting between Haq and Birarti takes on new relevance.”

“So you’re saying the woman, Birarti, kidnapped Allen for PKK, and now Abdul Haq is hiding Allen in Syria for them?” Dempsey asked, trying to follow.

“Not Haq or YPG per se, but we believe Haq arranged access to a safe house in Syria for Birarti. It is a business arrangement, not at all uncommon among these cooperating groups motivated by money and the promise of future favors. I’ll scratch your back, you scratch mine.”

“Why al-Bab? Isn’t al-Bab under the control of the pro-Ankara Syrian forces now?” Grimes asked. “Why not choose a safe house in Manbij, a city where YPG has control?”

“Two reasons,” Baldwin said. “One, because Haq doesn’t want to give Turkish or Syrian forces any justification to launch a campaign against them in Manbij, and second, because since 2014, an American-British coalition has been providing weapons, training, and support to YPG in the battle against ISIS. If they were discovered to be aiding and abetting a PKK faction in a terrorist operation against the United States, then I can’t imagine it would sit too well with the coalition. So my guess is, Haq is acting alone on this, making good on some blood debt or other promise.”

“Okay, whatever,” Dempsey growled. “The point is, PKK took Allen, and now you think Mutla Birarti moved her to this compound in al-Bab?”

“That’s what we’re attempting to ascertain, John. HUMINT suggests ownership of the compound has changed hands several times. We believe another third-party faction owns this compound presently and that this third party is now involved and may potentially have custody of Allen.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Dempsey said, feeling a headache coming on. “Is Amanda Allen being held in this compound or not? Answer yes or no.”

“There is a high degree—” Baldwin began, but Dempsey cut him off.

“I said answer yes or no. I did not say use lots of words that mean maybe.”

“Ah, look, here is Director Smith,” Baldwin said, red-faced but bemused, turning on-screen to face Shane Smith as he walked into the frame. “Perfect timing.”

“Hey, guys,” Smith said, his voice so crystal clear over the sound system in the Boeing TOC, it was as if he were sitting in the room with them. “I couldn’t help but overhear the conversation, so I thought I’d jump in.”

“Hey, Shane,” Dempsey said. “Now that you’re here, can we stop playing footsy on this one and you just tell us when and if we have the green light to hit the compound?”

“I realize you’re anxious to kit up, John, and go yank Amanda Allen out of the lion’s den,” Smith began. “But we still have a lot of questions on this one. We suspect PKK was behind all this, but we don’t have proof. Normally, we’d wait for confirming intelligence before authorizing any sort of rescue op, but as you know, every hour that goes by is another hour Allen’s life is at risk and the information in her head is in jeopardy of falling into enemy hands. So the DNI has authorized us to conduct a small-footprint, kinetic operation in al-Bab. The mission objectives are to A, confirm whether Allen is being held at this compound Baldwin identified, and B, identify the party holding her.”

“So you’re sending us in?” Dempsey asked curtly.

Smith’s gaze took in the whole team. “We’re finalizing the mission details and solidifying Dempsey’s NOC as we speak—”

“Hold on,” Grimes interrupted. “Dempsey’s NOC? Don’t tell me you’re sending him into Syria alone.”

“He won’t be alone,” Smith said. “Adamo is going to embed him in a UN chemical weapons inspection team for a surprise inspection in al-Bab, just a few miles from the compound. Once in al-Bab, we’ll use a field asset who can get him close to the site for intel collection.”

“And hostage recovery?” Dempsey interjected.

Smith pursed his lips. “If appropriate, John—I trust you to make the call on the ground. But it does Amanda Allen no good if you get killed trying to pull off a one-man insurrection in al-Bab, does it? The first and best option is to gain intel on the facility, stage in place, and we’ll pull a team together for a raid. What we desperately need is confirmation she’s still alive. I also need you to keep in mind that the other criterion for mission success is gathering intelligence on who is responsible for this and what their next play might be. The DNI and I are both concerned that other attacks are coming, and your ability to gather information to that end is vital.”

“Understood,” Dempsey said.

Grimes shook her head. “I can’t believe you’re sending him in alone.”

“Agreed. I don’t like it,” Munn said. “It should be a two-man team, at minimum. Send me with him.”

“Having two of you folding in on the NOC raises too many eyebrows,” Smith countered. “You’ll stand by with a strike team comprised of the rest of Ember SAD, and we will supplement with JSOC assets out of Turkey if required. We can get you in and out by air if things go sideways.”

“Simple to say, but what if we can’t mobilize an air asset across the border in time to bail him out? What then?” Munn said. “There needs to be some sort of contingency plan.”

Dempsey could feel his friend and fellow frogman’s eyes on him.

“It’s only twenty-four clicks from the border. That’s like fifteen miles, Dan. You could practically run and get to me in time. But if it makes you feel better,” Dempsey said, turning from Munn back to Smith, “can you arrange support from the 160th Special Operations Air Regiment? That would go a long way toward relaxing everyone here.”

“Sure, and if we can’t secure an asset from the 160th, we’ll use the Air Force’s Seventh Special Operations Squadron. They have a detachment at Incirlik right now.”

“Pave Lows?” Munn asked.

“No. They’re using the B-model Ospreys.”

“Shit, that’s even better, Dan,” Dempsey said, selling it to his friend. “Those CV-22s are a helluva lot faster than helicopters. Even from Incirlik, you’re looking at an INFIL under thirty minutes. Hell, if you spooled up the squadron for ‘training flights,’ you could even shave a couple minutes off that.”

Munn nodded, his expression not pleased but at least mollified. “If it’s Seventh, see if we can get a couple of PJs from the Wing. Nice to have high-end medical assets for CASEVAC if things go bad.”

“Good thinking, Dan. Will do,” Smith said.

They were a planning machine now, doing what Ember did better than anyone else.

“How do we make sure the UN inspection team gets across the border, much less with John in tow?” Grimes asked.

“Yeah,” Martin said, speaking for the first time. “I just read that Syria has been jerking the inspectors around. They wouldn’t let them inspect Khan Sheikhan and then delayed them coming to Shayrat Airbase until it was pointless. Then just this year they refused inspectors access to Douma.”

“All true,” Smith said from the screen. “But before I address that, I’m dying to know—since when can Marines read, Gunnery Sergeant Martin?”

The room broke into laughter, Martin smiling and shaking his head. Smith was a natural-born leader. The break in tension allowed a pause and for everyone to refocus and come at the problem with a fresh perspective.

“Okay, so here’s what you need to know about the state of Syrian chemical weapon inspections,” Smith said, now deadly serious. “First, there’s renewed world pressure for compliance, and this will give Damascus a great opportunity to show cooperation since we know and they know the Syrian Army is currently in control of al-Bab. The Syrian

military will be happy to cooperate because there's nothing in al-Bab. Cooperation is all gain and no loss for them since the UN team will obviously find no chemical weapon signatures. Moreover, the locals will welcome any opportunity to garner more international support for their plight and should be overtly cooperative to a UN team that might report on war crimes perpetrated by the Syrian Army."

"That's smart," Latif said.

"I'm still uncomfortable with this plan," Grimes said. "Who is this asset that's going to be taking Dempsey in?"

"He's with DIA and has been operating for over a year as a chemical weapons expert with the UN. He's made three incursions into Syria under this NOC," Smith said. "I talked to his CO already, and he's a shooter. Don't worry, JD won't be the only gun in this fight if things go bad."

Dempsey had doubts about whether his DIA counterpart was a blooded operator, but if the dude had infiltrated Syria three times and was still going strong, then he had to have skills. Syria was presently the most dangerous fucking place in the world. It was the definition of *suck*.

"So when do I go?" Dempsey asked.

"As soon as possible. While we pull together your NOC credentials and contact your DIA partner to arrange the meet, I advise you folks start prepping everything else we discussed."

"Roger that," Dempsey said, and then, turning to his fellow team members, he added, "You heard the boss. Let's get to work."

He got acknowledgments from everyone around the table, except for one . . .

Grimes was already on her feet, standing by the door to exit the TOC, hand on the knob. "A word?" was all she said and then disappeared.

Dempsey followed her into the Director's office adjacent to the TOC and shut the door behind him. "Yes?" he said simply.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” she said, hands on hips. “You can’t go into Syria and execute this mission alone.”

“Where is this coming from?” he said, folding his arms across his pecs.

“You’re doing this because of Elinor, aren’t you?”

He took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. “Elizabeth, I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve never talked about it . . . what happened in Tehran. Not once. It’s been a year, and you pretend like nothing happened. But something did happen, John. You won’t admit it, but there was a connection between the two of you.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head emphatically. “It was all an act . . . a painstakingly constructed, impeccably executed cover story.”

“Bullshit,” she said. “I saw the two of you together in Jerusalem. I saw the way you looked at each other. You can’t fake that. I’m a woman, John. I know what I saw.”

He averted his eyes. “For a fleeting moment, maybe there was something . . . a connection between us. But does it matter now? She’s dead.” Then anger suddenly flared in his chest, and he resented her for riling up his demons. “Jesus. This is fucked-up. Why are you doing this? Is this how you get off these days? Fucking with everybody’s head?”

“Is that what you think of me?” she said, screwing up her face. “Nothing could be further from the truth. We’re family. I care about you. I’m worried about you . . .”

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine . . . Just drop it. Please.”

“Look at me,” she said and waited until he did. “I know how your brain works, JD. I know that in your mind, you broke the one rule that no SEAL has ever broken. You left a teammate behind. But because you can’t live with that, you tell yourself that Elinor was a traitor, that she was a double agent and a spy and that she deserved everything that happened to her. But your heart knows better, and so the end result is

that you're stuck oscillating between denial and soul-racking guilt. You can't go on like that. It'll break you, trust me. I know what I'm talking about."

Dempsey felt a lump forming in his throat. "I see her in my dreams," he admitted. "Writhing and bleeding on the floor . . . I left her, Lizzie. I left her to die."

"Yeah, you did. And now you need to forgive yourself for that. There was no scenario, and I mean absolutely none, where you could have exfiltrated with Elinor and survived."

"That's not the point. The *point* is, I didn't even try."

Grimes shook her head. "It's exactly the point. Ember is not Tier One. We play by different rules. We follow a different code. And every member of this team accepts that risk. Elinor accepted that risk. Your executing the mission was not a betrayal. Your escape was not a betrayal." She stepped toward him, her hand reaching out but not touching him. "But it is okay to grieve for her. It is okay to admit that no matter what Elinor Jordan truly was—ally or enemy—a part of you cared about her."

He swallowed but said nothing.

"Going into Syria alone to rescue Amanda Allen is not penance. It is not an act of contrition." She pressed her palm against his chest, over his heart. "No matter how many Amanda Allens you go galloping off to rescue, you can't change the past. All you can do is accept it."

He met her gaze, and her pale baby blues seemed to bore into his soul. He believed her—believed her when she said she cared and was worried about him. But he didn't want someone to care about him. He didn't want someone to worry about his safety or his feelings or the logic of the decisions he was making. He'd lost so many—his entire Tier One team, his identity as Jack Kemper. And those he hadn't lost, he'd either abandoned or let down—including his son and his ex-wife, who could never know John Dempsey. The truth was, caring was just too damn painful. Caring was too hard.

And he didn't want to do it anymore.

"I appreciate your concern," he said, gently removing her hand from his chest. "But orders are orders, and there's an American CIA agent out there who desperately needs our help. So if there's nothing else on your mind, we've got work to do."

Her nostrils flared as she stepped back. "That's the way you're going to play it, huh?"

"I'm not sure what you're talking about," he heard himself say.

"In that case," she said coolly, walking past him to exit the office, "if you'll please excuse me, Mr. Dempsey. As you correctly pointed out, I've got work to do."

CHAPTER 8

Lubyanka (FSB Headquarters)

Moscow, Russia

May 6

1551 Local Time

Arkady Zhukov, the most powerful man in Russia without a job title, watched a live stream on his computer. The feed was from a security camera mounted in the upper corner of a detention cell in Simferopol, looking down at a man seated at a metal table. The man was dressed in a neatly pressed and tailored suit and wore a smug, self-assured grin. Arkady yawned, already bored despite *the show* having not yet started. He knew how this would end; he'd seen it so many times.

“Who is this fool?” Arkady asked, his gaze not leaving the screen.

“Yevgeny Lisovsky,” said Arkady’s newest acolyte, Yuri. “A Russian human-rights attorney who has begun to make a name for himself. I think he prides himself as the new Sergei Magnitsky, champion of the people and defender of human rights. He stormed down to Crimea a few weeks ago to augment the Crimean Tartar activist Michael

Uramov's legal defense team. We picked him up en route to the courthouse. Uramov's trial is today."

"What time does it start?" Arkady asked, watching as two FSB agents entered the frame. One took a seat across from Lisovsky, and the other walked around and stood behind the attorney.

"In less than an hour," Yuri replied.

"And the plan is to detain him so he misses today's proceedings?"

"*Da.*"

"Is that Boris Bykov?" Arkady asked, squinting at the FSB agent seated at the table. The rear quarter-profile perspective made it hard to recognize the man's face, and Arkady's eyes weren't as good as they once were.

"It is" came the reply.

Arkady groaned with weary aggravation. "He's like toenail fungus, this guy. No matter what I do, he keeps popping back up."

"Lisovsky?" Yuri asked, confused.

"No, Bykov. He's going to fuck this all up. He's going to try to question Lisovsky, but Lisovsky is going to cite attorney-client privilege and tell him to fuck off. This will cause Comrade Boris to lose his temper and get physical. He is not the right man for this interrogation."

"So long as he doesn't mark up Lisovsky's face, what's the problem? Lisovsky misses the trial, knows that the *important* people in Russia are displeased with his actions, and the bruises give him something to think about for next time."

"Right out of the operating manual," Arkady said with a sigh. "But not as effective in the long term as you might think."

"But you practically wrote the operating manual." Yuri laughed, but with good-natured reverence.

"True, but I'm always revising it," Arkady said, turning to look at his prodigy. "Do you have someone on the line with us?"

“*Da*. There is a chat window minimized at the bottom right of the screen. I requested the link so we could send them questions and directives during the interrogation.”

“Very good,” Arkady said, getting to his feet. “Trade places with me.” The powerfully built young Russian did as instructed, taking Arkady’s seat at the computer while Arkady stepped behind the chair.

Arkady had poached Yuri from Vympel. Like its sister group, Spetsgruppa A, or Alpha, as it was known in most circles, Vympel was an elite, multimission-capable Special Operations force that worked for the FSB. While in years past Alpha and Vympel had operated with different charters, more recently both groups had been used almost interchangeably for counterterrorism operations and false-flag insurgency missions throughout the former Soviet republics. Like their American counterparts, these Spetsnaz forces operated with relative impunity, overwhelming adversaries with vastly superior skills and firepower. And like the American Navy SEALs, a mythos of godlike invulnerability and superhero status had begun to permeate the zeitgeist. Arkady had always poached the Spetsnaz ranks for suitable candidates for his own ultracovert unit, Spetsgruppa Z, or Zeta.

Almost every Spetsnaz operator had the physical prowess and mental toughness required to become one of Arkady’s shadow men. What they did not universally possess, however, was the intellect and disposition necessary for his particular line of work. Intelligence he was able to assess with relative ease during the recruiting process—truly brilliant men, he’d found, distinguished themselves quickly. Disposition, however, was another matter altogether.

Sociopaths and sadists made terrible spies. Identifying them and weeding such men out of the Zeta candidate pool was difficult. They were drawn to this type of work like sharks to blood. But contrary to what the world might think, espionage, and even counterespionage, was about relationships. Effective spies built strong relationships and then exploited them. Sociopaths, while excelling at the latter, failed miserably

at the former. So he used them almost exclusively for the only thing they were good at—killing people.

He looked at Yuri, who looked back at him expectantly, still waiting on instructions. Yuri showed great promise—so eager and capable, but still so very, very green. Arkady's gaze flicked back to the monitor, where it appeared that Lisovsky had already succeeded in raising his interrogator's ire. Boris was on his feet now, stalking around the table. "Order Comrade Bykov to stand down," Arkady snapped.

"Yes, sir," Yuri said and quickly turned back to the computer. The chat window populated with text as Yuri's fingers flew on the keyboard. Acknowledgment of the order came back, and a beat later, Bykov turned to look over his shoulder at the door. With a scowl of irritation, he stormed out of the frame, leaving Lisovsky and the other FSB agent in the room wondering what had just happened. A new line of text appeared in the chat window, a request for an explanation for the intervention. Despite the respectful diction, Arkady could practically hear Bykov's indignant fury behind the words. "They want to know why we interrupted the interrogation. What is it that you want them to do?" Yuri asked.

"Go to the file directory on the computer. Find the folder labeled *deviantnoye*," Arkady said.

Yuri did as instructed and clicked to open it with the mouse. Inside the folder were a half-dozen subfolders.

"What is this?" Yuri asked, turning to look at Arkady with surprise. "You already have detailed files on Lisovsky?"

Arkady nodded.

"But I thought you didn't know who he was?"

"I didn't say that."

"But you gave the impression . . ." Yuri's voice trailed off, and then he smiled. "I hate when you do that."

"Do what?"

"Pretend you don't know something to see what I'll say and do."

The corners of Arkady's mouth curled up into a grin, but he simply said, "Click on the folder labeled 'photographs.'"

Yuri turned back to the computer and did as instructed. The folder opened, revealing dozens and dozens of thumbnail images. Most of the images were of Lisovsky, but a good quarter of the photographs were of a woman.

Arkady leaned over Yuri's shoulder and pointed to three different thumbnails. "Open this one, this one, and this one."

The first photograph showed a young blonde woman seated across the table from Lisovsky—wineglasses and dinner plates between them—smiling animatedly at something he'd said. The second showed her in a formfitting tank top and yoga pants, her brow dripping with sweat as she worked out at a public gym. The third and final photograph was a close-up of her asleep in bed, taken with a night vision-equipped camera.

"Is that Lisovsky's girlfriend?" Yuri exclaimed.

Arkady nodded.

"She is beautiful," Yuri said, staring at the monitor.

"I know," he replied. "Would be hard to find another one like this, wouldn't you say?"

Yuri turned to look at him, wordlessly acknowledging the obvious.

"It would be a shame if something happened to her while Comrade Lisovsky was away in Crimea. Moscow is a very safe city, but people have accidents all the time. Sometimes they slip on the stairs and break their necks. Sometimes they trip and fall into the Moskva River."

Yuri nodded and smiled. "You're right, comrade. Accidents can happen anywhere . . . Is that the message you would like me to transmit, along with these three pictures?"

"Yes," Arkady said and then, heading for the door, added, "I need to piss. I'll be back in a minute. Don't let them sever the connection."

He walked to the bathroom, acknowledging nods from colleagues he passed en route. The third floor of Lubyanka was where the important

people worked, where the Director of the FSB and his Deputy Directors and Chiefs kept their offices. Arkady had been offered the top post by President Petrov on three separate occasions, and he'd turned it down each time. The people who needed to know him knew him. The people who needed to fear him feared him. That was enough. The last thing he wanted was his name listed on a Wikipedia org chart with a headshot photo and a clickable link to his profile. He was no politico. He was no bureaucrat.

Just like he had shunned promotion, he had also eschewed oligarchy. As one of Petrov's oldest and closest confidants, that path had been open to him. If he had desired so, it could have been him at the helm of Rosneft or Gazprom; he could have been a billionaire robber baron of Russia. But those men disgusted him. They were parasites, draining Russia of her vitality and strength. There was no desire their money could not buy, yet even as American sanctions and falling energy prices crippled the economy, they continued to suck the lifeblood from their countrymen.

It had been Arkady who'd encouraged Petrov to instill trusted allies as the heads of these companies and then use the alliances to take control of the country's energy, financial, and media infrastructure, but never did he imagine this would be the outcome. He'd overestimated their principles and patriotism while underestimating their avarice and self-interest. In the Soviet Union, there had been a wealth gap between the politic and the citizenry, but that gap had been small on both relativistic and absolute terms. He'd expected these men to get rich, but the wealth they'd pilfered exponentially eclipsed what he'd foreseen. Instead of becoming gleaming pillars of a new Russia, men to be emulated and respected, they'd taken the low road, choosing to behave like mafiosos.

Over the past decade, Arkady had helped Petrov round up, break, and stable these wild stallions running amuck. It had proven to be a more difficult task than either of them had anticipated, but by deploying secret FSB resources and tactics, Arkady had gotten it done. Petrov

was now, at Arkady's coaching, using his propaganda machine to diminish the perceived importance and influence of the oligarchy—rebuffing talk of *crony capitalism* and rebranding it with the term *state capitalism*. Russian capitalism had stumbled, yes, but now it was remaking itself after the Chinese model, which many economists believed would supersede Western capitalism as the dominant system in the twenty-first century. This was the narrative the Petrov government was peddling, but it was a lie. Despite having wrested functional control of the country's enterprises back from the oligarchy, the oligarchy was firmly entrenched. And recently, a new problem had reared its hydra's head—nepotism.

Over the past two years, Arkady had watched four oligarchs hand control of their enterprises over to their sons. These young barons, the oldest only thirty-two, had grown up in post-Soviet Russia. They had no reverence for the old Communist empire and no respect for Russia's working class—the other 99 percent of the population. None had military service. None had worked for the state. The classrooms of their youth had been nightclubs and yacht decks. They had been socialized in an environment of corruption, drugs, and lavish excess. And they, in concert with their fathers, would take whatever measures necessary to ensure that Russia never transitioned to a true and functional state capitalistic system. The bitter irony of it all was that for all the transformational change and upheaval that Russia had experienced over the past century, under Petrov it'd come full circle back to where it started before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Petrov's Russia was a neofeudal state harkening back to Tsarist Russia—with the oligarchs pledging loyalty to Petrov like feudal lords and paying tribute in the form of deposits in offshore bank accounts. With the oligarchy now under his control, Petrov could stay in power indefinitely. He was rich beyond comprehension, had the Russian army at his command, and his tendrils in every baron's business—Petrov was no longer President . . .

He was Tsar.

Unbeknownst to the world, Arkady Zhukov had been the architect of this grand debacle. He had failed the Russian people, and he hated himself for it. For Russia to survive, Arkady had no choice but to turn his coat.

He'd been a kingmaker.

Now he would have to become kingbreaker.

He flushed the toilet, both his bladder and his conscience voided. He knew what must be done, but how to do it was another matter altogether. One does not slit the king's throat unless all the chess pieces are moved into place, and in place they were not.

Fortunately, he was not alone in this cabal. Secret alliances had been made. Not every Russian in a position of power was a spineless sycophant. There were other men like him who wished to see Russia purged, stabilized, and returned to its former might. The Soviet Union was dead, its Communist corpse too cold and decayed to be revived. But the Soviet empire could be reclaimed and its influence restored. The Chinese model of governance was the key—a disciplined centralized government with tight control of foreign and domestic policy atop a state capitalistic economy in which foreign direct investment could be managed yet innovation could still thrive. In this model, the functional control of the nation would be wrested from Petrov's hands. The Federal Assembly would be purged of his cronies and once again become a functional legislative body.

The efforts were already well underway.

Arkady returned to his office, where Yuri still sat behind the computer. Arkady looked at the monitor and saw that the brash young attorney's bravado had evaporated. He was afraid. No further dialogue or negotiation was necessary. Arkady had seen this look a hundred times. They'd won. Lisovsky was his.

"You see?" Arkady said with a satisfying exhale. "Compliance can be achieved without brutality. No yelling, no punching, no bone breaking. If you want to control a man, all you must do is find something

he treasures and threaten to destroy it. He knows the FSB is not an organization that bluffs. We make good on our threats.”

Yuri nodded. “So what do you want me to tell them now that he’s agreed to cooperate?”

“Tell them that Comrade Lisovsky is to be released immediately. That he is to go to court and try very hard to do his job *just poorly enough* to ensure his client is convicted. Whatever grand defense he has planned should be abandoned; whatever trick he’s hiding up his sleeve forgotten. Tell him that if he thinks he can game the system by secretly passing his strategy on to the other members of his legal team so that they can fight while he sits out of the game, we’ll know. A guilty conviction is the only acceptable trial outcome. Otherwise, his girlfriend dies.”

Yuri passed the instructions to the field agents verbatim, and then they both watched as the message was conveyed to Lisovsky. The attorney listened without interruption, but Arkady saw the man clenching his jaw in restraint. When Bykov was done talking, Lisovsky sat wordless for a long beat. Arkady watched as the anger in the young lawyer’s eyes faded to cold compliance. This was the reaction he’d wanted to observe. Had Lisovsky accepted too quickly and without emotion, then Arkady would have known that Lisovsky was playacting and thought the threat idle. But Lisovsky knew better. Everyone in Russia feared the KGB. Everyone in Russia knew the mythos was real. The FSB was the KGB reincarnated, only bigger, badder, and better equipped. The three letters branded on the beast may have changed, but the beast lived.

Arkady’s mobile phone rang in his pocket. He retrieved it and checked the caller ID. He took the call immediately.

“*Da?*” he said simply.

“Are you busy?” said the voice on the line.

Arkady felt a flash of reflux. This would not be good news. “Where are you?”

“Outside. Across the street on a bench.”

Arkady pocketed his phone and turned to his young protégé. “Stay here and make sure they don’t fuck anything up.” He took his heavy black overcoat from where it lay folded neatly on the desk. “I’m going for a walk.”

“Is something wrong?”

“*Nyet*,” he said, feeling Yuri’s eyes on his back as he shrugged into his overcoat and left. A measure of mystery and uncertainty was good for men like Yuri.

He stepped outside and was immediately hit by a blast of chilly air. It was an unseasonably cold May afternoon, despite the sunshine, and Arkady stood his collar up to block the wind as he set off at an angry pace. He crossed Lubyanskiy Proyezd and made for the park across the street. Face-to-face meetings gave the illusion of privacy—but there were so many ways to eavesdrop, especially here in the Russian capital. Nonetheless, he had trained all of his acolytes to eschew technology and embrace the old ways whenever possible. He dropped heavily onto the bench beside the much younger man, a man diligently climbing the narrow ladder of the Zeta ranks.

“I suspect you’re about to ruin my afternoon?” Arkady said.

The man nodded, keeping his gaze fixed across the park. “Malik is dead,” he said. “And the yacht is at the bottom of the Adriatic. Imagery captured it being scuttled by a small special operations team.”

“The Americans?”

“Unconfirmed, but we have intelligence that they were actively hunting al-Fahkoury. This appears to be a case of very bad timing. I don’t think our operation was compromised.”

“How can you be so sure? Maybe they took him. Are you positive he’s dead?”

“Well, not one hundred percent,” the young Zeta said. “But the last ping we received from his tracker was on its way down to the bottom of the ocean.”

“Okay, let’s hope that’s the case,” Arkady said and then sat perfectly still in silent thought. This development was a terrible blow. Malik wasn’t an actual person, but a Zeta legend most recently occupied by one of his best deep-cover operatives, who had been coordinating a complex series of proxy operations in Turkey. Now he had a decision to make. Let the legend expire and sever all its ties to Russia, or try to salvage the campaign by backfilling it immediately. This was not the first time he’d had to make this decision, and with the Malik legend no less. The man who had been occupying the role was in fact the second man to wear the persona, the first Malik having met his untimely demise after a gun battle with a Chechen rival. There had been few witnesses, so it had been easy to refresh the role. This time would prove trickier. *I don’t have a choice*, he decided at last. *The PKK operation in Turkey is in progress. Everything will fall apart if I don’t.*

“Are you going to backfill?” the young man asked, reading his mind.

“Yes.”

“Who did you have in mind?” the Zeta operator asked, his voice betraying his eagerness for the opportunity. But Arkady knew he wasn’t ready.

He needed someone who could put on the legend like an old worn pair of gloves. There was only one Zeta capable of getting them out of this mess—Valerian Kobak. Unfortunately, Valerian was in Abkhazia completing other critical tasking . . . Well, this was the way of things. Valerian would have to wrap that business up quickly and change his skin.

“Patience, my young friend,” Arkady said, placing a hand on the other man’s shoulder. “You might yet wear the skin, but not today. In the meantime, I need you to stay on damage control. Keep the legend alive until Kobak becomes active. Help him with logistics and comms. We’re throwing him into a hornet’s nest, and he’s not going to be happy. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes, sir,” the young man said as they both got to their feet. “I won’t let you down.”

“I know” was all Arkady said in farewell, and he turned to leave.

I have too many damn balls in the air to juggle, he thought as he walked back to his office.

The FSB was the busiest it had ever been. GRU and SVR were similarly engaged. Arkady could not remember this many simultaneous covert operations being spearheaded by the Russian Clandestine Service since the height of the Cold War. But it was different this time around. The service was much bigger; more capable; and, thanks to Petrov’s hubris, emboldened. Petrov’s appetite for risk was one of the reasons Arkady had supported the man from the beginning. On this front, he and the President had always aligned. The complexity and scope of the operations they were undertaking put the KGB of old to shame, even with nostalgia coloring his memory.

No, this time was different.

Russia was back.

And this time . . . she was back to stay.

CHAPTER 9

Somewhere . . .

Voices woke her from a dreamless sleep.

For a moment, Amanda couldn't remember where she was. Then the dull pain in her stomach and her throbbing left eye socket reminded her. She was in hell, that's where she was. Other aches and pains, from lesser blows delivered during her beating, made themselves known as she came into full consciousness. Her right hip and thigh, her left shoulder, her left biceps, and her ribs were all complaining now.

She opened her eyes and stared into the pitch-black. Her plywood-box prison had no windows and only a single light bulb, which her captors had turned off. A small gap at the bottom of the door provided a strip of anemic gray light, which made her think it was probably night. The conversation taking place outside her cell, which had begun in hushed tones, was now becoming heated. She recognized the voices—the man with the broken tooth who'd beaten her and the woman who'd checked on her afterward. They were arguing in Turkish:

“We never should have agreed to come here. I don't like this city,” the man said. “And I don't like this safe house.”

“It was better than the alternative,” she replied. “Staying in Turkey was not an option.”

“I don’t know these men,” he growled. “I don’t trust them.”

“They are brothers in arms. Haq has worked with them for years. He vouched for them.”

“They’re not brothers in our cause.”

“I know, but that’s the beauty of the plan. If anything goes wrong, we are not implicated.”

“But we’re still here!” said the man. “The longer we hold her, the greater the risk we’re found. I say we cut her head off, give false credit to Al-Nusra for the attack, and leave. I’m ready to be done with this whole kidnapping business.”

Dread flooded Amanda’s body, and she began to tremble with fear.

Oh God, he wants to cut off my head. They’re going to cut off my head!

Her heart rate leaped, and panicked thoughts flooded her mind. Primitive, animalistic impulses told her to pound on the door, beg for mercy, offer them whatever they wanted. There had to be something she could offer in exchange for her life. Her body? They didn’t have to kill her. They could sell her to a sex-slave trafficker. State would conduct a search for her and they would find her. Then OGA would send in a team to pull her out . . . but if money was all they were after, she could offer to pay a ransom. Her father would pay it.

“You’re not thinking this through,” the woman argued. “If we do that, we don’t get paid. And worse, our relationship with Malik is over.”

“Malik,” the man scoffed with bitter disdain. “We don’t need Malik.”

“How can you say that? Before Malik, we were losing. Now we have access to weapons, capital, and information. Without his moles and allies inside the Turkish government, we could have never executed this operation. And the next attack is even more complicated and difficult. Don’t you see? With his backing, we finally have the power to incite regime change. Erodan, the puppet of the West, must be brought down.

Only then can we return control of Turkey to its rightful master—the people. The other members of the Movement are counting on us to lead. We must not lose sight of our objective. This was but the first battle in a long and difficult campaign.”

Silence hung in the air until finally the man said, “What is so special about *this* girl? What is so special that he would have us kill the Ambassador and take her instead? What is Malik’s plan for her?”

“I don’t know the details of his plan. That is not the type of information he shares.”

“If he ransoms her to the United States, then I think we should be entitled to a share . . . on top of what he agreed to pay us. We are the ones who risked our lives to take her. We are the ones risking our lives waiting with her now.”

“I think that would be unwise,” the woman said. “He has always treated us fairly.”

“Don’t be a fool. He’s not our benefactor; he’s a mercenary. This is a business relationship, and in business, everything is subject to negotiation.”

Amanda’s panic was ebbing now as she took stock of the information she’d gleaned from eavesdropping on her captors’ conversation. First, she now knew she was no longer in Turkey. Her best guess was that they’d smuggled her into Syria—an unfortunate development because the probability of her rescue dropped dramatically. Second, she was being held at a safe house that was operated by a different terror outfit than the one that had taken her.

“How much longer are we meant to wait? The handoff should have already happened. Turkish Intelligence is looking for us. The Americans are looking for us. We can’t stay here indefinitely,” the man complained.

“I know, I know,” she snapped. “But we cannot risk electronic communication, either. The digital spies are always listening. We just need to be patient.”

“Something is wrong,” he said with an air of anxiety. “I can feel it. Malik is not coming.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m telling you, something happened. Something feels off. If we don’t receive word from Malik within the next twelve hours, we’re leaving.”

“And going where, Samir? Back into Turkey? Are you insane? No, we don’t dare do this,” she argued. “Our instructions were clear. Are you willing to forfeit receipt of payment and the relationship over a few hours? I can assure you that leadership is not. Demîl brokered this deal; we are only his intermediaries. Are you willing to suffer his wrath if Malik cuts ties? I, for one, am not.”

“I’m not willing to die for this American or for Malik. Forfeiture of payment would be a devastating loss, but we have fulfilled our end of the bargain. We captured Amanda Allen and brought her to this safe house alive and on schedule. Now we must look after ourselves. Twelve hours, Mutla. Demîl is old and standing with one foot already in the grave. We are the future of the Movement. We are the future of our people. Twelve hours more is all I am willing to wait. If Malik’s people do not show up by then . . .”

Amanda heard the big man stomp away and the woman mutter a quiet curse under her breath. Once everything fell silent, she took stock of the gold mine of intelligence she’d collected and even permitted herself a little victory smile. She’d gotten four names from the conversation. The man with the broken tooth was Samir, the woman was Mutla, and they both reported to a man named Demîl.

Demîl, Demîl . . . Where have I heard that name? Could it be Demîl Sinjar—one of the five founders of PKK? That could make sense . . . especially if the “Movement” they kept referring to was the Peoples’ United Revolutionary Movement—a congress of terrorist groups bent on overthrowing the Erodan regime. Okay . . . this is all starting to make sense.

There’d been a fourth name they’d used as well. Malik.

This was not a name she'd heard before, but if her translation of the dialogue had been accurate, then Malik was her buyer. Apparently, she was to be sold and handed over to this Malik, but for what purpose she did not know.

A chill snaked down her spine.

Twelve hours, the man with the broken tooth had said. Twelve hours left before she had a new master. But what if Malik didn't come? There seemed to be some legitimate concern over this . . .

She pulled her knees against her chest, hugging them.

If Malik didn't come, what would they do with her?