

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 include introducing United States Senator

Elbert Grossman, 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 Grossman 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. Swivelling the board 180 degrees to face the Senator, Jackson slid the documents across the desktop until they came to rest directly in front of Grossman.

"Standard 'read in' documents, Senator." He held the pen toward Grossman. "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," Grossman 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, Grossman 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."

* * *

Several months later, in Washington, DC.

The time was 8:45 p.m. on a cool fall day and Senator Grossman 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. Grossman 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, Grossman 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, Grossman 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.

Grossman 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 Grossman reeked of power and influence, the Arab had taken Grossman'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 Grossman again. This time he followed Grossman 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 Grossman's wife would not approve of.

The man realized the value of this knowledge concerning Grossman – 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 codpiece. 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 codpiece.

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.”

* * *

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.

* * *

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.”

CHAPTER 2

Two weeks later.

An exhausted Beth Becker made her way down the vacant institutional hallways of CIA Headquarters in McLean, Virginia. The trauma of the mugging had, for the most part, passed. Her shoulder and foot were fine, though the psychological turmoil of killing a man with her bare hands lingered on . . . and might do so forever.

This evening CIA had summoned Beth from her home in Red Wing, Minnesota to its headquarters for a last minute “extremely urgent” assignment.

It had been 5:30 a.m. when the Delta red eye deposited her and her “go bag” at Ronald Reagan International. Dulles would have been closer to Langley, but Delta was the only major airline with a Minneapolis hub, and they flew to Reagan.

There she’d been met by a silent, black-suited chauffeur, standing at attention beside a gleaming black Lincoln. Washington higher-ups were never subtle about flaunting power through the vehicle fleets they controlled.

Beth laughed under her breath at the sign he held with military precision – “Elizabeth Weston.” She hadn’t gone by that name in nearly a decade. The Agency had assigned it to her when she first began working in Classified CIA operations. The name protected her identity from unwanted intrusions into her life after service . . . at least that was the theory. Now the CIA itself was violating the quietude of her retirement – on a Sunday, no less.

Following a short limo ride, she’d arrived at CIA headquarters. The electronic entrance pass awaiting her at Langley’s front gates allowed her unrestricted access to the administrative offices. The

fact that Beth was permitted to move about Langley without an escort would have been unheard of for most visitors to CIA HQ. But Beth's part-time job doing CIA decryption work from her home in Red Wing, Minnesota required her to annually renew her Top Secret security clearance. To the CIA, Beth was "one of us."

Nearing the end of the terrazzo-floored fifth level hallway, Beth turned to open the translucent glass-paneled door labeled "Deputy Director Simon Connor." She was mildly surprised to find the Deputy Director's bright and cheery administrative assistant on duty behind her burlled walnut desk. Beth supposed if the Deputy Director's reason for this meeting had been urgent enough to collect her on short notice from Minnesota, it had also warranted dragging his underpaid and overworked secretary out of bed on a Sunday morning.

"Good morning, Ms. Weston. I trust you had a pleasant trip?" The woman's bubbly tone *had* to be manufactured. But Beth had to admit it was convincing.

"Highlight of my day so far." Beth winked at the young woman, who showed no indication of comprehending the irony in Beth's statement.

"May I offer you a cup of coffee? We have espresso, French press, latte, Arabic . . . almost anything. Your choice."

"Thank you. I'll have a good old Café Americano, black, please."

Beth deposited her bag on one of four walnut chairs in the assistant's office.

"I'll be happy to safeguard that for you, Ms. Weston, if you'd like. I can take it behind my desk."

"Thanks, but I'd like to keep it with me. My gun's in there and I might have to shoot the Deputy Director for disturbing a pleasant weekend with my adoring husband." This time Beth didn't wink.

Clearly not accustomed to flip comments about visitors shooting her boss, the young woman recoiled a bit, but managed to keep the coffee in the cup.

"Very well, Ms. Weston. Here's your Americano, black. Please let me know if it is unsatisfactory in any way." After extending the white ceramic mug to Beth, the woman slipped back behind her

desk, all the while keeping a eye on this unusual visitor.

Beth remained standing while a moment of silence ensued.

"So . . ." she said after a few seconds. "Is the boss ready to see me?"

"I'm afraid he's still en route, Ms. Weston. Please make yourself comfortable here and let me know if there is anything further you will require . . . anything at all." She motioned to one of the side chairs.

Placing her cup on an end table for the time being, Beth removed her coat (which the assistant scrambled to hang up for her) and took a seat next to her luggage.

Beth was not disturbed at her boss's late arrival. In fact, she would have been shocked if he'd been there waiting for her. In D.C., it was SOP for a superior to arrive late to a meeting, simply to establish a position of power early on. This was a tactic Beth had employed herself on frequent occasions, in a lifetime long past.

She sipped her coffee. Probably a Starbucks dark roast. No Mr. Coffee swill for this bureaucrat's guests. Nothing but the best. Even the coffee was a power play. She supposed that, so close to the D.C. beltway, everyone needed to keep up appearances. After all, without appearances, what did a bureaucrat have to distinguish himself? High buck coffee was merely one new power tactic the Agency had added since her time in the service.

After a suitably intimidating period, the Deputy Director strode through the outer office door. He turned to Beth, who noted his entrance, but remained seated.

"Ah, Beth Becker. Good to see you again. So sorry to keep you waiting." The man spoke with a noticeable British accent. "Early meeting with Homeland Security. There's no end to the free assistance those chaps require."

He moved closer to Beth and extended a hand.

She rose and returned a firm shake.

"May we go into your office now, Simon? I'm bursting at the seams to hear your plans for me." Beth offered a fake smile.

"Yes, of course.

"Becky," he said to the receptionist, "I'll have my usual."

“Right away, Sir.”

Connor opened the heavy wooden door to his inner office and bade Beth to follow him inside. The door closed behind them with a click.

Simon removed his trench coat, placing it on a hanger inside a closet. He wore a navy power suit, red tie, and shoes that had been buffed to the verge of causing blindness.

Beth didn't wait for Connor to sit. She selected a richly appointed leather and walnut side chair, turned it at a forty-five degree angle to the desk, sat down, and crossed her legs at the knees.

In contrast to Connor's outfit, Beth wore a finely tailored black cashmere jacket over a short-sleeved black cashmere top. Buttery tan leather pants and medium-heeled black and tan St. John's pumps completed her ensemble. Beth's soft, sandy-blonde hair was pulled up in a French twist, while a modest gold chain adorned her neck.

Before Connor even had a chance to speak, Becky appeared with his coffee delivery. Picking up the coffee mug, Connor took his place behind the massive wooden desk and surveyed his subject.

“Well, Beth. I see you've forgotten how to dress for business meetings. I hope your other skills haven't suffered similar decay.”

Beth leaned forward, her hands on the desk top.

“First of all, you know damn well my name is Elizabeth Weston. Where the hell do you get off using the name 'Becker' in front of your secretary!”

Connor reclined in his high-backed leather chair, a smarmy grin on his face.

“Now, now, Beth. Becky has all the necessary clearances. No need to get all worked up . . .”

“The hell there isn't! What happened to 'need-to-know'? Did the CIA change that policy while I was gone? And who read her in on my private life anyway. For God's sake, Simon!”

Connor sat up straight in his chair.

“I've been patient with you, Becker, because you've been out of the loop for a while. But protocol requires you to address me as

Deputy Director, *not* by my first name.”

“I’ll tell you what, Simon, when you stop using that fake English accent, and quit addressing me as ‘Becker.’ I’ll call you the freaking Prince of Hearts if you like.”

Connor’s face flashed red for a moment, then returned to its normal incandescent pallor.

Their eyes held equal contempt, one for the other.

Finally, Connor sat back and crossed his hands over his soft belly.

“Alright, *Ms. Weston*. It seems we’ve gotten off to a poor start this morning. Let’s begin again, shall we?”

His voice still carried the accent. Beth imagined he’d used it for so long, he couldn’t remember how to speak any other way. His tone remained disrespectful, but at least his words offered a fresh beginning. She’d do her best.

Beth reclined in her chair once again. Connor couldn’t help staring as she crossed her long legs in the tight-fitting leather.

“Well, Deputy Director, you called this meeting. What’s up?”

“They’ve assassinated the Egyptian President.” He said it without emotion or further explanation.

“You mean the new guy who just took office last week? What was his name? Mahmoud Shalaby?”

“At least you still keep up on world events. Yes. That’s the gentleman.”

“So when you say ‘they’ve assassinated Shalaby,’ who do you mean by ‘they’ exactly?”

Connor pondered the question as though it was entirely unexpected.

“We’re assuming it was Islamic Terrorists, of course,” he finally spat out. “Shalaby was a conservative Muslim, to be sure, but who can be conservative enough for these bloody extremists? Some Muslim group likely took him out to destabilize the country and give the Salafis another crack at the presidency.”

Beth lamented how little the Washington machine had learned about geopolitics during her absence.

“So . . . my role? I’m guessing the SigInt folks need some

assistance with increased message volume in the Middle East? And that's why you wanted me here?" Signal Intelligence, derived from wire-tappings, radio intercepts, and internet traffic, always spiked during geopolitical crises.

"SigInt is, indeed, pressed, but we are interested in assistance of a different sort."

"We?" Beth asked. "Who besides you wants my help?"

"Actually . . . the Director wants to tap your experience concerning the Egyptians."

Beth knew and respected CIA Director Holford. If he had asked specifically for her help, he probably had a reason. She'd still like to hear it from Simon.

"You're kidding, right? The Agency must have two dozen people in Cairo who've got more current intel than mine. What's my connection, beyond a short stint at the Embassy more than twenty years ago?"

Connor remained silent.

"Okay," Beth said, "you want my expertise on Middle East power dynamics?"

"Yes. That is partly your connection. Yes."

"Alright, here's what I think. Of course, Islamic Extremists are one possibility for the assassination. But there are at least half a dozen others."

Connor eyed the ceiling. "So whom do you surmise might be behind this act of villainy?"

Beth ignored the Deputy Director's expression, and his British speech affectation, and continued.

"How about the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces? The SCAF has been running Egypt behind the scenes at least since Nasser, and they've openly claimed power since the Egyptians ousted Mubarak in 2011. Maybe the SCAF doesn't relish relinquishing their control.

"Then there are the more liberal Egyptians . . . they may feel disenfranchised. After all, the old guard *has* co-opted *their* revolution. Young liberals fought and died in those protests at Tahrir Square. There's certainly enough emotion in that movement

to fuel an assassination attempt.

“And of course, our good friends in Israel aren’t above removing an Egyptian leader if they feel threatened by the new regime.”

Connor interrupted.

“Israel? They’re our best ally in the region. You don’t seriously believe they would assassinate a foreign head of state without consulting with the U.S. first.”

“Maybe they *did* consult us, Simon, and we gave them the okay. Even you can’t be naive enough to believe our hands are clean when it comes to Middle East politics!”

“Not Israel. I don’t see it. You’re just Jew-bashing with that allegation.”

Beth remembered all too well how the slightest questioning of military aid to Israel, or cooperation with its government, called forth shouts of antisemitism inside the beltway. Israel had always possessed a lobbying strength in U.S. politics that was disproportionate to its strategic position in the region. Criticizing Israel in any way could easily lose a government employee their job. Fortunately for Beth, she didn’t have a Washington job to lose. She was merely a consultant, and one the Agency needed more than she needed it – at least, so it seemed at the moment.

“Don’t give me that anti-Jew BS, Simon! If you’ll recall, Israel invaded Egypt and Jordan in 1967 without approval from LBJ. They bombed the hell out of Gaza on their own initiative. And when the U.S. asks Israel for something as small as ending construction of new settlements in the occupied territories, they blow us off. In fact, I believe they recently suggested the U.S. should return to our national boundaries prior to the Mexican cession of 1848, giving California and three other states ‘back’ to Mexico. They’re our good buds all right.”

Beth raised an eyebrow at Simon.

“And don’t tell me the Mossad isn’t capable of executing foreign civilians. Who do you think’s been killing the Iranian scientists lately? It’s either Israel, or us, or both.”

Connor’s face grew redder by the minute.

“So now you’re accusing the U.S. Government of assassinating

a foreign president? You know that's against the law."

Beth found Simon's adherence to the party line both ridiculous and aggravating.

"Like the CIA would never act outside the law?"

Connor gave no response. Beth assumed he knew better.

"Would you like me to continue?" Connor correctly interpreted the dare for what it was.

"No. I think you've made your point . . . not that I care."

Beth's struggled to control her aggravation.

"If you don't want my opinions, stale as they may be, then why'd you drag me to Langley in the first place?"

"As I said, I didn't. It was the Director's idea. He seems to think you possess some unique qualification for this assignment."

"What assignment is that? I thought I'd be on the next plane back home as soon as our little meeting was over."

"We . . . the CIA, that is . . . want you to go undercover at the U.S. Embassy in Egypt – sort of pick up where you left off there twenty-five years ago."

Beth stood.

"No, thank you. I'm outta here."

She turned toward the door.

Connor leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the desk.

"Before you depart in a huff, don't you want to know *why* the Director wants you, and only you, for this assignment? Why you are uniquely qualified for this assignment in one respect?"

Beth looked back over her shoulder at Connor.

"And what respect is that?"

"Someone at the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate asked to meet with you specifically. She claims to know you from your past time in Cairo and doesn't trust anyone else with certain information she deems 'critical' to Egyptian – U.S. relations."

Beth turned to face him.

"This has got to be some sort of ruse, Simon."

Connor tried not to flinch at the repeated use of his given name.

"Exactly who wants to meet with me?"

"Rasha Metwally."

Beth returned to her chair.

"Rasha Metwally." Beth's eyes drifted upward as she scoured her memory. "You know, I do remember her. She was a messenger for Egyptian Foreign Affairs when I worked the 'back office' in Cairo. She'd deliver diplomatic pouches to us and wait in the Embassy foyer for our responses."

"Well, apparently, she has more than a pouch for you now. So will you accept the assignment? Or are you going to deprive your country of this woman's invaluable tidbit?"

Beth neither liked nor trusted Connor. Yet, this was an intriguing opportunity . . . if what Simon had said was remotely true.

"Simon, you'll have to pardon my skepticism, but if you expect me to take your proposition seriously, I'll need to speak with Director Holford."

"I anticipated you might say that. And while I am personally wounded at your lack of confidence in me, I have arranged for the Director to be available to meet with you this evening. Becky will relay the details.

Simon stood.

"I believe our meeting is now concluded, *Ms. Becker*. Please show yourself out."

CHAPTER 3

Eighteen months ago, Egypt.

Inside a classified underground laboratory twenty-five miles northeast of Cairo, three white-coated Egyptian scientists labored over the small pile of aluminum castings on the table before them. They were building a model airplane. But it wasn't just any airplane . . . it was Aurora.

They had manufactured the parts in 1/30th scale with the highest possible precision based on digitized plans provided to the engineers by the United States of America. Well . . . the plans were definitely of U.S. origin, but perhaps the word "provided" wasn't entirely accurate. An operative of the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate (GIS) – Egypt's version of the CIA – had procured the plans from the Americans. A certain U.S. Senator with an immense assortment of scandalous baggage had facilitated the delivery.

After acquiring the Top Secret information, GIS had had sought out these three scientists – considered Egypt's finest minds in aeronautical engineering. What was their opinion? Could they turn these technical drawings and specifications into a tangible product – into the fastest air-breathing plane on the planet?

Upon initial review of the Aurora designs, the scientists were excited to take advantage of this opportunity to accelerate their own technological knowledge. They had worked on experimental military aircraft for the SCAF before. They even had experience with one component of Aurora's advanced propulsion system – its pulse jet engines. While it was true that some of Aurora's other technologies were revolutionary, and different from other projects the scientists had worked on, they saw no reason, with detailed drawings and specifications in hand, why they could not duplicate

the American achievement in building this aircraft.

Once the scientists had expressed optimism to the GIS Director, he had wasted no time in conscripting them to lead Aurora's construction team. At that time, the Director had made it clear that the incentives for their success were considerable. Or more precisely, the disincentives for their failure were unacceptable – at least to the scientists and their immediate families.

Given the Director's response to their optimism, the scientists may have regretted their original confident appraisal of the project's feasibility. But it was too late to turn back now. They would need to make good on their predictions.

CHAPTER 4

At CIA Headquarters. McLean, Virginia.

Beth had more than a few hours to kill before her meeting with Director Holford. Since she hadn't planned on spending the night, she hadn't booked a hotel room. Accordingly, there was no comfy bed to offer her a much needed nap. She decided the next best option was more caffeine in the SES lounge.

SES was the Senior Executive Service, mainly a government "pay grade" designation that allowed the big wigs to make more money than the normal GS (Government Service) pay system allowed. But of course, employees classified as SES also lorded the acronym over the mere GS folks whenever possible. One of the SES perquisites was a deluxe private lounge which Beth now intended to occupy . . . by force if necessary.

Upon arrival at the lounge, she found it unlocked and deserted. Perfect. Dropping her bag in one corner, she shed her top coat and cashmere jacket, hanging them in the coat closet. She found the complimentary cappuccino machine and punched up a double espresso. Café Americano wouldn't touch the headache she had coming on. A Power Bar from the vending machine would provide lunch later.

With coffee in hand, and reclining on one of the leather sofas that squeezed government budgets still seemed able to fund for the bureaucratically privileged, she punched up her husband on her encrypted cell. Even though the call was theoretically "secure," Beth and her husband, James "Beck" Becker, wouldn't be discussing anything Classified, just to be safe.

"Hi, Beth. Jefferson Avenue is a lonely place in your absence. How's Virginia treatin' you?"

"Ha ha. It was dark when I last saw the outside world. It's pretty crappy inside though."

Beth settled into a corner of the sofa and tucked her shapely legs beneath her.

"Well . . . Minnesota hasn't been all peaches either. My laptop had some glitch this morning and it took me two hours to figure out I needed to shut the darned thing off."

Beth smiled. She'd told him more times than she could count that the first fix for computer problems was to reboot the machine. Despite his skills with military technology of every variety, he couldn't seem to master a simple PC – or more likely, he didn't *want* to.

"I hear ya, Babe. Those computer glitches can be bitches."

"Ah . . . some poetry for the morning. But I don't sense any sympathy in there."

Beth laughed.

"At least your senses still work."

"So besides missing me to death, how've your conferences with the potentates gone? Famously, I hope."

"Not so much. You do remember that my meeting was with that pinhead, Simon, right?"

"Not your favorite guy?"

"I think you know the answer to that one. He hasn't changed a bit since I left D.C. Oh, except he picked up a British accent on a London assignment and hasn't been willing to part with it. Now he's so bloody brilliant one might think him to be worldly."

"We *are* both talking about the same Simon right . . . from the deep south? Mr. 'Hey all, y'all. Where's them chitterlings and grits?"

"Yup. Only I guess he's decided the British persona is more upwardly mobile than the drawl. Sadly, he's probably right. Appearances are everything in this vortex of mediocrity."

"Okay . . . enough chit chat," Beck said through the phone. "I got dishes to wash, windows to clean, carpets to vacuum. Did I say dishes to wash?"

"Nice try. I've only been gone," Beth glanced at her Tag Heuer,

"nine hours. And the place was spotless when I left. Either you had an early morning kegger, or there's somewhere else you wanna get to."

"Okay, Ms. Smartypants. I've got a meeting with Gunner coming up yet this morning. He can wait for a while though. I'm truly dying to know what computer gobbledygook they want you to resolve now. Please, please, please."

"Here's your only warning. I'm tired and cranky and your snide level is off the charts. So cut me a break from your humor right now. Okay?"

"Absolutely. Sorry. I love you, and you know I want to hear all about whatever got you hauled off to Virginia. So please, proceed."

Beth took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, too, Babe. I'm just in a bad mood, that's all."

"No worries. Carry on."

"So here's the deal . . . at least as much as we can discuss right now." Beth relayed the substance of her meeting with Simon and that she had another meeting with "his boss" that evening.

"So it looks like they may want me to take a trip . . . duration undetermined. I don't know whether I'm up for it. It'd be a chance to make a difference . . . maybe a big difference. But I'm not exactly psyched for re-upping at this point in our lives. I'd rather spend time with you and the girls, at least when they're available."

"I understand."

Beth laughed. "I'm so glad you've finally learned to say that after all these years of marriage, but right now I'd really like your advice."

"Thanks for appreciating my husbandly efforts. Here's what I would do. Listen to the guy tonight. You'll know a lot more after you talk to someone you trust. Then . . . and this is the important part . . . tell him you'll think about it and get back to him when you can. Don't commit to anything when your brain is awash in melatonin."

"I don't know, Babe," Beth said. "I expect this whole deal is pretty time sensitive and there'll be a serious push for a quick decision, followed by immediate action."

"Look at it this way. They can't make you go. There don't seem to be any qualified substitutes. Let 'em wait for a few hours. They're not going anywhere."

Beth sighed deeply, then sipped the espresso.

"I know you're right, James. In fact, I suppose I knew that before I asked you. Guess the neurons aren't hitting on all cylinders right now."

"How could they be? Now, you need to get a nap someplace. Check into a hotel or something."

"Actually, other than the presence of an espresso machine, this lounge I'm in will probably work out just fine. In fact, my eyes are already closing. I'd better hang up and catch a few winks."

"Nothing like a conversation with the old ball and chain to bore you into oblivion. I should get a commission from the sandman."

Beck chuckled.

"Now get some sleep."

There was a long pause.

"Beth? You still there?"

"G'night, Babe."

CHAPTER 5

At Red Wing, Minnesota.

I had just told Beth that I'd be meeting with Gunner. Since she'd apparently hit the snooze button on our phone call, I decided now was as good a time as any.

Gunner, aka Doug Gunderson, was Ottawa County's Chief Deputy Sheriff. He was also one of only a few people in Ottawa County who knew anything about my rather special government background and related skills.

I had never planned to let him in on my secrets, especially because if word got to the wrong people, my entire family would be in mortal danger. But I had known Gunner since we were both kids, and he'd pinned me down one night, demanding to know where I had really been for twenty years of my life.

He can be an assiduous investigator and he managed to get me to cough up a rough sketch of my life story as a military intelligence operative. He'd promised that my secret was safe with him. To date, that was a promise he had faithfully kept.

Anyway, Gunner knows I have some background that can be useful to law enforcement in certain situations. And he knows that I often take a different tack in my investigational approach than the one provided in the Sheriff's Manual.

But he also knows we're both pulling the rope in the same direction and have the same goals. So for the most part, we're able to resolve our differing styles in the interest of catching the bad guys.

Gunner had asked me to stop down to his office at the Law Enforcement Center (LEC) to "chat." Gunner never just wanted to "chat." In fact, he usually was just fine not seeing or hearing from

me for days or even weeks at a time. So when the invitation presented, I took him up on it.

Arriving at the LEC, I muscled open the stiff outside doors, crossed the lobby, and offered myself up to the uniformed receptionist/dispatcher.

"Attorney James Becker. Chief Deputy Gunderson is expecting me," I said.

It was sort of refreshing to speak that phrase when it was actually true. I have to admit that, on occasion, I have intruded at Gunner's office without invitation, generally introducing myself in the same manner.

After punching up Gunner's extension and announcing my arrival, the receptionist hung up the phone.

"Chief Deputy Gunderson will be with you shortly. Please have a seat."

She gestured toward the molded yellow plastic lobby chairs that resembled something out of a Jetsons' cartoon. I'd tried sitting in one once. It wasn't worth the effort. The chairs didn't require an eject button . . . it was designed into them.

I decided to examine the picture array of "Past Sheriffs of Ottawa County" hanging on one wall. I noted that black and white pics remained the standard for Ottawa County Sheriff photographs. Kodachrome hadn't yet arrived in law enforcement memorabilia.

Presently, the metal door to the detectives' inner offices opened and Gunner stuck his head out.

"C'mon in, Becker. I've been waiting for you. What's the hold up?"

"Damsel in distress," I said, as I slid past him into the hallway.

"That figures."

We reached Gunner's office and he took his seat in the metal and vinyl swivel chair behind the desk, while I was left, as usual, to clear files from a side chair before I could sit.

"Wanna cuppa Joe?" Gunner offered. He was pretty chipper this morning.

"That'd be great."

I waited.

"You know where the coffee is. I'm not your flunky. Get your

own.”

I was familiar with Gunner’s style of entertaining and didn’t take offense. I filled my cup with the dregs of the 7:00 a.m. brewing, including a nice scum of coffee grounds that had made it through the reused filter, then took my seat again.

“Here’s to Midwestern hospitality,” I said, raising the ceramic mug as a toast in Gunner’s direction.

“Yeah, well, this ain’t the frickin’ Ritz, you know. Now, you got any other bitches before we talk?”

I considered a list of possibilities, but thought better of it.

“Nope. I’m all yours.” I sipped the coffee, straining the grounds with my teeth.

“Okay. Well, here’s the deal. I’ve just been advised by the Sheriff that Ottawa County is going to be hosting a ‘significant dignitary’ later this month, and I’m in charge of coordinating local security with the States, the FBI, and everybody else.”

Gunner eyeballed me, waiting, I presumed, for some ooing and ahing.

“That’s darn impressive, Gunner. Sounds like a huge responsibility. And you’re just the guy to pull it off.”

“I should think so. And yet, I’m a touch light on experience in that specific area.”

We don’t get tons of celebrities visiting us in Ottawa County.

“So what can I do to help?”

Gunner leaned back in his chair, taking care to limit his recline within the aging contraption’s tolerances.

“You been around Washington, right? You’ve prob’ly seen how this stuff works – who does what and when and stuff. Maybe you could give me a little prep session so I’m ahead of the game. You know, so I make a good impression on the ‘dignitary’ and his guys.”

Actually, I *did* have experience guarding dignitaries on occasion in my past life. My role had always been to do my darndest to make sure nobody got killed. My unique training and expertise allowed me to choose how I did that. Other than making sure none of the other security folks shot me, I hadn’t needed to do any coordinating with them.

But I had definitely been close enough to the rest of the security folks to see how this "assignment" was going to go down for Gunner.

He'd be allowed to scope out routes and venues ahead of time – a task which would be duplicated by the FBI and private security. Once the "dignitary" was in the vicinity, either the FBI or private security was probably going to shove everybody else in a corner and tell them to keep the coffee and donuts coming.

Gunner's a good cop and I don't want you to think that, just because he lacks experience working a security detail, he's not a top notch law enforcement officer. Other than his insistence that everything be done "by the book," I've found him to be one of the best investigative cops I've encountered . . . and I've encountered quite a few. Now was probably not a good time to give Gunner the bad news.

"Gunner. I'd be more than happy to give you a hand, but I need to know more about this 'dignitary' before I can offer anything useful. Do you know anything at all about him, or her, yet?"

"Nope. So far, 'dignitary' is all I've got. It's damn odd this person is keeping everything so tight lipped. Maybe he's a famous gangster and the mob is still after him."

Gunner smiled.

"Yeah. Some Cosa Nostra Don is coming to Red Wing to give your deputies a seminar on receiving bribes for fun and profit."

Gunner chuckled.

"Now wouldn't that be interesting! But seriously . . . when the time comes, are you free to lend a hand?"

"Usual pay scale?"

"Yup. Free." Gunner smiled.

"Hey. No problem, Gunner. Just ring me up when you get more deets and I'll get my butt right down here to help you out. Deal?"

"I s'pose there isn't much else to be done about it for now. So . . . deal."

We shook on it.

CHAPTER 6

In Washington, D.C.

Beth's meeting with Director Holford was to be a dinner at 1789, a long-established, upscale restaurant on 36th Street Northwest in Georgetown. Before catching a cab, she freshened up in the women's lavatory and decided that her present attire – her only attire – would suffice for this session with the Director.

Upon arrival at 1789 a few minutes before 7:00, the appointed time for her to rendezvous with the Director, she was moderately surprised to find that he had already been seated.

The maitre d' bid her follow him to the Director's table. Given the early hour, her stroll through the restaurant went mainly unnoticed by the few other patrons, most of whom leaned in closed conversations across dark wooden tables and deep booths.

The Director had reserved a table in a secluded alcove near the rear of the establishment – no doubt a location that had served him often for confidential chats. He held a lowball glass of brown liquid in one hand while his bespectacled eyes perused the contents of a thin manila file on the table top.

When he notice her approaching, he closed the file, removed his readers, and rose to greet her.

"Good evening, Elizabeth. I'm so pleased you could spare me the time for this visit while you're in town." He slipped out from behind the table and extended his hand.

Beth noted the warm tone in his voice as she gave his hand a firm shake.

"Good evening, Director."

"Elizabeth. There is no need for formality this evening. Please call me Joseph." He stepped a bit closer to her and turned the

handshake into a friendly hug, which Beth returned without trepidation. Then, backing away from the embrace, Beth spoke.

"Certainly, Joseph. I wasn't sure how meticulous D.C. had become about protocol in my absence. I'm glad to see that you, at least, haven't changed."

He pulled out a chair for her, pushing it in as she sat.

"Ha! Forty pounds and a head like the capitol dome. I'm afraid I have changed a great deal in a decade since we last met in person. But passage of time doesn't require me to be rude to my good friends."

"Thank you, Joseph," Beth said, as the Director retook his seat.

"So tell me, Elizabeth, has life treated you well since your retirement? You are still a stunning dresser, I see."

Beth glanced down to see how well her clothing had survived the flight, limo, nap, and taxi ride.

"I'm holding up." She smiled.

"And your life, Elizabeth? All's well I hope?"

"My life's good, Joseph, just as always. My husband keeps me worrying, but it's simply not realistic to think he's going to sink into an easy chair and thumb a remote all day. He's good for me – keeps me young, you know. My consulting provides a nice diversion from less intellectual pursuits and allows me to keep my technical skills sharp. And there's no job like being a mother to our great kids.

"How's your family, Joseph? Well I hope?"

"Linda died of cancer two years ago."

"Oh, Joseph. I'm so sorry." Beth reached across the table and covered his hand with hers.

"Her pancreas went bad and the whole thing was over in three months." He paused in momentary reflection. "But the boys are doing great. Followed the old man into the Civil Service. I'm afraid I can't discuss the details. But then, I don't need to explain that to you, do I Elizabeth?"

She withdrew her hand and nodded.

The waiter arrived in a black bow tie and pleated white shirt with a glass of water for Beth and asked if further drinks were required.

"Yes, please. Another bourbon for me, neat with a twist. And for you Elizabeth?"

"I'll have a cognac, please. Whatever brand you're pouring will be fine."

"Nonsense, Elizabeth. This is on my tab." Turning to the waiter he said, "Louis the Fourteenth for the lady."

"Very fine choice, Sir." The waiter backed away to retrieve the drinks.

"I'd have thought with the government's budgetary fiasco, the cocktails might've taken a hit," Beth said with a smile.

"Nonsense. In the scheme of things, with a billion spent here and a billion spent there, what's a nice cognac for a valued public servant every twenty years or so"

"I'm not one to argue, Joseph."

After a few minutes, the waiter returned with their fresh drinks.

"Would you like a moment before ordering, Sir?"

"Yes, please. Keep your eyes peeled and I'll let you know when we're ready. In the meantime, we'd prefer not to be disturbed."

"Very well, Sir." The waiter again departed with a bow.

"I bet the mac and cheese in this place is to die for," Beth said, swirling the cognac in its glass.

The Director laughed.

"Elizabeth, you have always cracked me up. Brains, beauty, and a sense of humor . . . it's no wonder you gave up government work."

Beth inhaled the cognac's aroma, then took a slight sip.

"That's very kind of you, Joseph. But I think I could get used to the pampering if \$5000 a bottle cognac is typical of what Uncle Sam is serving in the higher echelons these days."

"Call the epicurean delights my one indulgence. The rest of the time, work is just as it's always been . . . and will, no doubt, always be. Hard choices with little support from those who need to give it. That part hasn't changed, Elizabeth. Few are willing to stick their necks out to do what's right, at least not if it might be politically unpopular. That shall never change, I'm afraid."

He took a swallow of the new bourbon.

Beth swirled the cognac, enjoying its heady fragrance.

"Well, Elizabeth. I suppose it's time to get down to business. You've had a long day already. And I can imagine your conference with Simon the Brit may have been less than pleasant."

"Is that what people call him now?" Beth laughed.

"That's what I call him, at least. Hell. He's puts up such a façade, I don't know how anyone could take him seriously."

"So why make him Deputy Director?"

"Hells bells, Elizabeth. You know in the government world we can't just fire someone for being a dweeb. We're stuck with him unless he decides to run naked through the streets. Might as well put him in an office and get him out of people's way. Anyway, he's not a complete idiot. He has capabilities and insights in there somewhere, that is of course, if one is willing to dig deep enough."

"Now I'm remembering why I left government employ."

Beth smiled and took another tiny sip of the ancient french brandy.

"Enough about Simon. We could enjoy the entire evening at his expense. But that's not why I've brought you here under such urgent circumstances."

"Yes," Beth said. "Simon mentioned something about a special request . . . that someone in Egypt wanted to speak with me personally."

"Indeed. And we believe this person may provide a unique opportunity for us to see inside an organization where politics have prevented us, thus far, from treading. When you knew her, she held a position of little consequence."

The Director leaned in and Beth did likewise.

"But times have changed, Elizabeth, and this woman now works at GIS."

The Director leaned back and enjoyed another healthy swallow of the bourbon.

Beth pondered the new information.

"Do you think this contact has something to do with the assassination?"

"It's certainly possible, but I hate to assume. It could as easily be a hundred other things. U.S. relations with Egypt are at a nadir

since Mubarak's ouster. If this woman has info about the assassination, great. But we'll take what we can get right now. The Egyptians have devoted plenty of their own resources to solving the assassination, I'm sure."

There was silence as the Director watched Beth swirl, then sip, her cognac.

"Listen, Joseph," Beth said finally, "you know I trust you. I wouldn't even consider an assignment of this nature on the word of Simon Connor. Be straight with me, Joseph. How important is my involvement in this matter to the U.S.? And does it have to be *me* and not one of your current employees? You know I'll be stepping on toes if you pull me into this with any authority to act."

"Elizabeth, I give you my solemn word. As God is my witness . . ." He crossed himself. "You are the only person for this assignment. If you decline, of course we will still pursue this opportunity the best we are able. But in my opinion, only with your direct involvement do we have a reasonable chance of success."

Beth considered the Director's words and sipped the cognac once more.

"Do you have a file for me to review, Joseph?"

The Director pushed the manila folder across the table toward Beth.

"Classified. Top Secret. The 'read in' is on top, that is, if you're willing to consider this assignment further."

Beth looked at the top page describing the sort of Top Secret information contained in the folder and her obligations to keep the information solely to herself and to disclose it only to others who had been "read in" to the assignment.

"Joseph. I need twenty-four hours. Will you read me in and allow me to consider the contents before I decide?"

"With your signature, you may consider it done."

Beth autographed the "read in" sheet and passed it back to the Director.

"Thank you, Elizabeth. You know how to reach me tomorrow. Now . . . shall we order? I'm famished."

Beth suddenly became aware that she hadn't eaten anything

since the vending machine in the Langley Lounge. Beth slid the manila folder into an outside pocket of her purse.

“Yes, let’s.”

CHAPTER 7

One year ago, at the Egyptian underground facility.

"Gentlemen. You have been nearly six months building your toy airplane. It baffles my superiors why this task consumes such great time and expense."

The three scientists and their khaki-tan-uniformed Commander stood under bright fluorescents around a stainless steel lab table in the windowless room.

One of the scientists, a grey-haired Arab named Hamadi, dared to speak.

"Commander. Sir. Please allow me to assure you the model inside this enclosure is no toy. It is crafted from parts made by Egypt's best foundry workers, engineers, and scientists. It has been no mean undertaking to create from the computerized plan the aircraft we are about to show you."

"Yes. I'm sure this toy made very hard work for you all. Let us see this thing on which you have wasted so much of Egypt's time and resources."

The two other scientists . . . one, a tall younger man with olive skin, strong hands, and thick black hair, and the other a shorter, bearded version of Hamadi . . . leaned over the table, carefully removing the wooden casting box that covered the airplane.

The plane claimed more than a meter of the table's length, its triangular-shaped, delta-wing form measuring more than half that distance across. Most anyone who looked upon the elegance and precision of the craft's steely presence would have been impressed.

As the scientists made way, the Commander paced the table's perimeter, inspecting the model from every angle.

"So this is Aurora?"

Hamadi stepped forward to answer.

“Yes, Commander, although the actual airplane will be thirty times larger – over thirty meters in length and nearly twenty from wing tip to wing tip. And of course, the model is made from common steel, not the rare metals the designs require. It would have taken us even longer to build the model had we cast these parts in the other materials.”

The Commander reached out and attempted to manipulate the plane’s control surfaces.

“These flaps don’t even move. Is this the best you can do? Perhaps my superiors will need to rethink the choice of experts to oversee this responsibility.” The word “experts” came with spit.

“But Commander, Sir. The actual control surfaces will move so very little that we were not able to incorporate their movement into the model. At speeds many times that of sound, control surfaces must operate very subtly or they will tear free from the craft. I assure you, this model is as accurate as can be made anywhere in the world.”

Hamadi and the other scientists all knew that statement wasn’t true. But they had little choice in the matter. Their very lives depended on keeping this project moving forward.

“Yes, yes, yes. You have excuses. I hear them. I will take this toy model to my superiors and they will decide how we shall proceed. But before I depart, I shall allow you one opportunity to sway my judgment. Tell me again when a real airplane will come of your work? One that will fly? One that we can sell to the Russians or the Chinese?”

“One year,” Hamadi promised. “No longer. Our facility is now prepared and we have already begun making patterns for full size parts. One year will suffice.”

The commander knew that this construction project had to succeed. The digital plans could not simply be turned over to Russia or China for them to build the airplane. If the plans were sold without proof that the design would work as promised, there would be no payment until proof of their viability could be produced. All of that process would be in foreign control, with no

way for Egypt to dispel claims that the plans were faulty and the designs, useless.

No. Even though Egypt had no use for such a long range and expensive aircraft, the plane must be built first in Egypt, to preserve its value – which was likely in the tens of billions of dollars US.

The Commander also knew that the scientists and engineers assembled in this facility were the very best available in Egypt. His superiors had hand picked them for this project. He could threaten them, try to make them work harder, but in the end, he was stuck with them.

“I will send my men to take the toy to the powers that be, and I will relay your time line. They shall decide whether it will be mercy or justice for you all.”

CHAPTER 8

Location unknown.

The day after the President's death, an encrypted email arrived at the organization's headquarters. Only the man in charge had the decryption code to open it. He did so at the computer in his private office.

My Friend,

As you have seen, the assignment is complete. The President is dead. Wire remaining funds to the designated account immediately. Perhaps we can do business again one day.

Out.

R

The man behind the desk chuckled. "Complete, indeed," he said to himself, deleting the email from his hard drive.

He called his assistant on the intercom. "I have a job for you, my dear."

She appeared at the door, ready to serve.

"Please take care of this for me right away, won't you?"

He handed her an official slip of paper, signed by him, and containing account and routing numbers. The document instructed the organization's banker to transfer \$1,000,000 US to a certain bank account in the Cayman Islands. The Memo at the bottom of the paper read, "Military Supplies – Security."

The assistant took the paper, perusing it briefly.

"It will be my pleasure, Sir." With that, she departed, closing the

office door behind her.

The man rose and crossed to the expansive windows that filled one wall of his office. He stood, observing the cityscape below and the hazy horizon beyond.

They think they know what they're doing – what is happening around them, he thought. Yet they are ignorant of everything that matters. It will always be so. I and a select few others will forever hold their destinies in our hands.

Their kings will fall. Their potentates will crumble, and not one of them can foresee nor alter his own fate.

He returned to his desk and fired a fat Cuban cigar. Bluish-white smoke swirled around and before him.

We are smoke. None can grasp us nor control our paths.

CHAPTER 9

Back in Red Wing.

By the time Beth arrived back home on Jefferson Avenue, it was past 2:00 a.m. I had been asleep since 11:00, but I'm easily awakened – a habit I developed during years working where such things meant life or death.

I waited until she'd entered the upstairs bath and I heard the shower flowing. When she emerged, I was standing in the doorway in my pajama bottoms.

Beth had begun toweling off in the shower without seeing me.

"Hey," I said.

She looked up.

"Oh, hey, Babe. Sorry I woke you."

"Pretty much unavoidable," I said. "Not your fault. Can you come to bed? Or are you pulling an all-nighter?"

Beth had finished drying herself. I watched as her naked body brushed past me and on into our bedroom. I followed.

"I'm completely fried and crashing from caffeine buzz," she said, slipping into her cotton jammies. "I'll tell you all about my trip in the morning."

She fell into bed and managed to drag some covers over her legs and torso. I tucked her in properly.

"It's good to have you home, Beth. Sleep well."

She was out as soon as her head hit the pillow. I could tell it'd been a trying day. I crawled into my side of the bed and lay on my back, staring at the dark ceiling.

"I love you," I whispered. "Goodnight."

* * *

It was a little after 9:00 a.m. when Beth came downstairs, still wearing her PJs. I had brewed a pot of fresh coffee in the machine and was working on my second cup when she joined me at the granite kitchen table.

I could see she was still waking up. So I allowed her to gain her wits before trying to start a conversation.

After three or four sips of coffee, and a full-body stretch, she turned toward me.

"Good morning, Babe. You're looking a lot more chipper than I feel."

I laughed.

"The long hours get harder with age I'm afraid."

She raised an eyebrow at me.

"Not that you're getting old or anything . . . just not any younger."

This time I got a head tilt and thought I'd better change my tack.

"I can't say how chipper you feel, but you're looking fantastic. How *do* you do it?"

Now it was Beth's turn to laugh.

"You're such a loser . . . and I'm unbelievably lucky I married you."

"True," I said, returning to my coffee. "Who could argue with that."

I could see that Beth's cup was emptying, so I freshened it from the pot.

"Thanks, Babe."

"Least I could do after you've just put in a hard day's night."

"About that . . . I've got about ten hours to make a decision that has potential to upset our retirement routines considerably. I want your input, but I've gotta read through the file first. I think I'll get at that right now, if you'll excuse me."

"Certainly. Hope it's a good read."

"Oh, they always are." There was more than a touch of sarcasm in her voice.

Beth headed out of the kitchen leaving me to read the newspaper and wonder what the next ten hours would hold.

* * *

As noon approached, I decided I'd arrange for a nice lunch. We'd only had coffee for breakfast, and I was sure Beth could benefit from something healthy to eat.

While she continued to mull over the contents of the manila file on our livingroom's red leather couch, I ducked out to Smokey Row and picked up two salads and a loaf of freshly baked bread. Smokey Row is equal parts bakery and coffee shop. I can't say one part is better than the other. But both together make for a heavenly breakfast or brunch.

I managed to escape the aroma of fresh-baked goodies without picking up caramel rolls, or cheese Danish, or anything of the other treats that had beckoned me through the display case glass, and made it out the door with our salads and bread.

Arriving back at 1011 Jefferson Avenue, I parked the Pilot in front and entered through the columned screen porch that spanned the width of our Georgian Colonial.

I looked in on Beth.

"Time for a lunch break. It'll help you focus those stunning eyes and sharpen your already incisive neurons."

Beth looked up. "You didn't try to cook, did you?"

"Not to fear. I picked this up from the professionals at Smokey Row." I rattled the bag containing our lunch.

"Sounds great. Shall we eat on the porch? Might be one of our last chances before cold weather."

"I aim to please. You sit tight and I'll get us set up."

A few minutes later, I had the front porch wicker and glass table looking quite presentable. The ice water had been poured. The salads were in their bowls. And the bread was sliced in a cloth-lined basket, with butter at the ready.

Beth took a seat at the table. I remained standing.

"Today we are serving your choice of a simple chicken salad with apple and grape slices on a bed of romaine, or cranberry spinach salad, with toasted almonds, dressed with a sweet and tangy vinegar and oil dressing, and chocked full of sesame and poppy

seeds."

"Hmm. I think I'll go with the chicken and fruit. Always a personal favorite."

"Chicken it is," I said, delivering the salad bowl onto her dinner plate, then joining her at the table with the spinach and cranberries.

We said a brief table grace and dug in.

I'm sure Beth was famished, but she ate with patience and dignity . . . at least as much dignity as one can have when one is still dressed in one's pajamas at lunchtime.

After allowing a few moments for each of us to begin our meals, I couldn't wait any longer.

"So, Beth. Have you gleaned enough juicy details from that bestseller in there to know whether I can help with anything?"

"Hmm. Now that's always a dangerous question. Do you think you can exercise appropriate restraint and maybe just help me talk through it?"

"Well . . . that won't be easy. But I promise to endeavor to succeed." I smiled.

"That doesn't comfort me. But we need to discuss this anyway."

"Okay," I said, dabbing my mouth with a cloth napkin. "Fire away."

"To start out with, I can't share all the details with you. It's Top Secret and you haven't been read in on this mission. So I'll share what I can."

I understood Beth's limitations concerning the info. Although I, too, had a Top Secret clearance, her info was need-to-know, and I didn't have the appropriate permissions to gain access.

"Understood."

"As I'm sure you've heard by now, someone assassinated the new President of Egypt the day before yesterday."

"Yeah, I saw that on CNN."

"The Agency wants me to spend some time at our Embassy in Cairo on an assignment that may or may not relate to the presidential assassination."

"Need to know?"

"Actually, nobody's sure exactly what information I might find once I get to Egypt."

"I'm assuming they want your code-breaking skills. Isn't it possible for you to do that stuff from home?"

"That's a reasonable question, but I can't answer it. If I accept this assignment, I *have* to go to Cairo, probably for weeks . . . maybe months. The timing depends on what I find when I get there."

This was a much bigger deal for the Becker family than I had anticipated.

"You know, Cairo isn't the greatest place for Americans right now. Since the Egyptians found out that U.S. support for Mubarak wasn't their only problem, they've been flailing around looking for somebody to blame for their persecution."

Beth gave me a motherly look.

"I'm sure you'll recall that I spent a number of years in Cairo. I'm up to speed on the Middle East and its . . . idiosyncracies. I'd be stationed at the Embassy. I know there's still a risk. But do you think any group in Egypt is really stupid enough to assault our Embassy? Arresting a few American pro-democracy advocates is one thing . . . but attacking the Embassy would be declaring war on the United States.

"Under the Camp David Accords, the U.S. basically bribed Egypt, Israel, and Jordan to make peace. We pay all of them billions every year as our part of that deal. If the SCAF allowed anyone to attack the U.S. Embassy, they'd be risking eighty percent of their military budget in the process. I'm pretty sure it's in their best interests to keep me safe while I'm there."

"I don't doubt you're right, Beth. But I seem to recall the SCAF just standing by while rioters overthrew the Israeli Embassy in Giza last year."

Beth took a deep breath.

"Babe, you are a wise man, and so skilled at many things, but trust me, you *do not* understand Middle East politics."

Beth waited for me to react. Eventually, I rocked my head back and forth in tacit acknowledgment that she might be right about my

relative ignorance in this area.

"In Egypt, *everybody* hates Israel," she continued. "And *everybody* wishes Israel would go away. But no sensible Egyptian wants war with Israel, and no sensible Israeli wants war with Egypt. Everybody's got too much to lose. The SCAF knew Israel wouldn't respond with force in that Embassy assault. They were just letting Egyptians blow off steam. A lot of young Egyptians are mad as hell at their situation and the SCAF didn't want that hostility directed at them.

"Of course, one could debate the wisdom of their strategy, since almost all Egyptians seem to have realized by now that Mubarak wasn't their problem, it was the army and the SCAF all along. Mubarak was just the front man."

"Okay," I said. "It seems you've got a good grasp on the risks of this assignment. How 'bout the benefits?"

"Sorry. I can't go into details with you. But U.S. interests in the region are already in jeopardy. I *might* be able to do something meaningful to . . . repair . . . some of that mess."

"Do your bosses know how the President was killed?"

"It doesn't seem so. Reports are conflicting. Or maybe they're just not sharing."

"Ahh . . . well, during your absence, I've been scanning the internet for clues. Lots of folks have . . . er . . . insights into the matter. Wanna hear some likely causes of death according to the World Wide Web?"

Beth folded her hands in her lap. "I can hardly wait."

"I made a list." Reaching into my shirt pocket, I produced a sheet of yellow-striped note paper containing my written recollections.

"Let's see . . . for methods of execution we have – sniper bullet, earphone bomb, backstabbing by someone on the platform, time-delayed poisoning, cosmic radiation, a bolt from a cross-bow, and 'struck down by God.'

"Had you considered all of those?"

"Hmm. The crossbow thing is creative. If God is involved, I'm not sure what I can do to help restore order. And I'm going to have

to throw out cosmic radiation.”

“Yeah. I thought you might.”

“But I’ll keep the others in mind. Is that it?”

“No. Not even close. I’ve got likely suspects, too.”

“Can’t wait to hear these. I s’pose God’s on this list as well?”

“Natch. Goes without saying.”

I referred to my paper again.

“Okay . . . for the possible baddies, in no particular order, we’ve got the Israeli Mossad, Egyptian Muslims – both right and left wing – an as yet unidentified militant faction of Egypt’s Coptic Christian minority . . .” I checked to make sure Beth was still listening. She was doing her best.

“ . . . the CIA, al Qaeda, Hamas, Syria’s President Assad, and Kim Jong II.”

I looked up again.

“You mean the North Korean President, Kim Jong II?” Beth said.

“Yup.”

“He’s dead.”

“Uh huh. But you can’t just discard these thing out of hand.”

I smiled. Beth smiled back.

“And you’ve got more brilliant insights to share, I’m sure.”

“Naturally. You want to know the motives, right?”

Beth sighed.

“Okay. Hit me.”

“Other than the obvious – to wit, the CIA, the Mossad, God, and I suppose, Kim Jong II – the Muslims either wanted strict Sharia law, or someone more liberal and democratic. Assad needed to draw attention away from domestic slaughter in his own country. Al Qaeda was just trying to get its good terrorist name back – they’ve been in decline since bin Laden’s demise. Hamas, who you might think would be entirely supportive of their only meaningful ally in the region, feared continuation of the peace treaty with Israel.”

“Is that it?” Beth pleaded.

“No. There’s more.”

"Okay. Not today. I think I've got the gist of world opinion. I'll bulk up my background data through more traditional channels."

"Right. It's a lot to take in all at once, what with God and dead people and all. I'll just leave the rest of the list with you for later reference."

I passed the yellow page across to Beth.

"Bless you!" She looked truly thankful.

"Other than more forensics concerning the assassination, do you have further thoughts to offer?"

I considered all that I'd heard and all that I'd read.

"I have just one question for you. What have you decided? Are you headed for Egypt or not?"

I wet my parched lips with a sip of water. I guessed I'd been talking longer than I'd realized.

Beth allowed herself a moment for reflection. No doubt I'd overwhelmed her with my copious insights.

"I think I'd like to take a stab at this assignment. There's a good reason why I should be the one to go to Cairo, though I can't tell you what it is. And I just might be able to accomplish some small bit of something that would be good for all players in the region – not just the U.S. – unless, of course, I get hit by a gamma ray blast, or God takes me out. I'm honestly not worried about the dead guy."

I leaned back in my chair, hands on its arms.

"Then I think you should do it. Accept the assignment."

Beth looked surprised at my reaction.

"What will you do about your longings for me while I'm gone?"

Beth purred, then followed with a smile.

"Hey, you know me. Gunner and I'll keep each other entertained. In fact, he's got some dignitary coming to town and wants my security advice. It won't be easy, but I'll keep my 'longings' in check. You know, I even heard somewhere that absence makes the heart grow fonder."

"Yeah. My intel has it that the guy who said that didn't have a choice in the matter. He was just looking on the bright side. In fact, I think his gal pal ditched him in the end."

Beth smiled again.

Did I mention that I love her smile?

"I shan't worry on that score. You've established your fidelity by tolerating my escapades for these past many years. It's only the bad guys who might threaten you that give me pause."

"Hey. I'm not so bad at protecting myself, you may recall. Besides, I'm pretty sure there must be *someone* else in all of Egypt who can protect me for you."

We both smiled.

"Then it's decided. When do you leave?"

"I'll find out more details when I get back to Holford with my decision. I'm guessing they'll want me there yesterday."

"Ah, yesterday. All my troubles seemed so far away."

Beth flicked water from her glass in my direction.

"Okay, McCartney. I've gotta finish the briefing and then call Holford. I shall beckon you when I'm free."

"I'll just clean up these dishes and remain available. Get back to work. Shoo." I waggled my hand at her.

Beth returned to her labors, and my mind began rolling through the list of all the horrible things that could happen to her while she was gone. Force of habit, I suppose.

CHAPTER 10

One year ago at the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate (GIS). Cairo.

"So this is the Aurora aircraft."

The voice belonged to GIS Director, Murad Muwafi. A stern, white-haired man, with a long history in both foreign and domestic intelligence activities, he wore his trademark black suit and navy tie. Muwafi had assumed the Directorship from Omar Suleiman, President Mubarak's last-minute appointee as Vice President shortly before Mubarak's fall from power.

When the SCAF took over governance, they hadn't seen fit to include Suleiman among their number, choosing instead to paint the former administration with a broad brush and eliminate as many stale reminders of its existence as possible. It seemed Suleiman had hitched his cart to the wrong horse, and as a result, had never been seen in public again.

Muwafi could not help but be mindful of the manner in which his newly acquired position had become vacant. His sole mission was to please whomever would be in power the longest. Right now, that was the SCAF. But he was mindful, too, that democracy might be on the horizon for Egypt. As a result, those who knew him best saw him for the fence sitter that he was – unable to take a decision without first weighing its political effects on his own career. If he could pull off a huge financial win with the Aurora project, his job would be secure regardless of who ran the country.

"Yes, Director," the Commander answered.

Muwafi strolled around the glass display case in the GIS high security wing.

"It is impressive, no?" the Director said.

"Mr. Director, it will indeed be impressive, if and when the plans are realized in full scale. Right now, it is six months of not very much."

The Director turned to Commander Saed.

"Do you have concerns that this project will not come to fruition, Saed?"

The Commander spoke freely.

"I have always said as much. Even with the stolen plans, this plane is beyond the abilities of our scientists and manufacturers to build, let alone of our fighter pilots to fly."

"I take your advice to heart, as I always have, Saed, but this plane cannot remain half-pregnant forever. I only told the Supreme Council that we possessed these plans. It was their choice to build the prototype rather than risk losing this valuable assets to our trading partners. Do you say we should stop now? Report utter failure?"

"Mr. Director. That is, of course, your decision, not mine."

"That may be true, Saed. But if we choose to report failure at this juncture, I will require your presence to explain why this significant matter, which I have tasked to *your* command, has come to nothing. Is that what you want me to do?"

The Commander was a soldier. He took orders and carried them out to the best of his ability. Yet he understood the implication in the Director's tone.

"If you insist on my opinion, Mr. Director, then I would choose to continue the project for now." The Commander cringed. "The benefits to Egypt could be great. I must place the greater good above my own self-interests in this matter."

He hung his head.

"I thought that might be your recommendation, Saed. Now . . . is there anything further you will need to complete this glorious and patriotic task? You know the full resources of GIS are at your disposal."

The Commander paused.

"Have we additional scientists or engineers who may have greater knowledge or skill than those already assigned to my duty?"

“Saed, my friend. You know that you already have the best minds in all of Egypt. Surely you are not saying that Egyptian education and expertise is somehow . . . second rate?”

“Certainly not, Mr. Director. I only wished to be confident . . . to guarantee this project’s success.”

“Very well then, Saed. Be about your business. I shall expect your regular reports, with a final completion date of one year from today. You are dismissed.”

The Commander saluted the older man, who half-heartedly returned the gesture. Commander Saed departed the Directorate with the knowledge that his only hope of avoiding prison, or worse, was success of the Aurora project. He would have to make it so.

CHAPTER 11

Two days after the President's Assassination.

The sniper had received the remaining monies due him for the Egyptian job and presently lay enjoying a professional massage beneath a beach palapa at an exclusive Dominican resort.

The dark-skinned young woman in the white masseuse uniform rested her hands quietly upon his wiry but well-muscled shoulders for nearly a minute.

"Terminado, Señor. ¿Quedó usted satisfecho?"

He remained motionless on the massage table's white cotton sheets.

"Si, Señorita. Muy bien. Your hands are a miracle for this tired horse." His Spanish was merely passable and carried a South Texas accent.

"Lo siento, Señor. No habla Ingles." She gave a shy smile.

"That's no problema, Señorita. La cuenta, por favor?"

She produced the hotel charge book from her apron and offered it to him with a nod.

After signing and including an ample gratuity, he returned the book to the woman.

"Mañana, Señor? Al mismo tiempo?"

"Si. Same time tomorrow. Gracias."

The masseuse covered the sniper's back and Speedo with a white terrycloth towel before departing.

As he lay in the palapa's shade, on the edge of sleep, he pondered his career choice. Not the moral implications, certainly . . . but how wise he had been to accept that first offer after departing Special Forces.

Life is good, Amigo. Life is good.

CHAPTER 12

At Cairo International Airport.

Beth had, indeed, been pressed into service the next day after arriving home. She'd boarded a Lufthansa flight at Humphrey International in the Twin Cities last night around 11:00 p.m. local time, transferred to another Star Alliance carrier, EgyptAir, at Frankfurt, and had just arrived here in Cairo at 6:00 p.m. today.

She'd heard that the Cairo airport had been remodeled since her last visit, but she was still amazed at the shining steel escalators, the smoothly functioning people mover, and the gleaming glass domes lofting above common areas and walkways. All of this had been accomplished since 2000.

The airport represented a magnificent transformation from "the old days." Beth began to wonder how much the Embassy had changed and whether she could, in fact make the adjustment to 21st Century Cairo.

Upon collecting her baggage at the carousel, she followed the English language signs that brought her to Customs and Immigration Services. Finding no specific area for diplomatic entries into Egypt, she waited in line for one of the Customs agents to become available.

When she presented her diplomatic passport and Visa to the agent, he compared her face to the photo in his hand. Apparently satisfied with the resemblance, he waved her through without any attempt to question her or search her luggage. After she'd left the customs area, the agent placed a telephone call to advise security to monitor the American diplomat.

Outside the terminal, the air was still and warm. The smell of auto exhaust mixed with diesel fumes permeated the sheltered

passenger pickup area. This could be any major airport in any major city. Beth found nothing familiar from her previous time here.

Locating the black limousine with twin American flags flying above its front quarter panels was hardly a challenge. Beth waved at the driver and he pulled up beside her.

After a perfunctory welcome and a further checking of her papers, he opened a rear door for her while he loaded her bags.

Before turning herself over to an unknown chauffeur in an unauthenticated vehicle, Beth called the Embassy and to request a description of the driver and the car. When she had confirmed all was copacetic, she followed the driver's direction and sat in the back, enjoying a brief stretch of both arms and legs in the ample rear of the limo while awaiting the driver's return.

The trip to the Embassy proved uneventful. The driver didn't care to chat, which was fine with Beth, who'd planned to rest her eyes, but immediately dropped off to sleep. She awakened as the limo rocked over the speed bump at the entrance to the Embassy's underground garage.

By this time it was after 7:00 in the evening and most Embassy employees had departed for their homes in the Cairo suburbs. A young, professionally attired, and cheerful American woman wearing a brunette bob met Beth's car on its arrival and escorted Beth and her baggage handler to the Embassy apartment that would serve as Beth's home for the next . . . well . . . no one knew how long. The young woman's name was Tara.

Beth surveyed the fourth floor premises. The room smelled faintly of pine cleaner and fresh paint . . . or perhaps it was the new carpeting. The decorating was standard government issue. There were framed prints on the walls – most likely the same ones that hung in each apartment on this floor.

Tara gave Beth the apartment keys and a hi-tech, electronic Embassy Employee Pass while the handler placed her luggage in the room.

"I hope these accommodations will be adequate, Ms. Weston."

"Yes, Tara. These will be fine. Please call me Elizabeth."

"Certainly, Elizabeth. Will there be anything else I might provide for you this evening?"

Beth remembered the days long ago when she had been the page who'd met seasoned diplomats upon arrival in Egypt. Had she been this staunch and formal? Probably.

"Actually, Tara, you can tell me how can I get on the internet from my room. If possible, I'd like an encrypted connection from here. Otherwise, normal web access will do for now."

Tara produced what appeared to be a business card from her suit breast pocket. "The internet access procedure is on this card. It's not encrypted though. And we don't use wireless networks here." She caught herself, realizing who she was speaking to. "But then, I'm sure you knew that. Will you need an ethernet cable?"

"No, thanks. I've got one in my bag. Are you able to request an encrypted link for me here? Or is that something I need to do myself tomorrow?"

"I'll be happy to make the request for you, Ms. West . . . ah . . . Elizabeth. Someone may contact you to validate your request. But I'm sure that, for *you* there won't be a problem.

"Is there anything else?"

Beth swept her eyes around the room once more.

"Yes, actually. I assume that my bags and I passed through a bug detector or two on the way in here, but could you arrange for a more thorough sweep of all my things as soon as possible. I wouldn't want to be bringing in any unwanted ears. And this is probably standard procedure, but I'd really appreciate a double-check of the room as well, including a search for optical and sonic detectors that might be listening from outside. I need this room to be 100% bug-free from the get go.

"Can you get the ball rolling on those things as well, Tara?"

Beth smiled at the young woman.

"I believe I can make those arrangements through my supervisor in the morning. Will that be soon enough? Otherwise, I can contact her this evening."

Beth knew Tara didn't want to bother her boss after work hours. And her boss probably didn't want to have her dinner interrupted

either.

"Tomorrow will do fine. Now I think I'm all set. So perhaps you're done for the day?"

"Just about. It was nice to meet you Elizabeth. I'm sure you'll be seeing me around. I kind of run all over."

Beth smiled. Tara exhaled and returned the smile.

"About a hundred years ago I wore your shoes, Tara. I haven't forgotten what it's like. Let me know if I cause you too much trouble, okay?"

"Thank you, Elizabeth. I hope you enjoy your first evening in Cairo."

Beth laughed.

"If the bed works, I'll be in heaven. Thanks again. You enjoy your evening, too."

Tara prepared to close the apartment door. "Goodnight, Elizabeth. Sleep well."

"Thanks again, Tara. I'll see ya around."

Tara nodded formally, then backed out into the hall, softly closing the wooden door behind her.

Beth unbuttoned her jacket and hung it in the closet. The bed beckoned, but she needed a shower before a restful night's sleep. That horizontal dream date would have to wait just a few more minutes.

Her thoughts drifted back to Red Wing and the husband she'd left behind. She hoped she'd made the right decision coming to Cairo.

CHAPTER 13

Nine months ago at the Egyptian underground facility.

The three Egyptian scientists had made great strides toward constructing a full scale prototype of Aurora. The composite casting process had proven daunting. The plans called for many components to be made from titanium and magnesium alloys. Titanium alloyed with aluminum was easy enough to work with. But the magnesium and zinc alloy, required for many of the larger parts, posed significant challenges.

For one thing, magnesium was stable enough in its solid state, but when heated to its melting point, reacted explosively in air. This meant that all magnesium alloy parts had to be cast entirely within chambers filled with argon gas. The casting process was identical to that used for simple parts made of aluminum or steel, but meeting the tight tolerances of intricate fuel channels and wiring conduit within the castings became almost impossibly cumbersome inside an argon chamber, where workers standing outside the enclosure, had to melt, mix, and pour the alloys into the molds using extendable rubber gloves or robotic arms.

And if pouring the magnesium wasn't complex enough, the scientists also needed to tightly control the cooling and contraction of the alloy inside the sand mold. Within the molds themselves, they had incorporated reservoirs to hold the necessary additional metal to fill the areas where cooling had contracted the hot metal – the metal that had originally completely filled the mold.

But cooling the reservoir itself – a relatively large mass of molten metal – at a rate that would allow it to meld with the faster-cooling, thin fuel channels and conduit, while still assuring that the entire alloy casting would develop the optimal crystalline structure

for strength and stability – now that was a process the scientists had never before pressed to these extremely tight tolerances.

As the project had progressed, the scientists' original confidence had begun to wane. The casting process for the exotic metals was proving beyond the capabilities of their metallurgists and foundry personnel to carry out with the necessary precision.

"Is there any hope this thing will fly when we are through?" one scientist asked his companions.

"There is still hope," another said.

Hamadi's assessment was less optimistic.

"We shall require a miracle for this to work. Let us all pray that someone else makes bigger mistakes than we. Or I fear we shall soon meet Allah face to face."

With dread and misgivings, the scientists moved ever closer to the day when Aurora would be expected to fly.

CHAPTER 14

Back in Red Wing.

It'd been a few days and I hadn't heard anything more about Gunner's "dignitary." A call was in order.

Gunner's phone rang twice.

"Gunderson."

"Good morning, Chief Deputy. Just checking in to see what's new on the security detail."

"You know, Beck, I often wonder what you do with yourself when your not riding my tail. Do you do *any* lawyer work at all anymore?"

I laughed.

" 'Course I do, Gunner. But I've got that office running like a finely oiled machine. I don't have to actually *be* there all that much."

"You realize that if you don't improve your pretend lawyer persona, somebody might just start asking questions about what the heck it is that you *do* do."

"Do do?"

"Yeah."

"Well, let 'em ask. As long as you don't tell, I won't. Maybe I've got a lot of important big shot clients from the Cities, so I'm not around here all that much. Or maybe the County Attorney has got me on retainer to keep the Sheriff's Department out of its own do do."

"Do do?"

"Yeah."

"Well . . . I don't think so."

"What don't you think?"

"That I want you telling my citizens that you're looking after me. So don't."

He'd had enough of my sparkling repartee for the day.

"Maybe it's you who's looking after me? How 'bout that?"

There was a pause.

"What? Look, can we just get back to the security thing?"

"Glad you mentioned it. What's new? Do you know yet who you're protecting?"

I flinched as Gunner obviously dropped his phone. Then in the background I thought I heard him say something like "Sonofabitch."

I stifled a laugh.

"Gunner? Gunner? You okay?"

He came back on the line.

"Just spilled frickin' hot coffee all over my uniform. Shit!"

I could visualize the scene in Gunner's office perfectly. I'd been there before when there'd been a coffee incident. He had too many files on his desk and often set his coffee mug on top of them. Java upheaval was bound to happen at periodic intervals. Again, I tried not to laugh.

"Look," I said, "you let me know when you're ready to talk business. I'll wait for your call."

I heard Gunner's phone hit the floor again.

"Goddammit!"

And I disconnected the call. Best to let Gunner regain his composure.

A few minutes later my cell rang. It was Gunner.

"Hi, Gunner. Everything okay?"

"Hell, yeah. I just gotta get a new filing system around here. Anyway . . . Sheriff says our dignitary is a member of Congress, but he can't say who. You got any idea why that might be? Those politicos usually advertise all over hell when they're planning a visit. Why the cloak and dagger stuff?"

"They advertise when they're campaigning, but it's an off year – no election this fall. Maybe it's a private visit."

I waited for Gunner to respond.

"Yeah. That makes sense, I guess. But if he's keeping his travel schedule on the down low, doesn't seem too bright for him to tell me, and every other cop in the southern half of Minnesota, that he's coming. D'ya think?"

Gunner had a point.

"And don't those Congress guys have plenty of Secret Service and stuff? Why would they need my little old kick-the-shit-off-our-boots Department to help?"

"I know a little about Congressional security, Gunner. They don't get the same kind of protection that a President does. In fact, they don't get any. I suppose the government figures killing one Congress member out of 535 isn't going to motivate too many potential killers to take the risk."

The line was silent for a moment.

"So you mean those guys . . ."

"Or gals," I reminded.

". . . or gals," Gunner squeezed through an obviously tightened jaw. "So they don't have any security at all?"

"Lots of them hire private security, Gunner. It's just the government doesn't provide it. It's on their own dime."

"Well, that at least makes some sense. So do you s'pose this guy . . . or gal . . . is extra security conscious and has some private muscle?"

"That *would* make sense, given that somebody wants to coordinate with Ottawa County for security."

Gunner paused again.

"So why is this particular . . . politician . . . so afraid of getting whacked? Why're they so jumpy?"

"Who knows, Gunner. Maybe somebody gave 'em a scare at another public outing. Maybe there's marital infidelity involved. The point is, something's got them spooked, and unless you're told what, you're probably never going to know."

"So we're back to ground zero on this security thing then, huh."

"Square one."

"What?"

"Ground zero is where something blows up. Square one is where

you start."

I could hear Gunner roll his eyes through the phone.

"If you knew I meant 'square one,' then why the hell didn't you just shut up and let me move on?"

"Hmm . . . force of habit, I guess."

"Well, get over it. Take a ten step program or something."

"Twelve step."

"Becker, you make me want to spit!"

"I suppose."

I'll get back in touch when I know more and we can get off 'square one.' *Don't* call me before I call you!"

I paused to see if there was more. Nothing.

"Got it," I said. "You do have my number, right?"

Click.

Gunner's not as surly as he might seem. He just doesn't appreciate witty banter.

I would await his call.

CHAPTER 15

At the U.S. Embassy, Cairo.

Egyptian cultural traditions dictated that Beth's wardrobe for this assignment assume a more conservative tenor than her typical Western style. She needed to cover her arms and legs whenever she was outside the Embassy or meeting with Egyptian or other Arab men. Fitted clothing would cause unwanted attention to body parts other than her brain.

Beth had selected two distinct, but equally acceptable "looks" for Cairo dress.

For more casual encounters, or for walking Cairo's crowded streets, she had packed a selection of "Diane Sawyer" outfits. These consisted of loose-fitting, tan khaki pants, with a colorful variety of long-sleeved, crew-neck, cotton tunics, to be worn with or without a drapey cotton sweater or tunic jacket.

For those times when she needed to project a more empowered presence, Beth reserved a selection of cotton "power suits" – mainly navy, dark grey, or black with mid-calf length skirts, long jackets, and white or cream blouses, buttoned up to the neck.

She would not be wearing any jewelry in Egypt, other than her plain gold wedding band.

Today would be a Diane Sawyer day. She preferred to get acquainted with the Embassy staff without coming off as a stuffed shirt from D.C. A casual Beth would be more approachable.

As she entered the lower level Embassy cafeteria, Beth saw the object of her breakfast meeting – Deputy Ambassador, Thomas Hitchens – already seated at a table for two. He either didn't notice her arrival, or didn't know what she looked like.

Beth chose fresh fruit and vanilla yogurt from the food counter,

then approached Deputy Ambassador Hitchens. He looked up from his *Wall Street Journal* and stood to greet her.

"Elizabeth Weston, I presume?"

"The same," Beth said, placing her plastic tray on the table.

"My pleasure to meet you, Deputy Ambassador Hitchens."

They exchanged a firm handshake.

"Okay. We're going to need to shorten that title up a bit. Please call me Tom or 'Hitch,' as you prefer."

"My pleasure, 'Hitch.' Please call me Elizabeth."

"Well, Elizabeth, let's have a seat and get acquainted, shall we?"

"We shall."

Elizabeth took her seat as Hitch returned to his. It was apparent from the condition of his tray that his breakfast had been a full meal of fried eggs, sausage, and hash browns. This diet, Beth imagined, accounted for Hitch's portly composition.

Covering his roundish exterior, Hitch wore a too-small blue cotton blazer, a white cotton short-sleeved dress shirt (as revealed by his bare wrist bones) with a green and blue striped tie, and a pair of tan chinos that could well have come from his clothes hamper. A suede pair of Birkenstock sandals over bare feet completed the eclectic ensemble.

Beth knew better than to judge a man by his attire, but Hitch had compiled a memorable look.

"Do you mind if I continue with breakfast while we visit?" Beth asked. "I'm famished."

"No, no. Not at all. I've got my coffee to keep me busy."

Beth decided to ask a question, giving Hitch the chance to talk while she peeled a banana. Beth knew Hitch had been read in on this mission. No one else was within earshot.

"I'm given to understand that I've attracted the attention of an Egyptian woman with some information we'd like to obtain. Rasha Metwally?"

This was business as usual for Hitch. He dabbed his napkin at a coffee stain on his belly.

"Yes. That's the woman. I've memorized her file. We first took notice of her when she was a page for the Egyptian government

back when you were here, in the late '80s, I believe."

Beth swallowed a bite of banana.

"Yes. That's my recollection. She delivered Classified documents for the Ambassador's attention."

"Indeed. That would be her. Do you recall anything else about her from that time?"

Beth rubbed her forehead.

"Not much, really. My cover job at the Embassy while I was code-cracking in the back room, was as a page and document clerk. Frequently, Rasha would hand off her documents on my signature. She seemed polite, smiled a lot, and was patient while she awaited a response. I may have fetched her water or a snack when she had a long wait. I was pretty diligent at the time about making a good impression for the U.S. in Egypt. I may have done a few little things for Rasha, but mainly I kept to my own business."

"Yes, well, others with greater influence might have benefitted from following your example. By that time, we'd managed passable relations with President Mubarak, who was favorably inclined to the money coming from the U.S. owing to Egypt's official recognition of Israel at Camp David. Recognizing Israel was a disaster in Egypt, not only for President Sadat, who met up with an assassin shortly afterward, but for the Egyptian people, who believed their government had betrayed them to their greatest enemy. The U.S. role in brokering that deal, and subsequent support for Israel, chilled popular Egyptian sentiment toward us considerably. In fact, for several years after Camp David, it was unsafe for Embassy personnel to walk the streets of Cairo without Egyptian escort.

"But I'm sure you don't require a history lesson."

Beth was well acquainted with the history of Egyptian-Israeli-U.S. relations since Camp David. Egypt, Israel, and even Jordan had made out handsomely with what amounted to a U.S. "peace-bribe." But in Egypt, Mubarak and the military were the primary beneficiaries. Egyptian citizens saw no "trickle down" effect of those billions in U.S.-Egyptian "aid." Since Mubarak had gotten what he wanted, Egypt's government applied little effort, and even

less financial support, to growing the domestic economy, the result of which was that Egypt's people languished in relative squalor, with government apathy sapping all hope of bettering their lot in life.

"No. I think I've got a pretty good understanding of where relations are now and how they got there. Please go on about Rasha."

"Yes. I apologize. I talk far too much. Must be the diplomat in me." He chuckled.

"Anyway . . . getting back to Rasha and your assignment . . . whatever relationship you and she developed those many years ago, she either values it today, and has trust in you, or – pardon the implication – she sees you as an opportunity to plant disinformation within the U.S. intelligence community."

Beth savored a bite of an Egyptian-grown strawberry while considering the possibilities.

"Who did Rasha contact when she asked for me?"

"Good question. Her present employ is with GIS, the Egyptian intelligence folks . . ."

"Yes, I'm familiar."

"Ah. Of course, you would be. My apologies. I am remiss in neglecting your affiliations. In any case, according to our sources, Ms. Metwally holds an administrative assistant position in the GIS. We're not sure who her bosses are or whether her job is relevant, though the latter certainly seems likely."

"Agreed. And . . . the manner of her contact with us?" Beth found Hitch pleasant enough, but the man took forever to get to the point.

"Yes. She . . . or at least, *allegedly* Rasha . . . authored an encrypted communication dispensed from GIS HQ and directed to one 'Silver Star.' The message contained several verses from the Quran, and the following note, all in Arabic, of course:

He recited from memory:

I must speak with Elizabeth Weston concerning a matter of urgency to our countries.

"The encryption was one used commonly by GIS, and of course, we decrypted it."

Beth pondered a for moment.

"Do we know who Silver Star is?"

"Not a clue. And we were not able to confirm receipt of the message at any location, which is exceedingly odd. But there I go, preaching to the choir again."

It was odd that the message appeared to have no recipient . . . as if Rasha had just put it "out there" for someone to find. Then again, since she didn't know an appropriate recipient, perhaps this delivery method was eminently sensible.

"She didn't say how we should respond?"

"No. But that didn't keep us from trying, of course. We attempted to contact her by phone using anonymous Blackberrys. We posted a message for Silver Star to contact one of our blind FaceBook identities. We even tried a newspaper personal ad seeking 'Silver Star' in several Cairo newspapers, in Arabic of course."

That pretty much covered the basics.

"Have you back-fed a message to the original message source yet?"

"No. Of course, we considered doing so. But with such an approach comes a risk of discovery, which we elected to delay until we knew whether you were available."

Beth thought postponing this communication tactic had been a wise decision. Incoming electronic traffic would be monitored by the GIS.

"Okay," Beth said. "Please cease all other attempts to contact Rasha and I will initiate the connection. Is that acceptable?"

"Of course. But how do you plan to do it?"

"I'm not exactly sure just yet. But I'll figure it out."

"You come highly recommended for this mission, Elizabeth. I shall pursue a totally alien path for a bureaucrat and allow you to proceed as you see fit. You may contact me once you have engaged the subject."

Beth was more than a little surprised to have been given free

rein to make the contact.

"Thank you, Hitch."

"My pleasure. Make me proud." He smiled broadly.

"I'll do my best toward that end. Now . . . may I ask how I go about getting hi-level encrypted communications in my room, and a thorough bug sweep as well?"

"Both are in process, my dear. I may talk a lot, but I am also a man of action." He postured with hands on hips and shoulders back.

Beth laughed.

"I bet you've got super hero tights on under the disheveled diplomat outfit."

Hitch let out the air he'd been holding in with a "Ha!"

"So you spotted my disguise. But of course you would, wouldn't you. You *are* good, Ms. Weston, very good. I shall have to keep an eye on you. Perhaps I can learn something."

Both arose from the table.

"I'm already learning from you, Hitch. And my sincerest thank you for the quick work on my room."

"Nothing you wouldn't have done in my place. Do have a pleasant stay in Cairo, and I shall see you when I see you."

A quick handshake and Hitch was gone.

Beth reminded herself how many spooks work in diplomatic missions around the world. There may yet be more layers to the seemingly obvious Mr. Hitchens. He was almost certainly with the CIA, after all.

CHAPTER 16

At the GIS office building. Cairo. Three months ago.

GIS Director, Murad Muwafi wanted an update on the Aurora project. It had been nine months since Commander Saed had promised completion within one year. Of course, he had seen the progress reports. But they were written by the scientists, and he knew their content might be optimistic. So he had called Saed back to his office for a first hand update.

There was a knock on the Director's door.

"Come in, Commander. I have been expecting you."

The door opened and Saed entered, closing it behind him.

"Good Day, Mr. Director."

The GIS Director remained behind his large wooden desk, but did not offer the Commander a chair. The Commander remained standing, not at attention, but hardly at rest either.

"The Aurora reports look promising, Saed. But you and I both know that these scientists have a propensity to exaggerate progress on an assignment of this nature. You are in charge of Aurora. What is your assessment? Will Aurora fly in three months' time?"

The Commander felt the weight of the Director's words. This was *his* project. If it failed, he would be the scapegoat. But if somehow the scientists could make Aurora fly, the accolades would fall to the Director. His own name would not earn so much as a footnote on the report to the SCAF.

"As you have said, Mr. Director, that is what the scientists tell me. I can see the frame of the aircraft, and it is impressive, indeed. But I have no independent means to assess progress of interior components, electronics, hydraulics, or other technical aspects of

the construction. I must rely upon the engineers and scientists for that information."

The Director frowned.

"And you deem such reliance prudent, Saed? If I were you . . ."

The Director's voice deepened. ". . . I would find a way to *verify* this data."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Director. May I engage a separate team of scientists to examine the work of those already included in Aurora's secrecy?"

"Saed. We have discussed this subject before. As you well know, more eyes mean more mouths. I will not risk compromising the integrity of the project by introducing additional opportunities for exposure of our prize. The last thing we need is the Americans to learn of our undertaking. One cruise missile from the Mediterranean and our plan has come to naught.

"No Saed. I will not authorize the risk. You must verify with your current personnel."

The Commander had anticipated the Director's response, but knew he'd had to make the request . . . for his own records.

"Then I shall make due with the resources allowed, Mr. Director."

Saed prepared to leave.

"We have a new matter to be discussed, Saed. A matter of utmost importance and urgency."

"How may I be of service, Director?"

"The Senator who provided us with the Aurora plans has gotten himself into trouble of late. According to our sources, in the past month, the Senator has suffered no less than two attempts on his life. His security thwarted both assailants and the American press does not seem to have picked up on the stories. So it appears he has been successful in covering them up . . . at least for now. But his erratic behavior concerns me, Saed."

"I understand, Director. If his behaviors are exposed in public, he may lose his seat of power and then have little reason to keep the existence of our project to himself."

"Precisely, Saed. He poses a grave danger to Aurora . . . a danger

we must address with all diligence. He must be silenced, Saed. Do you understand?"

"Do you not fear that an assassination of a United States Senator might draw unfavorable attention to Egypt and the Intelligence Directorate?"

"That is why we shall employ an independent contractor to perform this service. I have had rare occasion to use such talent before. Although I have not been in touch with the man for several years, I believe with some diligence, you can locate him for me."

"If that is your wish, Director, then that is my command. I shall locate this assassin. Will you provide me information from past contacts?"

"I shall provide what you need to begin your search. The man calls himself, The Raptor. The name is dramatic, but no more so than his results. You will find him for me and then I will eliminate Senator Grossman."

"Yes, Director."

"You have your assignments. You are dismissed, Commander." The Director opened a manila file on his desk and began reading.

"Yes, Director. Good day, Sir." The Director shooed Saed away without looking up. The Commander spun 180 degrees on his boot heel, and left.

* * *

"I'm tired of your blanket assurances," the Commander said to the three scientists. "Show me which parts of this aircraft are presently operable."

The three men in white lab coats exchanged long looks between themselves.

Finally, Hamadi, the eldest and most experienced, responded to the Commander's request.

"Please follow me to the hangar floor, Commander. I will show you what I am able. But I caution you that your expectations of visible progress should not be too high. Most aircraft components will be made operational when the electronics have been installed,

and that will not be for several weeks, at least.”

The Commander was unimpressed with excuses.

“Just show me something, Hamadi. I want to see tangible progress. Now.”

“Yes, Commander. Please follow.”

The foursome made their way past computer clean rooms, and electronics testing laboratories, down the long, steel-grid staircase to the hangar floor.

The Commander could not help being impressed by the scale of this aircraft – 30 meters from nose to tail, and at least 20 meters across the rear edge of the elegantly aerodynamic delta wing. Aurora hung suspended by cables from the hangar ceiling with the help of three, powerful overhead cranes.

As they walked beneath the wing, the Commander was again awed by the size of Aurora’s rectangular engine cavities, but dismayed when he climbed a ladder and saw no engines inside.

“Are there not even engines, Hamadi! Only these shells?”

“The engines are complete, Commander. The combustion chambers contain no moving parts.”

The Commander appeared doubtful.

“Explain it to me. How is this possible?”

Hamadi realized for the first time how advanced this technology was beyond anything the Commander had experienced with fighter jets and bombers.

“Sir. If the engines had moving parts, the airflow at Mach 20 would rip them from the fuselage. At hypersonic speeds – those in excess of Mach 5, that is, five times the speed of sound – the compression of the air as it enters the front of the engine cavity, and constricts to the slightly smaller rear, creates enough heat by itself to burn the fuel.”

Hamadi could tell that the Commander had not understood.

“Sir. It is like a diesel engine. You know how these work, yes?”

“Of course, but I am no fool. This is nothing like a diesel engine.”

“Please allow me to explain, Sir.”

The Commander nodded his assent. His expression remained

skeptical.

"In a diesel engine, air and fuel enter a chamber where a piston compresses the gas mixture until it becomes so hot the oxygen and diesel fuel combine to cause an explosion. Yes?"

He waited to be sure the Commander still followed his train of thought.

"It is the same with Aurora. The fuel flows into the combustion chambers – the engine cavities. But because the airspeed is so great at incredibly high speed, the compression as it passes through the narrowing engine cavity causes the plane's methane fuel to ignite." He paused again to search for comprehension in the Commander's eyes.

The Commander held his hand to his chin.

"Proceed."

"But this combustion is different than a diesel engine because it does not require repeated compression and explosion. The compression, and therefore, the combustion, are constant. The engine burns its fuel in a single, continuing explosion . . . an explosion that propels the craft forward at incredible speeds, far faster than any normal jet aircraft could withstand.

"Do you now see, Commander?"

"You are saying that Aurora's propulsion will only operate at unimaginable air speeds. How do you plan to accelerate Aurora sufficiently to run these unique engines?"

"Commander. Sir. Acceleration is a two stage process. Solid rocket boosters will aid the takeoff. These will be attached beneath the wings and will be released when they have done their work.

"The rockets will accelerate Aurora to a speed in excess of Mach 1, at which time the pilot will engage the pulse jet propulsion system. The pulse jets are also located within the hollow engine cavities. Unlike the scramjets which will operate only at speeds in excess of Mach 5, the pulse jets can become functional at Mach 1, or even slightly slower speeds."

"And where are these so called pulse jets? As I have seen, the engines are empty. Do you think me a fool?"

Hamadi's frustration at the Commander's lack of

comprehension was building, though he would not let his irritation show.

“Sir. The pulse engines operate like gasoline motors within the engine cavities. Pumps inside the wings inject fuel into the combustion chambers where spark generators embedded in the engine walls ignite the fuel/air mixture. The ignition cycle is very rapid – many explosions per second. The aerodynamics of the engine cavity at Mach 1 force the fuel explosions out the rear of the engines, providing forward thrust to the aircraft. The pulse jets will bring Aurora to the Mach 5 speed required to engage the scramjets for primary propulsion.”

The Commander remained incredulous.

“To launch this craft you require rockets, then a switch to one type of propulsion – pulse jets? – followed by yet another power change to the scramjet engines? And both pulse jet and scramjet thrust is dependent upon these empty engine chambers? Am I hearing you correctly, Hamadi?”

“That is correct, Sir. I realize it all sounds very complex. But I do not know how to explain it more simply.”

The concepts of pulse jet and scramjet propulsion remained unfamiliar to the Commander. But then, he supposed, these peculiar engines were one reason Aurora was so unique . . . and so valuable.

“Very well, Hamadi. I accept your explanation. Can we test an engine now so I may see how it works?”

Hamadi drew a deep breath and exhaled.

“Sir. To fire even the pulse jets, we would need to inject a steady stream of air into the engine housing at the speed of sound. We possess no technology that would allow us to do this. It can only be tested in flight. If we fired the pulse jets now, fire would erupt from both the front and rear of the engine cavities with unpredictable results.”

The Commander drew a deep breath.

“Well, what then *can* you show me that actually operates?”

Hamadi moved tentatively to a control panel connected to Aurora with a thick umbilical of electrical wiring. He slid one of the

control gliders forward. The sound of hydraulic machinery in motion filled the hangar.

Presently, the covers for the landing gear began to swing open, coming to rest at a fully flexed angle, ninety degrees to the wing and body surfaces. With a further command from the control panel, the landing gear hydraulics kicked in, lowering the wheels until they clicked into a fully locked position.

Hamadi turned to the Commander.

"You see how well the landing mechanism operates," he said with as much confidence as he could muster.

"That is all you can show me? The plane has wheels?"

"I'm afraid, Sir, this is all the physical progress we can demonstrate – except, of course, you can see that the frame of the plane itself is nearly complete."

Hamadi held his breath.

The Commander sighed. Neither the description of how the engines would operate, nor the fact that the landing gear appeared to function, provided him with any assurance that the project was on schedule. But he could think of nothing further to resolve his predicament.

"Hamadi. You realize the consequences if Aurora fails to fly on schedule?"

"I am well aware, Sir."

"And to your families as well?" He looked down the line of scientists.

"We all understand, Sir. Aurora *will be ready* on schedule. I promise you."

The Commander eyed each of the three scientists in turn.

"Then I encourage you to redouble your efforts to ensure timely completion."

With that, the Commander turned and left the scientists alone beside Aurora. They remained silent and motionless until he had disappeared from sight.

One of the other scientists turned to Hamadi, panic in his eyes.

"What are we to do, Hamadi? You know this assignment is impossible."

"Continue to pray, my friends. If there is a deliverance for us, it will be from Almighty Allah."

"Amen."

CHAPTER 17

The red 1960 Jeep CJ-3B zigzagged its way up the Caribbean slope of Venezuela's *Serranía del Litoral* mountains, its rugged tires clinging impossibly to the steep dirt tracks of what could hardly be called a roadway. The distance from the city below to this secluded retreat was a mere two kilometers, but the ascent would take the man in the Jeep nearly an hour.

The driver was a smallish but sinewy man of Caucasian descent, though his dark hair, ruddy brown skin, and coffee-colored eyes would allow him to blend in among Hispanics and Arabs as well as he had among his fellow Texans. He perspired freely with the exertion of keeping the aging Jeep true on the rustic path as it wound its way through the jungle humidity.

Nearing the end of the climb, the afternoon sun revealed a small but well-appointed villa peeking through the tropical foliage. This was "The Raptor's Nest." The sniper had chosen its name to match his clandestine identity as a high-priced gun for hire.

With his vehicle parked alongside the house, The Raptor walked behind the Jeep, reached over the spare rear wheel, and withdrew a grey, steel and rubber cargo case from the back. The package contained his most beloved possession – a .408 caliber CheyTac M200 Intervention Long Range Rifle System (LRRS).

To call this machine a mere rifle was a significant slap in the face to its artistic developers. The LRRS included a CheyTac tactical computer, a Nightforce NXS 5.5-22X scope, and Kestrel 4000 wind, temperature, and atmospheric pressure sensors. In short, it was a sniper's wet dream, developed under secret contract with the United States Military, and capable of successful soft target (personnel) shots at ranges exceeding 2,000 meters.

With baggage in hand, he nudged the building's unlocked screen

door open with a foot and slipped inside.

After allowing his eyes to adjust to the interior dimness, he placed the cargo carrier containing his rifle on the dark wooden table, and patted the case lightly on top with one hand.

"We made it home agin, Angel. Home, sweet home."

In the kitchen, the Westinghouse offered a selection of several dozen long-necked brown bottles – all of them Lone Star Beer. Allowing the fridge door to slam shut behind him, he cracked open one of the bottles on his belt buckle and took a slug.

After traveling the long and circuitous route necessary for his undetected return from the Dominican Republic, The Raptor was bushed. Entering the main room, he kicked off his scuffed cowboy boots and dropped onto the sofa – a southwestern job with an apache wool blanket draped over its back.

"Sure is good to be home."

* * *

As he reclined on the couch, dozing with his Stetson pulled down over his eyes and a beer bottle dangling from one hand, he became aware of a low tone emanating from the stack of army surplus electronics piled in one corner. He squinted, then shook his eyes open, sending the Stetson flopping to the floor.

Awake!

The tone grew louder, and would continue to do so, he knew, until he responded to it. Frankly, he wasn't in the mood. Another beer, maybe a sandwich, and then rack time – that's what he'd had in mind. He could turn it off if he wanted to, but elected to accept the communication, nevertheless.

Rolling off the couch and approaching the "communications center," he slapped a pressure switch on the desktop . . . and the tone stopped. Still pinching sleep from his blurry eyes, a callused hand pulled out the wooden desk chair so he could sit. Almost fully awake now, he straightened himself in the chair and flipped open the army-green laptop. He typed in the password, then waited.

"Incoming TelSat Message," the screen blinked.

He spoke over one shoulder toward his rifle.

"Looks like our services are in demand, Angel. Sit tight and I'll take a looksee whether we're inter'sted."

The screen continued to blink out its message.

He looked again at the grey cargo box on the table.

"Sit tight. Be patient. Sometimes she takes awhile."

Finally, the decrypted email text appeared on the laptop screen.

R,

*Senator Elbert Grossman. Red Wing, Minnesota. Saturday,
November 5.*

\$250,000 Euros.

Respond ASAP.

Job

"Well it certainly is our month for the Egyptians, ain't it, Angel. But I don't think we're likely to go huntin' fer a lousy quarter mil of anything . . . and sure as hell not Euros. What would I do with Euros?"

He turned to the grey box as if expecting a response.

"You, too, huh? Okay. Let's see whether they'll make it worth our while."

The Raptor turned to the laptop and tapped out:

\$1,000,000 US. <Enter>

Half now to usual account. Half after. <Enter>

Respond 24 hours. <Enter>

<Send>

"Now we wait an' see, huh, Angel. Let's eat while we're waitin'."

He got up and went to the kitchen to make a sandwich.

* * *

Two hours later, The Raptor was watching CNN via satellite and about to turn in when the tone hummed again.

“Well, well, Angel. Looks like we got an answer already. I’ll check it out. You jus’ sit tight.”

After logging into the laptop, and allowing the message to decrypt, he read:

R,

Agreed.

Sending \$500,000 US tomorrow.

Remainder on completion.

Job

The Raptor leaned back in his wooden chair.

“Well . . . ain’t that nice!”

CHAPTER 18

At the U.S. Embassy, Cairo.

When Beth returned to her room, she found everything Hitch had promised had been done. The usual stack of encryption/decryption hardware accompanied the laptop dock on a newly arrived work desk. A note on the desktop attested to the fact that the room had been confirmed by Embassy Security to be 100% surveillance free.

When Beth checked behind the drawn curtains, she found an additional layer of plexiglas had been added on the inside to prevent any possible sonic surveillance of window vibrations.

The security folks here had been thorough, and unbelievably prompt, particularly for government employees. Beth guessed that her mission carried a high enough priority designation to warrant the expeditious service. She'd better get to work.

After docking her laptop with the high security encryption electronics, she pulled up a Word document containing further details of Rasha's attempt to contact her. After a quick review of the document's contents, she navigated to the password page for Rasha's encrypted files and entered her memorized, twenty-six digit, alpha-numeric password.

After a moment, the file listing appeared on the screen.

Surveying file names, she selected one entitled "Technical Aspects of Initial Contact," and clicked it open. She studied the information. For the most part, Hitchens had been correct in his brief analysis of the message to "Silver Star." But Rasha was definitely *not* a mere assistant. She would have to possess advanced programming skills in order to send the transmission in this precise manner. The fact that Rasha possessed additional computer

knowledge gave Beth an idea.

She knew Hitchens had granted her authority to proceed without his approval. But in this case, she wanted him onboard. She planned to send a message directly to Rasha's computer at GIS – a strategy her counterparts had thus far elected not to pursue.

She rang Hitchens up on his cell.

"Ready for another chat already, Elizabeth? You do work fast."

"I plan to ping Rasha's computer at GIS, Hitch. I just wanted you to know before I did so."

Hitchens' end of the line went quiet.

"You have considered other reasonable options, I presume?"

"No . . . you did. Your people have covered all the safe advances. This is the one avenue that remains, short of kidnapping her on the street. But I think I can message her in such a way that her superiors won't detect it, and if they do, they will disregard it as chipset static. May I proceed?"

Hitchens paused again before answering.

"Yes. Proceed."

"Thank you. I'll be back in touch when I connect with Rasha."

"You have great confidence in your strategy, Elizabeth."

"Yes, Hitch . . . and so do you. Let's hope our confidence is well placed."

"Indeed, Elizabeth. Indeed. *Ciao!*"

"*Ciao.*"

Having received oral approval, although unprovable should she be called to account, Beth elected nevertheless to move forward with all haste. It had already been several days since the contact, and she didn't want Rasha to give up hope of making a connection.

Using a software program of her own design, Beth assembled a series of data packets – essentially parcels of digital information – which Rasha could reassemble into a single message after receipt. Since all information in and out of networked computers travels in similar packets, any security screen or firewall would notice nothing unusual about these, apparently random, minuscule chunks of information headed for Rasha's computer. The fact that Beth intended to send the data packets separately, as opposed to

combining them into a single message, significantly enhanced their chances of passing through network security unnoticed.

Once the packets had arrived at Rasha's computer, the final packet would place a tiny silver star in the lower corner of her computer screen. It wouldn't be larger than a quarter inch from tip to tip. But if Rasha spent a lot of time at her computer, it would catch her attention immediately.

If Rasha or anyone else at her end clicked to open the star icon, the words "*Do you want to play Silver Star? Y or N*" would appear on the screen. A "Y" response would take the user to an inactive website apologizing that Silver Star was no longer available. An "N" response would minimize the star icon again.

Beth's hope was that the name Silver Star would prompt Rasha to pursue the message contents using all tools at her disposal. She would know that a game bearing that name could not be a coincidence. If she eventually got around to running the algorithm she'd employed to encode her initial message, the program would assemble the data packets, and her screen would read as follows:

Silver Star,

Call Elizabeth at 20-76-5559200.

The number was that of an anonymous Egyptian cell phone the CIA had provided for Beth's use while in Cairo. Any call to this number could not be traced.

After performing a "test send" by transmitting the data packets to her own computer to confirm the program worked as designed, she typed in the code to contact Rasha's computer, and following a deep breath, she pressed *<Enter>*.

Now she would wait.

* * *

It had been four hours since Beth's digital invasion into GIS Headquarters. She'd filled the time unpacking and ironing clothes,

steaming suits, and checking her cell phone frequently to make sure it was functioning properly.

There still had been no contact from Rasha.

Time passed at the speed of a root canal. Beth occupied herself by making the rounds at the Embassy, introducing herself to various Embassy personnel. During her last stint here, she'd known everyone. She'd also known who were the spies and who were the diplomats . . . and who were both. None of the faces here was familiar today, save Tara's. Beth spent extra time making sure Tara knew she was valued at the Embassy . . . an affirmation Beth didn't expect Tara heard often.

As day turned to dusk and then to night, Beth became impatient. Even though she knew Rasha probably wouldn't be able to work on the decryption while her bosses were around, and even though she was fully aware that her message might be beyond Rasha's technical ability to assemble and comprehend, Beth still spent an inordinate amount of time pacing her room, willing the cell phone to ring.

At 10:00 p.m. Cairo time, Beth sent her husband a short satellite message:

Having a jolly good time. Wish you were here. :-)

Brief contact once a day was all prudence would allow her and her husband to make. They'd worked for years to establish their cover in Red Wing. She wasn't going to let contacts from Egypt destroy their anonymity. But the daily check-in would allow James to sleep better at night, knowing she was safe – so these cryptic messages were worth the risk.

Beth began preparing for bed, and most likely, another long day of waiting tomorrow. Just as she was turning down the sheets and about to crawl into bed, the cell phone rang. She wasn't sure what the sound was at first. The ringtone echoed like wind chimes in the distance, but grew louder by the moment.

I should have set the ringer myself so I at least knew what it sounded like. You're rusty, Beth.

Having determined the source of the chimes, she lunged for the cell phone, which lay atop the stand on the far side of the bed. Gaining control of the phone, she answered the call.

"This is Elizabeth."

"Can we meet?"

The voice was a woman's. It might have been Rasha, but it was hard to say for certain after so much time had passed.

"Yes. Yes, of course. You say when and where."

"There is a café on Talaat Harb Square called Groppi. Do you know it?"

"Yes. I've been there many times."

"Meet me at Groppi at 3:00 tomorrow afternoon."

"Three o'clock at Groppi. Got it!"

The phone clicked off.

Beth stared at her handset. The caller was listed as "Unknown." That was no surprise, of course. But the word served to emphasize Beth's present circumstances – she was an unknown person, in an unfamiliar land, planning to meet a woman whose identity was uncertain, to receive information, the subject of which was obscure at best.

Beth suddenly felt very much alone. Unknowns surrounded her, engulfed her, and now reached out to her on the phone as well.

Clarity would come, Beth knew, but only with time. Tomorrow she would begin killing off the unknowns, starting at Groppi's Café. The thought of standing on the brink of progress buoyed Beth's spirits. But there was nothing to be done right now . . . nothing, that is, except to get a good night's sleep.

CHAPTER 19

Back in Red Wing.

I received Beth's message at about 2:00 o'clock this afternoon. The message meant all was well, and for that, I was grateful. She had arrived safely eight time zones away. Only two days had passed, but I missed her already. I would have liked to contact her, but CIA protocol did not allow me a return message.

The protocol thing alone wouldn't have kept me from messaging Beth. I'm not a rule follower in the best of times. And I could have found a way to contact her safely. But as things stood, I had no way to find out where I might reach her . . . short of knocking on the Cairo Embassy door. I had learned long ago that, too often, bureaucracy triumphs by virtue of its inertia and impenetrability. My time would be better spent jousting at windmills than wading through institutional mire.

And thinking of windmills . . . Gunner's security project came to mind. He'd told me not to call. I didn't remember him telling me not to visit. So I hopped in the Pilot, drove the grueling six blocks to the Law Enforcement Center, and presented myself to the uniformed receptionist.

"James Becker to see Chief Deputy Gunderson, please. I believe he's expecting me."

I smiled.

"The Chief Deputy's not in his office right now, Mr. Becker. If he's expecting you, you're at the wrong place."

I scrunched up my face in abject confusion.

"I coulda sworn he said to meet at the LEC."

I assumed a thinker pose with one hand on my chin, adding additional puzzlement and confusion to my expression.

I guess I gained enough sympathy from the receptionist, because she said, "Just hold on a sec. I'll ring him up for you."

She punched up what I assumed was Gunner's cell number on the desk console.

"Chief Deputy? I got Mr. Becker here says he was supposed to meet you." A pause. "Uh huh. Uh huh."

She raised an eyebrow at me.

"I see. Certainly. Right away." She hung up the phone.

"So where can I find the Chief Deputy my good woman."

"He says he doesn't remember scheduling a meeting with you, Mr. Becker."

I needed to respond.

"Hmm," I said.

"But it seems like it's your lucky day, 'cause he says you can find him down at the St. James, scoping out the place with some out-of-towners."

"Thank you very much, Madam. You're an absolute peach."

Her expression didn't look as though she'd been shooting for "peachy."

Time to depart. I doffed my imaginary fedora in her direction and let myself out.

Two minutes later I was at the St. James Hotel, a city landmark since the days when Red Wing was the largest grain port in the world. Back then, it was a working man's hotel. Small rooms. Shared baths. Full breakfast included.

In the 1970s, the Red Wing Shoe Company had bought the hotel and embarked on a multimillion dollar restoration and renovation project. Small rooms were combined into suites. All rooms now boasted deluxe baths and showers complete with antique fixtures. The St. James was no longer a flop house for transient workers, but a hub for business meetings, small conventions, and weekend getaways for those special occasions.

My guess was that Gunner's "dignitary" would be visiting the St. James and the "foreigners" were the Congress-person's security detail.

I parked the Pilot in an open spot on the street out front, entered

through the hotel's massive wooden main doors, and strode across the lobby to Hotel Reception.

"How may I help you, Sir?"

"I'm looking for Chief Deputy Gunderson. Have you seen him around?"

"I believe he's with some gentlemen on the fifth floor, Sir. Do you need directions?"

"Nope, I'm good. Thanks."

I scooted around the perimeter of the hotel's interior boutique mall to the main elevators. A minute's ride later, I stepped out into the fifth level corridor.

Since the fifth floor was devoted entirely to banquets, pub goers, and wedding receptions, the place was deserted, except for the male voices emanating from the main banquet room – also known as, The Summit. I headed in the direction of the voices.

Entering the Summit, I saw Gunner listening intently to one of three black-suited gentlemen with shiny Italian shoes. They were standing next to the floor-to-ceiling windowed wall that spanned the far side of the banquet hall, opening the room's occupants to vistas of the Mississippi River valley below.

There was a reason the architects had designed this wall of glass. The panoramic view included everything from the city's river front parks, to the winding main channel of the Mississippi, to the 1963-vintage Dwight D. Eisenhower expansion bridge connecting the great state of Minnesota with its neighbor to the east – and if one peered far enough upstream – to the haunting silhouette of the reactor containment structures at the Prairie River Nuclear Power Generating Station.

Gunner hadn't spotted me yet. Before he knew it, I was standing beside him – a part of the semi-circle of security professionals.

Gunner noticed me when the black suit who'd been speaking moved his eyes from Gunner's to mine and back again.

"Who's this?"

It seemed to me a reasonable question.

Gunner turned so only I could see his face and whispered something like "What the hell?"

I smiled.

I stepped toward Suit Number 1 and offered up a shake.

"James Becker, Attorney at Law," I said in an unusually loud voice.

The man gave my hand a firm, but not so friendly, reception.

"Why are you shouting?"

"Oh. Well . . . I wasn't sure whether you were protecting someone right now, or going deaf." I tapped my right ear.

He jerked out his earpiece.

"I hear fine. Thank you."

He looked again at Gunner.

"He's part of my local security team," he managed, with more *savoir faire* than I'd anticipated. "Just pretend he's not here, and let's continue."

Gunner had handled the situation adroitly. And his advice was sound, although pretending that I wasn't present would not be an easy thing to do.

"Okay," Suit Number 1 said. I still wasn't sure if Numbers 2 and 3 could talk. "There's too much territory out there to exclude a sniper from this direction. We've got to cover some of these windows."

"If we only cover some of the windows, do you think the Senator'll be able to avoid appreciating the remaining view with his constituents?" Gunner asked. "I don't know the Senator personally, but lots of pols tend to go where they want once they're off the leash."

Gunner sounded darned professional.

Suit 1 considered Gunner's observation.

"You're probably right. He'll mangle his ass right out to the view, regardless of how much we cover. Can we install bullet proof glass before he gets here?"

It was all I could do to stifle a laugh.

"How thick'd that have to be to stop a sniper round?" Gunner asked politely. I figured he had a pretty good idea.

"Probably four inches, give or take."

"You could sure ask the hotel," Gunner said, "but I doubt their

high class restoration is gonna allow for you to put four inch thick glass in here . . . sure as hell not by Saturday."

"Then I suppose we'll have to cover all these windows with something . . ."

"Like campaign posters?" I interrupted.

Suit number 1 looked like he was considering my suggestion.

"The Senator would probably like that. But I was thinking maybe something else, like maybe cloth-covered boards that fit the window frames."

"Or . . .," I said, "how about some sort of fabric that could somehow be suspended between the windows and the room? Like hanging down from above. Oh yeah . . . like . . .like . . . curtains."

Suit number 1 gave me the hairy eyeball.

"But I bet the Senator didn't pick this venue for its spectacular enclosed atmosphere," I went on. "I doubt he's going to let you cover all the windows and ruin the pretty view. But then . . . that's just me thinking out loud."

Suit 1 looked annoyed, but apparently agreed with my line of thought.

"So I guess we tell the Senator about the risks of these windows and a sniper bullet, and let him make the call. I can't see any way to protect against that attack avenue unless we cover these damn windows."

All three suits continued to stare at the window frames, apparently at a loss for a solution.

Gunner dared a suggestion.

"I know you guys are the security experts and all, but I was just sorta thinking . . . how about we put up one way mirror film?" Gunner tucked a thumb in one pocket and shifted his weight to project confidence.

He didn't do too bad a job of it either.

Suit 1 looked at Gunner like he'd just hopped off the bus from Hicksville. Seeing Suit 1's expression, Suits 2 and 3 joined in. Monkey see monkey do.

"Gunner, that's genius," I said. "You could coat the glass with some of that hi-tech reflective film. Hell, you could stick it right on

the inside here. From the outside, the whole fifth floor would look like a mirror. I'm sure it's not something the hotel would want for its exterior appeal in the long run, but we could rip it down as soon as the Senator's gone.

"Helluva good idea, Gunner."

Suit 1 made a face like he'd just stepped in a pile of something yucky.

Then Gunner chimed in.

"You know, maybe it's just something to mention to the Senator . . . since he's so security conscious and all. I bet we could probably line you guys up with summa that mirror stuff in time for Saturday."

Gunner glanced at me. I nodded.

Suit 1 tried not to look interested in the film idea.

"Give us a minute please."

The three black suits took a stroll along the glass wall to a private corner.

"Nice one, Gunner. Where'd you come up with the one way film idea?"

"I didn't just fall off the potato truck, you know. Besides, I knew the view would be a security issue, so I Googled it."

"Well done." Gunner valued preparedness as much as I did. A person had to respect that. At least *this* person did.

The suit squad was on its way back, apparently having made a decision in the huddle.

"Thanks for your suggestion. We've talked it over, and we're not so sure the light will be right for that sort of thing to work. That's why I didn't mention it in the first place."

The man needed to trade in his Italian loafers for something more appropriate to the barnyard terrain he was cultivating.

"So we appreciate your touring us around town and through the hotel. But don't go ordering any reflective film. We've got the security planning covered from here. We'll just need some of your guys to stand around during the Senator's visit. Sort of a show of local cooperation. We'll let you know when and where."

Gunner was working up a good lather, but he managed a

tempered response.

"Okay, Fellas. You're in charge. But we haven't even talked about how we get him inside the hotel yet. I was thinking his car could pull right into the hotel's covered ramp. He'd be easy to cover in there."

"I appreciate your concern. And of course, we'll take your suggestion under advisement. But I really believe we've gotten all the local input we need for today." He shot an eye dart my way. "We'll check out the exterior and make sure we've got everything covered."

"Thanks again, Deputy Gunnerman."

I put my hand on Gunner's shoulder, hoping he'd let that one pass, which he did.

"Well then," Gunner said with a shrug, "I guess my work here is done. You fellas enjoy our pretty little shit-kicking town. Ya'll come back now, ya hear?"

Before the suits could respond, Gunner was headed for the elevators. I was close on his heels.

On the ride down to first floor, Gunner shared a few choice expletives about his role in this security detail.

"I hate to tell you this, Gunner, but it wouldn't matter if you were J. Edgar Hoover, those guys have been determined to run the show from day one. They're hacks! Big shoulders. Big Guns. Big egos. Small brains."

Gunner choked on a laugh.

"In all truth, Gunner, this security planning is almost always unnecessary. I can't remember anyone killing a Congressman – except maybe his wife."

Gunner chuckled.

"But you've still gotta take your role in this seriously. Make sure you cover your ass with these guys. If the Senator's in any real danger, they'll futz it up if it's at all possible. And it's always possible. If the crap hits the fan, you can bet it'll blow on you."

"You think I don't know that? But they won't let me control anything. You got any suggestions . . . I'm all ears."

"Write up your own security plan and make sure you submit it

to those private security guys, the Senator's Office, the FBI, the Sheriff, and every other place you can think of. If you suggested something that would have prevented a theoretical injury to the Senator, you've done what you could. And, most importantly, your ass is covered."

We reached the Floor 1 and exited the elevator into the mall.

"I sure as hell am glad I'm not a cop in Washington. Dealing with all this CYA political BS would drive me nuts."

"It should. It drives all the good law enforcement folks in D.C. crazy, too. I can vouch for that."

We faced each other.

"I'm gonna take your CYA suggestion, Beck. And who knows, maybe somebody'll actually take me up on some part of my security plan. Stranger things have happened."

"You just keep hoping, Gunner. And in the meantime, make sure your backside is covered with Kevlar."

Gunner laughed.

"Honestly, thanks for your help, Beck. I think I got it from here."

"Follow your instincts on that plan and you'll do just great."

"By the way, it used to just be a Congressman that was coming to visit. Now it's a Senator. And I heard the word 'constituents.' Is it Grossman?"

"Yup. It'll be in the paper and on the news tomorrow. He'll be here Saturday for a lunch address at the hotel . . . but then you already knew where, huh."

"You'd think if somebody wanted to get rid of that good old boy, they'd of done it years ago. He's probably safe."

Gunner turned toward the exit with a wave in my direction.

"I'm sure I'll be seeing you around."

"Probably a good bet. Ya'll come back now, ya hear."

I heard Gunner's laugh as he turned the corner toward the door.

CHAPTER 20

Downtown Cairo.

It was a sunny, early November afternoon. The air was warm, kept from becoming oppressively so by the occasional cool breeze. Autumn was her favorite season in Egypt, Beth remembered.

Beth's walking route to Groppi from the Embassy would take her past Mujamma at Tahrir, the Egyptian government's mammoth administration building on through Tahrir Square (which is actually a circle), and then along Talaat Harb Street toward her destination. Beth had chosen another of her Diane Sawyer outfits for this meeting – casual, yet proper and modest. So as not to draw unnecessary attention with her sandy blonde hair, she wore it up, covering it with a simple tan shawl that draped down around her shoulders and clipped together in the front.

Her appearance was properly non-Egyptian, but still respectful of the local culture's conservative dress code. She had left the Embassy at 2:30, planning to hike the half mile of downtown streets, arriving at Groppi at 2:45. She had already reached Tahrir Square and all was well.

To be honest with herself, Beth would have admitted to harboring trepidation at the thought of walking through post-revolution Egypt. But continuing onto Talaat Harb, she could see that much of the Cairo she had known in the 1980s and 90s was still there. Crowds of people still mingled and jostled along the narrow sidewalks in front of small shops.

Many of the same businesses lined the traffic-clogged street. A stubborn haze of auto and truck exhaust still hung in the air, while a grayish, filmy dust veiled everything you saw, everything you touched. Those things hadn't changed.

On the street itself, taxis, cars, and buses still jockeyed for position in a seemingly random manner – the blare of horns their constant companion. The cars, Beth noticed, were different now. The Egyptian masses seemed to favor the Korean Hyundai, likely because of its reasonable price. Yet interspersed among the aging sub-compacts, one could still see the occasional Mercedes Benz arrogantly roaming the streets among the riffraff, demanding right of way – a provoking contradiction, Beth imagined, of this country's corrupted reality. The privileged lorded their station over the working class, whose existence they merely tolerated, and when possible, ignored.

Anti-government graffiti screamed from the walls of some buildings . . . screaming loudest perhaps, after government personnel had obliterated the taggers' criticisms with large black rectangles.

Beth checked the time as she approached Talaat Harb Square (another circle) where Groppi awaited her. The architecture in this part of Cairo recalled the years of European occupation. Though the rioting of 1952's Black Saturday had gutted many first floor storefronts, upper floors retained their original European character. Groppi was one of only a few first floor businesses fronting Talaat Harb Square that had been spared the riots' destruction.

Established in the early 1900s, Groppi was once "the most celebrated tearoom this side of the Mediterranean" and had been known as the shop of choice among royalty, including princess Margaret and Queen Elizabeth of England, for gifts of fine chocolates.

During more than sixty years of military rule, like so many other proud Egyptian landmarks, Groppi had lost its former renowned stature. And like Egyptian society, the building façade had suffered from persistent decay. Yet even without its former splendor, Groppi remained a cultural icon for native Egyptians and tourists alike. All of which made Groppi the perfect choice for Beth's meeting with Rasha.

Stepping into the front alcove, Beth stopped for a moment,

admiring the ornate blue mosaic tile adorning the exterior restaurant entryway. Then with a deep breath, she continued through the open doors and into Groppi.

Once Beth was inside the restaurant proper, the raucous street din mellowed to a humming of vehicle motors mixed with muted horns of passing cars – the distinctive background sounds of downtown Cairo.

She'd visited Groppi many times in the old days. As far as she could tell, Groppi hadn't changed with the Revolution or the new repression of SCAF rule. In fact, entering Groppi was like taking a trip through the looking glass into a Bogart movie. The café's high ceiling held ancient chandeliers that only faintly illuminated the cracked white marble walls and floors. The tabletops matched the rest of the decor – cracked marble squares resting upon black iron pedestals.

Jerking her consciousness back to the present, Beth pondered her next move.

The CIA hadn't had a recent picture of Rasha in its files. Probably, because it had considered her insignificant . . . a mere secretary. Beth now found herself at a disadvantage because of that bit of laxity. She would hope that Rasha could find her. There were no other options. At least as an American, she was in the minority in this place. That should make her easier to spot. If necessary, she would uncover her blond hair.

Groppi encouraged patrons to seat themselves. Beth selected a table for two in a rear corner. A moment later, a waiter in black pants and a formal white shirt approached.

"Only one today, Miss?" he said in perfect English.

"I'm expecting a friend shortly."

The waiter offered her a menu.

"I don't believe we'll be needing menus this afternoon, thank you," Beth said. "But I'd love a slice of baklava and a cup of your house tea, please."

The waiter made a note on his order pad.

"Very well, Miss. Thank you."

Beth checked her watch, a plastic Timex she had purchased

specifically to avoid a “showy” appearance on this visit to Cairo. She found the time was ten minutes to three. As she waited for her order, she leafed through pages of the English language *Egyptian Gazette*, which she had brought with her from the Embassy. As she did so, she also took every subtle opportunity to size up the patrons already seated in the café. Groppi was a social venue. There were few lone patrons, and none that appeared likely candidates to be Rasha.

At two minutes before three, an Arab woman wearing light tan pants, a loose, white cotton tunic, and a light-toned, beautifully decorated *hijab* – a head scarf designed to cover hair and any otherwise exposed neck and shoulder skin – appeared in the doorway. Beth thought it creative that Egyptian women had taken the *hijab*, which many Westerners considered a sign of Egypt’s oppression of women, and turned it into a fashion statement, albeit a subtle one.

The woman scanned the room, obviously searching for someone. At last her eyes came to rest on Beth. She watched Beth for a moment. Beth looked up, and catching the woman’s eye, gave a slight nod.

The woman looked away. Perhaps this wasn’t Rasha after all. But soon the woman began making her way between the tables back to Beth’s corner. When she arrived, Beth motioned silently for her to sit, which she did.

In the eyes of this middle-aged Arab, Beth finally recognized the youthful page with whom she had once been a casual acquaintance. This was, indeed, Rasha. The silence seemed endless, neither woman knowing how or where to begin.

Finally, Beth said, “It is very kind of you to join me. I am alone in the city. Your company is welcome.”

Beth smiled.

Then Rasha smiled as well.

“Elizabeth. I cannot say how wonderful it is to see you after all this time. Have you been well?”

“My life is good, Rasha. I am married with two grown daughters who are beautiful, strong young women. And how have you been?”

Egypt has seen many changes since I was last a guest here.”

Rasha lowered her face.

“I regret that all has not been well with me, my friend. I envy you your lovely children, for though I long for a family of my own, I have never married and have no children to raise up.”

Rasha spoke excellent English, if accented somewhat by her British language teachers.

“But Rasha, if you want to marry, isn’t it still possible to have marriages arranged through your family members? I was given to believe that such arrangements remain common here.”

Rasha’s eyes filled with a deep sadness.

“Rasha. We don’t need to talk about this subject. I can see it is unpleasant for you.”

Rasha reached across the table and covered Beth’s hand with her own.

“I want to tell you, Elizabeth. It is something of great shame and I cannot speak of it among my friends. I wish you to know it, that my burden may be divided. Are you willing to hear?”

Rasha had a dark secret in her past and it would be both kind and wise for Beth to know what it was.

“Yes, Rasha. Certainly. I will share your burden.”

Rasha eyed the ceiling and cleared her throat, searching for the place to begin.

Just then the waiter arrived with Beth’s order, a chipped white ceramic tea cup resting upon a plain white saucer, with a small matching plate holding the baklava.

“Would you care for a menu, ya Rasha,” he asked in Arabic.

“No thank you, Khalid. I will have my usual, please,” was Beth’s best interpretation of Rasha’s response.

“It will be my pleasure, ya Rasha.” The waiter bowed and left the table.

“Shall we wait until he has returned with your order, Rasha.”

Rasha laughed.

“The service here is slow, my friend. The Revolution has not change this. We will have time.”

“Okay. Whenever you’re ready.” Beth offered a sympathetic

smile.

"I was twenty-three years old," Rasha began. "I lived in my parents' home with my mother and two younger brothers, Hossam, and Amr. You know this is a common thing in Egypt, yes?"

"Of course. Families remain close, usually living together at least until marriage." Beth was familiar with the custom, which had its roots both in culture and economics.

"One night Hossam, who was age twenty at the time, returned from a night out at the clubs with his friends. He had been drinking alcohol . . . too much alcohol. When he came home, he stumbled into to my bedroom." Rasha paused as tears welled in her eyes.

"Elizabeth. He forced himself on me. He raped . . ." Her voice caught on the last word. She was unable to continue.

Now it was Beth's turn to hold Rasha's hand. Beth knew that, for Rasha to share these intimate details of her life, was exceedingly rare, especially in the Egyptian culture. But keeping a dark secret to oneself can be unbearable, regardless of customs. I was honored she felt safe sharing this extreme embarrassment with me.

"Oh, Rasha. I'm so sorry."

"Thank you, Elizabeth. Bless you. But this is only the beginning."

Beth waited for Rasha to collect her thoughts and compose herself.

"If either Hossam or I were to speak of this great shame, we might both face death at the hands of my father."

Beth was familiar with the cultural practice of honor killing, but had never personally known a family that condoned it. The fact that her brother was entirely to blame made no difference in certain parts of this culture. Rasha was no longer a virgin. In the eyes of many, her life had been devalued to the level of a discarded paper cup.

Beth continued to hold Rasha's hand and waited for her to say more, for she knew there was more to be said.

"So no one spoke of that night ever again . . . until today, Dear Elizabeth. Silence has saved my life, but at the same time, my life has been taken from me. This is why I cannot marry or have a family. In my culture, an unmarried woman without her virginity

is as much as a prostitute, and would never be touched by an honorable husband. Since virginity testing is still practiced prior to marriage, I have no hope of hiding my disgrace.

"So I have made a new life for myself . . . one with no family, but with a purpose nevertheless. I am a good worker and very skilled with computers. As you may know, I am now in the employ of the Egyptian government. My work there is to maintain technology and to be an example of a woman who can have a life without children, although it may be a mere shadow of a life."

Rasha had been right about the slow service. We had been speaking for quite some time and her order was only now arriving at our table.

"Your tea and pastry, Rasha."

"Thank you, Khalid."

Again, their exchange was in Arabic. Beth was thankful that her language skills had not deteriorated to the point of worthlessness.

Now that both women had received their orders, they began to taste dainty bites of pastry on small forks, and to take occasional sips of hot tea from the ceramic cups.

"Rasha. Why have you asked to see me after all these years?"

Rasha's transformation from a sad woman, sagging in her chair, to her original confident and cheerful demeanor was immediate.

"Dear Elizabeth. There are two reasons. There is the reason I needed to contact *someone* in the U.S. And then there is the reason I had hoped it might be you. I would very much like to share the latter reason first, if I may."

In truth, Beth was more anxious to receive the valuable intel than the back story. But she had to admit, Rasha's request for her, personally, held intrigue.

"Please, Dear Rasha. As you see fit."

"You and I did not know one another well when I worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs delivering documents to your Embassy. But you were always kind to me in little things, even though you were busy with your own work. I respected your kindness.

"But there was a certain event, which you may not even recall, that has made you, in my mind, a woman of power and integrity .

. . . a person I could trust to deal with my current information properly.”

Beth couldn't remember anything in particular.

“You're right. I don't remember anything special, I'm sorry.”

“Do not be sorry. I will tell you and you will then remember.”

Rasha's eyes looked upward into the distance as she began to recall the event for Beth.

“One day I was taking documents to your Embassy. As I approached the main entrance, outside the Embassy compound, I saw a man in a white baker's uniform smoking a cigarette and speaking with one of the Egyptian soldiers who lined the street. It was Omar, a worker at the bakery where my family bought its bread. When he noticed me, he tossed his cigarette and walked quickly to . . .” she struggled for the word, “intercept me. I walked faster, but he still managed to place himself between me and the Embassy entrance.

“I was afraid of this man, and although he would not let me pass, I dared not meet his eyes. But I remember well his words.

“ ‘Why does such a beautiful Egyptian flower visit with these foreigners?’

“ ‘Please, sir, let me pass,’ I said. But when I tried to go around him, he again blocked my way.

“ ‘Such a beautiful flower is meant to be plucked by a man of Egypt. You must come with me.’ He grasped my elbow.

“ ‘No, please, sir. Let me pass,’ I said. I struggled to free my arm. One soldier noticed my situation, but only smiled.

“ ‘You reject me? How dare you reject a man of Egypt to attend to the godless Americans! You have become one of them . . . a tease and a whore.’ ”

Beth now remembered witnessing this confrontation, but she hadn't recalled who the young woman was. Obviously, it had been Rasha.

“He tried to drag me down the street, grasping my back side with his lustful hand. But I got free and raced to the Embassy entrance. It was then that I saw you running up the street toward the man. You must have been returning to the Embassy and

witnessed my embarrassment.

"You called to him. 'Hey, you!' And then overtook him, placing yourself between Omar and the Embassy entrance, where I awaited my document pickup.

"When you reached him, you stood with your face so close to his that I imagined you could smell his foul breath. But neither of you retreated.

" 'If I *ever* see you do something like that to another woman, *anywhere*,' you said, 'you will pray for a swift death.'

"Omar laughed into your face. 'And why should an American whore cause me to have such a wish? You are nothing more than a street prostitute.'

"I feared for your safety and wished you would end the confrontation. But you looked into his eyes without moving a centimeter from him. Do you now remember what you said to him?"

Beth nodded with a smile.

"I reached into my purse and pulled out my gun. He backed off a step and raised his hands.

"Then, if I recall correctly, I said, 'Why should you wish for a swift death?' I stepped forward and stuck my gun up under his chin. Then I said, 'Because . . .' I moved the gun downward until it was pointed below his waist and between his legs. 'I never miss what I aim for . . . no matter how small.' "

Rasha laughed.

"Very good, Elizabeth. I could see the front of his trousers growing wetter by the moment. And then you said a word I have never heard before or since. Do you remember it?"

Beth searched her memories but came up empty.

"No. What did I say?"

"You said, 'Now, git!' "

Both women laughed.

"I have to admit, I did lack a bit in the diplomacy department back then. And I carried that stupid .45. I can imagine the crazy woman with the cannon in her hand did frighten him a bit."

"And Elizabeth, here is one more thing you do not know, but you

will like to hear. The next week I was buying bread for our home at this bakery where Omar worked. The owner's daughter knew I sometimes visited the U.S. Embassy. So when I was paying for my bread, she asked me if I knew why Omar refused to deliver to the Embassy any longer.

"It was all I could do not to laugh. But I just told her that I really could not say why that would be.

"After I left the bakery, I laughed and skipped all the way home. It was one of the proudest moments of my life . . . proud for you, Elizabeth, and proud for women."

Beth smiled.

"Thank you so much, Dear Rasha, for sharing that story of my foolish actions and how they inspired you for good. God works in mysterious ways."

"Indeed. Allah is merciful and wise."

I couldn't wait any longer for the information I'd come here to get.

"Dear Rasha. I apologize if I am being rude, but what is it that you have to share with me? Time may be important."

Rasha and Beth both leaned in slightly.

"Some days I work in the Director's office at the Intelligence Directorate. I fix his computer and, because I am a mere woman, I am invisible to him. Last week, I was working in an adjacent room and overheard him speaking with one of his lieutenants about a plan to kill a U.S. politician. They did not speak the name. So who it is they are plotting against, I cannot say. But I know it is not in Egypt's interest to kill Americans . . . especially not American leaders. So I needed to tell someone."

"Thank you, Dear Rasha. That information is helpful. But there are so many possibilities, I don't know how we could protect this person."

"I knew that as well. So when the Director was gone, I searched his computer. There is a back door that allows me access to his data without needing a password."

Of course, there would be. What programmer would want to have herself locked out of a computer because the user forgot his

password.

"I searched his computer and, unfortunately, did not find the name I sought. But . . ." Rasha's hand crossed the table and deposited a tiny black piece of plastic under Beth's napkin. "I did find something unusual. It is unlike any other data on the Director's computer. I cannot open the file, so it carries a very high level of security protection. I am hoping that your country can reveal its secrets and that this information may help save the politician."

Beth palmed the computer chip and slipped it into her pants pocket. Actually, it wasn't a chip, but a tiny data storage device called a Micro-SD Card.

"Dear Rasha. I regret that, for the moment at least, this matter must take priority over continuing our conversation. I need to get back to my office. Will you forgive me?"

Rasha laughed.

"I would expect nothing less from the great Elizabeth Weston. Now, go. Do what is right for both our countries."

Beth wished she could promise that would be how it all worked out.

"Rasha, it is likely that I will need to contact you again. Is there a safe way for me to do so?"

Both women stood and exchanged a hug, during which Rasha passed a card into Elizabeth's hand.

"This number is safe," she whispered, "but I cannot answer while I am working."

They ended the hug.

"Thank you again, Dear Rasha. I shall do my best not to let you down."

Rasha remained at the table finishing her tea as Beth left for the Embassy, proceeding with all due haste.

CHAPTER 21

From Venezuela to Red Wing.

Even though he lived in voluntary exile from his native U.S., The Raptor was not without connections there. He would need to employ a number of “black enterprises,” within and outside of America to gain entry. The greatest travel challenges always awaited him at points of entry, whether by land, sea, or air. While alone, he could travel fairly freely with his U.S. Passport. But bringing Angel along complicated matters.

For the Minnesota job, he hopped a drug plane flight from Venezuela to Tampico, Mexico. From there, he and Angel traveled under the paid protection of the Gulf Cartel north to Matamoros, near the Gringo border. From Matamoros, he caught a ride on a fishing trawler heading northeast, making sure to stay within established fishing routes. Switching vessels along the way, he took the final leg of his journey to the U.S. interior aboard an acquaintance’s private yacht through the port of Galveston. Corpus Christi would have been closer, of course, but Galveston’s security was much more lax. After all, who would sneak into the United States via Galveston when Corpus Christi was so much closer to Mexico?

Once on U.S. soil, with all transportation having been paid in cash with U.S. dollars, he was free to move about as he wished – Angel included.

He drove into Red Wing, Minnesota two days before the Senator, checking in at the very same St. James Hotel where his target would be speaking – if he lived long enough. The Raptor’s name on the hotel registry matched his phony Texas driver’s license and the name on a fraudulently procured credit card. No one would

be able to trace him from those documents.

He had also arrived at the hotel wearing a Twins baseball cap and a false beard – sufficient disguise to deter any facial recognition programs, or even *ex post facto* video tape analysis.

Shortly after arriving in Red Wing, The Raptor had checked out the ballroom at The Summit, as well as possible shooting lanes through its glass windows from the river foliage below. But when he drove to the Wisconsin side of the Eisenhower Bridge, he immediately knew a shot through the windows would not be possible. Someone had coated them with reflective material. There was no way he could see inside from this angle.

A certain amount of security interference was to be expected in his line of work, so the glazed windows had not dampened his spirits. He'd next considered points of entry and exit to the hotel. If the target chose to enter through the parking garage, there would be no clear shot except through the car's windows, though Angel was certainly up to that challenge if it should arise.

He'd walked the streets of the small town, surveying building tops, industrial structures, and other potential vantage points. There were several favorable candidates for his purposes. But there was one location that stood out from the rest. It offered clear sight lines to both the hotel's front entrance and its garage portals. There would be no one around to stumble upon his position as he prepared for the kill. And the shot's trajectory would be a slightly downward angle at a distance of, perhaps, a thousand yards.

That prime location sat atop one of Red Wing's most impressive geological landmarks – Mount La Grange.

The Raptor had laughed at the name when he'd looked it up on his computer. This was no mountain. It was a hill, or a bluff, perhaps, but not a mountain. In performing his due diligence, he'd discovered that La Grange had barely surpassed someone's definition of a "mountain" by standing 1,001 feet above sea level, though it "towered" a mere 350 feet above the river.

Funny name or not, Mount La Grange provided the perfect spot for his needs. So Mount La Grange it would be. He would begin his preparations immediately . . . a successful escape from an isolated

knob of ground bordered by water on one side, and local law enforcement on the other, did not happen without planning.

* * *

Later that day, he climbed the diminutive mountain to take a first hand look. Shooting lines were, indeed, exceptionally favorable. Escape would be the challenge.

There were only two options for escape from Mount La Grange – and both were on the river side. It wouldn't take the cops long to figure out where the shot had come from – at least not if they were good, and he had to assume they would be. They would seal off the land side of La Grange quickly.

The river side, predictably enough, offered only two options – upstream or downstream. La Grange was already a good distance downstream from Red Wing by boat. That made downstream the obvious choice. Why boat upstream directly into law enforcement assets rather than flee downstream and away from police density?

The biggest problem with a downstream escape was that the river valley offered few decent outlets for his boat and gear. There were lots of good spots to hide among the maze of weedy sloughs, scrub tree islands, and mucky side channels. But there was really no place to get free of the river valley terrain – at least not before any water cops might identify his fleeing boat, or find his hiding place. Even if he had access to a fast craft, patrol boats from other jurisdictions posted farther downstream, or helicopters overhead, would soon close in on him.

No. As much as the downstream route begged to be chosen, it was not feasible.

If The Raptor were to use Mount La Grange as his point of attack, the downstream failings left only upstream for his escape route. He knew there would be patrol boats in that direction. He and his craft would need to withstand a reasonably thorough search. The Red Wing harbors and landings would be teeming with cops. For him to land his boat there would be foolhardy. Then there would be further patrols if he continued north toward St. Paul. It

was almost certain that police on the Wisconsin side of the river would join in the manhunt, making a safe boat landing there improbable.

No answer was obvious. But La Grange held too many attack advantages to give it up hastily. The Raptor would return to his escape play book. He would make something work.