

THE CONTROLLER

-Obsession

Jerry Bruce

obooko Edition

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CHAPTER ONE

Richard was devastated when his nemesis revealed that Veronica was his White House insider. It would not have hurt more had he been stabbed through the heart. Who else did the Controller have under his thumb? More important than that, who could Richard trust? How long was she under the Controller's influence? Was it just during his eight years as President of the United States, or was it even longer? Was it an accident that they met and instantly fell in love, or was it planned to happen that way? These were only some of the questions racing through Richard's mind.

It was now very clear to Richard that the Controller had been hedging his bets all along and had his stand-in waiting in the wings from the very beginning. And if he had one, maybe he also had a second. The Controller always seemed to have the odds calculated down to the most finite degree, leaving nothing to chance, and having all possible outcomes thoroughly analyzed. Richard was certain the Controller had at least one backup plan for any action that he could conceivably take, demanding that he come up with something foolproof, something that would be successful—without costing him his life.

It didn't help that he was growing wearier with each passing day. He had the affairs of his World Organization of Nations presidency to deal with as well as his conflict with the Controller, and he needed about twenty hours every day just to stay on top of things.

Richard knew that this ongoing battle of wits wasn't getting him anywhere and served only to agitate the Controller. He started to doubt his own abilities to match this worthy adversary. The Controller looked upon every one of Richard's moves the same way a boxing champion views the feeble jabs of a sparring partner—something to be dealt with, but not to be taken seriously. Richard was merely helping the champion hone his skills, when in fact he needed to use their sparring sessions as an opportunity to learn more about his enemy. After all, sparring partners occasionally end up as title contenders.

Richard reflected back to the beginning of his first term as U.S. President. After the initial adversity with the Controller, he saw the positive aspects of what the Controller was trying to do, to elevate the underprivileged, feed the starving, eliminate disease, and rid the world of the political undercurrents that made peace a dirty word. He bought into the Controller's plan because these were also the accomplishments that he wanted to leave behind as his presidential legacy. He learned to suppress his misgivings by weighing his doubts and suspicions against the very real accomplishments that he could achieve. He was part and parcel to everything that had come to pass. No longer could he argue with his inner spirit that he had been forced to take part; that stand collapsed with his first voluntary act. He would never be able to confront the Controller, let alone defeat him, until he admitted to himself that he had abetted Satan and had become part devil himself. He would have to exorcize the demon within, but not until he used it to squash the Controller. If it meant taking himself down, then so be it, but he had to succeed, failure could not be an option.

"One thing is certain," Richard whispered to himself, "I have to convince the Controller that I'm back on his side and that my recent opposition was misguided. Then, after I have regained his confidence, I have to create a weakness where one doesn't exist. A false sense of security might help. I can't allow him to oust me and install a replacement. I have to assure him that such action is unnecessary."

* * *

The cell phone rang out its rendition of "Hail to the Chief," the same way that it had done so many times before. As with each time before, Richard felt the same tingle go down his spine and could feel the same apprehension that he was about to talk to the devil himself. He could feel the cold beads of sweat on his forehead. God, how he wished this would all end—one way or another. With trepidation he picked up the phone.

"Hello, Controller."

"Hello, President Sinclair. Are you of a frame of mind to discuss our relationship? We did, after all, leave some things on the table."

"I suppose now is as good a time as any." Richard could have kicked himself for not sounding more cordial and eager to talk. How else was he going to win back the Controller's

confidence?

“Excellent. Now then, let’s not beat around the bush. Are you desirous of continuing our relationship or not?” His voice was all too familiar with its cold, calculating, emotionless tone. On many occasions, Richard thought that the Controller must have ice water in his veins.

“I have given it a great deal of thought and I have come to the conclusion that it would be in my best interests, as well as yours, to continue our arrangement. Unless, of course, you have changed your mind and prefer not to have me on board?” Richard wanted to lay his cards on the table and see what kind of response he evoked from the Controller. The Controller was going to have to accept Richard’s new attitude, that of one who has become somewhat disenfranchised with his superior, as a part of the deal.

“As long as you realize, Richard—and I am certain you do—that the consequences for failure to comply with my wishes would be most severe. With that in mind, I am willing to allow you to maintain your position. However, in light of your lack of belief in my cause, I will have to keep the reins a little tighter.” The Controller realized that while Richard’s good looks, charisma, and morality were assets in getting him the U.S. and W.O.N. presidencies, they were also characteristics that deeply endeared him to the people. Even with the world’s populace under the Controller’s drug induced influence, it would be hard to replace Richard without suffering some setbacks. The Controller wished to avoid any roadblocks to the completion of his plan, so keeping Richard in place was the path of least resistance. He was certain that Richard would, when all was said and done, comply with his wishes rather than face his wrath. The Controller considered this and quickly determined that Richard’s attitude was inconsequential.

“I want to know one thing before we go any further.”

“Yes, I’m certain I know what it is, Richard. You are curious about your lovely wife, Veronica, and her level of involvement with me. Am I correct?”

The pompous know-it-all attitude was almost too much for Richard to take, but he had no choice. Richard would have to learn to choose to do battle on his terms and only when success was a certainty.

“Precisely.”

“All right, but this will be the first and last time I will discuss with you any of my followers.”

Richard had to bite his tongue so that his thoughts didn’t become vocal. What did he just say? “Followers?” Does he really think that these people believe in his movement? He must be delusional if he thinks they are acting out of anything other than fear of reprisal.

“Your wife decided to be my mole in the White House once I approached her with the possibility that it might not be in the best interests of her children should she refuse. I think it must run in the family, because throughout she maintained the same attitude which you now have. Don’t take that to mean that you are safe from my prying eyes, Richard; she still realizes the impact that non-cooperation would have upon her family.”

Richard’s spirits were lifted briefly by what the Controller had revealed. It was comforting to know that Veronica wasn’t a willing disciple, but his elation soon gave way to despair at the thought that his wife had been living a lie all these years and would be forced to continue her role. How he was going to deal with Veronica wasn’t clear; the only certainty was that their relationship would never be the same again. At least now he knew that Veronica wasn’t cooperating with the Controller until after he decided to run for the U.S. presidency. It was also clear to him that she colluded with the Controller strictly out of concern for Randall and Jennifer.

“Tell me one more thing.” The Controller cut him off before he could finish his thought.

“No, Richard. I’ve told you all that I intend for you to know. Do we have an understanding?”

“Yes. I understand what you must do and you understand what I must do.”

There was a slight pause in the conversation before the Controller responded.

“That almost sounds like a threat, Richard. But I know you wouldn’t be so bold as to do such a thing—not to me anyway.”

“No threat intended.” Richard didn’t sound very convincing. He couldn’t force himself to be humble with this bastard.

“Don’t put yourself in a precarious position Richard. I’m willing to continue our relationship; however, you must realize that I’m not going to be very tolerant of any actions that I consider not in my best interests.”

“Don’t fret yourself, Controller. I will remain the poster child of your campaign.”

“Good. The alternative is just too gruesome to think about. Good day, Richard.”

Richard walked over to the bar to make himself a scotch and water to help steady his nerves. After fixing his drink, he looked up and noticed his reflection in the mirror that provided the background to the bar. Perhaps he was too afraid of what a mirror might reveal, but for whatever reason, he never looked closely at himself anymore, not even while shaving. He concentrated on the whiskers and not on the entire face. Now it was a different story, and he forced himself to pay heed to every feature. He made himself admit how much he had aged the last few years. The graying had increased from the slight salt and pepper on his temples to a fifty-fifty mix of silver and black over the rest of his still full mane. The deeper lines around the corners of his eyes and the bags under them only served to fortify the sadness that they revealed. He wondered if others were seeing the same Richard that he was viewing in his mirror—a man looking older than his sixty years. Could they see the utter frustration that he felt? Was his face providing clues to the fits of depression he would lapse into on occasion? Staring deeper still into the image before him, he couldn’t help but wonder if he wasn’t turning into another Dorian Gray. Perhaps he, as with Dorian, was physically displaying the sins that resided within.

It took Richard a long time to finish his drink. He spent more time thinking over his relationship with the Controller than he did imbibing. “I have to put this behind me and concentrate on my duties for the W.O.N. I need to make sure that the W.O.N. presidency stays mine for as long as I need to depose the Controller.” Richard wondered if his talking to himself was a sign that he was losing his mind.

Since he was convinced of the Controller’s insanity, Richard decided that if he was going insane it might be an advantage in dealing with the Controller. “It takes one to know one.”

* * *

The Controller sat in total darkness in his lair. He had just finished reading the newspaper while enjoying a glass of Duckhorn merlot. “I see why this is your favorite wine, Richard, it has a very pleasing fruity taste. I’ll have to stock more.

“I wonder about you, Richard.” The Controller was talking aloud, as though Richard was present and hanging on to his words. “What are you thinking? What plan are you hatching? Are you foolish enough to think that you can depose me? Well, I suppose I will find out in due time. It doesn’t really matter; I’m certain I’ll be able to deal with anything you can dream up. In the meantime, I intend to make sure my plans are followed to the letter. Soon all will be in place.”

With that, the Controller gave a loud, evil laugh.

CHAPTER TWO

Before he left office as U.S. president, Richard knew that he would have to come to terms with Stephen Hamilton, his former vice president. Stephen was now comfortably entrenched in his position as U.S. president and Richard needed to determine if he had any involvement with the Controller. Richard would need all of the cooperation from Stephen that he could get if he was to successfully battle the Controller.

He and Stephen had been fast friends for over eight years and Richard hated the thought of losing that closeness; however, he found it hard to believe that the Controller would allow someone not under his thumb to run the most powerful country in the world. It was a remote possibility that the Controller, having achieved his primary goals, was willing to let the U.S. president off the hook, knowing that he had the W.O.N. president wrapped up and the infrastructure in place to maintain his dominance.

The United States would always play a vital role in the overall plans of the W.O.N., if for no other reason than its military capabilities. However, the influence of the American president wouldn't be as significant as in the past. The structure of the W.O.N. empowered its leaders to use the military capabilities of any of the member nations without a majority vote. Since the Controller had placed his own people on the leadership panel, he in essence controlled all the military power in the world. Of course the Controller could never envision an instance where such awesome power would ever be needed. The occasional uprising would be a rarity now that the world was at peace, rid of disease and well fed. Any misguided group that stirred up trouble could be easily taken care of by security forces.

Richard knew he would have to work very closely with Stephen in the course of conducting normal business, something he was looking forward to with delight. Most of all he was hoping that if he could prove Stephen was free of complicity with the Controller, they could form an alliance. Possibly between the two of them they could find out the identity of the Controller and take him down.

Richard was certain of only one thing at this point—he could trust no one. If he learned anything at all after finding out about Veronica, it was that he couldn't take the loyalty of anyone for granted. From now on everyone around him would have to pass the test. Everyone was under suspicion until he could prove them innocent of collusion with the Controller. As much as it hurt Richard to take such a stance, he knew that there was no other choice. He hoped that it wouldn't cost him the valuable friendships he so dearly cherished. He would start with Stephen and work down the list until he could be positive who was an ally and who was an enemy.

* * *

Hamilton had taken to the office in perfect fashion, which wasn't surprising to anyone since former President Sinclair had given Stephen a vital role in his administration. Stephen was kept up to date on key matters even if he wasn't directly involved. Richard Sinclair was not the kind of man to have a lame duck as his vice president, quite the contrary in fact, as Richard believed that his vice president should be capable of taking over the Oval Office on a moment's notice. Of course Hamilton's main duties consisted of managing the implementation of the water purification and agriculture projects that Sinclair was so staunchly supporting. Stephen's experience would serve him well in his new position. The Oval Office didn't miss a beat, so

smooth was the transition of power.

“Mr. President, President Sinclair is on the line and would like to talk to you if you have a minute.” Mrs. Margaret Williams had agreed to stay on as Hamilton’s secretary, thereby continuing her service as Secretary to the President. Though her fondness for Richard was immense, she didn’t want to relocate to New York to continue being in his employ, even though it meant a great deal more money and prestige; Washington D.C. had been her home since the day she was born and would remain so. Stephen was delighted to have her remain, as the experience she gained over the last eight years would be of great benefit to him. She brought an insight that only direct contact with those seeking attention from the president could possibly hope to attain; her innate ability to read people and their intentions served Sinclair well and would do likewise for Hamilton.

“Thank you, Mrs. Williams, I’ll take the call.” Stephen pushed the speakerphone button so he could free up his hands and continue shuffling, reading, and signing papers while he talked to Richard.

“Stephen, how are you old friend?” Richard wasn’t trying to be condescending, he truly believed Stephen to be one of his closest friends.

“I’m doing just fine, Richard. How is life in the Big Apple treating you these days?” Stephen hadn’t lost one iota of his Texas drawl. Richard had once jokingly accused him of going out of his way to make sure it didn’t become “diluted,” an accusation that Stephen blatantly refused to deny.

“Oh, I can definitely say that I’m enjoying being back. The problem is finding enough extra time to get back into the swing of the nightlife. Veronica has been pestering me to take more time off so we can go to more Broadway shows. And of course, all our old friends are trying to get us to spend more time with them. Veronica has already told me that we will be spending several weekends this summer in the Hamptons with one of her sisters. I don’t think she understands the logic that if I was busy trying to run the United States, then I would be even busier trying to run the world!”

Stephen couldn’t help but laugh at Richard’s dilemma. “I don’t envy you one bit, believe me. I thought I was driving myself hard when I was leading those projects of yours, but now I don’t see too much of the light of day. If my offices were on the interior of this building, I wouldn’t have a clue if it were night or day. As it is, in the evening I lose track of time. Once I phoned one of my aides over some trivial matter only to find out that it was two in the morning. Needless to say I don’t have a very happy staff!”

“As the song goes, welcome to my world. Stephen, I was thinking that we should plan on getting together one of these days. You know, have a nice lunch and spend some time talking.” Richard was hoping to set something up in the near future.

“I’m all for that. Did you have something in particular you wanted to discuss or just talk about the good ole days?”

“Just some casual time between old friends. Of course if there is an issue or two that you would like to talk about, I would be receptive.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d rather do than spend time with my ole friend Richard. You know, I just thought of something, would it be possible for you and Veronica to come to Camp David for a day or two? I know you two loved the place and Elizabeth and I have been procrastinating about spending a weekend there. What do you think of that idea?”

“I love it and I’m certain that Veronica would also. Should we pick a date now?”

“Sure, why not.” Stephen started flipping through his calendar looking for an open

weekend. “Let me see, I think I can shuffle a few things around and make arrangements for the second weekend of next month, how about you?”

“I do have one thing planned, but I don’t see any reason why I can’t reschedule that particular appointment. I will have to check with Ronnie to make sure she hasn’t planned anything. I’ll check with her and get back to you tomorrow. Is that okay with you?” Richard actually had a fairly busy schedule that weekend, but decided that this was far more important and everything else could wait. He was also going to insist that Veronica drop any plans she might have as well. This time with Stephen was too important to postpone.

“That sounds good to me. I don’t have any notes about the first lady having any plans but I still better verify that with her just to make sure. I’ll talk to you tomorrow Richard. Bye now.”

“Take care my friend.”

Richard was glad that they would be able to talk in only a few weeks time. Camp David would be the perfect place, relaxed and laid back; Stephen would be more susceptible to opening up and possibly divulging any information he may have regarding the Controller. Already Richard felt like he had scored the first points in the game. He wouldn’t be playing on his home court but at least he would be in an arena where he had many successes.

Stephen leaned back his chair as far as it would go and fixed his gaze upon the ceiling, deep in thought about his conversation with Richard. He was relieved that Richard had called him. He’d been dreading making a call to Richard for quite some time but, as luck would have it, Richard made the first move. Camp David would be the ideal spot for him to confront Richard. He had a lot of unanswered questions that he needed to get resolved—the sooner, the better. Stephen couldn’t help but wonder if Richard’s call was as spontaneous as it seemed or if he also had a hidden agenda. In a few weeks he would find out if their meeting would be a curse or a blessing.

* * *

Richard contacted Stephen and confirmed the date of the Camp David visit. He had Veronica cancel her plans to attend a Saturday evening charity fundraiser, telling her he needed to discuss the United States role in the new world government with Stephen. He hoped this excuse would be satisfactory and not raise any red flags that might cause her to contact the Controller.

Since he didn’t have a chance to ask the Controller if Veronica was aware of his knowledge of her entanglement, the only safe thing to do was assume that the Controller had informed her. Richard thought that once the secret was out she would approach him, but her silence on the matter led him to believe that the Controller may have been toying with both of them. Either way, he knew that his relationship with Veronica was never going to be the same—all trust had vanished.

* * *

Richard spent the days before his Camp David visit wrapping up as many affairs as possible to avoid having to cut short his visit with Stephen. He also dedicated a great deal of time laying out a strategy that might get Stephen to open up to him and reveal any relationship he might have with the Controller. Stephen was going to be the first political figure that Richard put under the microscope, his guinea pig, with many others following in Stephen’s wake. Richard’s list was long and growing longer with every passing day.

After much thought, Richard convinced himself that the solution to overthrowing the Controller would be dependent upon neutralizing his “followers.” With that in mind, he put together a list of those individuals he suspected of being under the Controller’s influence which

in turn led to a list of friends known to be associated with the person in question. His plan was to systematically approach each individual and attempt to determine if they knew of the Controller, and worse still, if they were involved with him. Once he determined where they stood he would formulate a strategy for dealing with them. His primary concern was approaching them in a manner that would not be threatening or alarming. He couldn't risk having them alert the Controller. However, before he could concern himself with them, he had to first deal with Stephen Hamilton.

* * *

It was the first warm day that spring had offered, coming all too close to the beginning of summer to suit Richard. Even though he knew that summer in New York City could be outlandish at times, he still wished it would hurry up and arrive. The brief exposure to the sun's rays warmed Richard's spirits causing him to walk slower than usual as he made his way from the limousine to the Gulfstream IV. He had offered Veronica his right arm, a surprisingly rare exhibit of closeness in Veronica's eyes, but of no significance to himself. Richard had requested that Stephen keep their visit as low-key as possible. He insisted that he and Veronica would go by private jet to Dulles airport and from there by private helicopter to Camp David and meet the first family there instead of first going to the White House.

Richard didn't want to give the press the idea that this was an official visit. Word would get out soon enough, and they would downplay the visit's significance saying that it was merely a coming together of two old friends. As it was, Richard was uncomfortable with the size of the entourage that always had to accompany him. He thought the number of individuals was purposely inflated so as not to be outdone by the U.S. president's security team. He noticed that the twelve-passenger jet didn't have any empty seats.

In his new role Richard found it hard to distance himself from the concept of America first, the rest of the world second. He knew that given enough time, he would make the transition; but for now it was an effort for him to check his patriotism at the door.

The just over two-hundred-mile flight didn't give Richard much opportunity to ponder what he was going to say to Stephen. Just as well, Richard thought to himself, I don't want it to sound rehearsed.

Veronica tried to initiate some small talk but Richard responded in one-word answers, if he responded at all, and didn't once turn away his gaze from the airplane's window. Later he would apologize to her for his coolness, explaining it away as being distracted by the topics he was going to be discussing with Stephen. She, of course, knew better.

* * *

Elizabeth and Stephen waited until the helicopter's blades came to a complete stop before they approached to greet Richard and Veronica with handshakes, hugs and kisses. As the women walked arm-in-arm towards the Laurel cabin, Stephen put his hand on Richard's shoulder and gave it a slight squeeze while saying how glad he was that they could get together.

"We have a lot to talk about, Richard." Stephen seemed elated that Richard had finally arrived.

"We sure do. You're going to have to fill me in on the latest gossip in Washington. I'm out of the loop now." Richard flashed a grin at Stephen.

"Why I'd be happy to, you don't know the half of what's been going on around the Capital since you left. All of it for the good, I might add, well, maybe not all. There are always those who will never be satisfied with anything. But enough of that, let's go have some lunch and a drink or two, shall we?"

“Lead me to the water trough!”

“You sure you’re not from Texas?” Stephen gave Richard a firm slap on the back as he flashed him a toothy smile.

* * *

Richard and Stephen decided to take a stroll after lunch so they could talk while working off some of the rich blueberry cheesecake they had for dessert. They had each partaken of three cocktails over the last couple of hours and were glad to be walking away from the liquor source so they could clear their heads.

As they walked along a path through the densely forested acreage that comprised Camp David, the conversation was light and non-political. Richard couldn’t stop his mind from wandering and had flashbacks to happier times when he would take similar walks with Veronica. They were never closer than when they were alone at the camp and could make time for themselves away from the media. He suddenly realized how much he missed the picnics Veronica would arrange when he and Randall went to the stream to fish and she and Jennifer would show up at lunchtime to surprise them. Those were happier times that would never be repeated.

Stephen had been talking, but it was merely a murmur in the back of Richard’s mind until the tone of Stephen’s voice suddenly changed, giving his words a level of severity that warranted attention. Richard had no idea that Stephen was also planning a confrontation; it took him by surprise when Stephen resurrected an old topic.

“Richard, there is something that I would like to ask you.” Stephen’s relaxed demeanor suddenly turned serious and he exuded concern.

“What’s bothering you Stephen?” Richard could feel the intensity of the moment.

“Remember back when we were campaigning for our first election?”

“Sure, those were some of the best times we had, when we were developing our friendship.”

Stephen purposely ignored the response lest he lose his train of thought. “Well, do you remember how we were concerned about the way various factions were shifting their loyalties from our opponents over to us?”

“I remember. What about it?” Richard sensed where this was going and could see that his window of opportunity to confront Stephen may have just opened.

“Richard, I have reason to believe that the person responsible for that support was the recipient of special favors from the Oval Office while you were president. Are you in a position to deny these allegations?” Stephen had rehearsed what he was going to say to Richard and decided that the point blank approach would be best, that way he could read Richard’s face and eyes to see if there was an immediate reaction that might give him a clue where Richard stood. To Stephen’s surprise, Richard remained relaxed and calm, hardly the reaction he expected.

“Before I answer that question, allow me the opportunity to ask you something.” Richard emphasized the ‘you’. “Is it true that you are involved with an individual who is looking over your shoulder and guiding your every move?” Richard decided “the best defense is a good offense” was the proper strategy to employ.

“That’s preposterous! I am not answering to anyone for my actions and I’m certainly not taking orders from anyone.” Stephen actually sounded hurt that Richard could even insinuate such a thing.

Richard could see how upset Stephen was and believed that it was a genuine reaction to being accused of something for which he was innocent. “So you are denying that there is anyone

or anything that is determining how you perform your job?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. And I am deeply hurt that you would even consider me guilty of such digression.” Stephen had to make a conscious effort to unclench his fists before he took a swing at Richard. “I can’t believe that you could even entertain such an idea.” Stephen turned away as if to return back to the cabins, took one step, turned back around and faced Richard. “Unless of course, you are guilty of it yourself.” He was going to say something further but Richard cut him off.

“Believe me, Stephen, I hated the thought of confronting you with this more than you could ever know. I value our friendship above everything else. I’ll make a deal with you; you tell me everything you know or suspect and I will tell you everything that I know.” Richard hoped that Stephen would accept the deal, not just so he could learn more information about the Controller, but so that he could finally tell someone about the roller coaster he had been riding.

“Okay. I’ll tell you everything I’ve heard. But whether or not we can continue to be friends will depend upon what you tell me.”

“Fair enough, Stephen. Just remember one thing, you also accused me of collaboration and I should be just as hurt as you.”

“Richard, I was told by a fairly reliable source that the individual who helped us get elected was also the same person who gave us the scientific breakthroughs that we implemented. This same individual was believed to be currying favors from you in return. What favors, I don’t know, just that there were special considerations given. And one other thing, and I think this is the most significant—he is reportedly the person behind the Israeli attack on our embassy in Cairo. There you have it, that’s the full extent of my knowledge. I wish I knew more, but I don’t. Now it’s your turn.”

“Before I begin, let me ask you one more thing. What do you make of this? What is your reading?”

“I’m not sure what to think. Clearly if any favors were granted, they were either of little significance or cleverly hidden from scrutiny. If anyone in the opposition had wind of this, they would have been all over it like white on rice.”

“Okay Stephen, let’s go back and make ourselves some stiff drinks. I guarantee you are going to need a lot of booze to get through what I’m going to tell you.”

Richard had made up his mind about trusting Stephen.

* * *

The walk gave both men a chance to reflect back upon the early days of their relationship. Neither man spoke until they were safely ensconced in Stephen’s office.

“All right, we have our drinks in hand, so let’s have it.” Stephen, being a fairly tall and hefty man, sank into the armchair across from the couch where Richard had chosen to sit.

“First of all, when was the last time this room had an electronic surveillance sweep?”

“Jesus, Richard, what’s with you?” Stephen needed only a few seconds to see that Richard wasn’t joking but was genuinely concerned. “Just a couple of days ago. You know the routine; they always sweep all the buildings before a presidential visit.”

“Just wanted to make sure. You will see why I asked soon enough. Now then, I guess I should start at the beginning.” Richard took a big gulp from his glass and started to tell his story.

Richard could see the anguish in Stephen’s eyes as he related the details of the projects that Stephen had championed. Richard didn’t hold back, choosing to lay all his cards on the table and subject Stephen to every bitter ramification. He noticed Stephen wince when he confirmed that the Controller was responsible for the slaughter of the embassy Marines.

Pausing only when they replenished their cocktails, Richard related his tale to Stephen, leaving out Veronica's involvement. He told Stephen every gruesome detail about the Controller and his motivation. Stephen was shocked when he realized that he had been a pawn in the game the Controller was playing. He turned very morose at the thought that he had contributed to the usurping of power by this madman. It took Richard three hours and as many scotches to get through the saga. After he finished they sat in silence for about five minutes before Stephen responded.

"Richard, why didn't you confide in me?"

"You can't imagine how much I wanted to. I almost did at one point, but I backed off when the realization that if I got you involved it could result in harm coming to you or someone close to you. I couldn't allow that to happen. You also have to remember that we were actually doing some good for the world, Stephen. I reasoned that since the world was benefiting from my actions that there was no need to place anyone close to me in jeopardy. Unfortunately, I never realized that there could be such a sinister plot underlying everything good that we accomplished. Had I known the final outcome, I would have never allowed any of this to happen." Richard hung his head as if inviting the executioner's axe.

"Don't beat yourself up over this Richard. You may not have been able to stop any of this in the first place. At worst, you only made it a little easier for the Controller. After what you have told me, I'm convinced that he would have found someone else to assist him with the plan. You had no way of knowing what he was up to. No one short of a maniac could ever conceive of such a diabolical scheme. You were played by a master. I know that you would never do anything so sinister if you could avoid it. The question now is where do we go from here?"

"I want you to know that the reason I wanted to get together with you this weekend was to see if I could determine if you were involved with the Controller. Once I knew for certain where you stood, I knew that I would have an ally—or a foe. An ally could help me overthrow this madman." Richard was on the edge of his seat in anticipation of Stephen making a commitment to help him oust the Controller.

"Just how do you propose to accomplish that? I mean, isn't this drug that he put into the water supply going to make everyone powerless to do anything?"

"I've wondered about that and I've come to the conclusion that it only dulls your willingness to confront authority; it doesn't eliminate it. After all, we have been subjected to it along with everyone else, yet we are capable of rational thinking. I think that if you really want to oppose the Controller, the drug will have no effect, but if you are complacent it helps keep you there. I don't know if this makes any sense; sometimes I question everything I'm thinking."

"I think you may be on the right track. If we were all reduced to being zombies, the world wouldn't be able to run. Besides, something tells me that this Controller wouldn't take any pleasure in ruling a bunch of babbling idiots; he needs to have some resistance so he can exert his power." Stephen was almost licking his lips in anticipation of the upcoming fight.

"So, are you willing to join me in battling this guy?"

"Richard, nothing would please me more than to kick this joker's ass. How do you propose we start?"

"I made up a list of everyone that I think may have some affiliation with the Controller. You have already dealt with some of them since taking office. One I am positively sure of is Israeli Prime Minister Schmier. I also believe that British Prime Minister Rolt, French President LeClerc, and Syrian President Yahman may be aligned with the Controller. What I must do is try to determine if an alliance exists between the Controller and these gentlemen and then I would

know a little better what we would be up against.”

“We would stand a danger of showing our hand to the Controller if we aren’t careful in approaching the others, Richard.”

“I know, Stephen. I figure that I may have been the only one who was told of the overall plan. The rest could be enjoying utopia, completely unaware of the positions they are in.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I am the only one he elevated in position. By making me world president, he has in essence made me his second in command. If the others knew, I believe there would have been some kind of discord. Maybe I can use that to win them over. The way I figure it, the members of the World Organization of Nations original panel have been strategically placed there to keep everybody, including me, in line. It’s more than a coincidence that the panel members come from the same countries as the leaders I think are aligned with the Controller. We need to determine how many leaders the Controller has in his back pocket. I’ve identified those I mentioned to you simply because they inadvertently gave me clues. We need to know who is on whose side if we are going to be successful.”

“So do you have a plan as to how we are going to depose the Controller?”

“I think I may have the answer.”

* * *

“Now why would you be meeting with Stephen Hamilton at Camp David, Richard?” The Controller was talking aloud to no one in particular since he was alone in his office. “What could you possibly have to discuss? Could it be that you are considering a pact with Hamilton—a pact against me, perhaps? That would be a big mistake, Richard.

CHAPTER THREE

Richard had filled Stephen in on all the information he had gained through “a source in the news media” and how he was going to use it against the Controller, being careful not to mention Ralph Blocker. Richard knew that he had to be certain that he could trust the people closest to him. If the Controller could convince Veronica to cooperate, then he could also convince anyone else in Richard’s close circle. For starters, he devised a plan to verify the trustworthiness of Christine Morrison and Adam Broderick. He needed them more than ever if he stood a chance of overthrowing the Controller, but as much as he despised the idea, they would have to pass a loyalty test before he would confide in them.

Richard’s plan was quite simple—he was going to have them take polygraph examinations. They would object of course, but he would explain to them that it was a requirement levied by the W.O.N., who wanted to insure that everyone close to the president was loyal. A refusal to take the exam would be a confirmation of complicity with the Controller, as would failing the exam outright. Richard hoped that they both passed because he had already made up his mind that if either failed, that person would have to be “neutralized” before telling the Controller of Richard’s actions.

Richard was calling in a favor owed him by CIA Director Charles Thornton, whom he had supported against a great deal of opposition while in his second term in the Oval Office.

Thornton had assured Richard that he could always count on him when in need, even after leaving the White House. He was now in dire need of that help, so Richard didn't hesitate to contact Thornton for this favor. He gave no specifics to the director, other than that the examiner had to be an expert and beyond reproach. Thornton expressed some reservations at misusing his power until Richard assured him that the subjects were taking the exams voluntarily and that the security of the United States was the motivation. Knowing that the former president wouldn't lie about something as critical as national security, Thornton relented and agreed to make the preparations.

Richard now faced the task of convincing Adam and Christine to voluntarily take the exams.

* * *

Richard stood by the window looking out on the world hustling by far below. It was a beautiful day with a bright, clear sky and a slight breeze moving the trees. It was enough to relax him to the point of closing his eyes and letting the sun's rays warm his face, a welcome relief from the chill of the overly air conditioned office. He had been enjoying the respite for several minutes when his solitude was interrupted by the intercom.

"Christine Morrison is here to see you, sir."

"Thank you, please send her in."

"Yes, sir."

"Good morning, Mr. President. You wanted to see me?" Christine closed the door behind her.

"Yes, Christine. Please have a seat."

As she walked over to the couch, Richard couldn't help but notice how her long black hair fell naturally over her shoulders and half way down her back. It was as though her hair was beckoning him to let his eyes take in the beauty of her long, statuesque legs. He thought to himself that he much preferred her with her hair let down, instead of wound up the way she usually did when she wanted a more formal look.

Christine sat in the middle of the deep maroon leather couch that faced two matching armchairs from across an inlaid mahogany coffee table. Richard was going to sit in one of the chairs, then thought better of it, and took a place next to Christine on the couch. He initially did this to make their talk less formal, but he soon realized that he just couldn't resist being close to her.

"Would you like some coffee?" Richard asked as he poured himself a cup.

"Yes, that would be nice."

After handing Christine her coffee, Richard took a sip of his before turning slightly toward Christine. Taking a deep breath he finally got it out. "I have to ask you to do something for me."

"You know I would do anything for you, Mr. President; all you have to do is ask."

With a voice as lighthearted as he could draw upon he told her "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, Christine, but the W.O.N. is insisting that you take a polygraph examination."

"A lie detector test? Why?" There wasn't a trace of anger or concern in her voice, only curiosity.

"It's a requirement that they have recently implemented. Apparently there was an incident that raised loyalty issues among the representatives of the Italian delegation. The panel feels that it would be a good idea for everyone close to me to take such a test. Would you be willing to do this?" Richard didn't like having to lie, but he couldn't think of any other way to get this done; blaming the W.O.N. wouldn't make him out as the bad guy.

“Of course, sir, it doesn’t bother me at all.”

Richard was relieved and couldn’t help but reach over and take Christine’s hand. “Thank you. I assure you this will be low-key and confidential. I have made arrangements with CIA Director Thornton to administer the test, so you don’t have to worry about anything. He will make it as painless as possible.”

“When do I have to take it?”

“I’ll contact Thornton and set it up for sometime this week, if that’s okay with you.”

“Fine.”

“So how is everything else going? Are you settled in and up to speed?” Realizing he was still holding her hand, he couldn’t help but blush as he released her. Christine was disappointed that he released his grip, and wanted to grab his hand to continue the closeness she was feeling with him at this moment.

“So far, so good. Everyone has been very cooperative. There haven’t been any significant problems, only those you would expect when dealing with people from different countries and languages.”

“Good. I’ve gotten some very positive feedback about you. You have managed to charm your way into the hearts of even the French.”

“Yeah, well I think there may be some ulterior motives there, if you know what I mean.”

“I think I see. Do you want me to intervene?”

“No, I can handle the situation; it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve had to fend off an advance.”

Richard felt an odd sensation, one he hadn’t felt for a while—jealousy. “Just remember, I’m here for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. President. Now if you will excuse me, I have some preparatory work to get done before today’s press briefing.”

Richard’s eyes followed her departure as he pondered his unease at hearing that another man was subjecting Christine to advances. He did take heart in that the advances appeared to be unwanted.

* * *

Richard had some time before his two o’clock meeting with the representatives from China, Korea and Japan so he thought he might as well tell Adam about the polygraph exam. Richard was still going through the formality of meeting with as many representatives as possible, thereby not showing any favoritism. He was admittedly concentrating on those nations that didn’t have a friendly relationship with the United States. Richard felt that opening the doors of communication should be his first priority. This was in fact Adam’s idea, so when Richard asked him to come by, Adam assumed it was to help the president prep for his meeting.

Richard thought about all the years that they had been classmates, co-workers, and especially, friends. The thought of Adam being a mole for the Controller was unfathomable to Richard and he wouldn’t let his mind entertain such thoughts. But feelings aside, he needed to confirm beyond all doubt that Adam was clean.

“Adam, I have to ask a big favor of you.”

“Anything at all, Mr. President.” Adam still used the formal “Mr. President” instead of calling Richard by name as he had requested on numerous occasions over the years. Old habits die hard with Adam, Richard thought to himself.

“There’s been an incident with the Italian representatives, something that brought their loyalty under question. As a result, the W.O.N. is asking that I have you undergo a polygraph

examination. Are you okay with that?" Once again Richard had employed a lighthearted tone.

"I never heard of anything so ridiculous!" There was definitely some ire in Adam's tone. "Don't they think that eight years as your chief of staff is sufficient proof of my loyalty?"

Richard was taken back by Adam's reaction. He immediately started thinking the worst. "I had no idea that you'd be this upset with the request."

"It just ticks me off, that's all. If you ask me to take the test, I will, but I'm not going to take it because they ask me."

"I'm asking then; do it for me, Adam." Richard was feeling better about Adam's reason for objecting.

"Okay, I'll do it—for you."

"Good. I've made arrangements with CIA Director Thornton to have the test done by the CIA. That way we can insure that everything is properly controlled and kept confidential. There will be no leaks and it will be low-key. I can set it up for this week if that's all right with you."

"I'll make myself available, just let me know when. Do I have to go to Langley?"

"No, I'm having the equipment and the technician brought to New York so there should be as little disruption of your schedule as possible. I'll get back to you with the details."

"Okay, Mr. President. Need me for anything else?" Adam was quite calm and obviously over the tantrum.

"No, that's all for now, Adam."

Adam rose and turned toward the door.

"And Adam, thank you, I appreciate your willingness to do this."

"My pleasure, Mr. President."

* * *

When Alex Winston was given the questions that he needed to ask his two test subjects, he didn't quite know what to make of them. Most of the questions were obviously geared at determining if the subject had been involved in activities which were not in the best interests of the United States or the president, but the final three were odd. This whole setup was odd. Why was he told to go to New York City to perform the tests? Why was the test being given in an empty office building? He wasn't told the names of his test subjects, though he would soon recognize them both from all the press conferences he had seen on TV. Most of all he was curious why the director himself was waiting outside the room and had personally made all the arrangements.

Alex read the last three questions aloud to himself to see how they sounded. He wanted to make sure he didn't stumble or lend any emotion to the questions since either could possibly affect the test subject and bias the readings.

"Have you ever heard of an individual called the Controller?"

"Have you ever been approached by someone calling himself Controller?"

"Are you now or have you ever been in collusion with someone calling himself Controller?"

When he was confident of his preparation, he asked for the first person to be tested.

Winston was immediately startled at how beautiful Christine Morrison was in person, much more than TV could convey. She had been waiting outside with the director, unaware that Adam was on his way over as well.

Christine was calm during the thirty-minute examination. It was all Winston could do to concentrate on the graphs before him with such a beautiful woman sitting mere inches from him. After he disconnected the wires, Alex escorted Christine to the door to stretch his legs and get a

drink of water before setting up his polygraph for the next person.

Christine followed Director Thornton's directions to wait in a room that had been outfitted with an easy chair, lamp and reading material. She didn't know that Adam was waiting in another room for his turn.

Adam put Winston through a third degree, or at least attempted to, but Winston was having none of it. He sternly told Adam to relax or the results would be skewed and a retest would be necessary. Adam didn't relish that thought, so he calmed down and let Winston proceed.

* * *

"Mr. President, I have a sealed envelope with the results of the polygraph examinations. Would you like me to have them dispatched to you or would you like me to read you the results?" Director Thornton knew that Richard wanted the results as soon as possible and that's why he called the minute he was handed the envelope.

"Have you read the test reports Director?"

"No, sir. And I wasn't in the testing room. I waited outside. Per your instructions, no one has any knowledge of the examinations or the outcome outside of the test administrator. He put the test reports and his evaluation in a sealed envelope."

"Very good, Director. Please have a courier deliver the envelope to my office immediately." Anxious couldn't describe how much Richard wanted to know if either of his two closest friends was to become a foe.

"You will have it as soon as possible, Mr. President."

"Thank you, Director; I appreciate your help in this matter."

"You're welcome, Mr. President. Should I continue to detain the subjects?"

"Yes, keep them there until I tell you to release them. I explained to them that it would be necessary to detain them for a short time, so they shouldn't get too upset. Do your best to make them comfortable. You are keeping them separate?"

"Yes, sir, neither one knows of the other's presence. I've made them comfortable, in separate rooms."

After he got off the phone with Director Thornton, Richard asked his secretary to call the security desk at the main entrance and request that she be notified as soon as the package arrived.

Richard passed the time while he waited for the envelope by editing and making changes to the speech he was preparing for his address to the World Organization of Nations Congress, his first official address. In what seemed like only a few minutes, his secretary knocked and entered, laying the manila envelope on Richard's desk. Richard didn't touch it until she had left and closed the door, then he eagerly slipped the point of the letter opener into one corner of the envelope and with one quick movement cleanly slit the flap. He slid the examiner's two reports from the envelope and placed them side by side on his desktop.

Richard picked up Christine's report first and after reading the examiner's overall opinion, turned his attention to the analysis of each individual question. She had answered each question truthfully and had no knowledge of the Controller.

Richard then read the opinion the examiner expressed regarding Adam's test. One question had been answered with a reaction that caused the examiner to express the opinion that Adam was uncomfortable with that specific question; he couldn't say that Adam was lying nor telling the truth, the answer was inconclusive. When Richard looked up that specific question, he saw that it was one of the filler questions that were put in at the beginning.

"Have you ever used a controlled substance?"

While not totally clean, Adam had obviously passed the critical questions. Richard knew

and didn't care that Adam had used marijuana and tried cocaine back in his college days. He knew Adam couldn't be under the influence of anything since he's known him; his mind was too sharp. He wouldn't confront Adam with this; he had more important issues to discuss with him and Christine.

Richard immediately called Thornton and gave him permission to release Adam and Christine, one at a time.

"Very well, sir. May I ask sir if the results of the examinations were satisfactory?"

"Quite so, Director. I can't tell you how pleased I am, both with your cooperation and the results. You can rest assured that both subjects passed with flying colors and don't pose a threat to our national security."

"I'm glad I could be of assistance, Mr. President. Feel free to call on me at any time."

"Thank you, Director."

* * *

Richard was relieved that two of the persons closest to him had proven to be free from the clutches of the Controller. He would need their assistance if he was to bring down the Controller and give the world the true freedom it deserved. The trick would be keeping any involvement on their part a secret from the prying eyes of his nemesis. Richard decided that he would have to protect them at all cost.

CHAPTER FOUR

At their last meeting, Richard promised Ralph Blocker that he would periodically call him to give an update on when he would be allowed to run a story on the Controller. Richard had a few minutes so he placed a call to Blocker's office at BNN.

"Blocker here." The voice sounded ticked off at the interruption caused by the phone call.

"Ralph, it's Richard Sinclair. I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

"No, not at all, Mr. President. In fact, just yesterday I was thinking about when I might hear from you. Are you calling to give me the go-ahead to release my story?"

"No, Ralph, I'm afraid not."

"You know, Mr. President, I'm beginning to believe that you never had any intention of letting me release this story." Blocker had an edge to his voice that Richard picked up on immediately.

"I know it seems like I'm stonewalling you on this, but it is imperative that you hold off for now. There have been certain developments of late that preclude revealing any information on the identity of our benefactor." Benefactor was the term Blocker used when referencing the Controller, a term he coined during the early days of Richard Sinclair's presidency.

"What kind of 'developments' are you referring to exactly, Mr. President?"

"I can't tell you quite frankly. You are going to have to take my word on it."

"With all due respect, you have been asking me to 'take your word' and 'trust your judgment' far too many times to suit me, Mr. President." Blocker was not pleased with Richard and didn't mind letting him know it.

"I know it seems like I'm leading you on; believe me Ralph, I wouldn't be asking you to

hold off if there wasn't a damn good reason." Richard was hoping that Blocker would take that as sufficient explanation and not press him any further, but Blocker was having none of it.

"You are going to have to tell me a little bit more than that, I'm afraid."

"All right, I'll tell you as much as I can and then you will just have to be satisfied. If I give you more information, will you agree to hold off?" Richard was desperate to get Blocker to agree so that he could avoid having to take any action to prevent the story becoming public. He didn't want to harm Blocker; he was, after all was said and done, Richard's primary source of information on the Controller's identity.

"I'll agree to that but only if the information you give me is worth it."

"Fair enough. I suppose you have already reasoned out that this benefactor of ours has enormous wealth and resources possibly far beyond what anyone realizes. Well, I have reason to believe that he has a great deal of influence in the worldwide political arena as well. This influence can make life very hard for anyone he doesn't care to befriend. But what is even more significant is that I am certain he has an ulterior motive for his generosity and that his agenda isn't necessarily good." Richard was gambling that Blocker was smart enough to realize the significance of what he had just heard. Richard wasn't about to give Blocker any details or let him in on what he already knew to be fact.

"That's a biggie. How long have you been keeping this under your hat?"

"That's not important right now. I need to know that you are with me. I need for you to commit to me that you will hold off on releasing any of the information you have until such time as I deem appropriate. So what's it going to be?" Richard was growing weary of this conversation and wanted to know where Blocker stood.

"Can I assume that you are taking some kind of action, with the power you have at your disposal, to put this guy out of business?" Blocker kept pushing, something that years in the media had taught him to do.

"You can assume nothing. I have told you all that I feel you need to know at this point; now it's time for you to decide if you are on my side till the end or not." Richard's tone was curt and challenging.

"Are you still willing to make sure that I get the exclusive rights to the story?" Blocker wanted to confirm what his reward would be for siding with Richard and keeping a lid on his story.

"My promise to you of an exclusive still holds true. You will be the only media representative to whom I divulge any information."

"All right, Mr. President, count me in for the duration. Just don't make me regret this, okay?"

"I assure you Ralph, the story you will be getting one day is going to be the biggest ever. Now, I need you to do something else for me. You need to keep an ear to the ground and fill me in on any new information you pick up. No matter how insignificant you may think it is. We have to be able to positively identify this character. There can be no doubt."

"I'll do what I can, but you have to understand, my resources have all been tapped out. I don't know where else I am going to get anything further. I've already given you everything that I have been able to come up with on this guy's identity. Plus, I have a job to spend my time on and I can't just forget that, it does pay the bills."

"I understand your position. Just don't lose sight of the reward you will be getting when it's all over. I think I can safely say that you will be the top dog in your profession."

"Yeah, but at the rate things are going, I'll die of old age long before that."

“Hopefully you won’t have to wait quite that long.”

* * *

Richard had been stringing Ralph Blocker along for quite a while and was actually quite amazed that Ralph was willing to hold off, yet again, on his story. Richard reasoned that it was probably due more to Ralph not being entirely positive of his subject’s identity than to anything he had to offer. Richard was convinced that if Blocker had definitive proof he would have published the story by now, unless he was completely misreading Blocker and Ralph was actually a patriot first and a reporter second. Richard wanted desperately to believe it was the former. He couldn’t avoid the feeling that somehow Ralph was going to play a significant role in the battle to come.

Since leaving the U.S. presidency, he hadn’t been giving Blocker any exclusive stories. Richard had not been in the W.O.N. presidency long enough to be able to feed Blocker any scoops. He made a note to himself to have Christine keep her eyes open for any story that might be of use to Blocker.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was just after midnight when Richard finished reviewing some of his notes regarding the Controller. He had filled several notebooks over the years and had never gone back to review, in detail, what he had written. In the past he didn’t need to use the information; now it was a different story, he was about to engage the enemy. He wanted to make sure that every detail was current in his mind and that every nuance in the Controller’s demeanor that he had noted was committed to memory. Richard wasn’t unlike a general planning his first battle with a formidable foe. Just as a general needed to understand how his enemy would react under certain conditions, so too did Richard need to have a firm grasp of how the Controller would respond to his assault. This could very well be the biggest chess match Richard had ever played, and there was little doubt in his mind that many pawns would fall before the war was won.

Richard was especially drawn to the notes he had made regarding the Controller’s reaction when he used the term “insanity” during one of their conversations. Richard had always tried to capture the Controller’s dialogue, verbatim, in his notes. He even went so far as to make footnotes wherein he elaborated on the Controller’s tone of voice and any hint of anger or satisfaction. And if that was true of this particular entry, then there was every reason to believe that the Controller was overly sensitive to the reference. His notes reflected that the Controller went into a lengthy diatribe, almost raving at times. Richard decided this aspect of the Controller’s behavior would definitely have to be pursued.

Later entries in Richard’s log made reference to the Controller citing how he would be seen as a savior to mankind and not a threat such as Adolph Hitler. This and other entries made Richard realize that the Controller was more than sensitive to references of insanity—he was averse to the concept. On reflection, Richard realized that the Controller had made unsolicited references to Hitler on several occasions. Richard didn’t think he needed a psychiatrist to read the obvious into what the Controller was feeling. His obsession with Hitler was due to his own assessment that his actions were similar to Hitler’s.

Richard suddenly gasped—something had just dawned on him; Hitler’s biggest claim to infamy was his commitment to genocide. Richard shuddered at the thought that the Controller might also be capable of such a despicable act. He had no reason to believe the Controller would do such a thing, but he wondered what the Controller might do if his program to eliminate disease didn’t totally succeed. The eradication of the AIDS virus was proving troublesome and progress was almost non-existent. In the past, Richard would never have imagined the Controller capable of mass genocide, but things were different now and, as Richard had learned, the Controller was capable of virtually anything if it meant reaching his goals.

“What was the term Stephen used?” Richard was thinking out loud and mumbling to himself. “Maniacal? Yeah, that’s it, maniacal. That’s appropriate.” Richard was convinced that the Controller had taken insanity to a level higher than any previous tyrant. There was far too much intelligence, planning and patience to his actions. He was able to control his temperament and bide his time if it was required for success. Hitler, Attila and Genghis Khan were not noted for their patience or even temperament. The Controller was the antithesis of his predecessors, perhaps because he felt no need to rush. Knowing that there would always be a clone of himself available to rule on a moments notice may have taken the edge off. Better to be accurate and methodical than prone to error and rash. This made him all the more formidable. Richard was certain that this could be the key to overthrowing the Controller—he had to drive the man to irrational behavior, thereby upsetting his balance and making him vulnerable to attack.

“Easier said than done, I think.” Richard purposely spoke out loud this time as if to impress upon himself the difficulty that lay ahead.

Richard decided to make a list of each perceived weakness, each chink in the Controller’s armor, a “hit” list of sorts. He would concentrate his attack, focusing on these targets.

* * *

It took Richard several days to go through his notebooks. He dedicated his days to the affairs of state that his position required of him; his evenings, which sometimes carried into the early morning hours, he dedicated to his notebooks and strategizing. It was during one of these early morning sessions that he ran across a particularly interesting notation.

There was reference to a set of ledgers that the Controller was going to turn over to Stephen Hamilton during the initial phases of the water purification project. At the time Richard had assumed that these would be computerized files, contained on discs, but he later noted that Stephen mentioned the ledgers he received were in the form of discs and printouts. What was most significant was that the printed pages had copious handwritten annotations. Richard reasoned out that the Controller was given the data files and printed them out for closer scrutiny. That being the case, then it was safe to assume that the handwriting belonged to the Controller. Stephen had said that there were some lengthy notations on many of the entries, so Richard made a to-do note to contact Stephen about the ledgers. He had no fear of them being discarded; Stephen was a pack rat and kept everything. The ledgers were stashed away somewhere, of that he was certain, just as he was that a good handwriting analysis might reveal some of the secrets hiding deep inside the Controller’s mind.

* * *

“Stephen, do you have those printouts of the ledgers that the Controller gave to you at the start of the water project?”

“Sure, you know me, I keep everything. What do you want with those?”

“I remember you telling me that there were a lot of handwritten notes. I’m thinking that if those notes were written by the Controller, then we can have the handwriting analyzed and

maybe learn a little bit more about the man.”

“Good idea, Richard. I’ll dig up the printouts and get them over to the F.B.I.”

“No, hold off on that. I would prefer that we give them to Director Thornton. He owes us a lot of favors and I trust him to keep things quiet.”

“Okay, I’ll get them over to him with an admonition that this is on the QT.”

“Excellent. Thanks Stephen.”

“Anything else going on in regards to the Controller?”

“I’ve just been going through all the notes I’ve taken over the years to try to piece together anything that we can use against this guy. After I’ve finished, I’ll run it by you and we can plan our next move.”

“Speaking of our next move, have you decided how you are going to approach the others about their involvement?”

“I’m still mulling that over. I did come to one decision though.”

“What’s that?”

“Stephen, it dawned on me that should one of the others sell me out to the Controller, we would need to have a backup plan in place so that our efforts won’t be wasted and the battle can continue. My thinking is that we keep your involvement with me between us. That way you are protected from reprisal should my plan be exposed.”

“That’s a good point; no sense in putting all our eggs in one basket. I’ll send those documents over to Thornton under your name so he won’t know I’m involved.”

“Thanks, Stephen. That also means that I will need to pass on to you some information that I haven’t given you as yet. I felt that the ‘need to know’ approach was the best option at this stage. Also some of the information leads back to a source that I have that must be protected.”

“What kind of source?”

“I’ll tell you when the time is right. For now, I want to get the handwriting analysis done and decide how I’m going to approach the others.”

“Sounds like a plan, Richard.”

“Great, talk to you soon, Stephen.”

* * *

Richard had decided to meet with Adam and Christine together instead of one-on-one. If they were going to be a team, it would make sense to start immediately.

“I’ve asked you both here to discuss something of extreme importance. Let me start with the results of the polygraph exams. Yes, you were both tested. I purposely didn’t tell either of you that both of you were being tested. You’ll see why shortly.”

“Some of those questions were odd, to say the least.” Adam couldn’t help interjecting.

“I know, but the significance will be clear to you after our discussion. Anyway, in a capsule, you both passed with flying colors.” Richard looked at each of them in turn with a smile on his face. He couldn’t help but notice a slight show of relief on Adam’s face.

“Just what was the W.O.N. thinking when they came up with those questions?” Christine was following up on Adam’s remark.

“This had nothing to do with the W.O.N.; I merely used them as an excuse. I didn’t like lying to you, but I had no choice. Let me give you some background. Since before I was elected to the office of President of the United States, there was an individual who used his great wealth and influence to make sure that Stephen and I got elected. He pressured the unions, the Black Caucus, the Hispanic Coalition, and who knows how many others to sway their members to vote for us. This was the man you saw at two of our appearances, if you can remember back that far,

Christine.”

“I remember only too well. So that guy was responsible for our success in Detroit?”

“That’s right. I’m not sure how much influence he exerted in other areas as well; he hasn’t told me.”

Adam leaned forward as if to get closer to Richard’s face. “You mean you know this guy?”

“No, not really. As far as I know, no one knows the identity of this man. But let me continue with my story. This man calls himself Controller.”

Richard noticed that Adam and Christine gave each other a knowing glance as if to say, “So that’s what the ‘Controller’ questions were all about.”

“He approached me as soon as I took office and informed me of his intercession on my behalf. He said he was intent upon making the world a better place and wanted me to help him. To make a long story short, when I balked he threatened the use of force against someone in my family. To stall for time, I played along with him thinking that I could find out who he was and have him arrested. As it turned out, I couldn’t get any insight into his identity. It was as if he never existed; all roads led to dead ends. Anyway, as a part of playing along, I agreed to listen to some of his plans, which at first sounded like pipedreams—to good to be true. Though it wasn’t long before I saw that there was some sound reasoning as to why it was possible to actually accomplish some of the things he was proposing.” Richard tried to relax in his chair but each time he started a new sentence, he found himself sitting closer to the edge of his seat.

“Are you saying that this guy is the one who brought us the agriculture and water projects?” Adam was dumbfounded.

“Yes, that’s correct. He brought us a lot more, however. In order to get me the influence that he wanted the U.S. president to have, he arranged for the assault on our embassy in Cairo.” Richard didn’t like having to reveal this and he was right for being leery.

After a lengthy pause, a shocked Adam finally spoke.

“Mr. President, are you saying that even though this guy caused the loss of American lives, you went along with his later plans?” Adam had a disgusted look on his face at the realization that his president and friend could have sold out the country.

“Believe me Adam, I’m not proud of what I did. But before you kiss me off completely, let me ask you something. Would you have sacrificed the lives of a platoon of Marines in order to bring peace to the world? Would you consider it a fair exchange for being able to end starvation? How about trading those lives for the ability to put an end to disease? Do you consider any of those things worth the price? Those were the questions I had to ask myself. And you know what? I came to the same conclusion anyone else would, those lives, and many more, would be a small price to pay for such a huge return. Think of me what you will; until you sit in the Oval Office, you have no idea the compromises that are necessary. I was facing a conflagration in the Middle East sometime during my first term. Of that I was totally convinced. You have to admit Adam, you were also positive that something had to be done before the Middle East blew up in our faces. But I’m not here to make excuses. Maybe I could have handled things differently, in fact, looking back on it, I should have. Anyway, by the time I got involved in the embassy situation, the Marines were already dead. I could not have done a thing to prevent that from happening. The problem was, and still is, that the influence this man has extends far beyond me. I have uncovered at least five heads of state that he has control over.”

“This is the most incredible thing I have ever heard.” Christine was awe struck. “What does he hope to accomplish?”

“That’s the next thing I was going to tell you. As it turns out, the projects were aimed at

achieving only one thing, making sure that every man, woman, and child were partaking of a substance that would render them subservient. The grain crops were genetically altered to accomplish this and the water treatment plants also added the substance to the water supplies. It doesn't render everyone mindless but it does play upon a person's desire to not rock the boat and question those in positions of authority. It gives one a false sense of security and contentment and breaks down their resistance."

"Oh my God, what have we done?" Adam was obviously distraught at this news.

"I'm afraid I have more to tell you. The reason for all this was so the Controller could be the dominant force on the planet. Essentially he has made himself the non-elected leader of mankind. To ensure that he will always rule, he had his 'wonderful' scientists perfect the art of cloning. There will always be a Controller around to rule. It was when that was revealed to me that I made a promise to myself to take this guy down, no matter the cost. This is where the two of you come in; I need your help. I think now you can understand the meaning of the questions you were asked."

"Good grief, Mr. President. How are the three of us supposed to stop this madman?" Christine was shaking her head in disbelief at what she had been told.

"It's not just the three of us, hopefully. I believe that we can count on a few of the other leaders to cross over to our side once they know the Controller's plan. I'm convinced that they aren't aware of all the details. I think I am the only one the Controller has told."

Adam said what Christine was thinking. "Where would we even start?"

"First of all, I need to know if I can count on you two to join me."

"Of course, Mr. President." Christine responded first.

"We've been together too long to break up a winning team now, don't you think?" Adam chimed in.

Richard filled them in on his notes and his plan of attack. After swearing them to the utmost secrecy, he told them of Ralph Blocker's research and findings and the level of his involvement and cautioned them to not reveal anything to Blocker. Then Richard told them what their first assignment was going to be.

"It was obvious from the first day I took office that there was someone in the White House, someone close to me, who was in collusion with the Controller, watching my every move and reporting back to him. The Controller himself confirmed this and later told me who it was."

"Who would do such a thing to you?" Christine took the words right out of Adam's mouth. "Veronica."

The silence in the room was at last broken by an "I don't believe it" from Christine. Adam just sat with his mouth open in total shock at this revelation, unable to summon a comment.

"I assumed that if there was one mole, there could be others. That is why I was forced to subject you to polygraph exams. I have anguished over this mole situation for years, not being able to give my total trust to anyone on my staff. The only person I felt I could trust ended up being the spy. I haven't confronted her, as she would say that she was forced to cooperate under the threat of harm to our children. I can honestly say that I don't know whether to believe this or not. I can only assume that I can't trust her since she didn't come to me at the beginning. That leads me to the task I have for you two. I have been in contact with Stephen Hamilton and he has assured me that he has never heard of the Controller, let alone colluded with him. I want to believe that, but I need to know for sure. He already knows where I stand, but he doesn't know anything about you two taking the examinations. If one of you approaches him as though you are working for the Controller, he will do one of two things—tell me about it or keep it quiet. What

he does will determine how we deal with him. If we had the President of the United States on our side it would definitely make things easier. Do I have a volunteer?"

"It has to be me. It would seem too unlikely that Adam would be involved. You two have known each other forever; it would be too hard to swallow." Christine made sense but that didn't make Richard any more comfortable with having to put her in the middle.

"How much does Stephen know?"

"I see where you're coming from, Adam. I have told him enough that if he is aligned with the Controller, then I am not long for this world. I debated with myself long and hard before deciding to show my hand. I dangled the carrot of a secret source, Blocker, but I never gave him any specifics. I figured that would buy me some time. The Controller would want to know who my source was."

"I am counting on you two to take up the battle should anything happen to me. Between the two of you and Blocker, you should be able to make things hot enough for the Controller and to wake up the other leaders."

Christine was uncomfortable with the idea of approaching Stephen, feeling that if the Controller was going to do something to Richard that he wouldn't hesitate killing her as well. She put the reservations out of her mind. "When do you want me to talk to Stephen?"

"As soon as you can. I want the two of you to remember one thing—we can trust absolutely no one. The slightest slip up and we are history. Assume that everyone is in collusion with the Controller and that the walls have ears. And one other thing." Richard got up and went to his desk, opened the center drawer and retrieved two envelopes. "Inside each of these envelopes is a key. Each key fits a different locker. There is a letter in each envelope as well that reveals the location of the locker and its contents. Should anything happen to me, one of you has to be sure to retrieve the contents from your locker and take the appropriate action. What you need to do is outlined in the letter. Under no circumstances is either of you to open your envelope while I am still alive." He handed an envelope to Christine and the other to Adam.

"Why can't we just have access to that information now?" Christine was saying what Adam was thinking.

"Because I feel it is best that I be the only one with all the details. The less dissemination at this time, the better control we will have should anything go wrong. It will only be a temporary situation. Once we have everyone on board and ready to take action, all of the team members will have access to everything I know. The information contained in those lockers would place you in the same position I now find myself. There is no sense in placing yourselves in harms way unnecessarily."

Richard paused, took a deep breath and gave his trusted friends an admonition.

"Don't for one minute underestimate this man. Not only did he take the lives of our Marines without so much as a second thought, but he was totally behind a nuclear strike against Israel if the need arose. This man plays for keeps, don't lose sight of that."

CHAPTER SIX

Richard had decided that since French President LeClerc had been so straightforward with

him soon after he started serving his first term as U.S. president that he should be the first one contacted. LeClerc had been open with Richard and it was clear that LeClerc was under the influence of the Controller. At the time Richard sensed that LeClerc was highly distressed over the situation and unless things had changed in the intervening years, LeClerc should be open to his plan. There was only one way to find out.

Richard was expecting the French president's call at two p.m. New York time. Since it was ten minutes past two, Richard was hoping that LeClerc hadn't opted out but was merely running late due to a prior commitment. He was pleased when LeClerc called him before he could grow too worrisome.

"Richard, I'm so sorry to be late. As you know, the affairs of state sometimes do not allow us to do as we wish, but rather as we must." LeClerc was sounding slightly winded, his heavy breathing indicating that he had just exerted some energy.

"Think nothing of it Jean Pierre. I understand completely. You sound a little winded, may I assume you have been jogging?" The joking tone in Richard's voice drew a slight laugh from the Frenchman, who was known for his lack of physical conditioning.

"I jogged, but only to get to the phone quicker so that I could call you before you engaged in some other matter. And I have to admit that I am getting far too old to be jogging the hallways! But you didn't want to speak to me about jogging did you?"

"May I speak freely, Jean Pierre? I mean, will this be a private conversation?"

"Yes, of course. I am alone in my office. Why the mystery, Richard?"

"I have been meaning to discuss something with you for quite some time, years, in fact. I just didn't feel that the time was right until now. Do you remember a conversation we had about eight years ago regarding your support of my world trade agreement?"

"I believe you are referring to the discussion wherein you questioned me as to my motivation for suddenly siding with you after having been so adamantly against the plan?"

"Yes, I can see that you do remember the conversation. Do you recall the reason you gave me?" Richard was being coy, hoping that Jean Pierre would take the bait and volunteer to discuss the Controller instead of forcing Richard to broach the subject.

"How could I forget? I admitted to you that there was a particular individual who was responsible for my change of attitude. Is it this individual that you wish to discuss?" LeClerc wasn't going to make this easy for Richard, having sensed that Richard was trying to draw him out.

Richard could see no other alternative than to be direct. "Jean Pierre, are you still in contact with this individual? And if you are, what is your involvement?"

"I see you decided to get straight to the point, at last." LeClerc took a deep breath and exhaled it loudly. "I am only contacted by him on rare occasions, specifically when he wants me to support a particular agenda of his." LeClerc was opening up and that pleased Richard.

"When was the last time he asked you for your cooperation?"

"Funny you should ask; it was to support you for world president. Incidentally, he didn't need to ask me, I was behind you all the way. I guess he merely wanted to make sure."

"Thank you for that, Jean Pierre. How would you describe your relationship with this man?"

"I cooperate with him only out of desperation; he has very effective techniques of coercion. I believe I mentioned that to you when we originally discussed him. In any case, nothing has changed that relationship over the years. Fortunately he hasn't required much of me. Don't you think it is time you told me why the sudden interest in this fellow? Is it because your

involvement with him is far greater than mine and perhaps not as comfortable?" LeClerc was no dummy and Richard could see that he was also astute.

"Before I answer your questions, let me ask you something. Do you have any idea as to the scope of this man's power?" Richard wasn't sure how much LeClerc knew about the Controller and his activities.

"I only know that he has told me virtually nothing. However, I do occasionally have access to information from another source, a source not unlike you and me, who is in the political arena as well."

"Really? Are you at liberty to tell me more?" Richard's interest just peaked.

"Not without checking with this person beforehand. However, I will say my source is known to you and has also been coerced by this man. I can also state confidently that he is as unhappy with the situation as I am."

Richard couldn't believe his good fortune. Not only has LeClerc opened the door for an alliance, but also has brought a friend with him.

"Would it be possible for you to talk to your source and get permission to talk to me further? Also, and I know this is asking a lot, do you think you could ask your source to talk to me?"

"I can ask, but I wouldn't get my hopes up if I were you. By the way, does this person we have been discussing have a name?"

"I know him as Controller. How do you know him?"

"Both me and my source know him by that name as well. I will contact my source to see where he stands on this situation. I will contact you as soon as I have any information. Good day to you Richard."

"Good bye, for now, Jean Pierre. I hope to talk to you soon."

Richard had gotten much more out of LeClerc than he was hoping. He was wishing for some indication that LeClerc was willing to join his efforts to overthrow the Controller and he felt he had gotten it. It could possibly turn out that LeClerc's source is someone Richard knows to be involved with the Controller, but it could also be someone new to the scene. Richard hoped that LeClerc would be able to convince the source to talk to him.

* * *

It was a week before Richard had any further contact with LeClerc, so he was slightly surprised when LeClerc called him one evening. For LeClerc it would have been about three in the morning. Richard had given Jean Pierre a phone number where he could be reached at any time and now Richard was curious why LeClerc felt it necessary to call at such an odd hour.

"I apologize for calling you outside your office; I hope this is not an inconvenient time?"

"It's perfectly fine, Jean Pierre. I have been waiting, quite anxiously I might add, for a call from you. But why are you up so late?"

"I felt the need to call you after deliberating for hours whether I would be doing the proper thing or not. You see, Richard, I have had several conversations with my source and he has only just this evening given me permission to talk to you. He told me a few things that have me quite upset. He made me promise to not reveal to you the things he told me. He believes that it is in his and my best interest to have you talk to him first. He will decide whether or not to take you into his confidence."

"When can I call him?"

"He will call you at your office at ten a.m. Richard, may I ask you something?"

"Sure, Jean Pierre."

“Why aren’t you willing to tell me more about your relationship with the Controller?”

“Just as you and your source are trying to find out if you can trust me, I am trying to find out if I can trust you.” Richard couldn’t have been any blunter.

“It would seem that we are at an impasse, Richard. Neither party willing to make the first move. I fully understand the reasons why. That became apparent to me earlier this evening. But if we can’t come to an agreement to trust each other, we will not make any progress.”

“Well, it sounds like your source will be the deciding factor. Based upon what I learn from him, I may or may not be speaking to you again on this subject. Thank you for calling, Jean Pierre. Please do try to get some rest.”

“Thank you, Richard. I hope we will be talking again soon.”

* * *

Richard was reviewing paperwork that required his signature and performing other routine tasks when his secretary stuck her head in the doorway.

“Mr. President, the Russian premier is on the phone. Should I put him through?”

“Yes, please do.” Richard looked at his watch—precisely ten a.m. He never imagined that LeClerc’s source would be the Russian premier.

“Hello, Mr. Premier; it’s so good to speak with you.”

“Thank you Mr. President. I believe you have been expecting my call?” Josef Vashenko had a deep, burly sounding voice, just as one would expect of a person who grew up in the climate of Siberia. He had worked his way up through the ranks of the proletariat the hard way, by working hard and not asking any favors. He was born to lead and that quality was quickly recognized. He was also a very proud man, proud of his humble ancestry, and proud of his country.

“Yes, President LeClerc told me to expect your call and I compliment you on your punctuality, Mr. Premier.”

“Please call me Josef. And I in return will call you Richard.” It sounded like an order instead of a suggestion.

“Thank you for agreeing to talk to me, Josef. I have to admit that I was surprised to find out that Jean Pierre’s source was the Russian premier.”

“Why should you be shocked? I don’t think our adversary, the Controller, shows any favoritism. He deals with people from all continents and all political views.”

Richard immediately picked up on the use of the word “adversary.” He didn’t believe that this was just a random choice of words. Vashenko was known to be very precise with his verbal expression. If he said “adversary,” then that’s what he intended to say—and to have Richard pick up on it. Richard decided that since the premier had purposely given him a clue to his feelings, then it was appropriate to respond in kind.

“I suppose that no one is beyond the reach of his evil influence.” Richard stressed the “evil.”

“I see we have a similar aversion to this man. Is that a correct assessment of your position, Richard?”

“Yes it is.”

“That surprises me to some extent. I have felt for some time that your own involvement with this man was—how should I say it—of mutual benefit. What has brought about this sudden change?”

“First of all, it isn’t a sudden change. I have always wondered about his intentions. However, since together we were accomplishing some things that were good for the world, I

cooperated. I have since come to realize that to be a mistake.” Richard tried very hard not to appear apologetic, which he was sure the premier would interpret as weakness.

“I was hoping that would be the case. Tell me Richard, what made you realize that you made a mistake?”

Richard sensed that Vashenko was on a fishing trip. “Some things that the Controller related to me.” He was going to leave it at that until such time as the premier gave him reason to believe he was trustworthy.

“I can see that we have to earn each others trust before we will be able to proceed.”

“Proceed with what?” Richard remembered that LeClerc used the same expression. He didn’t think much of it at the time, but now it seemed significant.

“Very well, enough of this chess match. I am going to assume that I can put my faith in you. I believe that you are genuinely at odds with this fellow, Controller, otherwise we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Therefore, I am going to ‘stick my neck out’ as you Americans say and tell of my intentions.”

“Let me interrupt you, Josef. I promise you, I don’t have any ulterior motives or hidden agendas. I am being sincere with you.” Richard hoped this would put the premier’s mind at ease.

“Good. Because what I am going to tell you could result in my death. I had some scientists analyze our water and crops. It is unfortunate that my predecessor didn’t do this before making my country dependent upon these. In any case, my scientists discovered traces of a substance that should not be present. They haven’t been able to tell me what effect this substance has upon those who digest it since they cannot obtain a big enough sample to run controlled laboratory tests. But I got them to speculate that it is probably not good for those taking it into their systems and could have undesirable long-term effects. Because of this, I feel that this Controller must be neutralized.” The premier gave no hint of emotion when he said, “neutralized.”

The premier’s words were like manna from heaven to Richard. Finally someone else was thinking along the same lines as him. “Josef, you have shown me a great deal of respect and trust by telling me this and I would like to return the favor. I have been planning a strategy for the overthrow of this madman for some time. I obviously had to proceed very carefully to avoid him getting word of my intentions. Can I assume that you and Jean Pierre are of like mind and would be willing to join me in my efforts?”

“By all means yes. We have already discussed the possibility. I only revealed my own intentions last evening to Jean Pierre. He was unaware of the chemical treatments being used against us.”

That explains why Jean Pierre was up all night worrying, Richard thought to himself.

“Do you have any idea what these chemicals are meant to accomplish Richard?”

“Yes. Unfortunately the crops and water have been treated with a genetically engineered substance aimed at altering how people react to authority. It seems that if a person is prone to complacency, the drug will enhance that trait. People would be very docile and could be led like sheep to the slaughter.”

“I have thought up many scenarios, but that one eluded me. This man is truly mad. But also very clever to take advantage of mankind’s tendency toward disinterested contentment.”

“You haven’t heard the best part. This maniac has done all this so that he can be the world’s ruler—forever. To insure that is possible, he has been able to have himself cloned. He claims the cloning process is perfected and that there will always be a Controller to rule over mankind.”

Finally telling someone of the Controller’s agenda, outside of his inner circle, gave

Richard a deep sense of satisfaction. The burden he had been carrying was growing lighter.

“That is very disconcerting news. I never dreamed that it was this involved. It is clear what we must do. When can we take care of this man?”

“Josef, first we must identify him. That is our first goal, until we can do that, we are powerless.”

“How do you suggest we proceed, Richard?”

“I have several trusted associates who are working on that right now. I have been trying to identify every leader that may be under the Controller’s influence. I thought I had a good handle on that until you came to light. Now I’m not so sure that we will be able to find out who all the players are. I know that Prime Minister Rolt is one of Controller’s pawns as well as someone in the Israeli government. I have also heard rumors to the extent that Syrian President Yahman might be involved. I was hoping to recruit as many other leaders as possible, but it may be too risky to chance bringing someone else on board. We may have to limit it to the three of us.”

“I believe that would be the best course of action. Do you think we will be able to identify this man?”

“We must identify him. I have assembled everything I know about this madman and my team is piecing it all together. We are confident that we will be able to put a name and face to the Controller. For now I encourage you to cooperate with him, we can’t let him find out about our alliance or give any hint of our dissatisfaction. He has to think that his plan is on track. I will keep you posted to my progress and hopefully we will be able to act soon.”

“Very well, Richard. I’ll try to be patient. I will also pay close attention to everyone I deal with in other countries to see if I can pick up on any others who may be involved, but I won’t approach anyone.”

“Good. With any kind of luck, the next time I talk to you I’ll know the identity of the Controller.”

“I hope so.”

Richard hung up the phone and walked over to pour himself a cup of coffee. He sat in his favorite chair and reviewed his conversation with Vashenko. He hoped that he hadn’t made a mistake in giving the premier so much information. If he was ever going to make any progress he was going to have to start bringing others into his circle of conspirators.

His biggest concern was revealing the names of some of those he knew or suspected of being Controller’s pawns. He had quickly decided, under the heat of the moment, that if Vashenko wasn’t on his side and informed the Controller of his knowledge about the others involvement that he wouldn’t be in any worse position than he already was in. If it meant the Controller took action against some or all of the others, it would be of no concern to him. The Controller would merely be aiding in his own overthrow. This seemed like a win-win situation.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Mr. President, President Hamilton is on the line for you, shall I put him through?”

“Please do, thank you.” Richard was anticipating a call from Stephen—ever since Christine told him that she had an interesting conversation with Stephen the evening prior. Christine was

impressed with how Stephen was non committal yet gave her every indication that he was interested in hearing her out. Even though it was obvious to her what he was doing, she had to admire the way he pulled it off. Richard told her that Stephen was too experienced to tip his hand if he didn't want to. Richard was hoping that Stephen was merely trying to get as much out of Christine as he could, with the intention of relating everything to Richard. Now the call had been placed; the only question now was what Stephen would have to say.

"Stephen, good of you to call."

"I called you as soon as I had a few free minutes. There is something that I think you need to know, Richard. I believe you will find it very interesting and critically important."

"You sound very solemn, Stephen, what's wrong?"

"This isn't going to be easy for you to hear but here goes. Christine Morrison called me last night and we had a very interesting conversation. I led her on so that I could get as much information out of her as possible. It was odd, but she was talking to me as though she felt I was working with the Controller. I played along to see if she would tip her hand and she did. She admitted that she was conspiring with the Controller against you. She claimed to be the Controller's inside source while you were U.S. president. Richard, you have to do something about her."

"What would you suggest?" Richard could hardly hold back his happiness that his friend was truly on his side, but he wanted to play out the entire hand before telling Stephen the real story.

"Are you familiar with the saying 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer'? Well I would suggest that you follow that advice. Preventing her finding out you know could be tricky, but it may also be the best option."

Richard decided to fess up. "Stephen, I have something to tell you and I hope you won't get upset with me. I put Christine up to it. I had to be one hundred percent positive that you had no connection to the Controller. Don't get me wrong, I believed in you from the beginning, but there is so much at stake here, I had to be positive. I hope you're not upset."

"You set me up? Why you sneaky devil, I should be pissed off—but I'm not. I probably would have done the same thing if the situations were reversed. So now that you know I'm clean, where do we go from here? Oh by the way, how do you know that Christine is clean?"

"As a matter of fact, I called in a favor from your CIA Director and had Adam and Christine submitted to polygraph tests. So I know that they are both okay. I have confided in them and they are going to work with us on this. I trust all three of you explicitly. Are you ready for other news?" Richard decided to relate his conversations with LeClerc and Vashenko to Stephen. He filled Stephen in on every detail of the conversations.

"Wow, that's big news. And you believe we can trust them?"

"I do believe that. We went around, back and forth, trying to draw each other out before we each laid our cards on the table. I think our biggest problem isn't a lack of trust, it's keeping Vashenko in check; he really wants to take down the Controller. Probably the only reason he hasn't acted by now is because he doesn't know the man's identity. When we do find out, we will have to keep it under our hats for a while. We don't want him going off half-cocked."

"Yeah, he can be very rash at times. I often wonder how he got where he is with that temper. But I think we will be okay, he's smart enough to know what's at stake here. You didn't answer my question, what's our next move?"

"I have something else to tell you. I'm sure you have heard of Ralph Blocker?"

"Sure, he's in the press corps here at the White House. He makes all the important

briefings from what I'm told. Used to make them all, but recently he hasn't been around as much."

"He hasn't been around because he is dedicating a lot of his time trying to find out the Controller's identity."

"What! Do you mean he's in on this?"

"He has been for years. He is a very resourceful man. He approached me a long time ago, shortly after we started the water purification project, as I recall. He made it his quest to find out the identity of our benefactor. I convinced him that it would be in his best interest to wait it out. In exchange, I gave him some exclusives and had Christine show him some slight favoritism by giving him a heads-up on occasion. I had to give him something to keep him from going off on his own. He doesn't know the whole story of just how vicious the Controller is. He has no idea of the real intent of the projects. He only wanted to expose the Controller. He doesn't even know the name 'Controller'. I promised him the biggest story any newsman has ever had and he is willing to work with us."

"But you say he has information that can lead us to the Controller?"

"We are evaluating everything he has gotten so far. If he turns up anything else, we will evaluate that as well. Obviously we need all the help we can get to find out who our adversary really is."

"I just hope we can trust Blocker."

"Don't worry; I've impressed upon him that if he slips up it could be very harmful to his welfare. He got the picture, although I think he believes it's me that would harm him, not the Controller. I didn't set him straight on the matter, figuring the less he knows the better."

"Good decision. Is there anything else we need to discuss, since you obviously are choosing to ignore my question about our next move?"

"Sorry, Stephen, I didn't mean to stonewall you. I'm going to feel out a few other foreign dignitaries to see where they stand. I'll keep you posted of my progress and hopefully I'll have something for you to sink your teeth into."

"I hope so. I'm tired of warming the bench. I want to get into the game."

* * *

Richard had long wondered how close Prime Minister Rolt's ties were to the Controller. He had decided to see if he could elicit some information from Rolt, having planned to do so during his early strategizing. Richard had placed a very early call to Rolt hoping to catch him during regular office hours but Rolt was unavailable and agreed to call Richard in the evening, London time. The call finally came through at three p.m.

"Hello, James, how are things in Merry Old England these days?"

"Just fine, Richard. How are you adjusting to your new position? Have you gotten disillusioned yet?"

Strange choice of words, Richard thought to himself and then shrugged it off. Richard loved Rolt's accent and it was all he could do to avoid trying to talk the same way. He had previously told Rolt of his propensity for simulating a British accent every time he finished a conversation with him, to which Rolt responded with a hearty laugh, after first calling Richard "a bloody wanker."

"No disillusionment here, just long days and sleepless nights!" Richard was tempted to add an "ole chap" at the end but decided against it.

"Give it some more time, you'll get there. So what did you wish to discuss with me, Richard?"

“Well I just wanted to touch base with you to see if there is anything I can do for you. I also wanted to follow up on how the water purification project in South Africa is proceeding?”

“Just fine, in fact it will be fully operational by the end of next month. While we are on that subject, Richard, have you gotten any feedback from some of the countries that have had plants up and running for a bit?”

Richard wondered if this was Rolt’s way of asking if there was something out of the ordinary. “Can you be a little more specific, James?”

“Well, I have heard that there may be some substance in the water that has been treated at the plant in Ethiopia. I’m not at liberty to go into any more detail, I’m afraid. I just wanted to know if it is something that is isolated to this one plant or might possibly be endemic to all.”

“Are you saying that we should be concerned about the water quality?” Richard didn’t want to let Rolt get away with saying so little after raising the topic.

“I’m reluctant to say anything further, Richard.”

“But how can you expect me to just let it drop? If there is a problem, whether it is isolated to Ethiopia or common to all the treatment facilities, then we need to take action. You have to give me more to go on James.”

“Very well, I have a source of information that says the testing of the water from the Ethiopian plant reveals traces of an undetermined chemical. It’s hard to tell if the chemical is having any adverse effect upon the consumers of the water. If we could identify the substance perhaps we would know whether there is cause for alarm.”

“I would think that anything in the water would be reason to worry. The fact that there is something that we cannot identify is cause for even greater concern to me.” Richard had to keep pushing to get Rolt to show his hand. “What else can you tell me?”

“Just that I have some chemists working on breaking this substance down to see if we can shed some light on its composition and possible effects. I’m surprised that you haven’t heard anything about this.”

“Well, since you seem to be the first one to come to the realization that there is something in the water, how would I have heard anything? Unless ... you know of other instances don’t you James?”

Rolt was taken aback by the accusation and was searching for words; “I assure you that I had no intention of concealing information from you Richard. I am merely trying to see if there is a reason we should consider this to be of worldwide concern. I didn’t want to raise any red flags until I had a chance to digest some of the information.”

“How long did you intend to wait before bringing this to my attention James?” Richard hoped that by putting Rolt on the defensive, he might slip up and reveal more than he would like.

“I was going to contact you in a few days, I swear. I just wanted to know as much as possible before doing so.”

“I’ll accept your explanation—for now; however, I demand that you tell me everything, no more games and beating around the bush. I sense that you know a lot more than you are telling me and I want you to know that you can trust me with anything as long as I know you are being upfront with me.”

“This is very hard. What would you say if I suggested that there may be an individual responsible for this substance’s presence in the water?”

“An individual? You mean someone is tainting the water on purpose?” Richard had Rolt over a barrel and needed to move in for the kill.

“I believe so. I know what your next question is going to be; let me say, I don’t know who

this individual is.”

“Then what is your basis for saying that there is a specific person involved?” Come on, spit it out, Richard thought to himself.

“I can’t tell you any more, Richard. You are going to have to trust me on this.”

“Trust you? How can I do anything about this situation if I don’t have more specifics? You are dangling a carrot in front of me that I can never reach. James, you must tell me everything you know. What are you afraid of?”

“The individual that I believe is involved is very powerful and could prove to be a menace to anyone aware of his actions.”

“Then why did you mention this to me in the first place, James? If you are so afraid of this man, why did you tell me about him?” Richard was growing impatient with Rolt.

“Because somebody has to stop him before it’s too late. I can’t do it alone.”

Richard kept a “bingo” to himself but oh how he wanted to shout it out.

“Are you saying that you want us to join forces to put an end to this man’s activities?”

Richard wanted it all.

“Yes, Richard. We must. This man is insane, I’m sure of it.”

“You have talked to this man, haven’t you James?”

“Yes, I have. Richard, I’m hoping that I can trust you to keep what I’m going to say between the two of us. Do you give me your word?”

“Of course you can trust me, James, and yes, I give you my word.”

“The man I know that is behind this refers to himself as ‘Controller’. He is a wicked, deranged madman.” Rolt hesitated, he knew that he needed to tell someone; he also knew that this could lead to his own demise. He decided that it didn’t matter any more what happened to him; he had to unload this burden and tell someone.

“Go on.”

“I have been conversant with this Controller for many years. Lately only fear has kept me from defiance.”

Rolt proceeded to tell Richard about his involvement with the Controller, a partnership that had lasted for about ten years. When he finished relating his tale, Richard was convinced that Rolt was a mere shell of his former self, lacking confidence, and questioning his every move. Richard sensed that it wouldn’t take much for Rolt to turn suicidal, or at the very least, step down from his position.

Richard learned few new things from Rolt; definitely nothing that he could use in his battle against the Controller. Deciding that Rolt was for all intents and purposes powerless to be of any aide, Richard chose not to tell him anything of his plans. In Rolt’s state of mind, he might accidentally let slip some of Richard’s plans alerting the Controller. Richard made Rolt promise to continue cooperating with the Controller, instead of taking action against him. If Rolt could be of no help, at least he could be of no hindrance. Rolt agreed to let Richard know if any further information came to his attention.

“I can’t tell you how relieved I am to be getting this off my chest, Richard.”

“I know, James, I know.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Richard's strategy to determine how deeply involved the other leaders were with the Controller was proving fruitful inasmuch as he was able to see who he could count on for support. He was disappointed that he wasn't able to obtain any information that would help him identify the Controller. It was obvious to him that the Controller went to great lengths to cover his tracks.

Richard had talked to Syrian President Yahman and Israeli Prime Minister Schmier to see if either could be counted upon, only to find out that Yahman wasn't willing to admit to any knowledge of such a man. Richard sensed reluctance from Yahman that was probably based upon fear but couldn't press the Syrian President without admitting his own involvement and putting himself in jeopardy. He would just have to consider Yahman as a hostile.

Schmier, on the other hand, was very willing to cooperate with Richard but didn't possess any direct knowledge of the Controller. He wasn't sure who in his government was the Controller's pawn; for all he knew there could have been more than one. At any rate he couldn't guarantee Richard any support other than to keep an eye open for any activity that might be of interest.

As Richard contemplated his next move, he looked out his office window and could see storm clouds moving in. Thinking that it wouldn't be long before the rains came, he decided to leave the office early to avoid getting caught in the storm. He wasn't in any mood to take care of business anyway, so why go through the motions. Maybe at home with a drink and some soft music he would be able to clear his head and concentrate on his plan of attack. He told his secretary to have his car brought around and to notify the security team that he was going home.

By the time his driver brought the car around and Richard was ready to leave, the sky had darkened and a light rain was falling. Richard told his driver, a young and obviously physically fit member of his guard, to take him home the quickest way possible. Richard didn't want to get caught up in the traffic jams that the weather would usher in. By the time he reached home, the rain had become a heavy downpour, accompanied by thunder and lightning.

"Terrific, just what I need to go along with my depression." Richard didn't mean for it to come out loud and his driver responded.

"Did you say something sir?"

"Just thinking out loud, don't pay any attention to me."

Veronica was pleased when Richard called her from the car and told her he was on his way home. She started a fire and checked to see if she had the ingredients to prepare him one of his favorite meals—meatloaf, made to his mother's recipe.

Veronica knew that their relationship was at a crossroad and she was dismayed that there was nothing she could do to improve the situation. She should have told Richard about the Controller the minute she was approached, but she didn't and there was no way to turn back the clock. Her only hope was that Richard would get over the hurt and forgive her. Until that time arrived, she would stand by him and make life as comfortable as possible. She didn't want to openly discuss her relationship with the Controller because she knew that there would be no way to soften the ill feelings on Richard's part. She sensed that Richard was not in any frame of mind for such a conversation; perhaps sometime down the road he might be more receptive.

Fortunately Veronica had put her car in the garage instead of leaving it under the covered portico at the home's entrance as she usually did; this left room for Richard's driver to pull in out of the rain. Both the driver and Richard appreciated not having to disembark in such a downpour.

Since the Controller told him of Veronica's involvement, Richard spent most of his weekday nights in an apartment he kept in the city. Originally he only did this on those occasions when he was forced to work late hours, making the longer drive to their home impractical. But with the current situation, Richard chose to avoid a possible confrontation by distancing himself as much as possible. He knew that eventually he would have to talk things over with Veronica; he just wanted to delay it as long as he could.

"This is a pleasant surprise. I'm glad you didn't wait until the weekend to come home." Veronica put on a cheerful face in spite of what she was feeling inside. She still loved Richard, as much now as in the beginning, and she hoped he felt the same way, but she dreaded what would inevitably come to pass—a clearing of the air. She adopted the attitude that if she never spoke of the situation then maybe it would somehow magically disappear. As childish as she knew that to be, she could think of no other way to avoid the inevitable confrontation.

"I didn't feel like staying in the city tonight and since I didn't have anything pressing ..."

"I'm making your favorite dinner."

"That'll be nice, although I'm not too hungry just yet."

"It will keep till later, just let me know when you feel like eating."

"Okay. In the meantime, I think I'd like to spend some time in the study." Richard proceeded down the hallway to his study and upon entering found that Veronica had started a fire. He was glad she did. He could warm out the dampness he felt from the storm. Richard noticed that she had also filled the ice bucket and replenished the supply of scotch in the decanter. He removed his suit coat and tie, unbuttoned his shirt's top two buttons, made a drink, and sat down in front of the fireplace. He stared into the flickering flames, which shed the only light in the room, casting eerie shadows upon the walls and ceiling. It wasn't until he went to sip his drink that he noticed the glass was empty. Glancing at his watch, he couldn't believe that a couple of hours had elapsed. Remembering what Veronica said, he walked to the kitchen and told her that he was up for dinner whenever she felt like serving it.

* * *

They got through dinner and a bottle of wine with few words having been exchanged. The topic of conversation was the children and how they were doing. Richard had long ago stopped discussing any official matters at home and Veronica accepted it as a small part of the price she had to pay for her disloyalty.

Richard started to clear the table but Veronica stopped him.

"You don't have to do that. It's not much to clean up. Why don't you change your clothes and get comfortable?"

"Good idea, I could use a hot shower."

Richard went upstairs to shower and change while Veronica cleaned up the kitchen. As she rinsed and placed the dishes into the dishwasher, she made an important decision to confront Richard. She wanted off the knife-edge upon which she was so precariously perched.

When Richard came into the bedroom, Veronica was sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for him.

"Richard, we need to talk. I know that you are aware of my relationship with the Controller. I also know of your involvement with him. We should have had this conversation long ago, but I was told—in no uncertain terms—that I was to do as I was told, and nothing else, or the children would be harmed. While I wanted to tell you everything right from the beginning, I couldn't be sure where you stood. I was told that you were on board with the Controller's plans and that you appreciated that the overall benefits were more important than our family. When

you didn't say anything to me about him, I assumed that you were committed to his cause. I was so afraid, Richard. I didn't know what to do or who to turn to."

"Why are you telling me this now? If what you say is true, aren't you still afraid of the repercussions?" Richard wasn't convinced that Veronica's display of emotion wasn't staged.

"Yes, I am. However, I think that the Controller has what he wants and couldn't gain anything by harming Randall or Jennifer. There is no way that I can disrupt his agenda at this point. Earlier, things were different; I could have posed a threat if I came forward."

"So you think that coming clean now will make a difference in our relationship?"

"I'm not sure anymore what I think. I'm so confused I don't know which end is up."

"The time to discuss this was years ago, not now. For all I know, this is nothing more than an act, some devious plot to see where I stand with the Controller. How can I trust someone who lived a lie for all those years?"

"But you were living a lie also, weren't you?"

"I had much more to deal with besides the children. I had an entire nation, hell for that matter, the entire world balancing on my actions. I wasn't allowed the luxury of choice. Everything I did I was compelled to do."

"Do you think I had a choice? What were my options?" Veronica could hardly get the words to come out as she was fighting to suppress the tears.

"You could have come to me and taken your chances. I wish I would have had that choice. You claim that all your actions were guided by the need to protect the children. Do you honestly believe that I would have let anything happen to them? You never gave me the opportunity to protect them from harm."

"I'm sorry Richard." Veronica was in tears and the anguish on her face could not have been faked. "I don't know what else I can say or do. I know only that I love you and can't stand to see us torn apart this way."

"I don't like it either, but all the time I thought I was protecting you, you were using your closeness to me to further the Controller's cause. The day may come when I can forgive you, but I can't see the day coming when I could forget what has happened. And, at least for now, I am not inclined to trust you. There is no way I can be absolutely positive that you aren't still in collusion with the Controller and that this is some kind of plot with a hidden agenda. You have to understand that in my position I have to assume the worst."

"Then I guess we can never have our old lives back." Even though the tears stopped, Veronica couldn't have sounded sadder.

"I'm afraid not."

* * *

Richard decided to sleep in one of the guest rooms instead of the master bedroom, leaving Veronica to her sobbing. He was surprised that he felt no urge to hold her and comfort her, something he would have done in the past without so much as a second thought. Now though, he found the very thought repulsive. It dawned on him that his emotions and inner feelings had decided for him that there was no hope for them to have a future.

Try as he might, Richard couldn't fall asleep.

CHAPTER NINE

Several months had passed since Richard had his confrontation with Veronica. He was torn between the heartfelt desire to see to her welfare and the need to maintain the strictest security. It wasn't just him anymore, he had others who were placing themselves in the line of fire and he couldn't take chances with their wellbeing. Unfortunately, Veronica couldn't understand his position and was growing more distant with each passing day. This led to a vicious circle, the more distant she grew, the less Richard could trust her.

Richard reviewed the latest information that his team members had assembled and decided that there was nothing to be gained by further delay. The game was on. Richard scheduled calls to his overseas contacts followed by a meeting with Christine and Adam.

As he waited for his first overseas call to come through, Richard gazed out his office window at the people scurrying down below in the visitor's plaza of the former United Nations building. They may have appeared no larger than ants from his vantage point, but they were far more significant in what they represented to Richard. These were the people that he had abandoned and left to suffer whatever indignities the Controller wished upon them. He prayed that he would have the strength and character to win the upcoming battle.

* * *

Adam and Christine were shown into Richard's office just as he was hanging up the phone, having concluded his final call. Richard motioned to them to make themselves comfortable on the couch while he asked his secretary to have fresh coffee brought in.

"I think the time has come." Richard's comment was met with a solemn quiet. They knew this moment was coming all too soon, yet hearing the words that would start the ball rolling brought home the realization that they were embarking upon a quest unlike any other that man has undertaken.

"I don't think we will gain any more momentum than we already have. Nothing new has been unearthed in the last couple of months; we need to put our heads together and plan our attack."

"I agree, the longer we wait the more momentum we will lose. We know as much about the identity of the Controller as we are probably ever going to know." Adam had been anxious to move several months ago.

"Okay then, let's go over what we know and start outlining the steps we need to take. Christine, I commend you on how you've assembled everything; this synopsis is worth its weight in gold." Richard held the inch-thick loose-leaf binder up as if to emphasize its importance. "It really condenses all the facts into a very usable format. Let's start with it and see where it leads us. Item one interests me a great deal—'handwriting analysis of sample documents reveals that the writer is more than likely to display instability under stress'. That is quite a statement and it confirms my own observations. I've found the Controller to be very edgy when any references to insanity or instability come up. Another thing I noted was his comparison of himself to Hitler. I didn't say anything that could have evoked him to make such a connection. He brought it up of his own accord. I personally think that with his egotistical and analytical mind, he has convinced himself that he is not at all like Hitler. He justifies his actions as being for the greater good by showing positive results, whereas Hitler had only destruction to his credit. He knows that Hitler was unstable but doesn't want to admit the he himself might be as well."

Adam could sink his teeth into this, having always been interested in the human psyche and majoring in psychology gave him some insight. "I won't subject you to any psycho-babble

but you're absolutely right, Richard. I think if we rattle this guy's cage he will go off like a rocket. But before we do that we are going to have to make sure he won't be able to wreak any havoc. We have to get him isolated from his resources, because once he knows what we are up to, all hell could break loose. This man could be teetering on the edge of a total loss of control. He couldn't be counted on to maintain any semblance of order or stability. He could subject the entire planet to some insane method of destruction."

"I concur. I haven't mentioned this before because I have nothing factual to support my thinking, but I wouldn't be surprised to find out that the Controller has someone in his pocket who has access to nuclear weapons. It's a frightening thought, I know, but I keep remembering what he said to me about his willingness to nuke Israel if the need arose during our embassy crisis. Let's face it—enough nuclear weapons are unaccounted for around the world to completely destroy this planet. He may have control of some of those. So yes, Adam, I agree, we have to make sure we cut him off from any outside contact before he gets wind of what we are up to."

At that moment, Richard's secretary entered with a carafe of fresh coffee. She set it down on the coffee service tray and took the other one with her as she left, quietly closing the door behind her.

"Then the question now is how do we go about it?" Christine poured them each a cup of coffee as she spoke.

Richard was quick to respond. "I think between the three of us we have to choose our roles. I've given this a lot of thought. I need to be the one to coordinate the actions of our allies since it is my trust that established the relationships. They probably wouldn't deal with either of you unless something happened to me. I've already given you those keys to the lockers so that is the backup plan should anything happen to me. I think Adam should be the one to handle the overt actions, such as dealing with the CIA, FBI, etcetera. There is already a rapport there and some mutual respect and we may as well draw on that. Christine, I see you in the role of back up. We have to keep you out of the limelight in case Adam and I are compromised. You have to be in a seemingly uninvolved position so you can get to the locker and then follow through with the other leaders. Is everyone comfortable with their roles?"

Christine answered first. "You know I want to have a more active role."

"And you will, because everything that Adam and I find out is going to be passed on to you for assembly and analysis. You are going to have the task of protecting our information and shielding our activities from prying eyes. Your skills with the media may be indispensable before this is over."

"By all means. We live under a microscope as it is now. I can only imagine what will come up when I start making visits to the CIA. If any media pick up on that, you're going to have to be ready with a plausible explanation Christine. I'm counting on you to cover my back." Adam wasn't being condescending, and Christine realized it, he was genuinely concerned about each one of them.

"Which brings me to another topic." Richard had a concerned look on his face. "I would like to suggest that we have our loved ones stashed away somewhere, out of harms way, but I'm afraid that if it leaked we would be tipping our hand. I don't see that we have a choice but to carry on as though it is business as usual."

"I agree, I don't like it, but I agree." Adam hated the idea of his family being in jeopardy.

"I don't have anyone close to me, other than my mother, just distant relatives that nobody knows about. My mother has been married and remarried, so I'm sure she is not easily traceable,

so I'm not worried." Christine was almost apologetic.

The three conspirators continued going through Christine's synopsis, hashing and rehashing each point until they were in agreement what actions should be taken. It was a laborious task and they spent the remainder of the day and a good part of the evening strategizing.

"So we are in agreement then." Richard gave a large sigh as he made the comment. "We have our plan. I think we need to get back together again tomorrow and come up with back up plans should any of our action items not succeed."

"Good idea, I have a clear calendar all day so I'm available first thing."

"Fine, Adam. And you Christine?"

"I have one thing to do, maybe take about an hour, but I can start early and wrap it up before nine."

"Great, let's meet here at nine. Have a nice quiet evening and get plenty of rest you two, tomorrow will be another long one, I'm afraid."

Christine smiled as she asked, "Are we supposed to be surprised at that, Mr. President?"

Richard responded with a serious look that caused Christine to stop smiling. "I'm hoping that the one surprised will be the Controller."

"I'll go along with that." Adam lifted an empty coffee cup up in a toast. "To the downfall of the Controller; may he rest in peace."

Christine and Richard both followed suit and hoisted empty cups. Richard offered another toast. "May he be returned to the hell where he belongs. Here's to you Timothy Wilkins."

* * *

Sitting alone in his lair, the Controller finished his third cup of coffee. Feeling uncomfortable, he went into the bathroom to relieve himself.

He had been concerned that Richard was keeping some distance between them.

"What are you up to, Richard?" Speaking to the empty room had become the norm over the last few months. "Why haven't I heard anything from my operatives about your activities?"

He started to pace the full length of the room, another new habit. On his fourth lap he realized what he was doing and made his way back to his recliner. Plopping down in disgust, he thought to himself, I've got to maintain my composure. Sinclair cannot possibly pose a threat. I have to stop letting my mind entertain these thoughts. Sinclair is just toying with me, trying to play my game. Perhaps I taught him too well and now he thinks he has some things to teach the teacher. Well, I have news for you Mr. President, I have tricks up my sleeve that you could never imagine.

For several minutes the room echoed the sound of deranged laughter.

CHAPTER TEN

"What do you think he looks like?" Richard had once posed the question to Christine and Adam. He had the advantage of being the only one who knew the man's voice. From it he pictured a man of average stature, possibly heavy set, about sixty years old, partially balding with his remaining hair on the gray side. Adam jokingly said that Wilkins was probably trying to

overcompensate for being a short, frail, mousy looking character with a “small pecker.” That last comment had put Christine and Richard into stitches.

Richard hoped with all his heart that Ralph Blocker was correct in naming Timothy Wilkins as the Controller. His evidence was very compelling and the reasoning process he used to analyze the evidence had no holes. Richard, Christine and Adam had gone over every piece of information with a fine-toothed comb and came to the same conclusion as Blocker. They ended up being as convinced as Blocker that Wilkins was their man.

The three conspirators went over their plans time after time trying to find holes and weaknesses that could turn the odds against them.

Christine had put together a spreadsheet containing each action item arranged in the sequence they were to be executed and by whom. Richard had already completed the first item—getting President Hamilton to convince CIA Director Thornton to commit the required resources necessary to track every move that Timothy Wilkins made. They couldn’t make a move until Wilkins displayed a regular routine. Once that was established, Adam would coordinate with Thornton to have Wilkins snatched up and put under confinement in a secret location known only to the team members.

Every detail had been worked out down to making sure that the four CIA operatives who were to kidnap Wilkins had no family so that they could be on around the clock guardianship of Wilkins and free from worry over family members. This would ensure that anyone who knew the whereabouts of the Controller would be isolated and unable to pass the information along. On the outside, only Thornton, Richard, Christine and Adam would know the location where Wilkins was being detained. Even President Hamilton wouldn’t be privy to the information—something that he insisted upon—“plausible deniability,” as he put it. The hideaway had to be completely self-sufficient and away from public scrutiny, so a vacant house in a remote wooded area of upstate New York was chosen. It had all the amenities that would be needed for a small group to subsist for six months, a timeframe considered to be realistic by the team members. Enough provisions had been stored on the premises so that there was no need for anyone to leave the property. Two CIA personnel were to be awake at all times, not just to guard Wilkins but to watch each other as well. They were given strict orders to never go outside the house, except to maintain security devices, and to never let Wilkins out of their sight.

Their only communication with the outside world would be via a telephone that was restricted and could complete calls to only two possible numbers—one being that of Thornton’s cell phone and the other that of an answering service that Richard, Adam or Christine could access. To insure as much security as possible, every way into the house was outfitted with bars, and the property perimeter was armed with trip wires that would sound alarms inside the house. Any tripping of the wires would also trigger a computer to place distress calls to Thornton and the answering service, if one of the team members didn’t reset the system within three minutes. The general consensus was that three minutes was enough time for the team to confirm an intruder’s presence as opposed to a roaming deer or other such visitor. Thornton, or one of the others, would then attempt to contact the agents. Failure to make contact would impel them to call a response team into action. The CIA agents also had the ability, should they suspect that a team of insurgents was assaulting the premises, to set off a series of anti-personnel claymore mines. The trees, shrubs and tall grass surrounding the house had been cleared for thirty yards in every direction so anyone approaching would have no possibility for concealment. Video cameras covered every square inch of the property displaying their images on a bank of monitors and recording everything onto digital storage media. Cameras also watched over Wilkins’ room,

enabling the team to give him the false impression of privacy.

The agents had no idea who their charge would be or his importance. They were merely told that under no circumstance should he be allowed to escape or be given any opportunity to commit suicide. They were told that if all security measures failed and insurgents were likely to overrun the house, they were to activate a self-destruct mechanism that would completely obliterate the property and its occupants. To impress upon them that they had no choice in this matter, they were assured that if their charge escaped, and they somehow survived, they would be executed.

The agents were also told that the man they would have in custody was extremely dangerous, likely insane, and that anything he said could be assumed to be a means of manipulating his captors. Richard's team wanted to make sure that the Controller couldn't ply his "charms" on the agents and somehow escape.

The only item left to attend to would be the actual kidnapping of Wilkins.

* * *

Agents Harvey and Klein sat in the car counting the minutes until their shift would be over when Wilkins's chauffeur brought the limousine from the underground garage and parked in front of the Fifth Avenue brownstone. Wilkins came out a few minutes later.

"Right on time, seven a.m. You could set your watch by this guy. Talk about routines, this guy is making this simple."

"Yeah, now we get to tail them for fifteen minutes on the way to his office while he relaxes and reads the Wall Street Journal and has a cup of coffee." Klein wished he had a cup of fresh coffee, in spite of having consumed at least six cups throughout the night. It was the same each and every weeknight—relieve the second shift at one a.m. and keep watch until Wilkins left at seven. Only the weekends varied the routine, and on those days, Wilkins didn't leave until after nine a.m., after their shift was over. The two agents joked about getting saddle sores from sitting in their nondescript sedan hour after hour.

"Why do you suppose this guy's routine is so important? Or for that matter, why is he so important?" Harvey had been asking the same questions for weeks. "I mean, this guy hasn't been in the news or on any of our bulletins; he's the most boring person in the world."

"My guess is that this guy must be some kind of white collar crime boss. There has to be some kind of wide network involved, otherwise we wouldn't be so concerned with just one man. He's probably the brains behind a much larger organization." Klein thought he had it all figured out.

"Well, he better be or I'm just likely to shoot him and put an end to his dull routine! Somebody has to put this slob out of his misery."

The agents continued their idle banter through the remainder of the commute to Wilkins's office. After Wilkins entered the high-rise office building, the agents swung their sedan around in a u-turn, parked and patiently waited for their relief. The building contained executive offices for several large corporations, all believed to be owned by Wilkins. A security center immediately inside the entrance prevented agents from following Wilkins so it was unknown which offices belonged to him. It didn't matter, they had no intention of absconding Wilkins in broad daylight.

"Here are our boys now." Harvey was looking into the rear view mirror as the twin to their sedan pulled up behind.

The passenger got out of the car and approached Harvey and Klein from curbside. Harvey unlocked the rear door so Stevenson could jump into the rear seat.

“How’s it going guys?” Stevenson smiled a broad smile and appeared jovial, but not because he was just starting his shift, he had news to convey.

“What are you so happy about? You look like the cat that ate the canary.” Klein just wanted to get home.

“This is going to be the last day we have to watch this Wilkins guy.”

“What? Are you sure?”

“Positive, just got the word from the boss. He says the surveillance is no longer necessary.”

Harvey broke in. “Heck, I could have told him that after the first week! This guy is too dull to be dangerous.”

“There’s something else. The rumor mill has it that tonight sometime, a team is going to break into this guy’s home and snag him.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear, Stevenson.”

“This comes from a very high up source. I think it’s legit.”

Harvey couldn’t believe that Wilkins was deserving of such attention. “Who do they think this guy is—public enemy number one?”

“I don’t think they would expend this kind of effort even for PE1. I haven’t heard anything about who this guy is but you can bet the farm that he must pose some kind of huge threat.”

“Well unless you have some more scuttlebutt for us, I would just as soon say adios, Stevenson. It’s been a long night.” Klein was tired of the rumor chatter.

Stevenson got out of the car and walked back to his sedan as Harvey and Klein sped away. He and his partner settled in to finish out their watch.

* * *

Two a.m. and the three agents watched, just as they had for the last fifteen nights, from the window on the sixth floor directly across Fifth Avenue, at the same level as Wilkins’ bedroom. It had taken some fast footwork to get the owners of the apartment to vacate the premises, ultimately resulting in the man and his wife, a retired couple in their seventies, getting an expensive Mediterranean cruise, all expenses paid.

Agent Tom Wendt had informed the infiltration team the second Wilkins turned off the lights in his apartment, approximately three hours earlier. Now he directed his binoculars down toward the street and focused on the van that had just pulled up in front of the brownstone’s entrance. He watched as four men exited the van, each dressed in black jumpsuits with black ski masks. His comment of “It’s going down” brought the other agents over to the window with their binoculars. Finally, after all these days, it was show time.

Each man on the infiltration team was equipped with a communication device, night vision goggles, and an assault rifle. They were not anticipating any resistance or guards, but needed to be prepared for any eventuality nevertheless. Their communications would be monitored by the agents across the street and recorded in case anything went wrong.

Wendt tuned the radio to the proper channel, turned on the recorder, and switched on the external speaker so they all could listen in on the assault team communications. Talk was at a minimum as the team had run through numerous drills going over every movement until voice communication was unnecessary. There was a doorman on duty from six a.m. until midnight, after that, anyone entering needed to know the access code to the security system that unlocked the front doors.

Wendt and the other two agents watched as the team leader keyed in the access code on the digital keypad and heard the audible click over their speaker as the entry door sprung open.

As the agents slipped quietly into the lobby, each man quickly scanned the area. Convinced

they were alone, they proceeded down a short hallway to the elevators. One elevator was already on the first floor, its open doors beckoning them to enter. The team technician picked the lock and opened the control panel within seconds whereupon he switched the elevator to operate in manual mode. The team ascended to the sixth floor, quickly and quietly exiting as the elevator's doors opened. One agent remained by the elevator, securing the hallway, while the others proceeded to Wilkins' apartment. The elevator hallway had a window on the street side allowing the agents across the street to see the team exit the elevator and make their way toward the Wilkins apartment.

The plan was to enter using the master key the team acquired from the building manager and snatch up Wilkins while he was asleep. The building manager supplied the team with a floor plan of the apartment and confirmed that there was an alarm control panel mounted on the wall to the left immediately inside the entryway. He informed them that the alarm would be activated thirty seconds after the door was opened. The team's technician was familiar with the alarm system and was certain that he could deactivate it within the allotted time.

The first order of business was to turn off the hallway lighting, ensuring that upon entering the Wilkins apartment stray light didn't filter through and tip off their presence. That done, the team leader made sure the technician was ready to be the first one inside when he unlocked the door. It took only five seconds for the three men to get inside and close the door behind them. In the twenty seconds that it took the others to sweep the immediate area with their night vision goggles, the technician neutralized the alarm. One by one, each room was checked to make sure they were empty. While one agent kept station outside Wilkins' quarters, the other two agents proceeded to the room that the valet/chauffeur occupied.

With deft precision they crept in, and before he knew what hit him, the valet had succumbed to the lethal injection. His body would be taken and disposed of later. Within a minute the team assembled outside the door that led to Wilkins' suite of rooms. They stealthily made their way through the sitting room/office and positioned themselves outside the bedroom's double doors. It was determined and practiced many times over that the best way to capture him was to have one agent hold him down at the ankles, another agent pinning down his arms over his head, while the team leader put his hand over Wilkins' mouth, simultaneously injecting him in the neck with a fast acting sedative.

The team watched in silence as their leader counted down using his fingers ... three ... two ... one. With everyone moving in unison, it was over in a few seconds. Wilkins never had time to clear his head from his sleep before the sedative kicked in. He had no time to resist or any opportunity to scream. Wilkins was placed inside a body bag for the short trip to the van and agent Bradshaw, an imposing figure of a man with a great deal of strength, was able to lift the diminutive Wilkins over his shoulder and carry him with ease. Their exit down to the van went without incident and as the van sped away Wendt heard the team leader comment "mission accomplished." Those were the only two words spoken during the entire operation. Wendt sent his two partners over to the apartment to remove the valet's body and "sanitize" the scene. Wendt then called the special number he had been given and after the phone stopped ringing and without waiting for an acknowledgement, he repeated the phrase ... "mission accomplished".

Wendt's agents brought the valet's body down to a waiting van, locked the body inside, and then took their equipment back to Wilkins' apartment to begin their clean-up process. They would complete their business and be miles away by the time the building would show any signs of life. In the meantime, Wendt took to removing his equipment and returning the borrowed apartment back to its original configuration. A cleaning crew was scheduled to spend the next

day making sure the apartment was spotless for its returning owners.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Once the van was moving, agent Bradshaw opened the body bag and exposed the Controller's head and torso. He unbuttoned the top two buttons on Wilkins' pajama top, and then using a stethoscope, he confirmed that the Controller had an even heartbeat and was breathing comfortably. He nodded in affirmation that all was well with their captive to the team leader who was looking back from the front passenger seat. Each agent turned off his transmitter so that they could converse without a signal being sent out.

"Great job men." Team leader Vale was smiling and relieved that all had gone according to plan. "Just like we practiced. Is everyone clear on what each of us has to do when we arrive at the house?"

All indicated with a "thumbs up" gesture that they knew what was required of them.

"Good. We have a two hour drive ahead of us, so everyone relax, just keep your eyes open in case someone might be following us."

* * *

They turned off the main highway onto the narrow dirt road leading to the house which was set back about two miles from the highway. About half way up the road the driver stopped the van and the demolitions specialist slid open the van's side door. He walked to the rear of the van, to a clump of saplings that edged the road, where he knelt down and attached one end of a trip wire. He then carefully played out the nearly invisible wire across the road to another clump of trees and attached it to the explosive device, which when tripped, would deploy smaller bombs, blanketing the road with enough explosive force to take out a tank. This was up the road far enough to avoid blowing up an innocent lost traveler. Anyone up that far was ignoring the "No Trespassing" signs and was assumed to be looking for the house, for no legitimate reason.

Once at the house, three of the team jumped out to check the perimeter and make sure the property was secure. They checked each of their booby traps and disarmed them. Then they walked around and checked each window and door to make sure that the hair thin wires they rigged hadn't been broken—a sure sign that someone had entered the house. They then proceeded into the house and checked every nook and cranny for anything untoward. Each man carried a detector they could employ to locate any electronic devices that may have been installed since their last sweep.

Vale remained in the van with the drugged Wilkins, ready to push the button that would blow up the van and its occupants should anyone, other than his teammates, approach. Once assured the premises were secure the agents returned to the van to help extricate Wilkins and get him into the house. While Vale and Bradshaw took Wilkins into the house, Taylor and Nelson put the van into the garage then proceeded to arm the claymore mines they had placed strategically around the perimeter of the grounds and house. Once inside, the perimeter security system was activated. The agents were now voluntary prisoners.

The agents made sure that Wilkins was revived and comfortable before calling the hot line numbers and giving the coded message that the second phase of the mission was successfully

executed. Once Thornton was notified, he gave Vale the combination to the wall safe wherein he found detailed instructions on how they were to proceed with the interrogation of Wilkins. Included in the information was a list of questions that were required to be asked and answered. Wilkins would be given a couple of hours to recover from the sedatives but once recovered he would be fair game. No time was going to be wasted—being a little confused and disoriented could result in him revealing information that might prove useful.

* * *

“Who are you people? What am I doing here? And where are we?” Wilkins was trying to get his bearings and clear his head. He had come around and with slightly blurred vision, was able to discern two figures sitting in the shadows. He could hear rain running off the roof and dripping onto the ground outside the window. He couldn’t see out the window as the regular glass had been replaced with black painted, bulletproof glass; he couldn’t see out and no one could see in. The other windows in the house had clear bulletproof windows so the agents wouldn’t have to rely solely upon the surveillance cameras for watching over the property. It also allowed them to have the benefit of sunlight, something Wilkins would not see again for a long time, if ever.

“You are our guest. Who we are is not important. Where we are is not important. What is important is this: you are here to be interrogated. You will tell us everything we wish to know. How painful the experience is will be determined by your level of cooperation. Make it easy on us and we will make it easy on you.” Vale came out of the shadows and moved closer to Wilkins as he talked until he was only inches from Wilkins’ face. His eyes never lost focus on Wilkins’. Vale’s voice left no doubt that he meant business, and staring into Vale’s eyes gave Wilkins his first taste of fear, and for the very first time in his life, the new sensation of the hair standing up on the back of his neck.

“Who do you think you are? You can’t just kidnap me like this and get away with it. This is America, I have my rights.” Vale had upset him so much Wilkins was almost making a humble suggestion, his earlier antagonistic tone obviously tamed.

“You have nothing but the clothes on your back, and I can take those away should I wish. The only rights you have are to tell me what I want to know, when I want to know it. We are going to give you a few minutes to decide whether you will cooperate or not. Personally, if I were you, I would cooperate—failure to do so would force me to do things that I’m sure you wouldn’t appreciate.”

Vale released the bindings on Wilkins’ wrists and ankles and pointed to the door to his right. “The bathroom is there. I suggest you take a shower; it seems that you have messed yourself. There are fresh clothes in the dresser and closet.”

* * *

Wilkins took a shower before taking note of his surroundings. The bathroom window had also been replaced with the same painted glass as the bedroom and the mirrored cabinet over the sink contained everything he needed for his personal grooming, he didn’t notice that the mirror was polished metal, not glass, to prevent him using a glass shard as a weapon or to commit suicide. He dressed himself from the new clothing that was neatly arranged in the dresser and closet. Everything was perfectly sized, from the socks to shirts. The wardrobe wasn’t extensive, but was sufficient for the time being. He was about to open the bedroom door when Vale suddenly pulled it open and appeared in the doorway.

“I see you’ve found everything. We wanted you to feel comfortable should you decide to cooperate. We can just as easily make things uncomfortable. Have you made up your mind?”

“I don’t know what this is all about, but if you’re after a large ransom”

“Stop playing games with me Wilkins. You know very well why you and I are here. Come with me, I want to show you something.”

Vale led Wilkins into a room at the back of the house. Agent Taylor followed them and took station in the doorway. Wilkins wasn’t quite sure what to make of the furnishings except that it resembled a hospital room of sorts. There was a bed equipped with arm and leg restraints, one of those metal stands used to hang an intravenous bag, a monitor for checking a patient’s vital signs and a couple of stainless steel wheeled carts, presumably containing medical supplies and instruments.

“This is the room where you will be interrogated. How much of this equipment will be used is dependent upon you.”

“Just what is it you want with me?”

“I see you are choosing to continue with your charade of innocence. Very well, we will assume that you do not wish to cooperate.”

“I simply want to know what this is all about. How can I cooperate if I don’t know what you want?” Wilkins was either a good actor or genuinely confused.

“Okay, I’ll play your game for now. You are here to answer questions regarding your activities and involvement with governmental officials of various countries. That, in a nutshell, is why you are here. I have a list of specific questions that we will be addressing shortly.”

“You must have me confused with someone else. I don’t have any dealings with foreign governments.”

“You deny that your companies have contracts with countries in the Middle East to do oil exploration and drilling? You deny that your companies built and are maintaining some of the desalinization plants that are located in Africa and other parts of the world?”

“I don’t deny those facts; I was referring to me personally having contact with foreign governments. My companies do business all around the world. I have companies that I can’t even remember the names of let alone with whom they do business.”

“You obviously think that I am someone who is interested in engaging in semantics with you. Well, you couldn’t be more wrong. I have a very simple job to do here and that is to find out, from you, what my boss wants to know—nothing more, nothing less.”

“Who is your boss? Let me talk to him and maybe between us we can straighten out this mess.”

“I’ll hand it to you, Wilkins, you put up a good front. You are almost believable. Now, enough of this idle banter, it’s time to get to work. Lay down on the bed please.”

“No, I refuse.”

Vale had indulged Wilkins far more than he should have and was now paying the price. To get back control and instill fear back into Wilkins he made one quick, unwavering motion and swung his right arm with all the force he could muster in a backhanded motion while making a fist. The clenched hand caught Wilkins flush on the right cheek, snapped his head viciously and knocked him backward halfway onto the bed. Dazed and trying to catch himself from slumping to the floor, Wilkins looked up at Vale in disbelief.

“Maybe now you realize that I’m not fooling around with you. That was only a small sample of what is going to happen to you if you continue to piss me off.” With ease, Vale bent over and grabbed Wilkins under each arm and lifted him up onto the bed. “Think about what I just said, I’ll be back in a minute.”

Vale turned to leave and as Taylor stepped aside Vale quietly told him to watch Wilkins

until he returned. Taylor had never seen this side of Vale before; of course they had only worked on a couple of assignments together and nothing of this importance. He merely nodded, not saying a word.

Vale went into the kitchen to get a glass of water and to settle his nerves. He was angry with himself for having allowed Wilkins to get to him. His instructions were clear, no harm was to come to his captive that could preclude him answering the questions; he had jeopardized that and could very easily have broken Wilkins' jaw, or worse. He was going to have to control himself or turn over the interrogation to Bradshaw.

After a few minutes Vale was making his way back to the room when he heard voices that made him pause outside the doorway. He could hear Wilkins offering Taylor a lot of money if he would help him escape. Vale was curious how Taylor would react and so he waited to hear his response.

"You may be willing to sell out your country, but that doesn't mean I am. I intend to make sure that you don't leave here until my boss says so, and even then, I hope you leave in a coffin."

Vale quickly erased the smile from his face before entering the room. "Let's get to it, shall we?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Richard and Christine were together in Richard's office when they finally heard the "mission accomplished" message that Vale had left. Adam had an engagement and couldn't be with them when they listened to the message they so longed to hear. It had been a long night punctuated with sporadic fits of sleep as neither Adam, Christine, nor Richard could stop thinking about the capture of the Controller. Each of them was bothered by the same nagging questions—what if the attempt fails, what if it's the wrong man, what if ... ? If, if, if, it was the same thing all over again, time after time, the same uncertainty kept rearing its ugly head.

Those two words, "mission accomplished," were the catalyst that started off a chain reaction over which neither Christine nor Richard had any control. When they heard the words, their joy and relief was so overwhelming that they found themselves embracing each other.

"I guess we did it." Richard didn't realize how tightly he was hugging Christine and he couldn't stop looking into her eyes, their faces only a couple of inches apart.

"It would seem so." Christine breathlessly whispered the words while drawing her lips closer to Richard's.

Christine thought that Richard might pull away, but instead he kissed her passionately and hugged her so tightly she thought she might break in two. She kissed him back with even greater passion and melted into his arms with total submission. She had longed for Richard's embrace for so long that she didn't want it to ever end. After that first kiss they remained entwined, staring deeply into each others eyes, saying nothing until finally they kissed again ... and again.

* * *

Richard couldn't put Christine out of his mind. He relived each moment with her over and over. He had been thinking about divorcing Veronica for some time and with the recent developments with Christine his mind was made up. Without any regard for what it might do to

his career or how it might interfere with his taking down the Controller, he knew that he must proceed with the divorce. He just had to work up the courage to tell Veronica how he felt. He was sure that she was probably thinking that divorce might be the only solution to their estrangement. It was she that had suggested they separate several months ago to think things over. She felt that since she only saw him on weekends that they were already spending most of their time apart so why not make it full time. The children were both grown and leading their own lives and both had sensed that there was something very wrong with their parents' relationship.

Richard made a note to himself to set up a meeting with Veronica at the house so he could discuss the matter with her. He also made a note to contact his attorney before meeting with Veronica.

Having finally made the decision was a great relief to Richard; he had been laboring over this issue for far too long trying to figure out a way to salvage his marriage, he just had to make sure that Christine wasn't the motive force behind his actions. Deep down inside he knew that his relationship with Christine forced him to treat the situation with a greater sense of urgency, but that it was not the reason for the divorce; it was merely expediting the inevitable.

The relief gave way to sadness once he realized that he wouldn't be able to make the marriage last. He and Veronica both came from environments where divorce was unheard of and long-term marriages were the norm. You were supposed to reconcile your differences and work through the problems; everything could be overcome if you tried. This was all well and good, but throw a Controller into the mix and it becomes a different ball game. The strength of the outside influence was far greater than that of the individuals. The devil himself had come between them and there was no way to repair the damage.

* * *

Richards's attorney, a specialist in corporate law, referred him to a divorce lawyer with a good reputation. Richard had impressed upon the lawyer that he wanted this to be as amicable as possible and that he was willing to give Veronica an equal share of all assets. Richard also insisted that this be kept as low-key as circumstances permitted. He didn't want to give the impression that his attention was being diverted from his World Organization of Nations duties. It was hard enough for Richard to balance his normal business activities while searching for the Controller, but now he had the battle to undo the Controller's misdeeds, his divorce, and the soon to be waged war against the Controller's pawns.

Richard sometimes wondered how he was going to get through the next few months and if he hadn't bitten off more than he could chew. He was getting by on just a few hours sleep every night; surely this eventually would catch up with him.

* * *

Veronica suspected that something was amiss when Richard called to make sure that she would be available on the weekend. He hadn't been home since they decided to separate, always sending his chauffeur in his stead to fetch any clothing or other personal items. Veronica had already consulted with her attorney and knew where she stood regarding her claim to any jointly owned assets. With her own wealth established before she and Richard married, she didn't need any of the possessions they had accumulated together. The items she was interested in were valued more in terms of sentimentality than money.

Financially she had no worries, but her mental wellbeing was another issue entirely. Veronica had been seeing a psychiatrist regularly since the separation with the hope she would be able to come to grips with her own demons. It didn't help that she couldn't make mention of

the Controller as the primary force behind her estrangement. This frustrated her doctor as he could see that there was something she was holding back, something that was stonewalling his efforts to identify the source of her problems. But in spite of his cajoling she was relentless in her determination to keep the Controller a secret in the vain hope that the doctor could somehow work a miracle and solve her problems even though his hands were tied.

Veronica greeted Richard with a warm smile and a hug that he returned with honest emotions. "It's good to see you Ronnie. How have you been doing?"

"I've been doing as well as can be expected given the circumstances. To what do I owe the honor of your presence? Wait ... I said that all wrong. I'm not being facetious so please don't take it that way."

"Don't worry, I know what you meant. I figured it was time we sat down and discussed what the future holds for us."

"I suppose it is about time. Come on in. Why don't you make us both a drink?"

Richard went to the bar at the far end of the living room and found it stocked just the way he preferred. All the various liquors were arranged by type and brand with each decanter outfitted with a gold-toned nameplate. He made Veronica a gin and tonic and for himself a scotch and water. He purposely walked slowly back to the sitting area so that he could see where Veronica would sit, wanting to be opposite her. Veronica took a seat in one of the armchairs and after handing her the drink, Richard sat himself on the facing couch.

"So, I assume that you wanted to discuss the terms of divorce. I'm correct am I not, Richard?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I just don't see any other alternative, Ronnie. We've come to an impasse through circumstances that neither of us could control."

"Yes, I came to the same conclusion shortly after we separated. I figured that when the time was right for you that we would be having this conversation. I'll make it easy for you. I consulted an attorney several weeks ago and we decided that the simplest method is to have each of us keep what we brought into the marriage. I was independently wealthy before our marriage and have increased that wealth even more. You were still struggling to become established and didn't have much, but over the years we've been together, you have done quite well for us. I feel you deserve to keep everything that we acquired during the marriage. That includes the homes, bank accounts and stock portfolios that are in both our names." Before Richard arrived Veronica swore she wouldn't get emotional and she succeeded so well that her attitude was similar to what a lawyer might display.

"Yes, I see you have given this some thought. I appreciate your generosity. You are entitled to keep everything that is in your name, of course. I am flexible on some of the other things though. For example, this house, I really have no need for it and if you wanted to remain living here, I would have no objection to signing it over to you." In spite of Veronica's offer, Richard was going to stick to his outline for the division of community property.

"That's very nice of you Richard. I have grown fond of this house, and I'll admit that the thought of packing and moving isn't my idea of a fun time." Veronica feigned a smile.

"Then it's decided; you keep this house. And if you later think of anything else you would like to have, just let me know. If you have your lawyer draw up the paperwork, I'm sure we can settle this in minimal time." Richard reached into his shirt pocket and retrieved his attorney's business card and placed it on the cocktail table. "Just send the papers to my lawyer."

"Well, I guess that's it then. There is one other thing we need to talk about, the children. They have had an idea for some time that things were not well with us. I haven't said anything to

them, have you, Richard?”

“No, nothing at all. How would you suggest we handle the situation?”

“Well, I think we need to be up front with them. It isn’t as though they are juveniles anymore. They are grown up enough to grasp the situation. I believe that we should maintain a friendly relationship for their sake.”

“Yes, I agree. I don’t think we should tell them anything but that we simply have grown apart and feel that this is the best course for us.” Richard didn’t come right out and say that the Controller should remain a secret but the implication was clear to Veronica.

“My thoughts exactly.” She set her drink down on the table and started to get up indicating to Richard that there was nothing else to discuss.

“Thank you for your time and understanding. I truly would like to remain friends, not just for Randall and Jennifer’s sake but for us. There will always be a special place in my heart for you, Ronnie.” With that Richard started walking toward the door.

“I feel the same way about you, Richard. I would like us to be friends and I hope you will find happiness.” With that Richard closed the door behind him and left the house for the last time. As Veronica turned away from the door, the realization that it was truly over between her and Richard caused her to fall to her knees, tears in her eyes. She remained in that position for several minutes, sobbing uncontrollably. Finally regaining her composure, Veronica, ever the neatnik, proceeded to gather up their drink glasses. She took them to the kitchen, rinsed them, and placed them in the dishwasher.

Veronica gave the living room the once-over before going upstairs to her bedroom, where she would once again give in to her emotions and eventually cry herself to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Vale wanted to give Wilkins one last opportunity to reveal his secrets without any provocation. This was more to put his own mind at ease as anything else; he had never gotten used to the sometimes-brutal interrogations he was required to conduct. Even the many interrogations he performed in foreign war zones didn’t harden him to the anguish his subjects suffered. He reflected, many times over, that he was fortunate to maintain his repulsion at some of the acts required of him; so many of his compatriots grew to relish the opportunities to administer pain. He hoped he never reached that point. So it was with significant hope that he could talk Wilkins into cooperating.

Wilkins had been lying on the bed in the interrogation room, staring up at the plain white ceiling. He memorized every detail, every flaw in the plaster, and every minute difference in the texture. He totally ignored the agent sitting a few feet away as he contemplated what was going to happen next. He sensed that Vale was a man of his word and would live up to his promises, good or bad. His head was aching from the tensed up muscles at the base of his skull, throbbing more violently with even the most minor physical exertion. Wilkins shot up as if launched from a catapult when Vale entered the room and fixed his stare on Vale’s unemotional eyes. Even though the sudden motion caused a more intense pounding in his head, it didn’t distract his gaze.

“Tell me, Wilkins. Tell me everything. I don’t want to hurt you. I guarantee that you will

ultimately tell me everything no matter how hard you resist. Why not make it easy on yourself and spill the beans voluntarily?"

"I still don't know what you want from me. How many times do I have to tell you that? I don't know anyone who calls himself 'Controller'."

"Okay, have it your way. I'm going to start off by giving you a shot of sodium pentothal. If you're lucky, I'll find out everything I want to know, but if your mind has been conditioned against involuntarily revealing secrets then ..."

Vale went over to the instrument table and picked up a hypodermic, carefully removing the sheath that protected the needle. Picking up a vial, he pierced the seal and extracted enough of the chemical to weaken Wilkins' resolve. He then took a cotton ball and soaked it in alcohol. As he turned back toward the bed he could see the fear in Wilkins' eyes. As Vale swabbed the pale skin over the vein, Wilkins could feel the chill of the alcohol spreading over his entire body. He wondered how he could be cold and sweating at the same time.

As Vale rubbed the cotton over the area he couldn't help but wonder if the Controller had ever spent any time outdoors, so ashen was his complexion. Within seconds Wilkins felt the prick of the needle and shortly after that lapsed into a fog.

Vale knew from experience just how much time that dose of pentothal would have effect and planned his questions accordingly. Dazedly Wilkins answered each question that Vale posed. There was no hesitation in his replies and Vale could not detect even the slightest hint of any subterfuge, presenting him with a dilemma. He was led to believe that certain information should be divulged before the interrogation could be considered a success, yet he was receiving answers that came up short of what was anticipated. Even though something inside him said he was being given the truth, he knew he would have to resort to other measures to be positive. He couldn't make that call himself; only Thornton could authorize proceeding to the next phase, so Vale decided to contact Thornton for a determination.

After Vale checked Wilkins' vital signs and was certain he was in no danger of aftereffects from the substance, he summoned Nelson to sit vigil over Wilkins while he went into his bedroom, where he had set up an office of sorts. Sitting atop the card table that served as a desk, Vale had the laptop computer on which he prepared his daily agent reports that were encrypted and electronically dispatched directly to Thornton at five p.m. There was also the telephone they used to communicate with Thornton and the answering service. Vale had been instructed to call Thornton anytime he felt the interrogation had reached an impasse and not to wait for his report to be read. He was sure that Thornton wouldn't like what he had to say but he had to make the call nevertheless.

"Director Thornton, this is agent Vale. I wanted to give you an update on my findings."

"Go ahead agent, what have you found out?"

"I'm afraid that I haven't gotten anything close to what we are looking for, sir. I administered sodium pentothal and ran through all the questions. I'm reasonably confident that the responses I obtained were truthful. This doesn't rule out the highly improbable ability of the subject to resist the chemical however."

"Agent Vale, we have to be absolutely positive that we get as much out of the subject as possible. If there is any possibility that he could defeat the pentothal then we need to look at alternatives. I authorize you to proceed to the next step, and if that achieves similar results, then I will decide if we proceed to phase three ... just get me results that I can be certain reflect the truth. Do I make myself clear?"

"Quite clear, sir. I will proceed to the next level."

* * *

“How do you think things are going?” Christine was suffering a great deal of anxiety since Wilkins was kidnapped. While she wanted to know for certain whether or not Wilkins was the Controller, something inside of her kept her on edge. Perhaps it was the knowledge that if Wilkins proved to be the Controller, the battle would have been won and the war that much closer to being over.

“I’m sure Thornton will contact us the minute he has anything significant to report.” Richard was as much on edge as Christine but he tried to disguise it with a nonchalant demeanor. “Relax, have some more wine.” Richard poured Christine some more merlot.

“I wish I could relax. I guess the waiting is what is getting to me.”

“It hasn’t been that long, Christine, just a few hours. We knew going into this that it could take days or even weeks to get anything out of Wilkins. You have to resign yourself to that.”

“I know, Richard. I guess I’m not the patient type. I’ve never felt so helpless. I’ve always been in control, pardon the pun, and now I feel like I have no power to influence the outcome.”

“Believe me, I know exactly what you mean. I’ve had the same feeling for years.

“I’m sorry, honey. I keep forgetting that you have had to deal with this maniac for the better part of a decade, with no one to talk to about the situation. For the life of me, I’ll never understand how you’ve managed to cope.”

“It’s all a big front, I’m just good at disguising my emotions when it comes to the Controller. I guess it must be due to all the conversations I’ve had with the Controller over the years. He has never shown any emotion in his discussions with me—quite the opposite in fact. He is one cold bastard. I can imagine what the agents interrogating him must be thinking. Anyway, let’s change the subject. Let’s talk about our future, shall we?” Richard raised his glass toward Christine for a toast. “To us.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Richard was emotionally drained yet relieved that he had finally talked things over with Veronica. No matter how unpleasant, it needed to be done so that they could both move on. Maybe now he could get back to taking care of business. Now that one distraction had been laid to rest, he could devote more time to the Controller. He was about to call in Christine and Adam to go over their progress when the intercom interrupted his thoughts.

“Mr. President, CIA Director Thornton is on the line.”

“Thank you, I’ll take the call.”

Richard wondered why Thornton would be calling. It couldn’t be good news this soon, or could it?

“Hello director. May I assume that you have some good news for me?”

“I didn’t want to bother you last night. I didn’t feel that the information warranted. I heard from one of my people. The subject seemed to be telling the truth while under the influence of the drug that was administered as part of phase one.”

“Why do I have the feeling that we are about to have a ‘good news, bad news’ conversation?”

“Well, while we feel we may have gotten the truth, the answers were in conflict with what we were expecting—based upon the information you provided. That’s why I wanted to speak with you. It’s been proven that it’s possible to lie even while under the influence of a drug such as sodium pentothal. I’ve already authorized my agent to proceed with the next step, a polygraph examination. If we do not receive decisive results from that, we will proceed with the next phase. Sir, would you like me to elaborate as to the methods we will be using, should the polygraph not satisfy us?”

Richard wasn’t sure he wanted to know the details. A part of him wanted the satisfaction of knowing all about each minute of discomfort that the Controller was suffering, while the gentler Richard wanted only to put an end to this matter. “I would prefer to remain objective. If I knew the details, I might be inclined to show some sensitivity to our subject. I cannot allow myself that indulgence—this is far too critical. You have my support on whatever means you need to employ to obtain the truth. The truth is the bottom line.”

“Very well, sir. I’ll keep you informed.”

“Thank you, Charles.”

* * *

Richard called Christine and Adam into his office after giving himself a few minutes to gather his composure. The thought of what might be required to get to the truth with Wilkins upset him a great deal. It wasn’t in his nature to be brutal, yet he had just given authorization for measures to be taken that he was sure would mean Wilkins would suffer great pain.

Richard’s secretary showed Christine and Adam in as soon as they arrived, bringing in a fresh coffee service as well.

“Make yourselves comfortable. I wanted us to get together for an update session. I’ll lead things off. I just got off the phone with Director Thornton. Apparently they are conducting the interrogation of the Controller in phases. The first step was the administering of truth serum, sodium ...”

“Pentothal, sodium pentothal.” Adam jumped in to help Richard’s memory.

“Yeah, that’s it. From what the agents told the director, it appears that Wilkins was telling the truth in his answers. However, the responses aren’t what we were looking for; his answers denying any knowledge of the term ‘Controller’ seemed to be plausible. Thornton did tell me that it’s possible to defeat the drug, in rare circumstances. So they are going to proceed with the next step, which is a lie detector test. Then if that is inconclusive, it’s on to the next phase.”

“What is the next phase?” Christine was leery of asking lest she not like the answer.

“I told Thornton I didn’t want to know. I doubt any of us want to know.” Richard let his emotions show on his face.

“You can say that again. I’ve heard of some of our interrogation techniques and we are better off not knowing. Although I’m not going to worry too much about what the Controller is going through. It isn’t like he’s a lily white, innocent victim.” Adam in many ways wanted the reassurance that the Controller was suffering a great deal of anguish for all his past sins.

“Rest assured, that’s the only way I can reconcile myself to the measures we may need to take. Anyway I would like to hear your opinions on what we may be witnessing. I mean to say, if Wilkins is indeed telling the truth that he doesn’t know of the Controller, then where does that leave us?”

Christine was the first to speak up. “Frankly I don’t see how we could have grabbed the wrong man. We waited until we were as positive as we could be before we gathered him up.”

“I agree with Christine, Mr. President. I don’t see any way we could have gotten the wrong

guy. He is just trying to outfox us. If he is as insane as we believe, then who knows what is going on in that sick mind of his. He may actually believe the lies. He may be so delusional that truths become lies and lies become truths. We may never get satisfactory answers to our questions.”

“I was thinking along those lines myself, Adam. But if what we suspect is true, how do we know that we have put the Controller out of business?” Richard wanted to see if they had come to the same conclusion that he reached a few minutes prior.

“I believe that if we have the Controller in our custody, then nobody should be hearing from him, not you Mr. President, or LeClerc, or anybody else. It should look like what it is—he simply dropped from the face of the earth.” Christine was thinking the same thing as Richard.

“I believe that as well, Mr. President. Maybe we need to try something which would elicit a response from the Controller if we have the wrong man in custody.” Adam got up and started pacing as he spoke, as he was prone to do when deep in thought.

Richard offered up that he tried calling the Controller several times since they had Wilkins under wraps only to receive no answer. He knew that wouldn’t be sufficient proof, especially if the Controller was aware that Wilkins had been abducted.

“If Wilkins isn’t the Controller, he is surely one of his closest staff members and would be missed. We need to come up with a foolproof plan to force the Controller to make a move and tip his hand.” Adam was still pacing and it was beginning to irritate Richard, not that he wasn’t used to it, it just rubbed him the wrong way at this frustrating time. “The question now is what can we do to make that happen.”

“Well whatever we do, we need to make sure that nobody gets hurt and no further damage is done. Other than that, it should be a piece of cake. Sorry, that was uncalled for.” Christine was being sarcastic, realized it and apologized before Adam or Richard could comment.

“Actually you may not be far from the truth. If we do put anyone in jeopardy, it should be me.”

“I disagree, Mr. President. If we go on the assumption that the Controller is still roaming about and knows that Wilkins has been snatched up, then you would probably be the first place he would look for answers. We would need to convince him that you had nothing to do with it. My suggestion is that we place one of those other leaders that have remained loyal to him on the hot seat.” Adam was pacing even faster now that he thought he was on to something.

“If he suspected one of the others was behind an attempted overthrow, he would intervene by killing the culprit. We may not like it, but we can’t just throw someone to the wolves to prove a point.” Richard was punctuating his opinion with rapid hand movements as if he were chopping at something invisible.

“Adam’s right, we can’t be a party to putting you in a threatening position. If someone close to the Controller has to pay the price, then so be it. We are going to have to take them down sooner or later, anyway.” Christine was hoping Richard would change his thinking.

“What choice do we have? What are our alternatives? Give me something to work with if you don’t like my idea, Mr. President. Just remember one thing—there isn’t a single one of them that wouldn’t kill, who knows how many innocent people, to stay in power. Can you honestly say that if the Syrian President was assassinated that the world wouldn’t be a better place? Come on, we’re talking about saving the world. What’s wrong with sacrificing someone who has put it in harms way?”

“I just think that there has to be a better way, Adam. You make a valid point, but before we assume that someone has to die, let’s try to come up with another plan.”

“Very well, Mr. President, I’ll give it some more thought. Now, if there isn’t anything else,

I think I'll head back to my office."

"Thanks Adam, I'm sure you will come up with another suggestion."

Richard got up and saw Adam to the door, closing it after his departure. Turning toward Christine, he asked, "Is there anything you want to say that you don't feel comfortable saying in front of Adam? I sense that you are reluctant to speak your mind, sometimes."

"Why do you say that? I'm always contributing to the conversations."

"It's just a feeling that I have. We are in this together, as equals; everyone has the right to speak their mind."

"I've been saying what's on my mind. I guess it's just hard for me to go along with any plans that might put you in jeopardy. I care far too much for you to see you place yourself in harms way, Richard."

Richard walked over to the window and stared out, focusing on nothing in particular, "I assure you, I don't look forward to making myself bait, but there may not be any other way."

"We'll just have to find a another way to handle this development. Having you voluntarily place yourself in jeopardy is not acceptable."

"Christine, I don't like the idea anymore than you do, but it may become necessary. Resolve yourself to that and it will be easier on both of us."

"I may resolve myself to it but I don't have to like it." As she spoke, Christine walked over to where Richard stood and placed herself between him and the window. She reached up and put her arms around his neck, stared into his eyes for a few seconds and then kissed him passionately.

As they separated, Richard commented, "While I find that invigorating, I hardly think it's proper office etiquette."

"Who cares about proper?" With that they kissed again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Okay Mr. Wilkins," Vale was emotionless as he talked to Wilkins, "What I'm going to do now is wire you up for a polygraph examination—a lie detector, if you will."

"I know what a polygraph is. It will just confirm the truth, the truth that I have been telling you all along."

"Then you have nothing to worry about."

Vale proceeded to tell Wilkins how the procedure to obtain a baseline would be conducted. After running through the baseline establishing questions, Vale got down to asking the same questions as he had asked while Wilkins was under the influence of the sodium pentothal. This time they were reworded so as to invite only a "yes" or "no" response.

Vale posed the first two questions, both of which Wilkins answered very coolly, and made note of the fact that Wilkins was exceptionally calm. Usually there was some uneasiness with polygraph subjects, the result of a small amount of apprehension that the baseline questioning did little to relieve. Only subjects who had been through previous exams displayed this much poise. Vale tucked this information away for later when he would be analyzing the results.

Vale asked the rest of the questions and asked some of those a second time to verify that he

got the same reaction each time. The questioning ended when a bolt of lightening lit the room, followed instantaneously by a horrendous clap of thunder. This so startled Wilkins that the polygraph went wild, its needles bouncing crazily over the graph. After several minutes, Wilkins was still showing signs of distress so Vale turned off the equipment and disconnected the wires. He thought it odd that Wilkins would be so upset with such a common occurrence; it was almost as though he had never seen lightening or heard thunder.

Vale asked Bradshaw to make lunch for everyone while he retired to his office to go over the examination results.

* * *

The hard rain was hitting the windows with such impact that Richard turned his desk chair around one hundred and eighty degrees to have a look. The sky was so dark that all the cars passing on the street below had turned on their headlights, their beams glistening off the drenched asphalt. Just as Richard glanced up at the skyline, a bolt of lightening flashed off in the distance. Richard subconsciously counted the duration between the flash and the thunder and calculated the lightening to be five miles away. Richard watched for quite a while as the storm moved closer and closer, timing each bolt of light. Before too long the heavy rain had turned into a hailstorm that pounded out a staccato beat upon the glass. Glancing back down toward the street, Richard could see that traffic had slowed to a crawl and the street itself was turning white.

Just then Richards's phone came alive with the intercom's electronic interpretation of his secretary's voice. "Mr. President, Adam Broderick is on the line and would like to speak to you."

Richard pushed the flashing button as he placed the receiver over his right ear. "What can I do for you Adam? Have you come up with a solution to our dilemma?"

"We may not have the same dilemma anymore, Mr. President."

"Meaning, we have a new one?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. President. I was just reading the "Wall Street Journal" and something dawned on me that got me to thinking. You read the Journal as well as the business section of the newspaper every day don't you?"

"Of course, but you know that. What are you getting at Adam?"

"I went back from the first day since we grabbed Wilkins and checked every day since then and nowhere is there any mention of Wilkins being unaccounted for. Wouldn't you think that if the CEO of a major conglomerate goes unseen for days that there would be some mention of it? Especially when two days after we grabbed him, Wilkins was scheduled to give the keynote address at the biggest assemblage to hit this town since the Democratic convention?"

"Go on."

"I looked into it and obtained an insert to the convention agenda that simply stated that Wilkins would be unable to give the address due to illness. That is the only thing I've been able to find that mentions Wilkins. Even the news article that summarized the convention made no mention of Wilkins. I don't know about you but this sounds like a cover-up to me."

"Definitely. But let's be logical. Wouldn't you put a lid on all outgoing news as the first step you take if you were second in command to a missing CEO? After all, you would have to buy some time to ascertain just what happened and you would have to do this without drawing attention. If news leaked out, the stock could be impacted and loads of investors would lose millions."

"I agree with what you say, but where do you draw the line as to how long you sit on the news? At the very least, you would have to file a report with the police within a reasonable timeframe. If he were to turn up dead in some alley, you would have a lot of questions to answer

as to why you didn't report his absence. I checked and no police report is on file. No, Mr. President, this sounds like someone is trying to let the matter just fade away as if nothing happened. That leads me to the question of who could pull this off, with the logical answer being none other than the Controller."

"Oh my God!" Richard's tone sent a chill down Adams back. "Adam, get Christine and get over to my office right away."

"Yes, sir." Adam was puzzled by Richard's reaction. He seemed more upset than the situation warranted.

Richard slumped down deeper in his chair and whispered to himself, "God, I hope I'm wrong."

* * *

Vale kept going over the polygraph results. He checked and rechecked each question and answer to make sure that there was no mistake. There was too much at stake for any of this exam to be misinterpreted. He wouldn't contact Thornton until he was positive about his recommendation.

All indications were that Wilkins was telling the truth—again. But just as in the previous questioning, Vale felt that Wilkins could be so convinced of what the truth was, or so well prepped, that he could lie repeatedly and show no signs whatsoever. Besides, there was the lightening—Vale couldn't put Wilkins' reaction to the lightening out of his mind. There was something there that Vale couldn't put his finger on, something that told him there was a complexity to Wilkins that hadn't been revealed until now. Vale, though detesting the thought, could see no other alternative but to recommend to Thornton that they proceed with the next phase of the interrogation. He was hoping that it wouldn't come down to this, but this was too important not to make positively sure that all the facts were obtained. Once again his mind resurrected the same questions he had been harboring since first getting assigned to this task force—who is this guy Wilkins and why is he so important? He hoped one day those questions would be answered.

* * *

Adam filled Christine in on his conversation with Richard as they walked toward the president's office. She agreed with Adam that the Controller must still be out there somewhere.

As they were shown in, Richard didn't turn away from the window but continued to gaze out as he told them to have a seat. After a few seconds he turned and sat down facing them.

"I assume that Adam briefed you, Christine."

"Yes sir; and I agree with Adam. It sounds like the Controller is still at large."

"Well, I'm afraid that we may have a problem that none of us ever considered. Whether we have the Controller in custody or not, there are only two scenarios that make sense. Hear me out and put my logic to the test. If we do not have him in custody then he is playing games with us—like ignoring my calls and covering up the Wilkins disappearance. That would indicate that he is on to us and we are treading in deep water. That is scenario one. Scenario two says that we do indeed have him. That means the cover-up would indicate that someone is going to great lengths to insure that his existence is downplayed."

"So you think that there is someone he controls who is trying to protect and maintain the status quo, so that he could continue with the overall plans?" Adam hadn't considered that possibility.

"Worse than that."

"What could possibly be worse?" Christine was wondering where Richard was going with

this.

"I don't think that any of the Controller's underlings would be capable of following in his footsteps. He's one of a kind, thank God."

"Then what are you thinking?" Adam sounded frustrated.

"That there is the possibility the Controller has someone he answers to—a boss with even more power. The Controller himself may be expendable."

* * *

"What are you saying, agent Vale?" Thornton wanted to hear the words not just the implications.

"I'm saying that I am no more certain now than I was before, in fact if anything, I'm even less sure what this guy is telling me. Something tells me that this could be our man but we haven't found a way to prove it—yet."

"So you suggest we bite the bullet and go to the next phase?"

"Yes, sir. I don't see that we have a choice."

"Very well, agent Vale, you have my authorization, proceed."

* * *

"Mr. President, Director Thornton is on the line. He says it is important." The intercom interrupted Richard as he was explaining his theory.

"I'll take the call." Richard switched on the speakerphone that sat in the middle of the coffee table so that Christine and Adam could listen in.

"Hello, director. You have some good news I hope."

"I'm afraid not, sir. Our agent sees no other option but to proceed to the next level of our interrogation process."

"The polygraph examination didn't clear away any of the haze, I take it?"

"If anything, sir, it added to it. Our agent feels that there is more to Wilkins than first meets the eye."

"Such as?"

"Normally I wouldn't place much stock in gut feelings, Mr. President, but when it's this agent's gut, I feel we need to take it seriously. If Vale, that's my team leader, says he feels there is something to be gained by further interrogation, I say we back him up."

"I see. I trust your judgment, director. Keep me posted." With that Richard ended the call and slumped back into his seat.

Christine, Adam and Richard just stared at each other for at least a minute before Richard finally spoke.

"Why do I have the feeling that we are in worse shape now than we were before?"

Christine hoped that what she was thinking was wrong but said it anyway, "Because we are."

"Wait a minute. Mr. President, suppose you're right and the Controller does indeed have a boss. If Wilkins is the Controller, we should be able to force him to give up his boss' identity. Maybe we should concentrate our interrogation efforts with that in mind." Adam thought he was on to something.

"I suppose we wouldn't have much to lose if we redirected our efforts." Christine thought there was merit in Adam's suggestion.

"I say we wait to see what the interrogators turn up before we change our plan. I don't want to see us go off on tangents until we are perfectly sure that Wilkins isn't the end of the line."

“But waiting could come back to hurt us later, Mr. President. The longer we wait, the more time we give our foe to prepare a counter-attack.”

“That’s true, Adam. But what if we’re on the wrong track and Wilkins is indeed the Controller and doesn’t have a boss? We would lose precious time in that case as well. We’re in a damned if we do, damned if we don’t scenario.”

“I suppose you’re right, Mr. President. Maybe we don’t any choice but to proceed as planned and see if we hit pay dirt.”

“Unfortunately, and as much as I detest the idea, it looks like the Controller is back in the drivers seat—for the meantime.” Richard let out a big sigh at the idea.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

This was the third straight day of heavy rains. The agents were growing weary of being cramped up inside the house. Even the occasional break in the showers wasn’t any relief as the grounds were a sea of mud and not conducive to leg stretching walks.

Two of the agents had to go outside once when one of the video cameras started acting up due to a wet connection, the result of a leak in the eave right above the camera’s location. The agents moved the camera over a foot, out from under the leak, dried out the connection and brought the camera back on-line. This simple action was a chore due to the heavy downpour and ankle deep mud. Once the task was completed, it took them a long time to clean the mud off their shoes since no one had considered the weather and duly brought along rubber overshoes. Cursing as they sat on the front porch removing the caked on mud with screwdrivers, they wondered what they had done wrong to draw such an assignment, never realizing that their country’s future rested in their hands.

“This has been one very long day. Now that second shift is on duty, I think I’ll turn in.” Vale decided that he was more mentally drained than physically tired.

* * *

Richard had been tossing and turning, unable to fall asleep so upset was he with the possibility that all his preparation may have been for naught. He turned to his left and saw that Christine was also wide-awake with a worried look on her face.

“Can’t sleep either?”

“No, I didn’t think I would; I was hoping fatigue would set in and force me to get at least forty winks.” She edged over to Richard and rested her head on his shoulder. “Do you think we will be able to get through this and have some hope of leading normal, happy lives again?”

“Now that I have you in my life, I truly hope that we can. We can’t rule out the possibility that we do have the Controller under lock and key and we just aren’t able to prove it. Maybe Thornton’s agents will be able to get something definitive out of Wilkins before much longer.”

“I pray they do.”

* * *

Vale awoke from a good night’s sleep, something he hadn’t been able to do when confronted with an interrogation such as he needed to perform on Wilkins. Must have been the incessant dripping of the raindrops, he thought to himself. No matter, he was just glad to have

been able to get some rest and avoid eight hours of thinking.

Vale and his team had been lax of late in the personal hygiene department so he had instructed all his men to shower and shave and he proceeded to do the same. He wanted Wilkins, now deprived of all but the required bathroom privileges, to see his captors fully refreshed and well groomed. He wanted every psychological advantage he could muster. Wilkins was getting healthy, though simple, food to sustain his well-being, but nothing that a conditioned palate would consider anywhere close to gourmet. The time for civility was long past, now he was going to suffer.

Vale went over again and again with his team the procedures they were going to follow during this phase of the interrogation. Each man knew his role and the significance of his carrying out every move exactly as required. Wilkins was going to be questioned primarily by Vale during the day, while Bradshaw would take the second shift, repeating the same questions and acting upon the observations noted by Vale. The only variation would be that which Vale decided was appropriate. The third shift would find Taylor playing the part of Wilkins' overseer. He would allow Wilkins to have only fitful sleep, waking him every hour or so. Wilkins resistance would hopefully be diminished more and more with each passing hour. One thing was clear though, he would reveal the truth, it was only a matter of time.

* * *

Timothy Wilkins hadn't had a decent nights sleep since being taken captive. Each night consisted of tossing and turning and occasionally, cold sweats. He had never had exposure to anything like this and was disoriented, not being able to gain his composure. Once he would start feeling the slightest bit comfortable, an interrogation would commence and throw him off again. He had no idea what would be happening from one minute to the next, something his captors were purposely cultivating. He didn't know that this was merely the beginning of the worst ordeal anyone could imagine.

* * *

"I would like to say that this is going to hurt me more than it's going to hurt you but I would be lying." Vale looked Wilkins in the eyes as he made the statement. "This is your last chance to tell me what I want to know."

"There is nothing to tell. I've answered all your questions a hundred times."

Vale motioned to Bradshaw with a nod of his head. Bradshaw brought a plank over to the bed and placed it alongside Wilkins. With one hand, Bradshaw easily rolled Wilkins onto his side, slipped the plank under his captive, and rolled Wilkins over onto his back.

Vale started talking as he tied Wilkins down on the plank, securing both wrists and ankles and his waist, following that with a cloth sack over the head. "We call this a 'waterboard'. It doesn't usually force its subjects to tell all but it does do one very important thing."

"What might that be?" Wilkins was somewhat defiant and flippant, obviously unaware of what was to follow.

"It says to you that this is the least painful thing that is going to happen to you."

Leaving that with Wilkins to mull over, Vale called in Nelson to help Bradshaw and him move the board. The three agents stood the board upright, propping it against the wall and positioning it so that Wilkins' was in an inverted position—head down, feet up. With a dismissing wave from Vale, Bradshaw and Nelson left the room, closing the door behind them. If they didn't see what went on in the room, they couldn't attest to it in a courtroom.

Wilkins could feel the blood rushing from his feet, followed by light-headedness as it rushed down through his arteries to his head. His heart started pumping faster to force blood

back up his legs and faster still from the fear induced adrenalin rush. All he could hear was the pounding of his heart, all other sounds, even the heavy rain outside, couldn't break through the repetitious thumping.

Vale gave Wilkins a few seconds to wallow in the confusion before proceeding to the next step. As Vale placed a large pail below Wilkins head, making sure it was clanging about, Wilkins mind raced trying to comprehend what was taking place. Suddenly it dawned on him, Vale said 'waterboard', was Vale going to lower him into a bucket of water? Was he going to be drowned?

Wilkins heard the clang of another pail in the bathroom followed by running water as though the bathtub was being filled. What was Vale doing? What was he going to do? Wilkins' confused mind was racing, trying to make some semblance of sense out of what he could hear but not see.

Vale returned and set the sloshing pail down next to the other one below Wilkins' head. "Is there anything you would like to say before I proceed?"

Wilkins could hardly think over the pain he was feeling in his bound ankles and wrists, still getting enough blood to preclude the onset of pain relieving numbness. His head was starting to pound as a migraine decided to add to his woes. Then in a matter of seconds he lost all feeling in his feet and could feel the numbing from the lack of circulation. All he could muster in response was a muffled "uh, uh."

Without saying a single word, Vale picked up the bucket and poured the icy cold water over and down through the sack covering Wilkins' head. Immediately Wilkins began gasping for air, the sense of drowning overcoming all else. When the water had drained into the empty pail, Vale switched the pails and repeated the procedure.

After what seemed to Wilkins to be hours, Vale called Bradshaw and Nelson back in to help him reverse the attitude of the board and put Wilkins in an upright position, then he slightly loosened the bindings. Vale had calculated that Wilkins, with his very slight build could withstand being inverted for up to ten minutes at a time. The lack of blood to the extremities could result in permanent damage if he left him inverted for much longer. That wouldn't do for Wilkins. Vale checked his stopwatch—five minutes, well within his time limit. Vale removed the wet hood so he could check Wilkins' eyes. He looked to be in reasonably good shape in spite of the ordeal.

Wilkins couldn't stop gasping for air, such was the sensation to which he had been subjected.

"Calm down, it's over; breathe regularly or else you're going to hyperventilate. So, have you had enough? Is there anything you would like to tell me? Or shall we do this again?"

"You can subject me ... to this torture ... from now until hell freezes over ... but there just isn't anything ... that I can tell you because I ... don't know what you're talking about! I don't know how many times ... I have to tell you that!" It took all of Wilkins' strength to get the words out through his desperate gasping.

Vale left the room for a few minutes, ironically to grab a glass of water and clear his head. He was beginning to believe that Wilkins was telling the truth. Vale knew that there was a fine line during an interrogation—a line that if crossed, rendered a subject powerless to resist any ideas that his interrogators chose to implant. You either interrogated to find out secrets or you did it to break your subjects resolve and turn them into pawns—brainwashed puppets willing to do your bidding. Vale wanted Wilkins to reveal the secrets, not force him into telling him whatever he wanted to know, which would accomplish nothing. He had to stop short of

destroying the man's spirit. He couldn't bring Wilkins too far and still be certain of the results. Perhaps one more 'waterboard' treatment ...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Richard was scheduled to meet with Stephen Hamilton at the White House for lunch so he had set aside the entire day to give himself enough time to sleep in a little, have a light casual breakfast and travel from New York to Washington. He wasn't sure how much time Stephen was setting aside for him but he knew they had to discuss some of the issues the U.S. had with the W.O.N., and Richard was sure that Stephen was interested in the latest developments with the Controller.

Richard arrived at the scheduled time only to find Stephen engaged in business with his defense secretary. Advised that it would be about ten minutes delay, Richard passed the time in conversation with his once secretary, Mrs. Williams. She hadn't changed a bit and was just as feisty as ever, even though she was now in her seventies and ready to move on. She assured Richard she would not stay on for another presidential term whether it was with Hamilton or anyone else.

"Things have gotten too boring around here. There aren't any more crises, not like the ones you had anyway, Mr. President. Ever since you got that world organization thing up and running, nobody is giving us any trouble to speak of."

"I would have thought you would welcome the tranquility, Mrs. Williams."

"If I wanted tranquility I'd sit at home on my porch and knit sweaters!"

Richard laughed heartily at that comment just as Stephen came out to greet him with a hug and handshake.

"Sounds like you two have been discussing the good ole days."

"Something like that. See you later, Mrs. Williams." Richard entered the Oval Office followed by Stephen, closing the door behind him.

"Good to see you again, Richard. How have you been?"

"Well, I'm sure you heard about the divorce."

"Yes, I did, very unfortunate too, I might add—at least from my perspective. I don't relish seeing two of my best friends at odds."

"It was amicable. We both reached the conclusion that the future didn't favor our continuing with the status quo. But enough of that, so what have you been up to these days?"

"Oh, just the usual day to day opportunities. Have you had a chance to go over the outline I sent you?"

"I sure did. Stephen, I agree with everything you said with only one exception, as regards the Columbian drug trafficking problem; I feel that there are other avenues we should explore before resorting to the actions you recommend. But other than that, I don't see any problem with your presenting these ideas before the general assembly."

"I was sure you wouldn't like the solution to the Columbian problem. I had to present it in its current form because of party pressure. I've made it pretty clear to them that I am not going to seek reelection and their prime candidate is the author of that particular item. I feel that the rest

of the proposals are strong enough to overshadow the Columbian idea.”

“Well, if he is going to make a name for himself, it won’t be with that proposal. No matter, since I’ve decided not to seek reelection; I can honestly say I don’t give a damn.”

“I can’t say that I blame you Richard, all things considered. But from a selfish standpoint, I wish you would reconsider. The world still needs you and will for quite some time.” Richard didn’t respond, merely shrugged his shoulders.

“Before we have lunch, how about a drink?” Stephen was already making his way over to the liquor cart he always had brought in when he was meeting with close cabinet members and friends.”

“Sounds good to me; I’ll have a scotch, neat.”

Stephen made their drinks then sat down opposite Richard who had taken one of the easy chairs, Stephen taking the other.

“So, Richard, do you feel like discussing the efforts to date as regards the Controller?”

“Sure, I don’t mind. There’s been a glitch.”

“What kind of glitch?”

“It turns out that we can’t get a definitive response from Wilkins which will confirm beyond all doubt that he is our man.”

“So what are you planning to do?”

“I haven’t decided yet. Thornton has asked for a little more time to see if they can get some further information out of Wilkins before giving up.”

“Best to be sure, Richard. We don’t want to go off half cocked.”

“Yeah, but in the meantime, who knows what other plans the Controller has had in the works; he could have started something of which we have no inkling. For all we know he may have a boss he answers to.”

Stephen stiffened at that last statement. “What are you saying? What aren’t you telling me, Richard?”

“It’s just a theory that I posed to Christine and Adam the other day.” Richard proceeded to fill Stephen in on the conversation that took place.

“I see what you mean. All this time and I never considered the possibility that the Controller wasn’t the top dog. How do you propose we confirm or deny your suspicions?”

“I’m hoping that the next phase of Wilkins’ interrogation will give us a better indication of what we need to do. If there is someone pulling Wilkins’ strings, I hope we can break him down into telling us the identity of his puppeteer.”

“So we just have to rely on Thornton’s team at this point?” Stephen had an aversion to the intelligence services, feeling that there was too much speculation and not enough confirmation regarding security issues. He didn’t attack the issue simply because of the world being stable and peaceful, but should the status ever change, he was more than willing to make wholesale changes.

“I’m afraid that we have exhausted all other avenues. If the CIA team can’t come up with something, then we might be out of business. Assuming the Controller knows what we are doing, then we better start thinking about a good place to hide.”

Stephen knew instantly that Richard wasn’t joking.

“Richard, if we assume what you just said to be true, shouldn’t we be putting a backup plan in place? I mean that if anything should happen to you, heaven forbid, who would be able to take up the battle? We need to have someone outside the Controllers prying eyes who can step up and champion the cause.”

“Don’t worry about that Stephen; I already thought of that and there is a plan in place that will kick in the minute I’m no longer able to maintain the fight. I just hope that it never has to be used. I’m not quite ready to roll over and call it a day.”

“What role do you anticipate me playing in the alternate plan?”

“I think you would be the key player. The individuals—two people I trust—who are targeted to carry out the plan would be looking for you to provide them with the resources to continue the endeavor. By themselves, they don’t have any resources they can tap. That isn’t a drawback; it’s actually an advantage in so far as the Controller doesn’t have them on his radar as anyone to be worried about.”

“I think I have a pretty good idea who they are. When will I find out for certain?”

“When the time comes for them to take over they will reveal themselves to you and outline their plan of attack.”

“I hope that day never comes.”

“Well, Stephen, the more I think about it, the more I tend to feel that it is inevitable. Logically, should the Controller find out that I’m involved in any activity aimed at subverting his plans, he will have no choice but to lash out and eliminate me as a problem.”

“Then we will just have to make sure that he doesn’t find out.”

“Easier said than done, I’m afraid.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Vale filled in Bradshaw, Taylor and Nelson on a plan he devised to have Taylor role-play at being the “good cop” to the others “bad cop” routine. They needed to devise a way to introduce Taylor to his role in such a way that Wilkins would think it his idea to try and curry Taylor’s favor. They brainstormed different ideas until Bradshaw suggested that they administer another waterboard treatment only this time they should have Taylor interrupt the process by showing some concern for the health of Wilkins.

“I think you may be on to something.” Nelson liked the scenario. “We could show some irritation at his lack of cooperation and make like we are blowing our cool. Then Taylor can intervene before we start to inflict further punishment on Wilkins.”

Bradshaw jumped in to expand on the plan. “We can argue amongst ourselves within earshot of Wilkins. He will assume that there is dissention within our group. Taylor can come off looking like his salvation if we do it properly.”

Vale figured that this plan might work if Taylor was prepared to fill the role. “What do you think, Taylor. Can you pull it off?”

“Sure boss. I’ll have that guy eating out of my hand.”

“Okay then, that’s our plan. Taylor, if you can gain his confidence then he might reveal some things to you that we can’t get out with force. I don’t mind telling you guys, this is a tough nut to crack. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but there is something strange about this bird.”

“Like what?” Nelson hadn’t had much to say to this point but his curiosity was aroused.

“Don’t mind me, it’s just some of my insecurities rearing their ugly heads, I guess. Anyway, Taylor, you need to make this guy believe that you are on his side. But you have to be

firm with him and make him understand that you can't help him if he doesn't open up to you. You are to make no promises to him without imposing the stipulation that he tells you everything he knows."

"Got it."

"Okay then; let's get to it."

* * *

"Richard, tell me honestly, do you think we can successfully overthrow the Controller and undo all that he has done?"

Richard rolled over onto his back and pushed the covers down so that he was uncovered from the waist up.

"I wish I could promise you that we will be the victors, but that would mean lying to you. I have my doubts, but only because I don't know what to make of Wilkins. I don't see how he cannot be the Controller, but yet the interrogation results are throwing me for a loop."

"Is it possible for anyone to be so conditioned that they could fool a polygraph and truth serum?"

"From what Thornton tells me, yes it is possible. But it would take months of conditioning to get to such a point and I can't visualize the Controller dedicating that much time to get there. He would have to be an extremely busy individual to manage all the things he had going on at once and probably wouldn't have the time to devote to fooling truth serums and such. And besides, all of that notwithstanding, it would be an admission of failure. If he were to prepare himself in such a way, he would be admitting that he could be bettered. That isn't in his nature. He can't see failure as a possibility because he prides himself on his thorough planning. He accounts for every eventuality."

"But if he anticipated that the time might come when he would be under scrutiny—like now—it would make sense for him to be prepared, especially since preparation and planning is his forte."

"That's just it, I cannot conceive of him entertaining the idea. He has always been so sure of himself and so sure of his ability to consider all possible scenarios that I don't think preparing himself for failure would ever enter his mind. Being taken captive and interrogated would definitely be deemed a failure by him and the word 'failure' isn't in his vocabulary. No, there is something we aren't seeing in this picture, something we are missing in spite of all our advance planning. There has to be a logical reason for what we are witnessing. We just have to figure it out."

* * *

Wilkins had been gasping and coughing from the effects of the waterboard torture and nearing the time frame for serious harm when Taylor burst through the door and confronted Vale.

"Don't you think this is enough? If you kill him, what good will he be to us?"

"Since when is it your responsibility to question my methods, Taylor?"

"I'm just not convinced that nearly killing the man is necessary, that's all."

"Well, since you're here, help me invert him before he passes out."

They proceeded to get Wilkins off the board and into his bed. He maintained consciousness throughout and heard every word that was said. When Vale started his questioning, Wilkins decided to say nothing and while still gasping from the waterboard torture, added some extra signs of discomfort to discourage Vale from further interrogation. He had been entertaining the idea of making up some plausible lie just to end the torture, but with Taylor

questioning the goings on, he decided to see how things might play out.

“I’m warning you Wilkins, if I don’t start getting some answers, I’ll make you wish you were never born. You are either going to tell me the truth or you’re going to welcome the waterboard; you decide for yourself what it’s going to be.” Vale’s acting impressed Taylor and he hoped he did as admirable a job.

“Taylor, take his vitals, get him cleaned up and feed him. I want him fresh for our next session. I don’t want him feeling any pain when I start the next phase. I want him to experience every agonizing moment.” With that Vale stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Taylor made sure Wilkins was feeling well enough to take a revitalizing bath while he fetched his lunch. Taylor waited patiently while Wilkins let the warm water soothe his aches. Finally, after about an hour, Wilkins sat down to eat.

While Wilkins picked at his lunch, Taylor decided to start his routine. “Why don’t you just tell him what you know and put an end to this? I don’t know what you’re hiding but surely it can’t be worth dying over.”

“Don’t you understand? There isn’t anything to tell; I don’t know anything.” Wilkins sounded very convincing.

“Look, if you insist on this charade, Vale won’t stop anywhere short of killing you. Consider it from his standpoint. He has his orders to get information from you and authorization to use whatever methods he deems reasonable. And yes, he is authorized to kill you if it is perfectly clear that you are not going to reveal anything.”

“But what good am I to anyone if I’m dead?”

“Alive you are nothing more than a loose end—a witness to something in which we are not supposed to be engaged.”

“So if I talk, you have to kill me anyway, isn’t that what you are saying?”

“No, if you talk we keep you alive. It may be only for purposes of putting you on trial and imprisonment, but at least you will be alive.”

“Some choices.” Wilkins shook his head in disbelief at the situation he was in.

“I’m being honest with you. I’m not trying to gloss over anything. You don’t have much of a future any way you look at it. But for the time being, if you cooperate you may not have to suffer any more torture.”

“How can I cooperate? I don’t know anything. Your boss won’t be happy with anything I tell him because it all falls short of what he wants to hear.”

“If you tell me the truth, I’ll convince him to end the torture. But just bear in mind that everything you tell me has to be true and verifiable, otherwise all bets are off. Think about it. I’ll be back in a little while.”

Taylor called Nelson in to stand watch and then he left with the lunch tray, closing the door behind him. He felt he had turned in a performance as good as Vale’s and wanted to fill Vale in on the progress he felt he made.

* * *

Richard wasn’t looking forward to this call, but he knew it was only a matter of time before it would take place.

“How are you, Josef?”

“I am fine, Richard, but I would be better if I had some positive news from you regarding our little problem.” Russian Premier Josef Vashenko wasn’t the kind of man to sit idly by while putting all his trust in a former foe.

"I wish that I had some good news to pass on to you but I don't. We are still questioning our man." Richard knew this wouldn't satisfy the Russian but couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Perhaps you need to have me send over some of our personnel? We may be more effective in such matters."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Josef. I have every confidence in my people being able to get the job done." Richard spoke firmly and unapologetically, demeanor he knew would have the most affect with the Russian.

"Very well, Richard. I will abide by your wishes, for now. Do not leave me hanging too long, however. My patience is wearing thin. Good bye."

Before Richard could give his farewells, the line went dead. He knew that he couldn't keep the Russian at bay much longer. Deep down inside, he wasn't so sure that it wouldn't be a bad thing to have Vashenko go off on his own. At least he wouldn't have to deal with the same constraints.

* * *

Taylor, Vale and Bradshaw sat down to discuss what had transpired and what their next action might be.

"I think I actually made some headway with Wilkins. I may have gotten him thinking about the futility of holding back. I deviated a little from our scenario."

"Deviated? How?" Vale was almost afraid to ask.

"I told him that his life wouldn't be worth anything if he wasn't up front with us."

"I don't believe you did that!" Bradshaw was beside himself.

Vale jumped in with both feet, "Don't you realize that you gave him every reason for lying to us just to keep himself alive. He could string us along for who knows how long."

"I told him that everything he gave us would have to be verifiable. If he lies to us, he knows that won't save him. Look, we aren't getting anywhere as it is, so what have we got to lose? He has already been thinking that the only way to get you off his back is to tell you what you want to hear. Using our current methods will only result in him lying to us to avoid more torture. Why not play out my scenario?"

"What choice do we have? You backed us into a corner." Bradshaw didn't try to veil his displeasure with Taylor's actions.

"Bradshaw is right, Taylor. You haven't left us with any other alternative. We have to play out your hand and see where it leads us. I think I should caution you though, forget the adlibbing. From now on, we discuss everything before you offer anything up to Wilkins. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir, quite clear. I really think this will work out best in the long haul. Now I better get back in there with him. I don't want to let him think about it too long."

"Make this work, Taylor."

* * *

Richard, Christine and Adam decided to have dinner together at Christine's apartment. They wanted to discuss the latest developments over a relaxing dinner.

"Any more word on how the interrogation is going, Richard?"

"Only what I have previously told you, Adam. I think there is a lag between the agents deciphering their results and our being informed. I'm sure we will be hearing something soon."

"I hope so; this waiting is harder than receiving bad news." Christine filled each of their glasses from a bottle of chardonnay that Richard had provided. "I just hope this is over sooner,

rather than later.”

“We’re committed to the long haul, so don’t get too impatient you two. Give it some time. Actually I think the waiting time is worthwhile; it gives us a chance to evaluate each new development without feeling pressure to react on a moment’s notice.” Richard hoped they didn’t see through his less than enthusiastic pep talk.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Richard had debated with himself over whether he should contact LeClerc. He was aware that LeClerc knew more about Vashenko than anyone else. He needed to know if Vashenko would be likely to go off half-cocked if Richard’s agents didn’t show some signs of success. He finally relented to his more curious self and placed the call to Jean Pierre.

“Hello, Richard, good of you to call.” LeClerc sounded almost joyous.

“Hello, Jean Pierre. I hope you have a few minutes to talk to me?”

“Of course my friend, what may I do for you?”

“Jean Pierre, I’m concerned about Josef. I think he’s growing extremely impatient with my lack of progress and I’m afraid he may go off on his own.”

“I wouldn’t worry if I were you, Richard. I talked to him just yesterday and while he was a little upset at the lack of progress to this point, he did assure me that he was willing to give you more time.”

“Well, I don’t mind telling you, that’s re-assuring news. I was beginning to have my doubts.” Richard’s voice sounded more relaxed.

“Don’t worry, Richard. I made Josef promise me that he would not do anything without first checking with me. I, of course, would notify you immediately. It is in the best interests of us all to work together on this.” Jean Pierre was the voice of reason that Richard needed to hear.

“Thank you, Jean Pierre. I’m very glad I called you.”

“You are most welcome, Richard. Feel free to call me anytime my friend.”

Reassured, but still concerned, Richard promised himself to keep a closer watch on Josef. Even LeClerc couldn’t stop him from going off on his own if he had a mind to do so. “As if I don’t already have enough to do, now I’m going to have to baby sit a Cossack,” Richard mumbled to himself.

* * *

Taylor gave Wilkins a couple of hours to recoup from his latest “questioning” by Vale. Maybe if Wilkins had some time to think things over he might be more prone to accept Taylor’s show of friendship.

Taylor closed the door behind him so they could be alone and to show Wilkins that he was trying to shield their conversations from the other agents. Wilkins fell for the ploy and gave Taylor a warm greeting.

“So, Mr. Wilkins, have you given any thought to my proposal?”

“Yes, I have been thinking about it long and hard. What assurances can you give me?”

“I’m in no position to give you any guarantees. All I can promise you is that I’ll do everything I can to see that you are unharmed. I can’t get you freed, if that’s what you are

looking for; I can encourage my superiors to cut you some slack. Other than that I don't have much to offer."

"You can't make any promises and I don't have much choice in the matter. We are both powerless. The only difference between us is that I'm the only one with something to lose."

"I take it then that you're willing to work with me and give me some information?"

"Yes, I'll tell you everything I know."

* * *

Vale, Bradshaw and Nelson were planning their next move should Taylor not be successful in getting Wilkins to open up. They were considering methods that would subject Wilkins to a great deal of pain, methods which Vale held back until there were no other options. Their discussion reached the point where each man was speaking louder and louder trying to be heard until Vale finally interjected.

"Hold it down; we don't want Wilkins to hear what we're planning for him."

Unfortunately his call for quiet came too late. Once silent, the agents heard the faint sound of a helicopter hovering high above the house. No aircraft of any kind ever flew over these woods, so the agents were more curious than alarmed.

Nelson and Bradshaw went for the front door only to stop dead in their tracks at the "thud" of a heavy object crashing down upon the roof.

Vale had one instant to reason out where they had failed. "Shit, we forgot about covering the airspace" he mumbled to himself. It was the last thought he would ever have.

The bomb was heavy enough and dropped from an altitude that would assure its crashing through the roof and possibly the ceiling. It didn't matter though as the device packed enough punch to completely destroy the house and bend all the trees within a fifty yard perimeter.

The helicopter pilot banked and turned away as quickly as possible, long before the bomb reached its target, lest any debris from the blast reach them. After the shock wave passed, the pilot circled back over the target area. The wash from the helicopter's blades cleared away enough of the smoke and dust to allow the pilot to confirm that nothing remained at the site. He turned his head toward the back of the helicopter and gave a thumbs up to his passenger/bombardier, then with a quick turn, he headed for home.

* * *

The old man dropped his hoe, shocked by the severity of the blast. Confused, he didn't know in which direction to look until he heard the approaching helicopter. Glancing over his right shoulder as he slowly turned his body, he saw the rising cloud of smoke and dust as the helicopter passed directly overhead. He was too surprised to notice what, if any, markings emblazoned the helicopter.

* * *

Richard had called Christine and Adam into his office for a quick conference to discuss a speech he was preparing. He was due to address the World Organization of Nations general assembly where he would update the members on key matters and present to them the plans he developed for the implementation of the organizations highest priority items. They were just about finished when Richard heard a familiar sound coming from the area of his desk. As the sound got louder he gasped aloud as he recognized the tune—"Hail to the Chief". It had been ages since the cell phone had been used; not since Wilkins had been taken into custody had Richard heard the familiar tune.

Christine and Adam looked questioningly at each other, the significance of what was occurring lost on them.

Richard reached his desk and pulled out the center drawer, removed the cell phone, and pressed the “talk” key. Before he could utter a single word, he heard the voice.

“Hello, Richard.” It was unmistakable; the same person Richard had talked to for so many hours over the years was on the other end. Only this time something was different, the voice was now even colder and more emotionless than Richard thought was possible. For a brief instant Richard hoped, against all reason, that it wasn’t the Controller on the other end, but all doubt was soon erased.

“You have put into motion something which cannot be stopped, Richard. My biggest disappointment with you is that you underestimated me even after all you have witnessed.”

Richard started to speak and was abruptly interrupted.

“No, Richard; you have nothing to say that I wish to hear. I take it you have not yet been informed as to the fate of your agents and their hideaway in the woods.”

Richard felt his heart skip a beat at the idea that the team had been compromised. No, it couldn’t be true, nothing could have happened. There were no stones left unturned, the house was a too closely guarded secret. There was no way that Wilkins could have escaped, abetted or otherwise.

“You probably want to end this call so that you may contact whoever was in charge of your operatives and verify what I am saying. Go right ahead. We will talk again later.”

With that the phone fell silent.

Richard looked at the confused faces of Christine and Adam as he walked back to his chair and plopped down in utter despair.

“What’s wrong, Richard?” Christine wanted to hold him but restrained herself. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I may have. That was him—the Controller.” Richard’s voice was that of a man who has been soundly beaten beyond any hope.

Christine and Adam were speechless. By the time they regained their composure, Richard had placed a call to Thornton. He had activated the speaker phone so Christine and Adam could listen.

“Director, I have just been contacted by the Controller.”

“What? That’s not possible; we have him under close observation, there is no way he could have placed a call.”

“When was the last time that you talked to your team?”

“They are due to contact me within the hour.”

“I suggest you try to contact them. I have reason to believe that something horrible has happened.”

“I’ll get back to you, Mr. President, as soon as I have some news.”

Richard hung up the phone and sat, dazed, just staring out the window.

“What did the Controller say?” Adam hung his head in disbelief.

Richard filled them in on the one-sided conversation.

“What do we do now?” Christine was thinking the worst, namely that Richard was going to be targeted by the Controller and probably killed. “You know what this means for you.”

“I don’t want to do anything until I hear from Thornton. I don’t know why, but I have the feeling that the Controller isn’t going to just kill me outright. I think he is going to toy with me the way a cat toys with a mouse. He can’t just eliminate me; he has to make an example of me to his other co-conspirators. You two should be safe for the time being. There is no way he could know of your involvement. I just wish I knew how he escaped, and for that matter, how anyone

knew where he was.”

“The most important thing to be concerned with now is your safety, sir. You know, Mr. President, there is nothing stopping you from dropping out of sight. You could just pack up some clothes and disappear. You could go to a small tropical island where nobody cares who you are or were. Change your name and vanish.” Adam was serious. “You have enough money to live like a king on one of those small tropical paradises. Why wait around for this madman to do his bidding. You don’t owe anyone anything; you’ve put in your time and becoming a martyr isn’t going to change anything.”

“Adam is right, Richard. You have to do something to protect yourself.”

“Don’t you think that I have an obligation to see this through to the end? I helped put the world into this situation. I can’t just walk away.”

“You may not have a choice, Richard.” Christine had to convince him that it was best for him to leave. “Think about it. If you were to lay low for a short time, while Adam and I continue on with our plans, you could come back and help with the rebuilding process. That would be the best way for you to make amends.”

“Christine is right, Mr. President. You have been compromised. In fact, if you stay here you could be taken captive and forced to reveal our involvement. You would put us in jeopardy as well.”

With that last comment Richard looked up at Adam with a pained expression on his face. “That’s the last thing I want to have happen. Besides you two, I could also reveal LeClerc and Vashenko as being in on it. That would put them in danger.” Richard stood up and walked to the window. As he looked down on the score of pedestrians, he shook his head in agreement. “I don’t have any options but to disappear. But I’m not going to leave the country. If I’m going to hide out someplace where I can’t keep track of both of you. I’m not going to leave you alone to fight this battle—I can’t.”

Christine was torn between wanting Richard safe and having him near. “Maybe there is a way we can protect you, we just have to find it.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. President, we’ll figure something out.”

“I hope so, Adam, because I’m not running away from this.”

They were startled by the intercom. “Mr. President, Director Thornton is on the line.”

Richard put Thornton on the speaker.

“What have you got director?”

“I’m sorry to say your suspicions were confirmed. There was news of a large blast in that area. I had an Air Force reconnaissance plane fly over the area to check it out. Mr. President, there is a crater where the house used to be. There isn’t any way any living thing could have survived such a blast.”

“Could this have been the self-destruct mechanism?”

“No, sir; we didn’t have anywhere close to that amount of destructive power on site. This was probably an air attack. Unfortunately, we never considered the possibility of an assault from the air.”

“I don’t understand something; are you saying that everyone in the house was killed?”

“Yes, it looks that way, sir. No one could have survived such a blast.”

“Then, if that is true, how could I get a call from Wilkins?”

“I don’t know. We only have preliminary reports at present. I have dispatched a team to the area to see if they can find any evidence as to what actually happened. I suppose it’s possible that someone somehow managed to extricate Wilkins and then destroyed the house. That’s highly

unlikely though. They would've had to know all the details of our security measures."

"Thank you, director. If you hear anything further, please notify me, and if I'm not available, pass on the information to either Christine Morrison or Adam Broderick."

"Yes, sir."

Richard hung up the phone and settled back into his chair. "If Wilkins was killed in the explosion, then Wilkins wasn't the Controller, and we had the wrong man all along. If Wilkins was indeed the Controller, then he escaped somehow. Either way, we are in trouble."

"How could he escape? Besides the three of us, only Thornton knew about the house. It certainly wasn't one of us and I seriously doubt that Thornton was the leak." Adam's reasoning couldn't be questioned.

"You're right; I don't see Thornton being guilty of anything. If he were passing information along to the Controller, the abduction of Wilkins would have been stifled from the very beginning. There has to be another explanation, but at this point it doesn't really seem to matter. The damage has been done and now we are on the defensive side of the ball." Richard hung his head and placed his hands over the back of his neck as he stared at the floor, like a beaten man.

"If Wilkins was indeed extricated, we have to find out how anyone knew of his whereabouts. If we don't find out then we would be going ahead with our plans knowing that there is a spy in our midst. How could we ever hope to succeed with that hanging over our heads?" Adam was no longer shocked; the shock had given way to anger and determination.

Christine went over and sat next to Richard and put her arm over his shoulders and leaned towards his ear. Quietly enough that Adam couldn't hear, she whispered, "I love you and I don't want to see any harm come to you, but I know that if you give up you will never be able to live with yourself."

Richard stood and walked over to the window. Looking down on the street below he spoke softly, "I can't tell you two how much your support means to me. Lesser people would have said 'to hell' with this whole mess, but you two have proven why my choice of picking you as my successors was a wise decision. You have given me the courage to go on."

"The most important thing for us right now is to figure out a way to protect you, Mr. President."

"Thanks, Adam."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Christine insisted that Richard sneak out of his office in disguise and go to her apartment to await any new information. Adam went out and bought an overcoat and hat so that Richard could slip out a side entrance and catch a taxi. Christine gave her cell phone to Richard to use as their communication media should her home phone be tapped; an unlikely possibility since no one knew of her involvement with Richard, but caution was the order of the day.

Christine had Richard's secretary clear his calendar under the guise of his being sick from food poisoning and unable to reschedule at the present time. This would buy him some time until they heard more about the bombing. They would have to devise a scenario to explain his absence

once he committed to dropping out of sight.

Richard objected to using Christine's apartment at first, but sound reasoning from Adam and Christine prevailed and he finally relented. His concern for Christine's safety was obviously driving his objections, but in lieu of an alternative, he had no choice.

* * *

Richard was wondering if he would ever hear from Thornton again. "It's been two days and still no word." Richard was pacing the living room and talking to himself out of frustration. Here it was, one o'clock in the afternoon and he was still in pajamas, hadn't showered or shaved and had a whole pot of coffee as his sole sustenance. He was beginning to feel the onset of cabin fever setting in. If something didn't break soon he was going to turn into a basket case. It would have been different had Christine been around, but she decided to spend a couple of days with her mother who was recuperating from a bout of the flu.

Richard was too used to a demanding and busy schedule to be relegated to sitting around. He had done as much reading as he cared to do, considering Christine's limited library. He made a mental note to chide her about her collection of romance novels. He did, however, find her selection of science fiction classics interesting. With all that was going on, they had never had the opportunity to just relax and discuss the little things in each other's lives. When they weren't being intimate, they were embroiled in their pursuit of the Controller.

Richard was about to turn on the television to see if there was any mention of him on the news when Christine's cell phone rang. He recognized the caller's phone number as his office private line. Answering it treated him to the soft lilt of Christine's voice.

"Richard we have news from director Thornton; his team went over the blast site with a fine toothed comb. They ... God this is gruesome ..."

Richard could tell from her cracking voice that Christine was fighting back tears. "Christine, get a hold of yourself and tell me what he had to say." Richard couldn't disguise his impatience.

"They found various body parts around the site. DNA tests were performed and the identities of the four agents were confirmed."

"What about Wilkins?"

"I was just getting to that Richard, relax and let me finish." Christine tried to restrain herself and not reveal her own impatience at Richard's interruption but the tone of her voice sent him a clear message—she was having a difficult time getting through the gory details.

"Wilkins was definitely killed in the blast; an arm was found and tests against the blood sample, that was taken when we captured him, confirmed it to be his. There were no indications of anyone other than Wilkins and the agents being there at the time of the explosion."

"So, we know for sure that Wilkins was not the Controller. Since he's dead, we now have no way to get him to lead us to the real Controller. This puts us back to square one."

Christine didn't need to see Richard to know that he was probably hanging by a thin thread with little to prevent him from lapsing into a deep depression.

"You know, Richard, what I don't understand is how we could have been so far off base in identifying the Controller. Every piece of evidence pointed to Wilkins. I could see if there were conflicting clues, but there were none. Everything fell into place and all the parts fit."

Christine's postulation got Richard thinking and snapped him out of his self-pity. "You're right, Christine. In fact, reflecting back on it, maybe it all fits too well. Tell me what you think about this hypothesis. What if the Controller somehow knew what we were doing and planted clues designed to lead us to Wilkins? What if we were manipulated?"

“It would explain a lot. But that leads us back to the same big question—how could he know what we were up to?”

“Simple, from someone we thought we could trust.”

* * *

Richard decided to get cleaned up and dressed. It was a perfect day for denim jeans, a polo shirt and a pair of sneakers. Maybe if he went for a walk and got some sun he could think more clearly and make some sense of what was happening.

The day was sunny and warm and the minute Richard felt the sun’s rays on his face and uncovered arms he spirits were slightly lifted. He had forgotten to pack a pair of sunglasses in his haste to drop out of sight, so his first order of business was to secure a pair. Richard noticed a drug and sundries store across the street so he jaywalked across the busy street, dodging traffic and eliciting a rude gesture from an irate taxi driver. Richard walked to the rear of the store where he found a rack containing non-prescription reading glasses and an assortment of sunglasses. After trying on several pairs and looking at himself in the rack’s mirror, he decided on a pair of standard aviator style glasses.

Back on the street, Richard noticed a sign for a park and recreation area and followed the arrow. A park might be a good place to relax and think things over.

Richard had walked three long blocks before coming to the park entrance and was relieved to see a heavily wooded area that provided a lot of shade, benches and a drinking fountain. Taking a long drink to quench his thirst, he noticed an especially dense patch of lawn under a gigantic pine tree. Richard sat down on the cool grass, and then reclined on one side, propped up on one elbow. Richard enjoyed taking in the sights and sounds of several children kicking around a soccer ball about twenty yards away. He actually found himself laughing when a small tyke fell after missing an attempted kick at a ball not too much smaller than himself.

His elbow starting to ache, Richard lay back looking up at the tall pine’s branches so thick that only an occasional glint of sun shone through as the tree swayed in the breeze. Gradually he became so engrossed in the peacefulness of nature that he couldn’t keep his eyes open and let the children’s playful yelling lull him into a deep sleep.

Richard could have slept longer had it not been for the ringing of Christine’s cell phone. He had almost forgotten to take it with him and would soon wish that he had indeed left it behind.

“Hi, Richard. What are you up to?”

“Actually, I’m sitting under a tree at the park a few blocks from your apartment.”

“Do you think it’s wise to be out in public? Somebody might recognize you.”

“I think most people are too busy with whatever they are doing to be worried about me.”

Richard looked at his watch and saw that it was four o’clock. “Why did you call? Aren’t you going to be coming home soon?”

“I was in your office looking for some paperwork when I heard that cell phone in your drawer ring. There is no mistaking that ring. Of course I didn’t answer it, but I was wondering if I should bring it home with me.”

“I suppose it would be a good idea. I don’t know if I’ll answer it, should it ring again. I guess it will depend upon what excuse we can dream up for my being out of circulation.”

“I’ll bring it home with me. I’ll see you soon. I love you.”

“I love you too, bye.”

Richard sat under the tree for another few minutes wondering what the Controller would have said had he answered that phone. He finally came to the conclusion that it would not have

been anything good.

Richard made the walk back less purposeful than when he was on his way to the park. He was enjoying being among the people walking the streets. It made him feel alive, a feeling that had been missing for the last several days. Finally getting back to Christine's apartment building, he got off the elevator just as the maid that came in weekly to clean the apartment of one of Christine's neighbors was waiting for a down elevator. Not thinking anything of the encounter, Richard flashed her a smile and said hello.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

That evening Richard had Adam come over to Christine's apartment so the three of them could have an update meeting and decide on their next course of action.

"Have you two come up with something viable to explain my absence?"

Adam took the lead. "We wanted to know from you whether or not you want your disappearance to be permanent? We have a scenario that would allow for your return to public life and also one for your 'death'. It's up to you which one gets the nod."

Christine jumped in with her own opinion, one that reflected her personal concerns for Richard's safety. "I prefer that you choose the death scenario. God, I didn't mean that to sound so insensitive." Christine's comment caused both men to laugh heartily. Christine decided to ignore them and continued. "If we make it truly believable, then the Controller will move on and forget about you. Anything else and you are still going to have to deal with him."

"Thanks, Christine, it felt good to have a laugh. There hasn't been too much levity of late. I've told you both many times before that I have no intention of giving up on taking him down. I can't very well do that if I'm dead. Besides, there is no way the Controller is going to believe that I'm dead. That would be too convenient a coincidence for him to buy into. So I think the issue here is how long do I need to be 'missing' and how well can I hide? We have to make some kind of statement soon, since I've been gone for several days already. Tell me about your scenario."

Adam inched forward in his seat, anxious to outline the plan. "Well, the beauty of this scenario is that we can drag it out as long as we want. We propose releasing a statement that says you have been taken hostage by an upstart, radical, terrorist group. Since we are making this group up, no one can disprove its involvement. What's more, nobody—including the Controller—can use resources to infiltrate the group. We will be the only ones determining how the cards fall."

"I like it. Of course the Controller will know it's just a ploy to buy time. He can't tell anyone except his closest confidants what is really going down without putting himself in jeopardy. In fact, the more I think about it, he would probably keep it all to himself so as to protect his cloak of perfection with his conspirators."

"Precisely. Everyone except the Controller will accept the scenario as fact. Even though the Controller will know the truth, he won't be able to do anything about it as long as you are out of reach." Adam was proud of himself upon seeing Richard's acceptance of this plan since he was the one who dreamed it up.

“The only downside I can think of, off the top of my head, is that once the Russian premier hears about it, he will go off on his own. I suppose that there is nothing we can do about that short of filling him in on the plan and I don’t think that would be a good idea. We still have the possibility of a spy among our close group hanging over our heads. And I think that we have to have Vashenko at the head of the list. He’s the biggest unknown.” Richard paused and looked up at the ceiling as if hoping for divine intervention. “Okay, let’s do it. How soon can you release a statement?”

“I have one ready to go.” Christine reached into her attaché case and pulled out a draft copy of the proposed statement. As she handed it to Richard she commented, “Once this goes out the wheels will be set in motion for you to be replaced as W.O.N. president. There is no way the organization can allow a disruption like this to bring it to its knees.”

“Of course. It doesn’t matter in any case. I want to be able to devote all my time to the Controller from now on.”

Almost, as if on cue, the cell phone sitting atop the mantle rang out its familiar tune. Suddenly there wasn’t a sound in the room as all three turned to the source of the ring. Each time it repeated its electronic summons the silence seemed even more intense. Richard finally got up and walked over to the mantle. Making a quick decision that he hoped he wouldn’t later regret, Richard answered the call.

“It’s about time you decided to answer. It wasn’t very nice of you to ignore my previous calls.”

“What do you want? Haven’t you done enough already?”

“Oh no, Richard, it’s just going to get better and better from here on out. No, I thought you must have been wondering how I slipped through your fingers.”

“The thought had crossed my mind.”

“Oh, I would be willing to bet that it has done much more than cross your mind. In fact, I dare to venture a guess that it would take me several hours of discussion to answer all the questions running through your mind at this very instant. However, I have no intention of entertaining your curiosity; my time is far too valuable to indulge your questioning.”

“Tell me one thing, who was Wilkins?”

“Ah, you are still thinking as clearly as ever, Richard. You have cut right to the heart of the matter. For the time being, I think it better if I keep that my little secret.”

“What’s the matter, afraid I might find something to use against you?”

“Afraid? You give yourself too much credit, Richard. You had your opportunity, your fifteen minutes of fame, if you will, and you couldn’t get the job done. You’re now so confused it’s mind boggling. You don’t know how to proceed from this point. Yes, I realize that you have no intention of giving up your pursuit. It wouldn’t be at all like you to give up so easily. In fact, I would be amazed if you did give up; it would be so unlike you.”

“You are afraid. Besides being insane, you’re starting to have doubts about your ability to stop me, aren’t you?” Richard sounded confident and challenging and hoped that he had pushed the right buttons, fortunately he didn’t have to wait long to find out.

“You presume too much, Richard.” The Controller’s voice sent a chill down Richard’s spine and caused the hair on the back of his neck to rise. This was the first time since their very first conversation many years prior that Richard detected some emotion in the Controller’s voice. He had finally evoked some reaction, albeit anger. “You have no idea what I am capable of doing to you.”

You took the bait you sick son of a bitch, Richard thought to himself.

Suddenly the voice was calm and not as ominous. "I will answer your question after all, Richard. Why don't you make yourself comfortable, then I'll tell you a little story."

Christine and Adam, hearing only one side of the conversation, were confused when Richard calmly went to the bar, poured himself a scotch and then returned to his chair next to Christine, all the time in utter silence, with the phone pressed to his left ear.

"Okay, I'm comfortable, let's hear it."

"You know Richard I'm surprised that you haven't figured it out by now. I did give you a clue a long time ago."

Christine and Adam couldn't help but notice the puzzled look on Richard's face.

"What clue?"

"Do you remember me telling you about a little project of mine regarding cloning?"

It hit Richard like a slap in the face. Of course, why didn't he think of that, it was now so obvious.

"So Wilkins was a clone." It was a statement not a question and caused both Christine and Adam to gasp.

"Yes Richard, a clone. You see, when I learned of your little conspiracy, I had a clone take over my day-to-day schedule. What better way to fool you into thinking you had indeed captured me?"

"Did you somehow program him to resist our questioning?"

"There was no need to do that. You see Richard; we have the capability to selectively filter out any undesirable characteristics before creating the clone. He couldn't tell you anything because he didn't know anything. His memory didn't contain anything damaging about me or my past, let alone his beginnings. Putting it in movie terms, you could say he was merely my stand-in."

"Well, he did give us one thing. We know what you look like you little weasel." Richard let his emotions get the better of him, and wished he could retract his statements. He couldn't believe that he let the Controller get to him.

"What makes you so sure? I told you he was a clone. I didn't say from whom he was cloned."

That last comment threw Richard for a loop. Now he had absolutely nothing he could be sure of. Regaining his composure, he decided to see if he could learn a little more.

"If there was no way he could tell us anything, why did you resort to bombing the house to silence him?"

"I think you know the answer to that question, Richard; you just don't want to admit it to yourself. I didn't want him silenced as much as I wanted to teach you a lesson."

Richard was reminded again how sick a man the Controller truly is, snuffing out the lives of four agents just for the sake of teaching him a lesson. "How did you know where we were keeping him?"

"Oh yes, I suppose there wasn't much left to give you any indication. You see, the clone had a tiny implant that transmitted his location to me. I assumed, correctly I might add, that you would want to take him alive for questioning, so the implant was a given. Too bad your agents didn't think of that. And isn't it unfortunate that they overlooked the possibility of an air assault?" With that the Controller did something that he had never done in all the years they were in contact—he laughed. A laugh that could only have originated in the bowels of hell reverberated through Richard's skull. Before he could tell the Controller what he thought of him, the line went dead.

“Wilkins was merely a clone. And we can’t even be sure that he was cloned from the Controller. He was a plant and didn’t have any knowledge of the Controller or his activities. No matter what we did to him, he wouldn’t have been able to give us anything useful.”

“So we’re back to square one.” Adam was showing the first signs of being overwhelmed by the battle to unseat the Controller.

“Not quite. One thing is different, now.” Richard had a solemn look on his face.

Adam responded. “What’s that?”

“He has killed four of our agents just to teach me a lesson.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After Richard told Christine and Adam what the Controller revealed to him, they were speechless. Most of their questions were finally answered with the Controller’s revelation that Wilkins was a clone.

“That explains a lot.” Adam was trying to be positive in spite of some of his misgivings. “But now we have a whole new set of circumstances to deal with.”

“Such as?” Christine had her own ideas and wanted Adam to elaborate.

“Well, for one thing, we don’t know who the clone was derived from. We also don’t know who put the Controller on alert in the first place so that he could get a clone ready—and that’s the thing that bothers me the most.”

“Adam has made a couple of good points. We may have answered some questions, but we have replaced them with questions of far greater significance. We are going to have to figure out a way to nail the Controller without any outside collaboration. We can’t trust anyone outside of the three of us.” Richard spoke very firmly and punctuated his statements with a poke of his finger.

“That could be a lot harder to do than to say. If we do that it means we won’t have any help from the CIA, the president, or any foreign powers. We would be left to our own wiles.” Christine wasn’t sure they could make any progress on their own.

“We don’t have a choice. We can’t be sure who told the Controller of our plans to abduct him. It could have been any one of a number of our so-called friends. After all, we couldn’t really ascertain beyond all reasonable doubt that everyone we conspired with was on the up and up. We did the best we could, it just wasn’t good enough.” Richard sounded a bit apologetic.

“It’s all water under the bridge. Now we have to concentrate on moving forward.” Even though Christine had doubts, she felt that Richard needed some cheering up with a show of support. “First thing we need to do, in my opinion, is make sure that whoever clued in the Controller is kept out of the loop.”

“How are we going to do that when we don’t know who it is?” Adam had a touch of sarcasm in his tone.

“Simple, we don’t let anyone know of our plans. Only the three of us will know what is going to happen. We shine off everyone else. As far as they are concerned, we’ve hit a stone wall and can’t make any progress.” Christine looked at Richard and then Adam with a pleased look on her face.

Richard felt that Christine had the right idea. "From now on, it's just the three of us on one side and the Controller on the other. We'll go ahead with the abduction scenario. After that's done we'll be able to devote all our time to the task at hand. You two do realize that your jobs will be terminated once a new W.O.N. president is in office, don't you?"

"Of course, the new guy will bring in his own staff and after a suitable transition period, which I suspect will be very short, we will be free to work with you again." Adam sounded elated at the idea and Christine smiled broadly at the possibility.

"By the way, don't worry about being unemployed. I'll see to it that you still get a monthly salary. I realize that you have financial responsibilities to live up to."

"Thanks Mr. President. I was dreading bringing up the topic." Adam made the assumption that Richard would somehow talk the W.O.N. into continuing their salaries for a time. Unknown to him was that Richard quickly decided that he could afford to take care of the salaries on his own.

"Don't worry, Adam, I understand. We all have commitments. We are going to have enough to worry about without the added pressure of paying bills. Now then, unless there is something else we need to discuss ..."

"Mr. President, are you going to continue staying here at Christine's? Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to be nosy, but we need to consider whether or not it is a good idea." Adam had a point and Richard could see where he was headed.

"I won't hear of Richard staying anywhere but here." Christine left no doubt that the conversation was over.

"I was only thinking from a safety point of view. With two out of the three of us in the same place most of the time, it puts two team members in jeopardy instead of just one."

"I understand your position, Adam. I thought of the same thing. It appears more natural that Christine is at home rather than going out to another location on a consistent basis. And when all is said and done, if the Controller finds out about the two of you being on the team, we are all on borrowed time. I'll have to come up with another hideaway."

"So when do you want to start on our next assault, Mr. President?"

"I'll start brainstorming on my own and once you two are free from your W.O.N. duties, we will gear up. So in the meantime, it's business as usual. So back to work you two and get that news release out."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Christine tried to lend some lightheartedness to the conversation by snapping a salute.

"Not funny! Just remember, a captain always goes down with his ship." Adam wasn't laughing.

Richard didn't know whether to laugh or sigh so he gave a brief smile to Christine as he ran his right hand through his hair. The years of association with the Controller had manifested itself by changing his once pitch black hair to greater shades of gray, and lately it seemed each day brought more. The wrinkles around his eyes didn't help the overall impression that this man had been through a great deal.

Christine couldn't help but notice that Richard was lost in unpleasant thought and bent over to plant a big kiss firmly on his lips, not caring about Adam or what he thought.

"Cheer up sweetheart; we're going to nail this bastard." With that, Christine flashed Richard a big smile and a wink.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Richard was watching the evening news after Adam gave him a heads-up that he was breaking the news about his abduction. Richard, trying to remain true to his word, had insisted that Ralph Blocker be given the story first. It wasn't the earth-shattering story that Richard was hoping to have announced—namely the entire airing of the Controller's rise to infamy and his downfall—but it would have to do.

Even though Blocker's newsgroup, BNN, knew of the story well in advance, they made it a point to interrupt their normal prime-time segment with a "special report." On cue, Ralph Blocker could be seen standing in front of the World Organization of Nations building. Blocker had pulled out all the stops and was impeccably dressed in a new suit, complete with a vest. He had gotten a haircut and a facial, all to appear the young professional that he once was. Even Richard couldn't help thinking to himself how great Blocker looked on the tube.

"This reporter has the unfortunate privilege of being the first to bring to the world the shocking news that World Organization of Nations President and former United States President, Richard Sinclair, has been abducted by members of an as yet unidentified terrorist group. When I inquired, authorities within the W.O.N. refused to comment on the issue. However, I have it on good authority that a communiqué was received by the W.O.N. from the terrorists claiming responsibility for the kidnapping of President Sinclair.

"It has been approximately five days since anyone has actually seen the president. He has reportedly been absent from his duties due to an illness believed to be food poisoning. However, my sources, who wish to remain nameless, are saying that President Sinclair has not been ill, but has been missing the entire time. Since foul play was considered to be the reason, secrecy was deemed appropriate until such time as further information could be obtained. While the exact contents of the communiqué have not been revealed, this reporter has been guaranteed exclusive access to that information when it is released. We do know, however, that the message contains demands that must be met if President Sinclair is to be returned unharmed. The exact nature of the demands is being kept under wraps so as to avoid any complications during the negotiating process.

"It is interesting that the term 'negotiating process' has been used, since it has been the norm for governments to not negotiate with terrorists for quite some time. This raises the question of the identity of this group. Since terrorism has been eliminated on a worldwide scale—coincidentally enough, by Richard Sinclair while serving as W.O.N. President—the W.O.N. may be at a loss as to how to deal with the Sinclair captors. It is probably safe to assume that this group is not affiliated with any government since membership in the W.O.N. is dependent upon governments eradicating all known terrorist elements.

"So the questions are mounting faster than they can be answered. Who are these terrorists, where are they hiding, what do they want and, most importantly, is President Sinclair alive and well? Hopefully we will find out the answers soon. Stay tuned to BNN news for further developments. For now, this is Ralph Blocker signing off."

Blocker delivered his story with undertones of urgency and concern. His demeanor showed genuine shock that the man he had conspired with recently had been absconded and with his very existence threatened. While somewhat dubious of Richard's motives, Blocker had come to

respect Richard more than he had any other man, and without consciously realizing it, had developed a fondness for the leader that now led to a feeling of loss.

Blocker genuinely believed in Richard and his quest to bring down the Controller. His first reaction to the news was that the Controller was behind it, although he soon reasoned that the Controller would simply kill Sinclair and not bother with putting up some bazaar cover story about terrorists. He came to the conclusion that this was not something that the Controller had any hand in bringing about.

Richard, having heard enough, switched off the television and walked over to the bar to make himself a scotch and water. After mixing the drink he slowly walked over to the sliding glass door that led out onto the balcony. Sliding the door open, Richard walked to the balcony railing and looked out over the city taking in the considerable view afforded by the tenth floor apartment. Even though he knew the Controller wasn't going to buy into the whole kidnapping scenario, he still felt a sense of relief. He didn't feel as big a target as he had been. It was only a matter of time before the Controller tracked him down and Richard could only hope that he would be prepared for the showdown.

Richard had barely finished his drink and walked back to the bar when he heard the familiar "Hail to the Chief." He had decided not to answer the Controller's calls, not to make a feeble attempt to persuade him that the kidnapping was real, but more for reasons closer to home—he didn't want any one-on-one contact that could give the Controller the opportunity to get inside his head.

Richard left the phone where it was while he made himself another scotch. Finally the ringing stopped as Richard went back to the balcony, sat down on one of the chaise lounges, and enjoyed his drink while relaxing under the warm sun. It would be several hours before Richard would see the flashing message light on the cell phone.

* * *

Ralph Blocker had decided that he owed it to Richard to learn as much as he could about this new terrorist organization and upon his return back to BNN headquarters he set about the task of getting to the bottom of the story. Blocker was convinced that the W.O.N. was not going to accede to any demands; the only way Richard was going to survive was if his whereabouts could be determined and a rescue mission undertaken. With that in mind, Blocker started itemizing each and every minute task that came into his head. He had already obtained permission from his boss to utilize any or all of the resources within BNN. Fortunately his boss knew that if anyone could milk this story for all its worth it was Blocker. Getting the exclusive rights to the story was a bit of genius on Blocker's part and now they had to remain a constant presence in the public's face. If, in the process, they could locate Sinclair and aide in his rescue, so much the better. A coup like that would be worth any expenditure the BNN could possibly make.

Ralph had to find one person in Sinclair's inner circle that he could warm up to and hopefully gain confidence. Looking back over all his notes, some going back to Richard's first presidential campaign, the one pattern that stood out was his constant closeness to two individuals—Adam Broderick and Christine Morrison. Blocker was nobody's fool; he knew he didn't stand a prayer of getting on the good side of Broderick. He was too protective of Sinclair and kept outsiders at more than arms length. No, he decided to concentrate his efforts on Morrison. She was the one he had direct contact with in the past. She was the one feeding him the exclusive stories that Richard had promised. Besides, he always felt, even though he had no specific reason to do so, that there was something more than a business relationship between

Morrison and Sinclair. Sure, he had heard all the rumors about Morrison rebuffing the advances of other members of the media pool, which led to stories of her being gay. Ralph laughed that off and decided long ago that the men involved had to come up with a reason why they were being rejected, and the gay explanation soothed their aching egos.

Having decided upon Christine Morrison as his subject, Ralph had to come up with a plan to gain her trust. First he had to convince her that he had no romantic interest in her. Then he would have to make her believe that he could be of use in finding Richard. That alone could sway the vote because if she had the kind of feelings for Richard that he thought she was harboring, she would accept any help that could save him. He made a note to himself to contact Christine first thing in the morning.

* * *

Blocker had decided to work from home since he wasn't feeling well. When he got out of bed and stood up suddenly, his head began to spin and he felt himself losing his balance so he immediately fell back onto the bed. After a few minutes he tried again, this time with better results. Making his way to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee, he thought that he was just suffering from exhaustion, and in his weakened state, maybe coming down with a cold. Shrugging it off, Blocker went to the front door of his apartment, peeked through the peephole to make sure nobody was in the hallway, opened the door, and grabbed the morning paper. He did this routinely and the excitement over whether or not someone would see him in the hallway in his skivvies gave him a shot of adrenaline to start his day. He had only been caught once this year, by the elderly woman across the hall. Ralph was convinced that she purposely laid in wait for his daily ritual in the hope of catching him. "If that makes her day, so be it," he said to himself.

Ralph was a creature of habit. He would carefully unfold the paper and remove the sports section. By the time he read the first page, the coffee would be brewed and he would pour himself a cup. He could usually finish the sports news about the time his coffee was cool enough to drink. He would polish off the first cup, pour a second, and then continue reading the newspaper. He was almost finished with the local news when a small column consisting of only a few sentences caught his eye.

"Woman claims to have seen Richard Sinclair. A maid at the Cheshire Arms apartments in Manhattan claims to have seen Richard Sinclair in the building where she is employed. The woman, who wishes to remain anonymous, said she saw Sinclair the same afternoon of the announcement of his kidnapping and on one other prior occasion. The woman, known to be an alcoholic, is considered to be an unreliable source."

Blocker voiced his thought, "I wonder how many other crackpots are going to claim to have seen Sinclair?"

* * *

"Hello, Miss Morrison, this is Ralph Blocker with BNN. I wonder if I might have a few minutes of your time. I'm following up on the abduction of Richard Sinclair and wanted to touch bases with you."

"Yes, Ralph, it's good to hear from you again. We haven't been in as much contact since President Sinclair left the White House."

"Very true, Miss Morrison."

"Please, Ralph, call me Christine, we've known each other far too long to go on formalities."

"Thanks, Christine. I appreciate you taking my call under the circumstances. I was hoping

we could get together and discuss this situation.”

“Well, I don’t know what, if any, help I could be. I’m not privy to any insider information. In fact, from the sound of your report, you seem to have more of an inside track than I do.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You may know some things and not even realize it. If nothing else, you could get a free lunch out of it if you agree to meet with me.”

“As nice as that sounds, I’m afraid that it would just be a waste of time for us both.”

“What if I were to tell you that I am using everything in my power, and the resources of the BNN, to locate Sinclair?”

“Then I would say that we do indeed need to talk.”

“Good. Would you like to meet somewhere near your office?”

“No, I’m not going to be here much more than another hour or so. It would probably be better to meet somewhere closer to where I live. Are you anywhere near Manhattan?”

“In fact, my apartment is in Manhattan. I decided to work from home today instead of going to the office. I take it you live in Manhattan as well?”

“Yes, I’m in the Cheshire Arms.”

The words “Cheshire Arms” hit Blocker like a shot between the eyes. To say that a maid seeing Richard Sinclair at the Cheshire, and Sinclair’s press secretary living at the Cheshire is a coincidence would be a stretch. There had to be some truth to the maid’s story beyond the hallucinations of an alcoholic stupor. Blocker decided to try to locate the maid and she what further information she could furnish. He didn’t have enough time before meeting Christine to snoop around the Cheshire Arms. Besides, there was too much of a possibility of him running into Christine. He would have to go there when he knew she was not in the building.

Blocker cut out the short column regarding the maid’s sighting and placed it in a folder he had started labeled “Sinclair Abduction.” This, the smallest piece of paper, could end up being the biggest in impact if his gut feelings meant anything. Blocker closed the folder and returned it to his desk drawer then proceeded to his bathroom to get dressed for his meeting with Christine.

* * *

Richard had read the same newspaper as Blocker but one difference stood out—he didn’t see the article about the maid. He never gave it a second thought when he passed the maid in the hallway and greeted her with a “good afternoon,” as he was on his way to the drug store to buy some painkillers. He had a headache when he woke up and it didn’t go away on its own accord so he decided to help it along. He wasn’t used to being a fugitive, a man trying to hide his existence. He was used to being in the public eye, surrounded by crowds most of his waking hours. It was unnatural for him to be deceptive, skulking around in the shadows. He was unprepared for this new role and was finding it hard to cope with his newfound predicament. While Richard was unaware of the article, that didn’t mean it slipped past the eyes of other interested parties.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Well, well, well, isn’t this interesting. I saw through your little ploy right from the start Richard, but I never anticipated that I would be able to find you simply by reading the

newspaper. Very stupid of you to allow yourself to be seen—very dangerous—one might even say deadly.” There was no one in the dimly lit room to hear the comments coming from the darkest corner of the room. Nor could anyone hear the sadistic laugh.

* * *

“So, Ralph, how can I help you?”

The weather was perfect for dining al fresco, which is why Christine chose the little Italian café down the street from her apartment. Christine had become a regular and developed a rapport with the Italian family that owned and ran the café. She was always assured the pick of the tables and always given a complimentary cannoli dessert. She liked this café for its European sidewalk ambiance. Inside was far too noisy to be able to carry on a conversation, which would have defeated the purpose of her lunch with Blocker, so she chose a table at the corner of the patio that was more private than the rest. She didn’t have to wait more than a few minutes and appreciated that Blocker was on time. After a greeting handshake, they made themselves comfortable and ordered two glasses of Chianti. They didn’t say much to each other while looking over their menus except for Christine’s comments about her favorites. Blocker decided to go with her recommendation and try the cioppino. After placing their orders, Blocker got directly to the point.

“I was hoping that you could give me some more information about the Sinclair abduction.”

“I don’t know that I have anything new to give you. I think you are aware of everything that I am party to.”

“Listen Christine, I’m not out to hurt Richard, quite the contrary in fact. I want to help him. I believe that this whole story about his abduction is just that—a story. I believe that you, Adam Broderick, and Richard dreamed this whole scenario up; why I don’t know, but I’m willing to bet that it has something to do with a certain adversary of Richard’s. I’m also willing to bet that you know exactly to what I’m referring. Any comment?”

“Suppose you tell me a little bit more of what you know? Maybe then I’ll see my way clear to comment.”

Blocker didn’t want to alienate Christine so he continued the conversation with a slight smile on his face. “Don’t be coy, Christine. Richard slipped up. I know where he is hiding. I can safely say that if I know, it is almost a certainty that his nemesis also knows.” Blocker’s tone wasn’t aggressive or confrontational, but in fact was sounding sympathetic.

“So tell me, Ralph. Just where do you think he is?”

“Okay, I’ll play your silly game. He is staying at the Cheshire Arms apartments. And my guess would be he is staying in your apartment.” Blocker stressed the “your” heavily. “Right now you are wondering how I could possibly know this. Well, it’s like this. Your ‘guy’ was seen by a maid that works in the building. She was positive that it was Richard Sinclair that she saw. The day she saw him just happened to be the day he was reported as abducted.”

“How did you find out about this alleged sighting?”

“You really should spend more time reading the daily periodicals. I believe it was Harry Truman who once said that ninety percent, or some such number, of the nations secrets could be read about in the newspaper. If you were to stay on top of the printed media you would have seen the same little article I did. The question before us now is who else may have seen that little write-up?”

“I would like to verify that such an article was written before I talk with you any further.”

“I though you might say that.” Blocker reached into his shirt pocket and unfolded a piece

of letter size paper—a copy of the article which he made before filing away the original was centered on the page. “This is yours to do with as you please.”

Blocker gave Christine a few seconds to read and digest the column then continued to press the issue. He leaned over the table as if getting closer to her would be more convincing. He spoke quietly and sincerely.

“Listen, Christine, if I’m right and Richard’s enemy saw this, then Richard is in grave danger. And if he is in your apartment, you are also in danger. Let me help. I’m the one who gave Richard all the information on this guy in the first place. I’m on your side.”

“Before I tell you what I know, you have to give me your assurance that none of it will be made public, otherwise it’s no deal. Everything has to be off the record.”

“Contrary to what you may think, I have principles and I do believe that human life is more important than a story. If it was anyone else besides Richard Sinclair, I might feel differently, but in this case you have my word on it.”

“You remember the guy you fingered for Richard?”

“Yeah, his name is Wilkins.”

“Was his name.” Christine dragged out the “was.”

“What are you saying? Is Wilkins dead? How?”

“Wilkins was captured and taken to a safe house for questioning by a special task force. He was being pumped for information. Information that would confirm that he was the man we were looking for, since there was a small shred of doubt. However, before the truth could be determined, something happened.”

“Like what?”

“Do you remember a news item about an explosion in the woods upstate?”

“Yeah, I seem to recall something about the explosion of a truck transporting propane gas, or something like that.”

“That was just a cover story. The explosion was caused by a bomb, a sizable one, which was dropped from a helicopter onto the safe house. Wilkins and the task force members were all killed.”

“Whew.” Blocker drew it out with an audible exhale. “I see where you’re going with this. But if Wilkins was killed, presumably by the guy we were trying to find, then who was Wilkins?”

“That’s not important now. What is important though is that this maniac is possibly aware of Richard’s real location. Are you willing to help me put him somewhere safe?”

“Of course. Do you have any ideas, Christine?”

“This is so sudden, I haven’t had a chance to think about it.”

“Does anyone know about my involvement in this?”

“No, Ralph, just me, Adam and Richard.”

“I’m assuming that I can trust you and Adam, Richard seems to have placed his wellbeing in your hands, so I guess I can risk doing the same. Tell you what, let’s get Richard over to my place. I’m about a mile from your apartment, but in NYC that’s as good as a thousand anywhere else. We can decide if, where, and when to move him after that. Are you okay with that?”

“Yes. Besides, what choice do I have?”

“Good. Let’s go now; time is of the essence. After we get Richard situated, we need to see about you. You can’t very well stay in that apartment. Is there someplace where you can go?”

“Yeah, I have someplace safe that no one knows about.” The face of Christine’s mother flashed into her mind so vividly she thought she could reach out and touch her. No one, except

Richard, knew about Christine's mother even being alive let alone where she lived. Since she had been remarried and widowed since Christine was an adult, her name wasn't Morrison any longer. No one could make the connection to Christine. The best part was that she lived within a couple hours drive of Manhattan. Christine would still be able to see Richard.

"Is there a place where I can park that will shield Richard from being seen when we take him out?"

"There is an empty parking space in the underground garage. You follow me and if you're quick you can get in before the security gate closes. I'll lead you to the parking space."

"We're so close to your apartment, why didn't you just walk over here?"

"I drove from my office straight here."

"So you haven't been home since early this morning?"

"That's right. You don't think that something may have already happened, do you?"

Ralph could hear and feel the terror in Christine's voice. He stood, pulled out his wallet and threw three twenty dollar bills onto the table. "I hope not."

* * *

Richard was startled when Christine threw open the bathroom door. He had just finished taking a shower and was toweling off when she barged in, out of breath. Without saying a word she rushed over and hugged him so tight he thought she was going to squeeze him to death.

"What's gotten into you? Why are you so out of breath?"

She released her grip as Blocker's voice could be heard coming toward the bathroom. "Is he in there?"

Richard quickly wrapped the towel around his waist and started for the doorway just as Blocker appeared.

"What in the name of heaven is going on? Will somebody please tell me why Ralph Blocker is in my bathroom?"

"Here, read this Richard." Christine handed the article to him as she took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. She was starting to regain her composure now that she knew Richard was unharmed.

Richard took a few seconds to read the news article. "Well, this explains your behavior but that still doesn't tell me why Ralph is here."

"Ralph is the one who discovered this article in the paper. He brought it to my attention a little while ago and we rushed over here to make sure you were okay."

"I guess I owe you a thank you, Ralph."

"That can wait. We still aren't out of the woods. Your buddy's goons could be on their way over while we stand here discussing the situation. I suggest you both throw some things together so we can get out of here ... pronto."

"I don't think we have to go into panic mode just yet."

"I'm not as confident as you, Richard. I think every minute we stay here we are putting ourselves in jeopardy. So in case you don't speak Spanish, pronto means now."

Richard and Christine crammed as much as they could fit into two large suitcases, one for her and one for him.

Blocker didn't give them much time for good byes. One quick kiss and hug and they were on their separate ways.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The two men had just parked their non-descript sedan and were in the process of getting out of the vehicle as Blocker pulled out of the underground parking garage and onto the street. Blocker had Richard lie down on the back seat just in case any prying eyes might be working overtime. Christine had made the right hand turn onto the street a few seconds before them with Blocker letting two other cars get between her car and his. Ralph gradually dropped back and followed Christine at a distance to make sure no one was following her, finally breaking off and taking an indirect route to his apartment, all the while checking his review mirror. Once assured that he was not being tailed, Blocker headed for his apartment.

For the first time since they left Christine's, Richard and Blocker talked to each other.

"We will be at my place in a minute or so. I wanted to make sure no one was following Christine and that we weren't being tailed. When we get into my garage, I'll take a few seconds to look around to make sure it's clear before you get out of the car. Stay down until I come to get you."

"Okay."

Blocker pulled into the garage and drove slowly toward his assigned parking space, observing and paying close attention to all the vehicles to see if anyone was just sitting there waiting. He didn't believe that there was anything to fear as long as Richard's assurances that no one knew of his involvement was correct. He was simply trying to avoid another maid sighting incident.

Confident the garage was clear, Blocker pulled into his space and shut off the engine. He then exited the car and as quietly as possible, closed the driver's door before opening the back door for Richard.

"Looks good Richard, come on, let's go. Pull that hat further down to cover as much of your face as you can."

"Roger. How far to the elevator?"

"Not far, I'm fortunate enough to have a space close by." Blocker grabbed Richard's suitcase and followed him to the elevator.

They made the ascent to the ninth floor without having to stop for other passengers and there wasn't a solitary soul in the hallway outside Blocker's apartment. Once inside, Richard finally took the opportunity to take a deep breath and relax.

"I'm very grateful to you, Ralph. You don't know how much it means to me for you to stick your neck out this way. I will forever be in your debt."

Embarrassed, Blocker couldn't think of anything to say at first. "Oh, knock it off. I'm just protecting my investment; after all, we still have an agreement about that earth shattering story you are supposed to give me, remember?"

"If we get out of this in one piece, I intend to give you more than we originally agreed upon. You won't be disappointed I assure you."

"So make yourself comfortable. I'm going to go tidy up the extra bedroom." Pointing off to Richard's left, he made the best suggestion of the day. "The bar is over there. Pour yourself a tall one, you could use it. In fact, pour me a tall gin and tonic, I need to steady my nerves. Be back in a flash."

* * *

The two men walked purposefully toward the Cheshire Arms, immediately setting about their task. Attired in business suits, they gave the appearance of two salesmen making a call. The resident directory supplied all the information they needed and soon they found themselves outside Christine's apartment. Assured they were alone, they affixed the silencers and released the safeties on their nine-millimeter Walthers. After verifying the door was locked, one of the men handed his weapon to his partner and pulled out a set of picks from his jacket pocket. Within a few seconds he had the deadbolt lock open.

Moving silently and swiftly, the men quickly scanned the living room, dining room and kitchen before they split up and went in separate directions. The taller of the two men approached the master bedroom off to the right of the living room and peered cautiously through the open double doors before entering. He quickly observed the disheveled pile of clothing on the bed and the half empty closet. Walking over to the bathroom, he opened the cabinets to find what was left after the daily-use toiletries had been removed. Muttering a subdued "crap" to himself, he walked boldly to meet his partner, no longer concerned about being discovered.

"Looks like we're too late. They left in a hurry. Only took what they absolutely needed. The boss is going to ream us a new one when we tell him."

The smaller of the two men was visibly concerned. "He can't get mad if we get here and find the place empty. Something or someone—not us—spooked them and they took off, it's that simple."

"All right, we couldn't get Sinclair, so let's go through everything to see if there are any files, documents or any indication where they might be going. We better bring something back with us or else."

* * *

Ralph and Richard sat quietly while partaking of the drinks Richard had poured. Richard finally broke the silence, much to Ralph's relief.

"Since I've put you right into the middle of this mess, Ralph, I think it's only fair that I fill you in on all the details. Get your notebook, or better yet, a tape recorder because there is a lot to this story."

"Before I do that, I want to correct you on something. I put myself in the 'middle of this mess,' not you. So don't blame yourself. I went into this with my eyes wide open. Besides, you gave me enough exclusives to salvage my career. I was on a downward slope until you came along. Now I'm back on top of the heap. By my calculations, I owe you a few. Now I'm going to get that recorder and plenty of tape."

Richard watched as Ralph disappeared down the hallway. Under his breath he quietly said to himself, "After you hear the entire story you won't be thanking me."

* * *

Christine was amazed at how cool and calm she was, considering she was fleeing for her life. She was being overly cautious, watching the rear view mirror more than the road ahead. Once Blocker stopped following her, she made a mental note of all the cars trailing hers and was relieved as each one turned off onto other streets as she wound her way across town. The normal two hour drive to her mother's took an extra forty-five minutes due to her circuitous route.

Better safe than sorry. You can only screw this up once, Christine, she thought to herself. She swiped at several beads of sweat on her forehead and after lowering her window a few inches, realized that the beads of moisture were not due to warmth, but rather to anxiety. She was finally able to take a deep breath and slump in her seat after pulling into her mother's driveway. Christine sat there for a minute to regain her composure so as not to alarm her mother. Alice

Farlow was very sensitive to her daughters moods and temperament; if something was bothering Christine, she would know it. Christine, having insisted that Richard keep her cell phone, called her mother from a pay phone to make sure she would be home. Christine hoped that her voice didn't betray her feelings. She had been practicing her speech all the way over and was concerned that it might appear rehearsed. Suddenly Christine was startled by the abrupt opening of the car door.

"My dear, why are you just sitting here? Come inside. Why are you shaking honey? What's wrong?" The sweet lilt of her mother's voice brought Christine's heartbeat back down towards normal.

"I was concentrating on something and you startled me, that's all. I'm okay now, Mom."

"You shouldn't be so jumpy. Grab that suitcase of yours and let's get inside. I've got a fresh pot of tea brewing and we can get comfortable and have a nice chat."

* * *

It took several hours and several scotches and gin tonics for Richard and Ralph to get through the saga of the Controller.

Blocker kept changing tapes, asking no questions of the former president, content to let him tell the story his way and without interruption. When he thought of a question, he made a separate note on his pad. After Sinclair finished, he would follow up to get further clarification. After Richard finished his tale, he got up to make another drink for himself and seeing that Ralph's glass also was empty, he grabbed it as well and made his way to the bar. From across the room he listened intently to get Ralph's reaction.

"I have to say Mr. President, I could never, in my worst nightmares, ever come up with such an insane tale. Don't get me wrong, I believe everything you've told me, mainly because it's you. Anyone else and I wouldn't believe a word of it."

"Thanks. No sane person could dream up such a nightmare, and yet I've been living it every day for years."

"Quite frankly, I don't know how you were able to accomplish all the things you did, under the circumstances. You are even stronger than the image you projected. My hat's off to you."

"I only wish I would have been able to see through this maniac right at the start and prevent all that has occurred."

"From what you've told me, I don't see how anything could have turned out differently. Don't be so hard on yourself. The Controller was going to succeed with or without Richard Sinclair. It would have been someone else in your place. In fact, it was more than likely that it was going to be your wife, and if not her, then someone else on his payroll. Nothing would have changed except maybe the timetable. The Controller had everything worked out right down to the last detail. Considering who he has on his side, not just here but all around the world, there is no way he was going to fail."

"There might have been something I could have done, I just didn't think of it."

"I'm telling you, don't beat yourself up over this. There was nothing you could have done to prevent the final outcome; I'm certain of that. You may not like hearing this but I'm going to say it anyway. If you put aside insanity and anything else he may be, the Controller is one brilliant man. Anyone would have been taken in by him. Hate him all you want, but you have to admire his genius. Need proof? Then consider this—Richard Sinclair, the most powerful man in the world, was and is powerless to bring down the Controller. That's all the proof you need."

"I can't accept that Ralph. If I accept that he can't be taken down then what have I got

left?”

“I didn’t say that he couldn’t be taken down. I said that you couldn’t take him down.” Ralph stressed the “you”. “Quit pacing the floor, you’re wearing out my carpet. Sit down and I’ll explain myself.”

* * *

“Are you calmed down now, dear?”

“Yeah, Mom. I’m quite comfortable now.

“So, are you ready to tell me why I am going to be having a house guest?”

“Well, I needed to take some time off to relax and think about what I’m going to be doing. The W.O.N. will soon pick a replacement for Richard Sinclair and I’ll be out of a job, so I was thinking of doing some consulting, most of which I can do from the comfort of my own home and not in an office. I will have to make regular trips to the city, but there is no need to live there.”

“That is such a tragedy, what happened to Sinclair, I mean. Do you think he is still alive or do you believe that his abductors killed him?”

“I’d rather not think about it, Mom. It’s very upsetting to me and I hope we don’t ever have to talk about it again.”

“Whatever you say, dear. I didn’t mean to open old wounds. It’s just that I sense that there is something you would like to talk about. If so, I’m here for you whenever you want to open up. In the meantime, I am all alone here since Elliot passed away last year and I certainly can use some company. I hope you will consider this your new home. There is no need for you to consider living anywhere else.”

“Thanks, Mom. I was hoping you would say that. I don’t want to live alone anymore and maybe we can help each other.”

“It’s settled then, you can take over the master bedroom, I don’t need all that space anymore. Besides, I’m sure you are going to want to move in some of your furniture from your apartment.”

“No I won’t be doing that. I want a fresh start. No more reminders from the past, except for one.” Christine was thinking of Richard and how soon she could see him again.

“And what might that be, dear?”

“I can’t say Mom, I simply can’t say.”

“You don’t have to say anymore, honey. I can see it in your eyes. You’re upset because there is more to it than Sinclair being abducted. You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

“I should have known that you would see right through me.” Christine tried to avoid looking her mother in the eyes.

“One day, when you have children of your own, it will be clear to you what the bond between a mother and child really means.”

“I think I’m a little too old to be thinking about having kids, Mom. Nice try though.”

“I should have known I wouldn’t be able to slip that one by you.” She smiled lovingly at Christine. “But you haven’t answered my question; are you in love with Richard Sinclair?”

“Yes, I am.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Okay, I’m sitting down; now explain how you think the Controller can be defeated.” Richard’s voice had a hard edge and his face looked tired and disgusted, all the result of too little sleep and too much stressful activity. It was early evening and Richard was growing weary of thinking about the Controller.

“You’ve been assuming that you are the only one with enough power to take down this man. But what if there was someone or something with even more power?” Blocker had a slight grin as he leaned forward.

“Like who?”

“Like the media. Even you made decisions or rethought policy because of something the media made an issue. I say we make the media the army that will defeat the Controller. Think about it for a minute; how else can virtually every human being on the face of the planet be made aware of the threat the Controller poses? Within twenty-four hours of me breaking a story here, the rest of the world will be blasting the airwaves with follow-up stories. Every newspaper will be splashing big bold headlines demanding the head of the Controller.”

“And you think that will make a difference?”

Blocker couldn’t decide if Richard was being condescending or actually posing a question that might bring an affirmative answer.

“It’s been ages since the media has had a cause of this magnitude to champion. Don’t sell us short; we are capable of toppling any regime.”

Just then Christine’s cell phone rang forcing Richard to leave the comfort of the easy chair and walk over to the breakfast counter that separated the living room from the kitchen.

“Hello.” Richard was expecting it to be Christine, but wasn’t surprised to hear Adam’s voice on the other end.

“I’ve been wondering if you have had a chance to come up with a plan yet.”

Richard hadn’t talked to him since Adam called to confirm that he had spoken with Veronica and the children to inform them of the plan to have Richard “killed.”

“No, but I am having a nice conversation with Ralph about a possible method to accomplish our goals. Have you heard anything from my wife or kids lately?” It had been decided upon by the conspirators that Richard shouldn’t be making any calls or personal visits for security reasons—not for Richard but for his family. If they were being watched, the more they put on the grieving family façade the better. Adam would be the one to visit with them, which wouldn’t raise any eyebrows or send up any red flags.

“I was planning to stop in on them over the next few days. Is there anything I can do for you? Do you want to run Blocker’s idea by me?”

“Not right now, Adam, we’re just a few minutes into the discussion. After we’ve hashed it over, and if we think it bears merit, then I’ll bring you in for your feedback.”

“Okay, sir, until then I’ll just hang loose and keep my eyes and ears open.”

“Thanks, Adam. I’m sure you’ll be hearing from me in a day or two.”

Richard returned to the easy chair, picked up his drink, and without looking at Ralph simply said, “So let’s hear what you have in mind.”

* * *

The young man sitting in the over-stuffed easy chair was tapping his toes to the repetitious pounding of the musical beat passing from the earphones into his brain. He had just started reading the novel he picked up minutes before at the bookstore and was totally unaware of the

intruder's entrance as he turned the page, head bobbing to the beat of a bass drum. Lost in the music and absorbing the words being read, his brain had no time to process the painful signals that were generated by the entering bullet. The nine-millimeter projectile passed completely through his head, exiting with an explosion of brain matter and skull fragments that transformed the wall next to the chair from a calming pastel blue to an angry cerise. The young man with the promising future was no more.

The assassin stared at the corpse, admiring his handiwork. He had all the time in the world since no one had seen him enter the building and the sound suppression of the silencer prevented the alarming crack of a gunshot. He bathed in the afterglow of his evil deed. He had considered using a smaller caliber pistol to avoid leaving such a messy scene, only to later change his mind. How else could he leave behind a testament to the art of his work? In his sick mind he truly believed his work was noble and should only be performed by an artist such as himself.

There was but one more task to accomplish, one he did not relish. Even though he had killed so many times that he lost count, and even though he could look at a wall covered with his victim's blood and not become the least bit squeamish, he didn't look forward to doing what he was told must be done. In his view he was being asked to turn a "clean kill" into a freak show. It wasn't right to abase his victim in such a manner, but his employer was insistent that he would not be compensated if he failed to fulfill the demands.

Reaching into the pocket of his overcoat, he withdrew the switchblade and in one fluid motion, slid the safety catch and pressed the button to release the sharply honed blade. Being careful to avoid getting any blood onto his clothing, he leaned over and faced his victim. Carefully—almost respectfully—tilting back the young man's head, he began carving into the forehead the message he was told to leave.

* * *

Richard was thinking over what Ralph had just said. He unbuttoned all the buttons on his polo shirt as if it might relieve the pressure he was feeling at the base of his skull. He had a tension headache that no amount of scotch was going to relieve. After a minute of rotating his head in every conceivable direction and rubbing the back of his neck, he finally just sat still and looked at Ralph for a minute before finally speaking.

"Okay Ralph, bear with me while I assume the role of devil's advocate. I don't see how the media is going to make him change anything he is doing. He doesn't have to answer to the public the way I did. He could care less what anyone thinks or does at this point."

"It would be indirect pressure. People would force their governments to take action."

"But what if the top men were under his control? They wouldn't be able to do anything without putting themselves in danger."

"They would be forced out of power. New people would be put in place who could take up the battle."

"That could take years. Besides, aren't you forgetting something, Ralph? The whole idea behind the water purification project was to put chemicals into widespread use that would turn the masses into uncaring, mindless zombies."

"You said the effects were not permanent, that it required constant exposure to the chemicals to maintain the status quo. If the supply of chemicals was cut off and the water produced was pure, everyone would gradually come around."

"So now we are posing the age old question of what comes first, the chicken or the egg. We need to get people off the chemicals, but we can't get them off until they realize what has happened to them and force action to be taken, and they won't realize that until they are off the

chemicals. Don't you see that it's a vicious circle?"

"Look, I don't claim to have all the answers. I only found out about this mess a few hours ago. You've had years to do something about it and couldn't; I'm going to need a little more time than a few hours." Blocker saw the look of hurt on Richard's face and quickly reacted.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for it to come out that way. I wasn't trying to be accusatory, I was just trying"

Richard raised his hand signaling Ralph to stop and interrupted him with "I know, I know. I think we've both had a long day and I for one am starving. Man cannot live on scotch alone, or something like that."

"We can't risk taking you out in public. I'll call for some takeout. Chinese okay with you?"

"Fine."

As Blocker went to the kitchen to call in the order, Richard turned toward him and verbally offered up something that had just popped into his head.

"You know, Ralph, you may actually be on to something. If we can disrupt the flow of the chemicals to those plants, we could start a cleansing process that just might make the rest of your plan feasible. We are going to have to figure out a way to do just that."

* * *

It had been a long day—the kind of day where nothing goes according to plan. It was the kind of day that you wish would be over at noon, rather than midnight. Balancing her studies with her volunteer work was bad enough but now she had the added pressure of finalizing her dissertation before the fast approaching deadline. A warm bubble bath, a hot cup of tea, some soft music, and a long soak would do wonders to wash away the blues that the day had wrought. Making sure the CD player had an ample selection of soft instrumentals, she put up her waist long hair with several large hair clips to keep it dry and then poured an ample amount of herbal scent bath crystals into the slowly filling tub.

While she waited for the tub to fill, she went into the kitchen to turn off the whistling kettle and fix her pot of tea. She decided an Earl Grey would best satisfy her taste buds and placed two bags in the pot to brew. Carefully she carried the teapot, cup and saucer and placed them on a small table next to the bathtub. Finally, with the tub full, she removed her bathrobe and slipped down into the mountain of bubbles while filing away a mental reminder to use fewer crystals the next time.

She was so enjoying the bath that she lost track of time and let her cup of tea cool down more than she would have preferred. She drank the tea and poured a second cup from the antique pot that was comfortably nestled within a handmade cozy. This time she would remember to drink the tea before it cooled too much. Before settling back down into the suds, she leaned forward and turned on the hot water faucet. A little more hot water from the tap brought the tub back up to muscle soothing warmth, encouraging her to slip down to a point where the water was just touching her chin. She closed her eyes and let the music gradually slip her into a semiconscious state of total relaxation. She was too deeply engulfed in rapture to hear the slight click of the door latching after the unwelcome guest entered the apartment.

Seeing the thirty-something young lady on the street, resplendent in a charcoal gray pants suit, one would picture her sitting behind a desk conducting business for a bank, or maybe practicing law. But no one would ever imagine that this prim and proper lady would make her living by killing people.

Her businesslike appearance was the cloak that hid the turmoil that raged within. Who would have guessed that this seemingly all together woman was constantly battling the demons

that lingered from an abusive childhood? So strong were the memories that they provided a constant supply of fuel for the killing machine that resided within.

Quietly opening the bathroom door just enough to peek in, she could see the bathtub and its occupant reflected in the long mirror over the twin basin countertop. Having previously removed her three-inch heeled pumps, she slid into the room without a sound and quickly, but silently, closed the door lest a draft send an alarm to her prey. Relieved that the door's hinges didn't reveal her presence, she only had to worry about her reflection in the mirror. Her victim, eyes closed and half asleep, never saw her murderer.

In one amazingly fast move, the assassin bent over her victim, grabbed her by the chin and back of the head, and with one powerful motion snapped her neck. The kill was instant but to make sure, she pushed her victim's head under the water and held it there for several minutes.

It was now time to complete the contract. She took a small pocketknife from her coat pocket and finding her gloved fingers incapable of extracting the blade, used her teeth to pull the blade out enough for her fingers to finish the job. Pulling her victim's head from the water and turning the lifeless face toward her own, she proceeded to carve.

Her work finished, and with the young lady's body motionless among the bubbles, she examined the bathroom making sure there was nothing left behind that could lead back to her. Proceeding to the living room, she repeated the process. She was proud of her ability to take a mental picture of her surroundings in a fraction of a second and remember every detail. Once she put her shoes back on and picked up her purse, the scene was as it was when she entered the apartment. She had never left a single clue on any of her past assignments and this would be no exception. Once assured that there was no shred of evidence left behind, she peered through the peephole and then opened the door and checked the hallway. Not seeing anyone, she left the apartment, locking the door behind her. Avoiding the elevator, she once again took the stairs at the end of the hallway. Pausing on the landing, she quickly removed the hairnet that she put on moments before entering the girl's apartment. Her long blond hair spilled down slightly over her shoulders. Then she pulled off the chic kidskin gloves and wrapped them in the hairnet before placing the neat bundle in her handbag. No fingerprints, no hair—nothing left behind to identify her.

* * *

Richard stood out of eyeshot of the open door while Ralph paid the deliveryman for their dinner. Seated at the dining room table, Ralph opened the two large brown bags and carefully removed the contents, one container at a time, placing half in front of Richard.

"I know we're both famished, but my God Ralph, you've ordered enough food for a small army."

"Hey maybe I'm planning ahead. This can take care of your lunch for the rest of the week!"

"Great, so you're trying to get me to build an aversion to Chinese food?"

"Quit complaining and pass the shrimp."

"Say Ralph, I've been thinking about your idea of using the power of the media. Basically I think it has merit; though there are a few aspects of the plan that I think we need to rethink."

"Like what?"

"Like the fact that I am fairly certain that the Controller has some exposure to the media himself. I was thinking back, many years back, about when I first ran for the United States presidency. There was reason for us to believe that some of the media was overly supportive of our platform. At the time we merely chalked it up to good fortune—now I'm not so sure."

“Do you remember who in the media were behind you?”

“I’ve been trying to get a handle on that. Maybe Christine can shed some light on the matter. We’ll have to discuss it with her. In fact, after we finish dinner, I’ll give her a call. There are several things I want to discuss with her.”

“I’ll bet there are.” Blocker was wearing a sly grin.

* * *

The stately manor house was bathed in the glow of the pathway and floodlights that dotted the property and illuminated the landscaping. Activated by sensors, the lights would remain on until dawn. Since each of the home’s downstairs rooms had motion sensitive light switches, the only interior light emanated from the kitchen where the lady of the house was rinsing off her dinner dishes. Once she finished and started for her upstairs master bedroom suite, each room would be lit and then within minutes, darkened as she passed through.

As she entered the master bedroom, she pressed the touch sensitive switch that turned on the matching lamps, each one atop an antique nightstand. Her fingers unbuttoned her housecoat as she walked toward the cavernous walk-in closet with its rows of cedar-lined drawers. Opening the double doors turned on the recessed lights in the closet’s ceiling. The color corrected bulbs made sure that it would be obvious one was selecting a navy blue rather than a black blouse. The T shaped closet had rods for hanging long dresses on the left for madam and over and under rods for sir’s shirts on the right. At each end was a floor to ceiling mirror to aid in the dressing process. It wasn’t until she faced her mirror that she saw the reflection of a ghostly figure hiding at the opposite end. She spun to face the apparition trying all the while to make sense of what she was seeing. At first all she could make out was the shape of a bulky man-like outline, then the shape turned into something familiar—a man inside a full body suit of thin vinyl material. It took her only a second or two to focus on the eyes behind the plastic facemask. They were as cold and steely as the blade that suddenly flashed into her line of sight. Before she could let out the scream she felt building within her, the knife had slashed her hand, forcing it out of the way on its forward path. The blade cut so deeply into her throat that her spine was the only obstacle preventing the keen edge of the knife from completely severing her head. Blood flowed profusely from the gaping wound, spurting from the carotoid artery as the heart pounded out its last few beats and the woman fell toward her assailant. The assassin forcefully pushed his victim off of him sending her backward into a heavy crash onto the hardwood floor. A final twitch of her foot told him she was dead. Without a second thought, he proceeded to carve out the calling card he was told to leave.

Having completed his gruesome task, he took his canvas bag from its hiding place in the corner of the closet and went into the bedroom. Not caring that he was leaving bloody footprints on the carpet, he placed the murder weapon in the bag and took off the environmental suit that covered him from head to toe. Folding it in upon itself and exercising great care to avoid getting blood on himself, he stashed the suit in the bag and zipped it shut. After nearly an hour of waiting, unable to move lest he trigger the light sensors, it felt wonderful to be able to move freely about. He made a promise to himself that he would immediately go to the nearest park and jog around to stretch his legs, but only after he made the call.

* * *

“Three confirming phone calls, three different assassins, three different victims, and most importantly, three successes; how I love it when my plans run like clockwork. If my team of murderers were careful, the police will have no clues to help them solve the crimes. They won’t know whether it was one, two or three assassins. They say it’s impossible to pull off the perfect

crime. Little do they know.” The heinous laugh rang out through the barely lit room. “Little do they know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Richard sat forlornly on the sofa watching the non-stop news on one of the cable channels. Even though most hours were comprised of repeating the major stories, occasionally there was a new piece.

He watched in anticipation of any news that could get him enthralled in anything other than the same endless boredom that was his life of late. At least he wouldn't have to wait long for some company. In a few minutes Blocker would be home and they were having Christine and Adam over for dinner and some discussion of Blocker's plan.

He had taken special care to make sure he was properly groomed, more so than he normally did when it was just him and Ralph. Tonight was different; Christine was going to be there. He didn't see as much of her as he would have liked, so he took extra measures to make sure he presented the best picture possible.

As Richard went over to the bar to make a drink, his first of the day, the door opened and Ralph appeared from around the corner of the wall separating the entryway from the kitchen.

Richard saw Ralph flash a quick glance at the glass of scotch and before Ralph could say anything, Richard jumped in with, “Don't worry; this is my first drink today. I told you I was cutting back and I meant it. Can I fix you one?”

“I wasn't going to say anything ... much. Yes, thank you, I could use a stiff one.”

“Didn't go well today, I take it?”

“You don't know the half of it. I'll fill you in after the others get here. Let it suffice to say that some of my news is good, but most of it is bad. On another note, I hope Adam isn't bringing Chinese food tonight.”

“I specifically told him anything but Chinese. He has a passion for Italian so that's probably what we will be having.”

Richard made Ralph a drink while he was changing into more comfortable clothes, shedding the coat and tie that he was forced to wear should there be a breaking news item that would put him on camera. There were a lot of those since the Richard Sinclair abduction story broke and even though Ralph disliked the idea of always “dressing for success,” he had to admit that he was enjoying the limelight. He could hardly walk in public without being stopped and asked for his opinion on whatever the topic of the day might be.

“So you're just going to leave me hanging until everyone else gets here, huh?” Richard handed Ralph the drink and took a seat in one of the easy chairs.

“Yeah, no sense in repeating everything twice. Besides there isn't anything you could take immediate action on anyway.”

Ralph plopped down heavily onto the sofa and immediately sank down so that his weary head could fall back and rest on the top cushion. The timing was right for him to relax as he could feel a tension headache coming on. It seemed like he and Richard alternated having these pains. The Controller was literally a pain in the neck to them both.

Richard glanced at the mantle clock and noticed that it was six o'clock. Christine and Adam should arrive any minute.

Almost as if on cue, the doorbell rang. Richard rose saying, "I'll get it."

Richard peered through the peephole and saw Christine's smiling face. After letting her in, he grabbed her and passionately kissed her.

"I'm going to have to make it over here more often." She gave him a come hither look over her shoulder as she entered the living room.

"Hi, Christine." Excuse me for not getting up, but I don't think anything short of someone yelling 'fire' is going to get me to budge."

"Don't worry about it, Ralph; you do look a little frazzled. Bad day, huh?"

"You could say that. Where's Adam, I'm starving."

Christine sat in the easy chair that Richard had been using, forcing him to pick up his drink and move to the other chair.

"Can I get you anything?"

"I'll wait and have a glass of wine with dinner."

Before Richard could sit down again, the doorbell chimed.

Richard let Adam in and helped him with the bags of take out. Richard put the bags on the dining room table, which he had set earlier.

Ralph jumped up a little rejuvenated, "Great, let's eat!"

"Someone must be hungry" Adam gave Ralph a disdainful look. "Mind if I make myself a drink first?"

"Go right ahead, I'll just open up the containers."

"I'll pour the wine. What would everyone like?" Richard looked at Christine first.

"Since we're having Italian, why don't you open a bottle of Chianti?"

"Chianti it is."

* * *

Dinner passed without any talk of the business that brought this group of people together in the first place. It seemed as though each person was afraid to approach the subject of the Controller.

Christine cleared the table, rinsed the dishes, placed them in the dishwasher, started it up and straightened out the kitchen before sitting next to Richard on the sofa.

Finally, Ralph broke up the idle banter.

"There's good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?"

"Start us off with the good." Adam wanted to hear something positive.

"Well, at that conference I attended today, I made a point of spending time with some of the people that I feel could help us. Since the other day when you guys gave me the go ahead on my plan, I put together a list of those print and broadcast media that I think could best aide us in getting the kind of attention we need. The response was iffy, at best, until I told them that the reason Richard was 'dead' was due to the manipulations of a man calling himself 'Controller'. Then I told them about some of what has been going on and how the future of the world is at stake. That seemed to have an impact and drove home the seriousness of what I had been telling them."

"So we can count on their full support?" Christine posed the question.

"Not exactly. That leads into the bad news. One of the guys I wanted on our side represents one of the biggest influences in the business—Artistel. Artistel has vast interests in TV, movies, cable news, newspapers and magazines. You would know them all if I gave you the names, they

have that much exposure.”

“So what’s the problem?” Adam sounded a little testy.

“The problem is this, my contact happens to be the big mucky muck over there, and when I talked to him he kept hedging. I finally pinned him down and got him to admit something that I wish I hadn’t heard. According to him, he couldn’t begin to make a decision like supporting us on his own volition. He is simply a figurehead. There is another man who is actually running Artistel—or should I say ‘controlling’ Artistel.”

“Good God, Ralph, are you saying that the Controller is running Artistel?” Richard just about came out of his seat.

“That’s what I suspect. I don’t have absolute proof as yet, but if what my source is telling me is true, there can be no doubt. Let me explain. Richard, when you asked me to check into the media support that you got when you first ran for president, all the names that Christine remembered turned out to be from various TV networks, papers and magazines—all under the control of Artistel. There wasn’t any other support outside of the Artistel group of any significance. It has to be the Controller who owns and runs Artistel. I checked and the whole shebang is privately owned.”

“Wait a minute. You got a name didn’t you? So who is it?” Richard could hardly control himself. He saw this as the big break they were looking for in identifying the Controller for once and for all.

“Yeah, I got a name alright. You’re not going to like this; the name is Timothy Wilkins.”

“Terrific, right back where we started.” Adam made no attempt to hide his feelings.

“I’ll admit that the Artistel news is not the greatest; but we still have the others on our side. With a little more pressure on my part, I’m sure I can get all the help we’ll need to spread the word. Artistel won’t be able to do anything about it.” Blocker wanted to make sure everyone knew the fight was still to begin.

“Ralph’s right. Artistel may not air the news, but they surely can’t try to dispute what the other networks put out. They would draw attention to themselves if they did that. I think they will keep out of it entirely.” Richard wasn’t as despondent over the news as Adam.

“What do you think, Christine?” Richard turned to her for support.

“I know many of the reporters that would be reporting on this and in my opinion, they should be sufficient to get the ball rolling. The rest will follow their lead and give us the exposure we’re looking for.”

“Great. So we’re still on target. Let’s get our plan in motion.” Richard spirits seemed to have been lifted.

“Christine, I’d like you to contact all the reporters you know would run with this story and put the bug in their ears. Ralph, you tell her what we should feed them.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“We’re right back where we started, as far as identifying the Controller—with the Wilkins dead end.” Richard couldn’t contain his disappointment.

“Not necessarily, Richard. I think that the Wilkins name is more than one used for a clone.

I think it really is the name of the Controller, or at least an alias he uses to do business.” Blocker sounded as though he felt there might be a possible crack in the Controller’s shell.

“Ralph might be right, Richard. We stopped checking into Wilkins once we identified and located him. Once we captured him, we gave up any digging into his background. Maybe we need to get back to researching the name and see if we can come up with some other information.” Adam had perked up a little; the thought that he might be able to sink his teeth into a background investigation of Wilkins got his attention.

Blocker decided to side with Broderick. “Adam is on the right track, Richard. I’m convinced that there is more to the Wilkins name than we think. There has to be something somewhere that can tie Wilkins to a ‘real’ person.”

“Okay, I’ll go along with you guys for now. Find out all you can about Wilkins. Divide up the workload among the three of you. With any kind of luck, something will turn up.”

* * *

“This is one horrendous crime scene, lieutenant.” Officer Stacy Mills was pulled off the street by the manager of the Mariposa apartments as he was writing up a ticket on a speeder.

Lieutenant John Parker had seen a few murder scenes over the course of his twenty-five year career, many of them quite gruesome. He had a tendency to rate each crime on a scale of one to ten, this one ranked a five.

“So, you say the manager ran out when he saw your squad’s flashing lights and brought you up here to check on this guy?”

“Yeah, he told me that he hadn’t seen the guy for several days and the rent was past due. Normally he wouldn’t have thought anything of it except that this young man was always early with the rent and every couple of days he would stop by for a chat and to say hello. The manager came up and knocked on the door several days in a row and never got a response.”

“Well, I guess we know why. Have you touched anything?”

“No, sir. The minute the manager let me in and I saw this mess, I closed the door and called it in.”

“Thanks officer, you can go now. We’ll leave this up to the crime scene investigators to fill in the blanks.”

“Yes, sir.”

As the officer was turning away, Parker had a second thought. “Officer, did the manager give you the victim’s name?”

The officer, looking down at his notepad, responded, “Yes sir, his name is Randall Sinclair.”

“Randall Sinclair? I seem to recall former President Sinclair having a son, was his name Randall?”

“I’m not sure sir.”

“Okay, listen up. We need to keep the wraps on this until we know for sure if this guy is related to the former president. The name is probably just a coincidence but I would feel more comfortable if we take precautions. You make out your report and give it to me, no one else. And you don’t talk about this case with anyone. Get me? Oh, and talk to the manager and tell him to keep this quiet.”

“Yes, sir; you’ll have my report tomorrow.”

The lieutenant turned his attention to the lead man on the CSI team.

“Can I talk to you a sec?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“We may have a touchy situation.”

* * *

Blocker had spent hours down in the bowels of the BNN library in the basement of his headquarters building. While he did manage to turn up some information on Timothy Wilkins, he hadn't run across anything that could lead him to the door of an actual person—yet. He was determined to finish at BNN and then get over to some of the other news services. Several of his contacts had already obtained clearance for him to visit their archives. If there was anything even remotely related to a Timothy Wilkins, he would find it.

At the same time Adam was calling in some favors and getting everyone he knew in law enforcement and intelligence to run background checks on Wilkins and anyone with whom he may have been in association.

Christine had called every reporter on her list with the news bite she and Ralph decided would be sure to grab their attention. Then she kept herself busy preparing to categorize all the facts as Adam and Blocker got them to her. She set up a computer program to cross-reference by keyword any and all information. If there was a pattern to be found, her software would help find it.

Richard, feeling more and more helpless, had to remain content doing what he knew he must do—stay out of sight.

* * *

Back at his office lieutenant Parker motioned Frank Brasille, the CSI team leader, to take a seat as he closed the door behind him.

“So what have you got?”

“Lieutenant, at first this looked like a sloppy murder by an amateur, but as we dug deeper it became apparent to us that this was a professional assassination. There wasn't a single piece of evidence left behind.”

“You think a pro did that?”

“Definitely. We verified that the victim is the son of former President Richard Sinclair. Considering what happened to him recently, this makes sense. What threw me at first was the mess. A pro wants to leave things as clean as possible, but not this guy. It looks like he went out of his way to make the scene as bloody and gruesome as he could. He could have used a smaller caliber pistol, for example.”

“So you think he made the mess on purpose? Why would he do that?”

“I wish I knew; maybe he is trying to make a statement of some sort. A psychiatrist would have a field day with this guy. This leads me to another odd twist to this case.”

“What kind of twist?”

“Did you get a close look at the victim's face?”

“No, I didn't want to mess up the scene, so I never got into the room far enough to see his face.”

“Be grateful you didn't. Besides half of his head being blown away, the killer left us a message.”

“A message?”

“Yeah, we didn't notice it, what with all the blood covering the victim's face; however, once the coroner cleaned up the body, it showed up clearly.”

“What kind of message?” Parker moved from a relaxed position in his chair to a rigid pose while drawing closer to his desk.

“He carved into the victim's forehead.”

“Carved? As in with a knife?”

“Yes. A very sharp knife that left no ragged edges, just clean cuts.”

“So what did this message say?”

“C.”

“C? That’s it?”

“Yeah, just a big letter ‘C’.”

* * *

Parker impressed upon Brasille the importance of keeping quiet on the Sinclair killing. The ramifications could be horrendous. Besides, he needed some time to contact the victim’s mother, Veronica Sinclair. He didn’t want her to hear this news on TV.

As he drove to the Sinclair estate, he rehearsed what he was going to say to a woman who had only recently lost her husband. How could he phrase what he had to say in a manner that was sensitive and caring when all throughout his career he had been forced to shroud himself with a cloak of insensitivity? He received counseling from the department shrinks on coping with the stresses of the job on a regular basis, but none of that included how to tell a parent that they have lost a child. It hurt him to the core each and every time he was forced to notify a child’s parents. That was bad enough, but to lose one this way.

Parker tried using his cell phone to call the Sinclair residence a second time. He hadn’t been able to get through to make sure anyone was home, but decided to make the drive anyway. Worst-case scenario, he had a nice drive outside the city. It would give him time to clear his head and put the limited clues in proper perspective. He sensed that this was going to be a frustrating crime to solve, with a great deal of pressure coming down from the commissioner and everyone in between, once they knew all the details about the victim and his family.

Parker arrived at the Sinclair estate, parked under the portico and got out of his car. A few seconds later a white van pulled up bearing an emblem that announced “Maid Marian—Your Cleaning Lady” had arrived.

Parker went to the door and pushed the button on the intercom and could faintly hear the chimes. He waited about ten seconds before pushing the button again.

In the meantime four Hispanic women got out of the van and started to unload their carrying cases of cleaning equipment.

Parker watched them for a few seconds and pushed the button yet again. Still no voice greeted him through the intercom.

After waiting a full minute with no response from within, Parker started to walk toward the cleaning crew as they approached the house.

He introduced himself, flashed his badge, and started to ask the ladies some questions. One of the women spoke up right away, leading Parker to believe that she was the senior or lead person on the team.

Parker learned that Veronica had contracted for the cleaning service many months before and that the crew was always scheduled for the same day each and every week. He also found out that it is the cleaning service’s policy that the homeowner be present at all times that the crew is working—for insurance purposes. Parker had a red flag go up inside his head. If Veronica Sinclair’s schedule had been so rigid that she could always be home for the cleaning service, then she would be certain to be there today.

Parker asked the ladies if they had been there before only to find out that the one that spoke before had been coming every week for about eight months. Mrs. Sinclair was there every time.

Parker couldn’t help but feel a sense of urgency, so he told the ladies to wait by their van

while he went around back to look for someone.

It took him a while to walk to the rear of the home, a testament to its size. He found the carports and wrote a note in his small notepad with details of the two cars. Years of experience told him that these particular brands, Mercedes and BMW, probably belonged to a woman; to him both cars looked like the models that women preferred to drive—smaller, less pretentious and usually brightly colored.

Going to the rear entry he peered into the house through one of the beveled glass panes that comprised the top half of the door. Seeing no one, he knocked so loudly that he hurt his knuckles. Still no one appeared. Parker had a bad feeling that kept growing worse with each passing minute. He made up his mind and called his captain.

“Yes, sir, I do think there may be something wrong here. I would like permission to force my way in. There are stickers on the windows indicating an alarm system is installed ... yes sir, Allied Alarm ... all right sir, I’ll wait until the local police arrive.”

Parker went back to the front of the house and told the cleaning crew that he was certain that no one was home and that they should probably leave, with which they agreed. Parker watched them repack the van and leave before he proceeded back to his car to wait for the local authorities to arrive. He didn’t have to wait long—eight minutes, according to his watch. He figured that his captain must have rattled some important cages to get such a timely response. He guessed that with such a dignitary involved, all stops were pulled, and judging by the number of officers and squad cars, he chuckled to himself that there was probably no one left minding the store, the local police force being minimally staffed at best. After introductions, Parker noticed one of the officers carrying a battering ram, and volunteered to pick the locks instead of breaking down the door. With approval from local Chief of Police Dan Franks, he removed his pick kit from the glove box of his car.

The chief kept ringing the doorbell while Parker took a minute or so to unlock the two deadbolts. Within thirty seconds of opening the door the alarm sounded. His captain had notified the alarm company and almost immediately the alarm was silenced.

“Hello, any one home? This is police lieutenant John Parker.” Parker knew that announcing his presence was a mere formality, considering the triggering of the alarm would have alerted any occupant of his entry. But if anyone was within hearing range, they now knew it was okay to show themselves.

As the local police started to enter, Parker turned and raised his hand in a halting posture. “Chief, I don’t mind if you accompany me while I look around, but I strongly suggest that your men wait outside. In fact, they could best be of use waiting by their cars. If we need to get crime scene investigators over here, the fewer people walking around the better.”

The chief agreed and ordered his men to stand by their vehicles to await further instructions.

Parker, in deference to the social stature of the home’s owner, went to the intercom and pushing the message button once again announced his presence. The intercom remained silent.

“Okay, chief, we’ll start down here. I suggest we stay together.” Parker would have preferred having someone he worked with instead of the chief, that way they could split up and cover more ground in less time. He just wasn’t confident that this local had the background for what they might encounter.

They proceeded to check each downstairs room and found nothing out of the ordinary except for Veronica Sinclair’s purse and car keys sitting atop a small desk that sat off to one side of the kitchen. Located near the rear entry, it was a logical place for someone to place a purse

and keys as they came home. Parker opened the purse to examine its contents. As he pulled out Veronica's wallet with her driver's license and credit cards, he remarked, "She didn't go off with someone, she would have taken this purse with her. If she isn't here, she was involuntarily taken." The chief nodded his concurrence.

They walked slowly up the staircase, pausing momentarily on the landing. Parker glanced around and determined that the master suite was more than likely to the left, judging by the decorative double doors at the end of the hall, and moved in that direction, the chief in tow.

They could see the glow of light emanating from the still lit nightstand lamps, and after quickly glancing around the suite and not seeing anything of interest, started toward the archway which led to a room being used as a retreat or reading room. Once again nothing drew their attention so they turned toward the area in which the bathroom and closet could be found. The closet was to their right and before the main body of the bathroom so they focused their attention there first. Opening the closet doors they couldn't help but glance upwards as the motion sensors turned on the lights. They were not prepared for what they saw next.

Suspecting that something was afoot and seeing such a bloody scene were two different things. Chief Franks couldn't help himself and ran to the toilet where he vomited up his breakfast. Parker took no note of the chief—just the scene that lay before him. He didn't carefully back up and move out of the closet doorway until his eyes registered what lay before him. He first made note of the massive amount of blood that had been splattered about. He thought to himself that he had never seen this much blood at a crime scene. Surely every ounce of this poor woman's blood had evacuated her body, he thought to himself. Still more upsetting was seeing Veronica Sinclair's twisted body, her head resting at about a forty-five degree angle to her shoulders, almost completely severed. Then he noticed something that made the hair on his neck stand up—a bloody 'C' carved into her forehead.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Back at the local police station, Lieutenant Parker convinced the chief that it would be best if he had his team of crime scene investigators handle the Veronica Sinclair murder scene. When pressed, he told the chief about the similarities between the murder of Veronica and another case he was working on, but that he couldn't go into any more detail.

Parker was convinced that whoever killed Randall Sinclair must be the same killer that murdered Veronica Sinclair. A professional hired to kill everyone in the Sinclair family? Family. Parker was thinking to himself trying to put some pieces together; then asked as casually as he could, "Don't the Sinclair's also have a daughter?"

"Yeah, they do, her name is Jessica, Joanne ... something like that." One of the younger officers responded to his query.

Another officer chimed in "No, it's Jennifer."

"Chief Franks, I think I need to talk to Jennifer Sinclair right away. Can I use your computer to see if I can locate the daughter?"

"Of course, help yourself and if you need any help, just ask."

As he started his computer searching, Parker whispered to himself, "I just hope we're not

going to be too late.”

* * *

Blocker had been through every old microfiche, every database and every hardcopy at all the news sources where he was given access and still couldn't come up with a link to Wilkins. How can you have a clone and still remain anonymous? That was the question that kept nagging at Blocker. Somebody, somewhere, had to know this man.

“Think, Ralph; think, think, think.” That was all he could say to himself as motivation to press on. “There's something I'm missing, something I should have thought about and haven't, but what?”

Several hours later, as Ralph kept looking through the database, and was about ready to give up the search, a story totally unrelated to Wilkins grabbed his attention. It wasn't so much the story as the photograph that hit him between the eyes. “Of course, I should have thought of that before!

* * *

Parker's cell phone rang about an hour after he called his captain requesting that a squad car be sent to check up on Jennifer Sinclair.

“Hello.”

“Parker, I just asked the CSI team to send some of their people to Jennifer Sinclair's apartment.”

“Oh no, not her too?”

“I'm afraid so.”

His worst fears had just been confirmed. He had mixed emotions. Having not been able to protect Jennifer from the same fate as her brother and mother was horrible. But he was also dejected about missing out on the opportunity to stake out her apartment and hopefully catch the murderer.

“Was the same message left?”

“Yes. Whoever did the first two must have done this one also. I've stationed an officer outside her apartment to seal the crime scene. We need to have the same CSI resources working this case as well as the other two; I want the continuity. Maybe they will be able to piece together clues from all three murders and get us something to work from.”

“I agree, sir. I'll get over to the Sinclair estate and talk to the team leader to see what we can arrange.”

“Oh, by the way Parker, I have someone working on tracking down relatives of the victims. We are going to have to notify family members soon, before the press picks up on the story. I don't know how much longer we can keep this under wraps. It might be best for you to come back here. When we do release a statement, I'm going to want you to do most of the talking.”

“I'll contact the CSI team and then head back.”

“Good, and tell the locals to keep a lid on this.”

“Will do, sir.”

Parker turned to Chief Franks. “Chief, I guess you've deduced from my conversation that Jennifer Sinclair has also been murdered.” Reactions from the chief and his men caused Parker to pause. “I may as well tell you the rest. Randall Sinclair, the son, has also been murdered. Once again Parker had to pause as the officers gasped; we're currently thinking that the same killer did all three crimes. It's even more important now that we keep this whole ordeal quiet. We don't want the media picking up on this and blaring it out over the air waves before we can reach any

remaining family.”

“Of course. I assure you that if there’s a leak, it won’t come from this office.” With that he turned to face his men with a stern look.

“Thank you chief, thank you all for your cooperation.”

The young officer looked at Parker and with tearful eyes choked out the words, “The Sinclairs were well loved around here ... catch the bastard.”

* * *

Blocker’s cell phone couldn’t get a strong enough signal from inside so he rushed out to his car to make the call.

“Adam?”

“Yes.”

“Blocker here. Listen, something just dawned on me. Do you guys have any photos of Timothy Wilkins?”

“Sure, we have a whole file drawer full. We watched him for a long time before we bagged him. We even have some ... oh my God. How could we have screwed up so badly? We have his fingerprints! We made the capture team take close up photos and get his fingerprints before they started their interrogation. They forwarded them to the CIA director.”

“Do you know if he had the photos and prints cross-referenced?”

“No, I don’t know for certain, but I can sure find out in a hurry.”

“Get on that because I have come up blank on my side. I can’t think of anything else I can do.”

“Hopefully Director Thornton will be of help.”

* * *

Parker had his hands full trying to stay awake as he drove back to his headquarters. He hadn’t slept since Randall Sinclair’s murder was discovered the previous evening. Here it was, almost twenty-four hours later, and the only thing keeping him going was adrenaline and lots of coffee. Seeing the signs for a coffee shop and gas station, he pulled off the highway. He needed to gas up his car and grab some more coffee anyway so maybe a good dinner might help his spirits.

Over dinner he kept running through the facts, over and over again, trying to make sense of why someone would pay a pro to murder the immediate family of a dead man. What kind of sick mind would do such a thing? It had to be mental derangement at play here, what other motive could there possibly be? What was to be gained by committing these murders? He went through a mental checklist of murder motives ruling them out one by one. The only possible scenario that fit was revenge. But revenge against a dead man made no sense. Revenge was only effective if the person was in a position to suffer.

Parker was planning to visit the Jennifer Sinclair crime scene, but as he drew closer to town, decided there was nothing for him to gain by doing so. He would just be in the way. Instead he phoned his captain to check in and get permission to head home for a few hours rest. A hot shower was what he wanted most, that and some sleep.

* * *

Parker was at police headquarters first thing in the morning. He wasn’t totally refreshed but did feel one hundred percent better.

A few minutes after Parker arrived, the CSI team leader called to see if he was in so he could come up and go over the evidence. Parker told him to come over as soon as possible. In the meantime, Parker waited for his superior, Captain Phil Forrester to arrive. Parker got up and

approached the captain when he walked into the squad room fifteen minutes later.

"CSI is coming up to brief us, should be here soon."

"Good. I am also expecting to hear from the coroner's office. I asked them to work all night if necessary to get us whatever they could. I expect to contact any surviving family members later this morning and then this afternoon we will have a press briefing. Grab your notes and come into my office and let's go over what we know and where we stand."

As Parker was returning to the captain's office after retrieving his file, the CSI investigator came in. Parker headed him off and steered him to the captain's office.

"Captain, this is CSI investigator Brian Williamson; Captain Forrester."

"Have a seat, men. I'm glad you've come by to update us, Williamson. We're at the point where we can no longer keep these murders a secret."

"You will have my full report by noon, captain. I just wanted to give you a verbal summary."

"Do you have anything that can lead us to the assassin?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. Whoever did this didn't leave us a single clue. What has me puzzled though is the different methods used. Usually a guy like this will stick to one kind of weapon. What we have here are three different scenarios and two different weapons—a gun and a knife.

"Wait a minute. You just said two weapons. What weapon was used to kill Jennifer Sinclair?" Parker was confused.

"Hands. Technically a weapon, I suppose. We need the coroner's report to be certain, but it looked like the only weapon used was the killer's hands."

"Hands?"

"Yeah. Jennifer Sinclair's neck was broken. Probably by a forceful twisting of the head."

"Getting back to what I was saying, the only commonalities are the victims' relationship and the defacing on the foreheads. Other than that, I would swear we are dealing with more than one killer."

"I hope you're wrong about that." Parker couldn't see how they were going to find one killer let alone two.

There was a quiet pause as each man considered what to say next. Suddenly they were startled by the ring of the captain's phone. Forrester noted that the caller ID was the coroner's office.

"This is Forrester ... yes, hello doctor. You have a preliminary report for me?"

There was a long silence on the captain's end of the conversation before he finally spoke. "I see. I'll expect your final report tomorrow. Thank you for calling doctor."

"Well, Williamson, you were partly right. There wasn't a sole assassin, or even two, there were three. Turns out that all three victims were killed within about a one-hour time frame, as near as the coroner can tell. Even if it's more like two or three hours, the result is still the same. No one person could have done all three murders in such a short time span. There was too much distance between the victims. One person, or even two, couldn't have been in three places at once."

"I guess this puts an answer to your suspicions, Williamson." Parker had a look of resolve on his face; he was going to find out who was behind these killings even if it meant putting his own life on the line.

"Okay. We know now that we have three assassins. Williamson, go over your notes again, and again, there has to be something that can be of help to us. Parker, I want you to check with records division, officer Manheim, he was looking into other family members. We need to

contact them with the news—not just to notify them, but to alert them to the possibility that they may be in danger.”

“I really don’t think they are, captain. More than likely we would have heard something by now if other family members had been killed. I think this is a revenge killing aimed directly at the immediate family of Richard Sinclair. Why, I don’t know, but it’s the only motive I can come up with to explain all this. I’ll definitely handle this as though the rest of the family is in danger, but I find it hard to believe they would be. Otherwise, I think they would already be dead.”

“I hope you’re right, Parker.

* * *

“Director Thornton, Adam Broderick is on the line and would like a word with you.”

“Thank you, I’ll take the call.”

“Hello, Adam, what can I do for you?”

“Director, did you by any chance run cross-checks on Timothy Wilkins photos and fingerprints?”

“You know, I don’t recall seeing any report on that. I can’t believe we screwed up like that. Must have been the pressure we were under to try to break the man. Let me check, and if we didn’t I’ll see that it’s done immediately. I’ll contact you as soon as I have any information.”

“Thank you, director.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

Jonathan and Marion Radliff could not understand why, after so many years of marriage to Richard, their daughter Veronica would be getting a divorce. Then after bearing witness to her anguish at the news of Richard’s abduction, it was even more obvious that Veronica was as much in love with Richard as ever. They refused to believe anything other than that Richard would return and that he and Veronica would reunite. But word of Richard’s assassination extinguished that flame of hope and put them into a state of depression such as they had never before experienced. Richard filled the void of the son they always wanted but never had.

With the news they had just been given by Captain Forrester, the Radliffs must have wondered what they could have done to cause such wrath from God. What had they done that deserved losing a child and two grand children in such a senseless way? Dazed as they were, they knew it was imperative that they notify Richard’s parents and their other daughters. Putting aside their grief, they decided it was best if Marion told her daughters while Jonathan would notify the Sinclairs. The captain had offered to talk to Richard’s parents, but Jonathan insisted that no matter how unsavory the task, it should come from someone close to the family. Jonathan did agree to have the Sinclairs call the captain so that he could be certain that they had been notified. Jonathan retired to his office and after regaining his composure, he took to the unwelcome task of calling the Sinclairs.

* * *

The press conference was scheduled for three p.m. in the police headquarters meeting room. All the major wire services and local media were notified that there would be a major announcement and sent camera crews.

As police Commissioner Warren Andrews delivered his news of a series of multiple murders in a methodical and reverent tone, gasps could be heard as each victim's identity was given. The commissioner took no questions, instead handing over the podium to Forrester, who in turn expressed his sympathies to the families and then introduced Parker.

Lieutenant Parker fielded the seemingly endless barrage of questions with poise and sensitivity. He had told himself repeatedly beforehand that the victims were not just his; they belonged to the entire world. They were known to millions of people. The Sinclair children had grown up under the watchful eyes of the public. He wasn't just talking to the cameras and reporters; he was talking to millions of concerned people, many of whom felt that these were members of their own families.

Parker didn't go into any of the details of the murders, lest he give away any specifics that could lend credence to some of the loonies who confess to crimes they didn't commit. That was a phenomenon that escaped Parker; such mentality he could not relate to at all.

The reporters weren't the least bit content to be getting so few facts and kept pressing the issue. Parker stood firm and revealed nothing. Finally they gave up and the conference was brought to a merciful end.

One of the reporters present was none other than Ralph Blocker. He was hoping that Richard wasn't watching TV and missed seeing this coverage. Blocker could only think of wrapping up his timeslot and getting home to console Richard.

* * *

In an instant, after entering the apartment, Ralph knew that Richard was aware of the murders. He immediately heard the sound of Richard's sobbing before actually seeing Richard sitting on the sofa.

Without even pausing to take off his coat, Ralph sat down next to Richard and put his arm around Richard's shoulders.

"I can't begin to imagine what you must be feeling right now, Richard. I know there's nothing I can say that will help. Christine and Adam are on the way over; they both called me as soon as the news coverage ended."

"I'm sure they are suffering almost as much as me. They both watched the kids growing up and formed their own attachments."

Ralph noticed the tall scotch and water that Richard had obviously already consumed most of and asked, "Have you had anything to eat today?"

Receiving a negative shake of the head and an, "I don't think I could keep anything down," caused Ralph to get up and head toward the kitchen. "I'm going to make you something anyway and you're going to eat it. I'm not going to have you sitting there drowning yourself in scotch—at least not on an empty stomach."

Just then the doorbell rang. Seeing Christine through the peephole, Ralph opened the door and let her in with a somber look on his face and a quiet "Glad you're here".

Christine ran to Richard, sat next to him and wrapped her arms around him. She didn't say a word. She just held him as he wept, her own tears running down her cheeks.

After a few minutes Richard gained a semblance of composure and started talking to Christine about anything and everything, as if in search of a topic that wouldn't remind him of Veronica and the children.

Ralph had put together some finger foods on a tray and placed them on the coffee table in front of Richard with a stern order to eat something. He no sooner set down the tray than the doorbell rang announcing Adam's arrival.

Ralph answered the door without a word, just a nod to Adam and a pat on the back as he walked in. Adam took off his coat, draping it over one of the barstools. Without a word he approached Richard, now standing to greet his friend, and gave him a hug as he simply said, "I'm so sorry".

Richard was much more composed now and took a step back from Adam.

"You know who is responsible for this, don't you? We all know."

"Are you sure you want to talk about this now, Richard?" Christine was holding Richard's hands in hers as she stood in front of him.

"Yes. We have to talk about it."

"Richard, I don't think any of us doubt for one second that the Controller is behind this. He's trying to draw you out. He's hoping you will lose your poise and do something foolish so he can find you. We can't lose sight of that." Adam started to pace as he usually did when confronted with a problem.

"Adam's right. As hard as it may be, you have to stay focused Richard."

"It's easy for you and Adam to remain calm; it wasn't your family that was murdered."

"You're right Richard, it wasn't." Adam was apologetic in his tone. "But we loved them nevertheless."

"I'm sorry Adam; I didn't mean it that way."

"We know what you meant, Richard." Christine spoke while she placed her hands on his shoulders and forced him to sit back down on the sofa.

"I can't help but think about the pain my parents and Veronica's parents must be suffering. They have been led to believe that I've been assassinated, and now this is dropped on them. I need to contact them ... talk to them ... try to help them."

"That's impossible and you know it. You would only be placing them in danger as well. We already discussed this before your disappearance." Richard knew that Christine was right and he was being foolish.

"So, what are we going to do now? How are we going to make him pay for what he has done to my family?"

"I don't think that now is the proper time to talk about revenge." Ralph was over at the bar making everyone a drink. It dawned on him how removed he was from the others, not just in the immediate proximity, but in every aspect. They were all family and he was an outsider. Nothing would ever change that. But, it could be a good thing if it allowed him to remain impartial.

"I want to talk about it. I want to use my rage while it can be an asset. Maybe that's where we have been dropping the ball. Maybe we need to put some emotion into our hunt for this maniac. Maybe that is the missing ingredient." Richard's attitude caught everyone by surprise. Never before had they heard him so emotionally charged when discussing the Controller.

"If we knew more of the details, we might be able to find something that could lead us to him." Ralph wasn't sure if anyone really wanted to get into this discussion but thought he would express his opinion anyway.

"You're right, Ralph. The police know more than they are telling. We need to find out what that is." Richard was definitely more focused; thinking about returning to the hunt brought him a new direction, away from his anguish.

"You don't want to know the details, Richard." Adam gulped down his drink and went over to the bar to make another.

Richard shot up from the couch and turned toward Adam. "You know something, don't you Adam? What are you holding back?" Richard's voice had a demanding tone, almost a "tell

me or else” inflection.

“If I tell you that there’s nothing to be gained from knowing the details, would you let it drop? Would you trust me when I say that it would not help find the Controller?” Adam was pleading for the right answer.

“Adam, you know I would, and have, trusted you with my life. But I cannot let you keep anything from me. Not where my family is concerned. If you know something, I want to hear it.”

“Even if it will accomplish nothing, only add to your pain?”

“Yes.”

“Please, Richard, don’t make me say it.” Adam was obviously distraught.

“Adam, compared to what the rest of the world has already suffered and what it will probably suffer in the future, do you really think my pain is of any significance?”

“You’re my friend, and your pain is my pain.”

“Tell me, Adam.”

“Against my better judgment, I’ll tell you. But first, I think all of us are going to need a stiff drink. Ralph, please do the honors.”

* * *

He sat alone in the darkness, the only light being the faint glow of the monitors at the other end of the room. He sipped ten-year-old Bordeaux from the Waterford crystal glass he held by cradling the bowl between his four fingers. Lost in thought, he wondered how it had all come down to this. Why had Richard forced him to take such drastic measures? Why didn’t Richard answer the cell phone just once? All this could have been avoided if only he would have answered the call.

True, Richard would have been exchanging his own life for those of his wife and children, but somehow he knew that Richard was the kind of man to make such a great sacrifice without a minute of contemplation.

In some ways he felt sorry for Richard, but not sorry enough to give up his search. He had decided that Richard must perish and nothing was going to prevent him from making that happen. “I never fail ... never.”

* * *

Before telling what he knew, Adam made Blocker swear that none of what was said would ever be revealed. Everything was off the record.

“I put pressure on CIA Director Thornton to get involved in the investigation. He didn’t need much prodding. On grounds of national security, he forced the police to release copies of their reports, the autopsy results and the CSI findings. Basically, what it boils down to is that there were absolutely no clues which could lead to the arrest of any of the assassins.”

“You said ‘assassins’, you mean that there was more than one?” Christine beat Richard to the question.

“Yes. Each killing was done at approximately the same time as the others. Because of the distance between the crime scenes, it would have been impossible for one or even two killers to commit all three murders. The conclusion is that three assassins, probably acting without knowledge of each other, carried out the crimes. Then there is the fact that each victim was killed with a different weapon ... well, I don’t want to get into that.”

“Go on, what else do you have?”

“Please, Richard.”

“No. I want to know everything Adam.”

“You’ll regret making me tell you this.”

“Then that will be something I’ll just have to live with.”

“Very well. Randall was murdered by a gunshot to the side of the head. He was sitting in a chair, reading and listening to music and never knew what happened. He couldn’t have suffered, Richard, it was over in an instant. The killer, according to the crime scene investigators, used a high powered pistol so as to leave a particularly messy scene.” Adam paused to see how Richard reacted to the description. He was surprised that Richard showed no emotion whatsoever. Adam figured that the shocking details hadn’t been fully absorbed.

“Jennifer was apparently taking a bubble bath when her assailant caught her by surprise. Apparently she was killed by a martial arts expert, as her head was abruptly twisted breaking her neck, killing her instantly. Richard, Randall and Jennifer didn’t suffer. They never knew they were in danger.”

“So? Am I supposed to be grateful for that? What about Veronica?”

“Unfortunately, she wasn’t so lucky. It appears as though she saw her killer. According to what could be pieced together, she was getting ready to retire for the evening and walked into her closet where the killer was waiting. According to the reports, she must have seen her killer an instant before as it appears that she turned to confront him and was then killed. They reasoned that out based upon a defensive wound on her right hand, as if she was trying to block the attacker.”

“How was she killed?”

Reluctantly Adam responded to the question. “Her throat was cut and she bled to death.”

“I sense there is something else you’re not telling me?”

“There was a message left at all three crime scenes.”

“Messages? What did they say?”

“All three were the same. The killers carved the letter ‘C’ in the foreheads of Randall, Jennifer and Veronica.”

With that, Richard lost his composure and was fighting back the tears. “It wasn’t enough that he viciously killed them, he had to degrade them as well?”

“I’m sorry I told you these things.”

There was a long silence, no one wanted to say anything lest it further upset Richard. Finally after several minutes Richard spoke up.

“I forced you to tell me the details, Adam, and in spite of what you may think, I’m grateful to you for finding out all the specifics and telling me. Without knowing all this I might have been stupid enough to take it as a warning and back off. But instead, I feel as though I am more empowered than I have been in a great while.”

“Are you saying that you aren’t going to rethink this fruitless manhunt?” This was the first time Christine, or anyone else, showed any sign of defeat.

“That’s precisely what I’m saying. He did this to get me to blow my cool and come out of hiding. And I don’t intend to disappoint him.”

“What! Are you crazy? You would be playing right into his hands.” Ralph had been quiet the whole time Adam was relating the details, but found it impossible to restrain himself further.

“That’s exactly what I want him to believe. But, in reality, I will be the one setting the trap.”

“Trap? What are you talking about?” Adam was beside himself. He was certain that his news must have so upset Richard that he had gone into some kind of detached state of mind.

“We’ve been approaching this all wrong. Instead of hunting him down we should have been pulling him out into the open. Now we can do just that.”

“Exactly how do you expect to do that?” Ralph was intrigued with the idea.

“By making myself a target.”

“What are you talking about?” Christine didn’t like what she was hearing.

“I’m going to let the Controller know where I am from time to time. When one of his assassins shows up to get me, we are going to nab the assassin. We are going to do that as long as it takes for the Controller to slip up and give us a clue that leads us to him.”

“What makes you think he will keep coming after you?”

“Ralph, you may not be aware of this, but everyone else is; the Controller is proudest of one thing—he never fails to achieve what he starts out to do. But so far he has failed in his attempts to dispose of me. I’m still a thorn in his side. And I intend to remain such for as long as it takes to destroy him. He can sense that. He’s a predator and he can smell his prey. He feels that he has severely wounded me and now he must move in for the kill. He has to finish me off before I can turn back on him. Well, I’ve got news for him—I have no intention of remaining his prey. I am going to reverse our roles and become the hunter.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

After talking to his friends for over an hour, Richard was able to overcome his grief and focus his mind on the controller, so focused in fact that he had almost instantly decided to implement a plan which he had been mulling over for weeks, a plan certain to incite the Controller’s rage and force his hand. As he started to relate his ideas to his fellow conspirators, he couldn’t help but smile at the simplicity of the plan.

“Ralph, you came up with a good idea about using the media to help us and that is exactly what we are going to do. I intend to give you an exclusive, prime time, live, on-air interview. In this interview I will not only be revealing that I am alive and well, but I will reveal all the history I was involved in as it relates to the Controller. If that doesn’t draw him out, nothing will.”

“I think what you’re suggesting bears some merit, but you realize that you are placing yourself in the open with a big target on your back, don’t you?” Adam didn’t like the idea of putting Richard in such a position.

“I know what I’m doing. I’ve been working out the details for a long time. The hardest part of this whole ordeal is going to be telling the public that has so strongly supported me over the years that I let them down. I just hope that they believe me.”

Not surprisingly, Ralph had mixed emotions, liking the idea on one hand, as it would force the Controller’s hand, but hating it since it meant putting his friend in jeopardy. He had been promised an earth-shattering story for a long time and now he had it—but would it be worth the price if something went wrong. “How soon were you thinking about doing this?”

“As soon as possible. Do you think you’ll meet any resistance from your superiors?”

“Are you kidding? When I tell my boss that Richard Sinclair is alive and wants air time to explain everything, he will ask me how high to jump. The only delay will be us coming up with a format for how we want to do the interview. The network will want some time to promote it, a day or two probably. Were you thinking about revealing that you’re alive and then a day or two later doing an interview? You know, to break the news a step at a time.”

"I hadn't thought about that. I suppose that if you are going to try to promote the interview, that the news I'm alive should be revealed first."

"Tell you what, I'll discuss it with my boss to see if he has any other ideas and what he would prefer to see us do."

"Okay. You go to your boss first thing tomorrow and tell him, but please make sure this is kept as quiet as possible. We can't risk the Controller finding out anything until we are prepared. Then, and only then, he can start his promotion. I don't care how he does it as long as we get as much exposure as possible. While he is doing that, you and I will sit down, right here, and come up with a format. I think it should lead off with me making a statement. After that we could do an interview type format with you asking questions. We have to be careful what questions you ask, though. What do you think?"

"I like the whole concept, except for the obvious downside. This is going to be some exciting week! You realize of course that I'm going to be up all night coming up with questions?"

"I'm counting on that, Ralph. We need to be careful what we reveal. For example, I don't mind telling the world that there are many heads of state that are cooperating with the Controller, but I don't want to name names; that would put them in jeopardy not only from the Controller but from their own citizens."

"I agree." Adam joined in. "By bringing all this out into the open, we might actually motivate them to reverse their positions and join us. I'm sure they will quickly realize that they are in a very precarious position. No matter whether they choose to piss off the Controller or their countrymen, they are caught between a rock and a hard place. Political survival is the least of their problems."

"What can Adam and I do to help out?" Christine felt like she was being excluded. She wanted to tell Richard that she didn't consider this plan an option, but it appeared that he had made up his mind and she knew it was pointless to argue with Richard once he made up his mind.

"I don't want either of you in the limelight on this. If the Controller knew you two were involved, he would rightfully think that you know where I am hiding out and target you both. He may already be exploring that possibility. We need the focus to be on me and Ralph. What I do want you guys to do is find me another safe house. I won't be able to stay here, it will be too obvious. In fact I don't want Ralph staying here either. I think we need to make it look like he still lives here, but I think it best if Ralph also has a safe place to hide."

"I'm assuming that you want me to arrange the security procedures."

"Yes, Adam I do. I think you should start with Thornton. I think he, more than anyone else, will see how important it is to keep me alive as bait for catching the Controller. We should also insist that Ralph has security people assigned to him as well."

"I'll get on it first thing tomorrow."

"Then we are all in agreement?" Richard looked at each person for a second to see if he could read anything into their facial expressions. He read enthusiasm from Ralph and concern from Adam, but Christine was another matter. Her face revealed pure anguish even though she made her best attempt to feign a smile.

Even though she didn't submit an objection, Richard felt she needed some reassurance.

"You know, Christine, I'm always going to be a target. There is nothing I can do to change that except for putting the Controller out of business. I'm getting tired of being in limbo, not being able to show my face in public. What have I accomplished by staying in hiding? Nothing

except keeping myself healthy and getting my family killed. This has to end—one way or the other.”

* * *

“Alive!”

“That’s right. The kidnapping and assassination were merely a ruse.”

“But why would he do that? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I can’t tell you everything that I know. If I do, all bets are off and Sinclair takes his business elsewhere. In fact, you can’t tell anyone else about this.”

“How am I supposed to get the air time that we’ll need for this without telling my superiors what it’s all about? Have you thought about that, Mr. Blocker?” There was cynicism in his voice.

“There’s a reason you’re my boss and I assume that it’s because of your ability to deal with upper management. So deal with it.” Ralph flashed his boss a big, broad smile even though he wasn’t trying to be funny. His boss had never done anything to endear himself to Ralph and some of the older reporters. He was easily twenty years Ralph’s junior and acted like it most of the time. He flaunted his ivy-league journalism degree at every opportunity, and it was common knowledge that his Washington D.C. connections were the only reason he got his position.

Ralph had not given him any details, deciding that it was best if he knew as little as possible for the time being. How Ralph was able to come up with such a coup was incredible and would do wonders for Ralph’s stature in the business, something his boss would probably consider a threat. They spent several hours pounding out a plan that they could take to senior management. They would only have one shot at this and needed to make the most of it. Ralph insisted that he be present in the meeting with the upper crust, something his boss didn’t relish but quickly realized that if there was any flack to take, better that it was Ralph taking it.

Conveniently their request for some time corresponded to a scheduled staff meeting where they would be given a chance to present their proposal. After what was a fairly heated discussion, with some members wanting more details while others respected the position into which Blocker had been placed, management approved the plan and applauded Ralph’s efforts at pulling off such a considerable feat. Further, they agreed that until Ralph could be provided with a security team, he would have to remain nameless as the interviewer. One senior manager, who had a young female reporter that he was obviously promoting, some say in and out of the bedroom, was bold enough to offer her name up as the reporter to do the interview. Ralph’s boss immediately squelched the idea by saying that it was Ralph or no one, a stipulation imposed by Sinclair under threat of taking his business elsewhere. He didn’t know this to be the case as Ralph had never alluded to it, but it sounded good and there was no way he was going to see Ralph take a back seat to a rookie reporter—especially one who worked for one of his competitors, just because she was beautiful and sleeping with management. So, after all was said and done, Ralph Blocker was given the ball and told to run with it.

Ralph’s boss impressed his superiors with his plan to promote the interview—he was going to have promotional spots aired not only on BNN, but also on any competitor stations that were willing. This would cost them millions to buy prime time slots but could have a tremendous return if things went as planned. The advertisements would not refer to Blocker until after his security was assured.

With all the arrangements made, a pleased and confident Ralph went home to go over the questions that would comprise his interview with the former president.

* * *

Adam had to do some fancy talking to convince CIA Director Thornton to provide some

security for Ralph Blocker. Thornton argued that it wasn't his job to provide security for reporters. It wasn't until Adam reminded him that Blocker would be spending a great deal of time with former President Sinclair preparing for the interview that Thornton finally agreed to see to Blocker's safety.

Thornton assigned six of his agents to watch over the two men, two per shift for around the clock coverage. He had arranged for them to be housed in the penthouse of an apartment building in Manhattan that the CIA director had recently leased for his own personal use. He was spending more and more time in New York since the formation of the W.O.N. and thought it would be more convenient to stay in the city rather than commute, when required to attend sessions. The four bedrooms could comfortably house Sinclair, Blocker and the security team for the limited time that they would need it. Thornton was somewhat amused that the recently furnished apartment had never been used and now it was going to be occupied by one of the most significant politicians in history. He could envision a future with the apartment being described by its own version of the "Washington slept here" scenario.

Once the arrangements were made, the electronic sweep team made sure the apartment was free of any electronic surveillance devices and the agents assigned to the detail verified its safety. Richard and Ralph were then clear to move into their new quarters.

The media blitz began the same day that Richard and Ralph were securely entrenched in the safe house. The half-minute promos were simple and dignified, showing a picture of Richard in one corner while Ralph, with the White House as a backdrop, told the viewer the date and time of his exclusive interview with former President Richard Sinclair. Ralph went on to explain that viewers would hear the reasons the president led the world to believe that he had been assassinated and promised them shocking new information regarding world leadership.

All the major networks, cable channels and public broadcasting stations carried the promotional spot except one—Artistel.

* * *

"That's right, ten million dollars. Kill Richard Sinclair before he goes on the air and that is what will be deposited into your bank account." This was the third and last call the Controller made to his assassins. Only one was willing to take him up on the offer. The other two knew that even if they could succeed, it would be the last time they would ever work. Killing a president, even a former one, meant dropping off the face of the earth for all intents and purposes. You would be prey until the day you died, turning yourself from the hunter to the hunted.

With the money she had accumulated over the last few years, and with this latest contract, she would be able to retire to a place where money could prevent extradition, should her identity become known. This contract was something she would normally turn away, but the lure of so much money carried a lot of weight in her mind, enough to offset the risk. She knew immediately the location to where she would disappear, a remote island near the Bahamas where no one saw anything nor asked any questions.

The hilltop house she purchased several years ago was equipped with the latest in early warning systems technology to safeguard her privacy—and health. The only people she feared were those from her own profession and she was confident that none of them would bother taking a contract against the person that could pull off a presidential assassination and make it to safety.

As much as he wanted Richard out of the way, the Controller knew that there was little hope of him being found, and even if he were found, the security surrounding him would be too daunting for a single assassin to face. It would have to happen while he was in the BNN studio,

minutes before the interview, when confusion would likely provide an opening for his killer to accomplish the task. He had spent enough time in his Artistel studios to know that there were dozens of people scurrying about seemingly without purpose adding to a general state of disorganization. This would force Sinclair's security detail to deal with one stumbling block after another. Such diversion could be tailor-made for an assassin.

What he didn't know was that the interview had already been taped in the penthouse apartment that overlooked Central Park. The "live" interview would be anything but live. Should any assassin show up at the BNN studios, he would be walking into a well-laid trap, one from which there could be no escape.

* * *

Agent Steven Robert's team had been given a crash course on duplicating the chaos that sometimes precedes a live broadcast. No one would think it unusual if this particular broadcast was more chaotic than usual, considering the guest and the circumstances. The idea was to replace all the station's personnel with CIA and FBI agents. Each agent went through the motions his position as a TV technician required, all the while observing his surrounding area. Every agent would be in constant radio contact with the central command center that had been tucked away in a corner and out of sight, making sure that any unfamiliar face could be immediately reported.

As per normal studio procedure, two security guards were posted at the door to make sure that only personnel with the proper credentials gained admittance. One outside door at the rear of the studio was padlocked and purposely left unattended. There had to be a way for an assassin to get in if the trap was going to work. Everyone was informed ahead of time that it was imperative that the assassin be taken alive.

While all this was taking place, Richard and Ralph were safely ensconced in their plush penthouse apartment. Blocker had to be convinced to curtail his normal activities in deference to security issues. At first he was opposed to the idea, wanting to be seen arriving at the studio and visibly present on the set, but when told that he could lead the Controller to Richard if he were to be taken hostage, should there be a team of assassins, he backed off. He didn't want to be responsible for any harm coming to Richard. Whether it was the camaraderie that resulted from being twin targets or the rapport they developed over the years, Ralph felt a special closeness to Richard.

Suddenly the radio silence was broken by an agent who was posted on the roof of a neighboring building that afforded a clear view of the studio's rear entry.

"Station six to station one. Over."

"Go ahead station six. Over."

"I've got a woman, repeat a woman, breaking into the rear door. She is wearing a dark business suit, high heels, and carrying a large purse. She is blond, with long hair and above average height. She is now opening the door. She's in. Over."

"Everyone be alert but carry on as if nothing is unusual. Remember, no shooting unless absolutely necessary." Roberts whispered into his mouthpiece and at the same time quickly scanned all the stations to make sure no one was out of position. Per their rehearsal, he would be the only one shouting out orders to the rest as if he were the director.

The back door area of the studio was unlit and provided the assassin with cover after she sneaked in. Once out of sight, she opened her purse, removed a clipboard, and stashed the purse behind a piece of equipment. Carrying her shoes she made her way around to the main entrance, so it would appear that she came in that way. After putting her shoes back on, with loudly

clicking heels, she boldly strode right up to agent Roberts.

“Mr. Warren sent me over to check on things. Are we proceeding on schedule?” She had no difficulty in finding out the name of the studio head and his aides and hoped to bluff her way close to Sinclair. She needed to get close to Richard for the small caliber automatic that she had strapped to the inside of her left thigh to be effective.

Startled by her attractiveness, Roberts had to think fast. He didn’t want to alert her, yet he couldn’t just let her get off without being questioned, something she was surely anticipating.

In a non-threatening manner, Roberts took a step toward her and asked, “Who are you? I don’t recall having seen you around here before.”

With an air of confidence that impressed Roberts, she authoritatively replied “I’m Sheila Knowles, one of Mr. Warren’s aides. I’ve only been working for him for a couple of weeks. Now, about my inquiry.”

Roberts appeared to accept her explanation. “On schedule. President Sinclair and Blocker are in makeup. They should be coming out any minute now.” Roberts had made a motion with his head that indicated the location where Richard was supposedly being made up.

“Good. Mr. Warren wanted me to extend his best wishes to President Sinclair so I’ll go do that now, rather than disturb your set.”

Roberts was amazed at this woman’s poise and boldness. She’s a cold one he thought to himself.

As she started off for the dressing rooms, Roberts waited until she was in the doorway to the narrow hall before he gave the orders. “All right men, she’s in the hallway heading towards the dressing rooms, everybody move into position.”

The plan was for the assassin to be trapped in the narrow hallway. The only door she would be close to was the supposed presidential dressing room. On Roberts’ command, agents Bender and Case would burst out of the dressing room and subdue the killer.

“Now, Bender!” Roberts couldn’t help but raise his voice above a whisper, the tension was so great.

As the door burst open, the assassin noticed the weapon in the hand of agent Bender before ever actually seeing the rest of the man emerge. In one fluid motion, she bent over, slightly lifted her skirt with her left hand and with her right hand swiftly withdrew the thirty-two caliber automatic from its holster.

“Federal agents, drop your weapon!” Bender shouted so loud the entire studio echoed his words.

Ignoring the order, she spun back toward the direction from which she came. Upon seeing agents closing in from that direction, she quickly assessed the situation and decided on the only course of action available.

Before an agent could get within three feet of her, she pointed the pistol to her right temple and fired. The sound from the small caliber automatic was magnified by the confining hallway, sounding like a weapon of much greater destructive power. However, it was more than capable of delivering a fatal bullet. The assassin fell, face forward, landing inches in front of agent Roberts, her beautiful blond hair now streaked with blood.

“Damn it!” Roberts was prepared for every conceivable outcome but this. He had no way of knowing how much fear of being imprisoned this assassin was carrying with her. She had long ago resigned herself to committing suicide rather than being taken alive.

“Great, just great.” In his disgust, Roberts forgot about the open microphone and everyone heard the comment he intended for himself. Realizing his mistake he said, “All right, everyone.

Let's wrap things up."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Richard was alone in his room at the penthouse apartment writing down what he wanted to say at the funerals for Veronica, Randall, and Jennifer. He knew if he tried to speak from his heart, without prior preparation, he would break down before he could utter a single word, better that he prepare and memorize a statement. That way he would be forced to concentrate on repeating the words he memorized without attaching any emotion to them.

He could not get his mind to stray from the self hatred he was feeling for letting the Controller get away with hurting his loved ones. Richard couldn't bring himself to admit that he vastly underrated the Controller. Somehow he felt that there was a line that his nemesis wouldn't cross, at least not when it came to him; anyone else might be subject to such despicable revenge, but surely not the president that assisted in his assumption of power. If Richard had a flaw, it was his belief that there was some good in everyone, even the Controller. Richard now had to resign himself to the idea that this flaw was the worst—a fatal flaw.

A knock on his door brought him back to the world that still placed demands upon him, in spite of everything else.

"Yes, come in."

Ralph appeared in the doorway, "Richard, the agents want to give us an update on what happened at the BNN studios. Are you available?"

"Yes, of course, Ralph." Richard rose from his chair and followed Blocker to the living room where an agent he had never met was standing, awaiting his arrival.

"Mr. President, I'm FBI agent Roberts. I was in charge of the detail that staked out the BNN studios earlier today."

"I'm glad to meet you agent Roberts. How did things go over there? It's been quite a while and we were wondering why it was taking so long to get an update."

"Sorry to take this long, sir, but we had to spend some time at the studio getting all our facts together. Basically it went down pretty much like we thought it might. An assassin, a female, made her way into the studio posing as an aide to the studio's operations manager. We had a trap set that would enable us to apprehend her without the need for any shooting. We hoped that she might be able to give us some information regarding the person that hired her, if we were able to take her alive.

I'm sorry to report that in spite of our best efforts, the assassin, upon seeing that she was trapped, managed to use her weapon to kill herself before we could reach her. She died instantly of a gunshot to the head. We're attempting to identify her and once we do, her identity might lead us to whoever hired her."

"I have my suspicions that you will only find a dead end waiting for you. But, nevertheless, I appreciate all your efforts. Is there anything else I should know?"

"No sir, that's it."

"Very well, if you'll excuse me, I have some matters that require my attention."

Richard proceeded back to his room and closed the door. He sat down to continue with his

eulogy, but upon seeing the names of his family, he burst into tears, got up and fell upon the bed, where he would sob himself to sleep.

* * *

After allowing himself a couple of days to contemplate where matters stood with the Controller, Richard arranged with his security team to have Christine and Adam brought to the safe house for a clandestine meeting. Richard's security team made certain that exceptional precautions were taken to protect Adam and Christine from being compromised. They arrived separately and the agents didn't get anywhere close to the apartment until they were certain that they were not being followed.

Richard asked that the agents give them privacy so that they could discuss items of national security, so the agents took up station outside the apartment in the hallway.

"As I told you both a couple of days ago, when the trap we laid was unsuccessful, I don't have any delusions that we are at the end of the line. There is no way that we will ever be able to identify the Controller. I'm afraid that we have failed and he has won."

"Don't talk like that, Richard." Adam had never known Richard to admit failure was an option. Not in all their years together at Harvard, Radliff Financial, two terms in the White House and his tenure at the World Organization of Nations had he ever heard the word "failure" uttered by Richard Sinclair. "I won't let you give up hope, not while there is breath in my body."

"Adam's right, Richard, we can't give up."

"Christine, you of all people know how frustrating this has been for me. It's been even more frustrating for you having to put aside our feelings for each other while we pursued this madman. No, it's time for you two to move on with your lives."

"And what about you? Don't you think that you are a part of my life, now and forever? You make it sound like we are never going to be together." Christine's despondency was obvious and made Adam so uncomfortable that he got up from the couch and wandered over to the bar to make a drink.

"I didn't mean for it to come across that way. It's just that I can't ask either of you to devote any more time to a lost cause. You've seen what's happened over the last couple of days. No one is taking me seriously. After the BNN interview aired, the studio got calls wanting to know how they dared to air such fiction in light of what happened to me and my family. They don't believe that I'm alive! If they can't believe that, how are they going to believe that there is a Controller and that he poses a threat such as none they have ever seen?"

"Ignore that. Those are the ramblings of the same few that always find a conspiracy in everything." Adam returned with his drink and returned to the couch. "There has to be a way Richard. We can't just quit now, there's too much at stake."

"Adam, I have always cherished your loyalty and dedication. There is no one I trust or rely upon more than you. But you have to let go of this. Every day puts you and your family closer to the kind of anguish that I have had to suffer. I don't want that for you."

"Aren't you forgetting one thing? It's my decision to make, not yours. I decide my own fate, no one else."

"That may be true, but if you continue to hunt the Controller, you will be doing it without me. I'm done, I've had enough."

"So what do you intend to do with the rest of your life? You realize that as long as the Controller is alive and searching for you that your life is going to be worse than you can possibly imagine. And what about Christine? Are you going to have her constantly on the run with you?"

"Why don't you just worry about yourself and your family and leave my well being to me."

I have no intention of subjecting Christine to any more danger. Both of you have been kept waiting in the wings for this very reason. The Controller doesn't know you are involved and will ignore you. But you have to forget about him and try to put your lives back together."

"What are you trying to say, Richard? You aren't telling us everything that you're thinking." Christine could sense that there was more going on in Richard's head than what he was saying.

"I'm saying that you have to get on with your life ... without me. I can't be responsible for more deaths. I've already allowed so much evil to run rampant, I just can't be put in a position to allow it to continue. You have to stay as far away from me as possible."

"Don't I get any say in this? What if I want to be with you, no matter what the circumstances? Doesn't that count for anything?"

"It's impossible for us to go on like this. It isn't fair to either of us. What would the quality of our lives be like, being constantly on the run? No, Christine, I'm sorry, but it's all over."

With that Richard abruptly rose and went to his bedroom, closing the door and his life on the last two people closest to him.

Christine couldn't believe what Richard said and through her tears she looked at Adam. "He still didn't answer my question, Adam. I think he has a plan that he isn't willing to tell us about. And I'm afraid of what that plan might be."

* * *

Several days passed with Richard refusing to take any calls from Adam or Christine. He would have equally withdrawn from Ralph if it were not for the fact that they were sharing the apartment. Ralph grew more wearisome with each day that he had to stay with an increasingly secretive Richard. Richard was unwilling to discuss the Controller or any plan that he might be harboring. Ralph was certain that he was indeed planning something, especially after talking with Christine and Adam. They convinced him to try to draw something out of Richard and hopefully put an end to any idea of going after the Controller single handedly. Ralph regretted having to tell them that Richard was becoming more secretive with each passing hour and that there was little if any chance of him discovering what the plan might be.

* * *

Several days passed before Richard summoned agent Roberts to the penthouse apartment. Roberts was stunned. He didn't know what to make of this proposal. Surely the former president wasn't himself and was still suffering from the shock of what happened to his wife and children.

"Sir, are you positive that you want to go ahead with this? I don't mean to be second guessing you, but this could have disastrous ramifications."

"I assure you, agent Roberts, I'm quite positive." Richard's senses, so often relied upon to get him through tough negotiations, were working overtime getting a reading into what Roberts was saying. "You are, more than likely, thinking that I am not myself, that my composure has been rattled. You may even be thinking that I've gone off the deep end. Well, I haven't. In fact I have never been as clear headed as I am now. There comes a time when a man, if he's lucky, reaches a state of clarity. After all the day-to-day obstacles are removed, all the worries, and all the apprehensions and fears are gone, then and only then can he see what's truly important. I'm at that point now, agent Roberts."

"But, sir; this is a"

"Suicide mission?"

"I didn't want to put it quite that way; but, since you brought it up, yes I believe it is a suicide mission. We could never be certain that our security measures would be enough. There

are too many chances for failure in this plan, sir.”

“That is precisely why I believe it will work. In fact, I would be willing to bet my life on it that the Controller himself will show up to witness the event.”

“You are betting your life on it, Mr. President.” Roberts placed great emphasis on the “Are.”

“What you have to remember, agent Roberts, is that it is my life to do with as I choose. And I choose to go ahead with this plan—with or without you and your men.”

“I couldn’t live with myself if I let you do this alone, Mr. President.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Richard hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in a week, spending hours pacing in his room, his mind racing, going over every detail repeatedly. He could think of nothing else since the futile attempt to capture the assassin, convincing himself that there was only one course of action left open. He couldn’t help wondering if the beautiful blond assassin was one of the team that killed Veronica and the children. If so, which member of his family did she murder? Was she the one that took such relish in making Randall’s murder as gruesome as possible? Was she the one that so brutally cut the throat of Veronica? Maybe her appearance hid the strength that was able to snap Jennifer’s neck so abruptly.

Richard didn’t like the idea of using the funeral for Veronica and the children as the bait, but reasoned that if, in death, they could help apprehend the Controller, it would serve as testament to their goodness.

Agent Roberts was devoting all his time, and that of several of his team members, to scouting out the cemetery where Veronica, Randall, and Jennifer would be laid to rest. They quickly realized that the former president chose this particular cemetery not out of sentimentality but for reasons much more serious. It was their consensus that Sinclair picked this facility because of all the hiding places it afforded a potential assassin. Multiple groves of tall trees and mausoleums of varying sizes outlined an open area where the Sinclair family gravesites were located.

Roberts and his team would set up a perimeter to encircle the area, keeping the groves and structures within, and extending out far enough that the kill zone was completely contained. At Richard’s insistence, there would be no agents within the perimeter.

“President Sinclair has really set himself up. He’s too smart to allow this to happen by accident.” Agent Farley shook his head in dismay while uttering the words to no one in particular.

Roberts couldn’t let the comment go without a response, “Yeah, he is one smart cookie. And you know something else?”

“No, what’s that?”

“He is the bravest man I have ever met.”

* * *

“What! Are you crazy? I think what happened to your family has pushed you over the edge Richard. You can’t be serious about this?”

Richard had just told Ralph all the details surrounding the family funeral arrangements. Once again Ralph was being given an exclusive story—one he could do without.

“Maybe I have been pushed over the edge, Ralph. I can’t honestly say that I’m the same sane man I was a few years ago. Maybe my crusade has taken more of a toll than I realize. I do know one thing for certain, the Controller will be there and one of us is going to die.”

“You don’t have any way of knowing that he will show up in person. He will probably just send one of his paid killers to take you out while he watches on TV.”

“Don’t ask me to explain it, because I can’t. Just let it suffice that deep down inside I know that he is going to be there. Something tells me that there is so much anger within him, so much hatred for me, that he wouldn’t miss this for anything. He’ll be there.”

* * *

Ralph broke the story and almost immediately, the other networks paused their regular programming to give a newflash that they would be covering the funeral services for Veronica, Randall, and Jennifer Sinclair. They reported that the church services would be held in two days and were restricted to immediate family and friends at an undisclosed location so that the grieving family would not be disturbed. The reports went on to say that after the church services, the ceremonies at the cemetery would be televised live.

Watching the monitors only occasionally, he put down his book when he heard the familiar music that Artistel used to announce an upcoming newflash. He listened intently as the date, time and location of the burial ceremonies were announced. Pausing only for a moment’s contemplation, he picked up the phone, the look on his face testament to the evil lurking behind the steely eyes and the sneering smile.

* * *

“We’re ready whenever you are, Mr. President.” The Secret Service agent had already made sure that the Radliff family members and Richard’s parents and siblings were in their respective limousines before summoning the former president. The vehicles were parked behind the church and out of view of passing cars. One would never know that a service had been held only minutes before.

Richard walked past the other limousines before reaching his and at each gave an acknowledging wave. What was going on in his mind only he knew. The seemingly endless hours he spent with the families took a great toll. He felt tapped of his last bit of strength and was almost welcoming what he thought might happen over the next couple of hours.

It was a ten-mile trip to the cemetery, most of it by a motorway thankfully devoid of intersections and traffic lights and blessed with light traffic. On the surface streets, each time traffic was stopped to let the funeral procession through, Richard looked out through the heavily tinted windows at the faces of those in their waiting cars, wondering if they knew who was passing by in the black hearses, or if they even cared. He had sacrificed and given all that he had, including his family, in his quest to fulfill their demands and desires. Now he wondered if any of it really mattered.

Shortly before arriving at the cemetery he noticed several helicopters hovering over the procession. They had been in the air for a quarter of an hour in anticipation of the procession’s arrival. The ever-present media, he thought to himself. He couldn’t blame them this time, it was his own doing that brought them out; he wanted the coverage and wanted everyone to see what would surely transpire—the capture of the Controller.

The vehicles wound their way slowly through the maze of roadways that led to the area where the Sinclair family plots were situated, finally coming to rest about thirty yards from

where the ceremony would take place.

Agent Roberts and his men had been waiting outside the cemetery, abiding by the president's request, and didn't man their posts prior to the arrival of the funeral procession. They had to make sure that any assassin would be able to station himself without restriction. Upon the procession's arrival they immediately fanned out far from the center of activity and stationed themselves at their predetermined posts. Each man knew that there was probably an assassin lurking somewhere within their line of sight, probably up in one of the trees. In their briefing, Roberts went so far as to caution his team that there might be as many as three assassins. He reminded them that a triangulated kill zone was the surest way to success, insuring that at least one assassin would be in position to get off an effective shot.

Roberts had only one thing on his mind. Since the former president wouldn't allow him to afford any protection, only permitting him to react, he would have to make sure that the assassin didn't get away. To that end, he had extra agents stationed around the perimeter whose only task was to make sure that no one left the scene. Waiting outside the cemetery were several vans of police personnel surrounding the entire grounds and manning the gates to make sure no one left without his permission. Hours before the motorcade arrived, the local police cleared everyone from the cemetery and made a sweep that would get innocent bystanders out of the way, but not thorough enough to thwart a would-be assassin. Whether there were one, two or three assassins, all would be trapped. Everyone who should be in the cemetery was on a list, both guests and agents. All local police were also accounted for in a similar manner. Anyone not on the two lists would be apprehended.

Richard didn't entertain a single doubt that the Controller was going to be there. He felt certain that the maniac wouldn't let the opportunity pass to see his nemesis struck down. He had to be there to personally witness the event. His deranged mind wouldn't allow it to be any other way.

It seemed like hours, instead of minutes, to Richard as he waited in his limousine. His Secret Service guard would summon him once all the other vehicles had emptied of their occupants and everyone was gathered around the gravesite. Even though he was gazing out the window, he wasn't seeing and was startled when the limousine door suddenly opened.

"We're ready, Mr. President."

Richard was suddenly taken back to better times at the sight of David Weathers, the first Secret Service agent assigned to him once he became a candidate for the presidency. As Richard got out of the car he took David's hand and gave it strong handshake. "Thank you, David. I'm surprised to see you here. I haven't seen you in years. How have you been?"

"When I found out that there was going to be a funeral for your family, I insisted that they assign me to the detail. I mean ... I feel like they are my family as well."

"Thank you, David. We always looked upon you the same way. Well, guess I better get this show on the road, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"David, they told you about the arrangements didn't they?"

"If you mean about not being with you during the ceremony, yes they did. I have to say Mr. President, this is not a good idea. Please let me be there, to protect you."

"No, David. I have my reasons, believe me. You can be of the most help if you just honor my wishes."

"As you wish, sir."

"Just do me one favor, if you will, David?"

“Anything, Mr. President, just name it.”

“Just make sure you nail the guy.”

“Sir?”

Without answering, Richard started the walk up the slight hill to the gravesite.

* * *

Roberts looked around, scanning anything and everything with his field glasses. He was almost positive that he saw a glint of light reflected from within the dense foliage of the cluster of trees closest to the funeral site. Focusing his glasses upon the treetops, he gradually worked his way down each tree. About half way down the second tree, he thought he saw a faint outline. Uncertain as to whether he was actually seeing someone or just imagining that there was someone there, he gave a second look. No doubt about it, he was watching a sniper position himself. Oh how he wanted to close in and nail the bastard. His frustration caused him to clench his fist so hard that it hurt as his fingernails pressed into his palm. Then he calmly gave instructions to his team that a sniper was in the grove to the southeast of the burial site. He then cautioned them again to keep looking for others.

* * *

No one gave a second thought to the man in the black cashmere overcoat, in spite of the unseasonably warm weather. Like almost everyone present, he was all in black and blended into the dozens of mourners, all of whom stood in stark contrast to the white, wooden, folding chairs in which they were seated. He didn't seem to be anything more than another member of the close circle of friends that were paying their respects.

No one noticed when his black limousine stealthily slipped into the cathedral parking lot at the precise time that the Secret Service agents were concentrating on getting Richard safely inside. His driver cleverly positioned the vehicle so as to allow him to join the ensuing procession without being detected. Complete with the “funeral” stickers on its windows, it fit right in. Human nature being what it is with normal people wanting to brag about anything that breaks up the monotony of their lives, the Controller had found it extremely easy to discover the site of the services from one of the funeral parlors employees. He remained in the limousine while at the cathedral, lest he draw attention to himself. “Bide your time. Plenty of time remains for you to bathe in Richard's grief.” He whispered to himself, all the while smiling.

At the cemetery, he seated himself toward the front, almost directly among the immediate family members, as if to say to all present, “I am the reason you are here.”

He was impressed by his own boldness as he thought back on instances where he should have made such a gesture instead of remaining meekly in the wings observing, but not making his presence felt. This was a different situation. This was a far more important event than any other in his life. He was here to witness the end of an era, the elimination of the last vestiges of resistance to his new world order. Soon there wouldn't be anything left to cause him concern, not that he really worried about Richard Sinclair's ability to dethrone him. He was just relieved that Sinclair would be out of the way and he could get on with business. He looked upon Sinclair and his efforts with the same attitude a person shows a buzzing gnat—bothersome, but hardly dangerous.

He knew that the absence of Secret Service agents around the former president could only mean one thing—a trap.

* * *

The priest spoke eloquently and impressed Richard with his knowledge of Veronica, Randall, and Jennifer. He obviously had done his homework and talked to many of the family

and friends that were present to gain more insight into the individuals that he was so elegantly eulogizing. After his comments, he asked if anyone wished to say a few things about the deceased.

Jonathan Radliff spoke about his daughter's childhood years but had to stop short as he felt the tears welling up. No one else chose to speak and the priest knowing that Richard wanted to say a few words nodded in his direction, to which Richard responded by standing and walking over to the priest who stepped off to the side several yards away.

Roberts, upon seeing Richard rise, focused his field glasses on the lonely figure. He realized that this was probably the best target the sniper would ever have and radioed his team to be extra alert.

* * *

He concentrated on every word that Richard spoke. Listening to what he was saying and also reading between the lines. He actually felt insulted that Richard never mentioned him by name, choosing only to refer to the killers of his wife and children as "cowardly and inhuman." That Richard would not give him his due was bad enough, but to call him cowardly was inexcusable. Too bad he wouldn't have the opportunity to confront Richard and express how truly disappointed he was with his lack of consideration. After all, he had gotten Richard elected as President of the United States and made sure of his reelection and his subsequent appointment as the very first President of the World Organization of Nations. Surely that was worthy of a few choice words.

He wondered if Richard had even noticed that there was an unfamiliar face among his friends and family, a face that he had never seen before. There was a high probability that Richard had seen pictures of his clone, Timothy Wilkins, but Richard wouldn't be able to make the connection what with all the makeup and the creative disguise he was wearing.

The thought that Richard would die without ever facing him and looking into his eyes was very unsatisfying. Of all the people he had eliminated, Richard was the only one that evoked special feelings. He could have been close to Richard if circumstances were different and he didn't have to play the part of mentor.

The Controller glanced to his right, staring for a moment at Stephen Hamilton and his wife. He hadn't talked to Stephen since the murders; he didn't care what Stephen thought of the cruel actions. Stephen had served his purpose.

* * *

Just as Richard concluded his tribute to his wife and children, he slowly scanned the attendees one by one, suddenly stopping with the strange face just to the right of center in the second row. Richard stared deeply into the eyes of the man in the overcoat. His gaze pierced through to the very soul of the figure before him and both men knew instantly that they had finally faced each other. Enemy to enemy, prey to hunter, they stared at each other until it happened.

* * *

Long after the incident, those present would offer conflicting interpretations of what had actually transpired. Some would say that they heard a shot ring out, others that there was no sound whatsoever, while a few, seated closest to Richard Sinclair would testify to hearing the horrible sound of the bullet's impact.

Only the experienced agent Roberts would know exactly what happened. He never heard a shot, wouldn't have since the assassin used a silencer in the hope that the sound of a gunshot wouldn't give away his position. What sound did find its way out of the rifle's muzzle was too

faint to be heard from such a distance.

Roberts knew it was over when, while watching Richard staring fixedly at one of the mourners, he saw the impact of the explosive shell as it struck the former president's head. In spite of all his preparation and anticipation, he still hesitated at the sight of a man he felt a great deal of respect for being cut down while he watched. Regaining his composure, Roberts yelled into his radio for the team to close the net.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Not a single person, none of the mourners or any of the agents, noticed the man in the overcoat slip away amid the confusion. Everyone, afraid that there was a chance that multiple bullets would be reigning down on the assemblage, took flight in many directions, almost breaking through the ring of security personnel. President Hamilton's assigned Secret Service agents quickly got him and the first lady safely to their limousine and out of the cemetery while chaos was still the order.

Before the agents could tighten their net, moving purposefully into a constantly diminishing circle, the man slipped into his hiding place.

Roberts' team managed to quiet everyone down and convinced them that they were in no danger. After making sure that they returned to their seats, Roberts had two of his men start a systematic roll call. This would keep the mourners occupied while he took care of business elsewhere.

Before he ran over to the grove of trees where the assassin was located, he paused long enough to take a black veil from one of the women mourners and rushed over to Richard's mother, who was kneeling over her son. With respect he gently grasped Mrs. Sinclair and lifted her into the arms of her husband. Then Roberts carefully spread the veil over the head of his fallen president. He wanted to say a prayer, but that would have to wait until the area was secured and the perpetrator apprehended.

When Roberts got to the grove, he found one of his men securing the sniper's weapon while two other agents handcuffed the assassin while he lay face down on the grass. Immediately Roberts stood the man upright, grabbing him by his shirt collar with two clenched fists, and lifting him with one forceful motion. Pulling the man's face within inches of his own, he stared into the steely eyes. "Are you alone?"

The sniper just stared back at Roberts, not saying a word.

"You don't seem to understand, I can do anything I want with you and no one here is going to say I did anything illegal to you. So I ask you again, are you alone?"

"I'm not saying anything until I get to talk to a lawyer."

Roberts couldn't suppress his anger and almost as soon as the last syllable was spoken, he drove a fist into the man's sternum with such force that two agents had to catch the sniper and steady him.

"I asked you a question and I want an answer."

"I'm alone."

"Who hired you?"

“I don’t know. I never met the guy. I only talked to him on the phone.”

“Take him to my car and one of you stay with him. Don’t leave him alone for a second. The rest of you join the others and tighten the circle. I want everyone accounted for.”

Roberts took aside his most senior agent and told him that the president had confided that he felt absolutely positive that the man responsible for hiring the assassin would be at the services. “We are looking for someone among the mourners, more than likely. Someone who isn’t on the guest list. Let’s get over there and start screening everyone.”

* * *

It took about twenty minutes for Roberts to verify that only invited guests were among those present. Roberts was wondering what his next move would be when he glanced at the empty seat. When questioned, a woman remembered that she had a man sitting next to her in that chair—a man in an overcoat. Roberts couldn’t stop himself from saying aloud “The man in the overcoat!”

Roberts keyed his radio, “All right men, tighten up the circle and search every place that a man could hide, we are looking for a man with an overcoat, dressed in black, medium height and slightly built. Just to make sure, detain anyone you find, even cemetery personnel. Local police, maintain your positions and don’t let anyone in or out of this cemetery.”

Agents methodically moved to close the circle, looking for hiding places among the grave markers, mausoleums and landscaping.

Two agents walking down a hillside that sloped away from the funeral site looked down into the freshly dug grave but ignored the mound of dirt covered by the green carpet; they were too intent upon checking out the trees that surrounded the grave. If they had only lifted the carpet, they would have found the hollowed out indentation and its occupant—a man of slight build wrapped in a cashmere overcoat, wearing a maniacal smile.

* * *

Several hours after the assassination, Roberts officially called off the search for any co-conspirators. Earlier he had allowed the guests to leave, convinced that everyone in the cemetery was accounted for and legitimate. Somehow the man in the overcoat had slipped through their fingers. He made one last radio call and gave his men and the police permission to shut down the operation and leave. Roberts took a seat on one of the white chairs and stared at the graves. Richard Sinclair’s body had long been taken away and would be sent to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda Maryland where a team of doctors would perform an autopsy. He knew that there wouldn’t be anything new to reveal since he had been watching Richard every second and knew that there was a single assassin involved. He wished that some miracle could unearth the man in the overcoat.

It was evening now and the workers had finished their task of lowering the coffins of Veronica, Randall, and Jennifer Sinclair down to their final resting places, filling in the graves and placing new sod over the dirt. The grave markers would be placed later, probably after Richard was also laid to rest next to his wife and children. When the workers finished their chores they took their portable lights and left Roberts sitting in the darkness. The agent couldn’t muster the courage to leave, knowing that if he did he would be closing the book on a mystery before he found out who did it.

He had plenty of time to reflect as he sat there in the dark of night and knew that his career was probably over. He had let a former president be assassinated on his watch. It wouldn’t matter that he was following the president’s orders and that the president wanted to be placed in the line of fire. It was his job to prevent that and he failed to do so.

He was about ready to leave when someone sat down beside him. Turning his head he saw the familiar face.

“I thought everyone was gone.”

David wiped away a tear as he spoke to Roberts. “Funny how things turn out sometimes isn’t it? I knew President Sinclair since before he was elected, was with him for most of his two terms; I loved him and his family and everything he stood for.”

“You know, David, there’s one thing I’ll never understand?”

“What’s that?”

“Why he let himself be taken down like this. What could have been so bad that he would want it to end this way? I knew enough about this man to know that nothing short of the end of the world would cause him to lose faith in the future, nothing.”

“That’s just it. To him it was the end of the world and it was, in his mind anyway, partly his fault. Him and the man he called ‘Controller’.

“I guess we’ll never know if this ‘Controller’ actually exists.”

“Oh he does, Roberts. Or should I say, he did. You can find his body up over that hill, in the bottom of an open grave.”

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The author has recently completed the first book in a series entitled COLOR ME MURDER. In COLOR ME MURDER-Sin City, amateur sleuth Darren Poole tries to solve the murder of his best friend while at the same time keeping himself from being a victim.

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