**THE EXILED ELEMENT**

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**PROLOGUE**

*Two years ago, mid-July, somewhere in the Nevada desert.*

Army Colonel Colin Jackson commanded this slice of desert pie known to outsiders variously as ‘Groom Lake,’ ‘Paradise Ranch,’ ‘Watertown Strip,’ ‘Dreamland,’ ‘Home Base,’ ‘Homey Airport,’ and most commonly, by its official Atomic Energy Commission designation – ‘Area 51.’

A remote detachment of Edwards Air Force Base, the bulk of which stood in the Mojave Desert nearly two hundred miles to the Southwest, Area 51 was home to the darkest of the nation’s ‘black projects’ – undertakings that only a handful of select personnel had any inkling existed.

Area 51's facilities included nearly a hundred buildings of varying shapes and sizes, from 10 x 10 foot storage buildings, to expansive metal structures that were almost certainly hangars for aircraft of some sort. There were also a scattering of landing strips running in seemingly haphazard directions. Two were topped with asphalt. The remainder ran through the salt flats, using the smooth, hardened crystals as their base. One of the runways stretched an unheard of 23,200 feet from end to end – more than four times the length of a typical runway at a commercial airport.

While all activities at Area 51 were highly classified, rumors had the military base as home to: the captured Roswell aliens and their spaceships, clandestinely procured Russian military weaponry, time travel technology, weather control equipment, and all manner of UFO-related meetings and activities – including actual conferences with extra-terrestrial beings.

Colonel Jackson wasn’t chatting with any aliens today. But his official duties did included introducing United States Senator Elbert Franklin, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, to one of his country’s best kept military secrets. A project that bore the designation ‘Aurora’ and had garnered enough of the U.S. military budget in recent years to draw the Senator’s attention.

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After landing at Las Vegas International, the Senator’s limo dropped him at Crystal Springs, Nevada, where he boarded a specially designed ‘security bus.’ Small skylights provided his only windows on the world. Opaque panels surrounding all but the bus driver’s compartment occluded views of the roadway and exterior terrain.

The Senator found the trip from Crystal Springs to the secret base – about twenty minutes via a dirt lane known as Groom Lake Road – to be less than comfortable. The air conditioning in this vehicle was inadequate, and the seating area clearly had not been designed to accommodate a person with his ample frame.

Upon arriving inside the Area 51 compound, the bus driver issued him a pair of refractive goggles, which he would need to wear whenever he walked outside the base’s buildings. The goggles were really more in the nature of blinders than anything else. While the Senator could see well enough directly ahead to allow him to walk safely, black slats blocked his peripheral vision, and thick, concave lenses distorted any forward images more than thirty feet distant.

The Senator had to concede the simplicity and effectiveness of the blackout bus and the security goggles in maintaining the secrecy of whatever sensitive activities happened to be underway at the base. But being impressed by the security measures didn’t keep him from being annoyed at the inconvenience . . . and the damn heat.

“Welcome to nowhere, Mr. Senator.” The voice was Colonel Jackson’s. It accompanied his offer of a handshake. The Colonel loathed escorting Congressional dignitaries around his base, but knew how important such visits were to maintaining funding for his projects.

“Good day, Colonel.” The Senator pumped the Base Commander’s hand vigorously. “Quite a nice facility you’ve got here . . . at least what I can see of it. Helluva cooker today, though.”

The Senator dabbed a handkerchief at his brow.

The temperature this day had peaked at 115 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. Jackson showed no effects of the heat, but the Senator, fifty-two years old with a build that begged for a coronary infarction, melted like butter in a saucepan.

“Yes . . . well. I assume you understand the need for our security measures, Mr. Senator. I apologize if they have caused you any discomfort.”

“Of course. Of course. No need for apologies, Colonel.” The Senator was a politician and knew very well that one could snag more flies with honey than vinegar – frankly, manure might be even better.

Perceiving the Senator’s discomfort, Colonel Jackson promptly escorted the Senator to the air conditioned comfort of the Colonel’s office.

After removing his goggles, the Senator took up a position directly in front of the air conditioning vent and mopped his face once more. Colonel Jackson stood beside his desk, waiting for the Senator to recover from the heat.

“Now that I’m here,” the Senator said, finally, “where shall we begin?”

The Colonel motioned him to one of the military-issue vinyl/metal side chairs arranged beside the Colonel’s metal desk. Senator Franklin couldn’t help but notice the austerity of this office compared to his senatorial chambers on Capitol Hill.

The Senator took a seat, as did Colonel Jackson.

Pushing his chair back slightly from the desk, Jackson withdrew a clipboard and pen from a side drawer. On the clipboard were several sheets of letter-size white paper. Swiveling the board 180 degrees to face the Senator, Jackson slid the documents across the desktop until they came to rest directly in front of Franklin.

“Standard ‘read in’ documents, Senator.” He held the pen toward Franklin. “Please let me know if you have any questions.”

The documents acknowledged that the Senator was aware of the sensitivity of the information he was about to receive and spelled out his responsibilities for maintaining absolute confidentiality ‘in all matters pertaining thereto.’

“Thank you,” Franklin said, accepting the pen and beginning to review the top document. The Colonel waited patiently as the Senator read each page in turn. When he had finished, Franklin returned to the top sheet and began initialing pages, finally signing his full name at the bottom of the last.

“Very good, Senator. Now . . . there are a few things I need to tell you before we head off to Hangar 16.”

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*Several months later, in Washington, DC.*

The time was 8:45 p.m. on a cool fall day and Senator Franklin was headed for his usual Tuesday evening dalliance. Depositing his black Lincoln in a remote area of the local shopping mall, which was about ready to close for the night, he turned up the collar on his trench coat. Pulling the brim of his dark grey fedora lower over his brow, he huffed and puffed the fifty-or-so yards to the entrance to the Rockville Metro Rail station.

The Rockville Metro platform was elevated and exposed to the elements. It was also visible to prying eyes, if one’s eyes should be so inclined. But the Senator wasn’t worried about spies or gawkers. If some newspaper reporter had been following him, the Senator would have certainly noticed the tail in the open parking lot. Franklin was hiding his face from the station’s ever-present security cameras.

This was not a part of town where one might expect to find a sitting U.S. Senator boarding the Metro. In fact, such a sighting would be unusual anywhere in D.C. Members of Congress employed chauffeurs to deliver them directly to the private entrances beneath the buildings on Capitol Hill. But even for the Metro, Rockville Station was particularly remote – the second to last stop on the outbound Red Line and a good half hour ride from Metro Center and the Federal Triangle.

No one would even *think* to look for him riding a train, especially boarding at this suburban, middle class stop.

When the Red Line train to downtown arrived, Franklin was one of only four passengers to embark upon it. He selected his usual seat in the rear of the deserted car, opened his briefcase, and began to scan the *New York Times*. Perhaps there would be another article about the new defense funding bill of which he was co-author. He enjoyed reading about his accomplishments in the papers.

Some twenty-five minutes later, the train pulled into the station at Dupont Circle. This hub for protesters, foreign college students, and tourists was elegantly anonymous by virtue of its constant activity. There was always a distraction. An impromptu saxophonist hoping for pocket-change donations, his reedy wailings echoing through the underground concrete cavern. A fund-raising student on the street above, soliciting money to save the starving children. A guitarist noodling on a park bench bordering the Circle, his instrument case seeded with bills and open for further contributions. Flamboyant gay men dancing in a conga line in the street between Starbucks and Krispy Kreme.

Of course, Dupont Circle had its mainstream museums, art galleries, and various other cultural attractions. Nevertheless, Franklin considered the area to be the two-bit circus of the beltway. He found the varied cultural displays a source of humor and a target for his derision. He would never come here at all if it weren’t for the lovely young woman in the second floor brownstone apartment awaiting his arrival just two blocks from the park.

Franklin never realized what an anomaly he was in this place, with his briefcase, trench coat, and fedora, trudging among the early evening buzz of the neighborhood. He was not as anonymous as he believed.

It was at the periphery of Dupont Park where the Arab man had first spotted the Senator one Tuesday evening months ago. Thinking that Franklin reeked of power and influence, the Arab had taken Franklin’s picture and discovered the Senator’s identity.

After that, the Arab had staked out the Dupont Circle rail station for a week before he saw Franklin again. This time he followed Franklin to the brownstone, noted its address, and waited the short hour until his departure.

The next Tuesday, the Arab had been able to see which door bell the Senator had pushed to obtain access to the building, and observed the Senator’s shadowy bulk behind the sheers in the second floor front flat. The filmy silhouette of a curvaceous woman embraced the Senator in a way that the Arab was quite confident Franklin’s wife would not approve of.

The man realized the value of this knowledge concerning Franklin – Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee – and his weekly visits to Dupont Circle. It was only a matter of time until he would find a buyer.

**CHAPTER 1**

No woman expects her mugger to be wearing a metal cod piece. But that is precisely what Beth Becker found when she landed a well-placed pump in her attacker’s groin, felt the steel through the top of her soft leather shoe, and heard a ‘clank’ echo through the concrete parking ramp.

The evening had started out normally enough. Certainly there were no indications that a thug would endanger Beth’s life mere hours later.

She had just come from an evening fund-raiser for the Minneapolis Art Institute, one of Beth’s most favored Twin Cities museums of classic art. The affair had been held in the commons of a luxurious downtown Minneapolis hotel.

She’d departed the hotel through the skyway and entered the empty ramp elevator, depressing the button for Level 7, where her silver Mitsubishi rag top convertible awaited her.

Just as the doors were closing a man’s voice had called to her. “Hold the elevator, please.”

Instinctively, Beth reached for the ‘Open’ button, but then decided that personal safety outweighed good elevator manners when an unchaperoned woman was alone and isolated in a big city. She allowed the doors to continue closing.

A split second before the stainless doors would have been shut tight, a black-gloved hand, followed by a black leather jacket sleeve, slipped between them into the elevator car, causing the doors to open again.

Beth’s instincts had her on alert. This was probably just another arts patron headed for his car. But preparedness is next to godliness in certain situations. This was one of her husband’s oft-repeated axioms. She clenched her key fob in her right fist, with the longest key protruding menacingly from between the second and third fingers. The key was a subtle weapon, but one that could inflict a vicious face wound on a would-be assailant, if need be.

The doors opened to reveal a tall, broad-shouldered, red-headed man of perhaps twenty-five years and two hundred pounds. Much larger than Beth. The leather coat, denim jeans, and work boots made him an unlikely attendee at the gala that evening.

“Sorry,” Beth said.

“No problem. I still made it.” He smiled, but his smile offered no assurances. The dilated pupils of his blue eyes revealed what Beth recognized as an unbalanced, and likely drug-impaired, psyche within. She should distance herself from him as soon as possible.

The doors were already closed. So Beth depressed the button for Level 3, hoping to make a quick exit. When the car stopped on the ramp’s third floor, the man moved to block her exit. His pale and whiskered face now wore a maniacal grin.

“Let’s go up a little further. Okay?”

That was when Beth had found out about the cod piece.

Her kick to his groin had evoked only a broader grin on the man’s face. The doors closed as she lashed at him with her keys. But he caught her arm in a strong hand and twisted it behind her.

At this point, Beth knew she was going to get hurt. That much was unavoidable. She would suffer any pain necessary to survive. Her instincts took over. From here on she would execute her training, no matter what it took. Survival was all that mattered.

The man held Beth pinned against the rear wall of the elevator until the bell rang and the doors opened on Floor 7.

“Now, let’s go get your car. I’m not gonna to hurt you. We’re just gonna take a ride. Okay?” His voice was falsely sweet.

Beth knew better than to allow him to take her to a place of his choosing. But she played docile.

“Okay. Just don’t hurt me. Please!”

The doors began to close. While retaining his grip on Beth, he punched the ‘Hold’ button.

“Okay let’s go.”

Still holding her right arm in a painful twist, he spun her around and pushed her through the doors into the deserted ramp.

“You’re hurting my arm. You said you wouldn’t hurt me. I’ll go with you. Just please stop hurting me.”

Apparently, the mugger didn’t consider Beth a flight risk in her medium heeled pumps. And he was plenty big to control her while they walked together. He released her arm from his grasp.

Beth rubbed her sore shoulder, then turned to him and said, “Thank you.”

He started to say “You’re wel . . .” when Beth launched forward, drilling her keys into his solar plexus. She’d succeeded in slowing him up, but his surprise and lack of air wouldn’t last long.

He was too big for her to muscle into a control hold, so she elected a key jab to the face. Since there was no point pulling punches, she drove the key straight into his left eye. He yowled in pain, his hands clutching at the bleeding socket. But he must have had enough drugs onboard to keep him moving.

He staggered toward Beth, reaching out with both hands for her shoulders. “You bitch!”

Beth ducked low, loading her powerful thighs for what she hoped would be a final blow. Dropping the keys and leading with the heel of her right hand, she launched upward, sending the full force of her leg and back muscles into the man’s nose, forcing it toward his forehead, smashing cartilage, and driving nose bone fragments into his brain.

He recoiled from the strike, staggering in an attempt to regain balance. He let out a beastly yell as he took a last step toward Beth, his one eye dead and black, and his nose gushing red. Beth retreated, finding herself up against the trunk of a parked vehicle, with no time or room to escape to the side.

An eerie smile crossed the man’s mangled face as he crashed to the concrete at Beth’s feet.

Beth stepped over the prostrate body, distancing herself from the attacker. Seeing no movement from the man, she retrieved a cell phone from her jacket pocket and punched in ‘911.’ Her breathing was heavy and her pulse raced as she reported, “There’s been an assault on Level 7 of the Radisson Ramp downtown. One injured and one probably dead. Send police and ambulance.”

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When the Minneapolis Police patrol officers arrived a few minutes later with guns drawn, the scene hadn’t changed. Of course, Beth had already confirmed that her assailant was, indeed, dead. But she was still near him, leaning against the trunk of a black Mercedes, her legs weak and hands shaking.

The officers appraised the trembling woman, and then the hulking frame of the man splayed out on the concrete floor.

The female officer spoke first.

“What the hell happened here?”

Beth’s nerves were fried.

“He mugged me,” she said, and then collapsed to the floor.

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When Beth awoke, she was in a hospital bed with her husband seated at her side, holding her hand. Beth reached for his face, but was stopped by the IV attached to her arm. She was groggy from the sedative the doctors had prescribed.

“What happened to me?”

“How do you feel, Beth? Does anything hurt?”

Beth mechanically inventoried her members. “My right shoulder’s sore, and my right foot hurts. Otherwise, I think I’m fine.”

As her eyes began to clear, she focused on her husband.

“There was a man in the parking garage,” she said.

“Yeah. He tried to mug you. Do you remember?” Her husband leaned over and kissed Beth’s forehead.

“Yeah. I do . . . sort of. I think I kicked his ass.”

She searched her memory for further details, then propped herself up on her elbows.

“Did I kill him?”

“Beth. He’s dead. And you’re alive. And that’s the only way this deal could come out right.”

Despite her decades of work at the CIA, Beth had never killed anyone before. She struggled to absorb the thought.

“Am I in trouble?” She searched his eyes.

“No. In fact, you did the City of Minneapolis a big favor. The guy who attacked you had raped and killed three other women over the last year. The cops matched tissue and finger prints from one of the other crime scenes. They know what happened and we’re all overjoyed you’re here and in one piece.

She flopped down on her back.

“I need to sleep, Babe.”

“You close your eyes. I’ll be here when you wake up.”