



TRAITOR

MURRAY McDONALD

Traitor

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Traitor

by

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Chapter 1

Saturday 5th July
Washington D.C.

The sound of the gunshot reverberated through her entire body. Her sole purpose in life was to ensure that wouldn't happen. She crashed through the door and was met by the sight of her colleague, Nick Geller, bleeding from a chest wound. Unfortunately it wasn't his own.

"Shots fired, POTUS is down, I repeat POTUS is down," she said calmly into her mic. Years of training had taken over.

She swept the Yellow Oval Room as more agents came crashing through the door. Trauma kits in hand, they rushed to the President's aid.

"Bill?!" she shouted, looking at her colleague, pressing his hand into the President's wound. The room was clear, except for the President and Bill Jameson, the head of the President's Secret Service protection team. A National Intelligence Cross lay on the floor next to the President; its recipient was nowhere to be seen. Frankie began to panic. Her training had not covered the loss of a loved one.

"Balcony!" replied Bill urgently, the President's blood spurting between his fingers as he tried to maintain pressure while handing over to the medics who were flooding into the room.

Frankie rushed across the lounge and burst onto the second floor balcony, her gun at the ready. The balcony was empty. The corner of her eye caught a movement on the railing that ran around the perimeter of the balcony. A thin wire was attached to the railing and trailed down to the ground below. Frankie moved across and watched a man unclip himself from the wire and take off at a sprint.

"Bill! Who's Nick chasing?"

"Chasing?!"

"Who's he chasing?! Where's the shooter?!" she shouted, scanning the grounds for whoever had taken the shot.

"He's not chasing, he's running!" replied Bill, as he joined her.

Frankie lined up her shot. He was already beyond pistol range but still within her capability. The image of the morning they'd had had flashed through her mind. She should be taking the shot, but it wasn't right. She could still feel him inside her.

She hesitated. "Are you sure?!" she asked, taking aim.

"Shoot him!" screamed Bill, lining up his own shot.

They both squeezed off shots. They both missed, although only one wasn't intentional.

"Shit! We missed him!" said Bill, watching Nick disappear around the side of the White House. Bill turned back towards the scene in the lounge and spoke into his mic. "All agents, the shooter is Nick Geller, DIA agent, last seen on the southeast corner of the residence, heading towards Kennedy Gardens. He is armed and extremely—"

A massive explosion interrupted Bill, lifting him and Frankie off their feet and slamming them into the railing. As heavy dust filled the air, the entire West Wing of the White House lay in ruins. The President was holding on by a thread and Frankie held her stomach, praying to God that the baby and the President's would-be assassin was safe.

Chapter 2

The White House - East Wing Presidential Emergency Operations Centre (PEOC)

Frankie took the seat indicated to her. Her mind was still racing. Barely thirty minutes had passed since the shooting and the explosion. The President was on his way to the Walter Reed National Military Medical Centre. His condition was described as grave. She looked around the room. For every face she recognized, there was another she didn't. Everybody remained silent. No humdrum chatter, just the deathly silence of shock.

From the faces she knew, she was the only Secret Service Agent in the room. She was also, at least she assumed, the only person in the room with intimate knowledge of the suspect. She focused on the word 'suspect'. She was still struggling to accept that Nick was capable of the deceit involved in the acts he was alleged to have committed. She had no issue believing he was capable of the acts themselves, they were what he had been trained for, that's what he did - just not to his own President or country.

The arrival of the FBI's Deputy Director and Bill Jameson, Frankie's immediate boss, silenced the already quiet room completely. Bill sought her out and, with a flick of his head, summoned her to him. Frankie got up and walked across the room, conscious of every pair of eyes in the room following her closely.

"Could you just give us a few minutes, Frankie?" whispered Bill in her ear. His apologetic tone made it clear that he did not agree with her having to leave the room.

Frankie opened the door to leave just as the Deputy Director's voice boomed across the room.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, you've been selected as the brightest and finest in your organization and you're here to lead the hunt for Nick Geller."

Frankie closed the door behind her, tears pouring down her cheeks, as she realized that she was not just closing the door to the room. Her life, her career, everything that made her who she was, had just ended. She had also been one of the brightest and finest operatives in the organization. She was the Deputy Lead Agent in charge of the presidential protection detail. No one had ever reached that position at her age and, more surprisingly, not with her background. Her professionalism and abilities were without equal and nobody doubted Frankie had a long and illustrious career ahead of her. Had it not been for Nick Geller, Frankie would have been representing the Secret Service on the Task Force. In all likelihood, she was about to be labeled a potential accomplice and conspirator. She began to shake with panic. She hadn't even considered that prospect.

With her legs no longer able to support her weight, she slid down the wall and pulled herself into a tight ball. The questions poured through her mind, all unanswered.

How did I miss the clues? How could I have trusted him? Will anyone believe me?

Every question had the same answer. A blank. The more she asked of herself, the less sense she made and the more she realized she was going to be suspected.

Nick Geller. She had loved him. She still did. Love didn't just stop. They had first spotted each other six months earlier, flirted with each other professionally, both knowing they wanted more. She was delighted when the flowers arrived at the White House addressed to 'The President's hot guard'. Embarrassingly, they were handed to her. She wasn't the only female member of the President's protection detail. However, it seemed the mailroom were in little doubt and directed them straight to her.

He was everything she wanted from a man. Handsome, well mannered, well travelled, intelligent and, most importantly, she actually felt he could protect her. His eyes pierced into her, opened her up like no one had ever managed before. He had a raw power and energy that very few possessed. There was no doubt in her mind that Nick Geller was a very special man. The man for her. She shared her house, her life, her body and soon a child with Nick Geller. She hadn't even had a chance to tell him about the test she had only taken that morning, or its positive outcome. She banged her head back against the wall in frustration.

Would he have still done it if I had told him?

It was irrelevant. She hadn't thought he was capable of anything like this to begin with.

Frankie felt the floor vibrate as a herd of shiny leather shoes thundered towards her with purpose. She pulled herself together, stood up and wiped her eyes as best she could. The thunder rose to a crescendo as the posse appeared at the end of the corridor. Secret Service agents flanked the protectee so well that Frankie could not even see who was coming. She assumed it was either the Vice President or the First Lady, given the size of the protection detail and the entourage in tow.

Her first glimpse of the protectee made Frankie realize that the worst day of her life had just gotten worse. The Speaker of the House drew to a stop by her side. The Chief Justice, Frankie could see, was still pushing his way through the entourage, a bible held high above the crowd, as he maneuvered his way towards the Speaker.

"Aisha Franks?" asked the Speaker, looking at Frankie.

Frankie winced at the Arab name her Muslim mother had insisted on giving her. A name that very few knew existed.

Chapter 3

Fort Detrick, Maryland

United States Army Medical Research and Materiel Command (USAMRMC)

Brigadier General Harold F. McLennan watched the horror at the White House unfold on the 24/7 news channels. With each passing minute, another of his senior staff joined him as the news of the attack on their President and the world's most prestigious address filtered through. They were desperate to know how their Commander and Chief was doing and whether any of their departments could assist in any way.

Between them, they controlled and developed the most advanced medical research and procedures in the world for battlefield injuries, diseases and biological weapons. If there were any people in the world who could help in that situation, the professionals crowding General McLennan's office were amongst the very few who could. The General had made a call to Walter Reed Hospital the moment he had heard the President had been shot. His people were ready to help in any way they could. The offer was noted and much to McLennan's concern and frustration, they did not update or offer any details of the President's condition.

His answer, therefore, remained the same to each of his concerned subordinates. Walter Reed would call if they needed them. In the meantime, all they could do was hope and pray for the President and all the other casualties.

An audible gasp silenced his office when the first aerial shots of the White House were broadcast across the world. The West Wing, the executive branch of the federal government, lay in ruins. The main body of the house remained undamaged but it was a very different silhouette that would be adorning the Washington skyline for some time to come.

The new skyline faded out, replaced by a somber-faced White House spokesman in front of a hastily prepared podium on the East side of the White House, out of view of the rubble and debris that littered the previously pristine White House lawns.

General McLennan hit the volume button on his remote and bathed the office in the background sounds of emergency sirens a few hundred miles away.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," began the spokesman, "I will be brief. At approximately 9:55 this morning, a gunman shot and injured the President. The President is responding well to treatment and is expected to make a full recovery." The spokesman paused as the relief was absorbed by reporters and audiences at home. "To aid his escape, the gunman triggered an explosive device that had damaged the West Wing of—"

The office door burst open and grabbed everyone's attention away from the TV screen. Breathless and panting Colonel Valerie Barnes, a sight that, without the dramatic entrance, would have got their attention anyway, stood almost unable to speak.

"General," she gasped, between attempts to re-oxygenate her lungs.

General McLennan was already up and helping her into a seat before she collapsed.

"Val?" he asked, concern deep in voice.

"W-we've got a Level 4 b-breach!" she stammered.

Level 4 was the highest biosafety hazard category involving highly infectious diseases with high fatality rates and no known cures; it was not an area in which you ever wanted to suffer a breach. A number of her colleagues in the room openly moved away from her.

"Not a leak, a *theft!*" she said, making it clear she thought this situation far worse. She could

control a leak.

—“Impossible,” replied the General, calmly. “This facility is as secure as Fort Knox and anywa security would have alerted me by now.”

“I’ve only just discovered it!” she said, tears welling in her eyes. The implications of her failu were catastrophic.

“I’m sorry to say that so far we have been unable to locate the Vice President.” The voice of th spokesperson cut through the chaos in the room, as the enormity of the announcement caught the ears.

“What did he just say?” asked the General, turning back to the TV.

“It looks as though the Vice President was in the West Wing when the explosion was triggered, explained one of his subordinates.

“Sorry, what explosion?” asked Val.

“The President has been shot and the gunman blew up the West Wing as part of his getaway,” replied the General succinctly.

“Oh my God! Is he okay?”

“It appears so. Now, what is it you think is missing?”

“I don’t *think* anything is missing,” she replied angrily. “I *know* that fifty doses of *Zaire Ebolavirus* have been stolen!”

“You must be mistaken,” argued the General, shaking his head. However, his demeanor change

“What’s the big deal?” asked one of the few non-medical members of the team.

“You know the movie *Outbreak*?” replied Val. On receiving an affirmative nod, she continue “*Zaire Elboavrius* is like the disease they faced but much worse and with no magic serum to cure it!”

“Oh shit!”

The TV was issuing an alert in the background and caught Val’s attention: “*We ask all citizen across the city and beyond to look out for this man. Please do not approach him. He is armed and extremely dangerous. If you do see him, call 911, lock all doors and windows and wait for th emergency services to attend. His name is Nick Geller...*”

Nick Geller’s photo appeared on the screen.

“Holy fuck!” said Val. Her heart almost stopped as the image burned into her retinas.

“What?” asked the General, turning to the screen and seeing Geller’s face.

“He was here yesterday!” Val managed to say. “Oh fuck! What has he done?!”

The General ran to his desk and picked up the phone. “Get me the Chairman of the Joint Chief now!!” he commanded. “Whatever he’s doing, get him on the phone now!!”

While he waited to be put through, he turned to Val. “Get to DC immediately. I want the White House and Walter Reed Hospital quarantined. Nobody gets out of either building until we have an all clear and I mean nobody!”

Chapter 4

“Yes, Madam Speaker,” replied Frankie.

“The President wants you in on the investigation,” she said gruffly before barging into the Operations Center. “The President is alive and will recover,” she announced loudly, walking to the seat at the top of the table. The Speaker was on the opposite side of the political divide from President Mitchell and she made sure he knew it.

A cheer echoed throughout the room but was quickly stifled as the Speaker continued. “I’m afraid that’s the only good news. The Vice President is believed to have been in the West Wing. From the initial reports of the damage, it is unlikely that he has survived. The President is currently incapacitated and as such I will take office while he recovers.”

A more somber audience watched the Chief Justice step forward and swear in the Speaker of the House as the Commander and Chief of the United States for the first time in its history. Maria Lopez became the first Speaker, female and Hispanic, to ascend to the highest office in the land.

“Madame President,” concluded the Chief Justice before leaving the Operations Center.

“Miss Franks?”

Frankie stepped forward from the doorway and into full view of the table of attendees when President Lopez said her name.

“As I said, the President—sorry, President *Mitchell*,” she corrected, “wants you to be fully involved in the investigation. As such, you will be the Secret Service’s representative on the task force. Please take a seat.”

A few grumbles echoed around the table, none of which President Lopez made any attempt to stop, making it abundantly clear that she herself disagreed with Frankie’s involvement. Bill, however, smiled warmly and gladly gave up his seat for her before leaving to resume his normal duties.

“So what do we know?” asked President Lopez.

To her right, the Deputy Director of the FBI, Paul Turner, stood up. A headshot of Nick Geller was displayed on the bank of screens that surrounded the room.

“This man,” he said, looking directly at Frankie, “Nick Geller, while receiving the National Intelligence Cross for services to the country, suddenly and without warning, produced a weapon, shot the President, and fled via the Truman balcony to the grounds below. From there, he made his escape under cover of a massive explosion that has all but demolished the West Wing of the White House.”

Hearing it out loud for the first time still did not make Frankie believe it was true. There had to be a catastrophic mistake.

“Run VT,” said Turner.

Any lingering suspicions of Nick’s innocence were instantly quashed. The video feed from the presentation of Nick’s medal played out before them. President Mitchell, smiling warmly, walked towards Nick, the medal in his hands ready to be placed over Nick’s head. Bill stood off to the side, relaxed in the presence of the President and a man who had proved to be beyond reproach. He was a man who had risked everything for his country. He was a hero.

Frankie gasped when Nick dropped his hand and in a flash produced a small pistol-like object. He fired it once directly at the President, who fell immediately to the floor. Nick dropped the pistol and ran for the balcony door. Bill rushed forward to assist the President, simultaneously drawing his gun. He managed one shot towards Nick as he desperately tried to stem the flow of blood from the President’s wound. Frankie rushed through the door, her gun drawn and was directed onto the balcony.

That was the last scene before the screen went blank.

—It was also the first time Frankie realized that the shot she had reacted to had not been Nick but Bill's. Whatever weapon Nick had used had not only been undetectable to the scanners but it was silenced. It also put an end to any doubt about Nick's guilt.

"Tell me more about this Geller guy," prompted President Lopez.

"Up until 9:55 a.m., Madame President, I would have said he was the all American hero. former Ranger and Delta Force soldier, he moved into the DIA's Defense Clandestine Services where he's been for a number of years as a specialist in the war on terror. Most recently he infiltrated and assassinated the recently appointed head of Al Qaeda."

The murmurs around the table started as this revelation came to light. Geller's assassination of the Al Qaeda leader had been a closely guarded secret and the reason for Geller's private presentation ceremony by the President of the highest award to an intelligence officer: the National Intelligence Cross. Nick Geller had been about to join the ranks of very, very few elite. Along with his previous Medal of Honor, the National Intelligence Cross would have elevated him to the equivalent of a double Medal of Honor winner.

The President motioned for quiet, shaking her head in bemusement. "Do we have any idea how on earth..." she began but struggled to find the words to convey how bizarre the situation really was.

A few heads turned questioningly to Frankie, who didn't look up, not wanting to engage with anyone on the inner mind of a man who up until a couple of hours ago she would have sworn she knew inside and out.

Before anyone could offer an opinion, the door swept open to reveal another entourage of suits. The Director of National Intelligence led the group and held up a DVD as though it were his invitation to crash the party.

"Madame Speaker," he interrupted, before noting the very subtle but deliberate shake of Deputy Director Turner's head. "My apologies, Madame *President*," he corrected, "I think you will want to see this and I'm sure it will answer a few questions for you." He handed the DVD to an aide on his left.

While the room waited for the DVD to be cued up, all eyes were on the TV screens displaying news broadcasts from the grounds of the White House. Buried deep in the ground, out of reach of every conceivable manmade weapon, there was no safer place for them to be.

"Don't press play!" commanded the President. The sound in her voice conveyed the fear that averted in the room shared.

Before she could say any more, the red phone in front of her began to ring. A direct link to the Pentagon and the military sat at her fingertips. She looked at the TV screen showing hermetically sealed biohazard-suited soldiers surrounding the White House perimeter.

Frankie watched in horror as the newly pronounced and acting President of the United States listened, failing to hide her terror at whatever was being conveyed to her by the military chiefs. She slowly replaced the receiver and turned from the screens to her captive audience.

"Well, things just got a whole lot worse," she said nervously. "It appears that we may all have been exposed to a highly contagious and deadly virus. It seems Mr Geller may not have failed to kill the President after all."

Frankie began to shake; it was too much. Nick loved her, he hadn't been faking it, *couldn't* have been, but he knew she would be there. If he had exposed the White House to a deadly disease, he had inevitably exposed her too.

The President looked directly at Frankie. "Miss Franks?" she asked coldly.

Frankie shook her head, she had to pull herself together. "I don't know...I feel fine, Madame President," she said.

“That’s yet to be proved,” said the President. “They want to check you first, you’re potential patient zero. Mr Geller may have used you as the delivery method.” The President paused, watching Frankie break down into floods of tears, before adding with little feeling. “Unwittingly, of course.”

Chapter 5

Leesburg Executive Airport 30 miles NW of Washington D.C.

The Gulfstream G650 touched down and taxied the short distance to the small terminal building. The pilot looked again at the runway and winced; it was going to be very tight. He would have to do a rolling start, build up some speed on the apron before turning sharply onto the runway and continuing the takeoff. It was the only way with a full tank of fuel. The prince had insisted on filling up. He didn't do refuels. The Leesburg officials wouldn't like it but he doubted they'd ever grace their runway again. The G650 was the smallest of the prince's planes and one he seldom used, certainly not for a transatlantic trip. With a fleet of private aircraft at his disposal, which included a Boeing 747 and an Airbus A380, it had been a surprising choice but the prince was not a man to be questioned, especially not at the exorbitant salaries he paid his staff. What the prince wanted, he got.

The prince, a great nephew of the king, was worth almost fifteen billion dollars and was one of the wealthier members of the Saudi royals. However, he was also one of their more visible and challenging members. His wealth had skyrocketed through the financial crisis. His father's death, just prior to the economic crash in 2007, had left him an inheritance valued in the hundreds of millions, almost entirely in cash. The crisis had allowed him to leverage his cash strength to great advantage and resulted in his meteoric rise in wealth. With wealth came influence and with influence came power. It was a mantle the prince was happy to accept. Power suited him.

The short hop from New York to pick up their precious cargo had been an unexpected one. An afternoon lunch in New York had somehow resulted in the prince spending the night in Washington. The pilot had no doubt they'd hear all about it during the flight home. The prince enjoyed telling his staff how important and powerful he was.

The helicopter arriving to his left caught the pilot's attention as he ran through the final checks with his co-pilot. They both hurried their progress. The prince was too important to wait for such mundane tasks, or so he told them. The pilot had previously explained how important such checks were, only to find his bonus curtailed that month. Losing fifty grand in a month was not something he planned to do very often, or ever again.

A knock on the cockpit door preceded the entry of one of the three most beautiful women the pilot had ever set eyes on. The other two were already on board as they prepared the rest of the cabin for their employer.

"He's just landing," said the stewardess. "Can I get you anything?"

The pilot could think of many things but unfortunately none of them were appropriate. He shook his head, as did the co-pilot.

After the door closed behind her, a knowing look between the pilot and co-pilot conveyed more than words ever could; a special language between men, for men.

The pilot watched the two bodyguards exit the helicopter and check the area before opening the door for their prince. The pilot waved to his employer, unnoticed, as the man walked directly onto the plane. More movement from the helicopter caught the pilot's eye. This was unexpected since the prince had journeyed alone. An elderly woman struggled out of the helicopter. She was covered from head to toe in a black burka. Her walking stick managed to hold her upper half from falling forward. Even without the burka, all you would see was the top of her head, such was the degree of her stoop. The woman struggled unaided towards the aircraft. The pilot unclipped his seatbelt and was about

rush to her aide when one of the bodyguards finally turned back to assist her. The pilot observed that the bodyguards attended to the prince before the elderly lady who was probably the prince's mother or an aunt. He shook his head in disgust. The prince's self importance knew no bounds.

He wondered again if a tax-free salary of a million dollars a year was enough. He turned away from the scene and completed his safety checks in record time.

Two knocks on the cockpit door confirmed the cabin was ready for takeoff. Leesburg had become far busier in the last hour but their departure time had been booked and a healthy donation to the airport's development fund would ensure a prompt and priority departure, befitting the prince's status.

Less than three minutes from securing his seat belt, the wheels were up, the sleek G650 jet was heading east, and Nick Geller, the most wanted man in the world, was making his escape.

Nick stretched out and removed the burka, tossing it into the corner of the cabin. His muscles and bones slowly recovered from his enforced stoop and he was able to stand up to his full six foot two inches.

"Now tell me, Mr Geller, why I am saving you and not having you killed, like the dog that you are?" hissed the prince.

Nick smiled. "Because of this." He handed the prince a DVD, the very same recording that the acting President had been handed in the White House.

Chapter 6

The screen burst to life. Although grainy, one half of the image clearly showed Nick Geller facing the camera. The other half of the image was the face of the man Nick Geller had assassinated just two months earlier. The man that had led to Nick being regarded as the all-American hero. The man that Nick had killed to receive the highest honor in the land from the most powerful man in the world.

The man was the self-proclaimed Caliph of Al Qaeda. His full name was Caliph Zahir A. Zahrani and he had replaced Osama Bin Laden. He had immediately pronounced Al Qaeda as Caliphate in the hearts of all its followers, in honor of their fallen leader. The Caliph smiled warmly at Nick before turning to face the camera.

“Following the death of our great founder, leader and father, Osama Bin Laden, our struggle has weakened. Our successes are a distant memory as the non-believers continue their daily lives disrespecting Allah. My friends, it is time to strike back, avenge our father and breathe fear into the hearts of all non-believers.”

The Caliph paused and turned once again to face Nick, before turning back and smiling into the camera.

“This man is a gift from Allah himself. He will rain death and fear onto the hearts of our enemies. They think he is one of them but he is one of us, a true believer in the will of Allah.”

The Caliph paused again and his smile disappeared. “Sacrifice is the greatest gift we have for the furtherance of Allah’s will,” he said, his rhetoric building. “Sacrifice is something that I and our father before me have asked of many of our brothers. Sacrifice is what our father did for us. And what I must do for you!”

“In the name of Allah, I have asked Nick to assassinate me. I do this for Allah and you, my brothers. A plan to rid the world of non-believers is in motion and I ask you, my followers, and all true Muslims to help our brother Nick fulfill my dreams and those of our father and Allah.”

The Caliph stood up and faced Nick, taking his head in his hands. “I ask that you do my bidding in the name of Allah. I ask this of you as a son of Allah and a true believer in Allah.”

Nick nodded, a tear clearly running down his cheek and said “Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar...”

The tape ended.

The prince rewound the tape and replayed it, moving closer to the screen and analyzing every frame closely. He replayed it again, this time watching every movement. Convinced it was genuine, he turned to Nick and smiled.

“Whatever I can do to help my Caliph, I am yours. My monies, my properties, anything, just ask. The Caliph is a genius! This is genius!” he proclaimed.

“We had to keep it a secret,” Nick said. “The Caliph felt terrible about not making you aware of his plan. You were like a son to him, the son he never had. I was to reach out to you before any other person. He made me promise that you would know before anyone else that his death was his doing and his plan to fight back in the name of Allah.”

“Anything, my brother, anything!” the prince said, hitting the play button again. The man who had been his childhood tutor, the Caliph, came back to life. The man who had been more of a father to him than his real father spoke to him from beyond the grave. The prince stood up and wiped the tears from his eyes and knelt at Nick’s feet.

Frankie left the room. Hearing the words from Nick's mouth was too much. She staggered in the corridor, barely able to hold her own weight. The biohazard-suited soldiers filling the corridor were only too happy to help her into a seat. They had a blood sample to retrieve and she was top of the list. Frankie's arm was held out as medics accompanying the soldiers took a sample of her blood. She winced when the needle punctured her arm. It wasn't the pain of the needle, it was the pain of what that needle may uncover—a deadly virus and the child of a murdering traitor.

The image on the screen faded, and the silence in the room lingered. Any doubt that Nick Geller would not have infected them with a deadly virus had just been dispelled. They had trusted Nick, someone who had worked with him for years and yet he had just exposed himself as one of the greatest traitors in the history of the nation, or even throughout history, period.

"It's been thoroughly checked by the NSA. It's real," confirmed the Director of National Intelligence, removing any remaining hope that it was all a mistake.

A knock on the door preceded the entrance of a biohazard-suited team who made their way towards the President.

"Madame President," the DNI turned to face the acting President, "would you please follow these gentlemen?"

"Why?" President Lopez asked as calmly as she could.

"You're going to be placed in a secure room while we ascertain whether or not the virus has been released. You may still be free from it and we do not want you to catch it while the checks are ongoing."

Acting President Lopez was about to discover that, when it came to her wellbeing, she was not in charge of her own destiny. The freshly drafted in and safely suited Secret Service agents placed a mask over her head and removed her from the potentially hazardous environment. A small office at the back of the Emergency Operations Center was awaiting her arrival. Airtight seals and a fresh smell of bleach welcomed her to her new home for the foreseeable future.

After the President left the room, the DNI turned to the FBI Deputy Director.

"Mr. Turner, I'm sure I don't need to say it but whatever you need from the intelligence community is at your disposal. This man Geller has to be tracked down and brought to justice. If anyone gets in your way call me, 24/7," he commanded before leaving the room with his entourage.

The message was as much for Turner as it was for the roomful of senior members of the intelligence community. The FBI was the lead and everyone was to jump to its tune.

Turner looked around the room at the team he had been given for the task. Some of them he recognized, others he had heard of, and others he had no idea who they were or which clandestine secretive part of the community they worked for.

Before he had a chance to address them, the door opened and another biohazard-suited person entered the room. However, this time, the person took an empty seat and sat down.

"I'm Colonel Valerie Barnes, I've been seconded to this team," she announced to the group through her glazed mask.

"On whose orders?" asked DD Turner.

"The Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs."

Turner nodded his approval of two people he would allow to trump him.

"I head up the USAMRIID unit at Fort Detrick," Colonel Barnes said.

Blank faces stared back at her.

After explaining what that meant, Colonel Barnes became the most popular person in the room.

everyone clamored for information on what the disease was and the likelihood of their catching it.

~~—With no confirmation that anyone was in fact infected, Colonel Barnes played down the impact of the disease as much as possible. The reality would come soon enough. However, even the sugar-coated version was enough to scare the life out of her captive audience.~~

Chapter 7

Nick removed the DVD from the player, replaced it carefully in its holder and returned to his seat. The prince stared at him throughout, his eyes transfixed on the man who had martyred his tutor.

“Can you tell me the plan?” asked the prince, struggling to hide the awe in his voice.

Nick closed his eyes. “No. The Caliph was explicit. Nobody should be made aware of the plan, only what is required of them. That way, even if we have a traitor in our midst, they will not be able to stop us. Even the scale, which I assure you will honor our dead Caliph, will remain a tightly guarded secret.”

Nick sensed the prince’s disappointment. He opened his eyes and stared deep into the prince’s eyes. “But what I can tell you is that what we have planned will destroy the western world and lead to the birth of the one true global Caliphate.” He smiled conspiratorially.

“So where can I take you?” asked the prince, wiping tears of admiration from his eyes and breaking into a smile.

Nick pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and handed it to the prince. “This is all I need of you just now but rest assured, My Prince, you have a very important role to play but your day has yet to come. The Caliph was explicit as to how vital your part in his plans would be.”

The prince took the paper in his hands and saw two numbers. One he recognized as a bank account number. A Swiss bank that he himself had an account with. The other number was a sum of money, \$250,000,000.00, one quarter of a billion dollars. The prince nodded as though this were small change. “It will be there tomorrow,” he said, without a second thought or question as to how the monies were to be used.

Nick nodded and once again closed his eyes. He had a few hours to kill during the transatlantic crossing. After that, sleep was going to be hard to come by. With the devastation he had left behind in Washington, there would not be a stone left unturned in the hunt for him. He knew the American and Western agencies inside out. He knew how effective they could be and how personally they would take the attack on the President and the White House. They were not to be underestimated but, more importantly, he knew their weaknesses.

The plan was a complex one but at its core it was stunningly simple. He had no illusion that it would be easy, nor that he would definitely succeed. Many obstacles lay before him. Tracking down and uniting the leaders of the world’s Islamic terrorist groups to launch a holy war on the United States was not going to be a walk in the park. The Caliph had laid down the groundwork. His initial conversations with his counterparts across the Arab world had set Nick in motion and only through the Caliph’s death could the plan ever hope to succeed. His sacrifice would unite jihadists like never before. Nick had one chance to strike a blow that would make the western world finally realize its days were numbered.

Uniting the cause was key. Al Qaeda, although a thorn in the US’s side, was not capable on its own of defeating the might of the US forces and capabilities. A jihadist force, combining the Islamic factions and groups to unite as one, with a common goal and leader, was the Caliph’s vision, a vision that he had tasked Nick with delivering.

With sleep pulling at him, Nick began to relax for the first time that day. As his mind and body began to de-stress, regret suddenly surfaced. Despite all the planning and preparation, one problem had emerged. Aisha Franks. Frankie. She had never been part of the plan. Their relationship had exploded from nothing, a mutual attraction that had just blossomed into something far more. He knew

his plans would mean it could never be but he'd never verbalized that out loud, caught in the moment caught in the closeness of a real relationship, a relationship he had never before experienced. The clicked. In another life, they'd have been perfect, destined to be together. Nick thought back to the hug and peck on the lips, as Frankie had run out that morning, the coffee he had prepared for her in one hand and a wicked smile etched across her face. She'd promised him a surprise that night that would trump the day he met the President, as she had closed the car door.

Nick hadn't had a chance to think about those words until that moment. The moment the car door had closed behind her, he had raced to get ready for the biggest day of his life. What would become of his beautiful Frankie? She'd be labeled a suspect, a potential collaborator. Her care would be over. That was a given. Who would trust her to protect them after her boyfriend had shot the President? He fell asleep, saddened by the loss of his first true love.

It was his only regret.

Chapter 8

“Let’s calm down people, we have work to do!” Turner shouted over the din. “While we wait for the results, we’ll assume we’re all clear. Let’s worry about things we can do something about.”

A few knowing nods agreed and the room silenced.

“Okay, I think that’s it for interruptions. Let’s start by introducing ourselves and then getting down to some work and catching this traitorous son of a bitch.”

Frankie’s timing was impeccable, reentering the room just as Turner described her boyfriend. She looked at him impassively, her reddened eyes incapable of any more tears, and sat down at the table.

With nearly twenty people in the room, it took some time for each person to stand up, give the name, title and the organization they represented. Frankie listened carefully as various investigative branches of the US government were rhymed off.

When it came to her turn, Frankie stood up and introduced herself, although it was obvious that everybody in the room had been made aware of who she was. They just weren’t aware that she was also a senior and highly respected member of the Secret Service, responsible—ironically, given her murdering boyfriend—for the safety of the President of the United States.

The door opened as she was speaking and a man entered the room silently, taking a seat against the wall rather than joining the table. Frankie noticed an almost imperceptible nod of recognition toward Turner as the man, in his early sixties, took his seat.

A hand shot up as Frankie sat back down. “Given Miss Franks’ relationship with—”

“Miss Franks is here at the request of the President,” interrupted Turner, silencing the man who had recently introduced himself as Brian Jones from ATF.

However, once again, the tone in Turner’s voice failed to hide his agreement with Jones and his bewilderment at the President’s order. He obviously would have liked nothing better than to get Frankie into an interrogation room and find out every piece of information she had on Geller.

With Frankie avoiding all eye contact, the remaining members of the group stood up and introduced themselves. The FBI was the most heavily represented of all the agencies with three agents on board, whereas the ATF, CIA, DIA and Homeland had each supplied two agents. The Department of Justice had supplied an attorney that would clear any legal obstacles, while Transportation Security Administration, the Coast Guard Investigative Service, Immigration and Customs had all supplied an agent to ensure Nick Geller wouldn’t escape the confines of the United States.

Turner stood up when the last attendee finished his introduction. Frankie, along with a number of other attendees, looked at the man seated against the wall at the back of the room. He sat impassively uninterested in their stares. He had no intention of introducing himself.

“The gentleman some of you are looking at is Mr. Carson,” intervened Turner. “He’s a representative from the Secretary of Defense’s office. He’ll be privy to the investigation but will play no active role in it. He’ll be the Secretary’s liaison on the task force. The Secretary has made it clear to me that the full might of all our forces are at our beck and call.”

“Whatever you need, I’ll make it happen,” said Carson, interrupting Turner. A quiet assurance in his demeanor filled everyone with the confidence that he meant exactly what he said. “And please everyone, just call me Harry,” he added with a smile before leaning further back into his seat, signaling clearly that everybody should move on.

“Thank you, Mr. Carson. Sorry, Harry,” continued Turner. Frankie had noted Harry’s disapproval.

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