



MOTORCADE

Hans Bauer and Craig Mitchell

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*The Secret Service is a strange group.
They don't really have a leader. It's not set up
like a military. Each one is supposed to be able
to act like a leader when something comes up.*

-Anonymous

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PROLOGUE

The horses knew it was time to go. They knew because in the middle hours of the night they had been bathed, groomed, and fed their special mixture of hay and oats, how it was always done. What they had no way of knowing was that the unfolding day would be unlike any before or after.

The herd, which numbered fifty, was stabled in the historic century-old barn at Fort Meyer, a half-mile from the fort gate, and another half-mile to Arlington National Cemetery, on the Virginia side of the Potomac, directly across from D.C. On a typical day, when up to eight military funerals were scheduled, seventeen hundred every year, excluding Saturdays and Sundays, the routine was to hitch a team of six to one of the restored First World War era field artillery caissons and transport a flag-draped casket to the cemetery for full military honors. Not all who wound up there were buried with honors, but a surprising number were.

The fifty soldiers of the full-time caisson platoon, members of the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Regiment, rotated between caring for the horses, riding funeral duty, and assuming their assigned role as guardians at the Tomb of the Unknowns.

The horses were rotated as well. After pulling caissons for a week, they spent a week in the stalls, with exercise, followed by a week grazing in the fertile pastures of Fort Belvoir.

To start, the day was different because it was still night. Instead of being hitched, they were loaded into a fleet of trailers for an across-the-river fieldtrip. Heavy fog lay upon the sleeping city. After a brief, pre-dawn ride through wide, empty boulevards, the caravan slipping past the ghostly contours of venerable monuments, the trailers containing the fifty horses and twenty-one riders pulled up in the shadow of the Washington Monument, on the grassy lawn of the grand avenue of the National Mall. The fifty flags surrounding the base of the monument hung at half-staff. Not only throughout the capitol, but across the nation, in every city, hamlet, and burg, the Stars and Stripes had been lowered. They would not be raised again for thirty days. Around the globe, on ships in port and at sea, flags flew at half-staff. Two blocks west, the dome of the Capitol building shone like a crystal mountain. Men and horses passed the night beneath the cherry trees that had recently blossomed and spent themselves.

At first light, the picketed mounts were watered from pails dipped in the monument's reflecting pool, the seven teams then hitched to their modified caissons, the spoked, two-wheeled gun platforms and vintage harnesses also shipped ahead the night before. Overnight, while the herd grazed and the men dozed, the Stars and Stripes draped caskets they would bear had arrived in seven identical hearses. From there they were loaded onto the caissons.

On signal, paired teams, now in full military dress, mounted their charges. The men rode in McClellan saddles, a design dating back to the Civil War.

At 9:00 AM sharp, the procession began. The lead team of silvery gray Austrian Lipizzaners slowly clopped onto Constitution Avenue. They were paired in twos—the “leaders” in front, a “swing” team in the middle, the “wheel” team nearest the caisson. A seventh walked beside the leads, its rider calling commands to the others. They had been trained to walk slowly, a difficult thing for a horse. The other teams followed.

The men rode ramrod straight. Of the caisson teams, only the three mounts on the left carried riders. The most experienced rode “wheel,” as the caissons had no brakes. A black horse, its saddle empty, walked behind the last of the seven carriages. Paired boots mounted backwards in the leather stirrups signaled a last command to the fallen troops.

Tens of thousands stood ten deep or watched the funeral cortege from hastily erected bleachers. Some had booked hotels, while others had slipped into the city in the morning hours. Later, the number was estimated at close to a million, the greatest number to attend a state-sponsored funeral since JFK. Around the globe, millions more watched the event on television or listened on a radio.

Recently returned to planet Earth or awakened from a coma or an uncommonly long snooze and switched on CNN, FOX, MSNBC, or any other channel, you’d be right to wonder about

the spectacle, whether while you'd been away an entire swath of your government hadn't somehow been obliterated in a plane crash, a hotel bombing, or a yachting accident, a party-prone senator and his entourage drowned somewhere in the Bahamas. Or perhaps something unspeakable had befallen the American president, *your* president, but there was far more to it: there were seven caskets, not one. But then, there he was, your misty-eyed anchor assuring you that the president was safe behind the tinted, bulletproof glass of the presidential limousine just then arriving, as was the vice president in his own limousine. In their wake, a fleet of black Suburbans ferried dignitaries and their families. A muffled drum corps completed the cheerless train.

A black caterpillar, the procession swung left at 23rd Street, marking the western edge of the National Mall. From there, it moved past the Lincoln Memorial, then crossed the river over the Arlington Memorial Bridge. It was now but a short distance to the National Cemetery, then through the gate, creeping past the Iwo Jima memorial.

Noteworthy on the eastern approach, from the D.C. side, the bridge features flanking neo-classical equestrian sculptures; the Arts of War, representing valor and sacrifice, seventeen feet tall, of fire-gilded bronze, while on the western approach, from Virginia, Mount Vernon looming behind, another sculpture pair, The Arts of Peace, one depicting music and harvest, the other aspiration and literature.

The burial service had already begun when the last of the mourners arrived. The National Weather Service had predicted intermittent showers. A sea of unfurled umbrellas formed a canopy beneath the low charcoal sky, threatening to swamp the six hundred twenty-four acres of rolling hills studded with egalitarian granite markers uniting PFCs and two presidents.

The American president stood behind a podium and addressed the nation, the world. "On this day, we pay tribute to colleagues and supreme heroes," he began, paused, and in that moment, on cue, seven UH-6- Black Hawk helicopters whocked overhead and tipped in salute. The president continued. It was not a lengthy speech, only four and a half minutes, totaling 477 words, perhaps not on par with other great American presidential speeches; Lincoln's Gettysburg Address or Washington's Farewell, but apropos of the occasion, made much mention of the key elements of valor, sacrifice, and honor.

Throughout, press photographers and amateurs from around the globe kept their telephoto lenses trained on the president's left hand, his wrist, actually, a bracelet of brightly colored glass beads visible there.

The speech ended, the flags cloaking the seven caskets removed and folded, each then ceremoniously touched to its casket before being presented to members of the seven families. The crisp volleys of a 21-gun salute came from the immediate area, yet somehow sounded as if they had come from far away.

Casket bearers lowered the coffins onto the silver stands positioned above open graves.

Afterward, seven buglers played “taps” while the sky made good its threat. It had been a long, difficult winter, but now, the manicured meadows between surrounding tombstones were finally sprouting new growth. April showers birthed May flowers.

Later, the Arlington Ladies, a group who attended the funeral of every member of the armed services interred at Arlington, and were themselves the mothers, wives, and daughters of military men, wandered about passing out inspirational pamphlets.

Many of the mourners lingered. The previous week’s proceedings, including private visitations and chapel services, were the first time the families of the fallen were gathered in the same place, at the same time. After exchanging phone numbers and emails, along with photos and videos of their loved ones, they reluctantly dispersed.

The horses returned to their barn.

That evening, at a private White House ceremony hosted by the president and first lady, each of the families of the dead were awarded the Medal of Honor.

The rain continued until shortly after midnight. By then the sodden grounds had already been reclaimed by ghosts.

The following day, photos of the president’s bracelet appeared on the front page of every newspaper, local and

international, and morning through evening, television newscasters began their programs with it.

So exactly what *had* happened?

CHAPTER ONE

If it didn't already qualify as one of the ten most treacherous roads on the planet, then it came damn close. Built by Paraguayan prisoners in the Thirties, for much of its length it was barely three meters wide. There is little room for error. There are no guardrails. Before setting forth, drivers pour offerings of beer onto the ground, beseeching the goddess *Pachamanma* for safe passage. Yet, many prayers went unanswered. Motorists chewed coca leaves or sat on knobbed cushions in order to stay alert.

The North Yungas Road, El Camino de la Muerte, the "road of death," started at twelve thousand feet above sea level, at La Paz, the world's highest capital, in the Bolivian Andes, and began its eighty-kilometer zigzag ascent to Coroico, threading a handful of remote villages along the route. Drizzle and fog made visibility perilous. Brakes failed, confirmed by tire tracks angling sharply into the abyss. On average, three hundred travelers die there annually. Mile after ascending mile the hairpin turns were studded with crosses and stone cairns marking the places where vehicles had gone over the side, about one every two weeks, many of them trucks hauling food and petrol, some of them buses crammed with peasants. Three weeks earlier, a bus disaster had claimed twenty-nine lives. Another, better road was being built, but it had been twenty years in the making. Most doubted it would ever be finished.

Standing beside his high-tech Japanese motorbike, Gustav Aquino had removed his full-face helmet and ate a candy bar while waiting.

Mountain traffic, never exceeding more than a crawl, had come to a dead stop. There had already been several delays. Stalled vehicles behind and ahead snaked up and down the mountain for untold miles.

The hoodie-clad figure straddling the bike harbored a dream—a paid position as a police detective investigating murders, problematic because he also aspired to be a paid assassin, a sicario.

There was only one rule of the road—downhill drivers never had the right of way. Descending, they were forced to move to the inner edge, their wheels skirting the precipice as they edged to one of the passing lanes carved into the cliff face. Ascending motorists could then proceed.

The next twenty-two kilometers were trouble-free.

And then, unexpectedly, there she was. He knew because he had been told her bodyguard would be driving a red Toyota Yaris.

There had been a small rockslide and men were in the road clearing the way. The woman and the three men sitting in the red car were waiting their turn to pass. He also recognized the car by its license plate. Had they not been stopped he might not have noticed it. He had been told there would likely be three bodyguards.

Bolivian Senator Carla Miranda Bautista's plan had been to arrive at the town perched below the crest before noon. She would spend the afternoon passing out fliers and meeting with locals, then digging into a hearty empanada with the big braids and orange crust that made it look like a Stegosaur, finishing with an oblong phyllo of custard and powdered sugar, before starting the long trek home, back down the mountain, reaching La Paz, God willing, before nightfall. But there had been more than the usual delays and she would not arrive at the town until mid-afternoon. She would have to spend the night.

There were occasions that required a ski mask to conceal the young assassin's features, but this wasn't one of them, a moot point because the odds of running into someone who knew him on this godforsaken stretch were nil to none, not that anyone would be able to identify him. His helmet would serve nicely. He took a folded photo from his dusty leather jacket and studied it. The senator looked to be in her forties, but was still a beauty.

Gustav walked his bike ahead for a closer look. The car's windows were down and he could hear the four humming an Andean folk tune, not to the radio, because reception at that elevation was impossible, but from childhood memory. The front seat bodyguard flicked a hand-rolled cigarette out his window.

The senator, sitting on the left rear passenger side, stopped humming and turned to look at him.

He walked the bike another dozen feet, then lowered the kickstand and turned. The pistola was already in his hand. He fired six shots in a general direction at the windshield. The precision work would come later.

When the first shots came, the men clearing the slide ran and disappeared around the next bend. The driver of the Volvo diesel at his rear abandoned his vehicle and likewise vanished down the ascending bend.

Gustav finally moved, now with purpose, slowly circling the car in a crescent as he fired. He was mildly surprised that none of the men returned fire. The driver's door swung open and he appeared in the open space, a weapon in his twitching hand, but it was too late. The precision work finished him. Somehow, as if by a miracle, the woman had not been hit.

He quickly returned to his motorbike to retrieve another weapon, this one from a leather scabbard, some kind of long barreled firearm, then returned to the car. Opening the right rear passenger door he lifted the muzzle to her face, the barrel too wide to be a conventional shotgun. The woman, a bouquet of orange, bell-shaped, sweet-smelling kantuta nestled in her lap, the Bolivian national flower, sometimes called the "sacred flower of the Incas," understood what was about to happen. She neither cowered nor spoke, her face more a mask of pity than fear, not for herself, but for him, and for a moment he was ashamed. Resolved, ambition trumped the deed at hand, the way of the world as he knew it, and squeezed the trigger. The

white-hot blast that followed lit the shadows cast by the cliff face and echoed across the valley. The first three, the men, had taken all of nine seconds. The woman had taken seven more.

Gustav removed his leather jacket and sweat-stained tee.

Hours later, because there was no place to land a helicopter, the policia would come in their car. It was a shame because it must be fun to fly in one, he thought, but, in truth, what had happened on the mountain road was not a great puzzle and would not be interesting to investigate.

He wondered whom the dead woman's flowers were for.

These things passed through his mind as he dipped the tee in the woman's blood, then stepped to the rocky wall and applied his hand in great sweeping strokes. He knew the message would not stay there long, the first rain would wash it away, the pink gore trickling across the road and down the other side, a miniature waterfall. Yes, it would have been better to kill the senator up in the town and post a bulletin where the people who lived there could easily see it, but it didn't much matter, anyone passing the spot where the killings had happened would get the message and the news would quickly spread.

He was cautiously proud of his logic. He was not a monster, without conscience, and knew it was a gruesome business, only just that, business, but a young man of his standing had few choices. Had the killings happened up in Coroico, afterward he might have gone to the plaza church to ask the blessed Madonna's forgiveness.

He circled the car, photographing the scene with his cell, wide shots to encompass the car and crumpled bodies, a close-up to capture the woman's ruined face. It was also part of the job. He turned to where he had scrawled the message. Snap. Snap. Snap.

Soon, the fled men who had heard the shots would creep back and gather around the car. They would wait and wait for the policia until someone got the idea to just roll it over the side. They would have no way knowing the dead woman was a beloved senator. Perhaps, as a courtesy, they would drag the bodies out first.

There was no longer any need to proceed to the uphill town, but the abandoned cholo truck angled across the downhill slope presented a problem. There was room for a man to slip past, but no way to squeeze the motorbike past the cliff wall on one side, the steep drop on the other, not with the truck blocking the way. He'd have to do something about that.

The truck's motor was still idling. Gustav climbed in the cab. He spun the wheel hand over hand until it would turn no farther, the truck's tires angling hard to the right. Before that day, he had never driven anything bigger than his father's pickup. He ground the gears and eased the truck toward the cliff drop, the filthy windshield facing the void. The trailer scraped against the mountain, gouging a thin vent. He stopped and climbed down. A loose stone lay nearby. He planted it against the accelerator, ground the gear into neutral, and quickly

stepped back. The truck slowly rolled over the side, dislodging boulders as it shed its trailer and careened into the mist. Start to finish the business had taken less than seven minutes.

When he had gone a safe distance, descending the way he had come, and was sure the firearms were no longer necessary, he hurled them off the mountain.

Despite getting a late start, the day had worked out well. By nightfall, after a hot shower, a light meal, and a change of clothes, he was back at his favorite haunt, the Café Mystique, where it didn't matter what kind of car you drove, of far greater importance being how one danced.

Tomorrow, when he went to collect his pay, he hoped that the man who had hired him would understand why he had killed the woman on the road and not in the town as originally planned. He didn't see that it made much difference, dead was dead, and hoped his independent thinking would not reduce his reward. If his report was well received, perhaps the one who had ordered the killing would have other work for him. And if he happened to pass a church on his way, he would slip inside and light a candle for the senator, God rest her soul. He had no illusions about what would become of his.

CHAPTER TWO

Oomph! Bone-jarring, teeth-rattling body contact! Steaming breath blown into cupped hands. Eight fit men and two women in grass-stained sweats playing a rough game of touch football. Mid-February, the manicured lawn was dusted with a thin sheen of frost. Crouched, the quarterback gave the countdown, shouted “Hup,” and received the ball. Retreating to a safe distance, a Hail Mary spiral rolled off his fingertips. Downfield, the intended receiver leapt, snagged the pass, tumbled back to earth, briefly juggled the pigskin, regained control, and sprinted for the goalpost, two conveniently spaced elm trees. Five yards—ten—fifteen—the touchdown a sure thing. The runner lost control again when a patch of frozen turf took him down. The ball squirted from his nearly numb fingers. He scrambled after it. Opposing players caught up and piled on top.

No one paid much attention when the frost was suddenly stirred by a powerful gust of wind, the white stuff nearly obscuring the Marine helicopter as it descended. It set down outside the playing zone. One might have expected more of a reaction, the players more concerned with which side had recovered the fumble.

The helo’s rotors slowed to a stop. A hatch opened. A suit wearing a billowing overcoat, dark shades shielding his eyes against the afternoon glare, carrying a briefcase, stepped off and crossed to the mounded, still groping bodies. A closer look

when his coat flapped open exposed a waist-holstered Sig Sauer firearm.

He waited for the players to unpile. Their grass-stained sweats stated: You Elect 'Em, We Protect 'Em.

United States Secret Service Special Agent Jesse Lee Gage, thirty-six, glanced off at the three long-coated agents patrolling the lawn perimeter. They nodded in recognition. Jess nodded back.

One by one the players rolled off and sprawled on their backs, panting, grunting. Finally, only a single figure lay curled on the cold ground, still clutching the errant ball. The butterfingers, who also happened to be President of the United States, George Jefferson Swann, tilted his head and peered up. His age was no secret, of course, but sometimes quipped being “Younger than George Clooney, but older than Brad Pitt, or did I get that backward?” which always got a chuckle. False modesty because he did somewhat resemble Clooney and was fitter than most men his age.

The recently purchased country retreat in the background was a sprawling Cape Cod style saltbox, all bay windows and a half-century of add-ons, the playing field a perfectly groomed lawn edging the slate gray Atlantic where a handful of sailboats studded the unwelcoming water. The envy-inducing yacht anchored offshore housed more members of the PPD, the elite President's Protection Detail—the Secret Service's holiest of holies.

Jess said, “Mr. President?” offered his hand and assisted him to his feet.

“Guess we’ll have to call it a draw,” Swann said.

“Yes, sir, appears that way.”

The two walked off toward the house, discreetly followed by one of the agents Jess had earlier nodded to. One of the players, Charlie, the president’s fifteen-year-old daughter, fell in step between them. She wore a University of Tennessee sweatshirt showing their mascot, a Bluetick Coonhound. She’d known Jess since she was in grade school, said, “What’s up, Jess?”

“Hey there, Charlie. Just need a few minutes with the president.”

“Under that pile, I had the distinct impression someone was trying to step on my neck,” Swann said. He turned to his daughter. “I don’t suppose that was you?”

“You’ll never know.” She giggled.

Swann turned to Jess. “If you saw something, let’s hear it, figure out whose side you’re on.”

“No, sir. I’m sure it was an accident, all part of the game.”

“Well, don’t bet on it.”

A gabled room over a detached four-car garage served as a command post, wall-to-wall monitors showing just about every square foot of the estate, inside and out, all except those rooms reserved for privacy. The three approaching the house appeared on the center monitor. “Javelin moving to porthole,” one of two

Service agents always on duty said into his headset, “porthole” code for the main house.

They were halfway there when First Lady Micki Swann, a good-looking woman bundled in a navy-blue pea coat, Micki a dozen years younger than her husband, emerged from the screened wrap-around verandah to intercept them. She skipped to her husband’s side like a flirty cheerleader. “Golly gee, my president and now captain of the football team,” she faux swooned. “Am I dreaming or have all my girlhood dreams come true?” She gave him a light peck on the cheek and handed him a towel.

“Mine too,” her husband beamed, toweling his face.

Anyone who didn’t know them would have assumed they were witness to a family reunion, Jess the grown son.

“Cool off, you two, it’s not like you’re alone,” Charlie said. She rolled her eyes and trotted ahead into the house.

Micki turned to the special agent. “Hello, Jess. It’s been a while, what, three, four days?”

Jess nodded. “Mrs. Swann. Five. Atlanta.”

Once inside, the first lady made herself scarce while Jess and her husband retired to his home office, the wood paneling hung with framed family photos, a bronze copy of a Frederick Remington sculpture, *The Bronco Buster*, on a pedestal. President Swann closed the door and indicated Jess’s briefcase. “What do you have?”

Jess popped the locks, took out a manila envelope and removed a color 8 x 10 photograph. He handed it to Swann, who studied it, appalled. The woman's face gunshot, it was impossible to make out her features. "Someone we know?"

"That senator you're working with down in Bolivia."

"Not Carla?"

Jess nodded.

"How do we know?"

"We know, sir." Coming from Jess, it was close enough. "Local police took them, sent them to the DEA. DEA vetted and sent them to us." He allowed a moment to let that sink in, then said, "There's more, sir."

"Show me."

Jess removed another half-dozen photos from the envelope and handed them to him. Swann skimmed them, some of the images darkish because they were taken in the shade of a cliffside, but enough to know he was seeing the aftermath of an assassination—oversized red letters spelling out FARA 16 on a cliff wall still visible. "Good God Almighty," Swann groaned, only halfway through the stack before he dropped them on a coffee table and sank to the couch. After a few moments he picked them up and studied them more closely, Senator Bautista slumped in the red car. "A shame. A goddamned shame." His fist suddenly came down on the tabletop, rattling it. "Excuse my French."

“Witnesses, some truck drivers in the area, said one man,” Jess said. “First took out the driver and two bodyguards. Then pulled out one of these.” He removed a final photo from the envelope, this one showing some kind of weapon, the muzzle too wide to be an ordinary shotgun, the photo not taken at the ambush site, but printed from a Google search, and said, “Some kind of flare gun,” Jess said. “Down there, they stuff them with shot, use them to kill snakes in the fields, you can’t miss with the spray that thing puts out.”

The door opened and Charlie entered. She’d showered and changed into jeans and a different sweatshirt and smelled good. “Mom wants to know if you’re hungry. She threw together a crab salad. Actually, she didn’t. Carlos, our chef, did. But let’s pretend.”

“No, I’m good, thanks,” Jess said. Swann said the same.

“What are you guys looking at?” she asked. She stepped behind the couch and looked over her father’s shoulder. Swann quickly gathered up the photos and turned the top one face down.

“Not for your eyes, hon.”

“Whatever.” She shrugged and wandered out again but not before first casting a flirty glance over her shoulder.

“I think she has a thing for you,” Swann said, anything to even slightly alter the mood. “Last month it was a boy on her school soccer team. He promised to score his next three goals in her honor.”

“Fifteen going on thirty-five,” Jess said, the first thing that popped into his head and immediately regretted the quip, thinking it might have given the wrong impression.

Swann flipped through more photos. “*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Andes*—Revolutionary Armed Forces of the Andes. Sixteenth Front. Forty years of this godforsaken mess, this shit, two hundred thousand dead.” He tossed the photos on the table. “We think Tomas Ulzana’s people did this?”

Jess nodded.

“Goddamn little narco-guerilla thinks he’s Napoleon. When are these people going to see some peace? I thought we had him on the run.”

“He went underground, sir. Digging deeper every day, always planning a comeback.”

“No doubt,” Swann said. “He’s been air-dropping these?” indicating the photos.

“Whenever, wherever he feels he’s losing his grip.”

Swann took a pack of smokes from a desk drawer, lit one and waved the smoke away from his face. “Micki allows me three of these a day. This’ll be my fifth. She catches me I’ll be in the doghouse.” He took a few puffs before stubbing it out. “Carla, I’ve known her since she was fifteen, sixteen years old, about Charlie’s age. Jess, you should have heard her sing. Like a diva. She’d take these kids, orphans, their parents caught in one crossfire or another between the drug traffickers, the militia, the guerillas, even the military. She turned their lives around.

Otherwise, they'd be off to the hills in search of a gun and someone to give their hurt to, like a disease, the *other* virus decimating the world." He picked up the first photo of Carla again. "Jesus, look what they did to your face," said like she was alive and well and present. He stepped to a bay window and stared out at the ocean. Away on the horizon a trawler was returning to Hyannis with the day's catch. "By the way, how's your mom?" a stopgap while he gathered his thoughts. The agent's mother had recently been diagnosed with late-stage breast cancer and he'd taken a few days off to be with her.

"She says laughter is the best medicine, unless you have diarrhea."

"You'll tell her we're praying for her. Don't forget. That's an order. If there's anything we can do."

"I'll be sure to do that, sir."

There followed a silence, Jess wondering if the meeting was over and he was dismissed.

Finally, Swann spoke again. "It's come down to a world symbol now. It's not enough to just pound your chest anymore. You've got to do it on CNN or Fox, MSNBC." He nodded to the TV. "And where there's no CNN, and people don't, or can't read, you airdrop photographs. Your strength is relative to your control of the image. It's called 'manufacturing consent,' using the media to shape and control both knowledge and ignorance. Maybe you should write that down."

"No need, sir. Pretty sure I'll remember."

Swann bowed his head and studied his hands. "Good god. Carla." He lit another cigarette, then said, "But we can play that game too."

CHAPTER THREE

Mention the United States government's involvement in the 'War on Drugs,' the one waged in Latin America, specifically the war on cocaine, the second most frequently used illegal drug globally after cannabis, and likely as not the image formed in the uninformed listener's mind is one of vast armies engaged in pitched battles, the over-the-top deployment of weapons of land, air, and sea.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The war, such as it was, akin more to guerilla rivalry between non-state actors, adept at ambush, sabotage, and assassination, was for the most part limited to Peru, Bolivia, and Columbia, the source countries for virtually all the world's cocaine-based products.

Coca bushes are unique to the Andean spine of Latin America. There were, and still are, many legal growing areas and markets within these regions. There were, and still are, many competing clandestine organizations as well.

At the time, production was intentionally bifurcated by the higher-level traffickers, to better control the market and profit margin. Cocaine production then had three stages: paste, base, and hydrochloride. Most paste and some base was produced in Bolivia, some in Peru, but the happy ending final product, cocaine hydrochloride, was primarily produced only in Columbia.

The market value of the product increased with each phase of production: within Latin America, roughly \$200 per kilogram for paste, \$600-\$800 for base, \$1,200-\$2,400 for cocaine hydrochloride (the finished product). Then, as it ran through the transit zone of the Caribbean, the price shot up astronomically, costing \$25,000-\$30,000 per kilogram upon reaching the United States. Traffickers garnered a hefty share of the average 47 billion in annual profit the illegal trade harvested from the U.S. alone.

In 1986, in the midst of the American cocaine epidemic, the collective leadership then in power determined that the problem needed to be attacked at the source, a sensitive and difficult proposition, as both Columbia and Peru were locked in bitter struggle with guerilla organizations trying to overthrow their governments.

The answer to this dilemma was termed Operation Snowcap. From early 1987 through 1994, with the cooperation of local governments, groups of twelve to fifteen drug enforcement agents at a time were dispatched to these countries on a continuous basis.

Bolivia's Chapare Valley was the cradle for cocaine production; a vast region of muggy, densely jungled lowlands starting at the base of the Andes Mountains and stretching east across the broad plains of the Beni to the edges of the Amazon basin, the area home to a third of the world's cocaine output, with more than 67,000 acres under cultivation; the coca leaf

grown and harvested there mixed with chemical solvents, then mashed in *pozo* pits by often as not barefooted peasants to make cocaine paste, the first step before transport to neighboring Peru or Columbia; leafy raw material converted to rocks and powder. An estimated 90 percent of the three hundred thousand farmers living in the region were believed to be involved.

Aggressive elimination involved two options. One, the eradication of illicit fields through air-launched fumigation, the other, search and destroy destruction of jungle “labs” by paramilitary squads trained and funded by the Americans. As with use of the expression “war on drugs,” “labs” in the Bolivian context is highly misleading. Not “lab” as a sterile environment where highly educated specialists in white lab attire go about their cryptic business, but the loosest possible definition; one or a cluster of open-sided, ramshackle huts for the storage of chemicals (“precursor chemicals,” the Americans called them) used in the manufacture of paste.

The way it worked, from 1987 through 1994, agents of the DEA first established an office in a major metropolis, say La Paz, Cochabama, and Trinidad, and from there branched out with satellite base camps (albeit clandestine ones, as much as possible) in the rural pueblos near suspected coca fields. Once established, the Yanks bonded with their local anti-narco counterparts, the UMOPAR (Unidad Movil Policia Para Areas Rurales; e.g. Mobile Police Unit for Rural Areas), the Bolivian

narcotics police, supported by the *Diablos Rojos* (Red Devils) of the Bolivian air force. Enablers, they provided limited manpower, intelligence, and toys in support. Beyond that, the U. S. had no military presence in South America, no standing bases, nothing of the sort.

The *pichicatero's* name is Mauricio Flores, involved in coca paste production, *pichicata*. He is thirty-three years of age. He owns two machetes. He has never been more than forty kilometers from the door of his pueblo shanty.

He had started at the crack of dawn before it got too hot. He chewed coca leaves to give him strength. He hadn't seen his wife, who was pregnant again with their seventh child, for forty-two days. He was accustomed to spending long periods away from his loved ones and missed his wife's cooking, but most of all her maternal grace, the tenderness with which she bathed his feet.

There were five men, a younger and an older brother among them (they took turns visiting their families), working the remote jungle lab surrounded by several hectares of coca fields. On average, they earned thirty dollars per day. If caught, they faced eight years in prison. Like each of the others, Mauricio had held many jobs before going to work for traffickers. He had labored in a high-altitude tin mine before prices dropped and he was again unemployed. Once, employed at a sugarcane plantation, he was bitten on the wrist by a snake. Had the reptile

been venomous, it would have been much worse. He had labored in a chocolate factory, and another creating energy drinks. Working for the cartel he also had many different jobs; a sentry armed with an old rifle, alert for the approach of a counter-narco squad. His boots, laces tied, hung from around his neck. His feet, too swollen to fit into them, were bound in filthy linen, as were his fingers when picking leaves in the fields, to keep the sharp needles from pricking them. One of his several jobs was as a “stomper,” hours spent tramping coca leaves with water, gasoline, and chemicals to create a cocaine paste. The fumes gave him terrible headaches and his flimsy rubber boots let in an acid that turned his toenails green. Returning home, he made it a point to walk where the stinging insects were few and the grass and leaves were soft.

The trip home had begun on foot, then on shared horseback, riding with a boy going some of the same direction, then later by canoe, one he had come across and took without asking, then again on foot. Back at the jungle site there were two small airplanes, an older model single engine Cessna and a newish Piper Cub (another of Mauricio’s brothers piloted for a trafficker over in Peru), the property of the trafficker who paid his wage, parked at one end of the red clay airstrip carved from the forest, the manpower and effort required to carve it from the jungle nearly unimaginable, but certainly no one was going to offer him a lift to town, and he would never be so foolish as to ask.

When he arrived home, he would buy presents, not something for each of them, he hadn't enough *bolivianos* for that, but one thing they could all share and enjoy, possibly a used bicycle, with fat black tires like well fed snakes, a bell, and twin baskets like saddlebags. Of course, he would also buy some small thing for his saintly mother who protected him with her prayers and lit a candle for him on her almost daily visits to the little whitewashed mission church at the edge of the pueblo plaza. He often teased her, claiming that her frequent visits there had nothing to do with him, but were simply an excuse to visit the alcove painting of Mario Alfonso Moreno Ryes, popularly known as "Cantinflas," a movie actor famous for his portrayal of life as a Bolivian peasant. It pleased him to see his mother blush and giggle like a schoolgirl.

Afterward, he would visit the local *barra* and spend some money there. He would drink beer with his old friend Juan Trujillo, not too much, only a little because he had promised his wife, and encourage Juan to work with him in the coca fields. The work was tiring, but the pay was good. He thought it a good bet that Juan, too, could use a nice bicycle.

Once, he had been a legal coca farmer, adhering to the allowance of his government, tending a few hectare, enough for his personal use (for strength, energy, and stamina) and able to turn a small profit, enough to feed and clothe his family. He saw nothing wrong with growing and harvesting the coca leaf. Doing so had provided a decent living. If some fellow citizens, or some

in neighboring Peru or Columbia added kerosene, sulfuric acid, and other chemicals to turn it into cocaine so that some in the West could stick it up their noses, even kill themselves as a result, that was their business, and nothing to do with him.

Then, one day, agents of Uncle Sam accompanied by armed countrymen had paid him a visit, “suggesting” that for the sum of \$4,000 cash he eradicate his crop and instead grow bananas, pineapples, or potatoes. At first, when the threat, thinly disguised as an offer, was made, he considered himself among those fortunate not to have been beaten or kicked. At the time, the Bolivian government compensated coca growers for voluntary eradication. Later it switched to forcible destruction of seedbeds and newly planted coca crops without giving compensation. He’d reluctantly agreed, but the new crop soon failed, the money long spent, and his loved ones often went hungry. He saw no choice but to return to what he knew best, this time deeper in the jungle, away from prying eyes. He still did not consider himself a trafficker, only an impoverished citizen trying to feed and dress his family. Before, one way or another, he hadn’t given much thought to Americans, but now he deeply resented them. They had given him no choice but to become a criminal, working for men better funded and organized than he could ever hope to be. It was a living.

Upon his return to the pueblo, he bought his family not a bicycle, but a young goat, intended first as a pet, then valued for its milk, a daily blessing, and later for its meat, good for stews,

sandwiches, and kebabs, especially delicious after a few beers. His wife washed his feet and scolded him for not taking better care of himself, but he shrugged, saying it was the way it was done. When he tried to tell her about his life as a leaf picker, she hushed him, saying, “The less I know about it the better.”

The formation of surplus and black market, unevenly-spaced helicopters, two HU-IU Hueys, an Apache left over from Nam that somehow wound up 12,000 miles away in a different jungle, and a Russian made Hind captured in neighboring Peru, were on seek and destroy. Flying in low from the east over the forest treetops, their longbow rotors resembled giant weed whackers. Their blade wash parted the jungle, causing flocks of parrots and other tropical birds to take sudden flight. A sloth lost its footing high in the branches of a *cecropia* tree and plummeted to the fungi littered ground. Lying in ambush in the tall reeds beside a bog, a sixteen-foot anaconda slipped into the tepid water, sunk beneath the surface, and settled on the muddy bottom among sheltering caiman and capybara, the creatures waiting it out.

Five miles from the suspected site, setting down on a sandbar in the middle of a wide stretch of river, the team unloaded Zodiac inflatable rafts and silently rowed upriver. Forty minutes later they approached the target.

It was mere coincidence that the lookout posted on the riverbank that late afternoon was caught off guard. He had

heard a loud splash in the water. Looking, he had glimpsed a flash of pink. A superstitious sort, he imagined it to be a pink river dolphin. In some parts, making direct eye contact with a river dolphin is a perilous thing, unleashing a lifetime of nightmares. And so, he had quickly looked away. After nearly a minute, when he dared to look again, he saw, not a dolphin, but the first of the inflatables gliding into view from behind an elbow bend. Snapping alert, he fired his rifle into the air, sounding the alarm. The *pichicateros* rarely fought to defend their operations, and this time was no different. Thirty dollars a day wasn't enough for a man to risk his life. The crew fled into the jungle. All except a peasant named Gualberto, brother-in-law to Mauricio Flores, who was wounded by gunfire, died an hour later, and was left to rot where he fell.

All things considered the raid went smoothly. There were exceptions: nine days earlier a helo had been shot down by a rocket-propelled grenade. The commando's intent wasn't to kill, only destroy. Seized were three rifles, a submachine gun, two grenades without the weapon to fire them, radio equipment, and a quantity of paste ready for transport. The previous batch of eleven kilos had been flown out nine days before. The current batch, scheduled for transport in one week, amounted to three kilos. The fields, paste, and single ramshackle structure used to house the men and precursor chemicals, were incinerated. Twenty minutes later, a heavy downpour doused the flames, but the damage had already been done. A close inspection of the

two aircraft revealed the Cessna 206, most popular with traffickers because its dual side doors allowed quick offloading, kits that allowed its gas tanks to be expanded, and the plane's ability to take off and land on runways as short as 300 yards, was deemed not airworthy and too much trouble to repair. The Piper was flown back to the base camp to be recycled into service. Before leaving, the raiders dynamited the airstrip to prevent its future reuse.

Later that day, other teams took out another twenty-three fields, and the day after, fourteen. They averaged two hundred per month. It hardly mattered that day in, day out, three or four such operations were happening simultaneously—a futile game of whack-a-mole. If progress was being made, it was damn hard to tell. War without end.

Riding in one of the Apaches, the sole member of the search and destroy who wasn't La DEA or Bolivian paramilitary had not been Mauricio's friend, not a true friend, but a paid snitch.

Sitting at a table sipping warm beers in the *barra*, Juan Trujillo had asked many questions. How many men worked with him? Were they armed? What kinds of weapons? Airplanes, how many? Were there women, and if so, were they young and pretty, or old and always in a foul mood? They paused amid their questions and answers to turn to the tiny TV behind the bar where Elvis sang the title tune in *Jailhouse Rock*, the sound off while they silently mouthed the lyrics. Afterward,

Juan resumed. Mostly he wanted to know about the fields and their location. Did they make only base, or also paste, or the finished product? What roads, what trails, what streams and rivers should he follow, saying he would join Mauricio there in a few days. Mauricio drew his trusted friend Juan a map.

As for Mauricio Flores, who had the good fortune not to be present the day the commandos paid a visit, afterward, neither agents of La DEA nor the *policia* came looking for him. He was a small fish in a great green sea and not worth the trouble. After a few weeks he again found employment at the chocolate factory. Back in the pueblo, on his off days he kept alert for the traitor Juan—but their paths never crossed, or so he claimed. Thirteen days after the eradication of the fields, a poacher discovered a headless body floating in a stream. Mutilated by a machete, the *policia* took it to be the body of Juan Trujillo. Suspicion fell on Mauricio, the murder meant to revenge the loss of his livelihood and the death of his bother-in-law, but there was never any proof—nearly everyone owned a machete or two, and green toenails were not enough to condemn a man.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jesse Lee Gage's first career choice hadn't been with the Service. Attending university on an ROTC scholarship, three months before graduating as an army officer from A&M down in College Station, Texas he was interviewed for potential recruitment by the Central Intelligence Agency. Recommended by a professor, a talent spotter for the CIA, Jess was a likely candidate; full ROTC and academic honors, student government, athletics, and thoroughly patriotic.

Most important, his will was strong. People his age viewed doubt as a legitimate philosophical posture—saw themselves as being dead center in the middle, whereas actually they were nowhere. But not Jess Gage. The way he figured it, instilled in him by his mother, a small-town librarian, no battle was ever won by spectators. For his thirteenth birthday she'd gifted him a picture book, *America the Beautiful, In the Words of John F. Kennedy*. Inside on the title page, she'd written, 'Dear Son, with this book there is a prayer that it may be a means to encourage a vision for you in this land.' Around the same time, he'd come across three Ian Fleming paperbacks, *Dr. No*, *Goldfinger* and *Thunderball*, in a bookshare kiosk and became fascinated by the exploits of agent James Bond. He'd joined the Boy Scouts and attained the rank of Eagle, one of the only four-percent who earned that rank. Ever since becoming a scout he'd felt strongly that he owed his country a debt. His recruiter argued that since

there was little chance for military promotion during times of relative peace, why not consider a career in the CIA? At least give it some thought.

Jess said he'd consider it, and promptly forgot about it, mainly because he knew there was a chink in his armor—his father, an only occasionally successful grifter, hit or miss, and frequently absent because he was tending his scams, always one step ahead of the law. Jess didn't see him often, but he did make an unannounced appearance at his college graduation. Afterward, at a restaurant, they got into it and he promptly vanished, something Jess had learned to live with. He sometimes thought that the less he knew about him the better. The closest they ever got to a genuine give and take was a brief period when they played chess, his father mailing his moves on postcards sent from wherever he was, whatever he was up to at the time.

The CIA needed six months to run a full security check. Thinking the odds were stacked, Jess went home to Tennessee to await his military posting.

Vienna, Austria. The Cold War was over. The Iron Curtain had been raised. Europe and the former Soviet Union were crawling with unemployed spies, loose canons all. A trio of CIA spies were caught and interrogated by agents of the recently created Federal Security Service, formerly the KGB. Poring over some photographs, one in particular bore resemblance to one of the three captured spies. They pinned the photo on his chest, shot

him in the head, and took another photo. They allowed the other two to escape. The photo arrived by fax at CIA HQ in Langley, Virginia.

A few months later the CIA recruiter showed up again, Jess still home in Tennessee, and said they'd take him if he'd have them. After signing a non-disclosure, they coached him in concocting a cover story for his mom and girlfriend. As far as they knew, he was headed to the east coast for his military posting.

There he fell under the tutelage of Marshall Shaw, an instructor with the CIA's covert junior officer training program at Camp Peary, Virginia, aka the 'farm,' the 9,000-acre military reservation near Williamsburg disguised as a Pentagon research and testing facility. Its existence is widely known, but has never been officially acknowledged by the U.S. government.

Jess's primary instructor, Shaw, was confined to a wheelchair, the result of a vague occurrence during his proactive days on assignment in Istanbul.

Shaw made no effort to hide that he took the execution in Vienna personally—the agent killed was one of his ex-students. He complained to his superiors, arguing that spying didn't stop just because the Cold War was over. He felt that CIA students weren't trained hard or long enough. They trained for six months. The KGB, still active when Shaw was in his prime, trained their people for over two years, at the "Aquarium," the alma mater of the former Soviet Union's greatest spies. Its

varsity trophies were America's most vital defense secrets. Its training methods could only be described as brilliant and torturous. But no one gave a shit what Shaw had to say. It was the nineties and he was out of touch. A Cold War warrior, a legendary agent, no doubt about it, but one also well past his prime.

Making his case, Shaw got even more specific: the real problem was Sasha, his former counterpart/instructor at the 'Aquarium.' In fact, it was one of Sasha's ex-students who'd knocked off the CIA operative in Vienna. And Shaw had too much pride to allow himself to be humiliated.

Jess arrived in D.C. where he was "fluttered," the CIA term for its grueling lie detection exams. They needed to know if he was hiding anything. Shaw, who had some input in who was chosen, was sometimes present. It being his last session, he was allowed to handpick his students.

Training at the camp, Jess was an outsider. Most of the other were Ivy Leaguers, scions of an old-boy network that stood together, and Jess's country smarts stood out against their blue-chip backgrounds.

One Yale guy, Val, was a dyed-in-the-wool dick. He intended to be the Top Gun there, head of the class so he could nab the best assignments. He intended to go places and wasn't about to let anyone stand in his way.

A few days into their training, some of the guys, including Jess, were blowing off steam at a local tavern. Drifting into

conversation with an old drunk at the bar, they thought nothing of it. The following day in class the guy made an appearance. It turned out to be Shaw. He'd been testing them the night before. He singled out Jess, making an example of him. "Shit, I thought you were supposed to be a spy."

Their training continued. Lots of James Bond type stuff. It's called tradecraft; bugging classes, flaps and seals (the art of letter opening), clandestine photography, secret writing, disguises, cool stuff.

On one occasion, some of the trainees were stripped of their clothing and ID's and dropped off in a rural area thirty miles from the farm. Their assignment—to make it back to the base without blowing their cover. Crouched in the shrubbery on the outskirts of a farming community, Jess helped himself to a pair of men's underwear from a backyard clothesline. Digging in a garbage can behind a country church, he found a discarded notebook. Someone's backyard barbecue grill provided the final touch. Tearing a sheet from the notebook, he smoothed it out. Using a lump of coal, he scrawled a big black number on the sheet, plastered it to his chest, and began to sprint. Taken for a long-distance jogger, he made it back to the farm without arousing suspicion.

One rainy afternoon, Shaw showed his trainees a b&w Soviet-era film. It showed a bleak factory where coffins were loaded onto rails and incinerated in a crematorium. At some point the footage cut to a hysterical soul bound tight to a

stretcher. Boilermen in leather aprons fed the stretcher to the flames. Tough to watch, it was Shaw's way of demonstrating what they were up against. He claimed that all Russian trainees were shown this film. It drove home what happened when they embarrassed their country. Jess was the only one with the balls to point out that the movie had to be at least fifty years old, that times had changed.

Yeah, well, clearly Shaw hadn't.

Shaw told his trainees that he intended to weed out the weak of mind and heart. What Jess and the others didn't know at the time was that he was pushing them for a reason. He was assembling his team, one he'd use to eliminate his rival, Sasha. Shaw became a mentor to those he selected. Jess made the cut. So did Val and two others.

The first indication that Shaw was up to something came when he took his guys aside, telling them there might be a few "plants" at the farm—CIA officers posing as trainees to make sure they didn't violate the secrecy rules. Shaw said he didn't know who the plants were, but as an exercise, he instructed his proxies to find out. And they damn well did.

One night, an exercise took them to a D.C. nightclub frequented by former KGB agents. There Jess learned something of importance pertaining to Sasha—the weak link Shaw had been looking for. He'd had an affair with a former student spy, Galena, then living in the States. Once Jess reported the info, Shaw's mind set to concocting a plan.

The exercise took its toll. There was actual gunplay. One of the team received a flesh wound. The guys realized they were in way over their heads. It dawned on them they'd gone far beyond mere training exercises. They got the distinct impression that all along they'd been on a mission, doing Shaw's dirty work for him. They decided to confront him, demanding to know exactly what was going on.

Shaw finally dropped the bomb, revealing their next assignment—to take out Sasha. Initially, Jess and three others wanted out. Only Val was eager to stay involved. Which was when Shaw sprung another surprise—he'd collected sufficient to blackmail each of them. In Jess's case, it had something to do with his dad.

Shaw's sting began by concentrating on Galena. Espionage led the team to the Russian Embassy, and later, aboard a Russian trawler. And in the process, a Russian agent wound up dead. One thing was certain; Shaw was dangerous.

The goal became to lure Sasha to the States for a showdown with Shaw. But the former KGB instructor had revelations of his own—he'd anticipated Shaw's plan and had one of his own. Sasha had also gained the info Shaw was using to blackmail Jess, and used it to coerce him into becoming a double agent. His first assignment would be to burn Shaw and get him out of Sasha's hair.

Jess had no choice but to return to the farm, working for Sasha, Shaw all the while convinced he was still part of his team.

Shaw prepared the final sting. Jess met with Galena and gave her the info regarding Shaw's plan, but he didn't tell her everything. He had something up his sleeve. He altered it.

Up to that point, Jess had never met Sasha. He'd been communicating through Galena. But to be absolutely certain Jess didn't blow it, the Russians set up a meeting with someone to train him. It turned out to be Sasha, who arrived stateside just the way Shaw planned.

The sting went down like this: Jess learned that Shaw had leaked the blackmail info to Sasha in order to lure him to America. Then Shaw prepared to spring his trap.

The operation got complicated, to the point where it was hard to tell just whose side Jess was on, but it turned out he was three steps ahead of everyone. He pulled off the ultimate coup by stinging both Shaw and Sasha.

The truth finally leaked out. The execution of an American spy in Vienna was only the most recent in a string of similar executions trailing back a dozen years. Each had one thing in common—they were all taught by Shaw.

The entire sting was a CIA operation from the get-go, but that didn't change the fact that Shaw was out of control. The object had always been to allow his Cold War mania to orchestrate a scenario where Sasha was manipulated into coming to the States. But Sasha was far too valuable, too progressive in his methods to simply knock him off. Shaw was the one who was expendable, and lost his life in the process.

Sasha was stung so bad that he has no choice but to join the Americans and make his livelihood doing what he did best. The last Jess heard, he was training a new semester of CIA recruits, presumably without the crematorium film.

It was the most common of espionage stories—one spy obsessively seeking another, with dire consequences for one, the other, or both.

It didn't take a psychiatrist to figure out that Jess had always needed to feel he was part of a family. It was one of the reasons he took to the CIA and Shaw—he'd replaced his own dad with Shaw as a father figure. But in the end, he decided against a career with the agency—too much skullduggery, too many double-crosses, too much cloak-and-dagger, too many betrayals, too much bullshit. He'd had his fill of cons, no matter which side was behind them.

When he returned home for a brief stay to decide his next move, his mom and sister still believed he'd been away on his military posting.

He began to look for another way to serve his country. Three weeks later, out quail hunting in the piney woods bordering the family home, a vehicle pulled up. A message was delivered—apparently, somehow the name Jesse Lee Gage had come to the attention of a young congressman from Tennessee.

That's how he wound up in the Service. After another extensive background check, he made the cut, chosen among the 1% of 15,000 applicants.

CHAPTER FIVE

The best way to approach this next is from the air, a bird's-eye nighttime view gliding over the twinkling lights of Santa Cruz de la Sierra ('Holy Cross of the Mountain Range'), Bolivia's largest city, now approaching the soup bowl of the Estadio Hernando Siles, the city's largest soccer stadium. It was mid-December.

The open-air stadium was packed, over 40,000 in attendance, but not for a football game. The American president had arrived to deliver a message from the good citizens of the United States to the law-abiding citizens of Bolivia. To one side on a vast stage sat Bolivia's *Presidente* Juan Evo Morales, beside him, the American first lady. Also present, the local head of the DEA. The remaining seats were occupied by members of Bolivia's governing body and high-ranking military. Behind, a three-story tall photo of anti-narco Senator Carla Miranda Bautista dominated the stage.

In the parking lot, thousands more kept vigil inside and out their vehicles, the president's voice broadcast through speakers.

"The first lady and I were shocked and saddened when we heard of the tragic murder of your beloved Senator Carla Miranda Bautista, whom we've been proud to call a friend since I myself was a young senator," Swann was saying, a translator repeating his words in Spanish, an occasional echo and squeal over the broadcast system sometimes making him difficult to understand, but mostly the audience got it.

Earlier that evening the cathedrals had been full, the Christmas masses peppered with frequent mention of Senator Bautista. Many of those at the stadium had set up small altars in their homes, photos of the her fronted by offerings of alcohol, sweet fruit, and cut flowers.

“The next morning, when I was putting on my necktie and getting ready to start my day, my naval steward asked if I’d forgotten something,” Swann said. “He was referring to this bracelet, a gift from your Senator Bautista, woven by the orphaned children to whom she was so devoted.” Swann raised his left arm, causing his suit sleeve to tug back, revealing the bracelet.

Jumbo screens throughout the arena switched to an extreme close up of Swann’s wrist displaying the ethnic-looking trinket. Fashioned of rainbow-hued glass beads strung on a woven cord, thousands like it were available for purchase at any tourist kiosk or market stall for no more than a few *bolivianos*, the local currency. Although he’d been wearing the bracelet for much of his term, few Americans paid notice or knew much about it. Only the TV journalist Charlie Rose had once bothered to ask about its significance on his nightly PBS interview show, at which time the president explained its message.

“With her untimely death,” Swann continued, “a powerful, unwavering voice against criminal intimidation has been silenced. As a commitment to finish the work she started, I vow never to take this off. I am not intimidated, nor should you be. I

am not afraid, nor should you be. I am not anything but determined to continue the legacy for which my friend fell.” The last line was spoken in the native tongue, the president having perfected the pronunciation on the way down in Air Force One. Wrapping it up, he could just as easily have said, Good comes from far away, evil is close at hand, but we shall persevere.

The lighting dimmed and was immediately replaced by forty-thousand wrists wearing nearly identical bracelets, raising flicked BIC lighters and lit candles, casting their faces in a golden glow. Forty-thousand voices then launched into the Bolivian national anthem, “*Bolivians, el Hado procipio.*” “Bolivians, a most favorable destiny.”

In the parking lot, as if on signal, thousands of headlights winked on and off.

Jess and several Service agents stood watch inside a cordoned-off area at the mouth of the exit corridor nearest the stage. Other agents, disguised as locals, sat interspersed among the bleacher’d crowd. Some wore traditional folk costumes, the men in homemade trousers and ponchos, the women in colorful *la blusa’s*, blouses worn either long or short sleeved, *la manta’s*, thick shawls of llama or alpaca wool worn around the shoulders, *la pollera’s*, baggy, pleated skirts, and *el sombreros*—bowler hats, mostly worn by women. The agents had done their homework.

The president’s motorcade, shipped the day before from D.C., waited outside at the foot of an easy access exit. What most

onlookers fail to realize is that the president and his peeps don't just drop into town anywhere in the world and as an afterthought order up a conveyance or two or thirty-three from the locals, didn't just ring up Pyramid, Taj Mahal, or Great Wall of China Limo. They brought their own.

Once the president and his entourage had passed, the detail followed him down the tunnel, his ride framed in the arched entry. He paused there beside a U.S. Marine and was handed a telephone.

Jess stood close enough to overhear.

"This is President Swann. I've guaranteed President Morales that together we will win the day," Swann said into the phone. "And by win, I mean a shellacking." Handing the phone back to the Marine, he stepped through the passage to his limo.

Later that evening, the president and first lady enjoyed a private supper with *Presidente* Morales, who is unmarried, but chose his older sister to adopt the role of *his* first lady. Already twelve years in power, Morales had recently vowed to run for a fourth term. He claimed to live an ascetic life, but it was hard to tell considering the lavish digs in which the American first family was wined and dined.

The South American visit lasted a mere twenty-eight hours before it was time to return to Air Force One parked at El Alto International Airport, eight miles west of La Paz.

The morning of departure, Jess and the detail were seated in a hotel dining room eating a meal of puffy fried *empanadas*. A busboy in his early thirties approached Jess's table and asked, "Who are you guys," in faulty but easily understood English.

Jess studied him, every unplanned approach and unanticipated question getting some scrutiny, decided it was what it was, a busboy asking an innocent question, and answered in passable Spanish. "The original men in black." That got a few chuckles from his team.

"Ah, *Hombres de Negro. Men in Black*. Will Smith. Fresh Prince. Bel Air. Tommy Lee Jones," said the grinning busboy. "I will go to one day."

Jess tried not to laugh, but a little snuck out. "Good to know," he said. "I'll keep the porch light on."

Out in the corridor, a troop of U.S. Marines marched past. Special Agent in Charge (SAIC) Duke Cobb's voice came over the agent's portable radios. "Security Room from Post 101, Javelin's staff just advised we are departing."

The agents quickly took last sips of their coffee, filed out into the corridor, and fell in with the Marines.

At the top of the landing the shift formed a protective shield around the commander in chief. On Cobb's signal they descended a winding staircase to a majestic lobby crowded with hotel staff. Halfway down Swann hesitated, not sure what to expect. Beaming, he raised his hand in greeting when they

suddenly erupted into cheers, their enthusiasm mostly expected, but one never knew for sure.

Eight hours later the aircraft with the call sign Air Force One set down at Andrews Air Force base at Camp Springs, Maryland. It was simply another day in the life of the most powerful personage on earth.

The motorcade's return trip to the airport hadn't gone without incident—a series of rapid staccato bangs, like bursts of automatic gunfire, coming from a nearby alley. Jess and the detail dealt with it. It turned out to be teen kids messing with fireworks, in no way political or terror related. Questioned, they claimed never to have heard of Swann, or even of their countrywoman Bautista and begged not to spend the rest of their lives behind bars. Given Jess's assessment that they posed no real threat, the local authorities had sent them home. At the time, Swann knew nothing about it, the firecrackers muted behind tinted glass, and was only briefed after boarding his plane. "Jesus. Kids," was all he'd said.

CHAPTER SIX

The tarmac at Los Angeles International Airport swarmed with vehicles—Chevy Suburbans, 4-door sedans, and vans, all gleaming, starless black, all sporting dark tinted glass—some waiting, some rolling out to meet the C-5 cargo plane making its final approach to the secluded UPS runway. The behemoth workhorse served as a flying warehouse capable of moving nearly every type of military combat equipment—tanks, choppers, a fleet of smaller aircraft, a combat-ready military unit, or disaster aid—say, 328,301,674 aspirin tablets—its cargo hold longer than the length of the first powered flight by the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk. It was nicknamed F.R.E.D. ‘Fucking Ridiculous Economic Disaster,’ as in, if a C-5 happened to crash, it would cause a F.R.E.D. Twenty-eight jumbo tires, each nearly as tall as a man, touched down, left smoke trails, and taxied to a stop.

The cargo bay doors in the bulbous nose cone opened. What followed was a scene from a sci-fi flick—three dozen or so silhouetted men and women materializing from the dark interior of an alien craft, human abductees being returned to planet earth by their alien abductors. Only as they descended down a wide shadowed ramp into daylight did it became clear these weren’t ordinary folk—they were United States Secret Service personnel, members of the elite Presidential Protection Detail—attired in dark, tailored suits, ties, and ubiquitous

shades. Others followed, some in military uniforms, all branches represented, others dressed as SWAT cops—like a professional sports team arriving for the big game.

In their wake, two black, burnished limousines rolled side by side down the wide double ramp—Limo One and the Spare, respectively codenamed Stagecoach and Chariot—boxy, twin custom-crafted Cadillac Fleetwoods sheathed in military grade armour, not only bulletproof, but capable of withstanding a chemical or biological attack. Additional features rendered the president's ride nearly impregnable: a roll cage, puncture resistant Kevlar tires capable of withstanding bullets and spike strips, tear gas and smoke screen cannons mounted on the rear bumpers, an oxygen system stored in the trunk. The trunk also housed a small armory—pump action shotguns and sidearms—as did a compartment between the engine and grill. Each of the fifteen-thousand-pound behemoths featured paired flags mounted on the hood: the Stars and Stripes on the driver's side, the presidential seal on the other. The vehicles displayed identical license plates.

All this was happening in front of Special Agent Lyle Moody leaning against the hood of a black sedan. Every bit as sharp in his tailored suit and shades, yet there was something missing—the confidence and swagger of the arriving agents. In his mid-twenties, Lyle was younger, greener than most of the arriving pros, that and a little too wound up, like this was *his* first big game.

Ray Rykoff, by contrast, leaning against the matching sedan beside Lyle, had his head back, face tilted to the sun, catching rays. Looking more like a bronzed surfer than a special agent, he held a paper cup of Starbucks.

“That him?” Lyle nodding toward Brooks Hale, a veteran agent who’d been around and looked it. Not as buff or polished as the other agents, his buttoned suit clung tight around his expanding waistline. The descending limos had stopped at the base of the ramp. Brooks stood between them, picking a morsel of lint off his elbow.

“Nope,” Ray said.

The two agents went over and joined the third. Brooks glanced suspiciously at Lyle.

“He home?” Ray asked, indicating Stagecoach.

“Hey, Ray. Yep.’

Ray rapped his knuckles on one of the limo’s rear windows. The cabin door opened, revealing Jess Gage sprawled across the back seat, just awakening from a nap.

“*That’s* him,” Ray said, meant for Lyle.

Climbing out, Jess squinted into the sun and rubbed the grogginess from his face. Reaching back inside for his suit jacket folded into a makeshift pillow, he shook it out and put in on, concealing the holstered Sig Sauer. An agent knew how to dress around his gun. Removing his shades from an inside pocket, he put them on and stretched. He glanced at Lyle. “Who’s this?”

Ray handed him the Starbucks cup. Once roommates, their friendship dated back to their Texas A&M ROTC days, Jess two years older, the kind of friends who talked shit to each other's face and talked nice behind each other's back. After graduation they'd kept in touch. It was Jess who convinced Ray to apply for the Service.

"And a good morning to you, too, Special Agent Gage," Ray said, then, "The boss sent him up," meaning Lyle.

"From the V.P. detail, sir," Lyle chimed in.

"V.P. or the wife?" Jess taking a sip from the cup.

"We mix it up, you know—" Lyle said casually.

Jess shot him a hard look, his gaze like truth serum.

"Okay, wife mostly," Lyle countered the agent's look.

"You think I don't know who you are and what you've been up to since grade school, Special Agent Moody?"

"I thought you didn't—"

"If you're within a mile of the president, I know you. That's the length of my leash."

"Yes, sir," Lyle said, somewhat chastened.

"The V.P.'s second fiddle. His details are second fiddlers," Jess said.

"But I play the piano, sir."

It was hard to tell whether it was simple innocence or trying to be a wise guy. Jess let it slide, deciding it was the former. He rubbed a throbbing knot at the nape of his neck. "If it were up to me, I'd say you weren't ready. But it's not up to me."

"I've been ready since I was eleven," Lyle said.

"What happened then, you get your first pair of sunglasses?" Ray said.

"I saw the Zapruder film."

Jess and Ray softly groaned. Turned away and rolled their eyes. Nearly everyone had seen the footage of the Kennedy assassination, the silent 8mm footage shot by Abraham Zapruder. Some went so far as to call it the most important twenty-six seconds in history. "That's all, special agent," Ray said.

Lyle hung back as the two men moved off. Nearby, a five-man CAT (Counter Assault Team) team mingled beside their fortified black Chevy Suburban, codenamed Hercules. To an unschooled eye, it gave the appearance of a standard issue SUV, a soccer mom's ideal choice of transport, something to haul the kiddies in. Ignoring the light bar on top, you'd have to be high up, looking down on the circular moonroof to suspect there was more to it than met the eye, something that couldn't be seen unless the motorcade came under attack—behind the front seats the hollowed-out interior housed a belt-fed Dillon Aero M134D gatling minigun. When in motion, an agent armed with a M4 carbine sat on the rear facing back seat, the rear hatch always open.

African American Lionel 'G-Man' Bible, a prizefighter's physique, waved Lyle over. "He doesn't set a real clubby tone,

does he?" he said, indicating Jess walking away, again rubbing his neck.

Dressed like a SWAT cop, Bible, hometown Belzoni, Mississippi, in the heart of the delta, the catfish capital of the world where his mom and dad ran a catfish farm, was a cross between U.S. Army and NFL. He'd spent his youth on the Yazoo River fishing cats and exploring the half sunk, moss draped wreck of a Confederate paddlewheeler. Each forearm sported a wrist to elbow cat tat. He'd once caught a monster flathead he guessed to weigh around seventy pounds, not a world record, but close. The G in his moniker didn't stand for government, gator, or any G word related to Mississippi. It stood for gat.

"Clubby? No," Lyle said, "but whatever." He shrugged, "Suits me."

"He doesn't want there to be any confusion," Bible said. "When the shooting starts, we save the president, not each other. He figures if you're here, you should know what you're doing. If you have questions, ask me, or one of these other guys, just don't fumble around Jess."

"Why? He's not the agent in charge."

"Yeah, he doesn't have any real pull upstairs. But if he drops you, a lot of guys around here will follow," said with a grin and a crushing handshake. He released Lyle's pulverized hand and said, "Welcome to the detail."

Marching on, Jess noticed a serious crease in his tie, the triangle tip bent at an odd angle. His mind elsewhere, he tried to

smooth it out, but the crease stayed. Ray knew what to do. Reaching in a jacket pocket he removed a spare and handed it to Jess. The agent turned to his reflection in a car window and changed ties. They'd started off again when Ray said, "Hold up," and adjusted the knot, a kind of brotherly intimacy to it. If you didn't know better you might think the two had something going.

They strode past a team of countersnipers loading their long guns, night vision goggles, concussion grenades, and heavy body armor into another Suburban, codenamed Hawkeye. Counter sniper Zac Lilywhite called out to Jess, "We're off to the rifle range, Gage. Five-hundred yards. A bill—nah, make it two and bragging rights. You in?"

Jess said, "No problem. I don't need your money. And I sure as hell don't need your permission to brag." But no one was going anywhere, not the rifle range, not off to hit the links, not to the movies, not that day they weren't, the men riffing on each other. Lillywhite chuckled and went back to loading the Suburban.

The two men stopped at a sign marking the entrance to a secluded perimeter:

UPS
AUTHORIZED PERSONEL ONLY
BEYOND THIS POINT

“Take me through it,” Jess said. “I want to know every step the president’s going to take tomorrow. Put me in his shoes,” nothing he hadn’t already said a hundred times before.

“Oxford or loafer?” Ray asked.

“Your choice, but start with the Oxford.”

A lapel pin, huge and distorted because someone’s holding it under a mounted magnifying glass, painting it with red enamel hobby paint from a small glass bottle. Dipping the brush, painting in delicate strokes. Dipping, painting, touch up work. Then blow-drying the pin with a pink hair dryer.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The following day would be Cinco de Mayo, the annual observance to commemorate the Mexican Army's victory over the French at the Battle of Pueblo in 1862. Perhaps not much celebrated in many parts of the country, it was a big deal in LA, in no small part because of its high-volume Mexican population.

Pre-screened weeks earlier, the downtown L.A. location selected for the president's Cinco de Mayo speech boiled down to a Mexican-themed tourist trap. A period outdoor venue, it featured an 1815-built plaza, a mosaic tiled fountain, and a parish church, Our Lady Queen of Angels—*Nuestra Senora Reina de Los Angeles*, dating back to when there was nothing there but scrub brush and cottonwoods, a hardscrabble habitat for Native American Tongva Indians, optimistic priests, coyotes, and snakes, lots of snakes, about a million years before there was any place called California.

Basically, 'Little Mexico' is just Olvera Street, the oldest in Los Angeles. Lined with restaurants, small businesses, and craft shops, the streets and alleys branching away from the plaza did a good business selling Mexican prayer candles, serapes, and hanging puppets attired in white peasant garb. The surrounding streets had already been cordoned off, the LAPD keeping the daily mill of tourists at bay. The next day, all those in attendance would first be scanned with magnetometers, a regular feature since the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan.

In the plaza, a dozen carpenters were laboring against the clock to finish erecting a stage, while others positioned folding chairs, seating for around three hundred, and a quarter mile of ski fencing. The drone of buzz saws and banging hammers filled the air. Onstage, a small crane lowered the 'Blue Goose,' the president's podium bearing the presidential seal: an American bald eagle clutching an olive branch in one talon, a bundle of thirteen arrows in the other. The thing was made of armored steel and weighed a half-ton. Across the street, other workmen were erecting a "green room," a gaily-striped red, white, and blue tent rented from a wedding concessionaire.

Jess was there. Unfolding a chair facing the stage, he sat and propped one foot atop another. The faint, doughy scent of freshly baked *conchas*, *tacos de piña*, and *polvorones* from restaurants two blocks away wafted through the air. He opened a sack of tacos bought from a sidewalk vendor, unwrapped one, bit into the crunchy shell, and took in the view, what those in the handpicked audience would see the next day when the event kicked off. A handful of ratty-looking pigeons (his mother called them "city chickens") gathered around his feet, softly clucked, and pecked at taco crumbs, awaiting a bigger handout.

After a few bites he opened a brochure earlier handed to him by a roving troubadour and skimmed some of the local history. Olvera was originally Vine Street. In 1877 it was renamed after Agustin Olvera, the first judge of the county of Los Angeles. 'A

fantastic place to spend a day in Mexico without actually having to go travel far,' the brochure promised.

Jess abandoned his tacos to the birds and went over to the stage. He was about to mount the short flight of steps when a workman in coveralls lugging a short stepladder, a toolbelt slung around his waist, started to come down. Jess stepped back and gave him room to go first. At the bottom, as the workman turned, the ladder brushed against the agent. The workman said, "Sorry, amigo," a Spanish accent, and went about his business.

Jess said, "No problema," and went on about his.

Standing behind the podium he took in the opposite view, what the president would be seeing; proximity of adjoining buildings, numbers of windows and height of rooftops, no detail unobserved, no nuance unnoticed.

A mile and a half away at 404 Figueroa, in an event space at the Westin Bonaventure Hotel & Suites, the White House staff lead stood facing a seated assembly of PPD agents, field agents, local police, White House staff and volunteers. The staff lead saying: "These people have given a lot of cash to the party over the years. The least we can do is shake the hands that forked it over."

A field agent advance guy sitting in the third row spoke up. "What started out as thirty supporters of the governor's has

swelled, along with some heads, into a hundred of his closest personal friends.”

There was light laughter, but not much.

“The governor’s made a lot of promises. And we promised the governor,” the staff lead responded.

The meeting was almost over when Jess walked in. He’d caught the tail end of the back and forth. He’d been listening for about a minute when he spoke up. “You keep saying “we” when you talk about the president, but I never see you beside him on the rope line.”

That got some genuine laughter.

“Special Agent Gage. Who has us shaking in our boots this week?” the staff lead asked.

“Everyone, Mr. Timms, including your mother, Mrs. Timms. You get thirty shakes, not a hundred,” Jess said. “Let’s move on, unless you want to take this to the chief of staff, clarify exactly who it is you’re working for—the governor of the Sunshine State, or the White House?” He scanned the room. “Now, how are we doing on dogs? Still short?”

A TDS (Technical Security Advance Lead) spoke up. “A little. LAPD and Sheriff are all in. Military EOD are spread too thin these days to help. Airport security is lending us a couple. We’re out to the DEA for cross-trained dogs and the governor’s people might bring down one or two from Sacramento tonight.”

And so it went—

A suburban garage.

A man wearing a red Bolivian soccer team tee showing three silhouetted soccer players in red, yellow, and green, each in motion kicking a ball, sat before a table downloading photos from a cell phone to a printer. Out slid photos of the Olvera Street site, including a candid shot of Jesse Lee Gage on stage behind the Blue Goose.

The meeting at the Bonaventure had broken up, those present meandering, getting caught up, exchanging gossip. Jess squeezed out into the corridor, Ray Rykoff right behind. "Let's get you checked in," he said.

"I want to run the route one more time," Jess said.

Ray said, "I'll find you a car," and squeezed back into the conference room.

"I'll be around, find me," Jess said. He'd started for the elevators when one of them opened and a young woman came charging down the corridor directly at him. Barefoot, she was carrying her heels. Seeing her, Jess instinctively opened his suit jacket for easy gun access and squared his shoulders.

"Did I miss the meeting?" she asked, breathless.

He eased up when it became clear she wasn't a security risk—the laminated credentials dangling from around her neck told him so—then stiffened again when she suddenly stopped short and handed him one of her designer shoes. "Could you hold this please?" She steadied herself against him as she

slipped on her other shoe, then plucked its twin back and put it on. “Thanks.” And just like that she was gone, striding quickly into the conference room.

Down in the lobby, Jess drifted to a brochure and postcard display—racks of info about local attractions; Disneyland, Universal Studios, the Hollywood Walk of Fame, also postcards of Marilyn, the Marx Brothers, Mae West, Dorothy and Toto. Sunny Southern California, a place he’d been to at least a couple of dozen times, always as part of the job. A catalogue of “fun things to see and do,” and he hadn’t seen or done any of them. He picked up a Karloff as Frankenstein. The caption read, ‘Party On, Dude.’

Ray found him. He noted the Karloff card and plucked out a Lugosi as Dracula. “I have to choose, I always go with the underdog,” he said. “The going gets tough, my guy turns into a bat, takes off, lives to fight another day.” Extending his arms, he flapped them like wings.

Jess returned Karloff to the rack.

Ray changed the subject. “I want you to meet someone. She’s somewhere—,” Ray looking around.

“Think I prefer being just one of the guys with a gun and an armored vest,” Jess said, not exactly to Ray, more to himself.

“You never *were* one of the guys,” Ray reminded him.

Jess neither agreed nor disagreed. Reaching back, he kneaded his neck muscles—long a habit of his since joining the Service.

To Ray, and probably most anyone who knew him, it was obvious the guy badly needed a vacation. “Why don’t you put in to stay the weekend?” Ray said. “I’ll show you Baja. We’ll rent something off-road. Mingle with the *senoritas*. Scarf down some tamales. Get drunk on margaritas. The real deal, like the gatefold of that ZZ Top album.”

“I don’t need to go to Mexico to see Mexico,” Jess nodding to the entrance where a street vendor pushing a cart of blow-up animal balloons strolled past. “A hundred fifty years ago, this *was* Mexico.”

“Hey, just being a friend. The offer stands, you change your mind.”

The formerly barefoot woman, who’d stood nearby watching, now approached them.

Ray tilted his head. “Special Agent Gage, I want you to meet someone.”

She came over and stood between them. “My daddy promised me I’d get to meet the president,” she began, without having first introduced herself. “But so far it’s been nothing but Washington wannabes, guys with guns, and lots of small talk.” She offered her hand and Jess shook it. “Grace Wick. And you, no doubt, are a man with a gun. I’m special too, but you can just call me Grace.”

Jess said nothing.

“Grace is a volunteer driver in the motorcade tomorrow,” Ray explained. “Even better, she’s volunteered to have a drink with us tonight.”

Jess blinked, unsure of what was going on.

“She has a car.” Ray said.

Okay, Jess understood what he meant: not just any car, but the “straggler,” a common feature of presidential motorcades. The way it worked, interested parties, civilians, sent in their names, where to he wasn’t exactly sure, but one got chosen (after a thorough background check), a kind of lottery, and got to drive a vehicle at the tail end of the motorcade, hang around and wait for tardy arrivals. Some in the know claimed it was rigged, that basically it boiled down to whom you knew, which was probably closer to the truth, so it was likely Grace Wick knew someone who mattered. But he’d never cared for the sound of “volunteer,” not when it came to participating in a presidential motorcade—something he considered an honor and a privilege, not something you did because a tennis date got canceled.

“Give me ten minutes,” Grace said. “Meet you out front,” and walked away to the elevators, Jess watching her go. He headed for the exit, Ray at his heels. “Dude, sometimes I don’t think you appreciate the amount of work I put in for you,” Ray said.

“Your advance work, or grandmothering?”

“Case you haven’t noticed, there’s nine women in every lobby in every bar in every hotel we work. And they all want the same thing—to cozy up to the man who protects the *Man*.”

“I know. That’s probably how I’m going to meet my future ex-wife. Just not tonight. Have fun.”

“Nah. I’m with someone now.”

Jess turned to him and raised an eyebrow.

“And I’m not going to blow it this time.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Okay, here’s a question,” Ray said. “What if you don’t get the promotion, you *don’t* get Duke’s job when he hangs it up?”

That touched a nerve.

“Guy your age, you either move up or out. Then what?” he went on.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing. That’s right. You never think beyond the job. Tomorrow night, we’re back in D.C. Sunday, Chicago. After that, wherever. But what would you do if Monday morning came around and you had nowhere to go?”

“I’d put my feet up and thank god I’ll never have this conversation again.”

“Maybe. But you’d also have to think for yourself.”

Jess said, “No offense, pal, but worry about yourself, pretty sure I’ll manage,” and stepped through the exit into the mid-afternoon light.

Breezing south on the 110 in tolerable mid-afternoon traffic, FM top forty radio station turned low, they passed time making small talk, mostly her, Grace saying something about what a pain it was every time you rented a car to figure out the dash controls.

It was the second time that day he'd traveled the same route, only this time doing it in reverse. Passing time and to show some interest, he asked polite, disinterested questions, and got more than he bargained for, catching only some of what she responded with. He was on the job and had other things on his mind.

Grace Wick sketched her life so far, up to a point; grew up on a leafy cul-de-sac off Sunset just west of the 405, like living in the backwoods of Vermont. The rustic million-dollar homes tucked away there like oversized luxury cabins. Painted him a word picture of narrow roads like little leaf-strewn country lanes winding over little wooden bridges. Room enough for horses.

Needing to concentrate, she fell silent navigating the 110/105 cloverleaf, then started up again, heading west to LAX.

Jess hung in there.

Grades nine through eleven she'd attended a private Catholic girl's school, Marymount, formal wear only, her schoolmates the daughters of celebrities. Her senior year she'd been shipped off to a coed boarding school in Switzerland, the "hoity-toity" (her words) Leysin American School, again formal wear only, the

student body from thirty-eight different countries. Pissed off her folks, “helicopter parents,” by opting to spend Christmas and Easter downtime in a ski slope chalet with her Italian boyfriend. Graduated with honors, flew home, blew off contact with the boyfriend, attended USC, “University of Spoiled Children,” before dropping out midterm her sophomore year, no regrets. Which, judging by the age he guessed her to be, left out about the next seven or eight years up to the moment she was sharing a van with Special Agent Jess Gage.

Okay, she grew up a rich brat, he thought. Probably still was, bet on it.

Her father directed TV sitcoms. She named a couple, none of which he’d had heard of, he didn’t watch much TV. “My dad, you can look him up on IMBD.” Her mother was a showbiz attorney and activist.

“What’s an IMDD?”

“Db, b as in bicycle. Stands for International Movie Database. A who’s who of anyone who’s ever done anything in the film or TV biz.”

Okay, learn something new every day.

At the top of the hour, she switched the radio to talk radio and turned up the volume, wanting to know if there was anything about the president’s forthcoming visit to Little Mexico. There was, a snippet. When it was over she turned it off.

By the time they got off the freeway and were on Century Blvd. approaching the airport, she’d abandoned her life story

and changed the subject to parrots. About how Tuesday last, she'd seen two blue and red macaws perched on a chimney and told him all about the Brentwood fire of 1961, how hundreds of homeowners had released their caged pets, which explained why afterwards for years and years you'd see parrots, maybe even waken to find a whole flock squawking in your backyard. She found it interesting because she hadn't seen any parrots since she was a kid, and then, suddenly, out of the blue, the two macaws, and how cool was that? "Fascinating, huh?" It wasn't a subject Jess had thoughts about one way or the other, so he kept quiet and listened.

Grace said, "So now can I ask you something I've been wondering about?"

"Go ahead."

"Something I've always wanted to ask you guys."

"Guys? I'm not your first?"

"I mean, like if I'm watching TV or a movie."

He waited for the question.

"Okay, so I heard, or maybe read about, that you wear shades so when you're watching for funny stuff, the bad guys won't know you're looking at them. Is that true? I mean, it makes sense if it is."

"Funny? What's funny about it?"

"I don't mean ha-ha funny. It's a simple question. Try not to have a heart attack."

"Working the rope."

She glanced over at him.

“What you’re describing, we call it ‘working the rope.’”

“Okay, whatever. But c’mon, you know what I mean. You see someone with an umbrella when it’s not even raining, or someone who looks uncomfortable, suspicious stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah. Stuff.”

“I don’t know about the others, but I wear mine for the same reason everyone else does—to keep the sun out of my eyes. I mean, you don’t wear them just to look cool.” He lowered his shades and turned to her.

“Oh, crap—now you’re mad at me,” she said.

“What am I supposed to say?”

“Fine, I get it,” she sighed.

“Hey, just saying,” he shrugged.

“So that’s it?”

“*And* to be cool.”

“Top secret, I get it. Okay, I’ll shut up.” She drew a finger across her tightly sealed lips, made a locking gesture, and threw away the key. They left it at that.

Only she didn’t. They didn’t. After about a mile she said, “I mean, parrots? You believe that?”

“You convinced me.”

She wasn’t finished, said, “You don’t wear them at night, do you?” sounding like she meant to annoy him.

At LAX, he directed her to park beside the airport fire station. They got out and approached a uniformed Air Force guard standing watch outside. At the door, Jess put a hand on her shoulder and stopped her. "It's either me or him," he said.

Grace gave a puzzled look, didn't get it.

"Put it this way. I need to pat you down."

"Have at it," she said, raising her arms and turning full circle, like this was a stickup.

He checked her shoulder bag, handed it back, then proceeded to do a quick pat down. A bit awkward for him, he bypassed her chest, her rump, Grace amused by his reserve.

"He missed a spot, several actually," she quipped to the guard as he stepped aside to let them pass.

"I'm sure Special Agent Gage did his best, ma'am. He's just a little rusty, I heard."

Jess shot the guy a bemused glance and they entered.

Inside, the paired presidential limousines, polished, spotless, basked in a cone of white light. Approaching, Grace was hugely impressed. Jess surprised her by stepping to one of the twins, opened a rear door, and nodded for her to climb in.

"Really?"

"Really."

She slid inside. He shut the door, then climbed in the right front seat, but left his door open, allowing some exterior light to spill inside.

"Where does the president sit?" Grace asked. "Which side?"

“Sure you really want to know? Because afterward I’d have to shoot you.”

“Yes, and pretty please don’t.”

“Then scoot over.” He adjusted the mirror so he could observe her.

She scooted to the opposite side.

“Behind the agent in the front seat,” he answered her question. “That way, if an armor piercing round made it through the windshield, which won’t happen, it would hit the agent, not the president.”

“Up there, is that where you sit?”

“No. This is my boss’s chair. This is *his* show. Tomorrow I’m just another samurai, one of a hundred.”

He settled in, liked it there.

“Suits you,” she said.

“It’s the top job, what everyone works for. But there’s only one seat and a lot of butts. Guys like me though—” He pulled back, getting too personal too early.

“What? Finish your thought.”

“Guys like me hit a ceiling sooner or later. Seems we’re too dependable, they forget about us.” He glanced in the rearview, adjusted it again. “Suits you too. Maybe *you* should run for president.”

“Hey, maybe the president should run for *me*.”

“He’s married. Happily.”

“So I heard, but not what I meant.”

Jess popped the glove box, removed a dust cloth, and wiped down the dash.

“Have you been with him long?” Grace asked.

“Ever since Bobby Kennedy we assign a detail to all primary candidates. He was a senator. I got the job because I was from his home state, a small town in Tennessee, you never heard of it.” Then, after a moment, “This limousine isn’t just a car for me.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“A rocket ship.”

She slowly rubbed her palm over the plush leather upholstery, as if she were shopping for a limousine of her own. Next thing, she’ll be asking about a payment plan, he thought. “Are you certain you’ve never used this to try to get lucky? Tell the truth. Our secret.”

“I have my Chevy pick-up for that.”

Earlier, standing in front of the hotel, she’d answered one of his questions, however glib, but now, having spent time with her she was starting to grow on him and he wanted more. “Why’d you sign up for tomorrow? You don’t seem like the volunteer type.”

“That’s the job again, isn’t it?” she said. “Making snap judgments.”

“Why’d you sign up? Seriously.”

“I sometimes like to sit at the grownups table.” Then, “I always nickname my cars. You know, something cute. Right now, it’s ‘Bonbon’”

“Whatever car the body’s in becomes ‘Stagecoach.’ Or the ‘beast.’”

“Whose body?”

“Service slang for the president.”

“Is that confidential? If it is, I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be. Common knowledge, if you’re into that kind of thing.”

“I wasn’t. Now maybe I am.”

She turned to look out the window and waved her hand, like a slow-motion windshield wiper, as if she were the Queen of England.

He watched her in his rearview—God she was cute; something about that hand gesture and everything about those walnut brown eyes had begun to chip away at him. He hoped that underneath she wasn’t as ditzzy as she first came across.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ten minutes later Jess and Grace were standing in front of the hotel entrance. “Listen, you know you don’t have to do this, I can catch a ride with someone else,” Jess was saying.

“Do what?” she asked, leaning into him, big smile as she raised her cell, but he deftly stepped aside before she could snap the selfie.

“Drive me around.”

“I know.”

“Ray was taking advantage. Although he claims he’s spoken for.”

“I realize. It’s pretty obvious that’s how you guys meet women. One of them, anyway.”

“No. I don’t do that. That’s not what this is.”

“All right.”

“Then why *are* you here?”

“I never say no to an invitation.”

“Never?”

She thought about it a few seconds, then nodded. “Okay, maybe when the outcome is predictable.”

Jess chuckled.

She said, “What?”

“It’s what I do for a living—make life predictable.”

“It doesn’t always work that way, though, does it?”

“Mostly. Not always.”

“How come?”

Jess shrugged. “Sometimes you have to force it.”

“I notice you didn’t stop your friend from taking advantage. Why not?”

“I predicted you could take care of yourself.”

“All that and we only just met, huh?”

“All that.”

A parking valet driving a white, three-door, twelve-passenger van, the straggler, a vetted rental, pulled to the curb. Stragglers tended to be high-capacity vehicles, able to haul at least a half-dozen passengers. The reason was obvious; the designated driver never knew how many late arrivals might show up. Grace gave the guy her ticket, Jess tipped him and they climbed in, Grace behind the wheel, the special agent her passenger.

Breezing south on the 110 in tolerable mid-afternoon traffic, FM top forty radio station turned low, they passed time making small talk, mostly her, Grace saying something about what a pain it was every time you rented a car to figure out the dash controls.

It was the second time that day he’d traveled the same route, only this time doing it in reverse. Passing time and to show some interest, he asked polite, disinterested questions, and got more than he bargained for, catching only some of what she

responded with. He was on the job and had other things on his mind.

Grace Wick sketched her life so far, up to a point; grew up on a leafy cul-de-sac off Sunset just west of the 405, like living in the backwoods of Vermont. The rustic million-dollar homes tucked away there like oversized luxury cabins. Painted him a word picture of narrow roads like little leaf-strewn country lanes winding over little wooden bridges. Room enough for horses.

Needing to concentrate, she fell silent navigating the 110/105 cloverleaf, then started up again, heading west to LAX.

Jess hung in there.

Grades nine through eleven she'd attended a private Catholic girl's school, Marymount, formal wear only, her schoolmates the daughters of celebrities. Her senior year she'd been shipped off to a coed boarding school in Switzerland, the "hoity-toity" (her words) Leysin American School, again formal wear only, the student body from thirty-eight different countries. Pissed off her folks, "helicopter parents," by opting to spend Christmas and Easter downtime in a ski slope chalet with her Italian boyfriend. Graduated with honors, flew home, blew off contact with the boyfriend, attended USC, "University of Spoiled Children," before dropping out midterm her sophomore year, no regrets. Which, judging by the age he guessed her to be, left out about the next seven or eight years up to the moment she was sharing a van with Special Agent Jess Gage.

Okay, she grew up a rich brat, he thought. Probably still was, bet on it.

Her father directed TV sitcoms. She named a couple, none of which he'd had heard of, he didn't watch much TV. "My dad, you can look him up on IMBD." Her mother was a showbiz attorney and activist.

"What's an IMDD?"

"Db, b as in bicycle. Stands for International Movie Database. A who's who of anyone who's ever done anything in the film or TV biz."

Okay, learn something new every day.

At the top of the hour, she switched the radio to talk radio and turned up the volume, wanting to know if there was anything about the president's forthcoming visit to Little Mexico. There was, a snippet. When it was over she turned it off.

By the time they got off the freeway and were on Century Blvd. approaching the airport, she'd abandoned her life story and changed the subject to parrots. About how Tuesday last, she'd seen two blue and red macaws perched on a chimney and told him all about the Brentwood fire of 1961, how hundreds of homeowners had released their caged pets, which explained why afterwards for years and years you'd see parrots, maybe even waken to find a whole flock squawking in your backyard. She found it interesting because she hadn't seen any parrots since she was a kid, and then, suddenly, out of the blue, the two macaws, and how cool was that? "Fascinating, huh?" It wasn't a

subject Jess had thoughts about one way or the other, so he kept quiet and listened.

Grace said, "So now can I ask you something I've been wondering about?"

"Go ahead."

"Something I've always wanted to ask you guys."

"Guys? I'm not your first?"

"I mean, like if I'm watching TV or a movie."

He waited for the question.

"Okay, so I heard, or maybe read about, that you wear shades so when you're watching for funny stuff, the bad guys won't know you're looking at them. Is that true? I mean, it makes sense if it is."

"Funny? What's funny about it?"

"I don't mean ha-ha funny. It's a simple question. Try not to have a heart attack."

"Working the rope."

She glanced over at him.

"What you're describing, we call it 'working the rope.'"

"Okay, whatever. But c'mon, you know what I mean. You see someone with an umbrella when it's not even raining, or someone who looks uncomfortable, suspicious stuff."

"Stuff?"

"Yeah. Stuff."

"I don't know about the others, but I wear mine for the same reason everyone else does—to keep the sun out of my eyes. I

mean, you don't wear them just to look cool." He lowered his shades and turned to her.

"Oh, crap—now you're mad at me," she said.

"What am I supposed to say?"

"Fine, I get it," she sighed.

"Hey, just saying," he shrugged.

"So that's it?"

"*And* to be cool."

"Top secret, I get it. Okay, I'll shut up." She drew a finger across her tightly sealed lips, made a locking gesture, and threw away the key. They left it at that.

Only she didn't. They didn't. After about a mile she said, "I mean, parrots? You believe that?"

"You convinced me."

She wasn't finished, said, "You don't wear them at night, do you?" sounding like she meant to annoy him.

At LAX, he directed her to park beside the airport fire station. They got out and approached a uniformed Air Force guard standing watch outside. At the door, Jess put a hand on her shoulder and stopped her. "It's either me or him," he said.

Grace gave a puzzled look, didn't get it.

"Put it this way. I need to pat you down."

"Have at it," she said, raising her arms and turning full circle, like this was a stickup.

He checked her shoulder bag, handed it back, then proceeded to do a quick pat down. A bit awkward for him, he bypassed her chest, her rump, Grace amused by his reserve.

"He missed a spot, several actually," she quipped to the guard as he stepped aside to let them pass.

"I'm sure Special Agent Gage did his best, ma'am. He's just a little rusty, I heard."

Jess shot the guy a bemused glance and they entered.

Inside, the paired presidential limousines, polished, spotless, basked in a cone of white light. Approaching, Grace was hugely impressed. Jess surprised her by stepping to one of the twins, opened a rear door, and nodded for her to climb in.

"Really?"

"Really."

She slid inside. He shut the door, then climbed in the right front seat, but left his door open, allowing some exterior light to spill inside.

"Where does the president sit?" Grace asked. "Which side?"

"Sure you really want to know? Because afterward I'd have to shoot you."

"Yes, and pretty please don't."

"Then scoot over." He adjusted the mirror so he could observe her.

She scooted to the opposite side.

"Behind the agent in the front seat," he answered her question. "That way, if an armor piercing round made it through

the windshield, which won't happen, it would hit the agent, not the president."

"Up there, is that where you sit?"

"No. This is my boss's chair. This is *his* show. Tomorrow I'm just another samurai, one of a hundred."

He settled in, liked it there.

"Suits you," she said.

"It's the top job, what everyone works for. But there's only one seat and a lot of butts. Guys like me though—" He pulled back, getting too personal too early.

"What? Finish your thought."

"Guys like me hit a ceiling sooner or later. Seems we're too dependable, they forget about us." He glanced in the rearview, adjusted it again. "Suits you too. Maybe *you* should run for president."

"Hey, maybe the president should run for *me*."

"He's married. Happily."

"So I heard, but not what I meant."

Jess popped the glove box, removed a dust cloth, and wiped down the dash.

"Have you been with him long?" Grace asked.

"Ever since Bobby Kennedy we assign a detail to all primary candidates. He was a senator. I got the job because I was from his home state, a small town in Tennessee, you never heard of it." Then, after a moment, "This limousine isn't just a car for me."

"Yeah, what is it?"

“A rocket ship.”

She slowly rubbed her palm over the plush leather upholstery, as if she were shopping for a limousine of her own. Next thing, she’ll be asking about a payment plan, he thought. “Are you certain you’ve never used this to try to get lucky? Tell the truth. Our secret.”

“I have my Chevy pick-up for that.”

Earlier, standing in front of the hotel, she’d answered one of his questions, however glib, but now, having spent time with her she was starting to grow on him and he wanted more. “Why’d you sign up for tomorrow? You don’t seem like the volunteer type.”

“That’s the job again, isn’t it?” she said. “Making snap judgments.”

“Why’d you sign up? Seriously.”

“I sometimes like to sit at the grownups table.” Then, “I always nickname my cars. You know, something cute. Right now, it’s ‘Bonbon’”

“Whatever car the body’s in becomes ‘Stagecoach.’ Or the ‘beast.’”

“Whose body?”

“Service slang for the president.”

“Is that confidential? If it is, I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be. Common knowledge, if you’re into that kind of thing.”

“I wasn’t. Now maybe I am.”

She turned to look out the window and waved her hand, like a slow-motion windshield wiper, as if she were the Queen of England.

He watched her in his rearview—God she was cute; something about that hand gesture and everything about those walnut brown eyes had begun to chip away at him. He hoped that underneath she wasn't as ditzy as she first came across.

CHAPTER NINE

The return trip downtown took twice as long as it took getting to the airport. It was nearly dark when they left the fire station. The next day they'd be part of a fully escorted motorcade, so no delays, no bullshit, but just then they were mere mortals slogging along with late afternoon commuters heading east on the 105.

When their talk turned to someplace to get a bite, Grace suggested the Pantry ("never closed, never without a customer"), an open all night greasy spoon at the corner of 9th and Figueroa, only a few blocks from the Bonaventure. She said, "Hey, trust me, you'll like it, probably right up your alley," and she was right—the atmosphere and menu items straight from the pages of a Raymond Chandler novel. They sat at the counter. He had the Philly cheese steak sandwich and a glass of milk. She had a tuna salad and an ice tea. He thought the food was okay, but what he liked most was being with her, which surprised him. When first introduced he hadn't given it much thought, but since then decided she was about the best-looking woman he'd ever seen. At one point she said, "Having to always be on guard, what's that like? I mean, that must really do a number of on you." Their waiter brought the check. Jess said, "It can, if you let it. But I'll tell you what helps." She didn't ask so he let it slide. Standing at the cash register, Grace turned to him and out of the blue said, "You think you're hidden in there, but I know you."

Okay, whatever that meant. They stepped out into the L.A. night. They were out on the sidewalk when he said, “Comfortable footwear.”

She said, “Huh?”

He said, “Forget it.”

She said, “Don’t worry. I wasn’t going to say anything,” but playful, not meaning to embarrass him.

Back at the Bonaventure, their conversation continued in the hotel’s revolving cocktail lounge on the 34th floor, allowing an ever-changing view of nighttime L.A. They sat in scooped chairs, the padding red leather or vinyl, on opposite sides of a round black table, a squat electric candle between them. Grace sipped a thirty-dollar cocktail served in a souvenir ceramic Tiki mug in the shape of the hotel—four mirrored cylinders surrounding a slightly taller central tower—otherwise there was nothing remotely Polynesian about the lounge’s non-descript theme. Jess nursed a Coke in a not-so-fancy glass.

“Been with him long?” she asked.

“He was a senator who’d just won his first primary,” Jess answered. “I got the job because I was from his home state, a mud hole in Tennessee.”

“So you said.” Then, “So what’s the difference between a special agent and a regular one?”

“We don’t do paperwork.”

He hesitated reaching for his wallet, felt foolish for what he was about to do, but overcame it—something about her invited him to loosen up and share more about himself. He showed her a blurry, black and white dog-eared photo, a woman wearing an apron, looked to be in her mid-thirties, and a kid aged around eleven or twelve, her arm draped over his shoulder, the kid dressed in bib overalls and a flannel shirt, the two posed in the yard of a century old, two-story clapboard farmhouse, the gabled roof badly in need of repair, a sagging barn, some outbuildings, and a handful of scrawny chickens. Jess said, “D.C. was a long, long way from there, another planet.”

She said, “A farm boy.”

He said, “Looks like a farm, but it wasn’t, not a working one anyway. Just an old farmhouse on the edge of town.”

“So, no cows, goats, sheep?”

He wasn’t sure if she was mocking him and decided she wasn’t, just asking a sensible question, showing interest. He said, “Just the chickens.”

“Is that your mom?”

“It is.”

“Is she still around?”

“She died two months ago. Cancer. She thought she’d beaten it, but it came back. She was the town librarian. Sometimes even drove a bookmobile. Saturdays she’d drive to these nothing towns, lend books to retirement homes, hospitals, places where people were stuck and didn’t get out much.”

“Wow, how neat is that? What about your dad?”

“The less said the better.”

A second photo, this one washed out color, showed Jess as a fledgling agent, standing beside the now president when he was still a candidate for the office. Charlie, Swann’s daughter, still a little girl at the time, held Jess’s hand. He tucked the photos back in his wallet.

“Okay, Tennessee,” she said. “Then I’m guessing you must have a thing for country music.”

“A thing? Depends.”

“Say, Elvis Costello?”

“He’s country?”

“Also depends. Have you ever listened to him? A very talented man. The guy can do about anything. You ever hear that song he did with Burt Bacharach?”

Speaking of which. They looked over when someone began tinkling the ivories at a baby grand—Lyle Moody seated there, playing something slow and jazzy.

Just then Ray Rykoff’s reflection emerging from an elevator appeared in the revolving picture window. He entered the lounge, looked about for someone, saw him, headed over to the piano, and placed a scrap of paper on the music stand. He and Lyle spoke, not close enough for anyone to overhear, but this is what was being said—

Ray: “Your dad’s been trying to reach you. Local call.”

Lyle wadded the scrap and kept playing.

Ray: "He obviously knows you're here with the president. A man can't be proud of his son?"

Lyle: "He had nothing to do with me getting here." He stopped between notes. "Besides, to him, pride's a sin."

Ray shrugged, nodded to Jess on his way out and returned to the elevator.

Jess and Grace picked up where they'd left off.

"Same question as before. Why'd you sign up for tomorrow?" he asked. "You don't seem like the volunteer type."

"My parents are big contributors. They set it up. They'll spare no expense to get me to grow up. Which pretty much guarantees I won't. Delayed reaction, at best."

"You could have said no."

"I never say no to an invitation."

He mulled that over. "Never?" Had he just been propositioned?

"Maybe when the outcome is predictable."

He chuckled at that.

She said, "What?" all innocent like.

"I like to know every step I make before I take it. It's my job."

"I like my tomorrows to be a surprise. My tonights, too. Sometimes."

He asked if she was going home for the night. She hadn't mentioned where that was, whether she lived alone or with her parents. She told him no, too much bother, she had a room, way

up high, had brought a change of clothes for tomorrow, letting him know she was in the hotel if he was interested.

Yeah, definitely coming on to him. All he had to do now was invite her down to his room. Or wait for her to invite him up to hers. Suddenly he was on his feet. He'd seen something through the glass doors to the bar.

"Listen, you mind if I don't walk you up? Some things I still need to do."

She said, "Let me give you my number."

"Sure." She handed him her cell. "Put it here." He typed in his number and handed it back.

She said, "Ciao, special," gave him a peck on the cheek and left him.

Jess went to the bar and took a stool beside Brooks Hale, the agent not wobbly drunk, but definitely under the influence. Maybe not tears, but Brooks wet around the eyes.

"Brooks? How long have you been here?"

Brooks stared ahead, didn't look at him, one hand wrapped around a squat glass on the bar top. "I'm sorry, Jess. I've been under-"

"The whole detail knows what you've been under. Our ex-wives could fill Fenway." Jess wasn't including himself, meaning it in a general way. He'd never been married. If he had been, there was a good chance he'd already have been divorced. Homewreckers, a high percentage of Service marriages came

with an expiration date. Among special agents, election years tended to take the greatest toll. Fifty, sometimes sixty-hour weeks on the road, the two days out of twenty you got to go home you were lucky if the wife and kids still remembered you.

"I think it's really over this time."

Jess patted him on the back. "Take some time. Patch it up."

"Too late." Brooks stared at his drink, slowly swirled it. "Can you give me a break? Maybe don't tell the boss?"

Jess didn't respond. Sensing his disapproval, Brooks hesitated before lifting his glass.

"Go on. Finish it."

Brooks downed his drink.

"When did we meet, you and me?" Brooks asked.

"Election night."

"Your guy won. My guy was out. Suddenly you were protecting the president of the United States. Who taught you to do that? The stuff that's not in the book?"

"Refresh my memory."

"I should have gotten out a couple years ago. I was waiting for something to happen, you know?"

"Waiting to do something big before getting out. Sure, I hear you."

"Yeah. Instead, the days are a blur, just one long wait," Brooks said. He stared at his hand, then turned to Jess and suddenly felt woozy. "Actually, *everything's* a blur." His elbow knocked a bowl of mixed nuts to the floor. He leaned back,

rolled his head on his shoulders, and likewise seemed about to slide off his stool, Jess on his feet ready to catch him, but he regained his balance.

Jess said, "Let's get you to bed."

On their way to the elevator, he detoured to the piano, Lyle still playing, folded a five, and dropped it in the tip jar.

A kitchen.

The one from before in the Bolivian soccer tee opens a fridge, removes a package of baloney. He steps out the back door, a bolt cutter in his hip pocket. He crosses the yard to a row of kennels, each dog there a Belgian Malinoise, K-9s, about a dozen, wolf-like. The dogs lunge and bark like crazy. He ignores them, moves along the row. He stops at the cage of the only dog not barking, only half snarling, a friendly sort. He sinks to his knees, rolls up a slice of baloney and passes it through a diamond shaped link. The dog sniffs the treat and scarfs it down. Using the bolt cutters, he clips the padlock. He opens the cage, cautious about it. The dog backs up. He leans in, still cautious, offers a second slice of baloney. The dog extends his neck, wolfs it down. He speaks to the dog in Spanish, a nice, calming voice, nice enough to calm a dog. He scratches between its ears, pets its fur while offering more baloney. Okay, now they're pals. The dog follows him across the lawn to a hose and spigot. He lathers up the animal with a bar of flea soap. He rinses. He fastens on a dog collar.

Up in his room, after a shower, a cold beer from the mini fridge, and time to think about what he was about to do, Jess glanced at his watch, subtracted five, and calculated it was four o'clock in the Hawaiian Islands. He picked up his cell, punched in a number, and waited. "Duke—? How's Maui?"

Special Agent in Charge Duke Cobb took the call on the fourth hole of the King Kamehameha Golf Club, the island's premier private golf resort. Nearby, the first family in suitable attire chipped away at golf balls. Farther on, the terraced course dotted with manmade streams, lakes, and waterfalls sloped to ocean surf pounding a rocky shoreline.

"It's snowing, you believe that?" Duke said. "How's L.A.?"

"Let's see, some actress named Angelina, can't remember her last name, rhymes with Bowie, asked me out."

"Hey, a man can dream."

"How's the president?"

"Can't get him off the course. Says to hold a special election, he's never going back."

In twelve hours, unaccompanied by his wife and daughter, who would remain on the island another three days, the president would be on Air Force One returning to L.A. to deliver an endorsement of California Governor Julio Montoya.

"How's the detail?"

"We're good here. We're set. Hey, I got you something."

"Somebody forget to tell me it's my birthday?"

“For your retirement, if you decide to really go through with it. You’ll see, it’ll be on stage tomorrow.”

Jess stepped to a window overlooking the fourth floor outside pool. Twenty floors below a kid on the diving board got a running start and launched into a cannonball. His mom and dad clapped as junior swam to the side and hauled himself out.

Duke said, “I’m not retiring, I’m moving on. You should join me while you still have some of that presidential bling. I hear it doesn’t last.”

The kid had gotten back on the board and was about to do it again. Jess turned away and said, “I’m not going to spend the rest of my life being someone’s White House trophy. Telling war stories to earn my supper,” wanting to get past the obligatory chitchat and on to the meat of the call.

Duke did it for him, asked, “Why’d you call, Jess?”

Damn, he hated doing this. “It’s Brooks,” Jess said. “We may need a new driver.”

A bedroom.

Dawn light spilled through the thin curtains framing the kennels at the rear of the yard. The sprinklers were on. The dogs had long stopped barking. All was still and quiet. On an unmade bed, the contours of a human form slept beneath a blanket. Judging from the painted toenails, it was a woman. The guy from before in the Bolivian soccer team tee drew the curtains and turned on the bedroom light. The tee was gone, his

body buff, hard, but still wore the baseball cap, same colors and design; three silhouetted soccer players. Lifting the woman's feet, he shifted them to the other side of the bed. He moved to a walk-in closet, dug in deep for a dark suit, and placed it on the bed. His hands smoothed it out. It was a police officer's uniform, a yellow LAPD patch on the shoulder. After removing some dog hair with a sticky roller, he put it on, observed himself in a floor length mirror, then pinned the red lapel pin to his chest.

CHAPTER TEN

It had been a perfect, made-to-order spring day, the temp maxed out at a pleasant 77 degrees and starting to cool, the sky clear, blue, and fair, a weatherman's wet dream without the wet. The vague disc of the sun perched directly overhead, a faint, ever-present shelf of yellowy smog squatted end to end on the horizon, but not enough to spoil the day.

Special Agent Dominca Ricci's voice came over the Airport Security Room radio. "Airport security, this is Angel. Javelin is alpha your location. Give me a situation report."

In the security room, the staffer manning the radio answered back, "Roger that, Angel," and consulted a notepad. "We have fifteen greeters, twenty-five press, and a band."

"Roger that. What kind of band?"

He consulted his notepad again. "Um, that would be mariachi." He'd shut off the mike before adding, "What else?"

Outside on the surrounding crisscross of runways there was controlled chaos in anticipation of the president's arrival. The nearly three-dozen principal vehicles comprising the motorcade, not including a dozen LAPD cruisers and cycle cops, stood in neat alignment, a single organism, a family tree of co-dependents. Many of the vehicles had their hoods up. Bomb sweepers and K-9 teams moved among them. Members of the press were kept at bay behind portable crowd control barricades. Nearby, a mariachi band composed of trumpeters,

guitarists, and violinists, the seven men sporting three-piece suits, boots, and custom embroidered ties, belts, and wide-brimmed sombreros, was tuning up.

A uniformed K-9 handler, Hispanic looking, paused to prime his Belgian Malinois with what appeared to be a gray, palm-sized, pliable brick. It helped to remind the dog what it was looking for.

Grace sat behind the wheel of the straggler talking to a White House staffer through the open window. Two weeks earlier, during a phone interview with another staffer, she'd asked what she should wear. The guy had said to keep it simple. She'd opted for a long-sleeved, below the knee, airy white dress, one already in her wardrobe, the outfit incongruous for a woman driving a van. The cheap shades she wore hadn't been there the day before, nothing girlish about them, not attempting a fashion statement—she'd stopped at a Walgreens and bought them off the rack—a not so inside joke to be shared with Jess, if and when she saw him again. From where she sat, the dozens of agents milling about were virtual carbon copies, but after only a brief acquaintance, she felt she'd know Jess Gage anywhere.

The K-9 team approaching from downwind had nearly made its way to her. Another couple of vehicles and the straggler would be next.

“You don't understand because you don't want to understand, okay?” the staffer said. You're driving the straggler.

That means you wait here for fifteen minutes after the motorcade has departed, in case anyone got left behind.”

Grace gave a non-comprehending look.

“Read for yourself.” The guy tapped the windshield indicating a placard propped on the dash: STRAGGLER in big, bold letters.

“I’m pretty sure I know what straggler means, thanks very much. And there’s no need to shout or be rude about it.”

“Lady, I’m not shouting. Just doing my job, making sure you understand.”

She understood, but now that it was about to happen, didn’t relish the idea of being left behind, no matter how illogical she was being. “But I’m supposed to be part of the motorcade. That’s why I’m here, why I volunteered.”

“How’s this, then?” The staffer sighed. “When the president gets here, any minute now, we’ll have him straighten it out. Right after he solves that whole world peace thing, maybe throw in cancer and climate change.”

Shaking his head he moved off as the K-9 team arrived, the van’s turn to be inspected. Tugging at its leash, the dog excitedly circled the vehicle, sniffing the wheel wells and bumpers, the 225 million scent receptors in its nose alert for chemicals indicating the presence of weapons or explosives. Unleashed, the dog scooted beneath the undercarriage, reappeared on the other side, and was leashed again.

The handler went around to her open window, said, “Ma’am, I have to ask you to get out,” spoken in good English, but with a Spanish accent.

“Yeah, okay, like I’m some kind of threat,” muttered under her breath, but she climbed out, no choice about it.

The handler stepped to the rear and opened the double doors. The dog hopped up inside, spent eight seconds sniffing around, scrambled over the seats, sniffed some more, then hopped to the tarmac again, wagging its tail, ready for a treat. The handler shut the doors and turned to Grace. “Special Agent Gage said to tell you he is sorry you got the booby prize.”

She looked around, hadn’t seen Jess since the night before. She’d hoped to catch sight of him at breakfast in one of the hotel’s restaurants, but their paths hadn’t crossed. On her way back to the elevators she’d spotted his pal, Ray Rykoff, talking to another agent, waited until the other guy moved off, then approached. She’d said, “Hey, it’s me again. Is your friend dating anyone special right now, or anyone that would prevent him from seeing other people? He’s not gay, is he? Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“Asking for a friend?” Ray said.

“Yes, she’s kind of shy.”

“Not unless he’s been holding out on me.”

“Is he married?”

“You spent time with him. Did you see a ring?”

“I looked, but you never know.”

“Reporting back to your shy friend?”

“Nope, just me being nosy.”

“Tell your friend, assuming she’s female, Jess Gage is up for grabs.” Then, “Is that what you’re wearing?”

“Stick around. You’ll see.”

“Anything else?” she asked, addressing the dog handler.

“That’s it.” He gave the dog the expected treat and moved off, departing with “Have a nice motorcade.”

She was about to get back in the van when she saw him, eight or nine vehicles down the line, beside one of the two presidential limousines, conversing with another agent. It was Ray, saying to Jess, “What’s this about Brooks getting benched?”

“He’s standing post at command. Duke’s call, not mine.”

“It’s not your fault. It was Brooks’ turn to flame out. Face it, we’re him in a few years.”

The driver’s side window came down revealing Lyle behind the wheel.

Jess tilted his head in Lyle’s direction. “Not my call either,” he said.

“And *he’s* us in a few years,” Ray meaning Lyle. He was about to walk off, remembered something and looked back. “Hey. How’d it go with Grace?”

“She’s an adequate driver. She’ll be adequate today,” Jess answered. He noticed a handprint smudge on the fender and bent to polish it with his handkerchief.

“I heard you sat with her in the ‘beast,’” Ray said. “You don’t sit with just anybody in the ‘beast.’ Kind of hard to picture.”

“Well, try not to,” said dryly.

“A night of small miracles.”

“Yeah? What else happened?”

“What’re you, fourteen?”

“Hey, Jess Gage bent a rule. Throttled it.” Ray raised his eyebrows, gave a small smile and strolled off.

Their chat over, Jess glanced in her direction. He appeared to nod. Whatever else it meant, it was an acknowledgement, Grace thought, worth at least something. Good luck today? She nodded back. Good luck to you too. She climbed back in the van.

A transmission in his earbud and Jess was all business again. He turned his head to the western sky, as did everyone else, the speck of a blue and white aircraft approaching.

Grace sat up straight, butterflies in her stomach.

Air Force One was on final approach.

Hercules sped to the end of the runway. When it reached about 120 mph, Air Force One set down one hundred feet in front of it, Bible and his CAT team cheering it on with war whoops. The jumbo aircraft taxied to its block and stopped. A ground crew rolled the passenger deplaning stairs to the aircraft’s nosecone and locked it in place.

The detail gathered a dozen feet to one side.

Everyone awaiting the appearance of the president.

A half-minute later the plane’s door opened.

Then, there he was, the president of the United States, George Jefferson Swann framed in the doorway, freshly tanned, attired in a Hawaiian print shirt—pineapples wearing sunglasses, and golf slacks, waving, descending, returning salutes and shaking hands on the tarmac, the White House staff lead making introductions. Press photographers caught everything.

The mariachis kicked in, a festive tune.

Lyle, behind the wheel in Chariot, took it all in, his first outing in the majors. Sealed in tight, he could hear his heart beat.

Another figure appeared briefly in the aircraft's doorway. Duke Cobb waited just inside the plane, for the moment steering clear of the limelight, allowing the president his due, instinctively knowing just when to alight.

Finally, it was time.

Moving in what could pass for slow motion, the protective diamond drifted unobtrusively into place; Duke just behind the president's right shoulder; Jess behind his left. Dominca Ricci, one of the boys, but in no way boyish, carrying a silvery gray aluminum briefcase, resembling a businessman's case, was there. Franklin Kilmer, the detail leader, hair slicked back, always damp looking, the special agent carrying a matching briefcase, bird-like, his head swiveling on his neck like an owl's, brought up the rear, walking backwards with such effortless

grace that it appeared to Lyle he must have eyes in the back of his head. Four more agents completed the diamond.

Someone stepped into Lyle's sightline. When he strained his neck to look past, his elbow slipped off the steering wheel, landed on the horn, and suddenly—HONNNKKKK! He blanched, wishing he could dig a hole or disappear under the seat, expecting the detail to turn and at the very least kill him with their looks. The agents, who didn't distract easily, only darted quick sidelong glances, their eyes immediately back on the president.

Only the Swann looked Lyle's way. "Keep your britches on!" he shouted, "I'm coming, I'm coming," which cracked everyone up except the stone-faced agents.

Lyle couldn't believe his ears. Not only had the president singled him out, he'd actually spoken to him. He noted that only one agent was glaring—Jess. *Oh, shit!*

Approaching the motorcade, the agents dispersed, heading to their assigned transports.

Dominca fell in beside Jess. A knockout if she chose to make you think so, but most of the time she didn't give two shits what you thought. She said, "Heads up. The deputy director joined us in Maui. You want Duke's job, better keep on your toes."

Jess peered around and saw Deputy Director of the Secret Service Vance W. Whale just then stepping off the plane. "What's he doing here?"

“Trying to get some quality time with the president, what else?” She shrugged. “Like everyone else in L.A., he wants to direct.” She moved off.

Jess too was about to move off, when the president called out, “Jess, hold up.”

Jess stopped and went back.

“Heard you finally did it.”

“Sir?”

“Got a young lady in the ‘beast.’”

“Yes, sir. News travels,” and found himself slightly embarrassed, although hosting a female in the president’s limo hadn’t broken a hard and fast rule, none that he was aware of.

“Not a problem,” the president said. “Heck, I’ve done it lots. I mean, if the wife counts. Anyone I know? Or should know?”

“No, sir. It’s nothing like that.”

“Micki said to tell you hello. Charlie too. “

“I’m sure they’ve having an amazing time.”

“Damn right they are.”

Standing apart and observing the men’s obvious closeness, Whale appeared envious. He strolled over to the two men and nodded to Jess. “Special Agent Gage.”

Jess returned the nod, a low-key tension between the two. “Deputy director.”

“Vance, did you know that Jess has been with me since I was a senator running for president?” Swann asked. “This man, this guy here, was an emblem, a beacon, for me. Standing beside me,

my own personal Secret Service agent, as professional as he was, so quiet he couldn't rub two words together, made me believe, for the first time really believe, that I could do this job. And do you know why?" Not waiting for an answer, he turned to Jess. "You made me look like a leader."

"Thank you, sir," Jess said.

"Yes, Mr. President," Whale said, his inflection non-descript, and walked a short distance away.

The White House staff lead took his place and said, "Mr. President, we should get going, sir."

"Okay, let's do this." The president was about to move off with him, then turned aside to Jess. "See how I slipped in a good word about you to the director?"

"Wasted breath, sir," Jess said.

"I'm just getting started. I'm giving a speech in thirty minutes. A five-hour flight to give a six-minute talk." The staff lead ushered him away.

Whale waited until the president was out of earshot, then returned to Jess. Jess took him to be mid to late fifties, the deputy director bald, uncommonly tall and spindly—Ichabod Crane, Jess though every time he saw him. Wire rimmed glasses framed his gaunt face balanced out by a crescent of neatly trimmed beard. "Did you know, special agent," Whale said, "that my background is with the Bureau? Organized crime. There we'd call you a 'made man.'" Recently promoted to the number two position, Vance Winston Whale, one year short of a three-

decade career in the Service, time spent on nearly every rung of the Service ladder, onward and upward. He nodded after the departing president. "He doesn't have any real authority over the Service, you know. We go by merit, not connections."

Jess, ignoring the taunt, said, "I never thought of that, sir," deadpan.

Whale slithered away as if he'd just swallowed a rodent, then turned back and said, "Nice footwear, by the way." He caught up to the president for another word.

Jess peered down at his lightly scuffed shoes. After a moment, his boss, Duke Cobb, joined him. In his late fifties, slim and cat-like, Duke, with his elongated face, droopy grey mustache, and wry smile that made him look a bit like the actor Sam Elliott. His once dark hair had started to take on a grayish shade at the edges. Anytime his name came up or Jess happened to think of him, the image of a cowboy seated horseback first flashed to mind. The two strode over to Stagecoach. "Sorry I had to sit Brooks down," Duke said. "I know you two go way back."

"Let's leave that in the locker room."

"I want you to take the newbie under your wing."

Jess looked down at his shoes, preferring there was some way out of this. "He strikes me as the type who doesn't ask for help," he said. "Coincidentally, I'm not the kind to offer it, so—"

"That's what I thought too," Duke said. "A perfect fit." They'd arrived at Stagecoach. He patted Jess on the back and was about to climb in the right front seat.

Jess nodded toward Franklin Kilmer heading for Chariot parked just behind Stagecoach. “Franklin ride in Whale’s lap?” he asked.

“Wouldn’t surprise me,” Duke said, and shook his head.

“Five-hour flight. Not a wrinkle. How does he do that?”

Duke shrugged, said, “You got me. Man’s a walking clotheshorse,” and climbed in Stagecoach.

One of Chariot’s rear doors opened, Jess holding it for the president’s physician, Jack Blooper, and a military aide, the insignia bedecked general carrying the “football,” the briefcase containing the president’s launch codes.

Jess climbed in the right front seat. He turned to Lyle and pointed. Lyle looked. “See that man there, looking all presidential?” Jess said. The president, in his Hawaiian shirt, was almost to Stagecoach now, shaking one last hand. Beside him, Vance Whale, by contrast, looked, dressed, and even behaved like a president. “Try not to hit the man standing next to him. That would be the president. But the other guy? He can take his chances.”

Ahead, visible through Chariot’s windshield, the president climbed into Stagecoach. Four agents stood alongside positioned at the front and rear fenders.

Dominca climbed in the right front seat of the follow-up vehicle, Halfback, the armored black SUV bristling with antennas, a police light bar on top.

Franklin Kilmer crossed in front of Chariot, climbed in the back seat, leaned toward the open divider and tilted his chin toward Lyle. "Is this the Charley Brown who honked? I almost swallowed my NicoDerm."

"We're wet nursing today," Jess said.

"Duke called me up because he had doubts about Brooks, okay?" Lyle said. "I'm from here. I know the route. Trust me, I'm ready for this."

Franklin smirked. "You want to burp him, or should I?"

Duke's voice came over the radio. "This is Stagecoach. And we are depart."

Franklin settled back, unlatched his briefcase, the man's nails neatly manicured, the open case revealing a Heckler & Koch submachine gun. He unlocked the bolt, flipped the weapon to full-automatic, inserted a thirty-round magazine and closed the bolt—the weapon now "hot," the trigger outside the case, no need to remove the weapon to fire it. (Never point your briefcase at someone unless you're prepared to do business was an old joke among Service agents). He shut the lid and threw down the latches, then duct taped a couple of extra magazines to the headliner.

Jess knocked twice on the wood trimmed dash for luck, Lyle casting him a sideways glance. "Don't ask. Just drive," Jess said.

And with that, the motorcade was off and rolling, the four agents trotting alongside Stagecoach.

Behind in the queue, in Halfback, Dominca was on the radio mike. “Three and Four back.”

The two forward agents trotting alongside Stagecoach pulled up, then took running leaps into Halfback’s “well,” the rear-facing third row bench.

Dominca: “One and Two back.”

The last two agents hopped into Halfback’s second row bench.

Doors were closed, locked.

Dominca looked out her tinted window and made out Grace now outside the straggler, leaning against it, arms and ankles crossed, a pose of impatience. She spoke into her wrist mike. “Hey, Jess? That the one you did in the ‘beast?’ You’ve got expensive taste.”

Jess heard the remark in his earbud and groaned. “Christ, does everyone know about that? And we didn’t—”

“Hey, we all have our moments of weakness.”

Jess let that slide. Ten seconds later she was back in his ear, saying, “Bet she’s never waited on anyone in her life.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Comprised of thirty-five primary vehicles and nearly one hundred support personnel, the motorcade in its full glory was a sight to behold. Front to back, it presented a logistical symphony, intimidating, yet majestic in its authority. The 'route' car, an LAPD cruiser, the main guide and decision maker, the eyes of the motorcade, led the way, providing guidance for a wedge of 'sweepers' comprised of cop cruisers and motorcycles; the 'pilot' car followed close behind, seconds ahead of the main body of the convoy; next in line, the 'lead' car, a Chevy Suburban, served as a buffer for what lay ahead; the presidential limousine, Stagecoach, drove at the forward heart of the 'package.' The spare, Chariot, kept pace side by side, the identical vehicles weaving in and out amongst each other, executing a shell game in order to confuse any would-be-attackers. Behind came the Secret Service Protective Detail in Halfback, the first line of defense should something untoward happen en route; then came Watchtower bristling with communications antennas; high-value staff followed in a support vehicle; next came the Counter Assault Team (CAT) in Hercules, its rear hatch open, an agent cradling an assault rifle visible on the rear facing seat; then Hawkeye, containing the team of counter snipers; then came the ID car, its function what one might expect, identifying possible hazards encountered in transit; a work truck, the Hazardous Materials Mitigation Unit,

carried sensors capable of detecting and responding to a nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons attack; nearing the end of the queue, a press van ferried the White House press corps and members of major news outlets; third from last, Roadrunner, a long black utility van with no side windows, dark tinted windshield and an amazing array of antennas and satellite communications kept the president connected to the world; next to last, an EMS van; the rear guard consisted of a phalanx of cycles with side cars. A Marine One helicopter, codenamed Huntsman, kept watch overhead.

Skirting the southern edge of the airport, the caravan proceeded a short distance along Inglewood's Century Blvd., the lanes on both sides wide open, not a civilian vehicle in sight to hinder its progress. The iconic, space age-looking LAX observation deck fell behind. Palm fronds swayed in the breeze. Locals, in some spots four and five deep, gawked and waved from behind crowd control barricades.

Now, this is how to roll with your posse, Lyle thought. He flashed on a YouTube music video he'd seen—Randy Newman, a tasty redhead, and a cross-section of Angelinos (the clip heavy on bums, surfers, and rollerblading, bikini-clad hotties) belting out a rousing chorus of "We love L.A.!" while cruising down Century in a cherry red '55 Buick convertible, the top down, wind in their hair.

The motorcade used the entire roadway, creating a standstill jam that extended several miles along every intersecting street.

Cycle cops rode ahead, dismounted, and blocked intersections. Once the rolling fortress had passed, they sped to catch up.

The agent seated on Halfback's rear facing bench lifted his wrist mike and said, "Bikes left."

"Bikes left," came over Lyle's radio. He glanced in his rearview and watched for the passing cycles. They blew past speeding to the next intersection.

One mile further on, the rolling White House mounted Interstate 105 and headed east to downtown.

Lyle accelerated to seventy and maintained speed. A good thing the president doesn't have to pay for his own gas, he thought—the bulky limousines only got about ten miles per gallon.

Signs announcing freeway exits and entrances loomed and fell behind—Crenshaw, Western, and South Central. The mostly dry, concrete bed of the San Gabriel River disappeared in their rear view.

Thirteen minutes later the cloverleaf of the 105/110 interchange appeared. The motorcade angled north on the 110, the midtown skyline now visible in the near distance. The caravan took the Alameda exit. From there it was but a short distance to Little Mexico, opposite the landmark Union Station, the last of the great train stations.

Back at the sequestered fringe at LAX, Grace glanced at her watch. Fourteen minutes had passed. She checked again—okay,

thirteen and a half. Screw it, she thought. About to pull out, she was startled by two late arrivals—one, squat and heavy set, a cameraman with an oversized video camera, the guy wearing a long-sleeved purple and orange #23 Lakers jersey and matching cap, the bill turned front to back, the other slim and tallish, the camera guy's sound mixer with a tape recorder and microphone, the guy wearing an *Anaconda* movie tee bearing the words 'Free Hugs.' The two sprinted toward her.

"You with the motorcade, the straggler?" the heavy one panted.

"Yes."

"You know where we're going?" the skinny one asked.

"Yes."

She'd seen their vehicle arrive across the way and twice aimlessly circle, looking for someone, something, but hadn't paid it any mind, nothing official about it, no TV or radio station call letters, so maybe it was one of their wives or girlfriends dropping them off, telling them not to come home if they lost their job after arriving late to cover a presidential gig. Grace was right. The camera guy's wife had been driving. Not a fan of the president, she'd glibly suggested that her husband get some footage they could post to YouTube to embarrass him, maybe catch him picking his nose, the worse the merrier.

The cameraman opened the front passenger door and scrambled in. The sound guy slid open a rear side door and climbed aboard. Grace put the van in gear and took off, hoping

to make up for lost time, but given her experience of L.A. freeway traffic, knew it was unlikely, the endless stops and starts without rhyme or reason. Hell, she'd probably miss the whole downtown event, may as well just turn around, return the van to the rental place and go home. But she didn't, no way.

Twenty-two minutes after starting out, a time and distance that could easily have taken an hour during high traffic, the motorcade navigated the maze of downtown streets leading to the Olvera Street Plaza, nicknamed "Little Mexico."

A block and a half from the plaza things began to get hectic, the lookie-loos out in full support. Homemade banners, placards and posters of every size and material expressed mucho enthusiasm. Some poor soul had managed to misspell 'Swann,' (one 'n').

Not all were in sync with the nation's leader or their governor. 'My governor is an idiot!' Like every head of state, George Jefferson Swann had suffered his share of controversy and naysayers. Some of the discontented held signs stating their disapproval, while others chanted negative, even filthy, rhyming slogans. Among the tamer censures, 'Not my president' was a common theme.

The president's voice came over Chariot's radio. Special Agent Moody, this is Javelin? Where are you from?"

“Here, sir,” Lyle asked, amazed that he was being spoken to again.

“Anyone going to be around to see us work?”

“My family? I’m not sure, sir.”

“Well, if not, maybe it’s for the best,” Swann said. “One of us might screw up.”

Then it was Duke Cobb’s voice, saying, “Relax, Lyle. Enjoy it.”

Excellent timing, Lyle thought, because just then he made out a clan of familiar faces leaning over a rampart, so close he could almost reach and touch them, the lot of them frantically waving signs: ‘Go Lyle,’ ‘L.A. Welcomes USSS Agent Lyle Moody,’ and ‘Honk If You’re Lyle!’ He resisted the impulse to wave to them, but it wouldn’t have mattered—his mother, three sisters, and three grandparents were unable to see the drivers and occupants behind their shields of tinted glass, but knew Lyle was somewhere among them. He scanned their faces for his father, but didn’t see him. No big surprise there, he thought.

The radio spoke again. “Somebody ask the kid if he wouldn’t mind switching places,” the president’s voice. “He’s got more votes than I do.” Twice now in less than thirty minutes that he’d been spoken to, Lyle again wondering if he was dreaming.

“Yes, sir, Mr. President, I’m sure he heard you,” Jess said, only half paying attention, his focus elsewhere, eyes scanning the area, no detail unnoticed. He cut Lyle a look as the rookie pulled Chariot alongside Stagecoach. “You know what to do. Follow the uniforms. Park behind the stage. Should take twenty, twenty-

five minutes, give or take, word is the governor tends to get long-winded. Then we bring the president back here, unless he decides to field a few questions.”

Lyle knew the drill, the same as with the VP detail—the president arrived in one vehicle and departed in another. In twenty minutes or so he’d be driving the leader of the free world, maybe even chat him up some more. Another thirty they’d be back at the airport.

He heard Jess say, “Pop the locks.”

Lyle popped them. “Anything else?”

“Try and stay awake.” Jess turned to Franklin Kilmer. “Franklin?”

Franklin said, “Yeah.” He flicked another NicoDerm in his mouth. “Remind me again what country we’re in.”

“My hometown,” Lyle said, a hint of annoyance at Franklin’s sarcasm. Chariot’s doors flew open and Jess and Franklin bounded out.

Next door, Stagecoach’s curbside door opened and Duke climbed out. He opened the rear door for the president. The onlookers shrieked and hollered, a noticeable spike in the decibel level. All down the line, agents and security personnel, including the president’s physician, got out of their vehicles, a discord of slamming doors.

A Secret Service uniformed division agent tapped Chariot’s hood, indicating Lyle to proceed, to follow a group of LAPD foot officers to the rear of the stage. Press corp and White House

staff dashed to and fro in front of the limo. Lyle stopped to let them pass. Approaching the cordoned seating area, spectators who had parked their cars blocks away were still passing through metal detectors, then swept and patted down for good measure.

Lyle was about to proceed when an LAPD officer signaled him to stay stopped. A K-9 team approached and gave the limo a final sweep. The officer stepped back and gave the rookie a thumbs up to continue.

Lyle proceeded a short distance, then mounted the curb and parked on the grassy lawn a short walk from the stage.

California Governor Julio Montoya, Mexican born but a naturalized citizen, and his entourage, on a day trip down from Sacramento, had gotten there first. Cinco de Mayo and the plaza provided the backdrop, but a pit stop in the early stages of the governor's bid for reelection was the real reason they were there. Inside the backstage tent, he and POTUS exchanged pleasantries while a Naval Steward fitted the president into a lightweight blazer over his tropical themed shirt. The president's physician stood by eating a sandwich from a hospitality table. Then they were ready.

The protective diamond formed around him and out they went, as well rehearsed and choreographed as a ballet, the president moving from hand to hand down the rope line. Swaddled in his own security, Montoya glad-handed a few steps

behind. Three members of the detail “watched hands” as the president pressed flesh. Duke at his side gave each greeter five seconds, then firmly broke the shake if it lingered. Jess and Franklin kept pace at arm’s length, hands inches from the president’s waist, ready to jerk him back at the first hint of anything that caused concern.

The force of concentration caused Jess’s neck muscles to knot up. Swann turned to him as they reached the end of line and said, “It’s not my hand they’re shaking, you know. It’s the presidency, the power they want to touch,” not the first time Jess had heard him say it.

Franklin Kilmer, well known to be a kiss ass, said, “I’m sure it’s you, sir.” Jess gave him a sidelong glance. Franklin returned it, eyes raised, a faint grin showing his pearly whites.

They moved the remaining thirty feet around the side of the tent to the stage.

A seven-member mariachi band, this one entirely composed of kids, but likewise attired in matching *charro* suits and twenty-gallon sombreros, launched into a festive tune—*El Borracho*.

Duke mounted the stage, followed by the two politicians and a couple more agents. Crossing to his seat, Duke found Jess’s surprise—instead of a folding chair, an old-fashioned rocker painted baby blue, a yellow ribbon tied around it. Inside he was chuckling, outside, no one could tell. He glanced across at Jess standing sentinel at the foot of the stage, struggling to maintain

his composure, acting as if there was nothing out of the ordinary to be seen.

The president stepped behind the bulletproof, glass paneled podium, looked out across the tightly packed pond of worshipful faces and allowed the audience to soak up his presence, knowing that for most it was likely the one and only time they would see their country's leader, breathing the very same air he was, under the same patch of sky. He waited for the applause to fade. A final flourish of an accordion and the mariachis settled down.

Then Swann kicked off his speech, the first few lines spoken in Spanish, some left over from his Bolivian outing three months earlier, multi-purpose phrases that easily fit any occasion when people of Spanish, mostly Mexican heritage, were present and you wanted to gain their favor. The crowd, many of whom were Latino, ate it up. After that, it was mostly English, again occasionally peppered with key words in Spanish. "Good afternoon, Angelenos. I thought—" The crowd whistled and clapped and when they settled down, he began again, "I thought I'd drop by to introduce your very own governor of California and—" more claps and whistles— "and announce my support for his reelection. How many terms is this, Julio? I presume the legal number?" The crowd laughed.

Jess and Franklin did their job, stiff-limbed department store mannequins from a previous event that someone had forgotten to cart away—legs slightly apart, hands clasped at crotch level,

shaded eyes darting from face to face, hand to hand, rooftop to rooftop. Ray and Dominca stood watch at the other end of the stage.

Above and behind Swann kept on, his frequent stops and starts fine-tuned by three decades of practice, allowing for frequent interruptions. “But not only that, I’m also here to wish you a happy Cinco de Mayo—Los Angeles, City of Angels, City of Flowers and Sunshine—celebrating not only Mexico’s independence—,” a squeal of echo and he adjusted the mike, “—but a bravely fought and bloody victory defending it.”

He paused again. The crowd, placards jerking up and down, waving them back and forth, gave their full-throated approval. Some waved small Mexican flags. The speech was intended to be brief, not too much about himself and all his cabinet had accomplished, he could feed his ego anytime, one of the perks of being the most powerful human on the planet, but intended primarily as a shot in the arm for his party mate, something one of his staffers had to remind him of before he hit the stage, although he did manage to squeeze in a few self-congratulatory slaps on the back. On cue, the band launched into a fresh tune, played for twenty seconds and died down. Swann continued, ready to wrap it up, saying, “—in which we share benefits, in which we share the path to a day when everyone is counted and each and every one of you counts. Thanks much for your support and for joining us today. *Muchas gracias por su apoyo y por acompañarnos hoy.* And with that, I’ll hand you over—” his

voice rose, the words drawn out, like introducing a magic act— “to the governor of the great state of California—” and waited for it, the standing ovation— “Julio Montoya!”

Amid more applause, Montoya rose to switch places at the podium. Heading over to shake his hand, Swann staggered slightly, as if he’d tripped over a protruding nail or a loose board, regained his balance and staggered again. The governor caught him, asking, “James, is everything okay?” Swann appeared flushed and confused and didn’t answer. Duke was instantly on his feet and at his side. Halfway there, he’d willed himself to slow down, his arms lending support, steadying him without making it too obvious there was a problem.

A hush fell over the assembled, hands raised to cover open mouths.

“I need to get off the stage,” Swann said, barely able to get the words out, “*now*,” the voice still weak and raspy, but with a bit more volume.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Lyle waited in the air-conditioned luxury of Chariot parked behind the stage, humming to himself while fingering an Art Tatum jazz piece on the steering wheel. He was thirsty and wondered what they had to drink in back, just wondering. Maybe there were bagged peanuts or raisins in the console. Never mind, they would just make him thirstier. After every outing it was someone's job to inventory the snacks, although there'd been nothing mentioned about pilfering munchies in the dos and don'ts manual. Maybe his mom would suddenly show up outside his window and pass him a slice of banana cream pie and a glass of milk. Please, Mom, no, but he wouldn't put it past her.

He became aware of a low insectile buzz. The limousine was built to withstand anything short of a missile strike, but couldn't dissuade a fly. He waited until it settled on the dash, slapped at it, missed, waited, tried again, that time squashed it, got rid of that annoying buzz. Any other car he wouldn't have bothered, but this was a presidential limousine, you had to keep things tidy. He scraped it off with a fingernail and buried it under the floor mat.

Muted but still audible he'd heard the president's amplified speech. Now that had ended to big applause and it was the governor's turn. Lyle took in the scene in his rear and side mirrors: Service agents positioned outside their vehicles all

down the parked motorcade; LAPD gathered in twos and threes shooting the breeze. Other agents still manning the public line, those that missed their first opportunity and hoped the president would retrace his steps and favor them with handshake or a pat on the back. Lyle looked around for his family but didn't see them.

He snapped to full attention when he noted the president's physician Blooper suddenly leave the tent and trot past his windshield heading for the stage. A handful of agents took note, caught up and also sprinted past.

Fifteen seconds passed. Then, dead ahead in his windshield, Lyle immediately knew something had gone amiss—the president and the detail hurriedly heading his way, Duke and Blooper supporting him, Swann seemingly being hustled along by their momentum more than his own—the speechifying clearly having ended early. Close behind, the governor's escort was likewise hurriedly escorting him across the street back to the tent. Jess had said the whole deal was supposed to take thirty, thirty-five minutes. Instead, it had lasted barely a quarter of that time.

Suddenly, Jess and Franklin were there ahead of the others, Jess knuckle-rapping the window, lips moving, mouthing, "Unlock it." Lyle unlocked the doors.

Then the rest were there, the detail taking position around the limo, faced away, hands positioned at belt level, all angles covered. Duke eased the president into the backseat, then

jogged around and climbed in beside Lyle. Blooper climbed in beside the president.

Doors slammed. Locks snapped shut.

Lyle turned to Duke. "Are we rolling, sir?"

"Lyle, relax," the gravity in Duke's voice anything but relaxed.

"Relax. Yes, sir."

Duke pushed the button that eased the glass divider down so he could observe the president.

"How're you feeling, James?" Blooper asked.

"I'm okay. Just give me a second," Swann gasping and hitching down air.

Blooper removed Swann's jacket, an awkward business, not unlike trying to undress a life-size puppet. The limousine housed life-saving medical equipment in the event the president was injured. Blooper opened a medical bag, placed a stethoscope to Swann's chest, listened, then cinched a blood pressure cuff around his left bicep, read the numbers and uncinched it. A fingertip oximeter registered his pulse.

"Doctor, do we need a hospital?" Duke asked.

"Heart's slightly accelerated, could be the dash to the car. Mr. President?"

"I said I'm okay," but still gulping.

Duke said, "Let's get back to the motorcade."

Lyle put it in reverse and began backing up, unnerved but doing his best not to show it, returning to where the rest of the

motorcade was parked a hundred yards behind. The detail trotted along on both sides.

Duke spoke into his wrist mike. "Command post, this is Cobb in the spare. Javelin's a little under the weather. We are depart back to Angel. We're going to keep him here, so we are now Stagecoach. Alert traffic support—"

Blooper interrupted, saying, "Duke—" Moments before, Swann had claimed he was "okay" but clearly, he wasn't. Looking back, Duke saw blood foaming from his nose. Blooper said, "We need to get to the hospital. Right away."

Duke gave the order. "Go now, Lyle, to the hospital. Now."

"How far, sir?"

Duke pushed a button and lit the GSP on the dash. "We're close."

Lyle switched on the grill lights. Switched on the siren. The limo abruptly swerved out of its protective shield. The detail broke formation and sprinted for their vehicles.

Ray Rykoff, accompanied by field agent Goode and LAPD officer Zabrizki, hurriedly stepped to the nearest vehicle, the lead car, climbed in, gunned it, and gave pursuit.

Lyle shifted and the limo shot down the street. A block away, having just cleared the security perimeter, he nearly collided with the straggler arriving on a side street. Grace hit the brakes, her head snapping forward as the limo whipped past and sped away. The cameraman in her company sensed the possibility of

capturing premium footage and barked, “What are you waiting for?”

Grace sat there, wondering whether Jess was in the limo that had just blown past—damn that tinted glass. She asked, “What?”

“Follow it.”

“Huh?”

“Christ, lady, you’re wasting time. Just do it.”

“Why are you yelling at me?”

“You need me to drive?” from the sound guy in back, his door already half open.

“Jesus Christ, lady, what are you waiting for?” the cameraman again. Then he *was* yelling. “Follow it!”

“Don’t think, just drive! Go!” the sound guy again.

By then, two wailing police cruisers had also whipped past. She began to turn the wheel, but not fast enough to suit the camera guy. He reached across to do it for her. She slapped his hand away, lurched a left and pursued. The camera guy leaned out his window, fitted his camera to his shoulder and began filming, yelling “Go! Go! Go!”

A block behind, Jess and Franklin sprinted to the former Stagecoach, now officially Chariot, scooted behind the wheel and were psyched by the news coming over their earbuds. Duke Cobb’s voice: “Cobb from Stagecoach. Be advised that we are on route to the primary hospital, ETA three minutes. Javelin appears non-responsive, short of breath, there’s bleeding from

the nose. Primary hospital security, what is your situation report?”

The reply came in an instant. “Stagecoach, this is primary hospital security. We’re clear. Come on in. Emergency staff is ready.”

Jess pulled out of the queue and took off after them.

Further back, Dominca Ricci and four members of her team flew to Halfback, their agent driver waiting, the doors open.

Three blocks away, Stagecoach made a sluing turn and raced down the street leading to the hospital, the big red neon block letters announcing its emergency entrance visible at the far end.

Duke heard sirens, checked his rearview and made out the flashing blue and red lights of the twin cruisers as they slid into the turn, catching up. Further behind came Ray in the lead car. Chariot, Hercules, Halfback, and other elements of the motorcade were nowhere to be seen, probably stuck behind a city bus or some other midtown snafu, he figured.

A blur, the lead, siren wailing, came up fast behind the straggler, blew past on Grace’s left, swung in front of her, and quickly outdistanced the van. The cameraman, still hanging out the window, never let up with his chant— “Go! Go! Go!”

Duke heard Lyle say his name. Turning back, he saw what the rookie had already seen—a garbage truck, a dumpster in its

claws, backing into the street, blocking it. The limo came to a hard stop, the twin cruisers squealing up behind.

“Pop the locks,” Duke said. “I’m going to run ahead and get him to move. Don’t stop. Relax. Roll slow, but don’t ever stop.”

Lyle popped the locks.

Duke threw open the door, hopped out, adding, “Any weird shit happens, turn this thing around. Anything even remotely hinky—” One hand was already at his belt in case his firearm became necessary.

Lyle unholstered his firearm, flipped off the safety and placed it where Duke had been sitting. The rookie inched along, the speedometer barely moving. The cruisers idled at his rear.

Duke had just about reached the truck, shouted “United States Secret Service!” and was about to tell the driver to move his ass, when he saw the cab was unoccupied, the opposite door wide open, the driver sprinting up the street. Christ, he’d have to move the truck himself. Opening the cab door, he saw something else—a “club” locking the steering wheel in place. Blanching, he groaned, “fuck me,” because he’d walked into an ambush. He turned and began waving his arms. “Go back! Back! Go back!”

Lyle began to back up, the jolt of the sudden reverse causing the passenger door to slam shut. There was another problem. He saw himself boxed in by the two cruisers. The officers saw what he was trying to do and slammed on their horns, reminding him they were there.

He waited while they angled into Y-turns to get out of his way. A passage opened and Lyle began to reverse again. What happened next came in the blink of an eye, although Duke had already guessed. A downward angling, whistling whoosh streaked past his ear. A micro second later one of the cruisers was obliterated in a whoomph of searing heat and flame.

Stagecoach shuddered as the cruiser's steering wheel spun past.

"Down, Mr. President, down!" Lyle shouted. "Doctor, help him to the floor." The muffled kathump momentarily roused the president from his stupor, time enough to look around and whisper "God Almighty" before Blooper flung him to the floor and landed atop to shield him. A mangled bumper came straight down from the sky, struck the trunk lid and somersaulted to the pavement.

Three second later, another slanting, whistling whoosh from the other side of the street. The second cruiser disintegrated into projectiles of steel and glass.

Duke was still retreating, scanning the flanking buildings for the hostiles. A glint of reflected sunlight to his left and he made out a MANPAD (Man Portable Defense Surface to Air Missile System), the fat barrel pointing from a fourth story rooftop. Backpedaling, he aimed and fired, unaware of a second barrel jutting from a rooftop across the street. It too spit fire. The missile streaked past his head and torpedoed the garbage truck. The truck convulsed and shattered. A deafening shockwave of

parts—shredded compactor, hydraulic lift, hopper, packing blade, and flaming garbage—blew in all directions. The chassis leapt three feet into the air, thumped down and settled sideways. The dumpster somehow stayed intact, shot forty feet into the air, slowed as it peaked, overturned and tumbled back to earth, its open lid raining down rubbish. Windows spider-webbed or blew out in a dozen of parked cars. A row of poster clad picture windows fronting a travel agency imploded. Across the street, a curbside display of crated produce: a mush of pulverized kumquats, avocados, and eggplants splattered the storefront. The truck's two left rear tires tore loose and bounced down the street, racing each other until they were spent. The gale force blast caused Stagecoach to shudder again.

Day turned to intermittent night as waves of roiling black smoke enveloped the scene. Duke dodged molten shrapnel and was halfway to the limo when the razor-sharp point of a twisted coil spring grazed his jugular and continued on its way until it struck a parking meter, the arrow in the shattered timer window stuck forever at eleven minutes. Blood pulsed from his thinly sliced throat. A potted fern landed nearby and exploded into shards. All this in nine seconds as the senior agent clutched his throat and collapsed. Finding the brass to pull himself onto his hands and knees, squinting into the smoke, he made out the limo's grill lights and began to crawl to it.

Of the two flags mounted on the limo's front fenders, one survived the whirlwind. The presidential flag tore free and was

carried away. Borne on a crosswind, it drifted through an open window above a maternity store.

The limo's windshield and hood were drubbed with debris. A swell of buckling asphalt undulated down the street and scraped against the undercarriage. The 'beast' lifted a couple inches, settled, and stood fast.

The mangled cruisers shadows in the reddish smoke, Lyle barreled in reverse, threading a needle between them, and stopped just clear of the blast zone. The limo's headlights drilled the smoky dark.

The rookie's world had shrunk to a single city block. He stared in numb fascination. Everything had settled except the smoke and crackle of muted flames. The street stood remarkably still and quiet, in part due to the limo's soundproofing, but also because it *was* quiet. Before him, a screen of fire fluttered to the height of a three-story building, causing the hospital to waver, a mirage. The specter of an urban hawk hunting pigeons drifted across the windshield.

He felt sick, to the point that he was going to vomit. The AC was blowing, but he was sticky with sweat.

At Lyle's back, on the floor, Blooper still atop him, the president of the United States curled insensate in a voodoo trance, the cause yet to be determined.

Lyle's training had anticipated every conceivable scenario, but none came close to the current situation. He'd never been to war but thought this is what it must be like—rolling down a

bombed out, rubble strewn street in Baghdad, Kabul, or Mogadishu, a target running a gauntlet while sniping hostiles lay wait in ambush. It brought to mind scenes from *Black Hawk Down*, his favorite film. In fact, wasn't he then and there installed behind the wheel of a kind of armored tank? He wondered at the difference—there he was, not in a foreign land, but in the City of Angeles, Southern California, America.

He could take his chances and continue to reverse (no other option, the street was too narrow to turn around), bulldozing other vehicles and anything that got in his way until he was able to maneuver and find a way out.

Relax? No way in hell that was happening. Lyle's mind raced. The American president needed protecting, but where was the rest of the motorcade? The situation demanded that the president stay with the detail, but how many of the men and women who had started that day were left alive to defend him? If alive, he'd give them a minute to catch up. After that, even with all his training, he wasn't sure what he'd do.

A sudden delayed eruption from the mangled dumpster, minor compared to what had come before, slingshot a dead rat and a Campbell's soup can against the windshield and shocked him back to his senses. The can bounced off. The flattened rat stuck. He turned on the wipers, easing the rodent aside.

Another thirty-one seconds had passed.

The radio was suddenly alive with distress calls. They'd been there throughout, but in his trance, he'd shut them out.

Lyle's mother, fervent in her faith, had instilled in him the power of prayer, and now in his mind he began to recite her favorite: "*Yea though I walk through the valley—*"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The lead had just made the turn and immediately faced a tsunami of smoke. Officer Zabrizki was about to brake when the limo's big rear end shot rough out of the smoky dark, caved in the right front side of the cruiser's hood clear back to the front passenger side door, caused the airbags to deploy and shoved the cruiser backward into the straggler which had also just made the turn. There followed a three-vehicle chain reaction. The impact caused the cameraman still leaning out to drop his camera. It hit the pavement and shattered. The straggler lurched backward into a meter maid's three-wheeler, more a hard bump than a crash. Flimsy as a golf cart, it flipped over on its side. The meter maid's day of lucky days, she was around the corner chalking a motorist's tire.

Grace sat dazed and amazed gawking at the aftermath of the pyrotechnics, then fumbled her seatbelt, slid over and huddled in the right-side passenger well.

The cameraman and his sound mixer bailed on her and ran away.

The smoke hadn't yet obliterated the intersection or the cruiser and the straggler would have known to slow and proceed with caution, but now a warm spring breeze channeled it down the street until it filled the junction and fanned out into the adjoining streets, resulting in multiple civilian crack-ups.

Motorists and their passengers, assuming a building was on fire, abandoned their cars and fled.

By then, Hercules had also arrived, saw the impenetrable mess in the intersection, mounted the corner sidewalk, then bounced back into the adjoining street, stopping hard between the crumpled lead and the straggler.

Officer Zabrizki turned off the engine, slid from under the airbag, drew his Baretta, and staggered out the cruiser. Ray in the front passenger seat shook his head side to side clearing away the cobwebs. He tried his door. It wouldn't open. Scooting across the seat, he exited on the driver's side. Field agent Goode, in the back seat, had just opened his door and begun to climb out when, close by, a burning moped's fuel tank erupted, the scooter already toppled on its side, catapulting bits of metal scrap. Goode winced, grabbed for his foot, lost his balance, and fell back inside the cruiser. Ray and Zabrizki already on the ground, they quickly assessed the situation, determined the wound to be non-life threatening. Ray straightened and surveyed the scene, spied movement on the nearest right-side rooftop four floors up and motioned to Zabrizki. The two men entered the building.

Duke had been right. The three tardy units (if the straggler could be considered a unit) had only just arrived because a city bus had blocked their way, the driver confused or pretending to be, refusing to budge because he was in a foul, big city mood,

possibly thought he was being jacked, it could happen, or maybe was simply annoyed or disinterested because motorists honking and flashing their lights was something he was used to and no concern of his. Fuck 'em, he thought. Forty seconds earlier a black stretch, flags mounted on the hood, siren wailing, grill lights flashing, had squeezed past, nearly running him off the street. Fucking big shots—what was he supposed to do, drive the bus onto the sidewalk? Only after Ray got out and pointed a gun through the driver's open window did he panic and scrambled off along with his passengers, leaving Ray to climb aboard and move the bus himself, bulldozing three cars onto the sidewalk. Other motorcade vehicles were also arriving, the white van and Hercules the closest, but were spread out, separated by jam-packed traffic. Before bailing on her seconds later, Grace's cameraman had captured it all.

Hercules. The tactical SUV's bulletproof halfmoon roof panels acting as shields separated and stood upright. Up popped the six-barrel gat, Bible seated on the trigger end.

The view ahead presented a wide screen tableau—an avenue of receding buildings flanking a flaming garbage truck, the dim shape of the president's limousine, what was left of the toasted cruisers, the white van, and the abandoned lead, all cloaked in swirling smoke.

Halfback had also arrived. Dominca Ricci and her team, guns drawn, hunkered behind the SUV's open doors.

Bible saw movement—on a right-side roof edge, a human figure glimpsed behind a fat barrel pointing down. He knew it couldn't be Ray or the officer—there hadn't been enough time to work their way to the roof. The gat took less than five seconds to deploy. Bible opened up, rat-a-tat-tat raking the roof edge, the sound at close quarters deafening. The noise canceling headphones protecting his ears helped some, but not much. Orange brick dust showered a ground floor store awning. Hercules' driver turned on the wipers to clear away the avalanche of spent shells like dead grasshoppers bouncing down the windshield. Bible eased up on the trigger, swung the gat side-to side, and waited. He hadn't seen his target nosedive over the side, but no more missiles came.

Chariot fishtailed and stopped hard. Jess and Franklin climbed out fast, guns out, forearms cocked, holding the grips with both hands, as if in prayer. A hundred feet ahead Stagecoach appeared and disappeared in swirling smoke.

Heading for it, slipping past the straggler, Jess's first impulse was to check that Grace was okay, but that would have to wait. The van's right front passenger door sprang open and she tumbled out, whimpered, "Jess—?" and threw herself into his arms. He thought fast, knowing there weren't any good options, said, "Get back in." Clinging to him, he had to pry her loose. He steered her back to the van, not so gently shoved her in and ordered her to stay down.

Jess moved on, Grace Wick mostly gone from his mind as he disappeared in a mass of swirling, darkish gray.

Behind, Franklin, weaponized briefcase in hand, studied the street. The building to his left looked derelict, every window but one boarded up. He stepped back for a better angle, adjusted his stance, waited, and made out a human shadow splayed against the interior wall. If it was a squatter, then that would be a damn shame, wrong time, wrong place, collateral damage—the president always came first. The shadow edged forward, became more visible and showed some detail, no mistaking something balanced on his shoulder that surely wasn't a broom. Franklin pumped three quick shots. The target also didn't nosedive, but dropped his launcher and folded, draped over the sill like drying laundry. Franklin dashed inside, moments later he reappeared in the open window and signaled an 'all clear' wave.

The answer to Lyle's prayer came in the shape of a murky figure in the dissipating smoke—Jess, suit sleeve pressed to his mouth, firearm out, the agent striding up in his rear view. He made a circular motion with his forefinger, indicating Lyle to pop the locks. The front passenger door swung open, Jess surprised to find the seat empty. "Where's Duke?"

Blooper opened his door and started to climb out, saying, "I need to see to that man." Scrunched low in the rear cabin with the president, the physician hadn't seen Duke go down. Now,

through the smoky haze, he saw him amid a scatter of flame-licked garbage.

Jess peered off and likewise saw Duke. Not so gently he nudged the physician back inside and said, “No, stay with the president,” and slammed the door on him.

The special agent bolted to where Duke lay face down in a dark red puddle reflecting fire and smoke, as if it had recently rained blood. Kneeling, he rolled him over and hoisted him into his arms. The front of his white shirt had turned a dark red matching the puddle. Blood still pumped from the neck wound, but it had slowed to a trickle. If this was the end, his final minutes had been spent choking on his own blood. More dead than alive, there was no point in moving him to the the limo. Any second now the area would be swarming with medical personal from the hospital. And Blooper already had his hands full. Better to leave him to someone who knew how to save his life, if it was savable.

Jess hustled back to Stagecoach and dropped into the senior agent’s seat. He shut the door, shutting out the billowing darkness. The interior lighting glimmered on the men’s faces.

“What about Duke?” Lyle asked.

Jess ignored the question, turned back, looked briefly at the president who seemed not to recognize him, then at Blooper, then back to Lyle and said, “Seal the car, flip on the oxygen.”

Lyle keyed the dashboard touch screen, activating a positive pressure reading.

“Put your gun away, Moody. Blow the siren.”

Lyle reholstered his gun and awaited Jess’s next command.

He pointed to a vague patch of dirty light between the smoldering truck chassis and the sidewalk and said, “There.” Beyond, shimmering heat continued to distort the hospital. A platoon of men and women in white, ghosts in dusky daylight, were running toward the conflagration.

“Drive there.” Not waiting for him to act, he mashed his foot atop Lyle’s on the gas. “I said go.” They went, like a drag racer hurtling off the starting line. A decapitated, moth-eaten teddy bear’s head rolled off the limo’s roof. Lyle swerved to avoid running over the dead or dying Duke. A tire splashed puddled blood. Arriving at the narrow gap, the limo slowed to a crawl, began to squeeze through, and was erased by a fresh wave of smoke. What was left of the dumpster was muscled aside. A twisted shaft of glowing red metal scraped along the driver’s side, gouging a shallow fender-to-fender trench, and for a moment they were stuck. Jess increased the pressure on Lyle’s foot and they began to move again, dragging the truck chassis a few feet before it tore loose and dropped away. The smoke thinned. Daylight appeared. Jess removed his foot and then it was all Lyle—accelerating, braking, insanely swerving and again accelerating. The hospital loomed ahead. White clad doctors and nurses jogging toward the inferno leapt to get out of their way. Outside the hospital, more medical staff with a gurney stood by

to receive the president. An orderly swung his arms left to indicate the emergency entrance.

Jess shook his head and said, "No, turn right."

Lyle gave a confused glance, not sure he understood.

Lyle: "Duke said—"

Jess: "Duke's not riding with us."

Lyle half-turned and looked to Blooper for support. "Doctor—?" Just as confused, Blooper was no help.

Jess said, "Shut up, Moody. Turn right."

The limo swung right and tore down the street.

Jess got on the radio. "Assault on Principle. Assault on Principle. Command post, this is Stagecoach, this is Gage, we have an A.O.P. in progress," not exactly calm, struggling to keep his voice in check. "SAIC is down with open wound trauma to the head and neck. Javelin is safe. We are in Stagecoach," he said. "Repeat, Javelin is safe. I've assumed command. Do you copy?"

"Roger that, Stagecoach," the command post super's voice in the Bonaventure came over the radio. "What is your destination?"

"We are on emergency route to LAX."

"The hospital is right behind you, Stagecoach. You just drove past it. We have agents standing by."

"Negative, command. The blaster's familiar with our hospital routes. He was ahead of us back there. How about if we don't let that happen again. And make sure agent Cobb is taken care of."

Nine blocks and seven minutes later, after stop and start navigating tightly packed streets, Stagecoach was back on Alvarado, wheeling past Union Station. A sign indicating an on-ramp to the 110 southbound appeared in the limo's windshield. Jess nodded, saying, "That's us."

Lyle muttered, "Thanks," he'd been downtown, he knew the city. He steered them under the overpass, ran a red making a left, mounted the ramp and merged into the carpool lane. Traffic moved at a steady clip, hopefully clear sailing all the way to the 105 and LAX.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jess looked across to the rookie driving with a white-knuckle cocktail of panic and instinct. Peering in his side mirror, he saw Hercules ascend the freeway access ramp, closing the distance, siren wailing, lights flashing. He exhaled deeply, then took his first full breath since the firefight. He turned to Lyle again. "You can slow down. Save the one fender you didn't buckle for later."

Now that the immediate danger had passed, Jess realized for the first time that his hands were damp with Duke's blood. Opening the glovebox, he took out the cloth he'd used the afternoon before to wipe down the dash, and now used it to wipe the blood off his hands. There was also blood on his pant knees, but nothing he could do about that. He returned the cloth to the glove box and turned in his seat.

Blooper had hauled himself and the president upright onto the rear seats. Swann looked like a man having a nightmare, dozing in fits and starts and occasionally mumbling before slipping under again. Blooper took his blood pressure again. Jess waited for answers. "He's stable," the physician said, uncinching the cuff. He tilted the president's head back and shone the light pen into his eyes again. "But his eyes are still dilated. And there's some paralysis." He switched off the light.

"Somebody got to him," Jess said.

"Ever hear of a twilight drug?" Blooper asked. "I don't expect you have."

“No.”

“It behaves something like this, a kind of anesthesia. Induces anxiety relief, a kind of hypnosis. The patient’s not unconscious, but sedated. Allows them to follow simple instructions.”

“What’s it used for?”

“Different surgeries for different reasons.”

“Sorry, doctor, all Egyptian to me.”

“I’m not positively saying that’s what this is, that’s going to require some tests, but certainly similar. Wiki it, or I’ll explain more later if you’re interested.”

“I’m interested.”

“What about the blood?”

Blooper had wiped the president’s nose but there were still traces. The physician shook his head, not ready to voice an opinion.

Framed against a backdrop of verdant, palm-studded hills, the luxury plantation style beachfront property belonged to a Swann family friend, a female singer-songwriter of enormous popularity and success, although her best days were behind her. First Lady Micki Swann and her pop idol friend strolled along the silky white sand. Nearby, in the shallows, Charlie and two teen girls who attended the same private school and had traveled with the family straddled surfboards. Incongruous in this tropic setting, the dark-suited silhouettes of two members of the first lady’s detail stood apart, close, but not enough to be

intrusive. Suddenly, the agents began to run toward them. A message was relayed. Micki listened intently, then turned and shouted to the teens, a controlled urgency in her voice. It took several moments to get their attention. Finally, the girls waded toward shore dragging their boards, then abandoned them and began to run when the first lady's voice became more insistent. The five females, accompanied by the agents, ran back down the beach to the waterfront compound.

Heading south down the 110 to the 105, Jess switched his attention between his side mirror and what lay ahead. No one else in the diamond lane in the short distance they'd traveled. He looked over his shoulder to see how the president was doing.

Lyle asked about the rest of the motorcade, shouldn't they slow enough to let them catch up, safety in numbers. Jess said they'd catch up, not sounding so sure. The thing now was to keep moving, to pay attention and do their job, get the president back to the safety of LAX. Lyle noted that he failed to mention anything about relaxing.

Back at the scene of the ambush what had recently been an inferno had been reduced to an acre of strewn, charred debris. A trio of fire crews had arrived and were hosing down the blackened shells of automobiles and storefronts. LAPD officers went from car to car checking for survivors. Hospital staff wandered about the still smoky scene.

Ray Rykoff and officer Zabrizki emerged from their building and slogged through a shallow lake of sooty water back to the crumpled cruiser. The officer slid behind the wheel and turned the ignition. The engine stuttered and refused to turn over. He and Zabrizki got out again and went around to the passenger side. Together they eased Goode out. Supporting him as he limped, they steered him to the van, slid open the rear door and eased him inside, after which Ray opened the driver's door and saw Grace, hands laced together covering her head, cowering in the passenger well. "Grace?" Hearing her name, she yelped and tried to make herself even smaller. He went around to her side and opened the door. She started to scramble across the seat to escape when he grabbed her kicking and shrieking and dragged her out. "Hey, hey, easy, easy Grace. It's Ray. Ray Rykoff. Remember? We're the good guys," he said, flashing his shield, as if that would somehow convince her. She snapped out of it, seemed to recognize him, and slumped into his arms. "It's not safe out here," Ray said. Other than trembling like a leaf, scared shitless, she seemed physically unharmed. He questioned whether to leave her on the curb, leave her to the docs and nurses, let someone else deal with her, but decided against it. Who knew, maybe another shit storm was on the way. Instead, he steered her to the rear door and slid it open. Unsteady on her feet, she groped along like a blind person. Ray eased her in, the officer and the downed agent already inside rolling down their windows, taking position, weapons drawn. Ray quickly went

around to the driver's side and slid behind the wheel, saying, "Keep your head down," meant for Grace. Removing the straggler placard from the dash, he tossed it in back. Switching on the ignition, he floored it. The sudden jolt of acceleration nearly flung Grace to the floor.

The three-room suite on the nineteenth floor of the Bonaventure served as a command post, a crowded nerve center where every asset pertaining to the president's visit was represented by commanders and staff. Maps of the motorcade route covered the walls. TV screens displayed late-breaking news broadcasts of the unfolding story, a nation in crisis. A live feed from Huntsman provided aerial views of an urban battlefield. Banks of monitors displayed GSP and satellite imagery. Radios squawked.

The sidelined Brooks Hale sat out in the corridor flipping through the L.A. Times sports section. Duke had instructed him to hang around the post, but so far no one had found anything for him to do. He hadn't had a drink in sixteen hours, a new personal best, at least in the four months since his marriage had begun to sour. He hadn't yet heard the news, not just about Duke, but any of it.

The elevator pinged. Heavy footsteps got his attention. From down the corridor came a wedge of agents marching toward him. Brooks stood and opened the suite door for them. The wedge parted and Deputy Director Vance Whale stepped out. He

looked right through Brooks and went inside. Brooks asked himself whether it was because the director had heard of his demotion (no clue yet whether tentative or permanent), or because the guy was generally considered to be an all-around dick, and decided it was some of each. The agents followed Whale inside.

“What going on?” Brooks asked.

“Assault on the principle,” the last agent to enter told him. “Duke Cobb’s DOA.”

Holy Christ, Duke was dead, what the hell had happened? A heart attack? A stroke? Brooks slipped in after them, bent on steering clear of Whale, not hard to do since more and more FBI, local field agents, and police had begun to invade, to the point where it was just about standing room only. He made his way to one of three coffee machines, the table covered in empty and half empty plastic cups and sugar packets and and listened in on a D.C. Service agent, a local field agent and a female FBI—FBI in big yellow letters on the back of her navy-blue windbreaker—the three discussing the events of the past twenty minutes.

“What’s going on?” the field agent asked.

“Assault on the principal. Duke Cobb’s DOA,” the D.C. agent said, confirming what Brooks already knew. For the second time it sounded impossible. Good God, Brooks thought, Duke Cobb’s gone, Duke who’d never again tell anyone to relax. The two had often been at loggerheads, the issue being Brooks’ on-again, off-again sobriety, but Holy Christ, dead? Okay, Duke Cobb dead

and there'd been an assault on the president, but the details were still unclear. "Jess Gage's taken command," the D.C. guy added.

The FBI chimed in, "Who?"

Brooks squeezed through the tightly packed bodies and found a niche at a GPS monitor. There, visible amid an ever-changing grid of streets and freeways, a blinking yellow dot—Stagecoach—was inching south. A loop in the agent's head kept repeating, Jesus Fried Christ, I should be in that car.

Across the room, the command super handed Whale a mike and said, "He's on a police radio."

"This is the Deputy Director of the United States Secret Service, who is this?" Whale said, impatient because crank calls were nothing unusual, at least a handful on every presidential outing. The PA speaker crackled to life, like a machine clearing its throat.

The caller wearing a tailored, gray sharkskin suit sat kicked back on an old-timey caster-wheeled chair, his vintage pangolin cowboy boots propped on a scabby leather ottoman. Bordering the 105, the multi-story, red brick warehouse converted into cavernous artist's lofts, the sixth-floor loft, the width and breadth of a basketball court, was of pale, paint-splattered wood, the high walls exposed brick. Empty cardboard packing boxes left by a previous tenant stood about. Unused canvases leaned against the walls. The only other furnishings were a

barn-large wooden table and seven mismatched chairs, a Bolivian soccer team tee bunched on a chair seat, an LAPD cop's uniform draped over another chair.

Beyond the window light, in shadow, a woman lay propped on a queen-sized air mattress. She'd bought it weeks before at a Walmart, her first experience in a superstore. There were fashion magazines scattered beside the bed, a way to pass the time, the woman unable to read English, but liking the pictures. A tan, black-tipped Malinois lay curled at her feet. She had given the dog a name—Bandito—because in the short time they had been together he had stolen her bra, a shoe, and anything else he could get his paws on.

She was late 20's, indigenous Peruvian, of mixed parentage. Her name was Jhosilin Miranda, but he called her Kantuta, sacred flower of the Incas, not a pretty name, but one linked with beauty and purity.

The first tentative report of an attack on the president's motorcade had appeared on the small television atop a crate at the foot of the mattress. Now the reports were on every channel. A square tin of edible condoms, the Brazilian Jontex brand, "like eating candy with the wrapper on," the ads in their home countries promised, clear squares, lay beside the television. She said, "Come see what you have made happen," spoken in Spanish.

He didn't answer.

His boots were vintage because the scaly South American pangolin had been put on an endangered animal's list and the boots were no longer made. The caller had taken them off a dead man, a rival of the boss whom he served, but that was another story. The rest of him was '80s Miami Vice. He was handsome, if you happened to have a thing for the type—mid to late 30's, Worcestershire colored hair, tawny complexioned, and suave, but in a way that betrayed a life spent trying too hard. He had to be somewhere way up high because the view outside a quartet of tall, narrow, arched windows showed nothing but clear blue sky.

Kantuta stood and stepped into the light. The colors of her floor length skirt were yellow and red, which, along with the green of the plant's leaves, reflected the colors of the Bolivian flag, not her country, but that of her lover. Above her waist she wore nothing. Coal black hair straight as an arrow flowed to the small of her brown back. Barefoot, she stepped to his side and lit a cigarette with matches from a pack on the paint-cruled table. The dog trotted by her side as she moved to a window and stood looking out, four puffs of her cigarette, saying nothing. She pushed the window up a couple of feet and fanned the smoke out. Santos didn't approve of her smoking.

He sat facing a police radio, a two-liter bottle of Diet Coke beside it. He spoke into the radio mike, answering Whale's question with a south of the border accent that became, in turns, thicker or nearly absent, depending on his emphasis. "A

supporter of the president,” he said, spoken with the ease of someone with not a care in the world. To Whale and those who would have to deal with him, Gonzalo Pablo Santos was no more than a disembodied voice, a tone, an inflection, which is all they ever were until the FBI or Service, following clues, ferreted them out in some loner survivalist’s wayward South Dakota cabin or Appalachian shack and attached a lackluster face that had tried to fool you with its off-kilter ideological babble. But this was different. If the caller was who he claimed to be, he’d already made good on his threat, or ordered others to carry out his insane wish.

“I was told you had a warning for me. About what?” Whale’s voice small in the cavernous loft.

His sacred flower turned from the window to her man. She stubbed out her cigarette on the tabletop, and said, “When you are finished, come see.”

Santos, answering Whale, said, “Another device.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Ray in the straggler had been speaking to Jess. "Ray, where are you?" Moments before, a block ahead through the windshield, he'd made out Hercules in the shadow of an overpass, turning left to mount the ramp to the 110. It was safe to assume Stagecoach had just made the same turn. "Catching up," Ray answered.

"Roger that," Jess said.

A tap on Grace's shoulder made her flinch. It was Zabrizki. "Where's the first aid kit?"

"I don't know," she said, panic in her voice because something was expected of her.

"You said this is the straggler, right?" Zabrizki's question meant for Ray.

"Yeah."

Zabrizki turned back to Grace. "Then there's a kit. Find it."

Ray saved them the trouble, groped under the seat, found a kit, and handed it back to Grace.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Jess Gage says the president's okay," Ray said, more for the benefit of the officer and the wounded agent than for the woman. "Back to LAX."

"Jess who?" Zabrizki asked.

Ray ignored the question.

Agent Goode sat with his back against the door in the third row, one leg stretched out on the bench seat, his gun in his lap. A sliver of metal had pierced his shoe and torn through leather and flesh. Zabrizki leaned over from the second row, unlaced the field agent's shoe and gently removed it. Goode's bloody sock containing his little toe came off with it. "Oh, shit, shit," the agent mumbled.

Grace paled and groped in the first aid kit.

Ray passed under the freeway and swung a left onto the curve of the access ramp.

Stagecoach sped south in the carpool lane, the downtown skyline zipping past on the left. The rookie and his boss rode in silence. Jess punched a number into his cell, waited for a familiar voice, then said, "You in the room?"

Brooks noted the caller ID and immediately answered. "Jesus, Jess, I should be there," voicing his earlier looped thought and sounding genuinely regretful. He was in the suite's bathroom rinsing his hands, having just emptied his bladder.

"I wish to God you were. You're sorely needed," Jess said.

Lyle glanced over, not sure whom he was talking to, but it didn't take a wizard to figure it out.

"So, what's the word on Duke?" Jess asked.

"Duke's dead," Brooks said.

The air between them suddenly went dead. Goddamnit, Jess thought, Duke's gone. He'd already guessed as much, but now

the absolute finality of it hit him. Duke had been like an uncle to him, actually, more like a father, since his own had completely disappeared from his life, whereabouts unknown.

“Jess?”

“I’m here. What’s happening on at your end?”

“Hang on. Be right back.”

Jess killed the call and waited.

“Is Duke going to make it, you think?” Lyle asked, already three quarters knowing the answer.

“No.” A quarter-mile blew past before Jess broke the silence. “You know what he’d tell you to do right now? Duke?”

“He’d tell me to relax.” Then, after a few seconds, “Maybe I should have gone to him.”

“No, you did right. You stayed with the president,” spoken to Lyle, but also intended for Blooper, in case he had second thoughts over not having seen to Duke.

Jess sensed there was something else the rookie needed to get off his chest, but hadn’t yet found the nerve. “Spit it out.”

“Gage, I know change is hard, especially for you older guys.”

Older? Jess figured the difference in their ages to be no more than eight, nine years, ten on the outside. And Gage? It was the first time Lyle had called him by his last name, which he took to be a not-too-subtle hint that after what they’d just experienced Lyle Moody was now his own man.

“Duke called me up from the VP as backup, not you. I don’t need your acceptance. I already had his. You can wish Brooks

was here all you want, and heck, I'm sorry about what happened, but he's the one who screwed up. Not me."

Jess had to admit the rookie had balls. "He'd kill to be sitting where you are," he said.

"Well, then I guess we're both disappointed because I'd kill to have Duke Cobb sitting where you are."

"Yeah. Me, too," Jess said.

The divider was still down and Blooper heard everything, but said nothing. In fact, the physician hadn't said much of anything, only every few minutes asking the president how he was feeling, to which the answer was always a heavy-lidded stare.

The limo's radio crackled to life, first a flurry of static, then clearer, two voices back and forth. One Jess recognized, the other new to him. He turned up the volume, heard Whale saying, "If you're claiming responsibility for the attempt on the president's life—"

"There has been no attempt made on the president's life. Not yet. If there had been, he would already be dead," the voice sounding cool, self-possessed. Jess pictured the caller kicked back, reveling in the attention.

For his part, Whale sounded in control, his voice modulated. "Listen, whoever you are, you should be aware that the president is no longer in authority to negotiate for any kind of ransom, political or otherwise. We have what is called a

continuity of government.” There followed a silence. “Are you still there?”

“We will not be requiring governments today,” Santos said. “This is a thing between men. A personal thing,”

“Personal in what way?” Whale said. “What do you want? Money? What?”

High up in the loft Santos lifted his hand and turned it palm up, as if studying an alien object. “I am told that what I am after will weigh almost two pounds,” he said. “The price per pound is complicated.”

“Then we *are* talking about money?” Whale asked, Jess listening in.

“No.”

“Then what are we talking about?”

“I want the president’s hand—his left hand. I am talking about two pounds of a man. You may have the rest.”

A hush fell over the suite. Whale wiped away the perspiration beading his brow. He was still unclear on what the caller wanted. “You, your people, whoever you are, blew up a garbage truck, why didn’t you—?”

Santos cut him off. “A rehearsal. A test. As you are testing me.”

Another silence, then Whale again, “I’m listening.”

“The procedure should not take long. It is not a difficult thing. The president’s surgeon is more than qualified to do this

and has all the necessary equipment. Not only is the limousine stocked with the president's blood, I believe it also carries a good Scotch."

"What makes you think I'd possibly order such a thing?" Whale said.

"A kilo of C-4."

"Can you repeat that? Clarify what you just said."

"A kilo of C-4. Ten times greater than the charge that earlier detonated. Clearer?"

"Where is this device?"

"Close to the president."

"That's not possible," Whale said, every cell between his ears tuned to wondering if such a scenario was, in fact, even remotely possible. The caller had to be talking through his ass.

Santos: "Look at the Death Watch," his voice garbled in static.

Whale: "Say again?"

The radio went dead, replaced by white noise, then, barely audible, "—Death Watch."

Whale turned to one of his people, said, "Put the Death Watch up."

Jess punched in a number on his cell. Brooks immediately picked up. "Yeah?"

"Can you get me the Death Watch?"

"Already on it," Brooks said.

Jess tuned his ears back to the radio.

“How?” Whale asked the mystery caller. “You couldn’t possibly have gotten close enough.”

“If I am invisible.”

“Repeat that. You’re what?”

“Invisible. Yet I am everywhere.”

“That doesn’t sound very realistic.” Whale checked himself on “realistic.” If the caller was who he claimed to be, he’d already gunned down a Service agent and destroyed half a city block, how much more realistic could he be?

“You do not believe in magic, deputy director?”

“Blowing up a trash truck is one thing. Getting near the president another. But a threat on his life, genuine or empty, is a very serious felony. Doesn’t matter if it’s real.”

“Where I am from, the real and the unreal are one and the same. Dogs play fetch with the limbs of dead mothers and presidents are mysteriously stricken ill.”

Whale allowed himself a smirk. He *knew* it, and no big surprise. Okay, he’d murdered an agent and blown up a garbage truck, but planting a bomb on the president’s limo—the freak was all talk, delusional. Thank God ninety-nine percent of them were.

Jess, nowhere near relieved, focused on every word. He half turned to Blooper. “You hearing this?” The physician turned from the president and nodded.

“Are you claiming to have had something to do with the president getting sick?” Whale asked.

Santos came through loud and clear, nothing to prove, merely stating facts. Elect to take him seriously or not, he knew what he knew, or damn sure sounded like he did. “Your president was administered a narcotic while shaking a certain supporter’s hand—a powder called *scopolamine*, a belladonna derivative. I am sure his doctor has already come to the same conclusion. Lethal in large quantities, but the small amount he inhaled and passed from his hand to his mouth was only intended to render him in need of hospital care. He will be fine in about ten or twelve hours. I did this because the device is under the limousine. I did not bring the bomb to the president. The president came to the bomb.”

Jess turned to the open divider and exchanged a look with Blooper. The physician released the blood pressure cuff and said, “Makes sense, actually. Possibly some kind of weaponized powder, but not a toxicant, an anesthetic.”

“Possibly?”

“James *could* have inhaled something, passed it hand to mouth. Or through his nostrils.”

Whale sounded like he was struggling to keep it together, but his voice rose. “The president’s illness has probably been on the news by now. You’ll have to do better than that.”

“I am not the one who will have to do better.”

Whale released the mike button, took a deep breath and turned to those nearest him. "Somebody do me a favor and get me the goddamn White House staff lead. I want to know who's been shaking the president's hand. Now! And tell the FAA to freeze all press helos and small planes. And get the Nighthawks in the air." He picked up the Service mike. "Stagecoach, this is command, Deputy Director Vance Whale. Hold your course until I tell you differently. I'm assuming all authority. Do you copy?"

Jess reluctantly lifted the mike. "Roger that, sir, Stagecoach copies." He put down the mike, withdrew his Sig Saur and put in on the dash. Unzipping a canvas bag on the floor, he took out a folding stock submachine gun. "The guy never made it out of the VP Detail. Spends his entire career playing in the minors, now thinks he owns the team," Jess talking to himself.

Lyle glanced over and said, "Now do I get to take mine out?"

"Moody, just shut up and drive."

Huntsman's pilot looked down on the freeway, the depleted motorcade spread out behind Stagecoach in the diamond lane, the limousine a shark breezing past schools of tightly packed sardines.

Brooks made his way through the suite to one of the two bedrooms where he found a WHCA (White House Communications Agency) tech seated at his post. "Can you patch

this through to Stagecoach?" he asked, trying not to sound furtive about it.

"Who's asking?"

"The deputy director."

The tech nodded without looking up.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The WHCA tech approached Whale and said, “Sir, the Death Watch is up.”

Brooks was on his cell, inconspicuous in a corner, you’d have to look hard to find him. All around, personnel crowded around banks of monitors all showing the same thing—the Death Watch, a video record of all the president’s entrances and exits for the day, from getting off Air Force One and returning to the spare behind the stage.

Whale stepped up and the others moved aside to make room, the deputy director’s eyes glued to one of the monitors.

In Stagecoach, Jess was fixed on the dashboard computer. The screen snapped to life. The cameras mounted on the press riser beside the site stage had done their job and caught it all: Chariot backing up to the rear of the stage; accredited foot traffic coming and going; the canine team approaching the limo; the handler lowering a brick-sized cube, slim red wires and blasting caps attached, to the dog’s snout, its scent setting the animal in motion.

“This isn’t right,” Jess said.

Getting Lyle’s attention.

He laid it out for the rookie. “Canine handlers prime their dogs by having them sniff a material scented with explosive

traces,” telling Lyle something he already knew, the rookie saying, “Thanks, but I already took the class.”

Whale was having much the same conversation with the Command Post Technical Security Division (TSD) agent, picking up where Jess left off.

“Why are we talking about this?” Whale asked.

“Deputy director, that isn’t fake C-4 he’s using to prime the dog. It’s—” the command post super saying it.

Jess was still fixed on the dashboard screen.

After the handler allowed his animal to sniff the C-4, he held it up in plain sight. No one else on the scene seemed to notice.

The tech at the command post magnified the image—big, bigger, biggest, so there could be no mistake.

Jess completed the tech guy’s thought, saying, “—real thing.”

Trotting his straining dog around behind the limo, the handler stooped, giving the appearance he was checking beneath the chassis. Finished, he gave a thumbs up and moved off.

The tech froze the image, then blew it up again, revealing the handler’s hand was empty—the C-4, whether real or a scent “seed,” was gone.

Jess slumped back, nauseatingly impressed.

“He did it. He fucking did it.”

Twisting in his seat, he observed the president's eyes had been reduced to slits and had barely enough strength to lift an arm. He motioned the special agent to lean closer to the open divider. "Do we know who they are?" spoken with difficulty, his voice thin.

"No, sir."

"But we know—know what they want."

Jess nodded. "Sir, what do you want us to do?"

The president shook his head and said, "No," barely above a murmur.

"Repeat that, Mr. President."

A pause before he spoke again. "No," with a bit more force.

Jess turned to the physician and said, "Doctor, open the dash back there, that Kevlar blanket? Let's get it around him." Blooper opened a rear compartment and removed a thick, sectioned blanket, like a bulletproof quilt, and tucked it around the president.

2,400 miles away in the nation's capitol, the grid of streets surrounding the First House, including the National Mall, the nation's most symbolically powerful open space, its 146 acres studded with civic monuments, had begun to resemble an armed camp. Armored vehicles rolled into position at opposite ends. A platoon of Marines stood on full alert. A fleet of Marine helicopters kept watch overhead. News of the events unfolding on the West Coast had only just begun to reach the general

populace, yet the Mall already seemed devoid of the usual number of locals and tourists, a good many having elected to stay at home or in their hotels to watch news of the unraveling events.

A few blocks away at Ford's Theater, a National Historic Site, tourists on the last walkthrough of the day gazed up at the flag-draped theater box where Sixteenth President Abraham Lincoln sat the night of the April 14th, 1865 assassination, or stood on the stage to which John Wilkes Booth leapt after the shooting. Elsewhere in the museum they could see the pistol used to carry out the act, among other period artifacts. (The rocking chair on which Lincoln was sitting is on display at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan). Had it been later in the year, on select winter evenings visitors had the option of viewing a live theater performance, the one act play, *One Destiny*, during which actors in period attire grappled with hindsight questions: Could the events of that fateful day have been avoided? Could John Wilkes Booth have been stopped?

But if you watched any news at all you already knew the first family wasn't home—they were away on vacation on one of the Hawaiian Islands. You'd seen them on TV perfecting their tans on some billionaire's yacht, the president on a championship golf course improving his short game, the first lady and her daughter snorkeling among leatherback turtles, octopi, and tropical fish in the blue green water of a partially submerged volcano.

Santos was back on the radio but was no longer alone. A dozen or so South Americans stood at the row of windows, one of the men peering off through high-powered field glasses. They were his soldiers, but not, excepting one, dressed as soldiers, the men wearing rumpled suits too big or too small. Three were women. Kantuta had changed to camo fatigues and combat boots and wore her hair in braids. One of the others wore a gray tee showing a cartoon llama inside a red, green, and yellow circle. The third wore a traditional brown felt *cholita* hat.

All were roughly Santos' age or younger, their peasant stock faces carved from some kind of dark brown rain forest wood. They had arrived in early April and taken rooms in pairs in motels on Western and Vermont. The two who had performed their jobs downtown, but had not been heard from since, were presumed dead. That was expected. Their families back home would receive their pay. Others on the team were positioned at key points throughout the city.

Field-tested, they had fought in their own drug wars in their homeland and in the border wars with surrounding countries, the never-ending conflict with law enforcement and rivals to decide who would control the trade.

Out of habit, some chewed coca leaves to calm their nerves and bolster their courage. They were prone to superstition. They read their futures in the green leaves. Earlier, in their motel rooms, some had burnt the leaves, an offering to sway

fate in their favor. They wore trinkets around their necks, miniature versions of the material things they hoped one day to own. In a corner, stacked cardboard boxes supported a makeshift altar, one the sacred flower had built. Bottles of alcohol, flowers, and a red toy corvette bribed their gods to protect them. The women had constructed similar altars in their rooms.

Some had seen with their own eyes or had heard tell of a backward running clock on the façade of the building housing the Bolivian congress in La Paz. Its hands had been inverted to go from one to twelve anti-clockwise. It was said the change had been made to get Bolivians to treasure their heritage and show they could question established norms and think creatively, a reminder that they lived in the south, not the north. Small versions of the clock were sold in the marketplace. Santos owned such a clock, his is in the shape of Bolivia, kept on his beside table at home.

He among them was not a believer. That very morning when Kantuta had awakened, she'd told him of a troubling dream in which she'd seen a small man inside a blue box, the box standing upright, like in a horror movie about an Egyptian mummy, maybe the box was a coffin, it was hard to be sure, the small man holding a cat, waving her lover to come close. At first, he'd been annoyed and dismissed her dream, saying it was caused by eating too much strange food, then took her in his arms, held her close and stroked her long black hair, whispering

in her ear, saying “Bad luck, good luck, bad luck, good,” in a singsong voice. A common saying among her people, she had heard it before, but was never quite sure what it meant, if there was some hidden meaning. She trusted him, but what good was the saying if it only meant they were bound to an endless wheel of bad and good fortune? She wanted something more lasting.

Santos raised his head to the row of windows, saw only pale blue California sky and said, “What do you see?” One called Keke, manning the field glasses, his hair pulled back in a tail, silver hoops in his ears, said, “I see nothing,” the two men speaking Spanish.

The loft the Bolivian Santos had picked as his command post, one he had leased three months earlier, back in February, two months after the American president’s December visit, vowing to avenge the self-righteous meddler Stnator Bautita’s death, overlooked an unobstructed stretch of the 105, the same route the president’s motorcade had taken on the way downtown. He’d paid cash in advance on a six-month lease, although after today it would no longer be needed, three months being the time it took to map the mission—weeks spent touring the city, taking pictures, making mental notes, until he knew it like the back of his own hand. Contacts had been made, resulting in the purchase of bootleg weapons. Signing the rental contract, the manager had asked if he was an artist, the lofts mostly used as studio space. Santos had said, yes, he was. The manager, making conversation, had said, “What kind, if you don’t mind my

asking?” Santos had his answer ready. “Performance art.” The nosy manager asked was he any good?” The new tenant with the Spanish accent had to think a few seconds before answering. “Enough to make a living.”

If all went well, in four days, after reporting to the narco boss who had sent him on this no-fail mission, he would be back in his country, in his own bed, sleeping beside his woman. To get there, he and Kantuta would first drive to Nogales, Arizona, cross the border there, then on to Mexico City to board a flight to Bolivia. A journey of four days if they didn’t detour to visit the great Aztec pyramids at Teotihuacan, a reward they had promised themselves, something they had discussed. Their suitcases were already packed and stood by the door.

Santos said, “Now what do you see?”

Keke, still looking, said, “Still nothing.”

There were buildings between the eighth-floor loft and the freeway, but they were low, one and two and three stories, allowing a clear view to the north. On the near side, an access road ran parallel with the freeway. Then, atop an ivy-covered embankment, the eastbound lanes, separated from the westbound by a high fenced median, paired tracks there separated by gravel beds, Metro trains commuting between Redondo Beach and the City of Norwalk coming and going all day and into the night. Then, another fence, this one bordering the westbound lanes.

That was the view from on high.

The president's limousine, the one the Secret Service called Stagecoach, if it came, would appear from the east, the far left, in the furthest lane, the one the Californians called the diamond. In a city of limousines there might be others, but only Stagecoach would be flashing its grill lights and sounding its siren.

"I have been planning this for a very, very long time," Santos spoke into the radio mike. Before him spread on the table were photos and bios of the protection detail—Duke Cobb, Raymond Raykoff, Dominca Ricci and other special agents. A map spread on the table showed motorcade and egress routes circled in red. Atop the map four cell phones were neatly aligned in a row.

"You have no moves that I have not anticipated, studied, rehearsed, photographed, recorded or dreamt," Santos said. "Even the escape to the hospital was not unanticipated. Do you understand?" Not waiting for an answer, he said— "You will say, yes, Deputy Director Whale."

Hearing his own name spoken further rattled Whale. "Let's just hold on here," he said. "Let's just take a minute."

"You are stalling, of course."

"No, I'm just not clear on what you want."

"When I tell you, I want the limousine to stop. I am not ordering a cut of beef. I do not want the president butchered. If you do not do this, I will detonate the bomb. If the limousine stops before I ask it to, I will detonate the bomb. If anyone approaches or leaves the limousine, I will detonate the bomb. If

your helicopters get too close, I will detonate the bomb. You will stop when I tell you. You will tell them now.”

There was silence from Whale’s end, the deputy director doing his best not to lose it in front of his team.

“You will say, “Yes.”

Whale mouthed a silent, “Shit,” then gave the bare minimum he’d been instructed to. “Yes.”

“I did not hear you.”

“Christ, I said, “yes,” then added, “Although I take your threat seriously, very much so, once again I have to insist that the president is no longer in authority to negotiate for any kind of ransom, political or otherwise. We have what is called—”

Santos cut him short. “I do not need an education in government. Today I am the one with the lesson.” He turned to the row of windows and said, “Now?”

Keke at the window, still peering through binoculars, didn’t speak, then raised a hand and said, “I see it.”

“I need to know why,” Whale said. “I need to know what to tell my people.”

Santos’ right hand moved to the four cells, passed over them, returned, and hovered over one, then moved again, a game of eenie, meenie, miney, mo. His suit sleeve tugged back, revealing the letters F-A-R-A tatted across four knuckles, and on the back of his hand the number 16, far bigger than the letters.

“You need to know why?”

A hiss of white noise and the voice was gone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Brooks sat beside the tech cleaning up the image of the counterfeit canine handler. Between the shades and fake cop mustache it was hard to know what the guy really looked like.

“What about the badge?” Brooks asked.

The tech zeroed in on the badge: tight, tighter, tightest. “Badge is bogus,” he said after close scrutiny. Next, he zeroed in on the lapel pin. “Same with the pin,” Brooks said. “Goddamn dog is real enough, though.” Brooks suddenly had a thought. “Wait. That’s right.” The tech said, “What?” Brooks said, “The handler may be fake, but the animal’s real. That’s a professionally trained bomb dog.”

The image on the monitor had been enlarged and pixelated to the point of abstraction. Scanning it, it was impossible to see the thing they were looking for.

But then, something swam into focus; canine teeth, a salivating tongue. The image moved past the dog’s mouth and settled on a small, shiny rectangle, still too blurry to identify. Whatever it was, it began to gain focus and nearly filled the screen. It was a dog tag, the number crystal clear.

Brooks said, “He wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of counterfeiting a dog tag.”

The tech said, “We can ID the dog.”

Brooks said, “We can ID its owner.”

Santos picked up one of the cells, handed it to Kantuta, pushed back his chair and stepped to one of the windows. Kantuta followed. Keke handed Santos the field glasses. Eight floors below, the frayed remnants of the motorcade whisked into view in the low occupancy lane. The black speck of a helo followed overhead and a little behind.

A few moments passed before Keke said, "Look," and pointed to the far left.

Santos swiveled the glasses. On the horizon, a boxy Metro train emerged from out of the western haze.

He returned the field glasses to Keke. Kantuta handed him the cell. He waited, waited some more, then tapped numbers on the keypad. A flashing red dot began to beep, beep, beep—the cell engaging.

Stagecoach sped west, following the weave of the 105. Ahead in the outside diamond lane, a bright orange, slow moving Caltrans truck, its automated grabber scooped up red traffic cones and neatly stacked them in the truck bed, one cone every twenty-five feet along a half-mile stretch separating the four active lanes from a work zone. A sign mounted on the truck roof flashed CAUTION, a blinking arrow below it pointing left.

Lyle blasted the horn, made out the driver's face, yellow hardhat tilted to the truck's side mirror. The driver ignored him, didn't speed up, still collecting cones. Lyle blasted him again, this time not letting up, Lyle pretty sure he could read the

driver's mind—screw the big ass limo and the hot shots throwing their weight around, let a working man do his job.

Jess said, "Go around him."

Lyle eased up on the gas, creating space between the limousine and the creeping truck. He waiting, watched his outside mirror for a break in traffic, then hit the gas and swung the wheel hard left into the next lane over. The Caltrans guy in his yellow hardhat cocked his arm out his widow and shot him the middle finger as the limousine whipped past.

The Caltrans truck a quarter mile behind, the limo blew past another stretch of cones, the next exit shut down by a triangle cluster of yellow collision barrels. Stagecoach whipped past. If road pebbles had eyes they would have seen the cube of C-4 plastique bonded to the undercarriage. Ahead, a work crew came into view, a dozen men in green and orange vests and hardhats standing beside their machines, laying down new asphalt. Traffic had slowed, the limousine hemmed in on three sides. No choice but to go with the flow. Appearing from out of the low sun, the eastbound train closed the distance.

A final beep and the cell went quiet. Santos stood at the window with the field glasses, a box seat to what happened next, the limousine already past those barrels and the work crew, the loft angle high enough that the coming train wouldn't block the view. What happened next was seen more than heard or felt.

For Jess and two of the three men with him in the limousine it was the opposite—more felt and heard. What happened: Jess looking in his outside mirror, the work crew falling behind, Jess looking for signs of the rest of the motorcade catching up; a blinding flash in his rear view as the cluster of sand filled crash barrels exploded in a concussion blast of self-perpetuating seventy mile per hour wind. Only these barrels weren't sand filled. They detonated as if filled with napalm, the incendiary blend of gasoline jelly sticking to cars, pavement, and road workers, creating a domino effect of colliding vehicles. Yellow hardhats and the flaming men wearing them spun like paper plates. Stagecoach was jolted. The air instantly reeked of gasoline and laundry detergent, the latter added to the mix to cause the fiery gasoline to stick to whatever it touched. Liquid fire dripped from the fence separating the westbound lanes from the train track median. The approaching train on the limo's left plowed through the expanding firestorm. Lyle looking in his side mirror watched it momentarily disappear in a sideways sheet of flame, then reappear and grind to a stop.

Santos kept the field glasses trained on the scene and signaled with his free hand. Kantuta raised the cell to her mouth and said, "That is why," her English heavily accented, but good enough to understand.

Courtesy Huntsman's live feed, Deputy Director Vance Whale, flushed and near catatonic, had his own box seat. The command post super wheeled about in her chair, extended him a phone and said, "Sir, I have the vice president. And Micki Swann's on hold."

"Jesus, I can't talk to her now," Whale barked at her. "Fill her in, skip the rough bits." He grabbed the phone, took a deep breath, altered his tone, and said, "Mr. Vice President, Vance Whale here. Let me catch you up, Avery."

Hemmed in on all sides, the limousine's progress had slowed to a snail's pace. Lyle sat rigid, hands locked at ten and two gripping the wheel, the limo scraping past engulfed, gridlocked vehicles, muscling others out of the way. Searching for a way through. The rookie slammed on the brakes, took his hands from the wheel and threw it in park.

Jess said, "What are you doing?"

"Stopping."

"No. Don't ever stop. You stop, you get out and walk."

"All right, Jess." Lyle reacted as if accepting a dare, threw it in drive, slammed on the gas, shoved aside a stopped vehicle with Arizona plates, and resumed crowding through the traffic puzzle. Thirteen second later they were stopped again, the way ahead an impenetrable steel wall.

Jess said, "Just get us off the goddamn freeway."

Lyle muscled forward again.

Whale couldn't believe what he was seeing. He said, "Excuse me. Mr. Vice President, could you hold for one moment?"

Santos, still with the field glasses, said, "Do you see?"

The one called Keke said, "I see."

Santos said, "They're not stopping."

Whale's voice came over the Service mike. "Command to Stagecoach. Do you copy?"

Silence.

"Stagecoach?"

"Stagecoach copies," Jess said.

"Just to be clear, who'm I speaking to there?"

"Jess Gage, sir."

"Jess. Good. Good. You stepped up. Good for you," Whale said. "We're going to need you to pull the limousine over until we can figure this out. I've got the vice president on the line here and he's concerned about provoking anybody."

"No, sir, I'm not pulling over."

"I'm not sure you understand, Jess," Whale said. "We're in a real pickle here. We're going to need you to pull over."

"No, sir, and I'm not going to allow Special Agent Moody to pull over, either, so for the record, this is all on me."

Lyle shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“You did a good job today, Jess, you’ve got a level head and I’ve always admired that, so let’s not get excited,” the deputy director for the moment setting aside their long-standing rancor.

Jess, rock steady, but surprised at his resolve, said, “I’m not excited.”

Whale, struggling to keep it together, now saying, “Special Agent Gage, I know I can count on you to do what’s right, to follow instructions. So, when I ask you on behalf of the vice president to stop the limousine, I expect you, and the vice president expects you, to stop the goddamn limousine.”

He switched to another phone, Jess able to overhear, Whale saying, “Yes, Mr. Vice President.” Listening. “Jess Gage, sir.” Listening. “Yes, sir, one more moment.”

Then back to Jess, Whale finally losing it. “I don’t know where the hell you’ve been, special agent, but I’ve been talking to a man with a fondness for C-4. Now I do not intend to be the one who gives him a reason to detonate it, and I don’t intend for some backwoodsman in scuffed brown shoes, a fucking second supervisor, to give him one. Are you?”

Jess kept his cool. “No, sir. But I’m not going to bring him his slippers and cook him a steak, either.”

“This man has trespassed,” Whale said. “He’s come into our house uninvited and he’s come with a bomb.”

“Deputy director, sir, respectfully, I understand you’re trying to develop some kind of rapport with the guy, but I think we

should make it clear—if anyone’s in need of a lesson today it’s him.”

“Listen to me carefully, Gage, because I can’t see you, and you can’t see me. Do not question my authority again. A breakdown in command will get the president killed. Now pull over.”

“Sir, I think we should at least look at the device. If he’s telling the truth, if it’s a remote fuse, we can jam it, bring in a disposal team.”

“The truth? Really? Did you catch what just happened back there?”

“I’m a lot closer than you are, sir. And he’s not going to detonate the bomb.”

“Yeah, why’s that?”

“Because you’re going to tell the vice president you have a mutiny on your hands.”

“I *do* have a goddamn mutiny on my hands!”

“You’re going to tell him I’m spooked, panicked, confused, a cowboy, a yahoo, a ‘backwoodsman’ is fine too, but that in time you’ll be able to reign me in. Tell him anything you want, sir, but buy us some time.”

“Time to do what?”

Jess hesitated. “To save the president.”

“And just how are you doing to do that?”

Another hesitation, Jess finally saying, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Then let me make this easy for you, special agent,” Whale said. “The vice president, the acting president, has

considered the options and decided the prudent course is to do what these people want. Consider it a direct order from the president.”

Jess said, “That’s really the problem, isn’t it, sir? Because I’m sitting here with the president who hasn’t said more than one word since this started. But it was a big word.”

“And what was that?”

“No.”

“No?” Whale finally lost his shit. “What does that mean, Gage? What the fucking hell? No to what?”

“Anything these people want, anything they ask for, anything they stand for. And he didn’t say it lightly because he knows what it means. Buy me fifteen minutes. Consider it a direct order from *the* president.”

Handing off the phone, he scooped up the service mike and said, “Command to Kilmer. Do you copy?”

Franklin Kilmer’s voice: “Roger that, command.”

“Stick with Stagecoach. Don’t let him out of your sight. We’ve got a little situation.”

“Situation, sir?”

“You heard right, a little situation. Jess Gage’s gone off the deep end.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll stay on him.”

Whale took a deep breath, picked up the police radio mike and said, “We’ve got a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Santos said.

“A mutiny.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The late afternoon sun, crisp and inordinately aglow on a pillow of clouds, perched low on the western horizon. Regulars who nightly convened at their favorite beaches were fewer in number. In Santa Monica, the double-jointed pier, typically aswarm with locals and tourists, stood mostly deserted. The solar-powered Ferris wheel and carousel found no takers. Only a handful of fishermen went about their business, the thieving pelicans on this evening having to do without. To their backs, nightfall crept over the deserts to the east, engulfed the San Gabriel Mountains, and slowly, mile-by-mile, blanketed the City of Angeles, but it would take another forty minutes to consume it.

The limousine's progress had again slowed to a crawl.

Lyle, not looking over, said, "Is it true you're almost a part of the first family?"

Coming out of nowhere, Jess thought it a hell of a question, one he had no intention of answering.

"And they're the only real family you have?" Lyle went on, still not looking. "Is that true?"

That got to Jess. He rolled up the divider so that the president, if he was able to understand, which from the look of him he doubted, then at least was unable to hear. "They're not my family, so let's just get off that."

Lyle wouldn't let it rest. "Is it your duty to disobey any order that may jeopardize the president's safety, even if it comes from the president?"

"Whose safety are you really worried about, Moody?"

Lyle ignored that, kept looking straight ahead. "They warn us about getting too close to our protectees. You stay detached. You stay focused, apart," he said. "It doesn't matter who they are or how we feel about them," sounding like they were questions, the rookie prepping for a test.

Jess came back with, "Try telling me something I don't already know, see if that works," then, "We're not stopping. I don't like it any better than you do, but we're not stopping," and then, after a pause, "And it *does* matter. It matters a hell of a lot."

That sat there a half-minute. Then it was Lyle again. "If there's a bomb, what makes you so sure he's not going to detonate it?"

"If they've anticipated everything, they've damn sure anticipated a fight."

Lyle, debating something, said, "Screw it." He slammed on the brakes and popped the locks. "Take the wheel." He flung open his door and bounded out.

"Moody?" Jess couldn't believe what was happening. "Get back in here." It appeared the rookie was deserting. "You gutless, newbie shit." He slid across and grabbed hold of the wheel. "Unfuckingbelievable."

Lyle didn't go far. He stepped to a Subaru Outback stopped sideways in the lane, drew his weapon and leveled it at a female motorist blocking the way. "Back the fuck up! Now!" Windows up, the wide-eyed, petrified motorist, a tourist and her three kids returning to their Holiday Inn from an afternoon at Knotts Berry Farm, stared back, mortified. Two of her kids were bawling, a third with her head buried in mommy's lap. Lyle reached for her door and found it locked. He tapped the gun muzzle against her window. "Back. The. Fuck. Up! I mean now!" The woman snapped out of it, spun the wheel, banged ahead, then reversed, then forward, finally clearing a way.

Lyle motioned Jess to move forward.

The limousine pulled ahead a dozen yards until another vehicle blocked the way.

Shell-shocked, the driver of a vintage Porsche Boxter, the guy wearing a powder blue satin jogging suit and matching sneakers, opened his door and staggered out. Lyle quickly stepped up, pointed the gun in his face and said, "No you don't. Get back in." The Porsche guy took three quick steps back, nearly fell on his ass as he tripped, recovered, and scrambled back inside, slammed the door, locked it, and sat cowering. Lyle, advancing on him, still pointing the gun, yelled, "Go! Drive!" The guy threw it in gear, hit the gas and bashed the nearest vehicle blocking his way.

The limo advanced another four car lengths before it was again blocked.

Ray in the straggler had pulled up not far behind. The side door slid open. Goode, foot bandaged, was about to climb out when Ray said, "Christ, I'll do it." Goode said, "I'm good." One foot shoeless, wrapped in gauze, he got out and hobbled off, gun drawn.

At LAX, two heavily armed military helicopters, Nighthawk One and Nighthawk Two, were about to lift off.

A third chopper, smaller, brightly painted, Sky-Eye 7 stenciled on the side, warmed up its engine across the tarmac. A motorcycle swerved to a stop beside it. A guy hopped off and was joined by a reporter with a professional hand-held video camera. The two approached the Sky-Eye helo and its pilot standing by. "At the least, you'll lose your license," the pilot said to the reporter.

"Why the hell do you think I called him?" the reporter laughed, nodding to the video guy. "Hell, they revoked his license years ago." After shoving a wad of cash in the pilot's hand the two men climbed aboard.

Lyle and Goode had finished playing traffic cops, finally nothing but clear sailing ahead, enough for the limo to advance to the next roadblock. The rookie gave the field agent a little salute and stepped toward Stagecoach. The field agent gave one in return and turned to the straggler. In the same instant, a bullet stung his temple, taking him to the pavement. Lyle ducked

behind the nearest vehicle as more gunfire erupted, punching holes in chrome and metal. The tire beside his foot hissed and sank. Peering around, he was unable to see where the shots were coming from—hell, they could have been from any number of vehicles with open windows.

Jess peered around for Lyle, was unable to see him, but could make out the downed Goode. He spoke into his mike. “Agent down. This is Stagecoach. Goddamnit. Agent down on the freeway.” He eased the limo forward, angling for a clear passage. “Where the hell are you, Moody?” He eased ahead a little further.

Unseen, Lyle remained crouched behind the sheltering vehicle, pressed so hard against the fender panel that he dented it, the rookie frozen, trying to disappear. Whiz, whiz, whiz, more bullets flew past. A headlight exploded. Window glass shattered. Daring to peer around the bumper, he saw Stagecoach edging his way, but couldn’t bring himself to budge.

Jess was still unable to see him. Jesus, he’d have to leave without the rookie. Picking up speed, he angled for the open passage. Suddenly, there he was, Lyle darting into view, framed in the windshield, waving his arms. Jess rolled up beside him. The rookie tore open the front passenger door and leapt inside.

Stagecoach crept forward.

Another twenty yards and they were stopped again.

Peering in his rearview, Jess made out the straggler easing alongside the fallen Goode. Zabrizki scrambled out and dragged him to the van.

Another twenty.

Stopped again.

Santos was back on with Whale, Jess listening in. "You may do it now. In ten minutes, one of your people will open the door," Santos said. "You will prove to me that the thing is done. If it is not done in ten minutes I will detonate the bomb."

"Prove it how?" Whale asked.

"Someone inside the limousine will get out and show me the hand."

Jess's cell rang.

Brooks Hale's voice: "We've ID'd the bomb dog. Should have an address soon."

"Good. Keep me informed."

Whale's voice came over the radio. "Are you copying this, Gage? I don't want another word out of you except to tell me you've got the president out."

The deputy director looked around and studied the faces of the men and women surrounding him. "Downside, anybody?" Deadpan faces all around, no one taking the bait. "Christ, what I wouldn't give for a pessimist," the deputy director said. "I want the president off. Like pronto. Now."

The super's voice broke over the radio. "Stagecoach, evac Javelin now. Get him out. Do you copy?"

Jess peered around. "Evac where?"

Whale's voice suddenly took over again. "Goddamnit, Gage. Get him out. Move him anywhere. Go, now! Do you copy?"

Jess turned to Lyle and said, "Whale's going to get us all killed."

Whale peered over his shoulder, made out Brooks Hale, and waved him over. "Special Agent Hale, you better talk some sense into your pal before it's too late." Brooks looked at him as if he'd gone mad. "Talk to him," Whale said, extending the mike. Brooks didn't budge. Whale glared, turned his back to him, and spoke into the mike. "Special Agents Ricci, Rykoff, Kilmer, Bible, convince your second supervisor he's making the blunder of the century, it'll be in the history books. He's endangering the life of the president and you are duty bound to stop him."

"No, you can't ask them that," Jess said. "I'm taking responsibility. I'm not asking them to."

"Their silence is insubordination enough," Whale said. He turned to his super. "Remind me again. Who's with him?"

"The rookie, Lyle Moody, up from the VP detail."

Whale into his mike: "Special Agent Moody, I hope you're not considering sabotaging your career. I need to know if you approve of Special Agent Gage's actions."

Jess answered for him. "I don't need your approval or his. They'll follow my orders, if only because I'm the one with the "body." Not you."

Whale spun on Brooks. "Well, that does it. Jess Gage just flushed himself. Your whole bunch did."

Jess leaned through the divider, popped open a rear compartment and removed a submachine gun. He turned to Jack Blooper. "I'm sorry, Colonel, I can't let you out. We need you here."

"I wouldn't leave if you ordered me."

"You know how to use this?"

Blooper nodded.

Jess handed him the weapon, then resettled in his seat.

Lyle turned to him and said, "I'm not worried about my career, if that's what you're thinking."

"You've got plenty of ambition, Moody," Jess said, "but careers don't last. What we do here'll be forever."

He rolled up the divider.

Stagecoach had come to another stop. Side-by-side, three eighteen-wheelers blocked the lanes, forming an impenetrable barrier. A mile from the chaos behind, the blockage likely had to do with a routine slowdown further along—life in the fast lanes.

Jess suddenly swung wide, took aim at the concrete shoulder barrier, bore down on the gas pedal and slammed into it. The

concrete crumbled but held. Backing up a short distance he stopped and gunned it once more. Again, the barrier crumbled but held, the opening now a bit wider. A third attempt did the trick. Slamming through, the limo was briefly airborne and landed with a soft thud onto a steep ivy embankment. Stagecoach slalomed, tires flinging foliage. Blooper steadied the president as they were flung about. Hissssss, a missile landed directly in front of the windshield, sending up a cloud of flaming green. The limo hurtled the curb and bounced onto the surface street.

“This is Stagecoach,” Jess said into his mike. “Be advised we are westbound on Imperial Highway at Hoover. Javelin is safe. Repeat. Javelin is safe.”

The command post erupted in a spontaneous cheer, like mission control after reentry. Huntsman’s live feed showed the limousine speeding west.

“We’re going to try to get to Angel,” Jess again. “ETA twenty minutes. I want a secure perimeter at LAX and EMS standing by.”

Whale’s voice: “Stagecoach, you are five minutes from safe house three.”

“Whale, you’ve been relieved of command,” Jess said, and wondered at himself, the full weight of what he was doing beginning to sink in. “I guess somebody should make note of the time.”

“Gage?” Whale said.

Silence.

“Stagecoach?”

Santos turned to Kantuta. “The deputy director didn’t order this.” He picked up the police radio mike. “Deputy director, if you cannot handle your men—”

“Not men,” Whale said. “One man.”

“Who is he?”

“Nobody.”

“Nobody? Then you should inform him of that, remind him, Deputy Director Whale.”

“It’s out of my hands.”

“It’s out of my hands, too,” Santos said. “But I will tell you who he is.”

Whale waited.

“He is the man who killed your president.”

Whale said, “No. Wait. Wait.”

There was a pause, then, “Never mind. I will.”

“Will what?”

“Remind him.”

The Bolivian’s fingers stroked one of the three remaining phones, then moved to the one beside it and picked it up. He punched in a number. The phone rang. Once, twice, three, a half dozen times, Santos listening. He ended the call and dialed again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The remote farmhouse compound, the only thing unusual about it the satellite dish mounted atop the roof, perched in the foothills of the Andes Range, its peaks and crags still cloaked in mid-spring snow. On the dry, exposed slopes, windswept colonies of mossy looking, 3,000-year-old *yareta* plants, like great green heads of broccoli, blanketed the ground. The TV weatherman had predicted another helping of snow.

It was six fifty-eight in the evening in Los Angeles, three hours earlier in Bolivia. On the far side of forty, short, stout, and stubble chinned, Tomas Ulzana stood in his kitchen, the apron he wore covered in bright red hearts under splatters of brighter blood, the apron a present from his twin nieces because he liked to cook, especially different kinds of meat. The year before, they'd gifted him a cookbook of wild game and fish recipes. His belly pressed against an enormous cutting board on which lay an even more enormous hog, one he was busy butchering—thwack, thwack, thwacking with his cleaver. The hog's decapitated head sat at arm's length in a shaft of sunlight, clouded eyes watching the man who occasionally glanced at a small TV, CNN International broadcasting aerial footage of events unfolding on a Los Angeles freeway, the anchor referring to it as the 105.

Hearing girlish laughter and music from outside, he stepped to a window, wiped the grimy glass with a dishtowel and saw

the twins, aged thirteen, out on the flagstone patio, each dancing to a record on a phonograph.

Their mother, his much younger sister, had left the twins with him, as she often did after her divorce, while she was away in Cochabamba, claiming it was for shopping and to commiserate with *her* sister, the two also twins, but which his spies informed him had more to do with spending time with her new lover, a rising star in the Bolivian Professional Football League, who had once scored six goals in a single game.

The twins liked to dance and sing along to the music of the American pop singer and sometimes actress Madonna, whom they'd first seen in the movie *Evita*, about the life of Evita Duarte, the B-picture Argentinian actress who became the wife of President Juan Peron and the most beloved and hated woman in Argentina. On their return from a rare trip with their mother, the twins had brought with them a small suitcase filled with Madonna's records which they played over and over, especially one in which the singer boasted about being a material girl.

Tomas Ulzana owned multiple properties scattered up and down South America, a penthouse condominium in Paris, and a good-sized estate in London. However, the twins close by for frequent visits, he preferred to spend his time at the farm, the girls bareback riding ponies, standing by wonderstruck while they foaled, or assisted with the milking of a dairy cow. He knew that before long they would lose interest in him and the menagerie, the way of the world, but until such time—

On the slope further behind, a dozen hogs wallowed in their sty. In retrospect, it had not been the best place to situate the enclosure. When the wind blew downhill, the stench of wafting manure entered the house through the doors and widows and seeped into his clothing, his pores, something he had learned to live with it—he favored pork in his dishes. When visiting the surrounding pueblos for supplies or entertainment, it was not considered a big deal, none of the people there smelled too good themselves, but on the seldom occasions when he traveled to the big cities, it was sometimes snidely commented upon, causing him some embarrassment.

A slush splattered panel truck, dull green and coarse orange, the green the original paint, the orange abstract patches of rust, its rear double doors wide open, the bed loaded with lumber, sat beside a small cow barn. It was an old truck, but Ascencion Gutierrez, barely out of his teens, still more boy than man, was good at fixing things. A day laborer and all-around handyman, he knelt on the barn roof in his long coat hammering away, replacing weathered, rotting planks with new wood.

Twenty-two days earlier, his older brother Francisco was among a group who flew to the City of Angeles, Southern California. At the time, Francisco had not been happy about the trip and expressed pangs of foreboding.

The twins looked over, ignored their uncle Tomas inside behind the window and went on with their dance.

A quarter-mile below the house, two men, AK's looped over their shoulders, stood sentry inside a gatehouse. Two more patrolling the farmstead were also armed, but their guns were concealed beneath their clothes, out of sight of the twins because their uncle chose not to remind them he was a man with many enemies.

There was a low stone wall on either side of the gate, but not much of one, running a couple hundred yards in both directions before it petered out. In theory, one could avoid the guards and go around them, but you did so at your own peril. The smarter thing being to pause at the gate, coming or going, and have a word with the guards, allow them to look you over, unless you were coming in force with bad intent, in which case it might *be* better taking the longer way around, fingers crossed or clutching the St. Christopher medallion or personal choice of saint around your neck.

There were four more on the property, likely asleep in the bunkhouse, which also served as an arsenal, its corrugated roof visible in a stand of trees. The eight-man team worked in shifts. A Dodge Viper and twin Jeep Saharas were parked nearby. Tomas Ulzana's personal ride, a white Land Rover, stood in an open shed beside the house.

Groping around when a cell phone rang, Ulzana found it under the hog's rump. After wiping his hands, he picked up the phone and said, "Yes?" in Spanish.

"I tried to call."

“When?”

“Before. Just now.”

Santos in Los Angeles doing the man’s bidding and daring to sound annoyed that Tomas hadn’t heard the phone.

“Okay, I didn’t hear it. Now we’re talking.”

“Are you watching?”

“I have CNN on.”

“Then you know.”

“I thought we were prepared for anything,” Tomas said, his words punctuated with a solid thwack of the cleaver.

“Do you want to end it?”

“You have your people on the ground?”

“Of course.”

“Then where will they go?”

Another thwack.

“Nowhere.”

He stopped thwacking. “I have seen so much death. The world has seen so much death,” he said, ruminating. “It has lost its density, leaving only glancing bruises.”

“Yes.”

He went back to dismembering the hog.

“Kill all the agents, if necessary, but the president must stay alive,” Tomas Ulzana said. “The people need to witness my power. To know that if I can do this to the president of the United States, I can do this to anyone, anywhere. I can also do it

to them. The best way to teach is with a good and proper lesson.”

“You know best.”

“How is the weather?”

“Good, but tomorrow it will rain.”

“Here it will snow.”

There was a brief pause. A sliver of meat had slid off the table and dropped to the floor. Tomas bent to pick it up and return it to the cutting board, followed by several more thwacks.

“So, you like the material girl?” from Santos, because he’d not yet been dismissed and dimly hearing the music it was something to say.

“The twins.”

“Oh.”

Another pause while Tomas rummaged in a drawer for a different cutting tool.

“Are we finished?” the one in Los Angeles asked.

The one in Bolivia came back on the line. “The sausages you enjoy so much, how did your blessed mother serve them?”

“I never said they were sausages. They were cumin-scented slices of roast pork in a *cuñapé* with diced tomatoes, jalapenos, and onions, best served at room temperature.”

“I prefer sausages, but I will think about it.”

Another thwack and the call ended.

Tomas turned to the window again, looked out at the twins, and said to the man he had just been speaking to, although he was no longer there, “Now go on about your business.”

The twins were not fond of his sausages. Now he must prepare something for them to eat, perhaps some macaroni and cheese from a box.

They looked over, saw him through the window, ignored him, and went on with their dance. Beyond them he made out the young handyman now seated in the open back of his truck, eating the sack lunch of tamales his mother had packed for him down in the pueblo and reading a book. The boy man often read during his breaks.

Were it another time, depending on his mood, he might have prepared a hot meal and taken it to him, or waved him over inviting him inside—but not this day. He returned to his cutting board—thwack, thwack, thwack—then remembered about the macaroni and cheese from a box.

Santos put down the mike and shuffled through the files and photos spread before him. He picked up Jess’s photo, studied it, then spoke into his mike again. “Deputy Director Whale, you have fifteen minutes to rein this nobody in.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Eight floors up, the row of windows provided an ideal vantage for viewing not only the American president's limousine, but also a spectacular sunset. But Santos and his team were no longer watching. They were clearing out, every trace they had ever been there removed on their persons.

One of them, Francisco Gutierrez, appeared to have something he needed to say, but reconsidered and remained silent.

Kantuta turned off the lights. Leashed to her wrist, the K-9 Malinois followed her out the door.

Santos led the way down a corridor to the freight elevator. They waited. A soft ding and their ride arrived. The doors slid open and the men and women squeezed inside. The doors slid shut. Santos pushed the bottom button on the control panel. The elevator lurched and began to descend.

Before they had reached the bottom, Francisco broke his silence. "No one will say it, but we all know he is not right," he said, the words more mumbled than clearly spoken, as if only half-heartedly wanting to be heard.

Santos squeezed his eyes shut, drew breath, slowly exhaled, pushed another button and halted their descent. He turned to face Francisco. "What did you say?"

The upstart waffled, then committed himself. "We should finish it, now, while we can," and instantly regretted it. The others looked on, disbelieving they'd heard correctly.

"But he is right, of course," Santos said without hint of anger, defusing the tension. He pushed another button and the elevator began to rise, stopping on the floor they'd just come from. The doors slid open. Santos stepped off and returned down the corridor, the others following.

Francisco lingered behind.

Santos stopped, turned and said, "Come," and motioned him to follow.

Francisco stood there.

"Come, come."

Francisco reluctantly followed.

The dozen men and women reentered the loft they'd just left.

"Close the door," Santos said.

Someone closed the door.

Santos stepped to a window and observed the city nightscape, the stretch of freeway immediately below it awash in smoke and flame. Away to the east stretched rivers of winking taillights. To the west, rivers of unmoving headlights, all traffic at a standstill. Finally, he said, "Anyone can kill a president." He turned to the dissenter. "This we know because it has been proven." As he spoke, he slowly advanced on Francisco.

Intimidated, Francisco backpedaled, rolled aside a chair, retreated further, and ended with his back pressed to the brick wall.

“The more insignificant the man, in fact, the better the chance he has,” Santos went on. “The more unnoticeable, the closer he gets.”

Withdrawing his pistol from its shoulder holster beneath his suit coat, he pointed the barrel in Francisco’s face, softly tapping his nose with the muzzle. Francisco cringed, certain his visit to the City of Angels, the Hollywood sign, and Rodeo Drive had come to an abrupt end. He had promised his woman, pregnant with their first child, that he would be paid for the job with *mucho bolivianos*, not enough to buy a ranch, perhaps, but more than enough to pay their debts and to buy a small house in which to raise their son, God willing. Now that would never happen. “No, no, please, please,” he sniffled. “I am nothing. I was foolish.”

“You were not in your right mind, then?”

Francisco eagerly bobbed his head, up, down.

“Santos leaned close and whispered in his ear. “I need men in their right mind.” He drew back and continued. “It is easy to kill,” still without malice in his voice. “It only takes a proper weapon. A gun, for instance.” Instead of shooting, he ejected a single bullet into his palm. “One hundred and fifty grams of lead, for instance.” He replaced the gun in its holster.

Francisco exhaled, relaxed a bit, and slid down the wall. He would see his woman, his mother, and his brother again. Likely now the *bolivianos* would be less than expected, but he would live to tell a tale.

Santos brought the hand palming the bullet close to Francisco's face, walking the bullet across his knuckles like a magician performing a coin trick, then stepped back and said, "Hold him."

Several of the other men piled on. Francisco struggled, but was overwhelmed. Pinning his arms, they hoisted him to his feet, dragged him to the big table, rolled him onto his back and steadied him.

The dog ran crazy, barking circles around them.

Casually, Santos wet the bullet in his mouth, an obscene gesture, then removed it. Leaning close, he slowly wedged it into the corner of Francisco's right eye, sliding, angling it into his skull, his brain, lobotomizing him as he shrieked and thrashed. The shrieks quickly turned to whimpers, then subsided and became mute. The men holding him released their grip. Hard-boiled, they had witnessed and participated in many hard things, but several flinched and looked away. After a moment, Francisco tried to rise, sank sideways to the table and spilled onto the floor. Lying there, he convulsed for a few seconds. Spittle foamed at the corners of his mouth. Yellowy, blood-flecked glop oozed from a corner of the punctured eye. Suddenly, he rose up and shrieked, then fell back and lay still.

“Now who is not right?” Santos asked, looking around, not expecting an answer.

The others, who had gotten the lesson, stepped back.

“It is easy to kill,” Santos said.

Leaving the malcontent, they returned to the elevators.

One level below ground in a badly lit parking garage, a half-dozen gleaming Suburbans, a Chevy Venture van, and a solitary sedan, all black with tinted windows, awaited their drivers. Neatly aligned, they could be mistaken for an overstocked dealership’s inventory of unsold vehicles, only missing their side window price stickers. Recently purchased, each of the eight vehicles still displayed a Mar Vista dealership’s temp paper tag. The elevator dinged. The doors slid open. The hostiles emerged and strode toward their rides.

The one called Keke uncorked a bottle of *singani*, a kind of Bolivian brandy, placed his thumb over the opening, then shook and sprayed it over his ride to protect him from danger.

Santos and Kantuta approached the sedan parked on the near side of the row and saw a sprinkling of red plastic shards on the ground, the left rear taillight broken, the bumper a little bent. She unlocked a rear door and the dog bounded in. For Santos, the animal had served its purpose and was no longer useful, but Kantuta had grown fond of it and wanted to keep it a little longer. Driving across the Arizona desert, stopped at a gas station while she used the restroom, he would let it go and tell

her it had slipped away. It was a smart animal. Let it fend for itself. At first, she would be angry with him and pout, but when they got home, he would buy her a puppy, or steal one. He wanted her to be happy. Santos rode shotgun. Kantuta climbed behind the wheel. Slipping the key in the ignition, she noticed the folded sheet of yellow paper wedged under her windshield wiper. Rolling down her window, she reached around, peeled it off, unfolded it, and puzzled out what was written there. She passed the paper to her lover. He looked at the nearly illegible scrawl and silently read: 'Sorry I hit your car no money no driver license and no insurence but had to get of my chest sorry agin.' Balling up the note he rolled down his window, tossed it, shrugged, and said, "What can you do? Animals everywhere."

The convoy rolled into the street and was gone, washed out by the early evening light.

"Huntsman from Stagecoach, what do you see from up there?" Jess asking. "Anyone following?"

The helo's pilot and co-pilot looked down on the freeway mayhem, the view nothing short of apocalyptic; mangled, flame-licked bits and pieces strewn across the lanes; twisted metal shapes that were civilian cars, scattered among them gray, smoldering shapes that were civilian bodies; tiny yellow circles that were Caltrans hardhats. Shifting their eyes a mile east, they made out the remnants of the motorcade—Chariot, Hercules, Halfback, the straggler, an EMS van and other elements passing

through the broken barrier. Behind, a mile long queue of bumper-to-bumper motorists awaited their turn to escape. Huntsman circled and returned. By then, the motorcade had moved on, those civilian vehicles now rolling down the still flaming incline. “Roger that,” the pilot reported. “About a thousand anyones.”

Streetlights had begun to ignite, swarms of moths drawn to the light. Stagecoach wove through surface street traffic, siren wailing, grill lights flashing. A paintbox of lurid reflected neon streamed across the windshield and played across the two agent’s faces. Car Wash Cheap, Psychic Reader On Duty, Chicken and Waffles, All Night Bowling, Toys and Costumes—a microcosm of urban L.A. boiled down to a freshman USC film student’s forty-one second experimental flick.

Jess checked his rearview for the hundredth time that day and saw Hercules trailing behind, matching the limo speed for speed, weave for weave, the vehicles in a *pas de deux*, Bible silhouetted above the roofline. The calculated distance between them created a safe zone, at least that was the idea.

Overhead, Huntsman stayed with them, its night sun cutting a shaft in the dusk. From above, Jess’s maneuvers behind the wheel were nothing short of astonishing, sewing a path, not missing a stitch, slowing at signal lights just long enough to

shoot the gap in cross traffic. Jess's voice came through the pilot's headphones. "Anything?"

"Lot of traffic," Huntsman said. "Damn hard to say if anyone's following, not the way you mean. Sorry, Jess."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Franklin Kilmer's voice heard in Jess's earbud: "You're making the blunder of the century, Jess," Franklin sounding borderline smug. "Whale's right. It'll be in the history books. You've just jacked the goddamn president of the United States, you fucking idiot."

Added to by Dominca Ricci. "Jess, without a plan, what you've done is irresponsible. Franklin's right. You were too impulsive." A pause, then, "We're following the president, not you," sounding like it hurt her to say it.

Silence.

Then it was Ray Rykoff, chiming in from the straggler. "Stagecoach from Rykoff," he said. "Jess, you bought some time, but for what? Dude, we can't just keep driving around."

Grace huddled on a rear bench, the unconscious Goode's head nestled in her lap. She'd tossed the cheap shades she'd bought, the intended humor of it no longer funny to her, thinking, if anything the joke had been on her. Red gore from the field agent's scalp wound soaked her blouse as she eavesdropped on Ray's one-way conversation, Ray saying, "Jess, you didn't think it through. You've got to hand this back to command."

She desperately needed to talk to Jess, but how? She peered over the headrest, the contents of her handbag strewn in the passenger well, her cell visible. The night before in the hotel,

Jess had loaded his number into it. She slumped back and tilted Goode's head for a better look. Blood had pooled into his ear, nearly obscuring the nipple barely visible there, the head wound worse than it first appeared, but the hitch of his chest proof he was still alive. Revulsed, she braced herself, plucked the nipple free, wiped it on her sleeve, and inserted it in one of her own. Gently, she lifted the agent's wrist to her mouth.

Ray, peering in his mirror, noticed. "Grace, what are you doing?"

"I want to talk to him."

Zabrizki, seated in the row behind her, had also noticed. Reaching over, he was about to snatch the nipple from her ear. Ray shook his head no. "It's okay. Show her." Zarizki leaned forward and showed her how to work the mike.

Jess heard a voice in his earbud. "Brooks?" Listening, at first not realizing it was a woman's voice. "Who?" Still listening, then, "Where are you?"

"The straggler."

Jess damn surprised to hear Grace's voice.

"Ray needed a car, there's an injured—"

"Grace, I can't talk."

"I know, I know. This is the most inappropriate thing I've ever done."

"Wait."

"Okay." She waited.

He listened to her breathing.

She listened to his.

He said, "I'm sure you've done way more inappropriate things," and knew it sounded ridiculous, the kind of flirtation the two might have exchanged on a first or second date. "I've got to get back to work." He ended the call.

Lyle looked over, an unspoken question—what the hell?

"Better believe they're following," Jess said, in his mind still speaking to Huntsman. He glanced over at Lyle, something else on the rookie's mind. "What?" Lyle remained silent. "You think I'm full of shit like everyone else on this planet?" Jess asked.

"It's a big planet. If they're one or two of us who don't, it's not going to make much difference."

"It's a start."

"Anyway, it's the wrong question."

Jess gave him a blank look.

"Not what you asked," Lyle said, "what everyone else is asking. It's the wrong question, what's our next move. Ask me, I'd say it's more important to know what *their* next move is."

Jess sat quietly, beginning to understand. It pained him to admit the rookie was making good sense. "They've been ahead of us all afternoon," he said. "They don't act. They react. Their next move will be to head off our next move."

Lyle glanced over again. It had taken awhile, but finally he'd gained some credence with the second supervisor. "Whatever

they expect us to do next, we need to be one or two steps ahead,” the two in sync for the first time that day.

“Okay, so what do they expect next?” Jess asked.

Arriving at a realization was one thing, what to do about it far more demanding. The agents fell silent, in their minds groping for the big idea, and sped on.

The dull whack, whack, whack of rotor blades pulled them out of their trance. Tilting their heads to the windshield, they peered up and saw twin helicopters overhead—the Nighthawks sent to escort them to LAX.

Lionel Bible spoke into his mike. “Hercules to Stagecoach. We’ve got your back, Jess.”

“Roger that, Bible. I see you,” Jess said. “Thank your team for me.”

Bible got comfortable, swung the gat around and trained his gun sight on one after another of trailing civilians.

“I meant what I said back there, Lionel” Jess said. “I’m taking the heat. I want everyone to understand that.”

“No problema, chief. Shit, we’ve got more than enough heat to go around. But next time I want something fucked up, you’re the guy I’ll call.”

Something caught Bible’s eye. Two dark, side-by-side specks coming up fast a block and a half behind.

“The agent at the wheel eyeballed his side mirror, half turned, and yelled over his shoulder, “We have possible police units on our ass!”

Bible confirmed the report, the specks now made as Suburbans, fast narrowing the gap. “Stagecoach, you have two unknowns at your eight-o-clock.” A half block later a black sedan parked at curbside joined the pursuit. “Make that three, two Suburbans and a sedan,” Bible said.

Jess paused, allowing time for the unknowns to draw closer, then said, “They ours?”

“No markings. I don’t recognize them.”

He switched to the radio mike. “Command, Gage in Stagecoach, can you help us identify the units joining us? We have two black Suburbans and a sedan, no agency markings. Are they ours?”

“Stand by, Stagecoach, checking,” the command post super said.

“I need confirmation that the police or FBI are sending those units *now!*” Jess said. “In about five seconds it’s going to get very fucking misty around here!”

Nothing, then moments later, “Those are *not* LAPD. Stand by, we’re still checking FBI, ATF, DEA.”

“Hercules, Jess. Deal with it.”

“Roger that,” Bible said.

Looking back, Jess saw Hercules pull to the shoulder. The trio of following vehicles blew past. Hercules bolted from the curb and fell in behind.

Jess accelerated, coming to an intersection, said, “Hang on,” and made a hard right at the last possible instant. Lyle braced himself, one hand clutching the door handle. In the back, Blooper and the president were flung across the cabin.

The hostiles reacted too late. The paired Suburbans nearly missed the turn, braked hard and spun in the intersection, nearly obliterating each other. Hercules cut them off, spun and stopped, the gat leveled at their windshields. The sedan hung a half block back.

At the same time, Nighthawks One and Two swooped onto the scene. There followed a tense seven seconds, Bible and the helo’s waiting to see what would happen next. Suddenly it went down—World War Three all over again. One of the Suburban’s rear windows came down revealing an M-16 muzzle. Several customers emerging from a corner minimart into a parking lot bolted back inside for cover. The few pedestrians on the sidewalks scrambled for safety. The gat erupted with return fire, punching navels in steel and flesh. The front passenger window of the second Suburban came down, revealing another muzzle. Nailed in the crossfire before he was able to swivel, Bible caught lead. A bullet grazed his right cheek, leaving a thin furrow, the nick so minute it could be assumed he’d cut himself shaving.

The flurry of remaining rounds wasted the upholstery, yet by some miracle missed the driver. The windshield vanished in a spray of glass. Nighthawk One opened up with its .50, a can opener surgically slicing through the first Suburban's roof. Three hostiles leapt out of the second Suburban and knelt in the street, MANPADS hoisted to their shoulders. Aiming at Hercules, the first was sawed in half by a helo's fire. The second and third took aim at the Nighthawks. The helos ascended and separated, but not before a second hostile ceased living. The third launched his missile at Nighthawk Two and missed. Under other circumstances, had there been some distance between the combatants, there would have been flash, report, and smoke on contact, confirming the targets had been hit, but in this firefight, at such close quarters, such amenities weren't necessary—the devastation instantly visible.

"This is Nighthawk One. We are under missile fire. We're going to have to hold out of range," heard at the command post.

"Roger that, Nighthawk One," the command post super said.

The twin helos banked and dipped behind the corner of an office building under construction. Another missile angled skyward. The ninth floor of the right-side corner of the fourteen-story structure took the hit, a glancing blow, but enough to implode the floor directly above and one directly below. They collapsed in an avalanche of building parts. At the

structure's base, a dense cloud of pulverized construction materials rippled across the street.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Not everyone in the minimart's parking lot had fled back inside. A twenty-three-year-old struggling actor set the twelve pack of Busch Light he'd just paid for on the hood of his Saturn and decided to stay for the show, convinced that what was about to happen was staged, a scene for an over-the-top action movie, what else *could* it be, and wondered how much longer before his own big break. Maybe if he stuck around, afterward the Rock, Cruise, or Stallone would grant him an autograph.

It was nothing short of a miracle that no one inside or out the minimart was killed or even slightly injured that day, although a rogue round *had* penetrated the plate glass fronting the parking lot, didn't smash it, instead leaving a neat, quarter-sized cavity, like a peephole, then whizzed across five aisles, on its way puncturing a can of motor oil, shredding a bag of potato chips, the fat, palm length round lastly destroying a self-serve drink dispenser before zipping through the cramped manager's office, spun her empty chair, and finally plowed out the back wall and into the side of an employee's parked car.

A lousy paint job, mottled ice white, the old Volvo had been impounded for lack of proper registration and afterward never claimed. The unmarked car, once a taxicab, a patch of dull yellow still visible on the trunk, but now property of the LAPD, pulled out the driveway of a bungalow style motor court on a

tree lined residential street, Robbery-Homicide Division Detective Benny Oddo in a light gray three-piece suit behind the wheel. He'd had the car the better part of a week now because his own ride was in the shop. Minutes earlier, he'd wrapped up a door knock interview related to a week-old home invasion, the victim in her eighties, the old lady unharmed but still rattled. The place seemed quaint to him, in a good way, an oasis of sorts, banana trees and bougainvillea creeping up the lamplit walls, each of the eleven units like a fairytale cottage. He didn't know squat about flowers but appreciated their color, the climbing shrubs mostly bright bubblegum pink, a few of them yellow. Bougainvillea, right? His wife would know. The taxicab Volvo pretending to be something else came with a bad muffler, belching black smoke and a noise that sounded like firecrackers. The radio didn't work, meaning he was in the dark about the big story. Now he sat scratching his nuts and lit a cigarette at a stop sign facing the nearest main thoroughfare.

Left to right, a black Suburban doing twice the posted limit streaked past his windshield. The first immediately followed by a second. Detective Oddo rolled down his window, took a last puff and tossed his smoke. It wasn't in his job description to pull over speeding motorists. Still, if he saw something really hazardous, he felt duty-bound to conduct a pullover. Slapping a magnetic light atop the roof, he hit the switch, then entered the wide street and gave chase, slowly gaining on the speeder. The speedometer crept to seventy-five and hung there. In the wrong

place at the wrong time, Detective Benny Oddo pulled alongside the nearest Suburban and waved the driver to pull over. Instead, the speeder's left rear window rolled down, exposing a long-barreled gun. The right side of Benny's face exploded like a red grape. The Volvo lost speed as his foot slipped off the gas, coasted a short distance and rolled to rest straddling the center divider. Driving past, laying on the horn to tell the driver to move his ass, or at least pick a lane, you'd think the car was empty. It wasn't, of course. Detective Oddo tilted dead across the front seats.

Five blocks west, Jess and Lyle peered in their rearviews, looking to see if there were survivors among the hostiles.

Didn't see the Suburbans.

Didn't see Hercules.

Didn't see them.

Didn't see them.

Saw them.

Not survivors of the shootout, but a third and fourth Suburban coming up fast, and behind, narrowing the gap, Hercules.

Making a daredevil turn, Jess almost failed to see what suddenly appeared ahead—a trio of pedestrians in a crosswalk, just now jerking their heads as they heard the wailing siren, likely assuming it to be an ambulance or fire truck. A young mother scooped up her five-year-old and retreated safely back

to the curb. The elderly gent froze, a deer in headlights. Jess braked, barely enough so you'd notice, skidded around him, and powered on. The old gent remained frozen, confused, which way to go, forward or back? The third Suburban missed him, not because the driver made an effort, it simply happened. The fourth arrived doing eighty in a stretch marked thirty-five, likewise didn't brake, and made no attempt to swerve. The spatula-flipped victim sailed up and over the hood, landed with a bone-crunching thump on the trunk, and crumpled in the street.

Pursued and pursuers hurtled on.

Jess rolled down Lyle's window and nodded at the submachine gun in the passenger well. Punching the headliner with his fist, he said, "I need you up there."

Queasy with self-doubt, Lyle wavered.

"Don't think about it. Just do your job."

But the rookie *did* think about it. A presidential limousine was built to be nearly indestructible—why exit a nearly impenetrable fortress tested to withstand almost any kind of assault, saving a nuclear strike? Why expose himself? Rhetorical because he knew the answer—it fit the job description—to protect and serve.

He hoisted himself into the open window frame, settled his butt on the ledge and leveled the machine gun across the roof, like riding shotgun on a runaway stagecoach attacked by

Apaches. Wind lashed his face. The limo's weave made it nearly impossible to maintain his balance and aim.

The third Suburban sped up and pulled alongside, keeping pace. The passenger window rolled partway down. A muzzle appeared in the narrow gap and began to spit lead, the rounds bouncing off Stagecoach, throwing up metal fragments, meddlesome wasps harassing an elephant. Chipped paint stung Lyle's face causing him to falter and lose his grip on his weapon. It slid across the roof, teetered there a moment, dropped overboard, and clattered behind. Lyle lowered himself back inside. The rounds from the Suburban kept coming.

The limo's left rear window slid down a couple of inches. The president, oblivious, lay sprawled across the seat. Blooper rock and rolled with his own submachine gun, laying down cover fire as the rookie drew his firearm and was about to hoist himself back up. Jess, who'd noticed something, reached over and stopped him.

The third Suburban had eased a car's length ahead. The M-16 muzzled disappeared, replaced by a hostile shouldering a MANPADS.

Lyle looked, saw Chariot suddenly appear from a side street and stop unexpectedly in the thoroughfare. Stagecoach swerved around it and drove on.

Window down, the agent riding with Franklin triggered his briefcase and chewed out the Suburban's glass. Struck dead, the hostile's MANPADS discharged inside. The Suburban shuddered,

exhaled fire, and wobbled on. Leaping the curb, it leveled a bus stop kiosk and came to rest.

Back about a mile east—another rolling, hairbreadth firefight—Hercules and a fifth black Suburban.

Hercules had pulled a car length ahead, Bible from his high angle able to make out the dim shape of the driver through the tinted windshield, the guy on a cell. More hostiles or a civilian speeding home to his supper and share the news? The tinted glass panel of a moonroof slid open. A face swam up through the darkness, then vanished as its owner bent back inside to retrieve something, enough time for Bible to adjust his goggles and check his belt feed. The gat swung around, taking aim. Bible waited. Waited. The face reappeared, then, a waist to head torso, the hostile turning to aim an AK. Bible opened up with the gat, putting an end to it before it began. Fifty 7.62 armor-piercing bullets per second spat from the muzzle and strafed the thin-skinned roof. Another burst of rounds riddled the exposed interior. Blood washed the windshield. An instant later it disintegrated. The cell sailed out the driver's window, skidded to the curb and dropped down a drainage hole. The moonroof hostile's AK squirted free, bounced on the pavement, kept firing, and suddenly stopped, by some miracle not hitting anything that mattered. The gunman twitched like an epileptic and sank back into the dark. The gat's immense destructive power hadn't caused the SUV to flip. It didn't roll. There was no explosion.

Losing momentum it drifted across the lanes, rolled into the parking lot of a Soup Plantation, right up to the front door, and stopped there, as if the driver had dropped by to make a delivery or awaited a family member, an all-you-can-eat soup and pasta lover.

Fourteen minutes after exiting the freeway some semblance of the tattered motorcade had reformed. Halfback and Chariot in the lead, Hercules and the straggler behind, Stagecoach sandwiched between them.

A brief respite allowed time for Jess to grab the radio mike. "Command, we can't make the airport. We are on route to safe house three. Do you copy?"

At the command post, a flicker of satisfaction danced across Whale's face. "I want every asset in the state to meet us there, do you copy?" Jess went on. "I want to see so many guns the guns have guns. "Just get him there," Whale said.

Jess glanced across at Lyle. The rookie was back in the passenger seat. "You hit?"

Lyle shot him a "what?" look, Jess indicating the red specks dotting his left cheek.

"Check yourself."

The rookie lowered the sun visor, checked himself in the mirror and saw the specks. He quickly patted himself down, searching for wounds. “No, no, I’m good.”

“Sure?” Jess cocked his thumb, indicating the red smear on the half-down partition glass, the cabin behind it too dark to see. Lyle turned, saw his reflection in the glass and drew a finger across it. It came back clean. The blood had to be on the other side.

Jess lowered it all the way, said, “Take over.”

Lyle lunged for the wheel as Jess relinquished control and hauled himself through the divider. The limo angled to the curb as the rookie slid across, bounced onto the sidewalk, and flattened a row of newspaper vending machines. Coins clattered across the sidewalk. Pages of the L.A. Times, L.A. Weekly, and assorted sex rags flapped away. Jess tumbled into the rear cabin and landed atop Blooper, the physician on his back atop the president, one hand clutching his throat, blood dribbling from a black hole visible between his fingers, the other still gripping the submachine gun.

Another half block careening along the sidewalk and Lyle steered back into the street. Jess rolled the physician aside and patted him down for wounds. Nothing appeared to have changed—he seemed in no way better, but as far as he could tell, no worse.

A voice came over his earbud. “Stagecoach, your nine o’clock. The car!”

Dominca eyeballed yet another black Suburban in the oncoming lane as it pulled to the curb and sat there. “Hercules, get up here!” Aiming her briefcase, she waited for a clear indication that the vehicle was hostile or a citizen motorist. “C’mon. C’mon. C’mon.”

She was still unable to make out a face. Approaching within a dozen yards, she made out a woman and teen girl in the front seat. “Stand down, stand down, stand down! It’s a woman, a kid! Stand—”

T-boned by yet another Suburban bolting from a side street, the impact instantly killed Halfback’s driver. Out of control, it tagged a parked car and jinked into a wild ride.

At the Bonaventure, the camera mounted on Halfback’s grill afforded a premium, slanted view. A hair-raising jaunt, Halfback tilted on its side, sparks flying, scraped along the pavement fifty yards before coming to rest. The Suburban stuck with it, angled into a donut shop parking lot and stopped. Immediately, the driver’s door flew open. A hostile bounded out and opened up with an M-16. Return fire erupted from the toppled Halfback, the surviving agents slow to respond as they recovered from their E-ticket ride. The straggler came up fast and stopped alongside. Ray, firing out his window, emptied his clip into the Bolivian. Grace rolled from under Goode and flung herself to the floor, knees drawn to her chest, eyes squeezed shut, flinching

with every gunshot. A second hostile, this one female, clutching a grenade, darted from behind the Suburban and bolted past Halfback's cam, something only those in the command post were able to see.

"Tell them to get out! Tell them to get out!" Whale shouted at the monitor.

It was too late.

The hostile lobbed the grenade through the missing back window, the shudder blast instantly killing agents James Huxley and Oral Tummy askew in the rear facing seats.

Whale and his team flinched. Some involuntarily ducked, half-expecting the monitor to explode. Halfback's camera shuddered, stayed intact, and continued to film.

Zabrizki fired his Baretta through the straggler's open door. In the enclosed space the spent shell casings stung Grace's skin and burned a hole in the hem of her dress. Struck multiple times, the Venezuelan mercenary lurched sideways and died on the pavement.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Halfback, Jess. What’s your status?” No answer. “Ricci?” Still nothing. “Dominca?”

Ray reloaded and waited to see if there would be more gunfire. None came. Zabrizki held his aim and also waited. The idling Suburban sat there. Grace cowered. Ray, peering in his side mirror, made out the motorcade’s EMS van stopped a half-block behind, awaiting the outcome, some signal that it was safe to advance. Another half minute before Ray extended an arm and waved them forward. The EMS van advanced, stopping between Halfback and the straggler. Ray and Zabrizki were already out, bolting to Halfback. Three paramedics from the EMS joined them.

Zabrizki peered in the mangled rear well, the two agents inside beyond saving, reduced to something found in a meat market. Ray hoisted himself atop Halfback. Its window somehow still intact, the right front passenger door was stuck. It took some effort to pry it open. By then, Zabrizki had joined him, the officer reaching through the rear door’s shattered window. Ray reached through the empty space, groped in the dark interior, felt something, and began to tug. Gradually, a woman’s head and shoulders emerged, Special Agent Dominca Ricci in a concussion daze, glass splinters like needles protruding from her cheeks and neck. Then came the rest of her,

Ray hauling her into the evening light. Gently, he lowered her to the waiting paramedics. Ray leapt down and accompanied her staggering to the EMS van. The paramedics eased her to the ground, then quickly returned to Halfback.

Ray stooped before her, delicately plucking the larger slivers from her neck. Dominca's head lolled. She moaned. "Ray—is that you?"

"It's me, babe. I'm here."

At Halfback, Zabrizki had extracted a second agent from the wreck, the man seriously injured, bleeding from the nose, the paramedics now escorting him to the EMS.

Ray said, "Helluva a ride, huh?"

Dominca said, "Yeah," then something garbled that he was unable to understand. He tilted her chin to remove another sliver, her skin pockmarked with blood red pinpricks. "Promise me something when this is over." She flinched. "You'll never take up knitting." She mouthed something. It sounded like, "You're a riot."

"You'll be fine. Nothing a tub of makeup can't hide."

He cupped her face with both hands, turning it toward him, and looked into her eyes. "Hey, hey, you see me?"

She nodded.

"Good, good."

Looking past his shoulder, she made out a vision—a figure in white, first walking, wobbly legged, then trotting away from the van. She seemed drunk. The figure stopped, back turned,

standing in a pool of streetlight. After a moment she turned, seeming to consider something. What was she—a nurse, a drunken angel? Well, obviously not part of the detail, Dominca thought, yet even from a distance she looked somehow familiar. Okay, then, please God, let her be an angel. Her vision began to clear. Then she remembered—the woman standing beside the van at the airport. Earlier that morning at the hotel, hadn't Ray mentioned her name? What was it—something that rhymed with lace. Race? Face? It came to her—Grace, the one Jess had got in the 'beast.' Now she was returning, first walking, then trotting, no longer seeming drunk, but with purpose. Stopped beside the van, she looked through the open door.

Ray heard Zabrizki yell his name, the officer needing help extracting a third agent. He steadied Dominca's face and looked into her eyes again. "You'll be okay. You're okay." He stood and sprinted back to Halfback.

Seconds passed. Dominca staggered to her feet, braced herself, and went to the angel in white. Grace turned to her. "Is he dead?"

Dominca looked inside and saw Goode slumped on one of the rear seats. Fresh blood smeared his gunshot temple, the wound barely an inch from where he'd been nicked the first time, the field agent unlucky in head wounds. His gun hand slowly lifted and sank.

Now Ray was there, Grace still staring into the van. "Grace, you good?" She looked at him but didn't answer. He placed his

hands on her shoulders and lightly shook her. "Grace? Grace?" Her head bobbed. "See what you can do." There wasn't any talk of leaving the field agent behind. Full up, the EMS van had already left. Grace turned away, climbed inside, lifted Goode's upper torso, slid underneath, and cradled him.

Dominca went around and got in the front passenger seat.

Ray got behind the wheel, threw it in gear, and sped off.

Goode mumbled something.

Grace leaned close to listen.

"My eyes—"

"We're here. I'm here. It's okay, it's okay," she assured him because she was light years out of her element and something, anything, needed to be said. She used her sleeve to dab blood from his eyes.

Ray lifted his wrist mike. "Stagecoach, Rykoff. We've got some agents down."

"How bad?" Jess's voice.

"Three dead. Two injured." He looked across at Dominca. "Dominca's okay. Nothing major. We need to get off the street."

"What about the woman?"

"Grace? She's good too. The president?"

"About the same, best I can tell." Then, "Jack Blooper's dead. Find us."

Brooks Hale was no longer in the suite, in fact, was no longer even at the Bonaventure. He was driving a borrowed Honda,

cresting the Hollywood freeway, the immensity of the San Fernando Valley spread below.

The scrap of hotel stationary tossed on the Honda's dash had scribbled on it an address he'd ferreted out by following up on the K-9 dog tag in the Death Watch clip, the special agent, his career in limbo, heading north, then west to the bedroom community of Tarzana. Brooks Hale going to see a man about a dog.

Jess's eyes darted, a dark colored sedan's headlights trailing behind, too close for comfort. He turned off the limo's siren and flashing lights. Approaching the next side street, he hand-gestured, saying, "Turn here." Lyle took the next right. Stagecoach rolled down the silent, empty neighborhood street, the modest stucco homes pastel-colored boxes. Jess kept his eyes on his rearview. Moments later, those headlights, a good bet they belonged to the same sedan, made the turn and followed. "Left." Lyle made the next left. Again, those headlights swung into the turn and followed. Another twenty seconds passed before a second pair of headlights, Hercules, Bible manning the gun turret framed against the night sky, made the turn and swung in behind the sedan.

Bible's voice came over Jess's earbud. "Stagecoach, Bible. You have company. Do we pursue?"

"I see," Jess said. "Check it out, then catch up, but make sure you're not followed."

“Roger that.”

Hercules caught up and pulled alongside the sedan. Peering over, Bible made out the dim shape of the driver, the woman not looking over, eyes straight ahead, seemingly unperturbed or even curious about the figure poking out the moonroof, eyeballing her. There appeared to be a dog, a big one, tongue lolling, pacing back and forth in the back seat. If there were other passengers, Bible couldn't see them. Hercules pulled slightly ahead. Now, from the new angle, he saw a passenger through the far side of the windshield, looked to be male, a white rectangle on his lap, maybe some kind of open notebook.

Halfway down the block, the sedan suddenly swung into a driveway and stopped there. Weird, Bible thought, that sudden, last second turn—didn't the driver recognize her own house? Hercules rolled past. A block later, Bible was still watching, only able see the sedan's rear end protruding from behind a shrub. Its taillights winked out. Hercules sped up, made the next left, then, a block later, another right, saw Stagecoach ahead, and fell in behind.

A minute later, headlights dead, the sedan reversed into the street, and began to follow.

Stagecoach, Hercules behind, idled beside a stop sign facing the boulevard, the one they'd left minutes before, Jess thinking LAX may as well have been Timbuktu. The street stood empty of motorists and pedestrians. Two blocks away, across a weedy,

undeveloped lot, loomed the gray, horizontal shape of a six-story monolith.

Now, left to right, a solitary pair of headlights crept into view.

Jess spoke into his wrist mike. "Ray, talk to me, where are you?"

The headlights slowed to a crawl, the outline of a white van now visible.

"Spit, you'll hit us," Ray said.

Jess eased a right, the straggler at his rear now, Hercules right behind.

Tailing the van came a third pair of headlights.

"Stagecoach to command. We are bravo safe house three." It was Jess, sounding resigned, but not wholly committed. "Can I get a situation report?"

The command post super turned to Whale and said, "It's almost over, sir. Seems we're good."

Whale glanced at his watch—the time was almost eight—nine, maybe ten more minutes of this madness, he thought. "Stagecoach, you are clear to come in. Do you copy?"

"These guys know our routes," Jess answered. "It's likely they're already there."

"We've spoken with them, Stagecoach. They're telling us they're secure," Whale hiding his annoyance at again being second-guessed.

Silence as Jess considered his next move.

“You make it out of this, Jess, it’s over for you. You realize that,” Whale filling the emptiness.

“Nothing’s forever.” Jess clicked off the mike and spoke to himself. “Jesus, a whole career in a single day.”

Chariot had joined the queue, now a four vehicle motorcade.

Jess spoke into his wrist. “You copying me, Franklin?”

Franklin’s voice: “At your six. Yeah, I copy.”

“Get up here.”

Franklin’s afterthought: “Case you’re wondering, already ditched the flag.” At some point during the afternoon, he’d removed one of Chariot’s hood-mounted flags, the one bearing the presidential seal. The limo’s headlights swung from behind Hercules, overtook the straggler and pulled alongside Stagecoach, the vehicles again carbon copies.

Jess said, “You ready to do this?”

Franklin had read his mind.

He said, “What the hell, let’s.”

Chariot pulled ahead, then Stagecoach took the lead. Their drivers maneuvered a well-rehearsed shell game, weaving in and out each other the length of a city block until they were side by side again, now impossible to know which of the limousines housed the American president.

Jess said, “Ray, Bible, stick with me. We’re westbound.”

He switched back to Franklin. “On three. One—two—”

Overhead, Huntsman saw the twin limousines racing side by side, mere inches separating them.

Jess pushed a button on the dashboard touch screen, deactivating the GPS. “Three—”

Arriving at the next intersection, the limousines suddenly separated. Stagecoach banked a hard right, heading west. Chariot a left, heading east.

The straggler and Hercules bore hard to the right.

The sedan was back on the boulevard, parked opposite a revival movie house, a double bill of *War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* on the marquee. Santos and Kantuta sat in the curbside shade of a eucalyptus tree. The two had watched the identical limousines blow past.

“Which one?” Kantuta asked.

Santos considered, then said, “The limousine that goes to the safe house will not be the president.”

She said, “How can you be sure?”

He nodded to the open notebook in his lap, tapping his index finger on a photo taped to the exposed page, a headshot of Special Agent Jessee Lee Gage, his handwritten bio taped to the facing page. “Because Special Agent Gage has figured us out.”

Punching a number into his cell, he briefly spoke to someone in Spanish. She heard “stagecoach.” She heard “chariot.” The call ended.

“Tomas?”

“He is busy making sausages. Not my mother’s recipe.”

She made a quarter turn in her seat and scratched the dog behind the ear. She said, “Then who?”

“One of our friends from Columbia.”

“Why, if it is not the limousine of the president, did you give the order?”

“To be sure, of course.”

“Tomas will not be happy if you are wrong.”

“He will understand.” Then, “Now go. We will see.”

The sedan pulled into the street and made the next right, following the westbound motorcade.

Whale had watched Huntsman’s live feed on the monitor, the vehicles splitting, a black amoeba dividing into its twin. He turned to the surrounding faces. “Which one’s Stagecoach?” No one offered a clue. “Anyone?”

Huntsman’s pilot had had to make up his mind—to follow one or the other. Unable to tell which was which, he gambled on Chariot.

The twin double beds and two oversized chairs had been moved into the main living area to make room, anyone arriving now hoping to enter the bedroom having to navigate the crowded mess. Throughout the late afternoon and early evening, other members of various support security had been arriving. An agent posted outside the suite door checked credentials.

The tech facing the monitor pushed his chair back so that others could better see. A late arriving agent knelt atop a dresser, peering over the tops of closely packed heads. The suite had been designated non-smoking, but that admonition had gone out the window. A pall of smoke hung below the ceiling. If the management had issues, they were welcome to file their complaint with the powers that be and good luck with that.

Vance Whale's wife had phoned three times during that late afternoon and evening, the deputy director twice telling the super he was busy, the third time grabbing the phone and telling her himself—he was up to his elbows, practically shouting it.

On the monitor, Huntsman continued to provide a live, silent feed—Chariot racing to safe house three, a fire station.

At the station, a dozen Marines descended from an chopper up from the Pendleton Base Camp down in San Diego, the Marines rappelling to the ground. On the street, two hundred armed men and women from nearly every branch of citywide law enforcement had formed a protective cordon. Three EMS vehicles stood by, their gurneys unloaded, paramedics standing by.

Still three blocks away, Huntsman flew ahead, its night sun spotting the fire station, camera zoomed in tight, illuminating a sea of tight, anxious faces. Now all heads turned as one, looking off down the street. Huntsman panned with them, went wide

angle and revealed fast approaching grill lights, siren wailing, although no one at the command post could hear it.

The image on the monitor suddenly fizzled and died.

“Gage—? Goddamnit?” Whale’s face squirmed with random twitches. “Gage—?”

Three seconds later the monitor flickered and the picture returned, this time showing Chariot stopped cold, mangled almost beyond recognition.

A block from the fire station, on the balcony of a four-story apartment building, a hostile, one of two from Columbia, lowered his MANPADS and surveyed the column of smoke and flame rippling from the maimed limousine. Behind him, visible through the sliding glass doors, the apartments occupants, a young couple in their early twenties, their throats slit, slumped side by side on a couch, open eyes locked on the TV, a news anchor there reporting the still unfolding nightmare.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jess, standing at the rail on the fifth level of a deserted six level parking structure, looked out at the night city. The block-long mall it once served had been earmarked for demolition, the stores inside empty shells. Stagecoach had led the way, smashing through the chain mesh fence surrounding the block. Ascending a corkscrew ramp, the limo had barreled through the barricades flanking the parking fee booths, Hercules and the straggler behind, weaving up and up.

Away in the distance, the crown lights of the downtown Library Tower, the tallest building west of the Mississippi, the city's Empire State Building, glowed green, white, and red, marking the holiday. At midnight they would return to a crown of white light.

Staccato pinpricks of sound that were common firecrackers erupted here and there. Further away, globes of streaming light, like enormous dandelions, silently burst and faded. May 5 still had some hours to go.

Light trails representing police cruisers and fire engines "wee-woo'd" in the night. Some were law enforcement responding to routine traffic upsets and crime in the third most populous city in North America, but on this singular night the greater number were racing to the multiple locations linked to the attempted assassination of the American president.

Positioned behind Jess were Stagecoach, Hercules, and the straggler, one of the CAT team visible above the Suburban's roofline, the gat trained on the last ramp they'd ascended. The president was out Stagecoach and now sat propped against the straggler. Lyle and Dominca knelt beside Blooper. Working together to remove the dead man's suit jacket, Dominca then placed it over his face. Lyle stood and stepped back. Adrenaline no longer pumping, the day's cascade of events had finally begun to extract their toll. Grace, wretched, sat watching from the open-door van.

The rookie climbed in Stagecoach and began wiping the blood off the cabin seats with old newspapers. Suddenly, it was all too much. Overwhelmed, he withdrew to a stairwell to gather himself. It was mostly dark in there, only a little moonlight spilling down the stairs. He bent at the waist and dry heaved his hotel breakfast.

"Not quite the homecoming you imagined?" Startled, he turned and saw Bible sitting on the stairs, catching a smoke. "Sort of like smoking behind the barn. Try not to burn it down, avoid daddy's whuppin." He extended the pack, shook it so Lyle knew where to reach. Lyle shook his head no.

Bible said, "Me, neither. Found this pack in some bum's sleeping bag."

Lyle eased down beside him. "I was supposed to have dinner with my family tonight."

"Call them."

“And tell them what?”

Santos had been wrong about the scotch. Bible took a sip from a crystal tumbler, an open bottle of Angel’s Envy bourbon between his feet. It was the president’s favorite, found in the limousine’s liquor supply, along with a stash of Reese’s Pieces. “Comes with ice.” He swirled the drink so Lyle could hear then cubes clink, then answered his question. “Say you’re working late.” He passed Lyle the tumbler and a tin foil wrapped chocolate. The rookie shook his head no, saying, “I’ll throw up.” Bible took a last draw on the smoke, flicked it against the cement wall, a shower of sparks in the dark that briefly lit their faces. He stood and patted Lyle’s shoulder. He said, “You’re doing good.”

“You think he did the right thing?” Lyle asked.

“Jess?” Bible gave the question some thought, eased the rookie to his feet, then said, “I think he jumped in front of a bullet. It just hasn’t hit yet.”

Thirteen minutes before, the first thing after they’d arrived had been to move the president to a safe distance. Then Blooper, although the physician was beyond help. Then Goode.

Now they needed to check for the bomb, see with their own eyes. The four special agents had had minimal training, but none were experts. Bible had positioned the straggler closer so its brights fell on the limo. On his back, Jess scooted underneath, and found it—a fist-sized chunk of plastique sheathed in an

olive-colored Mylar wrapper, two orange wires dangling from it—wedged between the undercarriage and one of the frame members, the bomb eighteen inches below the main cabin.

Just in case, Ray and Lyle groped inside the wheel housings.

Jess tried to pry the cube loose. It stayed stuck. He called out for something to cut the wires. Bible scooted beside him and handed him a Swiss Army knife.

The two men sucked down air.

They all did.

Jess sawed through the first wire.

Nothing happened.

He sawed through the second.

Nothing.

If there were other wires tucked away, he couldn't see them.

Somehow, they'd survived running a gauntlet, but now what? Afterward, Jess said he had something in mind, but wasn't ready to share. He still needed time to think.

Jess took the stairs to the rooftop parking level. On the cement wall on the way up, spray-painted graffiti spelled out Hate Free Community. A half flight up, I Hate Everybody. The well reeked of stale piss, the garage a shelter for homeless Angelenos who'd quickly cleared out when the caravan arrived. They'd seen their makeshift tents of plastic sheeting and soiled bedding scattered about.

Ray was up there. He said, "Good evening. How are you today?" as if they'd just run into each other mall shopping.

Jess said, "Franklin's dead."

"Yeah. I heard. Duke too." A pause, then, "Told me he wanted you to have his job, did you know that?"

"I *have* his job. He's the one who dies. I'm the one who goes to hell."

Jess looked off, studied the winking lights of the dozen airliners arriving from all points around the globe. LAX, the second busiest airport in North America, had been shut down, all air traffic, arrivals and departures, diverted to John Wayne in Orange County, forty miles south, or to Burbank, thirty-four miles to the north, behind the Hollywood Hills. He wondered whether those aboard about to land had heard of the seismic events still unfolding in the City of Angels. Surely by now they all had, that infamous May 5 about which they would tell their grandchildren.

One hundred feet below at street level a solitary, candy yellow, Chevy Impala lowrider, windows down, the radio throbbing hip-hop, cranked into view and grew small down the block. Apparently, there was at least one person who hadn't yet heard the news of the calamity that had stricken the nation, Jess thought. Or maybe he had and didn't give a shit.

He turned to Ray and said, "Nothing like it went in rehearsals, is it?"

"We were a lot younger then. We're too old for this."

“Thirty years in three hours.”

“Damn sure feels like it.”

“How far to LAX, would you say?”

“The crow flies, eight, nine miles. But the rate we’re going, could take a week. What do you have in mind?”

“We get Huntsman to set down here.” His hand gesture took in the rooftop. His eyes slid over Ray’s face. Was he in, or was this going to be another problem?

“I tell you what I think, would it make a difference?”

“No.”

“It’s chancy. Very. Maybe you should ask command, get a second opinion.”

“Whale’s got too many toys. He’s playing shock and awe when what we need is hide and seek.”

“I hear you.” Ray paused. “Okay, when?”

“Soon as I clue everyone in. You have a better idea, let’s hear it.” A pause while Jess waited.

“Sounds like we’re singing the same hymnal,” Ray said.

Just then Dominca emerged onto the rooftop from the stairwell. She stood watching the two from across the way. Ray stole a glance in her direction.

Jess gave them a moment, then said, “I’m tired of you two skulking around each other like a couple of cat burglars.”

Ray didn’t understand, or was pretending not to.

“Hell, just go over there,” Jess said.

“You know about us?”

"I know everything about everyone who gets within a mile of the president," Jess said, and immediately realized that was no longer remotely true. "Thought I did, anyway."

"Jess, this isn't your fault."

Jess shrugged.

"Anyway, thanks for not saying anything. It would have washed us out of the detail."

"For good reason—you might get confused about whose body you're watching."

"That's not going to happen."

"Something I forgot to mention. The president's the only one getting out. We stay and cover."

Ray said, "Yeah, I figured," and crossed to Dominca.

Jess turned to descend the stairwell, then paused and looked over his shoulder. The lovers were wrapped in each other's arms.

Jess shouted, "Hey!"

They looked over.

"Take care of each other."

A few miles over at the Olvera Street Plaza, now a major crime scene, the area had been locked down while a crew of FBI launched their investigation. Klieg lights brighter than daylight illuminated the scene. Duke Cobb's ribbon-bound rocker still sat on the stage. A slight poof of wind and it began to gently rock, but no one paid any notice, no one mentioned Lincoln.

Back at the parking garage, Lyle half in, half out Stagecoach, had resumed wiping the blood off the seat. Jess stood alongside with a submachine gun and a couple of banana cartridges. "Lyle, take a walk, get some air."

Lyle wadded the newspapers, tossed them, nodded solemnly, and started to move off.

"Moody, relax," Jess called after him.

The rookie stopped and turned. Relax. It was the third or fourth time in the past twenty-four hours he'd heard the same thing. "Relax," an aspect of disbelief in the way he said it. "Know what? That's the last thing Duke told me just before this started. And twice before that," Lyle said.

"He was a good man," Jess said, knowing it sounded lame, the totality of a man's character reduced to a generic "good man." Hell, why not just toss in "nice guy" or "swell fellow," top it off with something equally vapid about "hearts and prayers," the verbal equivalent of tossing a panhandler the smallest coin in your pocket, the stock phrase so often spoken in the aftermath of fate's outrageous slings and arrows. "It's meant to be reassuring," Jess said. "Although when someone tells me to relax, I do the opposite, tense up." The thought was enough to cause him to rub the back of his neck again, the throbbing knot never having left. Hours earlier, when the day began, it had been a minor nuisance, one that over the years he had grown accustomed to, but now it threatened to expand into his brain

and inflict a monumental migraine. He stepped to the rookie, handed him the submachine gun and cartridges, scooped up the blood-smearred newspaper and returned to the limo.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Twenty-four miles northwest, on Quailwood Lane, Tarzana, an LAPD helo beamed its night sun down on the low-pitched roof and yard of a craftsman-style house, then tilted its light to take in the ratty back yard, exposing an appalling scene—a row of fenced kennels, about a dozen stiff limbed Belgian Malinois dogs scattered inside.

On the periphery, neighbors stood on their lawns, gawked or yelled questions, but received no answers, although most had already figured out that what was happening on their street had everything to do with the incredible story being told on every news and cable outlet, the world having come to a standstill, only this one story being told. Martians could have landed on the White House lawn and this would still have been the one and only story.

The street out front, yards, driveways, were crowded with official-looking vehicles belonging to SWAT, DHS, LAPD and assorted field agents. Deputy Director Vance Whale had spread the word: the bomb dog handler's name and residence had been identified—yet another aspect of the investigation was underway.

Brooks arrived driving the borrowed Honda. Seeing the LAPD helo's roving light when he was still two miles away had helped. He'd already circled the block twice without luck. On the third pass he finally told himself, "Screw it" and parked in a

flowerbed across the street. Climbing out, the homeowner and his wife standing on the sidewalk gave him dirty looks and were about to say something, but the look Brooks gave in return shut them up.

A USSS PID (Protection Intelligence Division) agent who'd stepped outside for a smoke met him on the wrap-around porch. The guy came down the steps, flicked away his cigarette and extended his hand. "Brooks Hale, Jesus, long time. Thought you were working the detail today."

"No."

"You take a sick day? Good fucking timing."

Brooks shrugged, the guy unintentionally making him feel about a foot tall.

First things first, the PID guy took him around the side of the house, unlatched a wooden gate, then across the back yard to the dozen kennels at the rear so Brooks could see what had been done to the dogs. He counted eleven dead animals.

"Going by the number of cages and bowls, we assume there were twelve dogs," the PID guy said.

"So we're missing one," Brooks said.

"Ya think?" the guy not letting up, nodding to the house. "There's more. Lots. A regular cornucopia."

Brooks wasn't exactly sure what the fancy word meant, but he got the idea, said, "Yeah, okay."

His guide first led him to a detached two-car garage at the end of the driveway. They entered through a side door. There

weren't any cars inside, the space having been converted into a workshop, but it was immediately obvious from the stuff lying around that it was where the bomb had been assembled.

Two FBI sat at a long table, two slabs of plywood supported by three sawhorses, the men going over the stuff—hand-drawn pencil sketches, printed diagrams, notebooks, disassembled cell phones, packets of batteries, a yellow collision cushion barrel in a corner, and three unmarked fifty-gallon steel drums amid a litter of empty plastic laundry detergent bottles.

“Hey, this agent, SS guy?” the PID guy said to the two FBI. “He was supposed to be driving the president today,” bluntly stated, without the tone of respect expected when referring to the attempted assassination of the American president, the situation still unfolding. Maybe he wasn't a fan, Brooks thought.

“What are you doing here, should be in Vegas,” one of the FBI quipped without looking up, “Heck, place some bets for me.”

“What's in those?” Brooks asked, indicating the steel drums.

“Napalm,” the second FBI said, also without looking up.

“There's more,” the PID guy said.

They stepped back outside and Brooks nodded toward the house. “You've got the dog's owner in there?”

“Yeah, you could say that,” the PDI guy said and led the way, saving the best for last.

There was death outside, and more inside the home, its seven rooms being tossed by investigators:

The tour began in the living room, the PID guy getting Brooks caught up. “Say hello to Zac Teabagger. Okay, my bad, make that Tealander. Ex-cop. Discharged under—”

“Not a nice way to talk about the dead.”

“Yeah, well, considering what we’ve learned so far—”

Brooks thought, imagine being stuck in an elevator with this clown, meaning the PID.

Cuffed and gagged, duct tape plastered over his mouth and eyes, Zac Tealander lay on his side wearing only his boxers, bound to an overturned dining room chair dragged into the living room, a blanket bunched on the carpet beside him. “We found him, he had the blanket over his head.” Brooks stepped close for a better look, Tealander obviously garroted, a length of nylon rope still wound tight around his neck.

“As I was saying—ex-cop,” the PID guy went on. “Let go because he was involved with a heavy drug mover, been training dogs since. Found another job as an LAPD advance lead for Clinton’s protective detail at the 2000 Democratic convention. Hey, so much for vetting. Anyway, we think that’s how they know so much about how we work. That and some sophisticated hacking of the governor’s security. We think a hacker by the name of Claude Dallas was involved. Found dead the day before yesterday, also executed. So was this narco-trafficker Teadlander was working with. Could be how they got themselves and their weapons into the country, trafficked in

with drugs. Whoever's involved waited for all the elements to come together."

"A perfect shit storm," Brooks said. "Anyone talk to the White House advance about the greeters?"

"As we speak."

"What's he saying?"

"An imposter. Took the place of the coach of the Mexican National Soccer Team, invited by the governor's office."

Brooks pictured a White House advance lead being grilled in an FBI office, group photos of some of the greeters spread on a table before him. He felt for the guy, the stain on the poor bastards career so dark he'd likely be forever blackballed from government service.

"The coach, he dead too?"

"The man he replaced is dead, along with his wife," the PID guy said. "Found 'em across town."

Brooks figured the teams that had arrived before him had been there roughly thirty, forty-five minutes. A thousand-piece jigsaw and they were beginning to stitch it together.

From there, the PID guy took him down a short hall lined with framed family photos to the master bedroom where "the wife" (Brooks didn't much care for the sound of that, objectifying the woman as collateral add-on, but knew a lot of guys who did it—the car, the tree, the stove, but saw no point in mentioning it) lay dead on the blood-soaked sheets, then across the hall to a teen boy's bedroom, the kid, also shot, curled beside

his bed, an open Snoop Dog CD case balanced on his hip, probably the last music he listened to before he died.

Back out in the hall, Brooks asked, "Anyone talk to the neighbors yet?"

"Yeah. Ones on both sides say they hadn't seen the family in two, three days. Couple whose flowerbed you parked in saw a black sedan parked in the driveway. Figured it belonged to a relative, maybe housesitting."

The two men returned to the living room. There, taped to a wall were dozens of photos, including Google Earth and ground view blow-ups of three safe houses, motorcade and emergency routes, primary and secondary hospitals.

Dominant among them was a poster-sized printout showing the Olvera Street Plaza the day before the event, the stage still under construction. A second enlargement, taken in real time, slightly smaller, taped atop it, showed Special Agent Jess Gage standing behind the Blue Goose podium, looking out across rows of empty, soon to be filled seats. Someone had circled the agent with a red felt-tip pen, an arrow pointing to him.

A big yellow cat came over and rubbed its head against Brooks' leg. He gave it a nudge and it bounded away.

"Anyone you know?" the PID guy asked, referring to the agent in the photo, not the cat.

"Jess Gage, the president's detail."

A Homeland Security guy came over and drew the PID away.

Thank God, Brooks thought.

Left alone, he gravitated back to the dining room. At one end of a table stood an open box of Froot Loops beside two bowls of rainbow-tinted milk. On the other end sat a carpenter's leather toolbelt. Rummaging in the belt, he found a miniature camera made to look like a carpenter's level and a laminated photo ID of the workman who'd bumped Jess the previous day, saying: "Sorry, boss," something about which Brooks, not being present, had no knowledge. The yellow cat came back, leapt onto the table, and began lapping the milk.

Brooks on his way out the door, the PID guy pulled him aside, saying, "Something I forgot to mention. Guy who did the Tealanders? We don't think he was here alone."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"We found these." Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out a pack of condoms and dangled them before Brooks. He turned and nodded toward a couch. "Left stuck between the cushions."

"So, a woman?"

"Unless, you know—?" the PID guy flashing a dumbass grin.

"No, I don't know."

"Forget that, let's go with a woman."

Jesus, this guy, Brooks thinking it.

"So, the missus, Tealander's wife, on top of everything else, you think maybe she was raped?"

"Report's not in, but first guess, we don't think so."

Brooks was halfway down the walk, heading for his car across the street.

The PID guy stuck with him. “Interesting fact,” he said. “What they do down there, especially around carnival time, the health ministry creates these fake profiles, pretend they’re looking for unprotected sex. Someone contacts them, they get a message warning about the dangers.”

Useless information, Brooks thought, wondering why the guy was sharing it. “How come you know so much?”

The PID twitched a shoulder, said, “I read, how else?” Then said, “I can’t get it out of my head. Mom and the kid dead in back, Tealander right there on the floor, and what, they’re doing it on the couch?”

“Might explain why they put the blanket over him.”

“Didn’t want to offend him.” The PID guy gave a little smile. “That and the bed being occupied.”

“Collect fun facts on your day off, huh?” Brooks said over his shoulder, deadpan because he’d had enough of the guy, Brooks already halfway across the street to his car parked in the flowerbed.

The PID guy stopped, said, “Hey, pal, you got a problem with your people, don’t take it out on me.”

“Make sure you put ‘em back,” Brooks said, meaning the condoms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Grace sat in the straggler, Goode's head cradled in her lap, her warmth and feminine touch the only comfort she was able to give.

Beyond the windshield, a solitary bat flitted below the cement ceiling. Hadn't she somewhere read that bad luck was predicted if a bat flew into a church during a wedding ceremony? She'd read nothing about bats in a parking structure but accepted that it was likely the same ill luck omen.

"Grace—?" Grace—?"

She came to her senses, turned to see who'd spoken her name, and saw Jess standing beside the open door. He bent to the agent and tilted his head, revealing a dark hole approximately the shape of a penny-sized starfish above his left eyebrow, the agent dead, something Grace hadn't realized, trying to comfort the first-time dad of an infant son well past receiving comfort.

Jess eased her from beneath the dead man and began fitting her into a bulletproof vest.

"Did he have a wife? Kids?" she asked, teary-eyed and sniffly.

Jess shrugged. Either he didn't know or didn't want to go down that road.

"Do you even know?" Now she sounded angry, accusing him, as if he somehow hadn't treated the deceased with the proper respect, not fully human, only a disposable cog in a supremely

well-oiled machine, Grace acting as if there was something more he could have said or done.

“He had it all,” Jess said, although he didn’t know the agent, nothing much personal, he’d seen him around, the agent not part of the detail. They’d been friendly, but not friends. “He’s the one agent who would have lived happily ever after if I hadn’t gotten us into this,” something he could just as easily have said about any of the fallen.

She’d struck a nerve, but hadn’t meant to. She apologized with a slight brush of her hand against his as he fastened the vest’s Velcro straps.

“These men and women,” Jess said, “the ones who didn’t make and it, and the ones still here, I’ve lined them up against the wall, but when the shooting starts, they can’t duck because that’s the job. I did that.”

He changed the channel in his head. He’d already explained the plan but had returned to her several times asking the same question. “You understand what you have to do?”

“Sit and wait.”

He studied her, then said, “You shouldn’t be here.”

“It’s as much a surprise to me as it is to you. More.”

“Things are going to happen. Once it—”

“They’ve *been* happening,” she interrupted.

“Once it starts, I can’t worry about you. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“None of us can.”

“Deal. I won’t worry about you either.”

“I’m just saying. There may not be time to look back for you. Some of this you’re going to have to do on your own.”

“I’ll just be sitting. Waiting.”

“That’s something.”

“Special Agent Gage, you’re making me feel pretty small. I imagine it’s having the same effect on you. Why don’t you spare us both, spit a nail and loan me a gun. Maybe I can be of some use. Amaze us both.”

Damn, she sounded drained, Jess thought. Pulling up his pants cuff he extracted a pistol from an ankle holster.

“Ever fire a gun before?”

She shook her head.

“You shouldn’t need to,” he said, “but if you do—” Without actually firing the weapon, he gave her a quick demonstration on how to use it. “Just keep your head down, you’ll be fine.”

“I know. Because you can’t look back.”

“No.”

“You can’t worry about me.”

He knew he was going to look. Knew he was going to worry.

She knew too.

George Jefferson Swann was back in Stagecoach, as was the dead Blooper. They’d placed Goode in the trunk. No disrespect, Jess didn’t feel it was proper having him in the cabin with the president. The physician was a different story—Jess explained

to the others he needed him in the limo. He eased Swann into a sitting position, removed the Kevlar blanket and began fitting him into a body armor vest, not an easy thing to do because he was nearly lifeless. Lyle and Dominca assisted. It took Swann a moment to recognize the agent. “Jess—?”

“How’re you feeling, sir?”

The president swallowed, coughed twice, and spoke with difficulty, barely a whisper. “Damn proud—”

Jess turned to Dominca. “How’re you holding up?”

“I’m holding,” she said.

“I’ve never seen you less than perfect. Not once.”

“Both my father and grandfather were Secret Service,” she said. “I let you down, I let down three generations.”

Jess refolded the blanket around the president, now a double layer of protection, then climbed out, groped inside his suit coat for his cell and discovered it missing, lost somehow, somewhere during what had already been an impossible, nearly three-hour rolling gunfight with no end in sight. He spoke to Lyle standing nearby. “Do you have your cell?” Lyle nodded. “Dial a number for me, ask for Micki,” Jess said. “When you get her, put me on.” He gave the number and the rookie dialed it while Jess went back to adjusting the blanket.

The cloying scent of orchids, hibiscus, and bird of paradise, the kind of massive floral arrangements rarely seen in the real world outside glossy photo spreads in upscale interior design

magazines, filled the room. All afternoon, the first lady, her daughter, and her daughter's friends, had been glued to the half-dozen wide screen televisions throughout the house, channel surfing, but it didn't matter which they watched; CNN, MSNBC, Fox, and local stations all reported variations of the same story.

Throughout, a dozen phones had never stopped ringing, a cacophony of custom ringtones, extended family, friends, and government notables going on record offering their sympathy and well wishes and expressing their shock. Each time they rang, Micki Swann jumped a little, a blend of hope and hopelessness wracking her brain.

Another phone. An aide reached for it and was intercepted by a Service agent who snatched it away, said, "Yes?" and listened. After a few seconds he handed it off to the first lady. "Hello?"

"Is there a Micki there?"

"Who's asking, please?"

"It doesn't matter who's asking," Lyle answered, his manner impatient, officious. "Are you Micki?"

"Yes, this is Micki Swann. Now please tell me who the hell is calling and what the hell you want—"

Lyle's composure instantly changed. Lost in his own misery, he hadn't made the connection between "Micki" and "first lady." "First Lady Micki Swann?"

"How did you get this number?"

"Ma'am, I'm calling for—"

Jess grabbed the phone away.

"It's Jess Gage, Mrs. Swann."

Her heart galloped. "Jess?"

"He's fine, ma'am. He was drugged, but he's starting to come out of it. He'll be fine once it wears off, going to have one hell of a hangover though. He's having difficulty speaking, but he can hear okay." He listened for a moment, then handed the phone back to Lyle. "She wants to talk to you."

Lyle was incredulous—first the president and now the first lady? He said, "Mrs. Swann?"

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Special Agent Lyle Moody, ma'am, here with the president," Lyle expecting to have his head chewed off.

She said, "Thank you, Lyle, for being there. Now would you mind holding the phone for my husband?"

Lyle's voice hitched. "Yes, ma'am. Here he is." He placed the phone to the president's ear.

"How are you, my darling?" Micki said. "I'm here with Charlie. She's so happy to hear you're okay. Jess says he'll soon have you back with us. Your daughter wants to talk to you. Here she is."

Charlie's voice came on the line. "Daddy, I don't know if you can understand me," she said in stops and starts, "but we can see the terrible things that are happening and I love you so much, we all do, and we're praying, praying for you. Mom and me spoke to grandma and grandpa and aunt Sue and uncle

Albert and they're also praying—" Micki gently pried the phone from her hand.

Lyle passed the phone to Dominca. "The first lady wants to speak to you." The pinpricks that dotted her face had begun to scab over, in the dim light giving the appearance of a young woman with chicken pox.

"Hello, Mrs. Swann, it's Dominca Ricci."

"Dominca, I'm so, so glad you're with him."

"Thank you, ma'am. We're doing our best."

"Of course you are."

"Would you like to speak to him again?"

"Yes, but no. Please, please take care of him, and yourselves. We hope to see you soon."

The call ended.

The first lady rose and turned to the Service guy. "I'm flying out there."

"Ma'am—"

"No, now. I need to be there."

The men and women crowding the command post stood anxiously waiting. Jess's voice over the radio sprung Whale to his feet. "This is Stagecoach to command. We want to come in."

"Tell us where and we'll come get you."

"I want Huntsman, alone."

"Fine, Gage. You win. Just give us back the president."

"Do not hold us up, Whale. Do not hold us up."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

There was movement on the street fronting the parking structure. A glint of chrome fender in moonlight, the flicker of a streetlight off a windshield, black, tinted vehicles moving into position. Santos had marshalled the remnants of his troops, those who hadn't disappointed, those still hungry. The occasional Cinco de Mayo firecrackers, cherry bombs, and far-off bottle rockets augmented the wartime atmosphere.

He and Kutanta sat in the sedan parked on the ground floor beside what had once been a Bed, Bath & Beyond.

Tomas Ulzana's voice on his cell: "You know where they are?"

"The Secret Service is nothing if not predictable."

"You were lucky. If they will not cut it off, we will do it for them."

Jess sat in the limo with the president and Blooper, the agent unloading smoke canisters and gas masks from the rear console. Climbing out, he distributed them to Special Agents Rykoff, Ricci, Bible, the four members of his CAT team, and Officer Zabrizki. An afterthought, he climbed out, opened the right front door, leaned in, and gave the dash a couple of knocks.

On his signal, Lyle maneuvered Stagecoach to the foot of the ramp coiling to the topmost level. Hercules rolled into position directly behind.

Not among the vehicles going to the rooftop, Grace sat in the straggler off in the shadows. Jess went over and stood beside her open window, quietly looking at her, something he'd done every chance he could since they'd met, and couldn't begin to imagine being in her shoes.

"What are our chances we'll survive this?"

"We've got our second wind," he said, not really answering. "We need to do this."

Suddenly, she drew him close and kissed him full on the mouth, the last thing he expected in a day already packed with the unexpected. "For luck and because I've been wanting to," she said after she released him.

Jess returned to his team at the foot of the ramp leading to the top. "We set?"

Ray said, "Good to go."

Jess waved them forward, Old West gunfighters at high noon. Lyle in Stagecoach followed.

Bible back on his perch, Hercules brought up the rear.

Once on the roof, Jess spoke into his mike. "Huntsman from Gage. We are ready for evac."

"Roger that, Gage," Huntsman's voice. "I don't see you."

The special agents and the officer scanned the night sky and soon made out the helo, a dark speck, its cone of light seeking them out.

"Straight ahead. Cut your light," Jess instructed.

Huntsman's light snapped off as it drew near.

Jess turned to his team and said, "Smoke."

Everyone pulled their masks down, then popped and tossed their smoke canisters. Stagecoach and Hercules were enveloped, those on the ground shadows in the swirling gloom. Lyle activated the limo's grill lights, illuminating them with bursts of red and blue light.

"Okay, we see you," Huntsman said. "We're coming. Are you clear?"

"Roger that, come in," Jess said.

Lyle cut the lights, casting them into darkness again. Tendrils of smoke drifted across the rooftop.

Huntsman swooped in and hovered, its rotor blades causing the smoke to disperse. Caught in the downdraft, a makeshift tent of plastic sheeting blew sideways, danced across the rooftop, snagged on the rail, tore free, and flapped away into the dark. The agent's suit jackets fluttered in the faux wind.

It was time. Jess and Ray reached into the limo and together lifted the president out, his body limp, wrapped in the Kevlar blanket, his face hidden beneath a gas mask. Dead weight, they half carried, half dragged him across the roof and set him down.

Huntsman slowed, kept its distance, and hovered.

"Now. Now, Huntsman, set it down now!" Jess spoke into his mike.

"Jess!" Dominca shouted.

Following her point, he made out one of the Nighthawks a block away, blinking like a Christmas tree.

“Get down here, Huntsman! Whale, give the order!”

“Wait for cover, Gage. Four minutes,” he heard Whale say. “We have ground assets on the way.”

“We *are* cover! Set it down, Whale! Put it down, Huntsman!”

Another sound got their attention—a high-pitched whistle beneath the thrum of the helo’s rotors. The MANPAD missile fired from ground landed but didn’t explode. Skiting underneath Hercules, the dud came to rest against a low retaining wall.

Jess yelled, “Huntsman! Now!”

Two more missiles came from opposite directions. One landed long, the other short, missing everything. The hostiles weren’t able see their targets, only guessing, firing blindly, needing a lucky strike.

“Abort! Goddamn it! Abort! Go, Huntsman! Go, it’s too late! Get out of here!”

Huntsman swung off and nearly collided with the arriving Nighthawk. The two helos separated. Nighthawk strafed the street and banked away.

Covered by Dominca and Zabrizki, Jess and Ray hoisted the president to his feet and started back to Stagecoach.

The first Suburban nosed up the ramp, attained the rooftop, hurtled through smoke and opened with indiscriminate fire. The firefight didn’t last but a few seconds, the hostiles put out of commission by Bible manning the gat.

Jess and Ray hauling the president started off again.

Backtracking with them, Zabrizki lowered his gas mask and shouted, "Wait! Wait! Stop! Stop! He nodded to a third helo, this one much smaller, rising into view beyond the railing.

Dominca spun. Jess and Ray froze, followed the officer's point and made out the Sky-Eye helo thirty yards beyond the rim. Dominca waved it off, gun pointed at the cameraman leaning out the open hatch. "Get the fuck out of here! Go! Go! Go!" Dominca realizing there was no way they could hear her.

A fourth missile cleared the rooftop and struck home. There followed a sickening crunch, the helo's blades sheared off. Sky-Eye spiraled sideways and crashed on the roof. Fiery bits and pieces rattled across the cement.

Jess dove atop the president, shielding him. Ray dove atop Jess. Dominca and Zabrizki stood over them giving cover.

Lyle climbed from Stagecoach, crouched behind the open door, gun out, unsure whether to go to them or stay with the limo.

Jess tilted his head, squinted into the smoke and motioned. What the fuck, Moody, get over here!

Lyle got back in and eased the limo alongside.

The two agents scrambled off the president, dragged him over and got him inside.

One level below, Grace waited in the straggler. She'd heard muted gunfire and the louder sound of explosions. The air smelled faintly of burning fuel. She'd spied first one, then two,

then three black vehicles, headlights dead, arrive on her floor, then disappear into the dark. The third, a black van, had slowed to glance in her direction, causing her to tighten her grip on the revolver. It too moved on. They hadn't returned.

Topside, Jess tossed his mask, drew his Sig and mounted the limo's near side running board. They'd have to head down, likely as not fight their back to the street. Then what? Trapped in a nightmare of unsafe safe houses, moving from one to another, the promised land of LAX and the safe zone surrounding Air Force one standing by, but always just beyond reach. He flashed on somehow surviving but having the same nightmare for years to come.

Ray followed his lead. Dominca and Zabrizki climbed aboard on the opposite side. Jess thumped his window with his free hand and yelled, "Let's roll!"

Lyle punched it, cut a wide circle, sideswiped a Suburban and fishtailed for the ramp down, at first going fast, then took it easy, mindful of the four clinging on. Hercules trailed right behind. Rotor-driven smoke had washed down the ramp, islands of it here and there clouding the view. On its way up, the second Suburban came out of nowhere, their head-on enough to nearly knock the foursome off. Locked grill to grill, Stagecoach muscled it down the winding incline. The three agents and the officer hunkered low, Bible's gat chewing up the vehicle's windshield and everything inside. By the time they hit the fifth

level no one inside was returning fire. Lyle shoved it aside and went looking for the next ramp down.

The hunters in the black van waited for their prey to come to them. Each of the five levels featured multiple ascending and descending ramps. They hoped they'd chosen well. Those on the ground hadn't been so patient. They'd fired their missiles without being able to see their targets. Santos had been angry with them, reminding them that their mission was still the same—not to assassinate, but to remove the hand that wore the bracelet—to teach a lesson. Tomas Ulzana was fond of lessons.

Santos had told them there was now a bounty on the American president. Each of the three manning the van hoped they would be the one to remove the offending hand, the one that wore the bracelet. If the president bled out and died of his injury, so be it.

Lionel 'G-Man' Bible and his CAT crew died that day.

Tires squealed in the dark, Lyle gunning it again, the rookie looking for the next ramp down. He'd traveled half the length of a football field when he told himself screw it, switched on the headlights and saw it, barely—EXIT—the overhead sign dead.

The shoulder-fired missile came without warning, not enough time for Bible to swivel the gat, the open-doored van from which it came buried in smokey darkness. The explosion pulverized Hercules, blew a fifteen-foot crater in the cement

floor and took out two support pillars. The shockwave propelled a cardboard box filled with empty wine bottles sixty feet across the floor.

Lyle didn't slow.

Eight seconds later Jess heard tires that weren't the limo's squeal in the dark, or thought he did, hard to be sure with the fire crackling at his back.

The rookie angled for the down ramp.

Now those on the running boards could see it—the dark shape of a stopped van blocking the way down—two, no, three hostiles crouched outside it.

Automatic fire erupted from the trio. There were no more missiles. Jess got it: at this point extreme prejudice defeated their purpose, the hostiles still needed the American president alive. The motorcade, once invincible, had been reduced to a single, barely defended vehicle that happened to contain the president of the United States.

The two agents and the officer returned fire.

One of the hostiles clasped both hands to his face and fell backwards.

The two flanking him kept firing.

Bullets pockmarked a mural of galloping horses. More bounced off the limo's near side windows. One tore through flesh. Zabrizki grabbed his right side above his hip, lost his footing, pitched sideways, and fell away.

A second hostile went down.

Ray faltered, dropped his weapon, but managed to cling on. Across the roof, Dominca watched Jess struggle to prop him up. Knowing looks between the three told the story; Jess would have to let him go. She watched as Ray tumbled off and dropped behind.

The third dropped his weapon and raised his hands in surrender. Jess and Dominca each squeezed off a shot—a miss and a hit—and put him away.

A fourth, the driver, darted from behind a pillar. Jess tracked him, fired, and missed. Another shot and his clip was empty. The limo hit the hostile dead on. Scooped onto the hood, he clung there, draped face to face with Lyle behind the windshield. He had a pistol. There followed three rapid shots. Lyle ducked, a reflex, the rounds leaving frosted gouges in the glass. Dominca inched along the runner trying to get a clear shot, but the angle was off. Planting her foot on the side mirror, she hauled herself atop the roof. The triggerman tossed his pistol and reached to his belt for a grenade. Lyle winced, unsure whether Stagecoach could withstand the blast. Legs akimbo, Dominca drew a two-handed bead on the Bolivian. The hostile pulled the pin in the instant she fired. Brain matter doused the glass. The hostile disappeared in a red haze. The explosion ejected Dominca overboard. Her gun flew from her grip and skidded away. Stagecoach shuddered but the windshield held, the blast blinding, rendering Lyle momentarily sightless. Jess, crouched low, clung on while the limo rolled to a stop. By then, Dominca

was back on her feet, wiping the viscera coating the windshield with her forearm. She stepped to the driver's door, hammered the glass with her fist and yelled, "Pop the locks!" Lyle popped them. Dominca opened the door and leaned in. "You good?" Lyle blinked, slammed the door shut and took off again.

Kantuta at the wheel, headlights off, the black sedan emerged from a ramp to the fifth level. A half-minute earlier, they'd run over Jack Blooper's stethoscope. Further on, they slowed to glance at a dead uniformed officer. Their windows were down, but they heard nothing—no screech of tires or gunfire. They had waited on the street, but the limousine hadn't come down. Nor had any of the team sent to finish the mission. She drove slowly, neither of them speaking. To one side they made out the dark shape of a bullet riddled Suburban. They drove past. If they encountered the limousine, they would keep their distance, but they needed to see with their own eyes. If there were agents still alive, the hunters felt safe. The agents wouldn't bother to pursue, the hunted turned hunters. Their job was to protect and avoid, not to risk further endangering the president.

Santos said to stop.

Kantuta stopped.

He said, "Turn on your lights."

Fifty feet ahead they saw two seated figures, possibly a man and a woman, one cradling the other in her arms. The woman turned to squint into their headlights. The two in the sedan sat

for a moment watching. Finally, Santos opened his door, got out and stood behind it, gun drawn.

He went to them.

Even in the dim light, Santos knew their faces, ones from his file. The male had been shot through the right breast pocket of his suit coat, but was alive, hitching breath, looking down at his red-stained shirt. The holster at his belt was empty. The female also from his file. He didn't see a gun.

The downed agent lifted his chin and looked up at him.

The woman looked up.

Santos looked down at them.

He lowered his gun to her face, held it there, deciding, then to the other agent's face, still deciding.

He turned to look at Kantuta, his sacred flower.

He turned back to the woman on the ground.

Still deciding.

The woman squeezed her eyes shut and held the shot man close, waiting.

After a moment, Santos turned his back to them and returned to the sedan. The headlights went off. The sedan drove off and disappeared into the dark.

A minute had passed since the sedan drove off.

Ray hadn't spoken. Neither had Dominca, not sure he was aware of what had just happened.

Finally, he said, "Don't say it." His eyes still closed.

She puzzled out what he meant.

He said, "Relax."

"I'm not your boss."

Silence.

His fingers crept up her cheek and plucked a sliver of glass from her eyebrow.

"What are you?"

"Your girlfriend."

"Don't forget it."

Silence.

Another minute and the sedan returned.

It wasn't the sedan.

It was a white van.

Two similar things were happening at the same time.

Lyle hunting for the next ramp down, Jess now the only one aboard the runner. He saw movement. A figure dragging a sleeping bag wandered into his headlights. The squatter, who'd somehow slept through the gunfire, explosions, metal slamming metal, had been emptying his bladder behind a pillar. Lyle swerved to avoid creaming him. Jess took aim, ready to put him away, then held his fire. The limo blew past, turned a corner and was gone.

Grace hunting for the next ramp—Ray and Dominca now her passengers. She braked, her headlights illuminating the chest-high rail separating them from the void.

Dominca said, "Shit. Missed it. Turn around, go back."

Shooting out of the dark, Lyle saw the straggler's brake lights too late. The rookie spun the wheel, clipping the van's rear right bumper. Jess leapt and rolled. Rear-ended, the van spun off, slammed the rail broadside and came to rest. The limo continued another dozen yards, struck the railing square on, shattered it, and ground to a stop. Stagecoach teetered there, its hood end dangling over the edge, Lyle staring into empty space. Unseen, the fronds of a sixty-foot palm tree brushed against the undercarriage.

Nothing had gone as planned.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The smoke had begun to thin, revealing the ghostly shapes of Stagecoach and the dead straggler. Goode's body again lay on the concrete. The doors to both vehicles stood wide open. The limo's trunk stood raised. A trauma kit satchel, its contents scattered about, sat beside the limo's right rear door. Two discarded, blood-flecked pairs of blue latex gloves. An open surgical kit sat on the limo's roof. A pair of scissors and alcohol wipes beside it. Ribbons of blood-stained bandages littered the concrete. An empty briefcase beside the rear right tire, the H&K submachine gun missing. Beside the briefcase rested a 12-gauge Remington pump-action shotgun, useless because the barrel had been forcibly bent. Handguns, cans of pepper spray, and Kevlar vests littered the concrete.

Descending a switchback stairwell at the rear of the structure, Special Agents Jess Gage and Lyle Moody, President of the United States George Jefferson Swann propped between them, groped their way down in the pitch dark. Swann, still groggy, off and on barely conscious, made an effort to support his weight on rubber legs, his handlers pausing every five or six steps to let him rest. The submachine gun lifted from the limo's trunk dangled from Jess's shoulder, an H&K sidearm lifted from the compartment behind the limo's grill tucked in his waist. Lyle too had an extra firearm tucked at his waist.

Close behind were Special Agent Dominca Ricci and civilian Grace Wick, Special Agent Ray Rykoff buttressed between them. Dominca also carried an extra firearm from the limousine's stockpile. Ray's chest wound had been dressed with a compress from the limo's surgical kit, the little they could do for him, but blood still seeped through. Patching him up, Ray had said he was okay, the wound only looked bad because there was so much blood, but wasn't all that serious, nothing a few days down in Baja couldn't cure. But saying it he didn't sound or look anywhere okay. He'd only gotten worse, barely able to keep himself upright.

"What you did back there for us, you were good," Dominca saying it to Grace. "We appreciate it."

"I didn't—"

"No, no, you did good."

Jess could hear their voices echo in the dark well. "Keep it down," raising his own, and they fell silent. "And stay off your mikes."

Another flight to the next landing the president said, "Stop. Stop." Jess and Lyle stopped. Then, "Think I'm going to be sick." They supported him against the wall as he bent double and dry heaved.

Dominca, Grace, and Ray had caught up on the landing above. Jess peered back over his shoulder, and said, "How're you doing back there? Ray?"

“Nothing that a plastic surgeon and a tan can’t patch up. Don’t wait for me.”

Swann took another half-minute to recover, then said, “Okay. Let’s go.”

The crescent of jam-packed vehicles fronting the not-so-safe safe house had grown and tightened, more and more law enforcement arriving until you had to wonder whether the rest of the city was left unprotected. If you’d had something criminal on your mind, but were undecided, now might be the time to get it done.

Inconspicuous in the darkness beyond the perimeter, a black sedan sat parked on the outer edge of the dozens of nearly look-alike vehicles.

Santos had just finished a call. He said to Kantuta, “He wept. He could barely get out the words,” but that was a lie—Tomas Ulzana hadn’t wept, he’d given his order and gone back to thwacking—but Santos enjoyed saying he did, the high drama of it.

“Order?” Kantuta asked.

“To finish it.”

Santos signaled her to pull away, then dialed his cell again. Beep—Beep—Beep—

Stagecoach teetered at the edge of the parking structure, the forward part of its hood and front tires suspended in space. A

faint, steady beep, beep, beep—synced to a phone dialing—disturbed the silence while casting a thimble width of dull red, pulsing light on the shadowed concrete. On the seventh beep the C-4 blew. A white-hot flash and the trunk end leapt, somersaulted, and plummeted five stories to the ground. Molten streamers erupted on impact. The limousine, like some pagan monolith, swayed upright for a few seconds, then slowly tilted backward and settled, the barely dented roof upside down, tires flaming at the base of the palm.

A hazy moon, warm butter melting at the edges in a black skillet sky, shone down on the six men and women making their way across a weedy, three-block-long stretch of somehow left undeveloped no man's land. Here and there a few palm trees stood their ground. Try Google Earth to get the lay of the land, zoom tighter and tighter, you'd see an elongated rectangle of brownish green bordered on all sides by a thousand checkerboards of urban sprawl.

Jess and Lyle's gun were out in their free hands, every few steps their eyes turned to the street, a narrow river of asphalt weaving alongside a grassy wasteland. They hadn't seen any civilian traffic—anything that looked suspicious or had the kind of presence to make their antenna go up—unless the hostiles had changed tactics and decided to come at them in disguise. All they'd seen were a trio of police cruisers whipping past. You didn't need to be clairvoyant to know where they were headed.

The president stumbled, nearly dragging Jess and Lyle to the ground with him. “You’ve got to try to walk, sir,” Jess said. “You’ve got to help us.”

“Yes— Yes—”

“We need to get out of the open,” Jess again.

They’d gotten him to his feet and started off again when they heard the dull whomp of the explosion at their backs, like a gas flamed gutting out. Stopping to look back, they made out the gray outline of the parking structure, a dull orange flicker at its west facing base, and guessed what had happened—beneath Stagecoach there had been a third wire.

Moving on, none of them mentioned it.

Santos heard the explosive whomp a mile-and-a-half away to the west. In the seconds before he’d been thinking it would be a wonder, so many dark-toned vehicles, similar makes and models, if some of their owners weren’t already halfway home before they realized they weren’t driving the ride they’d arrived in—First World problems—then, the explosion. He told his sacred flower to take them there.

The Tender Box, the twisty oversized words once outlined in winking bulbs now long missing or dead, the cube a bubblegum pink adult book store, sat isolated on a quarter acre of cracked concrete at the end of a short drive from the street to a small parking lot. A faded black on yellow sign over the boarded-up

entrance promised much— ‘You Are Entering a Classy Adult Book Store,’—but had long since given up. Two forward-facing windows were painted over with thick black paint, the door between them boarded-up with plywood.

They’d entered through a rear door after prying off another sheet of plywood. Jess went in first, checking for squatters. After he signaled, the rest moved down a brief corridor past a row of open curtained viewing booths, the booths for sitting on a stool and dropping a quarter in a slot and watching a film clip on a toaster-sized screen, only a minute or two before another quarter was needed. Moving on, moonlight stabbing through the Swiss cheese ceiling revealed the deep plum peeling paint interior. They passed through a maze of empty wooden bookcases, like a smalltown library, but here the shelves not too high, you wouldn’t need a stepladder to reach the classics—*New Wave Hookers* or *The Devil in Miss Jones*. Sagging racks of wire wall shelving that once stocked rows of dirty paperbacks, magazines, and packaged sex toys stood bare. Over the years, vandals and come and gone, leaving behind their graffiti signatures. An empty ten-gallon aquarium sat on a counter beside an obsolete 8mm film projector. A closer look in the tank revealed the bones of some kind of small animal that wasn’t a fish. A tiny pale beak identified it as a bird.

The women tore down the moth-eaten curtains and laid them out on the plaster-dusted floor. They lowered Ray to one of the makeshift pallets. Jess and Lyle lowered the president to

the other. The sick and the wounded man laid side-by-side in the shell of a bombed-out building, a scene from a war film.

Jess turned to Lyle and said, "You still have your phone?" Lyle fished in his jacket, took out his cell and handed it over. Jess punched in a number and got right to it when the first lady answered, this time no go-between staffer to intercept the call. "It's Jess Gage again, Mrs. Swann. He's fine," saying it fast, wanting to get through the first part to spare her the pain of seeing the agent's name on the caller ID, assuming he'd been instructed to confirm what she was likely already seeing and hearing, wherever she was, although he correctly assumed she was already on a private jet somewhere over the Pacific, a five-hour fight to L.A. He slowed it down. "Ma'am, I need you to know that you're going to see and hear some things, you probably already have, but know he's okay. We still have a way to go tonight, I'll spare you the details," and even that was difficult, piling further mystery on what was already a clusterfuck of one impossibility after another. "But we need him as alert as possible, so whatever you can do to clear his head, ma'am." He handed the president the phone, saying, "It's your wife, Mr. President."

The president said, "Micki—?"

It seemed to work, the sound of her voice instantly reviving him—like he'd been given a dose of smelling salts.

Jess stood close by, wanting Swann to keep the call short, ready to take the phone back, but decided to give him a bit more time. He stepped away to give him some privacy.

Ten feet away, Grace exhaled, emptied her lungs, filled them again, pressed her back to the wall, and slid to the floor. Drawing her knees to her chest, she rested her head on her folded arms.

Dominca reluctantly left Ray and returned down the corridor to the back door. She stood the slab of plywood back against the opening, shutting out the moonlight, but left enough space so she could peer out. Every few seconds she looked back over her shoulder to lock eyes with Ray.

Lyle explored and found a half empty box of nails sitting atop the gallon paint can used to darken the windows. He stepped to one of the forward-facing black rectangles and began to scratch at it, the flakes falling away like black snow, creating a quarter-sized peephole.

If you were driving by on the street, you had no way of knowing anyone was inside.

No one drove by.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A modest suburban tract home at the corner of Acorn and Butternut, situated in the city of Arcadia in the San Gabriel Valley, thirteen miles northeast of downtown Los Angeles.

In the living room, eight members of the extended Moody family—three grandparents, two parents, and their three teen children—stared with dazed incomprehension at their flat screen Toshiba. Yvonne Moody, bent forward, crossed arms hugging herself, sat on the couch between her three daughters, all under the age of sixteen, arms draped around each other, tears on their faces. Her husband, Herb, a wiry, short man, a former jockey but confined to a wheelchair after suffering a broken back during a six thoroughbred pile up on the final stretch at Santa Anita Park three years earlier, the racetrack three miles from the family home, sat apart from the others.

Behind them, an arched portal gave way to the dining room where the family's dinner, a bucket of Kentucky fried picked up on the drive home from the Olvera Street site where they'd manned the rope line and waved at the arriving motorcade, knowing Lyle was somewhere behind the dark tinted vehicles, was still untouched, the overturned bucket visited by the family pooch until there was nothing left to gobble down, no side dishes left to lick clean.

They'd first heard of the president's sudden illness and much of what followed on the car radio right after picking up the

chicken, and over the next two hours found it impossible to think the disaster could take on further and further scope, yet somehow it had.

But where was Lyle in all this?

On the television, three blocks from ground zero, a veteran reporter long inured to calamities great and small, looked and sounded genuinely rattled, for once no fakery about it. Three blocks because if you were a news crew or anyone who wasn't involved with law enforcement, it was the closest you were allowed to get.

Until fresh footage became available, the same images—mostly helo views of the Olvera Street site, the mall parking structure, the White House, the first family's vacation digs in Maui, and stock footage of the president going about his business—were being recycled over and over, the same coverage on every channel.

The TV reporter saying, "The wreckage, which we're not allowed to show you, we've been asked, ordered actually, to keep our distance, which we absolutely understand and want to respect, is believed to be the presidential limousine. And it's also believed, and I can't stress this enough, that what we're hearing is unconfirmed, that President George Jefferson Swann may have been inside the vehicle at the time of the explosion. Again, I want to stress, repeat that for you—the president may have been aboard." The camera pulled back, revealing hundreds of the mortified milling about. "People have been gathering, as

you can see, crowds of people arriving, this is just so hard to believe, impossible really, folks arriving to see for themselves as the nation awaits official word.”

Yvonne picked up the remote and switched channels. Another reporter: “While some of the locals who live around here have been escorted away, a great many more are still arriving, overwhelming the police presence.”

Lyle’s mother suddenly leaned forward, cupped a palm over her mouth, pointed with the other hand, and said, “Oh, my god, oh, my god, is that our Lyle?” a hopeful whisper. She looked across at her husband for confirmation, not that she needed it, she damn well knew her son when she saw him, but it would help to know his father was feeling at least some of what she was. Herb didn’t look at her.

Herb Moody’s intense dislike for the current administration (he prided himself on being among those who’d gladly tell you, if you bothered to ask, or even if you didn’t, “Not my president,” and had a sign planted on his front lawn to make the point) extended to his very own flesh and blood assigned to protect the president or anyone associated with him. It was bad enough when his only son had been assigned to protect the first lady, but his recent transfer to the presidential detail was more than he could stomach. He claimed it made him physically ill, as if being stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of his life wasn’t enough.

On the television, the camera had picked up a dark-suited figure standing on the margins, back turned, legs spread, arms

clasped behind his back. Yvonne suddenly erect, pointing, saying, "Wait, wait, is that our Lyle?"

She rose, quickly stepped to the television, sank to her knees, and pressed a finger against the screen. "Him, him, this one. It's him."

"Where, Mom?" one of her daughters asked.

"Which one, Mom?" Another daughter.

"Mom, move, move, I can't see," the third.

Yvonne scooted aside on her knees, kept her finger pressed to the screen and said, "That one. It's Lyle."

The figure turned. Even with the shades they knew it wasn't Lyle.

Yvonne sank to her heels and hung her head.

Her daughters slumped back on the couch.

Yvonne, who now supported the family with her job as a paralegal and part-time weekend work as a mutual teller at the racetrack, rose from the couch and disappeared down a hall toward the far end of the house. The pooch padded after her.

"Mom, come back, you'll miss something!" one of her daughters yelled.

"You'll tell me!" Yvonne yelled back.

In the parental bedroom, at the foot of the unmade king-sized bed, she knelt before a faux leather antique treasure chest. She lifted the lid. Nestled atop a folded duvet rested a framed 8 x 10 photograph of her boy. Smartly attired in a dark suit, matching tie, and ever-present shades, Secret Service Agent Lyle

Moody, age twenty-four at the time the photo was taken, had only just graduated from the USSS training center located just outside Washington D.C., a city she had never been to, but planned one day to visit.

She brought the photo to her lips and lightly kissed it.

Returning through the dining room, she positioned his likeness on the middle shelf of a sideboard, between a small framed print of the Holy Mother and one of Jesus.

Herb looked over his shoulder and watched, as she'd hoped he would. She sat at her customary place at the table, the photo of her son positioned so she could see it the next time and every time thereafter when she sat down to eat.

After a moment she rose, slightly adjusted the photo's angle, then returned to her seat at the table. Bowing her head, she clasped her hands in prayer, amending one of her favorites: "Christ be with him, Christ behind him, Christ beneath him, Christ above him. Amen, Lord."

Returning to the living room, she retook her place between her daughters. Half defiant, half hopeful, she again turned to her husband—and got what she needed—a barely perceptible nod. He could have done much better, but it was enough for now. Their eyes locked, she added a grim, slender smile—shifting shades of motherly pride, abhorrence, and fear in a single expression. If their son was among the dead, he'd died a hero.

The camera swung back to the reporter, tightened on his face, and held it. The same questions for the hundredth time: “Was the president in the limousine? Who was with him?”

Outside the house, in a pool of light cast by the porch lamp, a free roaming peacock and two peahens, Arcadia’s pride and joy, pecked at the lawn.

Jess found the cramped toilet off a small room that must once have been the manager’s office, a second empty aquarium stuck in a corner, some purple gravel and a fairy sandcastle still in it.

Not much light in the toilet, a frosted window about the size of an album cover letting in some moonlight, a big brown stain on the wall behind the toilet tank. Standing over the dry, encrusted bowl, emptying his bladder, leaning forward, the palm of one hand pressed against the wall for balance, that stain roughly the shape of South America—it brought to mind a pull-down map of the continents in a high school classroom. An image flashed in his mind—South America. Which meant the Amazon, right? Okay, the Amazon River then, the mighty Amazon. He pictured two aquariums on opposite sides of a room, the Bolivian narco lord Tomas Ulzana seated between them. One tank contained a piranha, big vicious looking orange-bellied mother, protruding jaw showing triangle teeth. The other tank held a couple dozen common goldfish and another, different fish, one he couldn’t right away think of its name, but like the ones you saw in pet stores in little round glass bowls,

the one that came in every color of the rainbow and had those big flowing fins, barely enough room to move in there—oh, yeah, Siamese fighting fish—you'd buy one for your kid as a starter pet, take it home, three days later it'd be dead. Every time Ulzana's cell rang, he'd listen, put the phone down, then go over to the goldfish, swish a net through the tank, catch one, and transfer it to the piranha tank, then go back to his seat, wait for the phone to ring again. Doing it over and over until the goldfish were all gone and eaten. Saving the Siamese for last. All that passed through Jess's mind in the time it took to empty his bladder. Out of habit, he reached for the handle to flush, then remembered there wasn't any water. He felt sorry for the women who'd have to come back there for a visit. He'd tell them to try and hold it in.

Parked inside the secure perimeter surrounding the mall, Huntsman waited, rotors spinning as Whale escorted the Bonaventure command super back to the helo.

"They weren't aboard!" Whale said, shouting to be heard above the racket.

"Doesn't look like it!" the super shouted back.

"They'll try for the airport!"

"Yes, sir!"

"He was right, you know!"

"If they make it!"

The super climbed aboard and Huntsman lifted, grew small in the night.

Whale returned to his sedan and was about to climb in when a lady reporter who'd dodged notice trotted up and shoved a mike in his face. Her cameraman began filming, the lady reporter demanding to know, "Was the president in the limousine, deputy director? Was the president in the limousine?"

Whale considered his answer, then nodded. "I'm sorry to say—yes, yes he was."

CHAPTER THIRTY

It had been close to four hours since the motorcade departed LAX for downtown LA. Had the day unfolded as a norm they would already have been out and about engaged in their evening plans.

The previous day at the Pantry with Jess, Grace had mentioned country music, thinking she'd invite him to an Elvis Costello concert at the Troubadour on Little Santa Monica, West Hollywood, then afterward, a hop, skip, and a jump to Barney's Beanery for burgers and chili cheese fries, to compare notes and get their show on the road, Grace hoping it wasn't too soon, scaring him off by easing into what she did and didn't want, hoping he'd loosen up a little and do the same—the 'show' being the result of their serendipitous meeting, one she felt for the first time in a long time had potential—the seasoned agent and the woman bringing up the rear in a presidential motorcade, and really, who could have predicted that—but they'd been interrupted by Lyle at the Bonaventure's piano and she'd never followed up. Never mind that they lived on opposite coasts, they were adults, they'd figure it out.

She dozed a little. When she awoke her thoughts were still all over the place.

Another name for The Tender Box popped into her mind—Playpen of the Damned.

Her thoughts turned to the dead and dying. Good guys. Bad buys. She never imagined she'd be witness to so much death.

She dozed off again.

Dominca Ricci had thoughts of her own. She and Ray had put in a stay for the weekend and made plans the next night for an evening on the town. They'd start with dinner and some hocus pocus at Hollywood's Magic Castle, members only, but Ray had a magician friend who could get them in. Or maybe at the last minute one of them would change their mind, convince the other to drive to coastal Malibu, have dinner at Gladstones on the beach, feast on coconut shrimp and sip mojitos, maybe afterward drive up PCH in their rental, stroll the beach at Zuma. On a previous visit to the restaurant, they'd seen a woman in the next booth over suddenly stand and bring her pewter plate down on her date's head, rice and crab legs all over the floor. What a trip, but hey, it could happen again. But any second now, ten minutes, an hour, Ray Rykoff might not still be alive.

She sat beside him. Jess had offered to take her place at the rear entrance. "How're you doing?" she asked. Before Ray could answer, she said, "I know, it only hurts when you laugh."

"So, tell me something funny. Make me laugh."

She thought, then, "Okay, how many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a lightbulb?"

"How many?"

"How many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"No clue. How many?"

"C'mon, how many Vietnam vets does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"I give up."

"Seriously, you don't know?"

"I don't know."

"Damn straight you don't. Because you. Weren't. There."

He smiled and gave a little cough.

After several moments, she said: "Okay, I'm scared."

Ray said: "I'm scared for you."

Dominca said: "Scared for the baby."

He closed his eyes and became still. She watched the slight rise and fall of his chest. A half-minute later he opened them. "Whose baby?"

"Yours. Mine. Ours." She leaned in close, lowered her voice, said, "Baby."

"When were you going to tell me?"

"Tomorrow."

"When, between the underwater chain escape and the amazing bullet catch?"

"No, afterward. Probably over mojitos."

In the moments before Chariot became Stagecoach, Lyle had been undecided. He'd glimpsed his mom and siblings and

grandparents at the greeters' line, but not his dad. In part, but only in part, that was understandable—the man was confined to a wheelchair. Now, after all that had happened, Lyle still hadn't made up his mind. When this was over, he would of course phone the house and speak to his mom and sisters and whoever else was there, but even now, after all that had happened, he was still uncertain whether his dad would come to the phone.

When Jess returned, he saw the president lying on his side, the phone tucked under his ear. He crouched, watched him, made sure he was breathing, then untucked the phone, said "Hello" in case the first lady was still on the line—she wasn't—and put the cell in his suit coat. Glancing over at Ray, his buddy looked about the same.

Grace came out of her mind trip, raised her head and looked around. No, it hadn't all been a crap dream. She was still there. Reaching for her bag, she peered inside, making sure she still had the gun Jess had given her. When she looked up again, he was standing over her.

"How're you doing?"

"According to the sign out front, I should feel cheated," she said, then mumbled something barely audible, worn out, sounding like, "Quick, think of something clever."

"I just did."

She waited.

"Careful what you ask for."

She understood, the quip not about their current whereabouts, but hard-earned advice, a warning to the next civilian champing at the bit to toss their name in the straggler lottery for the next motorcade and all the ones that came after. And if there was any doubt, felt you needed to hear it first hand, ask around, Grace Wick might be available for a front seat perspective. Something to consider.

Jess crossed over to Lyle, making the rounds without any real purpose, hoping he might come up with something they could believe in, but in truth, there wasn't anything more to be said or done until they—really meaning Special Agent Jess Gage—was ready to move on. Lyle spoke before he could. "What's our plan? Are you going to call for help?"

"Same thing I told Ray about an hour ago."

"Remembered to tell Ray but forgot to tell *me*."

"Something about our side having too many toys. We need hide and seek, not shock and awe."

Lyle glanced across at Ray, the agent lying there on the pallet, eyes closed, Dominca beside him.

"Is he going to make it?"

Jess said nothing, picked up the H&K and took Lyle's place peering out the peephole.

"How far to LAX?" Lyle again.

It was a simple question and he knew what Lyle meant, but answered with, "You're asking *me*? It's your town."

"How *long*?"

“Long as it takes, Moody, there’s your answer.”

“What are we, walking?”

They stood there in silence, eye to eye.

Outside, headlights drifted up the street. A chocolate brown freight truck, the familiar UPS logo visible on the side, turned a few feet into the mouth of the driveway leading to the cube, stopped and sat there, engine idling.

Jess tightened his grip on the H&K and unholstered his firearm.

Lyle unholstered his firearm.

Grace came around for the second time to the sound of low voices, the guys over by the window saying something in hushed voices, dust motes dancing in a pencil thin bar of light stretching between the peephole and the wall above her head, the glow there overlapping her face. In a split second she was up and moving, dragging her bag by the straps, scrambling to get to the agents at the window. She peered up at Jess. “Oh no, are they out there?”

Jess put a hand on her shoulder, eased her down, then turned sharply, and said, “Dominca,” somewhere between a loud whisper and a low shout, that laser beam and his tone enough to let her know something was up. Gun drawn, she bolted down the corridor, the four gathered there at the window, Jess’s face in profile to the peephole, just outside the circle of light, his face slightly turned, squinting into the headlights glare.

The truck's interior light came on. Hard to be sure from that distance, but it appeared the uniformed driver had picked up a clipboard, was likely double-checking an address. After a few seconds the interior light went off. The driver put it in reverse, backed into the street, completed a three-point-turn, and disappeared back the way he'd come.

Jess reholstered his gun, and said, "It only takes one."

Lyle held on to his firearm, not convinced they hadn't somehow been fooled into letting down their guard. Any second now they'd be under attack again, the men hunting them storming the shithole castle.

Dominca holstered her weapon, and said, "Thanks, I'll try and remember that," and went to see to Ray, on the way, not looking back, saying, "Proud of yourself, Jess? Jesus, what am I missing here?"

Jess watched her go. She was boiling pissed but wasn't going to have it out with him then and there, but he knew damn well they'd get into it afterward, if they lived to walk away. Part of him suspected she wasn't wrong—he didn't have what it took to lead them, to trust him—wasn't smart, strong, or good enough to steer them out of this mess. Look where he'd got them. Christ, the agent closest to him in the Service lay twenty feet away shot up and there wasn't a thing he could do about it. It was yet another character builder his mother had instilled in him—if you lose, blame yourself first. He hadn't been up front with them, keeping things to himself—the others, after a certain

point, simply along for the ride, whether they liked it or not. Beneath it all was having lost their respect. But back to trust—who could *he* trust?

He turned to Lyle. “Your turn,” daring him to say something.”
They’d been there roughly twenty minutes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

In every home in America and tens of millions in every country around the world, news anchors had interrupted their scheduled programming to report on the American national tragedy. The elderly African American retirement age couple dressed in pajamas and slippers, a macramé throw blanket draped over their legs, sat side by side on their couch likewise watching, a hundred unanswered questions between them, the two vacillating between disbelieving and reluctantly accepting. Around late afternoon, each in turn, their three grown daughters seen in the framed photographs displayed around the room, had telephoned, one from Florida, the other two from across town, breathlessly telling them, “Oh, my God, oh my God,” if their parents weren’t already watching, to immediately turn on their set.

“The wreckage is believed to be the presidential limousine,” the on-site television anchor was saying. “It is also believed that President George Jefferson Swann was in the limousine at the time of the attack. A high-ranking Secret Service agent on the scene has confirmed this, but as yet there has been no official word from the White House or any members of his party. So far, of the few people I’ve been able to talk to, no one seems exactly certain what happened, but of course the investigation is sure to continue for weeks and weeks, possibly months.” There were multiple roving and cutaway shots of the crowd held at bay

behind makeshift barricades, a huge police presence, but none of the actual limousine. “The police are trying to keep them back, but as you can see, hordes of people are gathering now, this is just so hard to fathom, impossible to believe really, families with their children arriving to see for themselves as the nation awaits official word on the possible assassination of the president of the United States.”

Unseen by the couple because the rear porch entry was through the kitchen, the back door suddenly flew open, banged against the wall and flew back, only to be flung open again.

Startled from his concentration, the gray-haired homeowner groaned and got to his feet. His wife stayed seated, only mild annoyance clouding her face. Thinking the wind had blown the door open her husband headed for the kitchen. Lately it had happened a lot, the door suddenly banging open because the surrounding frame had warped, something he’d meant to have repaired, but hadn’t yet got around to, accounting for his wife’s annoyance.

Stepping into his kitchen he was intercepted by the dark suited stranger already halfway across the yellowy linoleum. Jess didn’t have his gun out but his hand was inside his jacket. Without introduction, he took hold of the old guy’s elbow and quickly steered him back into the living room. Seeing the intruder, his wife bolted upright, dropping the blanket. Jess flashed his badge case and showed them his shield—the shield gold, an eagle at the top, wings spread, below that U.S. SECRET

SERVICE scrolled above a five-pointed star, the words SPECIAL AGENT scrolled below it—Jess saying “United States Secret Service.” Then, “Is there anyone else in the house?”

Dumbfounded, the old guy shook his head no. His wife sat frozen, unable to speak.

“Don’t move,” Jess said, then returned to the kitchen. Moments later he reappeared, but this time wasn’t alone. Behind him entered two women propping up a second man. Half dragging him across the carpet, they wordlessly lowered him into a Barcalounger, careful about it because the one in their care seemed ill.

There were more. A third, younger man, also attired in a dark tailored suit entered supporting yet a fourth, the oldest of the group and somehow familiar, a blazer over a print shirt—a glimpse of pineapples wearing sunglasses. Whoever he was, he looked out of it, like he’d had too much to drink or had overdosed on drugs.

The third steered the fourth to the couch and gently lowered him to it. Lyle tucked a pillow under Swann’s head, then scooped up the dropped blanket and tucked it around him.

Dominca stepped to the couple and lightly frisked them.

Stock still, their expressions flickered from fear to confusion, eyes glued to the man on the couch, then finally, when recognition dawned, mute awe.

The old gent was first to speak. “It’s the president,” spoken like a question.

“Oh, lord in heaven, have mercy—it’s the president,” his wife’s turn, like a reply. “But oh my, the whole world thinks he’s dead.” She looked back and forth from the TV to the president, and then turned to Jess. “Is he?”

“No, ma’am, just a little under the weather,” Jess said. “Is there anyone else in the house?” repeating his earlier question.

“Just us,” answered the gent.

Jess swung his head, indicating for Lyle to check the rest of the house. “And turn off the lights.”

The Hispanic looking woman in the dark suit went out back the way they’d entered and returned a few moments later carrying a bunch of firepower. She dumped them on the living room floor.

Jess turned to the old guy again.

“Expecting anyone?”

“No, sir. Not a soul.”

“Do you have any firearms?” Jess again.

“No.”

Jess got right to it. He said, “We need your car.”

The guy looked at his wife, then turned back to Jess. “We have two.”

“Show me.”

He led the agent back through the kitchen and opened a door into a one-car garage. Flipping on the overhead fluorescents revealed a parked hearse, vintage with dark purple velvet

window curtains, a Don't Worry, Be Happy sticker on the front bumper.

"It's not as dependable as it was, though," the gent explained.

"What are you, a mortician?"

"Yes, sir, used to be."

"Where's the other one?"

Back in the living room, Jess parted the bay window drapes and saw the couple's silver birch Ford Crown Victoria parked at the curb.

Lyle came back, shook his head—meaning the couple were the home's only occupants.

Dominca stepped to Jess's side. Out on the street headlights slowly swept around a corner, followed by a light-colored car rolling past. It drove three houses down the block before pulling into a driveway. A woman carrying a shopping bag got out and went inside.

Jess let go of the drapes. "Dominca, we're not taking him," he said, nodding to Ray, the wife having just returned from a bedroom bringing a second blanket, which she tucked around him, doing her best to make him comfortable.

"I know," Dominca said.

"I'll send someone as soon as I can. Settle him in, say your goodbyes."

She started for Ray, but then turned, needing to say what was on her mind. “Back there, you never intended to get the president out, did you?”

“No.”

“You could have told us.”

“I couldn’t count on you, Dominca. Not back there.”

“Bullshit.” Fed up, she stepped away to tend to Ray.

Jess turned to the husband. “The key.”

The old guy turned to his wife. “He needs the key. You drove last.” Fishing in her purse, she shook out a ring of keys, selected the one for the Crown Vic and handed it to the agent. “This one. Now, may I ask a question?”

“Ma’am, you have every right.”

“Of all the houses you could have gone to, how did you happen to pick ours?”

“Blind luck. And for that I apologize,” and left it at that. It was true. They hadn’t had time to reconnoiter the neighborhood. A random pick from along a row, they’d approached the house from a back alley and entered the fenced yard through an unlocked gate—after that, what happened had happened. At the time, they were unaware of the black Suburban a hundred yards at their back, headlights dead, pausing briefly at the mouth, the two men inside peering into the alley before disappearing down the street. Moments later, a second Suburban, headlights also dead, followed. After that, a black sedan.

“There’s no need,” the woman said, responding to Jess.

The special agent stepped to the front door, withdrew his Sig, and motioned to Lyle. "I'm backing the car up. Cover me." The rookie followed him out, still too ashamed about his panic attack back at the freeway to look Jess in the eye.

Outside on the porch, gun drawn, Lyle stood watch while Jess studied the street, then quickly stepped down the walk to the Vic, climbed in, put the key in the ignition, revved it, and backed the car into the driveway. He noted the fuel gauge hovering just below the quarter full mark, more than enough to get them to their next, hopefully final destination. He left the engine idling, got out, started for the house and mounted the porch, Lyle slouching behind. Jess turned to him. "You've got to get past this, Lyle," he said. "I need you here. I need you present."

"I know."

"You got back in the limo."

Lyle gave him a "what" look?

"On the freeway. The gunfire made you pause—"

Shame clouded Lyle's face.

"—but you got back in, that's the thing."

"That was instinct."

"Running, that's instinct. That's why it matters, Lyle. Who or what you're doing this for. It matters."

Silence, then, "Yeah, okay."

Jess opened the door and stepped aside to allow the rookie to enter first, then tapped him on the shoulder. Lyle turned to

face him. “There’s a movie, *The Wild Bunch*? A western. Ever see it?”

“Think I may have heard of it.”

“We survive this, check it out.”

“I will. Watch it with me.”

“You need to get back on your horse.”

Back inside, a pall hung over the living room, the pale glow of the TV the only light, the sound muted. Jess matched eyes with Grace, a deep sorrow written there. She nodded to Dominca kneeling beside Ray. She said, “He died.” Jess went over, bent down beside her and checked the agent’s vital signs. Dominca lifted one of his limp hands to her heart. Jess refused to be overwhelmed. He removed Ray’s wrist mike, also took his gun and shield, and then was back on his feet. Lightly touching Dominca’s shoulder, he said, “Let’s go.”

“Wait.” It was the president, having difficulty trying to stand as he spoke. All eyes turned toward him. Reaching for Grace, he took one of her hands in his own. He spoke haltingly, but with a command not heard since that late afternoon when he’d delivered his downtown speech. “Ray Rykoff honored me, my family, my country, and all of us here with his service,” he began. “And so, I am honor bound now to serve him and his good, proud name, and what he gave his life for. As we all should—what’s left of us.” They waited, listening if there was more—there wasn’t.

The old guy said, “Amen.”

"The president said, "I'm so sorry, Dominca."

Dominca said, "Thank you, Mr. President."

Jess and Dominca exchanged a look. Each could see the other's expression change, letting their eyes do their talking, nothing said about questionable choices made amid the insane sequence of events that had got them there. Their feud was over. They were more than good.

"Mr. President, my husband voted for you. I didn't," the elderly woman said. "But I don't mind telling you, I'm damn glad you're still with us."

"The Lord works in mysterious ways, to be sure," the president said.

"That he does, Mr. President. That he does. And praised be for it."

"What's your name?" the president asked.

"Gloria."

"Thank you for taking us in, Gloria. And you, sir?"

"Maurice."

"We're the Hooks," Gloria said.

Jess made another trip out to the Vic and dumped their extra weapons in the front seat well. When he came back inside, it was time to go.

"A little help here," the president said, trying to stand again. Grace went over and eased him to his feet, helping to steady him.

Dominca lingered, standing over Ray, softly stroking his face.

Jess spoke softly, saying, "Dominca."

The two women flanking the president, the five started back into the night, Jess and Lyle leading the way. The last thing they heard was, "Have a blessed day," Gloria Hooks saying it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The suburban street empty, silent. Lyle again stood guard, his gun arm stiff against his thigh. Jess climbed in the Crown Vic and fired it up. Grace opened the rear door for the president. Dominca joined her easing him inside.

A streetlamp on the near corner erratically flickered, as if trying to make up its mind whether to wake or or go back to sleep. Something moved on the periphery of Lyle's vision. Cocking his head, he looked but saw nothing. Jess noticed Lyle's reaction, climbed halfway out the Vic and said, "What?"

"I don't know," Lyle answered.

Again, he spied movement in the strobing light. On edge, he stepped into the street for a closer look. There, between the staccato bursts of light, he saw it—a little white poodle relieving itself, one leg lifted against a lawn gnome. No sooner seen than the its owner called to it from the dark. The dog trotted off and vanished.

Dominca saw it too and was first to react as headlights sprang to life. The black Suburban lying in wait around the corner leapt forward, tires wailing as it made the turn and barreled toward them. She yelled. "Go, Jess, go! Go now!" She ran back to the Vic, shoved Grace atop the president and slammed the door after them. Jess gunned the Vic out the driveway. After that, everything happened in a blur: Lyle stepping aside as the hostile whipped past, barely missing him,

the rookie taking a two-handed gun stance, aiming at the vehicle as it passed, then hesitating because Dominca blocked his line of fire. Jess in that big lump of American pig iron struck the vehicle's front left fender and slammed it against the opposite curb. The Vic scraped past and took off, burning rubber down the street. The hostile behind the wheel recovered and went after it, Dominca running alongside, she and the hostile leaning out a rear window exchanging gunfire, Lyle hauling ass after them.

Porchlights ignited all up and down the street.

A shot from the hostile trimmed Dominca's gun arm, but she managed not to drop her weapon. Before she could fire again, a second caught her in the leg and brought her down. "Aw, shit, shit." Firing belly-flat from the pavement, she managed a kill shot. Fatally struck, the driver lost control, leapt the curb, slowed, hard bumped a small grapefruit tree in a neighbor's yard and stopped. Fat bright yellow balls shook loose and rolled across the hood.

The back seat shooter leaned out, just his gun arm visible, and popped off a few. Climbing out, one of his legs somehow snagged on the bottom strip of the doorframe and took a tumble.

Lyle had come up from behind the downed agent, took a knee beside her, and fired three shots in rapid succession. Still tumbling, the gunman caught one in the ear, in one and out the

other, surely a one in a thousand case of a target hurrying to meet its bullet.

The rookie lingered, trying to decide what came next. Dominca decided for him. "You go. Catch up. Leave me. I'm okay. Go."

Reluctant to leave her, Lyle took her at her word and sprinted to the Suburban. Sidestepping the dead, face down hostile, he flung open the driver's door, reached inside, dragged the dead partner from behind the wheel and took his place. He keyed the ignition. The engine sputtered, but wouldn't turn over. Two of his shots had gone wild and punched holes through the open door, punctured the left front fender and cracked the engine block. He returned to the Hooks' house and went inside. He didn't bother to knock.

Miles away, in the San Fernando Valley, the street outside the craftsman was still jam-packed, maybe worse than before. Brooks parked the Honda in the same flowerbed. After leaving, he'd driven around for twenty minutes, passing several bars, but resisted the urge to drop in, then, troubled by a nagging suspicion, had returned to the murder house. This time the neighbors were nowhere in sight. Then they were, peering out through a curtained window.

Outside the house, the dogs were still in their kennels. Inside, the three Tealanders hadn't been moved. He didn't see the PID

guy. The two FBI from the garage sat at the dining room table, taking a break, snacking on protein bars.

One looked over, and said, “How was Vegas?”

Brooks ignored it.

The grandfather clock standing tall in a corner ticked softly. Dominca lay on the couch, her right foot resting atop an ottoman, her pant cuff cut away to the knee exposing the Ace bandage bound around the meaty part of her lower leg. Her left arm, bound at the bicep, lay limp across her stomach. There was blood visible in both places, more on the leg than the arm. She’d been mostly quiet and unmoving, only the occasional grunt of pain when she shifted her leg or repositioned her arm. They were flesh wounds, not life threatening. She’d been correct telling Lyle she was “okay,” more or less—certainly less for the moment. Either way, Ray Rykoff, dead or alive in the chair across the room, she needed to be with her lover.

It was a mixed-race neighborhood—blacks, whites, browns. Five minutes after the gunfire abruptly ended and the screech of tires faded, everyone who lived up and down the street, the adults, excluding their youngest, had ventured out of their homes to see what it was all about, including some who lived a block or two over who’d heard the gunplay. The last time anything remotely like it had happened was six years earlier when a gang related drive-by shot up a suspected rivals house.

That was hit and miss. This time there were hits—a shot up vehicle and two men stone cold dead beneath a grapefruit tree.

A neighbor had discovered Special Agent Dominca Ricci on another neighbor's lawn, next to a realtor's For Sale sign, as far as she'd managed to crawl, the flattened grass leading to her smeared black with blood. The guy who found her shouted, called over some others, including her recent hosts, the Hooks. There followed a group meet, most reluctant to move her, better to wait for an ambulance, but the dark suited woman on the ground insisted, said she wanted to be taken back in the house. Which house? The one she'd just come from.

Across the room, Ray sat propped in the Barcalounger, like a patient in a dentist's chair, only with a blanket covering his face. Maurice Hooks sat beside him in one of the twin chairs he'd dragged in from the dining room. Gloria Hooks placed the receiver in the cradle of a rotary phone and took the chair on the other side. "I've called for an ambulance," she said. "Two actually, although if you ask me, they should send their whole fleet."

They sat there and Dominca lay there in the near dark, bathed by the faint glow of the TV. "Would you like me to turn up the volume, just a little?" Gloria Hooks asked, not waiting for an answer, but rising to do exactly that. Her husband reached for her arm and drew her back. More silence before the woman spoke again, anything to fill the void. "Would you like a cup of

tea, or something else while we wait?" Dominca, eyes glued on Ray, appeared not to have heard. "We have—" Maurie patted his wife's lap to quiet her.

Tick tock.

After a few moments, Gloria said, "We've told you ours, but you haven't told us yours. May I ask your name?"

"Dominca."

Gloria leaned forward and tilted her head toward Ray. "And his?"

"Ray. Raymond Rykoff." Tick tock went the clock, then, "From Port Aransas, Texas," her attempt at making him a tiny bit more real.

"Were you close?"

Dominca squeezed her eyes shut, an expression of physical and emotional pain.

"That's enough, dear," Maurice Hooks said, his tone bordering on a rebuke, then reached across and brushed Gloria's lap again to let her know he wasn't angry. "Let's just sit here quietly while we wait," he said. "It shouldn't be long." After two minutes, Gloria spoke again. "It's your good fortune, Dominca, that Maurice here was a medic and knew what to do. Over in Vietnam. That was a long time ago, but in his time, he helped save a number of lives."

"Can I see his face?"

"Dear, I don't think—" Gloria said.

"I want to see his face."

Gloria bent forward and looked across for her husband's approval, received his nod, and slowly drew down the blanket, revealing Ray's face.

Dominca lay there, dry-eyed and collected, the young woman and the elderly couple not unlike fellow mourners first time met at a funeral parlor, the young woman far more invested than the two, Special Agent Ray Rykoff not dead eighteen minutes, the chairs to be expected, the couch available for anyone who needed it, the tall clock going tick tock, tick tock—nineteen minutes.

"Such a day it's been, such a day," Gloria said, low and respectful in the presence of the dead. After a few moments she sighed, lost it, and began to silently weep.

Back in the garage where the bomb had been assembled. Sitting alone at the sawhorse table, reading by lamplight, Brooks flipped through stacked sketches, diagrams, and notebooks. He stretched and glanced at his watch. Coming up on nine. What the hell was happening with Gage, the president, whoever was still with them, and whatever was left of the motorcade? He went back to flipping pages, then stopped when something caught his eye, another sketch—

It *had* snowed. Not as much as predicted, but enough to again blanket the higher elevations and add to the already lightly

dusted hillside *yareta*—powdered sugar sprinkled on a plate of *tres leches*, “three milk” cake.

Down at the farmhouse, smoke curled from an open pipe bolted to an exterior wall.

The guards on the day shift were still patrolling.

A vintage wood-burning cast-iron stove with brass accents, flickering light behind its grilled mouth, warmed the room. A small, fat man in a big chair, Tomas Ulzana sat in his basement den watching BBC World News, the story there the same as on every other channel—revealed in piecemeal, a kaleidoscope of after the fact footage, a crash course in the Los Angeles freeway system and surface streets never allowing a full, true picture of what was happening in its multiple theaters, but more than enough to get the general idea.

The afternoon’s events unfolding on his set had caused him to lose his appetite. On a TV tray set to one side, a dish of *Fricase paceno*, accompanied by a homemade baguette good for dipping, mostly untouched, the pork rib soup grown cold. A short, empty glass stood between two bottles, the imported Kentucky bourbon half-full, the local *singani* nearly empty.

The twins had eaten their late lunch of macaroni and cheese from a box and gone to their room—to do what—another visit with *Eltiva*? The woman was a monster.

Ascencion Gutierrez came down the stairs, his hat in his hands held at waist level and stood behind Tomas. The

basement smelled of burning wood. It was warm down there, too warm for his taste. Sweat beaded his upper lip.

Tomas could see him reflected on the television's wide screen. "What do you want?" he said.

"To tell you the work will not be finished until tomorrow."

"Why are you telling me this?" not sounding annoyed, just tired. "Come back tomorrow."

His cell rang. Reaching for it, he listened a few seconds before speaking—two words only: "Come home," he said, without telltale emotion, and replaced the phone on the tray.

The idea for the method of assassination had come from a paperback translation of a biography of Leon Trotsky, the upstart Russian revolutionary eliminated under orders from Stalin, the weapon of choice a mountaineer's ice ax—a single blow to the skull—the deed done up in Mexico City in 1940.

Tomas picked up the remote and extended his arm, intending, or pretending, to switch channels. Looking down from behind his shoulder, Ascension saw his free hand dip between his legs. The hammer tucked into the assassin's belt was suddenly in his hand and came down in a swift, practiced motion, its blunt face cracking the side of Tomas Ulzana's skull, not a loud sound, but a dull thunk. Gray gore like lava seeped from the jagged fault line and matted his sparse hair. His knee jerked, overturning the TV tray and Ascension's head instinctively turned to the top of the stairs and waited. No one came. He turned to look at Tomas again, the cartel boss tilted

low in the chair, still breathing, twitching. Ascension brought the hammer down again, a different angle, not meaning to strike with the clawed side—the hammer had simply turned in his hand. This time, a mini geyser erupted, enough to douse his coat. Tightening his grip on the handle, it took some effort to pry it loose. Again, he turned to the top of the stairs and listened, but heard nothing. He turned back. Looking for a gun, he saw it—the grip protruding from under the chair’s seat cushion.

Upstairs on the ground level, he stole down the hall past the room of the twins. Earlier when passing there he had heard them: Madonna as the ghost of Eva Peron singing “*Don’t Cry for Me Argentina,*” telling her country not to mourn her. Had they been in the basement with their grandfather he did not think he had the stomach to kill them also, even now armed with the gun. They had always been friendly to him, teasingly inviting him to dance with them, and sometimes offered snacks, and also because—well because. He left through the back door, held himself in check, not trotting, but walking to the truck.

The plan, not his, he had been approached—but its execution—had gone well. So far, he hadn’t had to shoot his way out. The decision to use the hammer had avoided the sound of gunfire alerting the two patrolling outside, also the men asleep in the bunkhouse, and carried down the hill to the ears of the two in the guardhouse.

The young assassin drove down the hill and stopped before the flanking stone guardhouses, the gate between them shut. The paperback he'd been reading, a volume of poetry by the beloved Adela Zamudio, a birthday present from his mother, lay open on the passenger seat. Wrapped in his bunched up, blood-flecked coat, the hammer was stuffed under the seat. He rolled down his window.

The two men on duty sported droopy, bandito style mustaches. The one on Ascencion's left wore a straw cowboy hat. His window was open about an inch, allowing the smoke from his cigarette to escape. The ground below was littered with spent butts. He slid the window open about halfway and leaned out. The one to his right also leaned out, elbows propped on the sill, but didn't speak.

Ascencion was afraid, but tried not to show it. He regretted having placed the gun under the seat and hoped he would not need to reach for it, one against eight, a battle he would lose. Much better to have placed the gun wrapped in his coat within easy reach on the passenger seat, but it was too late now. He did not think he would have to use it, but each second held the possibility of the unexpected, something Tomas Ulzana could testify to, were he not at that moment dead in his basement, his skull shattered.

Nothing much happened at the gate.

"How goes it?" the guard to his left said, not asking about his health, but nodding toward the farmhouse, wanting to know if

Ascencion had news of how things were going in the City of Angels. There were no satellite dishes mounted atop the gatehouses and the two guards were in the dark—they were paid to watch guard, not watch television.

“It goes well,” Ascencion said. “A great victory.”

“Say hello to your mother.” The guard came from the same pueblo as Ascencion, but these days lived in the bunkhouse.

“I will.”

Ascencion glanced in his outside mirror, the farmhouse framed there on the slope, the boyish man nervously anticipating any second now for the twins to come screaming from the house. Now the guard was saying something else. Ascencion’s eyes left the mirror and looked at him. “Next time, bring cigarettes. Kools.” Ascencion nodded.

The gate swung wide. *Adios, muchachas*. The truck rolled through, wound down the valley road, grew small, and disappeared.

Forty minutes later, back in his mother’s house in the pueblo, Ascencion Gutierrez rinsed the hammer and replaced it in his toolbox. The coat and book about the life of Leon Trotsky he took to the village dump. The gun he decided to keep, should he ever need it again.

The next day he would climb in his truck and drive the eighty miles to the city of the new boss who now owed and owned him and tell what had happened inside the farmhouse. By then, the

new boss would already have heard, but was sure to want details.

Ascension had already decided that he would move himself and his mother there. Someone had told him the city had a good library.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

They stuck to mostly empty surface streets. Now Grace was driving, Jess in the passenger seat. The president lay still across the backseat under one of Gloria Hooks' blankets. They'd pulled over at a grade school playground and switched places, Jess wanting his hands free to return fire if they were being tailed, the H&K propped upright between his feet, an extra magazine across his lap.

Jess said, "How much further, you think?"

Grace said, "Getting there. Another couple miles."

A police cruiser, siren wailing, lightbar flashing, passed them speeding in the opposite direction. Grace instinctively slowed down as it blew past, and then sped up again when the cop was gone.

They had the radio dialed low, but loud enough to get the gist, a reporter or anchor, her exact location unidentified, it could have been any of several, saying, "All of the gunmen are presumed dead at the scene, actually there are several locations, and no doubt this will take days, weeks, possibly months to unravel exactly what happened. But no official word yet from the White—"

They blew through a red light, Grace not slowing or looking at Jess for permission, Grace guessing he would have done the same.

“You’re sure as hell part of the motorcade now,” Jess said. “You *are* the motorcade.”

She said, “About time.”

At the next intersection a solitary woman draped in the Stars and Stripes stood on the corner sidewalk in a pool of streetlight holding a homemade sign: God Bless America and President Swann. She unhappily waved at the passing Vic. Jess pictured Grace in the ‘beast,’ waving like she was royalty. That was a happy wave.

Brooks Hale’s borrowed Honda flew south weaving up the Sepulveda Pass on the 405, the twelve lanes comprising both sides of the freeway surreally empty this evening. Cresting the hill at Mulholland, the Honda descended the winding artery between encroaching hills. Ahead and below, the vast grid of LA city lights stretched away to the horizon, a hundred miles south along the coast to San Diego and Tijuana, Mexico.

Brooks spoke into his mike. “Command, this is Hale. Do you copy?”

“This is command, Hale,” the command post super.

“Where’s Special Agent Gage? Are you in touch with him?”

“Negative, Hale. They’re not responding.” A pause while he spoke to someone, then, “Best guess? On route to the airport.”

Deputy Director Whale was back at the Bonaventure and stood close by listening. He motioned the super to pass him the mike, and said, “What’s going on, Hale?”

“There’s another device. Shit. A bomb. There’s another fucking bomb.”

A ‘58 Cadillac Superior hearse—61,211 miles on the odometer, the bone wagon over forty years old, Lyle behind the wheel. There’d been no sign of the Crown Vic. The speedometer indicated a maximum speed of 110 mph, but the old hearse maxed out between forty-five and fifty, probably hasn’t been tuned since the Fifties, he thought. A woman bundled in a flag and holding a sign waved at him. A long block ahead, a light-colored car that could be the Vic turned into the boulevard from a side street and drove up the block. Lyle gunned it and got there as the car angled into a corner Exxon station, the station dark. Pulling alongside he made the car as a Mercury Grand Marquis, the guy at the pump looking over at the guy in the hearse crawling past. Lyle hit the gas, sped off, and heard Jess’s voice in his earbud. “Where are you?”

“Driving a hearse.”

“What happened back there?”

“Dominca’s down.”

“How bad?”

“Arm and leg. She’s with Ray,” then caught himself. “I mean in the house. Where are you?”

“Getting near the airport. Hold on.”

Lyle waited, assuming Jess was looking for a street name and block number. Moments later, he gave him the name and number, then said, "I won't wait up," and was gone.

"The view here is absolutely astounding," the guy on the Vic's radio went on, only slight variations on the same news they'd been listening to all across the dial, "at least a thousand people, two thousand, five, maybe more, it's impossible to say, have walked here, the streets are blocked with vehicles for, I don't know, miles and miles perhaps, they've come here, individuals and entire families, to see with their own eyes, to mourn, to be together, to share in this utterly tragic moment in American history—"

The guy was right. The special agent, the woman, and the American president were several miles from ground zero, citizen traffic heading that way, the streets becoming more and more congested, finally reduced to a bumper-to-bumper crawl. The next light was red, but it didn't matter, the traffic so tight there was no getting through to the other side. Jess told her to make a right, drive against the flow. A block down the street they were blocked again, stopped by a cycle cop conducting a crosswalk full of pedestrians. Jess turned, bent to the president, and adjusted the blanket to better conceal him. The foot traffic passed to the other side, revealing a black Suburban, its tinted glass too dark to see inside, the car stopped facing them in the oncoming lane. The cop waved it forward, then the Vic.

The Suburban paused in the crosswalk. The driver rolled down his window a couple inches and addressed the traffic cop. "Too bad about your president," the voice heavily accented.

"Yours too," said the cop. "And yes, it damn sure is."

The window went up.

The two vehicles proceeded, slipping past each other. Grace suddenly said, "Jess," wanting him to look. When he did, it was too late, the Suburban already gone in the opposite direction. A block further on, he watched the vehicle, now in his side mirror, make an unhurried U, not following close enough for immediate concern, but enough to pay attention to. When a second vehicle, a black sedan, emerged from a side street and fell in behind the first, Jess tensed. "Turn at the next street."

"Why?" Grace asked, her antenna also up.

"Not sure. Just do it."

She swung right onto the next street into an industrial park cloaked in ocean fog: warehouses, storage units, U-Haul rental lots, trucking companies, not far from LAX. Here the air smelt and tasted slightly salty, a strand of unseen beach just beyond the airport fence.

Jess said, "Go slow."

A half-mile ahead, shrouded in a misty glow, they made out the security perimeter surrounding Air Force One. Too far to make out any detail, but it was a sure bet the area was an armed camp.

"Slower."

Grace eased up on the gas.

Jess waited to see if the vehicles would follow.

The street behind stayed empty.

“Up there, again.”

She made another turn.

“Again.

Then another.

Still looking to see if anyone showed.

No one did.

“Grace said, “Jess,” and slammed her foot on the brakes.

He turned and saw what she was seeing—the murky shape of the stopped Suburban straddling the narrow street made narrower by the parked semi cabs and trailers on one side, a row of U-Hauls parked on the other. In the maze of streets, it hadn't been difficult for the Suburban to get ahead of them. Its headlights dead and so much fog, the reasons they hadn't seen it until the last second. Best they could tell, a solitary driver silhouetted behind the wheel.

Jess said, “Go back, back.”

Grace shifted into reverse. Tires screaming, she wheeled back the way they'd come.

The Suburban sat there. Shots rang out from the driver's side window. The flanking streetlights went dead, the faint tinkle of glass hitting the pavement audible in the dark.

More gunfire. The sedan that'd been following swooped in and stopped thirty yards behind blocking their retreat. Two

silhouetted front seat figures in the pea soup gloom. The passenger stuck an arm out the window and shot out the Vic's taillights, more glass tinkling in the pale funk.

"Cut the lights," Jess said, Grace fumbling to find the switch, but the forward shooter beat her to it—shot out the Vic's headlights, the street now lit only by moonlit saturated fog.

"Stop! Stop!" Jess said.

Grace slammed her foot on the brake again. The sandwiched Vic sat there idling.

"Get in back and keep down."

She scrambled over the center console and dropped into the space between the rear and front seats.

Jess said, "Where's your gun?"

"Bag."

He saw it tucked under the driver's seat. Upending it, he picked up the gun, racked the slide, passed it back to her and said, "Don't forget to squeeze the trigger," then clambered across the console to take her place behind the wheel.

He glanced left—there, a block of self-storage units fronted by a gated chain-link fence. To his immediate right, another fence, this one about seven foot high topped with coiled razor wire gave way to an alley formed by neatly aligned rows of luxury RVs on a paved lot. On the far side there appeared to be another gate, hard to be sure in the fog. He guessed the distance between the gates to be about two hundred feet to where a

parallel street offered a way out. Other hostiles might be waiting there, but there was no other outlet.

Jess spun the wheel right, hammered the gas, tore through the gate and angled down the open space between the RVs, dragging a section of chain link thirty feet before it dropped behind.

The sedan leapt forward and stopped solid alongside the wrecked gate where the Vic had sat moments before. The Suburban didn't budge, stayed curbside to one of those parked U-hauls. Gunfire erupted from inside the sedan.

Halfway to the far side, the Vic's rear right tire blew, then, seconds later, the rear left, making it hard to steer, causing the car to slalom and tag the side of a fully loaded, twenty-six-foot Winnebago. The Vic's grill buckled.

The gunfire had stopped.

For some reason the airbags hadn't inflated. Jess marveled that he was still alive. As best he could tell, none of the shots had penetrated the Vic's interior; there'd been no sound of bullets shattering glass or punching holes through steel. All had been aimed no more than a couple of feet above the ground. He guessed the shooter hadn't been aiming at the occupants, had only meant to halt their escape.

Steam oozed from the sides of the buckled hood. Jess threw it in reverse, mashed his foot on the accelerator, and backed up a few feet, testing the engine. The car was still drivable, but shit, how far would they get?

Head low, he peered between the seats, saw Grace huddled there, just the midriff white of her dress. The force of impact had rolled the president half off the seat, his upper torso squashing her, one leg still on the bench. She peered up from behind his shoulder.

Tell me you're okay," Jess said.

"I think so. Oh God, what happened?"

"We're hit."

"You're hit?" a moan in her voice.

"No, we're stopped," then, "The president?"

Again, she misunderstood. "He's hit?" panic in her voice. She tried to sit up, twisting her neck to see for herself. "Stay down," Jess said, placed a hand on her shoulder, and pressed her down.

He groped along the president's body—chest—no telltale dents in his Kevlar indicating he'd been hit—then his abdomen, groin, and thighs. He checked his pulse at his neck. A cursory glance might give the impression he was dead, not unconscious, but gone forever, but the almost imperceptible heave of his chest said otherwise. Nothing had changed, his condition as it had been since the nightmare began.

"Seems okay," Jess said.

He peered through the Vic's rear window and saw the sedan still there on the street. By then the Suburban had rolled forward, bumper to bumper kissing the sedan.

"Show me," Jess said, simply because he needed to see it again.

“What?”

“The gun,” Jess said, sounding pissy. She was undone, disoriented, but he needed her full attention. Struggling to shift her pinned arm, she showed him her hand tightly gripping the gun. “Good. Now stay. No matter what happens don’t try to follow. You stay. The car’s still drivable. If you see a chance, drive out of here.”

“Yes, sir, whatever you say,” saying the words, but Jess still not convinced she understood.

“You drive off. You can’t worry about me.”

“I remember. You can’t worry about me, either.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

They waited, holding on to the moment.

She said: “Next time be careful what I sign up for, huh?” something to fill the space. Another moment passed.

He said, “Yeah, well. Goodbye.”

She said, “Goodbye.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

He crawled into the passenger seat and opened the door. The interior light came on. The door edge jammed against the RV, but there was room to squeeze out. The H&K in hand, he rolled out, hunkered low, using the Vic for cover.

He'd considered his options. In the coming firefight, he'd need to put some distance between himself, Grace, and the president, and wondered how her name came before the "body." He'd have to draw the hostiles off, blast away at each other somewhere else. They'd cat and mouse each other, buy more time, shoot out a bunch more windows, flatten more tires, and leave it to whoever owned the inventory to bill the U. S. government. Crouched low, he angled toward one of the parked RVs, would shelter behind it. Halfway across the open space a shot nailed him in the chest, on the side opposite his heart, his vest stopping the bullet, but the impact slamming the wind out of him, causing him to stagger and collapse to the ground. Then, Pop! Pop! Pop! again from the Suburban, the driver visible leaning across the seats and firing from the open passenger window. A round parted Jess's hair, taking with it a flange of skin. A millimeter lower and it would have shattered bone. It stung like a Jurassic wasp had had a go at him. Blood seeped down his forehead, between his eyebrows, followed the slope of his nose, and dribbled onto his upper lip.

A fourth shot from the Suburban stung the pavement, angled away, and clanged into one of the RVs. He wondered whether the gunfire could be heard at the airport. He doubted it.

Flopped on his side, the blood from his scalp wound had changed direction, lazily streaming across his right eye. He drew his sleeve across his face, wiping away the wet. Bracing his elbows, he returned fire, a stacatto burst from the H&K.

Then silence.

There was something else—a bullet must have penetrated where he was unprotected, a flesh wound, otherwise he would already be dead or dying, but still, he was losing blood from elsewhere than just his scalp, the damage enough to make it difficult to lift his weapon.

Jess wiped more blood from his eye. Able to focus now, he fired again, a long burst, his aim shakey, until finally—click, click, click. His thumb pressed the magazine release. The empty clattered to the ground. He groped for the extra in his suit jacket. Gone. Cheek to the tarmac, he peered toward the Vic's undercarriage. On the far side he saw the magazine he'd dropped getting out.

Silence.

A soft, different kind of click as a car door opened.

The Suburban. The driver got out, fully exposed now, straight armed his weapon and came toward him, measured steps. He'd got within ten feet when a shot rang out from the street. The hostile froze in mid-step, teetered for six seconds,

dropped his gun, and slow motion toppled forward onto his face.

The hostile shot in the back was called Keke.

Jess figured it came from the sedan.

He looked over at the Vic again. What was she thinking, waiting for him to save the day so they could drive off together? Maybe he hadn't fully explained the plan, for her not to hang around and see the outcome, drive off on those floppy tires while the shooting was happening, because there *would* be shooting, lots of it, unless someone got lucky and it ended quickly. He'd told her the Vic was drivable. He hadn't done it himself because, with the flats, trundling along they wouldn't get far, they'd have to shoot it out anyway, same story, different location, the long day still not over.

He willed himself to crawl, every second foreseeing that the next shot heard would end his life. He was halfway to the Vic to retrieve the magazine when he heard another click. He turned his head and looked.

A figure had climbed from the sedan.

"Special Agent Gage," the figure called out.

"What do you want?" Jesus. Lame question, Jess thought, as if he didn't already know the answer.

"To look in the last car in the motorcade, of course," like the guy was in no big hurry, just something that needed getting done.

"I've been telling everyone no all day," Jess said. "Guess I've got one more in me."

Santos, gun in his hand, approached and strode past, then stopped, returned and looked down at him, the special agent rolled over trying to sit up, wobbly as a drunk, the hostile towering over him, deciding something. Lifting his foot, he shoved Jess flat on his back. Jess took note of the expensive looking boots, one pointed toe level with his good eye. What were they—lizard, maybe some kind of snake? Jess certain that now, finally, his time had come. He'd failed in every respect, unable to protect his president, the woman in the Vic, Ray Rykoff, Duke Cobb, whoever else went down that shitty day.

"Special Agent Gage," Santos said, "if it flatters you—flatter, this is a word, correct?" He didn't wait for an answer. "We never planned on a man like you."

Jess looked up, the guy's gun hand limp at his side, F-A-R-A tatted across four knuckles, the bigger number 15 tatted on his wrist, the gun barrel eighteen inches from his face. Jess said, "Jesus, can we quit with the chit-chat, already heard enough of that."

Santos lazily rolled a pebble beneath his booted foot. "Do you recognize me?"

Jess didn't answer, expecting any second for the boot to kick a hole his eye.

Santos answered for him. "Of course not. It was many months ago."

Jess said, "Where's your dog?"

"It was a good and dutiful animal, but only a tool. It had served its purpose. But why are we talking about this?"

"Maybe I just happen to like dogs."

"And—?"

"Your people, or maybe it was you, murdered Carla Bautista."

"I did not kill the senator."

Jess shook his head. He said, "whatever," sounding tired and bored. What else was there to talk about?

Santos grinned and made a kind of goofy face. "*Hombres de Negro*. Will Smith. The Fresh Prince." He returned to his normal voice. "I served your breakfast dishes. You claimed to be one of the original men in black. Now do you remember? I did finally see Bel Air. It was nice. But I did not see Will Smith." Silence, then, "What about this?" His voice and expression turned goofy again. "Sorry, boss." Jess got the picture, got it when he'd said "*Hombres de Negro*." Yeah, also the guy who'd bumped him the day before at the Olvera Street Plaza, pretending to be a carpenter. Again, his voice returned to normal. "Yesterday, at the downtown plaza." He gave a sly grin.

Jess said, "Yeah, okay, I get it."

"Earlier today, I said to the deputy director that I was invisible, yet I was everywhere, but he didn't believe me. You are paying the price for seeing through me, Special Agent Gage. Tonight you can see me just fine." He turned his head to look

toward the Vic, then down at Jess. "Why did you fight? How did you know we always intended to kill him?"

"We protect the presidency as much as the president. Shit, thought you knew everything."

Santos nudged his head with the toe of his boot, adjusted the angle, a barber about to perform a shave, and kicked him under the jaw, knocking two molars loose. A third tooth was swallowed. It took a moment to regain his focus, his left eye a puffed slit.

"Dude, you really need to learn to control your temper," Jess said, sounding like his mouth was stuffed with marbles, in his mind hearing Ray Rykoff saying, "Dude," then Jess saying, "Guess you should have read the handbook."

Santos turned and started for to the Vic. Jess grabbed for his ankle and got hold of a pant cuff. Santos easily shook him off.

Cautious, one hand on the left rear door handle, about to open it, he glanced back at Jess, hesitated again. Perhaps he had something special in mind for the bothersome agent, something that required more time, something that needed getting out of his system, some activity that benefited from a pair of heavy-duty work gloves protecting his hands. No worries, a handy pair could be found in the sedan's glove compartment. But no, that could wait.

He turned to the Vic, his shadow splayed against the window, and in that instant a bullet shattered it. The round nicked his shoulder, causing him to lurch backward, mostly

reflex and little to do with the force of it. Grace sat upright across the front seats, her back pressed against the passenger door, both hands gripping the gun she'd just fired. She hadn't obeyed, hadn't driven off as Jess instructed, and if ever he got the chance, he'd kiss her for it, for that and a hundred other reasons.

Three seconds later Santos had recovered, wheeled, and fired twice through the shattered window. The first shot missed, exploding the window behind her, but the second carried away the fleshy pad between the woman's thumb and index finger. Her stomach revolted and a bubble of anxious gas erupted from her mouth, not caused by the pain, which tingled more than it did anything else, nor the sight of her own blood, but the shock of it, a realization; she'd seen others die that day—unimaginable deaths—and understood that now her turn had come.

Santos ripped open the door and reached inside. One hand grabbed her gun wrist, the other entwined in her hair. Bent double, he yanked her forward and slammed her head against the steering wheel. He dragged her out and began pummeling, no glove necessary, mouthing something. To Jess it sounded like "American bitch," or maybe it was "witch." A revenge beating, not because she'd seriously wounded him, she hadn't, but for the sheer satisfaction. Somehow, she kept her grip on the gun. He spun her, slapped her, spun, and slapped her again. She slapped back with her damaged hand, the torn flesh between her thumb and forefinger leaving a red stain on his cheek. A rag

doll in motion, on the third spin she pulled the trigger and missed again, the shot whizzing off into the ground clouds. Jess, semi-conscious, thought he heard her mutter, “fuck.” Another spin and she flung the gun in his direction. It landed nearby, arm’s length. Jess crawled to it. Reaching for the gun, he again pictured Grace in the ‘beast,’ the slow-motion crescent of her waving.

Where the hell was Lyle?

Pictured her in sunglasses and the white dress standing beside the white van at the airport.

Where the hell was anybody?

Pictured her at the counter at the Pantry, lips moving, Grace mouthing, “I know you.”

By the time his fingertips touched the gun grip he was unconscious.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Minh Troung, Vietnamese, thirty-seven, barely five feet, who'd emigrated to the States along with his grandmother, parents, four sisters, and two brothers a quarter century ago, lay on the sofa bed in a vintage beat-to-shit camper van watching events unfold on his little TV perched on a shelf. He'd been on the job as a security guard, one of two, the other guard also Vietnamese, the two switching out every five days, two days off, for about six weeks now. During that time there hadn't been any burglaries or vandalism. Before he got the job, there'd been a couple of German Shepherds patrolling the lot, but one night one got poisoned after wolfing down a pork chop laced with rat poison some asshole had lobbed over the fence. After that he'd adopted a stray cat to keep him company. One of Minh's sisters picked him up and dropped him off at the RV holding lot here near the airport, the main showroom over on Lincoln in Venice. He had a key, and every once in a while, when bored, he'd move the camper to a different spot, but basically had the same view, different angle, still just rows of neatly spaced RVs, about an acre and a half of overstock. The camper didn't have a toilet. This evening, when he stepped out to stretch his legs or go to do his business in the plastic-molded blue porta-potty close by, he'd have a view of the gate off to his left. Beside him on the ratty, sea foam green carpet, an open book, a practice copy of

the U. S. naturalization civics test, which he'd been studying when the big story first began to break.

The guy on the TV saying, “—told to keep our distance, which we absolutely want to respect, is believed to be the president’s limousine.” The camera pulled back, broadening the view, revealing hundreds of the mortified milling about. “People have been gathering, as you can see, crowds of people arriving, this is just so hard to believe, impossible really as the nation awaits official word.”

Minh heard gunfire and squealing tires coming from the street. He sat up quick, muted the TV, stepped to the cupboard over the sink in the mini-kitchen, an open can of cat food on the counter, and took down the Walther P38 sidearm passed up the family tree, the gun taken off a dead French officer and used by his grandfather at Dien Bien Phu against the invaders back in '54, the gun weighing almost as much as Minh. Stepping to the window he pulled the cord on the venetian blinds, peered out, and listened. Everything that happened moments later went fast—the big car ripping through the gate, more gunfire, the car slamming into the RV.

Jess wondered how long he'd been out? Ten seconds? A minute? The kick to the head had rendered his left eye useless, the lid swelled shut. The gun Grace had thrown his way was gone. Looking over, he saw her crumpled beside the Vic.

Santos was nowhere in sight.

Then he saw him, Santos standing beside the sedan now pulled into the lot, talking to the driver through the open window, the two speaking Spanish, Jess staring into the headlights. The driver, a woman, because of her voice, appeared to reach in the back seat and handed him something. It looked to Jess to be a leather shotgun or rifle scabbard. She leaned to the glove compartment and came back handing him some kind of beverage-sized cylinder. He put it in his suit pocket. Things go better with Coke.

Santos returned to the Vic.

Jess lay there dazed, watched as he unzipped the scabbard and took out what appeared to be some kind of snub-nosed shotgun, but *not* a shotgun, more like some kind of flare gun, the kind used down in South America for killing snakes in the fields, probably the same weapon used to extinguish Senator Carla Miranda Bautista's life. He placed the weapon on the Vic's hood, then opened the rear door, saying, "Mr. President?" He reached inside and drew Gloria Hooks' blanket down off his face. "Nice to see you again." The president tried to sit up. Santos pushed him back down, said, "Allow me to help you, sir," then flung the blanket aside, took hold of his legs and dragged him partway out, feet dangling. Then dragged him all the way. President Swann flopped hard on his back on the blacktop.

Jess crawled over and Santos kicked him away. He said, "Tomorrow, if there were time, I would go to your Disneytown,

say hello to Mickey Mouse and the duck. But one cannot do everything. Such is life.”

Jess muttered, “It’s Disneyland, asshole.”

Reaching for the president, he got kicked again, Santos saying, “Patience, Special Agent Gage. You must wait your turn,” then got his head hammered with the shotgun stock. The upward angling barrel went off, nearly missing the hostile’s face, the pellets lost in the darkness.

Santos took a shell from his pocket, reloaded, turned back to the president, and laid the weapon on the ground, out of arm’s reach.

On his knees, he folded back Swann’s left sleeve cuff. The president feebly lifted his head and said, “Who—the—hell—are—you?”

“Have you ever truly considered the human hand, Mr. President?” Santos said. “The Pope crosses himself and a billion of the faithful do the same. Adolf Hitler, the *fuhrer’s* Nazi salute. Also, there is *your* hand, Mr. President. Your fingers closed in a fist, something to be feared the world over. And placed over your heart in honor of a murdered ally is enough to incite an entire country to call for the blood of Tomas Ulzana. This hand, this is the hand—” Santos rose and stepped on the president’s hand, lightly at first, teasing, then slowly ground it into the pavement. Swann squeezed his eyes shut and sucked down air. “And this is the bracelet,” Santos said. Stooped again, he slipped a finger under the woven strands and lightly tugged. “At the

soccer stadium, I was there also, as I am everywhere, one among thousands, lighting their candles and Bics when you raised your hand and pledged revenge with—this—”

He took a buck knife from his pocket, unfolded it, and hovered, savoring the moment. It seemed he was about to saw through flesh, but instead neatly nipped off the bracelet. A handful of colored glass beads rolled away. “You should be more careful what you do with your hand, Mr. President.”

He folded the knife and put it back in his pants pocket. The bracelet went in a jacket pocket. He scooped up the shotgun with the oddly shaped muzzle and pressed it against the president’s neck, held it there, then slowly traced it down his arm until it pressed against the open hand that had worn the bracelet.

Santos teased the trigger, thinking. There was still time, one more thing to do. Well, two. No, three.

His eyes roamed and settled on the camper. He went over and propped the shotgun against it.

The can he took from his pocket wasn’t a beverage. He gave it a few shakes. He began to spray—F-A-R-A—in bright red letters, the paint dribbling down the camper’s side. Next, he’d paint the numbers, then finish what he’d been sent to do. But first, stepping back to shake the can again, one eye on Jess, he noticed something—pale light flickering inside the little window in the camper’s door. Now, gun out, he had the door

open and was leaning inside, his upper body washed in white light from the TV.

He turned away, eyes roaming again.

To Jess, they seemed to settle on the porta-potty forty feet away.

Jess sprawled atop the president. Hearing footsteps, he saw the woman from the sedan walking toward him, a revolver in her hand, past the body of the man on the ground. The mottled gray and green of her uniform could be camo fatigues, like the wearer was used to jungle warfare. Well, L.A. was a kind of jungle, wasn't it? Maybe they should all be wearing fatigues. She stopped a few feet way and looked down at Jess. He hugged the president tighter. She lifted her head and turned to the camper. Going there, she stuffed the revolver down the front of her pants and picked up the unconventional looking shotgun. She turned to the porta-potty, studied it. After a moment she went over there.

Focused on the toilet, Santos hadn't heard the woman step up from behind. He only turned when she spoke his name. They stood face-to-face six feet apart, Santos with his handgun, the woman with her shotgun. She said a few words in Spanish. He answered her. She spoke again. He put a finger to his lips to shush her. She kept talking, throwing in "Bandito," not sounding happy about it. After that she shot him in the face.

Inside the blue box, Minh clutching his cat heard voices close by. One male. One female. He half recognized “bandito,” Spanish for bandit. Everyone in L.A. understood at least a little Spanish.

He nudged the door open, the little man in the blue box framed there holding his cat, one hand scratching its ears, the other holding a gun.

The man in a gray suit, who didn’t look like a punk vandal or someone who’d poison a dog, lay on the ground near the woman straight-arming a shotgun. He wondered if the dead guy’s name was Bandito.

The woman tilted her head to look at him. The shotgun stayed pointed straight ahead. To Minh, she seemed not to be in her right mind, mesmerized, as if she’d seen him somewhere before. He wondered if she was going to shoot him too. He didn’t wait to find out. Three quick shots from the Walther, one striking her in the forehead, the sacred flower also died that day. When he fired, the cat leapt from his arms and bounded away.

Jess heard the arriving vehicle before he saw it. Moments later, headlights raked a row of storage units as it took the corner, the late arrival taking their time about it. He squinted into the light—more hostiles or the cavalry to the rescue, there was no way of knowing whose side the newest player was on—

maybe just a civilian there to store or retrieve something from their rental unit.

The hearse came into view, drove about forty feet past the parked Suburban and the smashed through gate, then suddenly stopped, backed up fast, and stopped again. The driver's door flew open and Special Agent Lyle Moody got out, weapon drawn. Slipping through the open space, then past the sedan, he took in the scene, spotted Jess and the president and went to them, the rookie drenched in excitement and fear, extended arms pointing his gun, pivoting back and forth, all angles covered, not looking at Jess, the special agent's face an unholy mess.

Lyle said, "I had a hard time finding you."

Jess said, "Relax, Lyle. It's over."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The Bolivian Santos wasn't dead, but close to it.

Huntsman hovered overhead, its cone of light blinding, the clatter of the rotor blades distant, dreamlike, like looking into shimmering, wind swept water. Memories of an Andean childhood wavered and dovetailed in his head: *El Mago de Oz* projected on a backyard sheet, he'd cheered when the evil, pointy-hated *bruja* began to melt; the piñata party thrown for him by his parents on his thirteenth birthday; the pretty girl in the red dress on the roadside riding the black alpaca glimpsed from inside the dirty purple bus packed with crated ducks and chickens, the one in red long before the one who came later, his sacred flower. Not a day passed that he hadn't thought of her.

Then another face was there, looming, this one unfamiliar, a last minute addition to the president's detail, the rookie not included in the Bolivian's file, Santos groping for something in his suit pocket, the special agent expecting a gun, hearing two muted "beeps," then another, the third louder because now the cell was out his pocket, then a fourth, Lyle wresting it from his grip, Lyle two-handed breaking it over his knee before it could activate, the beeping suddenly stopped, Lyle flinging the broken halves, still half expecting something, somewhere, to detonate, the end of them all—but nothing happened.

Patting him down, Lyle found the fist-sized chunk of plastique strapped to the hostile's waist, ripped it free and likewise tossed it.

Lyle's training included a basic understanding of explosives, how they worked, but like Jess, he was no expert. Unlike dynamite—shoot a gun at it and there was a good chance it would explode—there was no danger that handing C-4 would cause it to detonate. Like all high bulk explosives, it was designed to be extremely insensitive, making it safe to handle. Drop it, hit it with a hammer, kick it down the sidewalk, it wouldn't go off, not without an electrical charge, in this case someone wielding a remote trigger, say a cell.

Searching the dying man's pockets, he removed the bracelet and held it up for Jess to see.

Moments later, Gonzalo Pablo Santos took his last breath and died.

Huntsman touched down.

The co-pilot hopped out and hustled to the president, crouched beside him, and said, "Mr. President, are you okay?" shouting above the racket. "Can you hear me, sir?"

The helo's rotors stopped churning.

Jess, unsteady on his feet, answered for him. "The president's okay. Let's get him inside."

"Huntsman?" Lyle said.

Jess took a moment while he looked around, his eyes first on the Vic, shifted to the hearse, then settled on the camper, and said, "No. We take him." He turned to the guy who looked to be Vietnamese, certainly Asian. Lyle had relieved him of the Walther. Jess said, "You, what's your name?"

"Minh."

"Minh what?"

"Troung."

"Okay, Minh Troung, that camper yours?"

Minh nodded.

"Does it work, drivable?"

Minh nodded.

"The key in it?"

Minh nodded again.

Jess said, "We're taking it."

Lyle said, "Jess—"

Jess said, "We take him. *We* take him."

Lyle got the president to his feet, ushered him into the camper, and settled him on the bunk at the rear.

Jess turned his attention to the co-pilot, indicating Grace. "Take her."

She said, "No, I'm going with you," and stood her ground. Their eyes met. After a moment, he nodded; fair enough, they'd been in it together from the start, had come this far. He put her in the camper, the front passenger seat, and buckled her in.

Jess said, "Special Agent Moody, you drive."

“Yes, sir.”

Jess followed him around to the driver’s side. “The president. Do they know? Does anyone know he’s alive?”

Lyle said, “No,” and climbed in.

The co-pilot had returned to Huntsman. Jess signaled the pilot to lift. The helo rose and hung there, its night sun spotting the “motorcade.”

Lyle drove to the opposite gate and stopped. There was no need to ram through. Minh, who by then had found his cat, had a key and unlocked it for them.

Jess said, “You too, Minh.”

Minh Traung climbed in the camper.

Lyle rolled up his window, muting the sound of Huntsman’s rotors, and drove into the street. He spoke into his wrist mike. “Airport security, this is—ah, the straggler, do you copy?”

“This is airport security. Who is this?”

“Special Agent Lyle Moody. Be advised that we are en route with Javelin aboard. I repeat, Javelin is aboard and safe. We also have injured. Do you copy?”

“What?” the voice incredulous.

“Airport security, do you copy?”

“Sorry, no, I’m not sure I *am* copying.”

Deputy Director Vance Whale stood riveted, as astounded as everyone else watching the murky image of the camper van on their monitors, the men and women surrounding him too

emotionally exhausted to celebrate, grown men and women allowing their watery eyes to speak for them.

Whale removed his lapel pin, set it on the table, pressed through the throng, and left the suite.

Lyle, still rolling, into his mike: "We need a situation report."

"Um, roger that, straggler. You are good to come in—"

"Do you see us? Look for the light."

Jess, limping alongside, faltered and leaned against the camper for support. Lyle lowered his window and extended an arm to steady him. Jess said, "Lyle, don't—"

"I know. Don't stop," but he stopped anyway. After a half-minute, while Jess caught his breath, they went on.

"You were the one in the limo last night, with Jess." Grace turned in her seat. It was the president speaking to her.

"Yes, sir, I sat in your seat."

"I recognize your perfume." He drifted off, then, after a moment, "L.A.?"

"Me, sir?" Grace asked.

"My driver."

Lyle realized it was his turn to be spoken to, and said, "Yes, sir." Wow, the president remembered him.

"Not quite the welcome home you imagined."

"No, sir."

"Me, neither."

They rode a bit further before Swann spoke again. "What are we riding in?"

"A camper, sir," Lyle answered.

"I seem to remember growing up we had one like it, but just now I wouldn't swear to it."

"I'm sure it'll come to you, sir."

"Well, whatever it is, it's nice and roomy and has a nice ride," the president said, his sense of humor amazingly still intact.

Lyle thought, he's rambling, but at least he's semi-alert. He said, "Yes, sir. Considering."

After that, they rode in silence.

Guided by Huntsman's light and the glow of the perimeter surrounding Air Force One at LAX, the half-mile trek seemed to Jess to take forever. Several times he stumbled, regained his balance, then signaled Lyle to continue. Several times, ignoring Jess's order, Lyle stopped to allow him a moment to rest and catch his breath.

Step by step, Jess began to sense they weren't alone. Blurred outlines on both sides began to take human shape. Ten troops, no, make that fifty, one hundred, two hundred, battle-hardened Marines who had seen and done much, formed a human corridor all the way to the secure perimeter of Air Force One. A fleet of EMS vans and paramedics stood by. Fire crews stood beside their trucks.

For those on the sidelines privileged to stand witness that day, there was no previous experience, no protocol to suggest a proper response, the closest approximation being the gravity and mythos of a state funeral, but that would come later. Instinctively, they knew to hold their emotions in check, allowing the scene to play out in mythic fashion. Perhaps their hearts knew what their minds were unable to explain. As Jess and the remnants of the detail slowly passed, one by one the witnesses saluted.

The camper crawled into the secure perimeter. An EMS van drew up beside it, the camper now surrounded by a tightening ring of military, law enforcement, emergency crews, and Secret Service.

“All right, Lyle,” Jess said, *we’re here,*” redundant because clearly, they *were* there, but somehow it needed saying, the closing of a castle door.

Lyle stopped.

Paramedics and official personnel swarmed the camper, tripping over each other to get to the president.

Jess went around to the passenger side and opened the door for Grace. She tumbled into his arms.

Air Force One visible in the background, Jess sat at the rear of an open-door EMS van, a pair of medics tending to his injuries, about to load him onto a gurney and race him to a hospital.

Lyle stood nearby.

An agent came over. "Special Agent Gage?"

"Yeah."

"The first lady wants to offer the services of the ER aboard Air Force One. She said it won't take off without you."

Jess shook his head no. Looking past the agent he didn't see Air Force Two, so guessed that Micki Swann was still somewhere over the Pacific. He turned back to the agent. "Take Special Agent Moody. Give him my seat."

"Are you sure?"

"He's never been on Air Force One. Make sure he gets his certificate."

The agent nodded, went to Lyle and spoke to him. Lyle came over to Jess.

Jess said, "Call your family?"

"They saw me on TV."

Lyle indicated his blood-spotted necktie. "Here you go, sir," he said. Unknotting his own tie, he handed it to Jess.

"Going to miss your plane," Jess said.

"Yes, sir."

The agent led the way to the waiting plane, Lyle along the way punching a number into his cell. "Dad, hey, it's me." Listening. "Yeah, I'm still in L.A." Listening. He had reached the boarding stairs and began to climb. "No, well, I mean, yeah, I was involved, but I can't talk now, I've got a plane to catch. I'll call you back when I can." Climbing the ladder, he boarded Air

Force One. At the top of the stairs a steward patted him on the back and he disappeared inside. The door shut behind him.

Jess lifted Lyle's tie, saw the dent of a bullet hole, and poked his finger into it, as if to prove to himself it was real, then tossed it in a nearby trashcan.

Looking across the tarmac, he saw Grace having an animated conversation with a middle-aged couple he guessed to be her parents, Grace glancing his way, pointing. She left them, came over, and said, "Hello, special."

"Forget something?"

"Told you before."

He waited.

"I got picked to drive the straggler."

Waited some more.

She shrugged, saying, "I picked up a straggler."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The long day of testimony had worn well into the evening. Several times the commission chair had suggested that the hearing be adjourned, to resume the following morning, but each time, with the exception of a handful of short bathroom breaks and to stretch his still aching limbs, Jess had insisted they continue.

A brass, green shaded reading lamp beside his pitcher of tepid water had been switched on, although at no point during the day had Jess been reading from a prepared text.

A dimly lit, wood paneled chamber. The chair, a portly Southerner, sat before a microphone, flanked by equal parts senators and congressmen, both parties equally represented, the assembly aligned in tiered seats. The morning had begun with the chair's reading of the special agent's prepared statement. "This commission, empowered by Senate Joint Resolution 731, is responsible for presenting to the American people a full and truthful account of the facts relating to the events of May 5th. In testimony before this commission, the Investigaton Divison of the United States Secret Service summarized the results into their inquiries into allegations that you, Jesse Lee Gage, Deputy Second Agent in Charge—"

"Second supervisor, senator."

The chair looked up and said, "Excuse me?"

"You said, 'special agent in charge.'"

“Did I?” The chair shuffled his papers. “Second supervisor, then. Now, if you’ll allow me to continue.” He went back to reading. “While serving on the Presidential Protection Detail, did recklessly, knowingly, and without proper authority endanger the life of the president, resulting in tragic and unnecessary loss of life.” He paused again. “And let me say, our hearts and prayers, and I have no doubt that I speak for everyone here this morning, go out to those who so bravely died or were wounded defending this remarkable, remarkable nation. And highly resilient, I might add. God bless us one and all for that.” He set the statement aside. “Now, Mr Gage, special agent, can we at least agree on that?” the chair out the gate already confrontational.

“Yes, sir.”

“Good to hear.”

Jess sat before his own mike, facing his jury from behind a table draped in green cloth, his left arm in a sling. The former black and blue on his face had faded. His eyes, no longer dull and bloodshot, were wide and alert.

For him, against him, or undecided, of which surely there were only a handful, the press and television media had already passed judgment, presenting him in their polarizing fashion; Jesse Lee Gage was an extraordinary hero. Jesse Lee Gage, renegade Secret Service agent, as a result of dereliction of duty and gross incompetence, had caused the deaths and wounding of numbers of extraordinarily brave citizens. Much worse, he

had risked the life of the president of the United States, and thereby imperiled the nation. Had a hostile government chosen to take advantage, the outcome was anyone's guess. If found guilty, a life term in prison would be too good for him.

"We're all here, so let's get started," the chair began again. "I want it to be clear that you have the right to the presence and advice of counsel—"

"I don't feel the need for counsel, sir."

"I'm having trouble hearing you, Mr. Gage. Are you sure you're well enough to continue?"

Jess pulled himself up in the chair and willed the effort to remain erect. Finally, he spoke. "It started with a football game."

"I'm sorry. A what?"

Jess cleared his throat, poured water from a pitcher into a glass, took a sip, leaned closer to the mike, and spoke again, this time louder. "A football game, sir."

Now, having finally finished his on-the-scene, minute-by-minute account of the extraordinary events of May 5th, a dire unfolding that shook the nation to its core, the same questions asked by multiple members in multiple ways, Jess slumped in his seat, exhausted. Not wearing a watch, he wasn't sure of the exact time, but it had to be late. What else could his interrogators possibly want to know?

"That was a very, very long day," said the chair.

"Yes, it was. A long ride."

“Say again?”

“A long ride, sir.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

After a brief pause, the chair resumed. “You knew all along the former deputy director wasn’t going to let that helicopter land, didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then I don’t understand. Help me out here.”

“Your strength is relative to your control of the image,” Jess said. “It’s called ‘manufacturing consent,’ the use of the media to shape and control both knowledge and ignorance.” He paused a moment, then continued. “The president taught me that. We used the media to convince them he was dead. If it doesn’t happen on TV, it doesn’t happen.”

That sat there a moment.

“You may still call witnesses. You do realize that?” the chair said.

“I have no one to call. If anyone disobeyed orders or broke the law, it was me. There were a lot of sacrifices made that day. If you people need one more, take me.”

Throughout, it had been impossible to read their minds, whether they were in any way favorably swayed by his version of events. At any time, it would have been easy for him to say, “Think what you want, but it wasn’t my fault. Decisions were made, under extreme duress, beyond anything you could ever dream or imagine. I did what I thought best with the situation I

faced." Still, life wasn't fair. The commission had no authority to arrest him, but the Service had yet to fully investigate the matter. At the least, there was a good chance he would be removed from the PPD, possibly even booted from the Service. In the weeks ahead, the Department of Homeland Security would conduct its own investigation, as would a host of other three-letter agencies.

Nearly a minute passed before the chair spoke again, and this time he stood. "Then I'll say something. Your name has been flung far and wide across this nation, spoken in every conceivable place and in every conceivable way, often as not with a great deal of esteem, but also with considerable confusion. Son, if I can call you that, because you appear to be about half my age, this is your chance for those who know you, know what you did, and more important, why you did it, to come forward and speak on your behalf."

"Thank you, but plenty of people already came forward on my behalf," Jess said. "They spoke with their lives."

An aide entered, climbed to the back of the room and whispered in the chair's ear. He listened, then returned his attention to Jess. "I'll give you a minute to think about it."

"Respectfully, sir, I don't need any more time. The sooner this is over, then the sooner I can be forgotten."

"Well, Special Agent Gage, I don't think that's likely. Not likely at all."

It seemed the hearing was finally over, but he still hadn't been officially dismissed. The commission sat silent, bidding its time, waiting for something to happen.

Jess, impatient, sipped more water, shifted in his seat, and looked around.

The sun was setting behind the Lincoln Memorial when the modest three-vehicle motorcade departed the White House. Nine minutes later it pulled up below the Capitol building's wide marble steps. Newly promoted SAIC Dominca Ricci climbed out of the middle vehicle's right front seat. Special Agent Lyle Moody hopped out of Halfback and opened the doors for the first family.

Within the chamber, a hushed reverence, the commission anticipating an imminent arrival. They rose as one as a door at the rear opened and the American president, the first lady, and their daughter entered.

Jess turned, then also rose, genuinely surprised to see them. The two men had spoken several times by telephone over the thirty-three days since that momentous May afternoon and night, soon to be declared a national holiday; three times during Jess's nineteen day stay at the UCLA Medical Center, twice during his evaluation at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, once at his Baja beach hotel, and again later at

his K Street apartment. But now, for the first time, the two were reunited—savior and saved.

George Jefferson Swann stepped forward and warmly shook the special agent's hand. Now the two communed again, but only the president's words were audible. "Special Agent Jesse Lee Gage honored me, my family, my country, *our* country," the president began, "and so, I am honor bound now to serve him and his good, proud name, and those things for which he was ready and willing to sacrifice his life." It was a version of what he had expressed when addressing Ray Rykoff's passing at the Hooks' home. Perhaps he had forgotten, or was perfectly aware, the chosen words still the best way to express his gratitude. Some had also been spoken at the state funeral weeks earlier, but at that time Jess was unable to be present.

Ten minutes later Jess emerged alone at the top of the steps. The mini motorcade had already departed. It was dark out. Overhead, perched atop the Capitol dome, a figure framed against the night sky appeared to watch over him. Nineteen feet high, the sculpted bronze female, Armed Freedom, stands atop a cast iron globe etched with the words *E Pluribus Unum*: Out of many, one.

Grace was there to meet him at the bottom. Going to him, she escorted him down, then assisted him hobbling across the parking lot to a dented Chevy pick-up with Tennessee plates.

Out of habit he approached the driver's side. She intercepted and steered him around to the passenger door.

"I'm driving."

He gave her a look.

"Relax, special agent."

She opened the door for him and skipped around to the driver's side. Jess's hand moved to the nape of his neck, gave it a good rub and climbed in. A boxed pizza sat on the dash.

"In case you were hungry," Grace said. Then, "Oh, and I got you something." Reaching in her bag, she pulled out a flat square wrapped in Japanese rice paper and handed it to him.

"What is it?"

"Open it. Find out."

Jess peeled away the wrapping. It was *Almost Blue*, an Elvis Costello CD.

"Actually, it's Elvis Costello and the Attractions, except only his name's on the front."

Jess turned the CD over to look at the back graphic.

"Recorded in Nashville," she said. "All country covers. Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, George Jones, the greats."

She keyed the ignition, took the CD back, and slid it in the dashboard player. Costello came on, crooning "Why Don't You Love Me (like you used to)."

They sat there a half-minute listening.

She turned down the volume. "Are you sure you're ready to do this?"

He nodded.

They rode in silence, Grace navigating the early evening traffic. Having crossed the Arlington Memorial Bridge and onto the grounds of the National Cemetery, they proceeded along a short, straight lane to the wrought iron entrance gate. There, a young soldier of the U. S. Department of the Army stood beside a parked sedan. Visiting hours had come and gone, but arrangements had been made, and so, they were expected. The soldier approached the pick-up on the passenger side.

“Special Agent Gage?”

Jess lowered his window and displayed the shield suspended from a thin silver chain around his neck. The soldier quickly stepped back, straightened, gave a brisk salute, then leaned forward again.

“I can accompany you, sir. Actually, I have orders to.”

“No, thanks, we’re good. Just tell your boss I’m an asshole,” he said good-naturedly and rolled up his window.

Grace leaned forward, said, “It’s true. He can be.”

“Yes, sir, ma’am.” The soldier handed Jess a map, stepped to the gate, unlocked it, and pulled one half wide. Later that night, the brief encounter would be told in reverent tones to his loved ones.

The pick-up eased through the gates and onto the hallowed grounds, winding through the eternal home of over 400,000

men and women. From a distance, the truck's interior dome light gave the appearance of a firefly weaving through the dark. Consulting the map, they arrived at Section 60, in the southeast corner, the burial site for military personnel killed in the Global War on Terror since 2001.

Grace parked and the two got out.

A short distance away, seven tombstones of white marble mined from a Georgia quarry basked in pale starlight. The names etched there are now familiar: Duke Cobb, Raymond Rykoff, Lionel Bible, Franklin Kilmer, and Jack Blooper, among others. Their names are also to be found elsewhere—on a wall of honor in the lobby the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and in the hearts of a grateful nation.

Should you happen to visit the facility, you will see this inscription: *"The Secret Service has a long tradition of excellence, and we are an organizational culture held together by an invisible web of obligation: duty, honor and country. We do not abandon one another. That is why we gather here today, to remember our fallen colleagues. These men and women died on duty. Some were killed in accidents, and some were deliberately murdered. We remember many of them now as they once were. Some were very young, at the beginning of their careers. Some were middle-aged and then they were gone from our midst, and we mourned their loss. There is, sadly, nothing as ruthless as truth and nature. Still, we do not lose hope. We are strengthened in their memory."*

Death ends a life, but not a relationship. Those memories, I think, linger in love. These honored dead have returned to the love that created them, and we miss their faces that we'll see no more. Yet, we know at the deepest level of our being that something of who they were, and are now, endures at a whole new dimension of reality. And our true nature is to embrace both life and death. As Thornton Wilder wrote, "There is a land of the living and the land of the dead, and the only bridge is love, the only survivor, the only meaning."

Assistant Director Jerry Parr (Ret.)

To Special Agent Jesse Lee Gage's ears, the last faint salvo of a 21-gun salute echoed across the vast, silent city of the dead.