

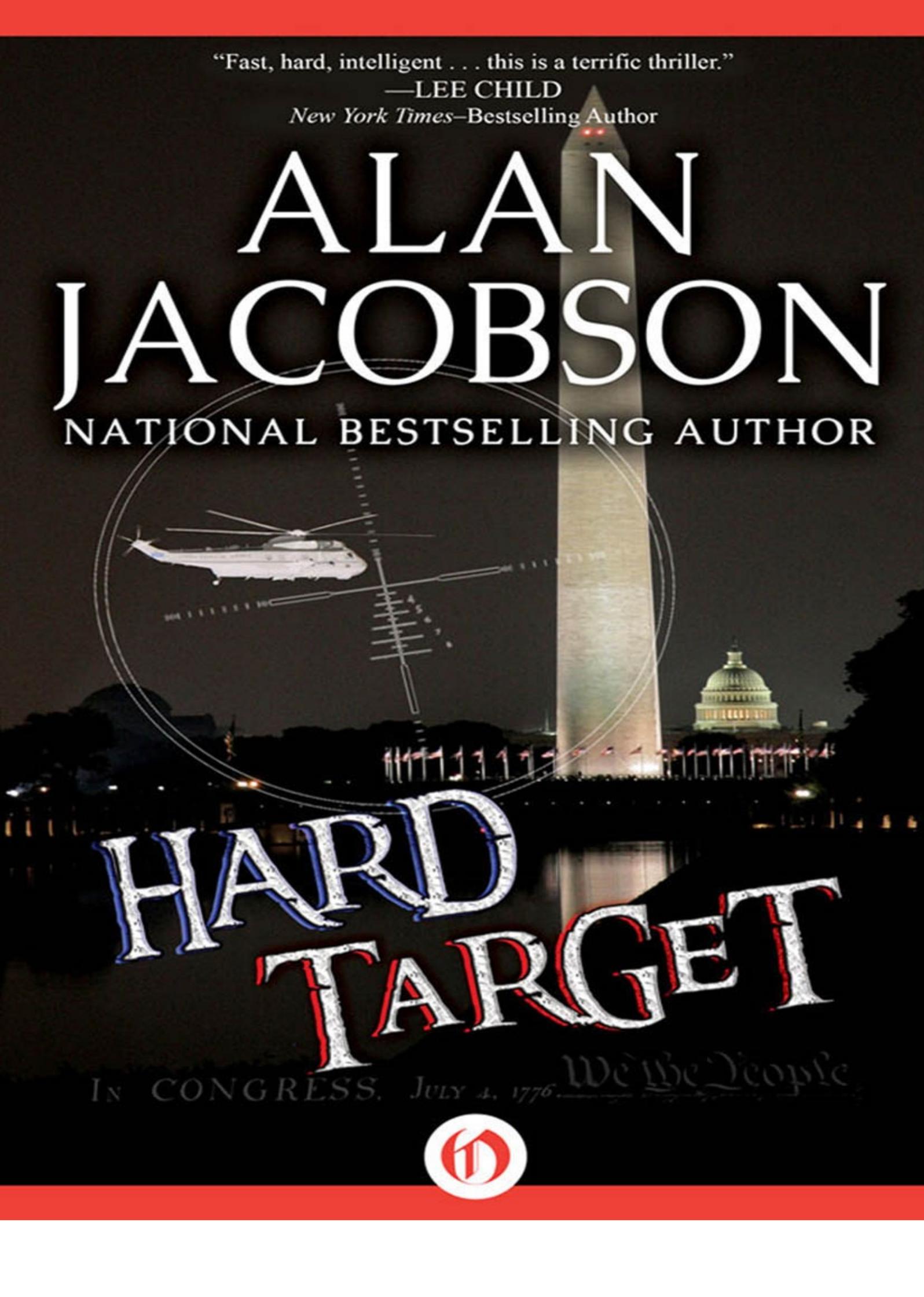
"Fast, hard, intelligent . . . this is a terrific thriller."

—LEE CHILD

New York Times–Bestselling Author

ALAN JACOBSON

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR



HARD TARGET

IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776. *We the People*



Hard Target

Alan Jacobson



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For my uncle, Leonard Rudnick

At first I thought that the Leonard Rudnick of my childhood bore little resemblance to the Leonard Rudnick of *Hard Target*. But then I realized that both are doctors who care deeply about their patients, and both are good souls who would do anything for a person in need. Moreover, both overcame substantial adversities as youngsters to lead rewarding lives.

On a personal level, my uncle has had a profound effect on me, starting with my earliest childhood memories when we went fishing in Bay Shore, New York and caught a large...boot. That taught me that fishing was not the sport for me.

My uncle also introduced me to chiropractic. Chiropractic treatment not only cured my blinding migraine headaches, but it brought me across the country to California, where I started a rewarding career and met the most important person of my life. There have been other influences, too numerous to record here, but suffice it to say that my uncle's smile, humor, warmth, and wisdom have helped me become the person that I am today.

Unk, this one's for you.

“...Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive... it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government...it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security.”

—THOMAS JEFFERSON
The Declaration of Independence

“Our death is not an end if we can live on in our children and the younger generation. For they are us, our bodies are only wilted leaves on the tree of life.”

—ALBERT EINSTEIN
Collected Papers of Albert Einstein © 1987

Everyone dies, it's just a matter of when. But Glendon Rusch, vice president of the United States, had always figured it would be a distant occurrence—three or four decades in the future. He had no way of knowing the events that would prove godlike in their finality were a mere three or four *minutes* away.

The Sikorsky VH-3 helicopter, one of only a dozen in the executive transport fleet out of Quantico, chopped its way through Virginia air space. Inside, in the relative quiet of the custom outfitted cabin, Rusch tapped his right foot, staring ahead at his wife, Macy, wanting the time to dissolve away like grains of sugar in hot coffee. Because the sooner the minutes passed, the sooner he'd know if his grueling two-year run for president would be the crown jewel in his career ring, or a nine hundred million dollar faux diamond.

"Too close to call," Rusch was told as they lifted off. But what the hell did that mean? He needed to talk with his campaign director. Just how close was "too close to call"? Was that statistical jargon for "It doesn't look good, but we're not mathematically eliminated"?

Rusch stole a glance at Macy's watch: could the last forty minutes have made a difference? He looked at the cabin phone ten feet away, willing it to ring. But would it bring good news or bad? He closed his eyes and let his head rest against the seatback. Stop obsessing.

Fatigue was dragging at every body part, trying to pull him into defeat. Like gravity, he fought unconsciously, not permitting the lack of sleep and his weary mind to darken his thoughts. He needed to shift his attention elsewhere, if only for a moment or two.

Rusch looked at his daughter, Kelsey, who was strapped into seat number three to her mother's left along the cabin wall. She was staring with longing eyes at Sam Washburn, the Special Agent-in-Charge of the vice president's Secret Service detail. Washburn was a hunk, or so sixteen year-old Kelsey had said, and she had a crush on him. Rusch cleared his throat and caught his daughter's attention. He raised a disapproving eyebrow and tilted his head. She rolled her eyes in response, her face shading red as she turned away.

Rusch shared a smile with Macy. He remembered when Kelsey was only a newborn bundle wrapped in a drawstring nightgown, sleeping in his arms. Time passed much too quickly.

And yet, in times like these, it passed much too slowly.

The cabin phone rang. Rusch's heart rate surged.

Sam Washburn, a veteran of the executive detail and several election cycles, knew the importance of the call. He unbuckled and snatched up the handset, listened a moment, then handed the receiver to Rusch's senior campaign aide, Chris Sawyer.

Sawyer nodded and grunted, his eyes darting around as he digested the information being relayed to him over the phone. His gaze found Rusch, the aide's poker face giving away nothing—but his shoulders slumping slightly. Finally, he hung up the phone and said, "The polls are just about close in Washington, Arizona, and California. And CNN's calling it." He waited a beat, then said, "We're in!"

Rusch closed his eyes and sighed relief. Macy took his hands in hers and squeezed. Rusch knew that of everyone on board, his wife was the most proud of him...with Kelsey a close second. He absorbed the moment, surrounded by those he loved dearly and who loved him, and he realized he didn't get any better than this. He blinked away the tears and found his voice.

"How long till touch down?" Rusch said, forcing the hoarse words from his throat.

"Five or six minutes," Sawyer said. "Big crowd waiting for us."

"Then where's that champagne? Pop the damn cork."

Sawyer snapped his heels together and sprung into a mock salute. "Yes sir, Mr. *President*."

Macy, seated across from her husband, leaned forward and wiped at his tears with a thumb. She spoke close to his ear: "I guess I'll find out tonight what it's like to sleep with the President of the United States. Not many women can make that claim."

"Probably more than you know," Rusch deadpanned, then planted a kiss on her hand. He leaned back, then blew a kiss to Kelsey as Sawyer ripped the foil from the Dom Perignon. With an audible pop, the cork exploded upward, frothy suds fizzling out of the bottle and crawling over Sawyer's hands like ocean foam. He stepped back to keep the champagne off his Allen Edmonds wingtips, then lifted the bubbly for everyone to see. "To Glendon Rusch, President of the United States!"

Sawyer reached forward to pour Rusch's glass, but the helicopter lurched hard to the right and the bottle flew from his hand. It shattered against a bulkhead, shards and spilled champagne showering the floor.

"What the hell was that?" Rusch shouted, his hands gripping the thick armrests.

But before anyone could venture a guess, a thunderous explosion blew the armored chopper aside like a plastic toy. Sawyer slammed into Washburn and the two men fell in tandem. The Secret Service agent tried to push Sawyer aside, but their tangled legs kept him buried beneath the man's weight.

A bright flash caught the edge of Rusch's peripheral vision. Through the window to his left, the blinding flare of the pulverized escort helicopter's flaming debris accelerated toward him.

"Sweet Jesus!" Rusch instinctively recoiled, bracing for impact.

The wreckage slammed against the VH-3, ripping a hole in the cabin's metal skin. The helicopter rotated out of control in a dizzying elliptical orbit, whipping its occupants about like an amusement park ride. The force dislodged the sprawled Sawyer and flung him into the wall like a rag doll—along with everything else that was not secured.

Glass from the demolished window littered Macy's bleeding face, her head flopping from side to side against the firm, upholstered seatback. "Macy...honey!" Rusch grabbed her wrist and gave a gentle tug. "Macy!"

She did not respond.

"Daddy—"

Kelsey. Her voice was barely audible over the wind and rotor noise, which was now deafeningly loud. Rusch turned toward his daughter, whose eyes were flushed with terror. Her thick auburn hair whipped fiercely in the violent wind. Straining against his seatbelt, Rusch reached forward and to his right, across the debris that littered the floor. "Sweetie—take my hand!"

Rusch knew the VH-3 was designed for maximum crash survivability, but logic told him that at five thousand feet, human flesh and bones in a free-falling metal coffin faced longer odds than he wanted to admit. What's more, there were only two crashworthy seats. And he and his wife occupied both of them.

Washburn's black suit jacket flapped furiously against his face as he wrapped a bloody arm around the adjacent bulkhead, desperately trying to right himself.

Despite numerous attempts, Rusch could not get hold of Kelsey's hand. He turned back to his wife whose neck and shoulders were visibly soaked with blood.

"Macy, can you hear me? Answer me!"

Other than involuntary jostling, she did not move. He again twisted toward Kelsey and stretched as far as he could, but he still could not reach her. Waves of nausea began racking his intestines. He fought the urge to vomit as he reached down to his seatbelt and struggled with the buckle. But the stress of the moment—or the violent movement of the helicopter—made the simple task of releasing the clasp instantly complex.

Washburn was suddenly in front of him. "Do not remove your seatbelt, sir!"

"My daughter—"

"Her belt's secure," Washburn shouted over the din. "She's fine." Washburn grabbed hold of the two arms of Rusch's chair to keep himself from tumbling out the gaping hole in the side of the cabin. His face was inches from the president-elect's.

"Get me out of this damn seatbelt, Sam." Rusch continued to struggle with the latch. "Now!"

"My orders are to ensure your safety—"

The chopper lurched again, and a cold flash of air blasted against Rusch's face. The rotor blades roared louder, then the cabin went black. A red emergency light snapped on, but in the dizzying spin Rusch could not steady his vision long enough to make out what was happening. One thing was clear though: Washburn was no longer in front of him.

In the dim light, Rusch could barely see the outline of Macy's still body. Uncontrolled grief struck him in the chest like a powerful blow, evacuating his breath like a vacuum. As he turned toward Kelsey, fire exploded into the cabin. Intense heat seared his cheeks. He instinctively threw his hands up to shield his face, a pain unlike anything he'd ever experienced enveloping his fingers and arms.

Flames sprouted all around him, licking at the spilled champagne along the floor.

Rusch saw Washburn in the fire's flaring light, his feet suddenly ablaze. The Secret Service agent stumbled backwards as if practicing an awkward dance step, arms flailing the dead air. And before the scream could leave his throat, he was gone, sucked through the jagged opening that used to be the cabin wall.

The rumble of another blast rocked the helicopter. Angry flames devoured the interior. Like a runaway elevator, the craft was suddenly free-falling, and Rusch once again reached for his daughter's hand. But she wasn't there.

Her seat—along with that section of the bulkhead—was gone.

A MAN DRESSED IN A BLACK leather jacket sat on a motorcycle, its muffled engine purring quietly. Somewhere off in his thoughts, Alpha Zulu was aware that the surrounding brush and field straw could ignite against the searing heat of his bike's exhaust pipes. But none of that mattered. At this point, nothing would sully their plans. They were well past the point of turning back.

Zulu checked his chronograph, then strapped a panoramic night vision device over his eyes. Seconds later, he located his target. The chopper was rocking from side to side and flying erratically, spinning uncontrollably as it fell from the heavens. He yanked the light amplification unit away just as a white flash brightened the sky.

Zulu rooted a tracking device from his pocket and followed a blinking red light as it coursed through

grid.

“Acquired the target,” he said into his helmet-mounted encrypted two-way radio.

“Copy that,” came the response.

The man seated behind him with his Timberlands curled over the rear footrests tapped him on his right shoulder. Time to go.

Zulu kicked the motorcycle into first gear as the VH-3 dropped from the lifeless night sky like a shot pheasant—a fiery, dying hulk heading for its final resting place.

*Federal Bureau of Investigation
Washington Field Office - WF
601 4th Street N
Washington, D.*

11:02 PM ES

FBI Supervisory Special Agent Aaron Uziel drummed his fingers on the armrest of his boss’s guest chair. The office was finished with tan paisley wallpaper, walnut furniture, and a floor-to-ceiling wall-to-wall entertainment cabinet. Playing across a forty-six-inch LCD television was ABC News Election Center, their pundits and anchors debating the latest presidential precinct tallies.

Uziel—“Uzi” to his colleagues and friends—stared vacantly at the images scrolling across the screen. A few moments earlier he had pulled his tired body out of the chair to lower the volume so he didn’t have to listen to the repetitive drone of newscasters and so-called experts spinning their party take on the evening’s results.

He ran the back of his hand across the black stubble that had accumulated on his face since this morning. His wife had always said it gave him a rugged look, and with the sharp, pleasing angles of his face, he had to agree. He never had difficulty getting a date as a young teen, and the lingering stares he got as his face and lean body matured only numbed him to all the attention. But in the past several years, his face had lost its boyish good looks. Lines crisscrossed his forehead like roads on a street map. Stress lines were one thing: live long enough in today’s type-A lifestyle and they accumulated like larvae on a corpse. But his were pain lines, formed from grief and deep-seated sadness...constant reminders of past tragedy. As if Uzi needed physical reminders. The emotional torment was enough, and it never gave him much of a reprieve.

The door swung open and Marshall Shepard lumbered in. Despite the relentless pressure that accompanied the assistant special agent-in-charge position, Shepard’s ebony skin was the polar opposite of Uzi’s: nearly wrinkle-free. His graying temples and creeping hairline were the sole overt signs of middle age. Shepard paused in front of his desk chair and removed his suit coat with a flourish, then draped it over the seatback.

“Well,” Shepard said, “you pulled a real freakin’ doozie this time, Uzi.”

Uzi rubbed at his dark eyes with a finger. “Are you trying to be funny, or do you always rhyme things late at night?”

Shepard sat down heavily. The large chocolate brown leather chair groaned. “Serious heat coming your way.”

“I’m surprised it took this long.”

Shepard massaged his temples. “My life just got a whole lot more complicated. Thanks a freakin’ bunch.”

“Look,” Uzi said, shifting in his chair and pulling himself upright. “I did what I thought was right. Osborn— What he did was dangerous. It wasn’t a little thing, Shep, it was big-time shit. And you know it. Could’ve gotten innocent people killed. It wasn’t the first time.”

Shepard waved a hand. “Yeah, I know the speech—”

“It’s not a speech.” Uzi was leaning forward now, his brow hard. “I did what was right, what I hope every agent would do if he or she was faced with the same situation.” He paused, leaned back, then continued. “It was the right thing to do. I get paid to do a job and I did it.”

“You don’t get paid to rat out a colleague.”

Uzi snorted. “You think I should’ve kept my mouth shut?”

Shepard looked away. “From my seat, you did the right thing. I just wish...I just wish it never happened. It’s bad all around.”

Uzi gave a conciliatory nod.

“I’m leaving him on the job. For now. You’ll have to deal with that.”

“Your decision. You’re the boss.”

Shepard shook his head. “You know I’d go to the end of the Earth for you, man. But some things can’t protect you from.”

Uzi’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t need your protection. I can take care of myself.”

Shepard rested two beefy elbows on his desk. “That’s never been an issue. But this is different. It’s not a criminal with a gun or a terrorist with a bomb... This is an enemy different from anything you’ve ever dealt with. The enemy’s your own unit, and they’re pissed as hell. They may never forgive you. You’ve gotta be prepared for that. That’s a lot to deal with, on top of, well...you know.”

“Not like I’ll ever forget.”

Shepard looked down. A moment of silence passed, then he asked, “And that brings me to why I wanted to meet with you. Whatever happened with that shrink?”

Uzi let his eyes wander to the television screen. “Stupid talking heads. None of ’em predicted such a close election. Not one of them.”

“You never saw her, did you?”

Uzi tilted his head. “President Glendon Rusch. Has a ring to it, don’t you think?”

“It’d be a good idea, especially because of what’s happened. The shrink can help. Your plate’s been full, and this Osborn thing’s only going to make it...fuller.”

Uzi tore his gaze from the television. “Thanks for the cliché. And for the advice.”

“Here’s the thing, Uzi. It’s not advice. Not this time. It’s mandatory. If you want to remain in charge in Washington. If you don’t, then it’ll be up to your new ASAC to determine what should be done.”

Uzi’s eyes widened. “Shep, don’t do this to me—”

“Your macho side doesn’t want to spill your guts to a woman, fine. You want someone closer to home, fine. No excuses this time.”

“Shep, please—”

“You should be thanking me for circumventing an EAP,” Shepard said, referring to the FBI’s in-house Employee Assistance Program that required a counselor to talk with an agent before sending him to a psychiatrist. “Besides, you did it to yourself. I’m just trying to keep my people happy. And right now they’re not very happy. You need to get some help and I need to keep things under control.”

Control's important right now. For your sake."

Uzi bit his lower lip.

"I've got someone else for you to see."

"You'd really transfer me if I don't see a shrink?"

"And by see him, I mean actually *go*. Talk to him, work with him. For as long as *he* sees fit."

"What about what I think?"

"I've cut you a lot of slack the past few years, Uzi. I've given you a lot of leeway in how you run your unit. Time's come for you to do it my way."

Uzi looked away.

"Way I see it, you ratted out Osborn because what he did struck too close to home. He reminds you of yourself. That's it, isn't it?"

Uzi stood up and leaned his palms on Shepard's desk. "I don't need this bullshit. Especially now. His face had turned crimson and his eyes were wide. "I did what I did because it was right. DIOG says so," he said, referring to the Bureau's Domestic Investigations and Operations Guide. "So don't be giving me any psychological mumbo jumbo explanation about how my actions had some deep meaning."

The two men stared at each other for a long moment.

"Sit. Down."

Uzi took his seat.

"You want to stay in Washington?"

"Yes."

"Thought so," Shepard said. "You'll be seeing Dr. Leonard Rudnick. You have an appointment with him tomorrow, eight o'clock." He reached into his drawer and tossed a business card in Uzi's direction.

Uzi scraped it off the desk. "Twenty-three eleven M Street. Two blocks from my house."

"Incentive to keep your appointments. Besides, he's a good man. You'll like him."

Uzi snorted. "Right."

The buzz on the phone made Uzi jump. Shepard lifted the handset and listened, his eyes narrowing as a noticeable layer of perspiration breaking out across his forehead. "Thank you," he whispered into the phone, then let the handset drop from his ear. His stunned gaze met Uzi's.

"What's wrong?" Uzi asked.

"Marine Two went down in a field forty miles from here." The two men were silent as they absorbed the impact of the statement. After a few seconds of silence, Shepard got to his feet. "Chopper's on its way to pick you up. Carolyn has the GPS coordinates. Get 'em and get out there. Now."

11:06 P

Paramedic Dell Gibbons and his partner had just returned from a three-car pileup on the interstate when the call came over the radio: a helicopter had crashed in a field just inside their patrol sector. Gibbons had to pee and his stomach was grumbling. But he shoved the rig into gear and headed out toward the nighttime countryside.

The paramedics were followed by a fire truck, three “attack engines,” and a couple of water tenders, sirens screaming as they rumbled down the roadway.

His partner leaned closer to the two-way radio that had spurted static a few seconds earlier. “Repeat?”

“That’s Marine Two that went down,” the dispatcher said. “The veep’s chopper.”

“The vice president?” Gibbons asked. “Holy shit.” He had the feeling he was about to enter a scene on par with the medics who had responded to the shooting of President John F. Kennedy. Well, almost on par. He felt a part of history. All the offhand remarks his mother had made about him not pursuing her dream of him becoming a doctor would be silenced forever. He would be one of the few who had responded to the scene when Vice President Rusch’s helicopter went down.

But as he toiled along the highway, he realized that his mother’s silence would last but a moment. Then she would tell him he could have been the *doctor* called upon to treat the vice president instead of “just” the paramedic who had transported him to the hospital.

“I read an article about these helicopters in some military magazine,” his partner said. “They got all kinds of special protection, lasers and shit like that. They can take enemy fire, even missiles, get hit, think, and still keep flying.”

“Yeah, well, this one ain’t still flying.”

SEVEN MINUTES AFTER THE CALL, Gibbons and his partner were first on the scene, arriving seconds ahead of the county sheriff and the fire trucks. The medics quickly surveyed the carnage, keeping a distance from the flames that stretched high into the sky, fed by an abundant supply of spilled Jet A fuel. Though less flammable than gasoline, the high performance kerosene burned very hot. Explosion wasn’t merely possible, but likely.

The firefighters jumped from their rigs and deployed their heavy inch-and-a-half hoses across the vast area of burning debris. In less than a minute, water was pumping onto the wreckage, followed seconds later by aqueous film forming foam designed to cap the fire and flammable liquids by suffocating them.

In short order, they cleared a narrow path for Gibbons and his partner to begin their search for survivors. But before Gibbons could move ten feet, he saw something off to his right: a man on the ground, crawling, trying to get to his hands and knees, without much success...dangerously close to the tip of a swirl of violent flames.

“Over there,” Gibbons yelled.

He and his partner were upon the man in seconds. They made a quick assessment, determined he was safe to move, then grasped him by both armpits and rolled him onto an adjacent spine board. After securing him with straps, they dragged the survivor away from the fire’s blazing heat.

Gibbons grabbed a pair of shears from his belt and cut through what remained of the man’s suit coat and dress shirt. “Sir, can you hear me?” he asked.

A groan in response, a half-hearted movement of his left arm.

“I’m a paramedic. We’re gonna take good care of you.”

The man’s face was so badly burned Gibbons couldn’t tell if he was thirty or fifty. “Starting a central line,” Gibbons said.

“A central line? We never do that in the—”

“We’ve gotta infuse him now, no choice. We’ll dress the burns and get him the hell out of here. Medevac?”

Seconds later, his partner lowered the two-way from his ear. "Three minutes."

Gibbons bit his lip as he worked, keeping his thoughts to himself. He was concerned about the extent of the burns covering the man's face, hands, and feet.

"Gib—I think I see someone else."

"Go," Gibbons said. He watched as his partner ran off in the direction of what appeared to be another prone body crawling slowly across the devastated landscape.

Gibbons finished establishing the IV, then noticed something shiny protruding from the partially burned suit coat he had cut away. He reached into the inside pocket and pulled out a blue and gold Waterman pen. It was thick and heavy, but well balanced. He rolled it between his fingers and saw something engraved on the barrel: "Vice President Glendon E. Rusch."

"Holy shit." He glanced over his shoulder, saw that no one was watching, and slipped the pen into his shirt pocket. Just in case his mother did not believe him.

11:39 P.

The wreckage was still partially ablaze, though the army of firefighters had the situation contained. Uzi stepped from the FBI's Black Hawk helicopter and ran toward the periphery of the crash site. He stopped at the outer border, taking in the carnage the way he'd been taught to view any crime scene: get the big picture first, then move inward for the details. He pulled a toothpick from his jacket pocket, stuck it in his mouth, and twirled it about with his lips and tongue.

Emergency personnel continued to wander the area, though at this point Uzi surmised the rescue aspect had concluded and they were now engaged in recovery efforts.

Uzi walked toward the concentration of investigators, which he estimated as numbering between fifty and sixty. The acrid stench of burning fuel mixed with smoldering electrical and mechanical parts flared his nostrils. He slid past a couple of workers who were placing klieg lights along the periphery, then knelt beside the first technician he came to, a woman in dark coveralls with "NTSE" written in white phosphorescent letters across her back.

He flashed his Bureau credentials and nodded at the ground she was examining. "Special Agent Aaron Uzi," he said, the toothpick bobbing on his lips. Years ago he got into the habit of truncating his last name during introductions, as most people botched it anyway. "I'm head of JTTF out of WFO," Uzi said, referring to the Joint Terrorism Task Force at the FBI's Washington Field Office.

"Angela Bonacelli, Aviation Go Team," she said. "Structures Specialist."

"What can you tell me?"

"I can tell you this A-triple-F makes it very hard to do my job."

"'A' what?"

"The foam. Good thing is it smothers everything in its path and puts out the fire. Bad thing is, well, it smothers everything in its path. And you're not supposed to disturb it or the fire'll start up again." She moved past a large piece of metal that was layered with foam and settled herself in a clearing beside loose dirt.

"Other than that," Uzi said, moving beside her.

Bonacelli spoke without looking up, suddenly fascinated by what lay in front of her, flicking at the soil with a small brush. "Both choppers crashed. Marine Two and its escort. Two survivors, from what I hear. A Secret Service agent and the vice president."

“You mean president-elect.”

As she sifted through the dirt, she said, “Yeah.”

“Anything else?”

“Wreckage is strewn over a very large area. Radar picked up pieces coming down ten miles from here.”

“Ten miles? On a helicopter crash?”

“First of all, we’ve got two choppers. We don’t know the sequence yet, but one could’ve gone down first, then the other. Leaves a much greater scatter pattern.” Bonacelli shrugged. “It’ll take a while before all the wreckage is sorted out.”

“Still,” Uzi mused. “Ten miles. Doesn’t seem possible, unless...”

“Unless there was an explosion of some sort.” Bonacelli nodded. “Disabling but not totally destructive. Debris falls, but the chopper stays aloft. Finally, she stalls or something else gives out and she drops out of the sky.”

“An explosion. Are you saying this was intentional?”

“Whoa,” she said, holding her hands out in front of her. “I was just reporting the size of the debris field. My job is to gather evidence, Agent Uzi. In a case like this, someone else who gets paid a lot more than me determines what it all means.”

“Theoretically. If there’s an explosion that’s not caused by a bomb, we’re talking either a mechanical or structural failure, right?”

“Right.” She looked out at the smoldering wreckage. “What a mess.” Almost to herself, she said, “How the hell could this have happened?”

Uzi turned away. It was exactly what he was wondering. From what he knew, the executive fleet of helicopters was meticulously maintained. Parts were replaced on a set schedule, whether or not they were worn. The human factor, however, was always something that needed to be ruled out: pilot error, improperly installed equipment, acts of terror. Until they had more information, it was ill advised to jump to conclusions.

But his mind was churning, nonetheless.

Uzi’s tongue played with the toothpick as he glanced out over the field of burning embers and twisted metal. “Who’s here? FAA, Hazmat, you guys, Secret Service, Marines...” He continued scanning the on-scene personnel, guessing affiliation by their dress and body language.

Bonacelli took a sample bag from her kit and scooped a trowel of dirt. “Defense Department, county sheriffs, and the executive branch medical team. I think that covers it.”

“Shitload of people.”

Uzi knew that in a crash scene such as this one, the National Transportation Safety Board ran the show until they determined cause. If it was accidental, the FBI left NTSB to finish their analysis. If it was a criminal act, the Bureau took over. In a case involving the executive branch, parallel investigations ran in the background: DOD, Secret Service, the Marines— They all did their own thing. All agencies were supposed to run their findings through the NTSB, but turf wars often compromised the process.

Uzi’s thighs were beginning to ache. He stood gingerly from his crouch, his old football knee clunking when he straightened it. Bonacelli rose as well.

“Who are your Powerplants and Systems Specialists?”

“John Maguire and Clarice Canfield,” she said, twisting her torso to scan the milling bodies

“They’re out there somewhere.”

Uzi’s glance followed hers and settled on a long-haired brunet in a business suit, walking slowly along the periphery. “Who’s that?” He wasn’t sure if he had said it aloud.

“Haven’t the slightest. Not one of ours.”

Uzi watched the woman take a few more steps, then turned back to Bonacelli. “Thanks. I’ll catch you a little later, in case there’s anything else you can tell me.” Without waiting for a response, he made his way toward the brunet. Her skirt ended halfway down her thighs, curiously short for a November evening in Virginia. Then again, she might’ve been dressed for a night out, then ordered a report to the accident scene. Whatever the reason, Uzi wasn’t complaining.

But as quickly as the hormones shot into his bloodstream, the guilt followed, like a radioactive tracer searching out its target tissue. How could he lust after another woman?

He and Dena had been together since high school, from the moment he had first laid eyes on her cute ass. She always laughed when he told her that his first attraction to her involved her backside. In her mind, she had more intriguing features. But as Uzi had told her, you can never explain attraction. It’s either there or it’s not. And with Dena, it started with something physical—her behind—and quickly progressed to the most intangible of assets, her heart and soul.

As the brunet slinked toward him, the thought that he was no longer married flashed in his mind. He was widowed. It was an important distinction, he told himself, though it was one he had not been able to settle deep within his core. Rational thoughts and logic almost always got lost inside the emotional baggage of guilt.

As an internal war raged between his hormones and conscience, he found himself blocking the woman’s path. Without meeting his eyes, she shifted her hips and deftly slithered around him.

“Have we met before?” He usually knew he was going to speak before words emerged from his mouth. In this case, something else had control over his body.

The woman turned slowly and looked at him, her lustrous hair falling across the left portion of her face. He could only make out the white of her right eye, as it reflected the burning embers along the ground.

“I’m sorry,” he said, stepping toward her. “Aaron Uziel.” He had used his full last name. Why? He couldn’t remember the last time he’d done that. He suddenly felt hot, a layer of sweat blanketing his skin. He stood there facing her before awkwardly extending a hand.

She took it in a firm handshake, then released it. “FBI?”

His left hand found the FBI creds ID clipped to his coat. “Yeah, I’m here for the wreck. To investigate.” *What the hell’s wrong with me? Of course I’m here to investigate.*

“Well, good luck,” she said.

Before he could object, or say something to prevent her from walking away, she turned and moved off in the opposite direction. Her hips seemed to gyrate rhythmically.

He shook his head, and an image of his beloved Dena popped into his mind.

“Hey, G-man.”

Uzi turned and had to hold up a hand against the blisteringly bright klieg light illuminating the area. Standing there was Special Agent Karen Vail, a profiler with the Bureau’s Behavioral Analysis Unit.

“Karen, what are you doing here?”

“My ASAC said to get my ass over here ASAP. So I got my ass over here. Luckily the rest of m

decided to come along for the ride.”

“I thought you’re in the adult crimes unit.”

“So you *were* paying attention.” She play-punched his shoulder. “I know some politicians behave like children, but last I checked, this *is* an adult crime.”

Uzi grinned at her. “I’ve missed working with you, Karen.”

“Actually, this should’ve been Art Rooney’s case, but Rooney just went on medical leave. They assigned it to my partner, Frank Del Monaco. But he’s caught up in traffic on the way back from New York. So you got me.”

“Don’t know Del Monaco.”

“Let’s just say you lucked out.”

Uzi held up a hand. “Hey, any time I get a chance to work with you, I’ve got the four-leaf clover thing going.”

“You’re not Irish, Uzi.”

Uzi jutted his chin back. “Are you holding that against me?”

“We all have our handicaps.”

A man wearing an NTSB jacket brushed against Uzi’s shoulder. “All right,” Uzi said, “you know the drill. Put on those mind-reading sixth sense glasses, take a good look around, then tell me who did this.”

“Mind if I click my heels three times first?”

Uzi puckered his lips and nodded. “So that’s how you profilers do it.”

“Hey, boychick!”

Uzi turned and saw a silhouetted figure moving toward him.

There was only one person who ever called him “boychick,” a Yiddish term that meant “man buddy.” A few more steps and his vision confirmed the approaching man to be Hector DeSantos, Department of Defense covert operative. Tall and lean, with the coolest pair of tiny, rectangular framed designer glasses Uzi had ever seen, DeSantos sauntered with the confidence of a battlefield soldier armed with an AK-47 and a belt full of ammo.

“Santa, my man. Long time.” The two men bumped fists.

“I heard somewhere you were with the Bureau. How’ve you been?”

Uzi bobbed his head. “Been better. You?”

“Same here. It’s been, what? Four, five years?”

“A little over six. Not that I’m counting.”

DeSantos leaned around Uzi. “Is that—Karen?”

“I was wondering how long it was going to take you to notice me,” Vail said.

“Hey,” DeSantos said, holding up a hand. “I never have a problem noticing a beautiful woman. This oaf was blocking my view.”

Uzi jutted his chin back. “Oaf?”

“Great to see you,” DeSantos said as he gave Vail a hug.

Uzi dug both hands into his jeans pockets. “I’d never figure you two for friends. You’re at, like, different ends of the personality spectrum. If there is such a thing.”

“We worked a case together,” Vail said.

“A pretty intense case,” DeSantos said with a chuckle. “I gotta warn you, Uzi, she’s a goddam

pistol.”

Uzi tilted his head in appraisal. “I’ve always thought of her more as a shotgun.”

DeSantos nodded. “Deadly at close range.”

“Exactly.”

Vail rolled her eyes. “Don’t know about you two, but I’ve got work to do.”

“Catch up with you later,” Uzi said.

“Is that a promise?” She winked, then walked off.

“So.” DeSantos waved a hand at the burning wreckage. “This your case?”

“Lucky me. What about you? You don’t handle shit like this. Don’t you still work in the basement doing things nobody’s supposed to know about?”

“I’m kind of on leave from the secret spy stuff. Better left for another time.”

“Consider it left. So whaddya got on this crash? You always know where to bite to get through the gristle.”

DeSantos chuckled. “Here’s the scoop: Air Traffic Control received a communication from Marine Two at twenty-three hundred-oh-one. They thought something hit their tail rotor. About the same time Marine Three reported a bright flash from Two’s aft, and then they thought something hit *them*. ATC had the two birds maintaining formation, so it’s pretty clear they didn’t hit each other. ATC was thinking maybe it was a piece of Two’s tail rotor that hit Three. They instructed Two to head for Quantico. Few seconds later, Three lost contact with ATC. Last communication at twenty-three oh two, Two reported a second jolt and a complete loss of control.”

Uzi mulled this a moment. “Maybe we can get something more from Rusch and that Secret Service agent.”

“The agent just bit the dust.”

“Shit.” He shifted the toothpick in his mouth. “Rusch?”

DeSantos shrugged. “Medevaced out. Burned pretty bad. How bad, I don’t know yet.”

“I assume they’ve activated COG,” Uzi said, referring to the Continuity of Government plan that provided for a shadow government to run the country’s infrastructure from a secure, hardened location in the event a terrorist attack wiped out Washington’s buildings and leadership.

DeSantos consulted his watch. “They should be boarding the transport choppers right about now. Until we get a handle on what the hell’s going on, Whitehall’s not taking any chances.”

Uzi glanced out at the wreckage. “Damn straight.”

“This kind of hit has gotta be a well-planned, coordinated attack. What do you think— al-Qaeda. Can they still pull off something like this?”

Uzi grunted. “There are sixty-nine major terrorist organizations in the world. Al-Qaeda’s a good place to start, but as to whether or not they could pull off something this complex, I don’t know. Not only have we taken out bin Laden, we’ve eliminated some of their top planners. Latest thinking is that AQ’s a loose collection of regional ‘affiliate’ groups that operate independently and use the AQ ‘brand’—no relationship to one another except for name and ideology. The stuff we found in bin Laden’s compound showed he was frustrated with those groups—they didn’t always do what he told them to do. But how AQ operated before we killed bin Laden, and how they’re operating now, could be different. Some think the leadership now sets the targets and their affiliates take care of business. Centralized decisions, decentralized execution.”

DeSantos shoved both hands into his jacket pockets. “And to think, we’re partially responsible for

creating this beast.”

“How do you figure?”

“We bankrolled bin Laden back in the eighties.”

“Oh, that. Yeah, well, it’s the Middle East. Your friend today is your enemy tomorrow. That get...but what kills me is that while we’re sending bin Laden two billion in taxpayer money to fight the Soviets, he was teaming up with a Palestinian Islamic member of the Muslim Brotherhood to build training camps in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda’s birth.”

“That shining moment in world history.” DeSantos tilted his head. “Two billion? Was it that much?”

“Something like that. Soon as we realized what was going on, we cut them off and shut down the banks that handled their money, but—”

“That’s when they started their own private banking system. The How— Howula?”

“*Hawala*. Yeah. Our sanctions worked, that was the good news. Bad news was it worked too well. It forced them to get their act together, form a more traditional centralized command and control structure. They used the illicit drug trade to develop affiliates and franchises in other countries. Bottom line—we had the right idea, but there was no way to know that freezing their money would force them to become a better organized, more professional organization.”

“Kind of like no way we could know that funding bin Laden to fight off the Soviets in the eighties could lead to him blowing up the Twin Towers and killing almost three thousand Americans twenty years later. What’s the saying? ‘Seemed like a good idea at the time’? At least we finally got the fucker.”

“Yeah, we got him. But I’m not sure how much good that really did. I mean, yeah, we avenged the thousands he’d killed. And taking him out may’ve disrupted the group and created a temporary leadership scramble. But in terms of impacting their effectiveness, not so much.”

“Maybe,” DeSantos said. “Maybe not. But if we go on the assumption that AQ is now more of a network of franchised groups, what’s your gut say about who we should be looking at?”

Uzi blew a mouthful of air through his lips. “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s generally considered the most dangerous, but close behind is Islamic Jihad of Yemen, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Al-Qaeda Organization in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Shabaab, al-Humat, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, East Turkestan Islamic Movement. Maybe a handful of others.”

“I asked about your gut, not our Ten Most Wanted.”

As Uzi opened his mouth to reply, an electronic guitar sung from DeSantos’s pocket.

DeSantos patted his jacket, found the BlackBerry, and brought it to his face. “Yeah.” His eyes narrowed. “Okay.” He listened a moment, then turned to Uzi. “So much for the obvious.”

“We don’t want it to be too easy. That’d be no fun.” Uzi nodded at the phone.

“Not sure yet. Intel could be good, could be shit. I’ll check it out, let you know.” DeSantos’s voice—and gaze—suddenly drifted beyond Uzi’s shoulder. “Mm, mmm. Who’s that?”

Uzi turned and immediately locked on the woman DeSantos was looking at. “Don’t know. I ran into her a few minutes ago. My brain turned to mush.”

“Yeah, well, my other brain ain’t mush, I can tell you that.” DeSantos tilted his head. “Finger-licking good looking thing.”

“Aren’t you married?”

“Last time I checked, a marriage license didn’t come with blinders. Besides, Maggie and I have

an agreement.”

“I don’t think I want to hear it.”

“You probably don’t. Knowing you, it’d make your ears curl.”

Uzi was staring at the woman, watching her lean frame as she moved amongst the wreckage.

“Yeah,” he said, not really hearing DeSantos’s comment.

“You know, you gave me shit, but looks to me like your radar’s locked in on the same target. You’re married—and I know your wife ain’t as understanding as Maggie.”

“Yeah.” Uzi tore his eyes from the woman. “I mean, no. It’s— It’s a long story.”

DeSantos’s gaze was again stuck to the woman’s body like Crazy Glue. “Miniskirt and high heels. Strange shit to be wearing at a crash scene, don’t you think?”

“Do me a favor, Santa. Get me her name and find out who she’s with.” Hoping his question wouldn’t initiate a discussion, he quickly added, “It’s for the investigation.”

DeSantos dipped his chin and looked at Uzi over the tops of his glasses. “Right. ‘The investigation.’”

Uzi saw three of his task force members approaching in the distance, led by Agent Hoshi Koh, his office confidante. He got their attention with the wave of a hand, then told DeSantos he would meet up with him later.

As DeSantos walked off to begin his own analysis, Uzi shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his long black leather coat and met his colleagues a few strides from the perimeter of the wreckage. He filled them in on what he knew—which wasn’t much. As Uzi expected, with the exception of Hoshi, they gave him a cold reception. Word traveled fast in field offices, even one as large as WFO.

Uzi and his team split up to begin their respective tasks. While en route to the site, Shepard had called Uzi to inform him that two dozen additional agents had been dispatched off-site to work the crash’s behind-the-scenes logistics: interviewing the executive transport division’s mechanics, pulling maintenance records, amassing weather reports for the region, and visiting with Air Traffic Control in an effort to reconstruct the helicopter’s flight path during its last fateful moments.

Uzi looked for investigators wearing NTSB coveralls and eventually located Clarice Canfield. She was a take-charge woman, five-foot-one in thick-soled boots and a short, military-style hairdo. They made introductions and canned the small talk.

“So what can you tell me about the aircraft?” Uzi asked.

“Which one, the VH-3 or the Super Stallion?”

“Let’s start with the H-3.”

“Walk with me,” she said. “I’ve got to find what’s left of the cockpit.” She started moving, faster than Uzi had thought possible with such short legs. Uzi flicked on a small flashlight and followed close behind like a puppy.

“I can tell you anything you want to know about it,” she said.

“I flew H-3s in the military, so I know about its older cousin. But I need to know everything you can tell me about this particular model, the executive fleet.”

Canfield shrugged. “It’s your basic Sikorsky masterpiece, souped up for VIPs. This model started transporting the executive staff with the Kennedy administration. Just about my favorite chopper. Thing’s a bulldog. Energy-absorbing landing gear to increase crash survivability, self-sealing, puncture-resistant fuel tanks. Even the seats are shielded. This thing can take twenty-three-millimeter shells and live to tell about it. But inside the cabin, it’s luxury all the way. Even has a galley and

restroom.” She paused long enough to turn around to glance at Uzi. “I feel like a used car salesman.”

Someone passing by caught Uzi’s shoulder and spun him half around. He took a couple large steps to catch up to Canfield, who had continued walking. “Carries a dozen people?” he asked.

Canfield stopped abruptly, then knelt beside a pile of foam-covered twisted metal. “These have a crew of three, sixteen passengers. Top speed, a hundred-seventy knots. Range, four-hundred forty-five miles.” She shined her flashlight on the wreckage, shook her head, then stood up.

“And the Super Stallion?”

“Also built by Sikorsky. CH-53. Three GE turbine engines, air-to-air refueling, max speed about the same as the H-3. It’s the military’s workhorse. Whatever you need it to do, it can do. Special ops, military transport, search and rescue, you name it. Coolest thing is it can carry sixteen tons of supplies, cargo, vehicles, artillery, and troops.”

Uzi’s eyebrows rose. “Sixteen tons?”

“Think of it as the most powerful helicopter we’ve got—on steroids.”

“So the Stallion’s a stud. How does something like that end up looking like... chopped meat?”

“Don’t know enough yet to say.”

“Come on, don’t hold out on me. You must have some idea. You can’t tell me you haven’t already started formulating an opinion.”

Canfield tilted her head, leaned closer to something on the ground, then straightened back up. “Can’t draw any conclusions till we have all the evidence collected. You know the drill.”

Uzi lifted his flashlight and lit his face from below. “Based on what you’re telling me, both these choppers were designed to withstand attack. The Stallion’s built like a fortress, the closest thing we’ve got to a flying tank. Seems to me nothing could take it down unless someone was aiming a Sammy at it. Am I right?”

She shrugged a shoulder, then looked away to avoid eye contact.

Uzi stepped to within a foot from her. “Could it have been a Sammy?” Not surprisingly, she did not answer. Uzi knew this was a sore subject. “Sammys,” or SAMs, were shoulder-launched surface-to-air infrared heat-seeking missiles that traveled 1,500 miles per hour—but stood only five feet tall and weighed a stingy thirty-five pounds. Known terrorist groups had gotten hold of at least three hundred of them several years ago. Then there were the Chinese and Russian versions, which could’ve fallen into who-knew-whose hands, and the Iraqi SAMs unaccounted for after the US invasion.

“Clarice.” Uzi waited until he had eye contact. “Could it have been a Sammy?”

“Not likely. You’d need several missiles striking the choppers at the same time. These birds are equipped with state-of-the-art anti-missile technology.”

“Such as what?”

“Fast-blinking strobe lights, like the ones in nightclubs and discos. Infrared jamming. The strobes confuse the SAM’s eye and throw the missile off course.”

“We used to use a low-tech version: throw a hot flare out of the aircraft.”

“Same principle. You mind?” She pushed away Uzi’s flashlight, which had strayed toward her eyes. “They’re also equipped with lasers so bright that they’d confuse the missile’s guidance system. Kind of like blinding someone by pointing your flashlight in their eyes.” She forced a smile, then crouched beside a small section of the chopper’s metal skin. “Then there’s IR-attenuating paint that dims the helicopter body’s infrared signature.”

She ran her own light over the fragment, which was nearly free of foam. “They also spread cruci-

helicopter components around the vehicle, and install backup copies. That way, the chopper's not likely to be destroyed by a single missile."

Uzi nodded. He had forgotten about that. "What about the shell of the helicopter? What's it made of?"

"Aluminum alloy. But parts of it have been ballistically hardened. Tough, lightweight armor placed around the body." Canfield shut off her light and replaced the fragment from where she had taken it.

Uzi stood there a moment, lost in thought. Finally, he said, "But bombs, strategically placed, could take these choppers down. Right?"

She forced her gaze back to his. Her eyes lingered there a long second, then she turned and walked away.

UZI SPENT THE NEXT NINETY MINUTES covering the crash site and talking with investigators. He kept asking questions designed to prod them into reaching preliminary conclusions as to causation. Though he would not hold any of them accountable for such early impressions, he wanted to get a jump on where to focus his investigation.

No matter who Uzi spoke to, no matter which agency they were with, he kept getting the same opinion: this did not look like mechanical or structural failure.

Either Clarice Canfield was wrong, and a shoulder-mounted missile had been successfully fired at the chopper, or a fuel tank exploded—or a bomb was detonated from inside the craft. Any of these possibilities, even a few years ago, would have raised eyebrows, even led some to chuckle. But after TWA-800's supposed gas tank catastrophe, and after discovering stolen SAMs and detailed al-Qaeda manuals in Afghanistan as well as bin Laden's own operational notes—not to mention security breaches at countless military bases—all three scenarios now made his list of possible explanations.

He approached DeSantos, who was crouching beside the NTSB Powerplants specialist, John Maguire. DeSantos had a bright white LED flashlight trained on a large piece of metal that Maguire was handling with rubber gloves.

"Boychick. Look what we've got here."

Uzi knelt beside DeSantos. "A hunk of aluminum. So what?"

"It's what this hunk of aluminum tells us that's got my interest." DeSantos elbowed Maguire. "Tell him."

"It's only preliminary, Hector. I don't know how accurate it is. I could be way off—"

"Tell him. Uzi's cool, you won't catch any heat if you're wrong."

Maguire hesitated, then sighed deeply. "First of all, best I can tell, there's nothing here from the tail rotor. If this bird fell from the sky, as I would expect it to, all the pieces would be in a well-defined area. They're not. That would lead me to believe that the tail rotor might be part of the debris that was picked up on radar a few miles back." He looked at Uzi, as if willing him to draw a conclusion.

Before Uzi could speak, Maguire nodded at the piece of metal in his hands. "This is from the transmission housing." He motioned to DeSantos to shine his flashlight on the fragment. "See this?" he asked, pointing with an index finger. "Right here."

Uzi leaned closer, his warm breath fogging the chilled air. "What am I supposed to be seeing there I'm not?"

"The sharp, jagged edges."

“Okay, yeah,” Uzi said. “And that means what?”

“When we look for mechanical fatigue, and therefore structural failure, we expect to see chafing the metal. If we look closely, we can see cracks where the metal gave way. It breaks, and the bird falls from the sky. But there’s no chafing, no overt signs of cracking here. No signs of fatigue whatsoever. In fact, all these parts look damn well brand new.”

“So you’re saying it’s not structural failure.”

“That’s a conclusion I’m not willing to commit to just yet. What I’m saying is that I don’t see any signs of the parts being defective or worn. But there is evidence that something pushed against the transmission housing. Something very powerful and very sudden,” Maguire said.

“‘Something’ as in...what?” Uzi asked.

DeSantos said, “Man, you’re thick. A freaking bomb, that’s what.”

“But there’s something that disturbs me,” Maguire said.

Uzi frowned. “If it ‘disturbs’ you, I’m willing to bet it’s really going to upset me.”

Maguire placed the metal fragment where he’d found it. “Whoever did this used a sophisticated device to take down the vice president’s bird. As for the Stallion...” Maguire shrugged a shoulder. “Had to be something very powerful. And gaining access to these choppers is damn-near impossible.

“The fact that they were able to do it is definitely alarming,” Uzi said. He studied Maguire’s face a moment. “But...that’s not what disturbs you.”

“No,” Maguire said. “If you’ve got a bomb, and you’ve gained access to the chopper, I could think of several more effective places to put it. Places that would’ve made it immediately drop out of the sky. Like the Stallion did. But if radar and the flight path check out, they flew Marine Two for almost five minutes after the first Mayday call.”

“Let’s go back to the Stallion for a minute. They took it down real fast. No fooling around there. What’s its Achilles’ heel?”

“Without a doubt, the Jesus Nut.”

Uzi smiled out of the right portion of his face. “Excuse me? What the hell’s a Jesus Nut?”

“I’m not being sacrilegious. It’s the ‘nut’ that holds everything together at the top of the main rotor. Screw around with it, put a bomb on it, the bird’s toast. Drops out of the sky.”

“Which is what happened.”

Maguire bobbed his head. “That’s what we think happened, based on radar. We’ll know more once I hear from the team assigned to that crash site. They’re searching right now with infrared, but there’s a hundred miles to cover. That said, if you want my opinion on the most effective way of bringing that chopper down in the middle of the Virginia countryside, that’d be it.”

They were silent for a few seconds before Uzi spoke. “So whoever did this wanted the Stallion down quickly, but they wanted Marine Two to stay up awhile longer. Why?”

“There’s no terror in a quick death,” DeSantos offered. “Whoever did this not only wanted Ruseff dead, he wanted him and his family to suffer the terror of his helicopter going down.”

“So this might’ve been personal,” Uzi said. His gaze met DeSantos’s. “Looks like this is going to be my job for the next year or so.”

“It would appear so.”

A DUST SWIRL ROSE FROM the ground a hundred yards to the north. Uzi, who had left DeSantos and Maguire moments ago, could tell a helicopter had landed, and seconds later the backlit silhouette

of a clot of men began moving toward the debris field. One of them had Marshall Shepard's shifting gait. Another appeared to be FBI Director Douglas Knox—followed by an unusually large security detail—and another gentleman Uzi could not immediately identify in the murky darkness.

The men stepped into the bright klieg light aura that hovered above the crash site. Knox, wearing dark suit and matching overcoat that contrasted with his thick head of gray hair, looked out at the firefighters hauling their equipment back to their rigs and the army of investigators combing the debris.

At this proximity, Uzi recognized the other official with Knox as Director of Central Intelligence Earl Tasset, which explained the large contingent of bodyguards: in addition to Knox's security detail, Tasset's Security Protection Officers were also along for the ride.

Tasset said a few words to Knox, shook his head in disapproval at the scene before them, then approached Uzi and Shepard. Tasset had pointed, petite features, John Lennon glasses, and above-the-collar wavy, salt-and-pepper hair with a tightly cropped goatee. Uzi always thought the guy looked more like a progressive college professor than a top spy master.

"Mr. Directors," Shepard said, "this is Special Agent Aaron Uziel, head of WFO's JTTF." Both men, each intimately aware of the Joint Terrorism Task Force, nodded.

Uzi shook Knox's gloved hand, then Tasset's. "An honor to meet both of you," Uzi said.

Knox's eyes roamed the area beyond Uzi's right shoulder. "Report."

"Everything's very preliminary at this point, sir, but my impression is that this was not an accidental downing. No overt signs of mechanical or structural failure. Not to mention they were both real tough birds."

"Anything point to a bomb?"

"There's some...suggestion that an explosive device was placed beside the transmission housing of the veep's chopper. But this is all very preliminary."

"Son of a bitch." Knox clenched his jaw. "Find these people, Shepard. Whatever resources you need, whatever it takes, I don't care." He turned to Uzi. "You've got nine days to get me an answer."

Uzi's eyebrows rose. "Nine days?"

"Yes sir," Shepard said quickly. "We'll have that information for you, not a problem."

"I want to be kept aware of everything you learn," Tasset said to Shepard. "The idea is to work together here, pool our intel."

Knox's scowl deepened. "I'm sure he's well aware of 'the idea,' Earl." Knox threw a cautious look at Uzi, then moved off to tour the wreckage. Tasset and his people followed.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Uzi spoke. "Shep, I can't guarantee we'll be any closer to solving this thing in nine weeks, let alone nine days."

"When the director tells you he wants something done, you do it, Uzi. No excuses, just answers. Answers."

Uzi frowned and turned away.

"You need something, let me know. More agents, just tell me how many. That's how this is going to work." When he didn't get a reply, Shepard put a reassuring arm around his friend's shoulder. "Hey, someone tried to kill the president-elect of the United States, Uzi. That's never happened before. This is major shit. And you get to be the guy in the middle of it all."

"Somehow that doesn't make me feel better, Shep." Uzi held up a hand before Shepard could respond. "I won't let you down."

“I know you won’t.” He tightened his large paw around Uzi’s shoulder, then turned and headed o
toward the director.

Uzi rolled his head back, ran his hands across his face...and wondered how he was going to delive

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