

# **A Brewing Storm**

**Derrick Storm, #1**

**by Richard Castle,**

**Published: 2012**

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# Chapter 1

## **Current Day Silver Creek, Montana**

He could feel it coming long before he heard it, descending like a sudden chill that swept through his bones, causing every muscle to tighten. It was a primal response, sharpened by years of experience. This, he thought, must be how dogs feel in those quiet moments before the earthquake hits, when they alone know the devastation of what's coming. When they alone know that everything is about to change.

For a split second, he considered tactical evasion, but out here among the pines and Rocky Mountain junipers, he knew it was a fool's errand. How far could he get? Maybe to the shore of the river before they arrived, maybe to the tree line, if he was lucky. And then what? He was easily fifty miles from the nearest town, equipped only with what could fit in his backpack.

But what did it matter? They'd already found him. And if they'd found him, that meant they knew.

He looked over the rolling water of the mountain stream. How long did he have? A minute? Maybe two? Scratching at the worn military cap covering his dark brown hair, his eyes fell on a rainbow trout swimming lazily near the surface, eyeballing the red-and-black fake bug dancing on the stream's surface. He'd spent the past hour luring the trout from the shadows. Maybe he had time enough for that. After all, if there was anything he hated, it was unfinished business.

„Come on. Come to papa,“ the man whispered. The trout, hypnotized by the hand-tied fly, drew closer.

But just as the fish was ready to strike, the water began to churn and rise upward around him, accompanied by a growing apocalyptic roar.

It was too late. They had arrived.

High above him the churning blades of the monstrous machine eclipsed the sun before sweeping over the tree line and coming to an imposing hover just above him. Droplets of water spattered onto the pepper-like stubble on his chin.

The sound of a Bell UH-1Y Venom helicopter is something that no soldier who has heard it ever forgets. It is what a man hears going into battle and what he hears when he is done fighting—if he is still alive.

The pilot landed in a clearing next to the stream and a twenty-something kid wearing an off-the-rack suit jumped from it, the blades of the aircraft still cutting through the clear air.

„Derrick Storm?“ he called. „Is that you?“

The fisherman glanced at the kid with disdain.

„Never heard of him,“ he growled.

Unsure what to do next, the young courier looked over his shoulder at the helicopter. A side door slid open and an older, pudgy man stepped to the wet ground. He slowly made his way to the creek's edge, cupped his hands around his lips, and yelled: „Jedidiah sent me.“

„Don't know him.“

„He said you'd say that.“ The speaker hollered, „Jedidiah says he's calling in Tangiers.“

Tangiers. Tangiers had been bad. Even after all of these years, whenever the fisherman thought of Tangiers, he could still feel the cold linoleum pressed against his cheek, sticky and wet with his own blood. He could still see the mangled bodies and hear the unanswered cries for help. If it weren't for Jedidiah...

Reeling in his line, the man started toward the creek bank. He did not talk to the two strangers waiting there. He gathered up his gear and boarded the helicopter.

Tangiers. It was a hell of an IOU to call in. Jedidiah knew how difficult it had been for him to disappear. To go off-the-grid. To die, at least to be dead to a world that he had once known. A world that had tried to kill him, not once, but many, many times. Jedidiah understood why it had been important for him to no longer exist. And now Jedidiah was calling him back, dragging him back, to what he had worked so hard to free himself from.

Now inside the chopper, the man looked outside at the creek, the meadow, the blue sky. He was leaving it all.

„Let's go,“ the fisherman told them.

„Then you are Derrick Storm!“ the younger man gushed. „You aren't dead like everyone said.“

The older envoy gave the pilot a thumbs-up and the helicopter lifted from the ground.

„What's it been, Storm?“ the older man asked. „How many years have you been dead?“

It had been nearly four. Four years of solitude. Of peace. Of self-assessment. Of reevaluation and reflection. Jedidiah knew Storm better than any man alive. And he had known that he would come back if the trump card was played. Jedidiah had played it. Tangiers. Derrick Storm always paid his debts.

Even in death.

## Chapter 2

A black stretch limousine was idling near the tarmac at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland when the air force C-21A Learjet carrying Derrick Storm landed. Now clean-shaven, dressed in a tailored Caraceni suit and black Testoni shoes, Storm walked directly from the jet to the car's rear passenger door. An officer from the Central Intelligence Agency's internal police force, called the Security Protective Service (SPS), opened the door for him.

Sliding into the back leather seat, Storm found himself sitting across from Jedidiah Jones, the director of the agency's National Clandestine Service—a fancy name for the CIA division that recruited spies and did the nation's dirtiest jobs overseas.

Jones inspected Storm over half-glasses perched on a nose that had been broken so many times that it had been impossible for surgeons to fully repair. Although Jones was old enough to be Storm's father, the NCS director was military-fit, built like a pit bull, with a shaved head and a raspy voice that sounded angry even when he was paying a compliment, which was rare.

„You look a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you,“ Jones said.

„It would be difficult to look worse,“ Storm replied, as the limo began making its way into Washington, D.C., along a route that was all too familiar to Storm.

Jones grunted. „Tangiers was a bitch. Didn't work out the way we planned. Shit happens. Anyway, I'm glad you're back.“

„I'm not.“

„I don't believe that, Storm,“ Jones said. „A guy like you needs the adrenaline rush. A guy like you thrives on the danger. You weren't really happy in Montana. Deep down, you know it. And so do I. You knew this day would come.“

„You're wrong. I was at peace.“

„Bullshit, you're lying to yourself!“

„Look, I'm here,“ Storm said. „But when I've done whatever you want this time, I'm going back. I'm done. We're even.“

Jones took a fat cigar from his coat jacket, nipped off its end, looked at it lovingly, and fired it up.

„What about Clara Strike?“ he asked. „You saying she doesn't matter to you anymore?2

Concealing his emotions had always been something Storm did well. It was a necessity in his line of work. He would not give Jones the satisfaction of a reaction now. Or ever. Still, Jones had struck a blow. Storm and Clara had worked together. They'd been perfect partners on assignment—and in bed. She was part of the reason he'd decided to disappear. She was part of the reason he still wished that he were a ghost.

It was an ironic twist. Clara had been declared dead once, too. There was even a death certificate filed in Richmond that verified she had been killed. He'd believed it when Jones had first told him. He'd been crushed. She'd been ripped from his life, and for one of the first times in his memory, he'd grieved. He'd actually felt tremendous and overwhelming loss because of her death.

Then he'd discovered it was a lie. Jones had engineered it. Her death was for the good of the company. For the good of the country. But it had not been for his good. It had taken him a long time to accept that Clara had not died, that she had been somewhere breathing, eating, possibly making love with someone else, while he was grieving. Yet she had not contacted him. She'd let him believe that she had been killed. Why? Being dead seemed to be an occupational hazard when you worked for Jones. It was a professional requirement; only her death had cut him deep.

Storm wondered, Had his death caused the same reaction in her?

„Don't worry,“ Jones said. „Clara is out of country.“

„Do me a favor,“ Storm said. „Don't tell her I'm still alive. It'd make things... complicated.“

Jones smirked, revealing rows of perfectly crowned teeth.

Did Jones have a heart? Or was he the ultimate Machiavellian company man? Ice-cold. Storm wasn't sure, even after all of the years that he had worked from him.

„Whatever you want, Derrick,“ Jones said, inhaling deeply.

„I want another promise from you,“ Storm said. „When I've done whatever it is that you want, promise me that you'll let me be dead again—this time forever.“

Jones leaned forward and stuck out his right hand to shake.

„You’ve got my word,“ he said.

„My debt is paid?“

„In full. After this time, you’re done.“ And then Jones added, „Besides, you’re getting too old, too soft for this.“

Storm returned his smile. „What’s so important that you called in Tangiers?“

„A kidnapping here in Washington, D.C.“

„You called in Tangiers because of a kidnapping?“ Storm repeated in an incredulous voice.

„There’s more to it.“

With Jones there always was. His mind was already racing. He knew Jones would not be calling him out of his self-imposed retirement because of a kidnapping. It didn’t make sense. The CIA was not authorized to operate inside the borders of the United States. Kidnappings fell under the jurisdiction of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and although in public the CIA and the FBI always presented a united front, Storm knew there was an intense rivalry between them. That was putting it mildly. Jones despised the FBI’s current director, Roosevelt Jackson.

„Who’s been kidnapped?“ Storm asked.

„The stepson of a U.S. senator,“ Jones replied. „His name is Matthew Dull, and his stepfather is Senator Thurston Windslow from Texas.“

Thurston Windslow. The first player in the Kabuki play that was about to begin. Windslow was one of the most powerful senators on Capitol Hill and chair of the U.S. Select Committee on Intelligence—the oversight committee charged with keeping an eye on the CIA and Jedidiah Jones. No wonder Jones was interested. But there had to be other players and more to this than a kidnapping.

„Who kidnapped his stepson?“ Storm asked.

Jones waved his cigar in his hand, dismissing the smoke around him and Storm’s inquiry in one move. „We’re on our way to Windslow’s office. He can fill you in. That way you will go into this fresh without any preconceived impressions.“

It was classic Jedidiah Jones. Storm had been here before. Jones liked his officers to assess situations on their own—to come up with their own opinions. He wanted to see what they would learn. He wanted to see if they might discover something that he might have missed. Jones would give them just enough to get them started and then feed them information if they needed it, when he felt they needed it, and only if he felt that they needed it. Jones played it close to his vest, and even when you had completed a job, you were never really sure of how it fit together with some grander plan. Only Jones understood the master plan. He operated in a world of smoke and mirrors where nothing was what it appeared and nothing could be taken at face value. Even those closest to him were never confident that they knew what Jones was orchestrating.

Storm said, „What about the FBI?“

Jones shrugged. „What about them? They’re on the case. The special agent in charge is a woman named April Showers.“

Another player enters the game.

„April Showers? Is that her real name?“

„Yes, it is. Her folks must have had a sense of humor. Or they were hippies from the sixties. Either way, she’ll be at the senator’s office when we get there.“

„And who am I supposed to be?“

„You’re a special advisor. Your name is Steve Mason. That way Derrick Storm can remain dead.“

„And if something goes wrong, there’s no Steve Mason to be found.“

„Exactly,“ said Jones.

„It seems like a lot of trouble—bringing me back and giving me a false identity—just for a kidnapping.“

Jones blew out a series of perfect smoke rings. „It’s sad really,“ he said. „Smoke rings. With everyone banning smoking, it’s becoming a dying art.“

## Chapter 3

Through the bullet-resistant windows of the black limousine, Storm saw the U.S. Capitol dome rising before them as they rode east on Constitution Avenue. It was an impressive sight, especially brightly floodlit at night.

The car passed the Russell Senate Office Building (SOB), which was the first of three ornate office buildings used by the nation’s one hundred elected U.S. senators. In a city obsessed with acronyms, Storm had always thought the shorthand SOB seemed a fitting description for where senators did their business.

The Dirksen SOB was next. Opened in 1958, it had been known for nearly two decades simply as SOB Number Two, until Congress decided to name it after the late Illinois Republican Senator Everett M. Dirksen, an orator so famous that he’d been awarded a Grammy for an album of his patriotic speeches called *Gallant Men*.

Senators loved naming buildings after their own.

When the limo stopped at the Dirksen SOB’s western entrance, the SPS security officer in the front seat jumped out and darted inside to alert the Capitol Hill Police officers on duty that two VIPs were arriving. Jones and Storm would not be delayed by security checks. There would be no walk-through metal detectors, no searching of briefcases and emptying of pockets. Instead, both men were quickly escorted to Senator Windslow’s office, where a secretary immediately led them into the senator’s inner chamber.

As with most other things on Capitol Hill, senate offices were doled out based on seniority and power. The bigger the office, the more important the senator. Windslow had been assigned the largest office in the Dirksen. His private domain had fifteen-foot-tall ceilings, ornate carved wooden bookcases, and thick carpet. Expensive brown leather sofas and overstuffed chairs faced an executive desk made of polished mahogany that had clearly not come from some General Services Administration warehouse. One wall was covered with framed photographs that showed the senator posing with foreign presidents and dignitaries. It was proof that Windslow relished his power and clearly enjoyed taxpayer-funded junkets to exotic locales. Another wall was decorated with the Texas state seal and a pair of mounted longhorns from a Texas steer.

The senator rose from behind his desk but made no effort to walk forward and greet them. He let them come to him with outstretched hands.

„About time you got here, Jedidiah,“ Windslow snapped, as he shook the CIA spymaster’s hand. „You’ve kept me waiting ten minutes.“

Windslow looked at Storm, and the two men immediately sized each other up, like two schoolboys squaring off during recess.

Tall and thin, Windslow was in his early seventies and instantly recognizable. He was a familiar face on Sunday morning television talk shows and evening newscasts. But it was his haircut and voice that made him memorable. He had pure white hair that he wore in an outdated, carefully coifed pompadour swept back from his forehead and held firmly in place with a glossy shellac spray. He spoke with a slow, deliberate Southern drawl that was sprinkled with homespun sayings that he frequently used to remind voters that he was one of them, a yellow-dog Democrat. In Texas, which he had represented for more than thirty years, he was considered undefeatable.

„So this is your man,“ Windslow said.

„Senator Windslow,“ Jones said, „this is Steve Mason. He doesn't work for me, but he occasionally does piecework for me. He's a private detective.“

„You're the fixer?“ Windslow asked bluntly. „You're the man who gets things done no matter what—am I right?“

Storm didn't like the fact that there were three others in the office. He'd identified FBI Special Agent April Showers as soon as he walked in. A telltale bulge under the jacket she was wearing had given her away. He'd recognized the senator's wife from news articles. But he had no idea who the twenty-something-year-old girl was sitting nearby.

„I'm here to lend a hand,“ Storm said, dodging the senator's questions.

„I've already got enough hands,“ Windslow replied. „I've got the entire FBI lending a hand, and so far, it hasn't done any good. What I need is someone with a fist.“

No one spoke for a moment, and then the senator's wife said in a quiet voice, „My husband seems to have forgotten his manners. My name is Gloria Windslow.“ She rose gracefully from her seat, showing the emotional control of a well-trained politician's wife. Even in times of great emotional stress, she knew that she needed to be composed.

Her grip was soft. Her fingernails manicured. She was at least thirty years younger than her husband and was dressed in a pricey New York designer outfit that had been tailored to accent her figure.

Storm had read about her in the media. As soon as she'd finished high school, Gloria Windslow had fled the poor, rural Texas town where she'd been born. Her ticket had been her breathtaking good looks and unbridled ambition, which had led to her winning a spot on the Dallas Cowboys cheerleading roster. She'd gotten pregnant, married a star NFL quarterback, and then divorced him two years later, after claiming that he'd abused her. She and her newborn had made the covers of both *People* and *Us* magazines, where she'd been portrayed as a determined single mom who'd refused to be bullied by her famous husband. Gloria and the senator had met two years later at a Dallas political fund-raiser where supporters had paid three thousand dollars a plate to hear him speak. She'd arrived on the arm of one of the city's most eligible bachelors, a prominent lawyer, but had traded up, leaving with Windslow. A month later, he hired her to work in Washington as his personal secretary. A year later, Windslow filed for divorce from his wife of thirty years, causing a dustup back home. The new couple's age difference raised eyebrows, but Windslow hired a Manhattan public relations firm to salvage his well-crafted reputation as a good Christian family man, and by the time the Madison Avenue spin masters were

finished, Gloria was no longer a home wrecker. She was now a confident and trusted advisor to her husband, with a passion about education, libraries, and women's issues. At Christmas, she invited special needs children to a party at their estate, and gave them pony rides in a heated barn.

She was still stunning in her mid-forties, thanks to a strict starvation diet, cosmetic surgery, and regular Botox injections.

After introducing herself, Gloria directed Storm to the other women in the office.

„This is Miss Samantha Toppers,“ she said, directing his attention to the youngest. „She and my son, Matthew Dull, are engaged to be married.“

As Toppers rose from her seat on a sofa to meet him, Storm realized that he was looking at an architectural marvel. She weighed less than a hundred pounds and was under five feet tall, but she was so top-heavy that Storm wondered how she kept herself from tumbling facedown when she reached out to shake his hand.

„Nice to meet you,“ Toppers said in her childlike voice.

When he finally got around to looking at her face, he saw that her eyes were swollen and red from crying.

„And this is Special Agent April Showers,“ Gloria continued.

In her green eyes, Storm saw a look of irritation. She couldn't have been any more opposite in appearance to Toppers. The FBI agent was six feet tall and had a world-class marathoner's body, which meant she averaged two pounds per inch. In her mid-thirties, she had porcelain white skin and wore her red hair tied in a bun.

„Now that you've met everyone,“ Senator Windslow said, „let's get to it. My stepson, Matthew, has been kidnapped. They grabbed him while he and Samantha were walking across the Georgetown campus.“

„Fortunately,“ Gloria interrupted, „they didn't bother Samantha, but they did kidnap my son.“

For the first time since Storm had entered the office, he saw a crack in Gloria Windslow's veneer. Tears began to form in her eyes. She removed a tissue from her purse and dabbed them.

„The kidnapers,“ Windslow continued, „left Miss Toppers hysterical on the sidewalk.“

Storm looked for some sign of sympathy in Windslow's face, but there was none. Had he expected the top-heavy Toppers to fight the assailants?

Toppers lowered her eyes, avoiding contact with Windslow's glare.

„I think it would be best,“ Gloria said, between sniffles, „if Special Agent Showers gave you the details. It is difficult for me to discuss the facts without becoming emotional.“

Taking her hint, Agent Showers said, „The kidnapping happened three days ago. A white van pulled up at an intersection on the edge of the Georgetown campus where Mr. Dull and Miss Toppers were waiting for a red light to change. It was shortly after fourteen hundred hours. Three men, all wearing ski masks, leaped out of the vehicle. One stayed behind the wheel. The first assailant fired an automatic weapon in the air to scare onlookers. The other two overpowered Matthew and forced him into the van. We found the van abandoned six blocks away.“

„No fingerprints or trace evidence, I assume?“ Storm said.

„That's right. Wiped clean.“



„How about the shell casings left behind?“

„It’s all in my report,“ she replied curtly.

„Which she’ll be happy to give you after we are done,“ Windslow declared. „I spoke to FBI Director Jackson this morning, and he has instructed Agent Showers to cooperate fully with you. No questions asked. Isn’t that correct?“

„Yes,“ Showers said. „I’ve been ordered to help you.“

„Agent Showers doesn’t think bringing you into the investigation is a good idea,“ Gloria Windslow said. „My husband and I feel differently.“

„That’s because the FBI hasn’t done a damn thing so far,“ Windslow declared.

Storm saw Showers’s jaw muscles tighten. He suspected she was biting down hard to keep her response from slipping out.

„I got a ransom note,“ Windslow said, „the day after those bastards snatched him. They demanded a million dollars, which I immediately agreed to pay.“ Windslow shot FBI Agent Showers a disgusted look. „Agent Showers here assured me that if I played along with these sons-of-bitches, the Bureau would be able to catch them when they picked up my money.“

„But that’s not what happened,“ Gloria Windslow said, cutting in on his account. The two of them made quite a tag team. For not wanting to discuss the case, both seemed eager to do it.

„The Bureau here screwed up,“ Windslow said.

„With all due respect, Senator,“ Showers replied. „We followed standard procedures. The ransom was left exactly where the kidnappers had told us to put it. The entire place was under surveillance.“

„That money just sat there,“ Windslow said, „and no one showed to get my million dollars. They knew it was a trap. Someone tipped off the kidnappers. I just know it.“

„We don’t know that,“ Showers said.

„Well, young lady, something spooked them—like a mule deer sniffing the air when you’re hunting,“ Windslow said. „The next morning, I got another ransom note; only now these bastards have decided to play hardball.“

Gloria began to quietly sob. Toppers left the couch and knelt down next to the chair where her future mother-in-law sat. Rising from behind his desk, Windslow walked over, too, and put his right hand on Gloria’s shoulder. „This is a terrible thing for my wife to be going through.“ He stroked her hair.

Continuing, Windslow said, „Those bastards pulled out four of Matthew’s front teeth and sent them to me in that ransom note, along with a photograph. That’s when I decided to talk to Jedidiah. That’s when I decided we needed your help.“

Storm looked at Agent Showers. She had placed her right leg over her left one and then wrapped them so tightly together that she now had her right toe tucked behind her left ankle. Her arms were crossed against her chest. Even someone completely unfamiliar with body language would have recognized how frustrated she was.

„I’d like to see the two ransom notes,“ Storm said.

„Agent Showers will get them for you,“ Windslow said. „Now, I’d like all the women folk here to skedaddle for a few moments so I can talk to Jedidiah and his man in private.“

„C’mon, ladies,“ Gloria said, rising slowly from her seat. Toppers instantly fell in line, but Showers didn’t move.

„Senator,“ she said sternly, „as head of this investigation, I need to be involved in every discussion that you might have that involves the kidnapping.“

„I have things to say in private, Miss Showers,“ Windslow snapped. „I was assured earlier today by Director Jackson that I would have your total and full cooperation. Do I need to have him replace you?“

„For the record,“ Showers said, „I think you are making a mistake bringing this outsider into the case.“

„For the record,“ Windslow replied, mimicking her, „I asked you to leave my office.“

Showers walked out the door.

„Jedidiah tells me,“ Windslow said to Storm when she was gone, „that you’re a man who knows how to find people who don’t want to be found and that you can handle yourself in extremely difficult situations.“

Jones said, „He’s my go-to guy. If it were my stepson, I’d call him.“

„That’s exactly what I wanted to hear,“ Windslow said. „I need someone who can track down these bastards and do whatever is necessary to free my stepson. Do you understand what I am telling you?“

Storm said, „You want results and you don’t care how I get them.“

Windslow smiled. „Finally, I’m getting the sort of answers I wanted. Yes, this is exactly what I want from you, Mr. Mason, or whatever the hell your name might be. I asked Jedidiah to get me someone who isn’t worried about legal niceties. I asked him to get me the best.“

Storm didn’t respond.

„First, I want you to track down these bastards, and then, I want you to kill every one of them. I’m not worried about you reading them their legal rights and arresting them and getting them some fast-talking lawyer whose going to bottle this up in some long, drawn-out trial. I want them dead. I want you to get it done before they send more of my stepson’s body parts to my wife.“

## Chapter 4

It was 8:30 P.M., by the time Storm and Jones left Capitol Hill and arrived at the Willard InterContinental Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue, less than a block from the White House. Before they parted, Jones handed Storm an envelope stuffed with hundred-dollar bills, a fake Nevada driver’s license, private investigator credentials under the name Steve Mason, a cell phone that was a direct line to Jones at the CIA, and the keys to a rental car parked in the hotel’s lot. Storm reached his fifth-floor suite at the same moment the phone inside it began to ring. It was FBI Agent Showers calling from the lobby. She’d come to brief him.

„Come on up,“ Storm said.

„I’ll wait for you in the hotel’s restaurant.“

Storm joined her five minutes later at a secluded table.

„I’ve never stayed in this hotel,“ she said as he was sitting down. „But it is famous. Mark Twain wrote two books here.“

„We can go up to my suite and I’ll give you a tour,“ he said.

„I was being polite, making chitchat,“ she said. „I’ve no interest in going to your bedroom.“

„Too bad,“ he intimated. „I was hoping for a full debriefing.“

Storm glanced around the mostly empty restaurant. „This hotel is much nicer than the places Jedidiah typically sends me,“ he said.

The waiter arrived. Showers ordered coffee. Storm ordered a sixteen-dollar hamburger and an eight-dollar beer. When their server left, she said, „And where would some of those places be—where Jedidiah has sent you?“

„If I told you, I'd have to kill you.“

„That's an old line.“

„In my case, it happens to be true.“

„Look,“ she said sternly. „I've been ordered to brief you and work with you. I think I deserve to know who you are.“

The waiter interrupted with their drinks. After he'd left, Storm said, „I'm a private investigator—just like Jedidiah said. I used to work for him on occasion when I was in the military.“

„Oh really,“ she replied skeptically. „I did some checking earlier today after Jedidiah told us that he was flying you into town. He said you were from Nevada. If that's true, why is there no record of you being a licensed private investigator in that state?“

Storm shrugged. „I've been meaning to get a license. I just haven't gotten around to it.“

„You do have a Nevada driver's license though, right?“

Storm didn't answer. She was supposed to be briefing him, not interrogating him. But Showers wasn't about to stop now.

She said, „I checked the photos of all the Steve Masons who have Nevada driver's licenses. You don't look like any of them.“

Storm was disappointed. Jedidiah usually did a better job backstopping legends.

„I got a haircut,“ he replied.

„I ran an FBI background check and there is nothing in any public record about a Steve Mason that fits your description. Who are you—really?“

Storm leaned in close and whispered, „I'm the man who's been brought in to clean up your mess. That's all you need to know.“

The waiter brought him his burger. Storm hadn't realized how hungry he was. He took a big bite and another long gulp of cold beer.

In a resigned voice, Showers said, „What exactly do you need to know about the kidnapping?“

„Everything.“

Between bites, Storm questioned her. Showers elaborated on the basics that he'd already heard in Windslow's office. Matthew Dull and Samantha Toppers had finished their last class for the day at Georgetown University and were walking across campus to get something to eat when a white van pulled to the curb and three attackers leaped from it. One fired an automatic weapon in the air to intimidate would-be heroes. He then pointed it directly into Topper's terrified face. The other two assailants overpowered Dull and forced him into the van. The entire abduction had taken less than a minute.

„Why hasn't this been all over the national news?“ Storm asked.

„Strings were pulled. The media was told that it was a college prank. Georgetown officials went along. Said it was a fraternity gag that got out of hand.“

„What kind of automatic weapon was used?“

Showers opened a black leather briefcase that she had brought with her and removed a clear plastic bag that contained about a dozen brass shell casings.

„There were no fingerprints on them,“ she said, putting the bag on the table.

Storm didn't bother opening it as he finished the last bite of his burger. He'd seen enough 7.62 x 39mm ammunition casings to recognize them by sight.

„The assailant used an AK-47,“ he said.

„Yes,“ Showers replied, impressed. „Unfortunately, there are about seventy-five million AK-47s being used right now in the world. The Soviet Union did a hell of a job exporting them to every terrorist and revolutionary group in the world, as well as every nut in the U.S. who found a way, legally or illegally, to get his hands on a firearm capable of firing six hundred rounds a minute.“

„It sucks being Bambi nowadays.“

He smiled. She didn't.

Storm said, „These guys went in fast, hard, deliberate, and left nothing behind that could be used to identify them. They were pros. Possibly ex-military.“ He said, „Let's see the ransom notes.“

She removed two letters from her briefcase. Both were protected in plastic. The first was written in block letters, similar to what a draftsman would use on blueprints.

WE WILL KILL YOUR STEPSON UNLESS YOU PAY US \$1,000,000.

The note went on to order Windslow to pay the ransom in hundred-dollar bills. The cash was supposed to be placed in a briefcase left in the fast-food dining area of Union Station, the city's major subway and Amtrak station, near Capitol Hill. The kidnapers had drawn a diagram on the note that pinpointed where the briefcase was to be left, underneath a table near a back wall. The ransom was supposed to be delivered by Dull's fiancée.

„Samantha Toppers was terrified,“ Showers said. „I kept telling her that she was fine. We had the entire train station flooded with agents—nearly a hundred—coming and going. We used interns and retired agents so the kidnapers wouldn't have a clue who was a civilian and who wasn't.“

„And no one showed up to grab the case?“

„No one showed any interest in it even after she walked away from that table.“

„I'm surprised. Not because of the kidnapers. But that you could leave a briefcase in Union Station without someone stealing it.“

Continuing her briefing, Showers said, „We found a partial print on the corner of that first note. There weren't any prints on the second one. It arrived the next day.“

Like the first, the second ransom note was handwritten, but not in block letters. There was no mention of a ransom—only a cryptic threat.

Your son dies if you continue toying with us.

Storm said, „Obviously, these were written by different people. Not only is the handwriting different, so is the paper they used. The first note had a partial print on it. The second didn't. There's also an error in the second message. In the first, Dull is correctly described as Windslow's stepson. In the second, he's called his son.“

„Yes, I noticed those contradictions, too,“ Showers replied. „But we know that at least four kidnappers were involved. One of them could have written the first note, and another the second, simply to throw us off. The same could be true about the discrepancies. They might have been intentional.“

Storm wasn't so sure, but he decided to move on. „Tell me about Senator Windslow. Does he have many enemies?“

„Does he ever. He's probably one of the most hated senators in Washington. He's blunt and he's been around so long that he's untouchable. He knows it. He's a bully, and when he doesn't get what he wants, he gets angry—and he always gets even. Other politicians fear him. Even the White House. He has a reputation for being ruthless and vindictive.“

„Sounds like every politician I've known,“ Storm said.

„No, Windslow is in a league of his own. You would expect Republicans to hate him because he's a Democrat. But half the members of his own party can't stand him. And that's just on Capitol Hill. Outside of Congress, the groups that probably hate him the most are the environmentalists. Windslow is a shill for Big Oil. Always has been. He doesn't believe in global warming, thinks oil companies should be able to drill holes anywhere they damn well please, and once voted against a bill that would have levied fines on visitors who littered in state parks.“

„It's hard for me,“ Storm replied, „to imagine that an armed gang of environmentalists kidnapped the senator's stepson.“

„You asked me to identify his enemies. That's what I'm doing. Being thorough.“

Storm called over the waiter and ordered another beer. „OK, besides the tree huggers, who's next on the enemies list?“

„As chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Windslow wields tremendous power. He's always been a strong advocate of Israel. That makes him hated by Middle Eastern extremists.“

„Any particular terrorist cell?“

„All of them despise him. He's also managed to alienate the Russians, the Germans, and the Greeks. He's a rabid anti-Communist and doesn't trust the new Russian leaders; he believes all Germans are closet Nazis, and he dislikes socialist countries.“

„How can anyone hate the Greeks?“ Storm asked. „All they ever do is break plates and spend Euros that they don't have.“

Showers didn't smile. „There's also your people—the intelligence community. Senator Windslow and Jedidiah were all buddy-buddy tonight in the senator's office, but there are rumors they're fighting about a covert operation. And their dispute has gotten nasty.“

„What covert operation?“

„Don't know. It's above my pay grade. Maybe you can find out.“

„Do you honestly believe Jedidiah is behind the kidnapping?“ Storm said skeptically.

„At this point, I'm not counting out anyone. I think you CIA types are capable of anything. Even your arrival here today could be part of a ruse.“

She finished her coffee and carefully placed the cup back on its saucer.

Although Showers had already given him a long list of suspects, Storm suspected she was holding back. He'd learned a long time ago that during

interviews, it was the last thing that people told him that often held the most important clue.

„If our roles were reversed,“ he said sympathetically, „I’d be pissed. I’d think, ‘Who the hell does this guy think he is barging into my investigation?’ I wouldn’t be as helpful as you have been just now. But a crime’s been committed, and there’s a chance that Matthew Dull may still be alive. We owe it to him to put all of our cards on the table, so if there is anything else that you can tell me, anything at all, please share it.“

He sounded sincere. He was very good at sounding sincere. It had always served him well—at work and in bed.

Showers sat quietly for a moment. „About a year ago, the bureau began hearing reports that Windslow was on the take. Bribes. Big ones. The first complaint came from a Texan who had bid on a lucrative military contract. One of Windslow’s staff members demanded a kickback. When the Texan refused, the contract went to another company. The Texan called us, but all we had was his word and that wasn’t enough—not to build a criminal indictment against a U.S. senator.“

„You began digging.“

She nodded. „I wasn’t going to let it go. I discovered Windslow was adding riders to legislation that permitted oil companies to move millions of dollars from their overseas operations into the U.S. without paying federal income taxes.“

„But that’s not illegal,“ Storm said. „Senators screw with the IRS all the time to help out their friends.“

„Right. But I discovered that Windslow was collecting a fee based on how much money he helped the oil companies get back into the country tax-free. Or, I should say, I got several people to talk about kickbacks. But nothing on paper. Windslow is smart. And then I found a smoking gun. I discovered a wire transfer that I felt certain was a bribe paid to Windslow by someone overseas.“

„Who? A government, a corporation, an individual?2

„I’m not sure. Bribery is difficult to prove. The person who paid it isn’t going to talk. The person who got it isn’t going to talk. Most times, you can only make a criminal case if you have a money trail.“

Storm didn’t interrupt. He wanted her to keep talking. But he was very familiar with how bribes worked and how to hide them. He’d helped Jedidiah distribute millions of dollars in Iraq and Pakistan. The agency had handed out hundred-dollar bills as if they were Halloween candy—all unbeknownst to Congress and the American taxpayer.

Showers said, „I was able to trace a six-million-dollar payment from a London bank account to the Cayman Islands, where it was converted into cash and brought to Washington, D.C. I’m fairly certain it ended up in Windslow’s hands.“

„Fairly certain or positive?“

A pained look appeared on her face. His question had hit a nerve. She said, „I feel confident that I had developed a sufficient circumstantial case—enough to indict. But when my file reached the director’s office, it was put on ice. No one would tell me why. That was three weeks ago.“

Showers glanced at her watch. It was eleven and the restaurant was closing. She collected the two letters from him. „I’ve done what I was told,“ she said. „I’ve briefed you. I’ll pick you up tomorrow at eight A.M. sharp. We have set up

a command post at FBI headquarters. If you have additional questions, then you can ask them to my bosses tomorrow at the briefing.“

„I do have more questions,“ he replied. „Since the restaurant is closing, let’s go upstairs to my suite so we can talk more.“

„I don’t think talk is what you have in mind.“

He grinned. „Depends on the kind of talk. At least let me walk you to your car.“

„I’m armed, and I think I can make it through the hotel lobby to the valet without your help.“ Then, for the first time since they’d met, she actually smiled and said, „Besides, I think I have more to fear from you than I do from any strangers.“

„Ouch,“ he replied, touching his heart as if he’d been shot. „Just trying to be gentlemanly,“ he said, intentionally repeating her words.

„Then you can pay the check—Mr. Steve Mason.“

He watched her walk away from the table, admiring the dazzling results of her yoga routine hidden under her tailored slacks. As soon as he’d signed the bill with his room number and fake name, Storm followed her. But by the time he reached the lobby, she was already behind the wheel of her BMW. He stepped outside the hotel’s double doors just as she was driving away. As he watched, he saw a black Mercedes-Benz sedan pull from a side street near the hotel and begin to follow her.

Storm recognized the red, white, and blue license tag. It was a diplomatic plate.

Hurrying back to his suite, he used his portable computer to log on to the Internet. Diplomatic plates contained a two-letter code that identified which country had been issued the plate by the U.S. State Department. Periodically, the code letters were changed and reassigned. GB was never used on tags from Great Britain and IS was never used for Israel, because that would make it too easy for potential enemies to identify the car’s occupants.

Storm had seen the letters YR on the plate of the Mercedes following Showers. Within seconds, he’d broken the code.

What had Jedidiah Jones gotten him into? Why would a diplomatic car from the Russian embassy be tailing Special Agent Showers?

## Chapter 5

The hotel phone in Storm’s suite woke him from an alcohol-induced slumber. Several jigger-sized whiskey bottles pillaged from the hotel’s minibar littered the nightstand. He’d stayed up late trolling for information on the encrypted computer network that the CIA and other federal intelligence services could access via the Internet. His searches had led him to several clues. But what he’d uncovered remained disjointed pieces of a puzzle that still needed to be assembled.

At around 3 A.M., Storm had gone to bed, but he’d found it difficult to sleep. He’d known why. It wasn’t the kidnapping. There were two reasons, and both had to do with his return to Washington, D.C. Clara Strike and Tangiers. Sometimes only Jack Daniel’s could help a man black out his past.

A woman’s voice on the telephone line said, „Senator Windslow is calling.“

Storm checked the clock next to the king-sized bed. It was a few minutes after 6 A.M. His head was throbbing. The next voice he heard was Windslow's. „Those bastards left me another note—this one at my house.“

„Did they send anything else?“

„No teeth or body parts, if that is what you're asking. But they raised their ransom demand.“

„How much?“

„Six million! I'm at my house in Great Falls. Get out here now!“

Storm jotted down the address and asked, „Have you called Agent Showers?“

The question was met with silence. Finally, Windslow said, „I don't want her or the FBI involved. I'll explain when you get here. Don't call her, that's an order.“

An order? That was something Storm would need to clear up with Windslow. Only Jones gave him orders, not a politician.

Storm went downstairs to claim his rental car. The valet brought him a white Ford Taurus. It was not what spies in movies used, but it was perfect for blending in around Washington and its suburbs. He drove to Constitution Avenue, turned right, crossed the Potomac River, and headed north on the George Washington Parkway until he reached the Capital Beltway, a major highway that encircled the city. Exiting west onto the beltway, he went farther into Virginia. It took him another ten minutes to reach Great Falls, a heavily wooded, rolling suburb dotted with multimillion-dollar Colonial estates. He assumed he was being tracked electronically—if not by the CIA then by the FBI. There was probably a bug planted somewhere in the Taurus, or they were using the cell phone that Jones had given him. At this stage, he didn't care.

Senator Windslow's driveway was barred by an ornate, monogrammed iron gate. Storm pushed a button on a speaker mounted at the driveway entrance, and when the gates swung open, he drove along a circular driveway bordered by a carefully manicured lawn. An older black maid answered the front door and escorted Storm into the grand foyer, which had an imported Italian marble floor and a massive Versailles chandelier made of crystal and oxidized brass. Rising directly in front of him was an elaborate double staircase. A portrait was hung next to the first step on each side. One painting was of Senator Windslow and the other was of Gloria Windslow. Because each painting was hanging next to the first step, it gave the impression that the senator used one flight of stairs and his wife the other. The artist, Storm noted, had been shrewd enough to recognize that his patrons placed a higher value on flattery than realism. Both of the Windslows looked like British royalty.

Senator Windslow appeared in a dark blue nylon workout suit with a curled up towel resting on his shoulders and his forehead beaded with sweat.

„I ride my stationary bike for an hour every morning,“ he explained. „Gives me a chance to exercise while I read the papers and watch the news.“

Storm followed him through a side door into a wood-paneled study where the maid had placed a pot of coffee and two mugs on a table edged by three leather chairs. They matched the brown leather chairs in Windslow's office. Storm spotted another pair of Longhorn steer horns mounted on the wall, just like the ones that he'd seen on Capitol Hill. Obviously, the senator's decorating taste was the same whether he was at home or work.

„Hattie, our housekeeper, fetches me the newspapers each morning from the box at our gates while I'm exercising,“ Windslow said, as he poured himself



coffee and took a seat. He nodded at Storm, indicating that he could pour himself a cup, too, if he wished. „This morning,“ Windslow said, „Hattie found this at the gate.“

Windslow nodded toward an opened manila envelope on the coffee table, along with a pair of yellow rubber gloves.

„Has anyone checked the note for prints?“ Storm asked.

„No. Put on those gloves there before you handle it. I had Hattie get them from the kitchen.“

Storm pulled on the gloves. They were tight. He removed the letter and asked, „Does your wife know about this new demand?“

Windslow shook his head. „She’s still sleeping upstairs in her bedroom.“

Her bedroom. He hadn’t said „our bedroom.“ Apparently using different staircases was not the only thing that the couple did separately.

This new note—the third from the kidnappers—looked much like the first ransom demand. It was handwritten in block letters and contained specific instructions.

GO TO YOUR SAFETY DEPOSIT BOX AND REMOVE THE SIX MILLION YOU HAVE STASHED THERE.

While Storm was reading, the senator said, „My stepson must have told them about the six million. I should’ve known that little bastard couldn’t keep his mouth shut. Probably told them about it when they were jerking out his front teeth.“

Six million dollars in a safety deposit box. Storm marveled at the way the senator had just let that drop, as if having that kind of money just sitting around in cash was the most natural thing in the world. Showers had been right about Windslow. He was indeed on the take. No wonder the Great Man had wanted to see him alone. Seeing as things were just starting to get interesting, Storm decided to play along.

„Why’d your stepson know about it?“

„The box is rented under his name.“

The note instructed the senator to remove the six million from the bank before closing time today. It was to be divided into four equal piles of \$1.5 million, and each pile was to be put into a gym bag. At exactly 6 P.M., the kidnappers would call Samantha Toppers on her cell phone with instructions on where to deliver the bags. She would need a car because the bags would be dropped at different locations around Washington, D.C. If the FBI attempted to monitor the deliveries or to intervene, the kidnappers would kill Matthew Dull.

Jabbing his bony finger at the ransom demand, Windslow said, „Make sure you read that last line carefully!“

HAVE STEVE MASON DRIVE SAMANTHA TOPPERS TO THE BANK AND ON THE DELIVERIES TONIGHT.

„How in the hell do the kidnappers know about you?“ Windslow asked in an accusatory voice, „and why do they want you driving my future daughter-in-law around with my six million in cash?“

Storm had to admit it was an interesting question. Clearly there was a leak, an informant, tipping off the kidnappers. But Storm didn’t like Windslow’s tone.

The senator might have gotten away with bullying his way over others, but not Storm.

„I’ve got a few questions of my own,“ Storm replied, ignoring Windslow’s question. „Why don’t you want the FBI to know about this note?“

The senator replied, „Because that six million is what we call *walking around money* in politics. Texas is a big state. Lots of people have their hands out come election time. I don’t think Agent Showers or the Justice Department would understand.“

„Neither would the IRS,“ Storm said. „It’s bribe money.“

„C’mon, son. Jedidiah told me you had street smarts. How do you think campaigns are run? I use that cash to grease a few palms. It’s no big deal. It’s expected.“

„I’m not talking about greasing palms in Texas,“ Storm replied. „I’m talking about your palms getting greased.“

A flash of anger washed over Windslow’s face. No one talked to him like this. But he kept his temper in check. „Where that money came from is none of your goddamn business,“ he said. „You’re not here to investigate me. Look, what choice do I have? The kidnappers are demanding six million or they’re going to kill my stepson. I can’t go to the FBI because the six million is off-the-books income. I need you to do this for me. I need you to do it without telling the FBI.“

Having carefully returned the ransom note to its envelope, Storm removed the rubber gloves and said, „The kidnappers know where you live.“

Windslow said, „Everyone knows where I live. It’s no goddamn secret.“

„The kidnappers know you’ve got six million in cash in a safety deposit box and you can’t tell the FBI about it.“

„Yeah, and they also know about you, Mr. Steve Mason, or whatever your real name is.“

„They seem to know an awful lot.“

„We got a leaky faucet,“ Windslow said.

„Any idea who?“

„No. I’ve been going over names since the note arrived.“

„How about Samantha Toppers?“

„Samantha?“ Windslow repeated, breaking into a toothy grin. „That girl’s bra size is twice her IQ. She’s not smart enough to be involved in this. Where would she find four men to kidnap Matthew? Kidnappers don’t advertise on craigslist. Besides, she’s a trust fund baby. She’s got no need for my money.“

„My experience has been that the richer you are, the more you want. The kidnappers have asked her to deliver the ransom twice now. Why her?“

„She loves Matthew and she isn’t going to take my money and disappear. I told you, she’s loaded. Her parents died in an accident and left her millions. Besides, she’s not exactly a threat to them since she’s so puny.“

„Could she and your stepson have dreamed up this entire scheme?“ Storm asked. He watched Windslow’s face for a reaction. Surprise. Anger. Anything. But there was nothing, and that suggested the senator had already considered the idea.

„Matthew is too vain to let someone pull out his four front teeth,“ Windslow said. „Also, the safety deposit box is in his name, and he knows I can’t complain in public if that cash vanishes. He could have gone in and taken it without faking his own kidnapping.“

„What about your congressional staff? A disgruntled employee, maybe?“

„Haven't fired anyone in years, and only a couple of them know Matthew is missing.“

„That leaves only two other people who could've tipped off the kidnappers about my arrival last night,“ Storm said. „You and your wife.“

Windslow smirked. „Why would I kidnap my stepson and demand six million in cash—money that's already mine.“

„That narrows it down to your wife.“

Windslow set down the coffee mug that he'd been cradling. „I'm going to tell you a story. A year ago, I had a heart attack and it almost killed me. Gloria never left my side. She nursed me back to health. By that time, we'd been married for nearly twenty years. Marrying a younger woman caused tongues to wag. Everyone thought Gloria was a gold digger waiting for me to die. But that woman really loves me. She proved it when I got sick. After I recovered from my heart attack, I tore up our prenuptial agreement. If I kick off today, Gloria gets everything and that's more than the six million walking around money that these bastards want. Besides, Gloria wouldn't put her son through this. She spoils that kid rotten.“

„Where's the leak then?“ Storm asked.

„Why are you assuming it came from my turf? Those instructions—telling us to divide the money into four piles so they can be delivered at four different sites—that sounds like something the CIA would dream up.“

„Jedidiah Jones?“

„Son, I've been dealing with the agency for a long, long time, and you never can be certain what Jones and his buddies are doing. For all I know, Jones could be playing some sort of game here.“

„I owe my life to that man.“

„That don't mean he wouldn't use you—to get to me.“

„For what reason? Why would he risk kidnapping the stepson of a U.S. senator on U.S. soil?“

Windslow shrugged. „All I'm saying is he's the one who brought you here, and he has contacts with plenty of ex-military who would know how to pull off a kidnapping. Plus, the kidnappers want you riding around with my money.“

„Motive? Jones could steal millions at his job. He doesn't need to rip off you.“

„Maybe he's got other reasons.“

„Since you've opened that door,“ Storm said, „what's the covert mission that you and Jones are fighting about?“

A flash of surprise appeared in Windslow's eyes.

„I'm not opening any doors. Our disagreement has nothing to do with this, nothing. Don't try to go there.“

„How about Ivan Petrov?“ Storm asked. „Could he have something to do with your stepson's kidnapping?“

The Russian was one of the names that Storm had come across during his late night probe on the intelligence network. Petrov was an oligarch who the CIA was monitoring. He'd recently had several dealings with Windslow, according to CIA INTEL bulletins.

The mention of Petrov's name sparked an instant reaction that Storm hadn't expected.

Windslow sprung from his seat toward the chair where Storm was sitting. Towering over him, the senator said, „You're sticking your nose where it doesn't belong now. Who the hell do you think you are? How dare you come into my

house and accuse me of taking bribes! How dare you accuse my wife of being in cahoots with the kidnapers! How dare you ask about private intelligence matters between Jones and me! Why did you mention Ivan Petrov just now? Did Jedidiah put you up to that? Is that why he brought you in—to investigate Petrov and me?”

Windslow hesitated for a second, clearly thinking about his next step. Still fuming, he said, „Listen, son, all I need to know from you right now is whether you’re in this thing tonight or you’re out. I can arrange for Toppers to get the six million from the bank. But I’m going to need time to find someone else to drive her around if you back out. Are you in this thing or not?”

„What about Agent Showers and the Bureau?” Storm asked.

„I’ve already answered that. No FBI. Period.“

„Even if Agent Showers and the Bureau are your best shot at saving Matthew Dull’s life?”

Windslow’s face was now turning red with both frustration and anger. „You’re supposed to be my best shot. But, so far, all you’ve done is flap your jaws and question my integrity. I’ve destroyed men much more powerful than you are. I crushed them like bugs under my boot heel. If you want out of this, then get the hell out of my house and go back to whatever rock you crawled out from under. But you’ll keep your damn mouth shut about the six million—if you know what’s good for you. Either way, I need to know if you are in or out.“

Storm rose from his seat and stood directly in front of Windslow’s age-lined face. „Don’t threaten me, Senator,” he said calmly. „The last guy who did didn’t survive his *heart attack*.“

For a moment, neither flinched, and then Windslow broke into an odd smile. „Fair enough,” he said. „In Texas, we admire a man who stands his mud. But while the two of us are having this little pissing contest, time is wasting.“

Common sense told Storm to walk away. The kidnapers had an inside source. The fact that they wanted him to drive tonight was suspicious. Was he being set up? Ever since Tangiers, Storm had trusted Jones completely. He still did. But was it possible that Senator Windslow was right about the CIA’s involvement? People were expendable. Storm had learned that early on. And that applied to him, too. For the good of the country, he could be sacrificed.

From the beginning, Storm had been curious about why Jedidiah had brought him back to help solve a kidnapping. There had to be more involved here. Jedidiah had admitted that to his face. But what was being hidden in the shadows? What was the game that he was being drawn deeper into?

During his overnight Internet investigation, Storm had learned about Ivan Petrov. The Russian was another suspect that he’d added to the long list of suspects identified by Agent Showers. She had told him that the senator and Jedidiah were involved in a nasty dispute about a covert operation. Windslow had reacted violently when questioned about that operation and about Petrov. Showers had mentioned a six-million-dollar bribe from a foreigner. The kidnapers were demanding a six-million-dollar payoff. Were they the same six million, and if so, was that significant or a coincidence?

Only one thing was perfectly clear—the longer Storm stayed, the more he discovered, the more difficult it would be to walk away. Senator Windslow had just offered him an out. To the world, Derrick Storm was still dead. He could catch a flight back to Montana that afternoon and disappear. He could be fly-fishing at sunrise tomorrow. The big trout was still there waiting for him.

It really could be that simple. That easy. All he had to do was walk away now, which is what anyone with any shred of common sense would do.

„I'll drive tonight,“ Storm said.

„What about Agent Showers?“ Windslow asked. „Are you going to tell her about what's happening—about the money and the four bags?“

„No,“ Storm said. „I'll deliver the money tonight with Samantha Toppers on my own. Without backup—either from the FBI or Jones.“

## Chapter 6

Storm had gone about a mile from Windslow's Great Falls estate, when the cell phone that Jedidiah Jones had given him began to ring.

„Out on an early morning drive,“ Jones said when Storm answered. „How's our friend this morning?“

Jones was tracking him. Was the FBI, too?

„He's a bit rattled,“ Storm said.

„Why don't you drop into my office? The exit is clearly marked.“

Jones was referring to a green exit sign on the George Washington Parkway that read: „*George Bush Center for Intelligence CIA, Next Left.*“

So much for secrecy.

Storm took the exit and soon reached a stoplight where Georgetown Pike intersected with the entrance to the CIA's vast compound in Langley. Someone had placed freshly cut flowers next to two wooden crosses in the median. The sight of them brought back a memory.

It had been cold in January 1993 when an Islamic fundamentalist from Pakistan stopped at this intersection and casually stepped from his Isuzu pickup. He'd lifted an AK-47 rifle to his shoulder and started shooting motorists and passengers in the vehicles that had stopped behind him at the stoplight, waiting to turn into the CIA compound. They were employees on their way to work. The shooter had spared the women because he'd considered murdering them a cowardly act. In all, the Pakistani killed two CIA employees and wounded three others before he returned to his truck and drove away. It had taken a special CIA team five years to track down the gunman. They'd caught him while he was asleep in a three-dollar-a-night Pakistan hotel. The terrorist had been brought back to the U.S., put on trial, and executed in Virginia's electric chair. The flowers were a reminder of the nation's many enemies out there.

When the red light changed, Storm turned into the CIA entrance and out of habit stayed in the left lane as he approached a large guardhouse. Suddenly, he caught his mistake and swerved into the right lane. The entrance on the left side was for employees. As directed by signs, Storm stopped at a speaker and announced that his name was Steve Mason and he was coming to see the director of the NCS.

„What's your Social Security number?“ a male voice asked.

„You'll have to ask the director for it,“ he replied.

For several minutes, Storm sat in his car at the now silent speaker, imagining what was happening in the guardhouse, which was about a hundred

yards directly in front of him. It was unusual for someone to withhold their Social Security number.

Finally, the male voice said, „Mr. Mason, drive forward slowly.“

Two armed security officers stepped from the guardhouse, both cradling semiautomatic weapons. When he reached them, one of the officers compared his face to a picture. It was an old shot from Storm’s CIA files, only the name on it now was STEVE MASON. Satisfied, the officer let him pass.

Storm drove the Taurus through a maze of waist-high concrete pillars designed to prevent motorists from speeding through the main gate. He parked in the visitor’s lot outside the 1960s-era Old Headquarters Building at the top of a gentle hill. Inside, Storm walked across the CIA emblem embedded in the gray marble lobby floor. To his left was a white stone wall inscribed with a quote from the Holy Bible: John, Chapter 8, Verse 32:

„And ye shall know the truth,  
and the truth shall make you free.“

To his right were five rows of stars on a wall, each representing a CIA officer who had been killed in the line of duty.

An attractive middle-aged woman dressed in a dark gray business suit was waiting to escort Storm through Security. Storm found Jedidiah perched behind his GSA-issued executive desk, which had been cleared of all papers, a routine practice whenever someone not officially employed by the Agency entered a room.

„Why’d the senator call you this morning? Was he having nightmares?“ Jones asked gleefully.

Déjà vu. How many times had Storm sat across from Jones in this office? How many times had they discussed black ops? But that had been then. This was now.

Ignoring Jones’s question, Storm replied, „When were you going to tell me about Ivan Petrov?“

Jones leaned forward and raised his interlocked fingers, placing them directly under his chin with his elbows now resting on his desk. He seemed to be in deep thought. „I wondered when you would identify Petrov. What have you learned?“

It was as if Storm were still in training, being dropped off with only the clothes on his back in a frozen wilderness as part of a survival exercise.

„Ivan Petrov,“ Storm said, „was once best friends with Russian President Oleg Barkovsky. It was Barkovsky who helped Petrov become a multi-billionaire by letting him privatize the nation’s largest bank after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He became one of Russia’s first oligarchs. Private jets, a yacht in the Mediterranean—Petrov bought all the toys. He even owns an English castle outside London formerly owned by the Duke of Madison. And then two years ago, Petrov started biting the hand that was feeding him. How am I doing so far?“

Jones nodded approvingly. „Go on,“ he said.

„Petrov began publicly criticizing Barkovsky. He developed political ambitions of his own. That’s when President Barkovsky brought down the hammer. He sent the Federal Security Service into Petrov’s bank and seized all its records.

He accused Petrov of embezzlement and crimes against the state. He was about to have him arrested when Petrov somehow managed to slip out of Moscow.“

Storm paused and said, „His escape looked like something you might have had a hand in.“

Jones smiled slightly and said, „More likely MI-6. The Brits. They’ve done that sort of thing before, remember? But you’re the one telling this story.“

„Petrov surfaced in London, where he surrounded himself with bodyguards and began a personal crusade to get Barkovsky ousted from the Kremlin. The Russian president didn’t take the attacks well. There was a sensational murder. The poisoning of a top Petrov aide. Radionuclide polonium-210, I believe. Nasty stuff. Next came a car bomb. Petrov decided to come here. Probably felt safer. That’s when he really began showing up on your radar. Correct?“

Jones leaned back in his chair, which squeaked loudly. He rested his hands in his lap. And waited, without comment, for Storm to continue.

„Petrov makes a big splash in Washington. He buys a mansion on Embassy Row. He begins throwing elaborate parties for the city’s political elite. And he continues his verbal attacks on Barkovsky. He continues plotting ways to undermine him. He starts making friends on Capitol Hill.“

„Money and power,“ Jones said. „They’re magnets in this town.“

„Petrov has the money. Billions,“ Storm said. „Windslow has the power. A perfect marriage.“

Leaning forward, Jones began rapping his right index finger on top of his desk as if he were playing a drum. He was becoming impatient. „That all?“ he asked.

„Is there more?“ Storm replied coyly.

„I was hoping you could tell me.“

Cat and mouse. You go first.

Storm shook his head, indicating that he was done.

„You’ve uncovered the basics,“ Jones said, taking over the story. „Everyone began getting nervous when Petrov and Windslow became so chummy. Officially, the White House has good relations with Russian President Barkovsky, so the President didn’t like having the chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee becoming bosom buddies with an oligarch whose mission in life is to destroy a sitting Russian leader.“

„I’m sure Petrov’s billions made the White House nervous—given Windslow’s light fingers.“

Jones gave Storm an approving smile. „So you do know more. Shall I assume you also know about Agent Showers’s investigation and her recent claim that Windslow was paid a six-million-dollar bribe.“

„Showers said the six million came from London via the Cayman Islands. Petrov was granted political asylum by the Brits after he was forced to flee Moscow,“ Storm said. „It’s an easy connection to make.“

„But it’s a circumstantial connection at best. There’s no proof that Petrov paid the bribe or that Windslow got it.“

For a second, Storm considered telling Jones about the six million in cash that Windslow had hidden in a bank safety deposit box. But he decided against it. He wanted to see what else Jones was willing to tell him.

„What was Petrov hoping to buy with his six-million-dollar bribe?“ Storm asked.

„We don’t know. At least, not for certain.“

„Could it be the covert operation that you two are fighting about?“

„So you know about that, too,“ Jones said. „You are a resourceful student.“

„That’s why you love me, isn’t it? Now, what is it—the covert operation that you are fighting about?“

„It’s a *need to know* operation, and you don’t need to know.“

„Is it linked to the kidnapping?“

Jones gave Storm a blank look. „I said you didn’t need to know.“

„Do you think Petrov is responsible for the kidnapping?“

„You tell me,“ Jones said.

It was a difficult game to play with someone as experienced as Jedidiah Jones. He knew secrets about secrets about secrets. And he kept them carefully concealed until he needed to use them. Obviously, he was keeping the covert operation and his opinion of Ivan Petrov to himself. At least for now.

„Is Petrov even in the country?“ Storm asked.

„He’s in London or on his yacht. It hardly matters. A billionaire can hire anyone to do his dirty work.“

„Why is a car from the Russian embassy tailing Agent Showers?“

„Now, that’s a good question—that you should ask her.“

„I will.“ Changing subjects, Storm said, „Senator Windslow suggested this morning that you brought me here as a ruse. He said you don’t really care about solving the kidnapping. He suggested that you wanted me to investigate his relationship with Petrov. He thinks you might even have engineered this whole thing—the kidnapping—as part of some elaborate agency ploy.“

A look of disgust came over Jones’s face. „Please, do you think I would put this agency at risk by abducting a senator’s stepson in broad daylight in Georgetown and then jerking his teeth out? My hands are clean. But he’s right about me wanting you to find out more about his relationship with Petrov. The White House also wants to know more.“

Storm asked, „Is that why Agent Showers’s bribery case against Senator Windslow has been put on ice? The White House doesn’t want the public to know that Petrov bribed Windslow?“

„Let’s just say everyone believes it is prudent to wait right now until we know for certain that Petrov bribed Windslow and, if he did, what Petrov expected to get for his money. The White House wants to know the answers to that before it’s made public. There could be international consequences.“

„And the covert mission—the one that you don’t want to discuss—could that be something that Windslow got you and the agency to do for Petrov? Are your hands really clean?“

Jones raised his palms in front of him. It was a gesture that was intended to show that his palms were washed and also to stop this line of questioning. „Let’s focus on the kidnapping,“ he said.

„*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,*“ Storm taunted.

„Sometimes too much truth is not a good thing when it comes to international politics,“ Jones replied. „Find out who’s behind the kidnapping. And do it without causing the White House or this agency embarrassment.“

„One last question,“ Storm asked. „Where’d you hide the bug? In the rental car or are you using the cell phone?“

„You’re the private detective,“ Jones said. „You figure it out.“



## Chapter 7

Storm could hear the muffled sounds of a television playing inside his hotel suite as he approached its locked door. Someone was inside. He knew it was her as soon as he smelled her perfume. Swiping his room key through the electronic lock, he walked in, expecting to see Clara Strike.

But she was not there. It was Agent Showers.

A coincidence that both women wore the same fragrance? Or was it him? How many times had he and Clara met in hotel rooms? How many sweaty mornings, afternoons, and nights had they made love? Was he having some Pavlov's dog reaction? Was Agent Showers replacing Clara in his thoughts?

„You were supposed to meet me at eight o'clock," Showers said, clearly irritated. „I was scheduled to take you to our FBI command post."

She was sitting on the suite's sofa watching CNN on a flatscreen while sipping a Diet Coke from the recently restocked mini-bar.

„A bit early to be drinking Diet Coke, isn't it?" he asked, walking to the minibar. He took out an imported beer.

„A bit early to be drinking a beer, isn't it?" she shot back.

He sat in a chair near the sofa. „I'm glad I finally got you in-suite," he said, glancing toward the bed.

„Don't get your hopes up," she replied.

„I was hoping you'd get them up for me," he answered.

Ignoring the innuendo, she said, „Where have you been? I've been waiting."

„Sightseeing."

„Are you going to tell me about your meeting this morning with Senator Windslow? How about your meeting with Jedidiah Jones? We're on the same team, right?"

So the FBI was tracking his movements, too.

Storm took a swig and then said, „Agent Showers, when were you going to tell me about Ivan Petrov?"

She looked surprised. „Did Windslow tell you about Petrov or did Jones?"

„Neither. This might surprise you, but I am a private detective."

„Does Jones think Petrov is behind the kidnapping?"

„You'll have to ask him," Storm replied. „Do you think Petrov had the stepson kidnapped?"

„Yes, I do. I think that's why the kidnappers didn't try to pick up the one-million-dollar ransom in Union Station. Petrov's a billionaire and he doesn't need the money. He kidnapped Matthew Dull because he's pressuring the senator to do something for him—something that I think your buddy Jedidiah Jones knows about. I think it's all tied to some covert operation they're fighting about. But every time I ask about it, I'm told it's *above my pay grade*. The same old shitty excuse that I'm always told."

„I'm surprised," Storm said.

„Why? You think I'm wrong?"

„No, I think you're probably right. Petrov is the most likely suspect. And I also think something strange is going on between Windslow and Jones. But the reason why I'm surprised is because you just said the word *shitty*."

She gave him a puzzled look.

„That’s such rude language,“ he continued, „coming from someone who got her undergraduate degree at Marymount University. Isn’t that suburban Washington, D.C., school a Catholic enclave, founded by the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary? I doubt the good nuns allowed you to swear on campus.“

„Is this your clever way of telling me that you ran a background check on me last night?“

„Editor of the Georgetown Law Review, top in your graduating class at the FBI Academy in Quantico. The Bureau sent you to Seattle first, but you were too good to stay long in the field. The brass wanted you at headquarters. The best and brightest. A go-to agent in high-profile cases. Smart. Clever. Someone who understood this city. A workaholic. No time for hobbies. No time for fun. No time for marriage or even a boyfriend. Your mother doesn’t like that. She wants grandkids.“

„There’s nothing in my personnel record about my mother wanting grandkids,“ she said.

„Doesn’t need to be. Flaming red hair. Emerald eyes. You’ve got Irish written all over your face. I’ve never met an Irish mother, especially a good Catholic, who didn’t want her only daughter married and pregnant. She must be so disappointed.“

„It’s none of your business.“

„You asked me about my past.“

„And you didn’t tell me a damn thing.“

„Ah, more profanity. Did the nuns slap your knuckles? How did they feel about premarital intercourse?“

She started to respond but caught herself. „Let’s cut the bull—er—crap,“ she said.

He had gotten to her. Unnerved her. Irritated her. He was enjoying this.

She asked, „Did the kidnapers contact Windslow this morning? Is that why he got you up so early and you went to his house?“

She had good instincts. She suspected something was up.

Storm took another long swig and noticed that he’d almost emptied the bottle. „The senator specifically asked me to keep our meeting this morning confidential,“ he replied. „If you haven’t noticed, he’s lost faith in the FBI.“

Showers hit the television remote hard with her right thumb, flipping off the CNN newscast. „What did Jones tell you at the CIA?“

„Why aren’t you married, Agent Showers?“

„Are you?“ she shot back. „Do you have an ex living in Hawaii, a girlfriend in Pocatello? Oh, maybe you like boys?“

She was getting warmed up now. He could see fire in her green eyes and he liked it.

Continuing, Showers said, „Are you going to tell me about your meetings with Windslow and Jones? Or are we going to keep trade insults?“

„Insults? I thought we were engaging in foreplay,“ he replied. „Tell me something juicy about yourself—something dirty.“

He could tell that she wasn’t enjoying this. He was.

„You think you’re clever, don’t you?“ she asked. „You roll into Washington like some big, bad hero brought in to save the day and impress everyone while giving me and the Bureau the finger.“

„Yes. But with you I mean it in the nicest way.“

Rising from her seat, she said: „You need a reality check. No one is above the law. Not Senator Windslow, not Jedidiah Jones, and certainly not you. If you're not going to cooperate, then I'm not going to watch your back. You should think about that. And think about this, too. If I discover that you intentionally withheld evidence or did something illegal for the senator—even something just a teensy-weensy against the law—I'm going to come down on you with the full weight of the Justice Department. You're not a federal employee. You're a civilian, just like any other asshole on the streets.“

With a look of fake innocence, Storm replied, „How did they define *teensy-weensy illegal* at Georgetown Law? I'm not familiar with it as a legal term.“

Her face flushed red. She started walking toward the suite's door.

„Agent Showers,“ he called after her.

She paused, glancing over her shoulder.

„This is the second time that I've been threatened today and it's not even noon,“ he said.

„Maybe instead of being an ass,“ she replied, „you should start cooperating with the people who can help you. You're a fool if you try to handle this on your own.“ She reached for the doorknob and turned it. „I'll tell them at the command post that you are being less than forthcoming.“

„Before you go,“ he said, „I have a question. Why was a car from the Russian embassy tailing you last night after you left the hotel?“

She turned to face him but kept her hand on the doorknob. „It's interesting that you know when someone is being tailed, but you don't know when you're being played. Did it ever dawn on you that the reason Jones brought you into this case is to be a fall guy?“

„How would I end up being a fall guy, Agent Showers?“

„Quid pro quo,“ she replied.

„Oh, I'll show you mine if you show me yours. No, thanks. Unless you actually do want to see mine.“

As before, she ignored his sexual flirtation. „There'll be a scapegoat if Matthew Dull ends up dead,“ she said. „This is Washington. Someone will have to take the blame.“

„You did learn something at Georgetown Law,“ he said.

„One of the first lessons was that it's always the person who's in the weakest position who gets hung out to dry. That's you.“

Storm put his now empty beer bottle down and looked up at her from his chair. There was a magnetism about her. A passion. His father had warned him to stay away from red-haired women. „They're nuts!“ he'd said. Storm thought about what she was saying. Was he really in the weakest position? It was not an unusual position for him to fall into. All of his training had been aimed at teaching him how to strengthen his position, how to overcome any type of obstacle. If he were in a weak position, he knew that he could find a way out. Could she? It was clear to him that Agent Showers was playing a game of checkers, when everyone else around her was playing chess. Did she realize it?

„Since you graduated magna cum laude,“ Storm replied, „You know that what you just said is—to use your own term—bull crap.“

He was mimicking her. He was continuing to push her buttons.

Storm said, „Yes, the weakest player is always the fall guy. But in this investigation, I am not him. It is not Senator Windslow and it certainly is not Jedidiah Jones. It's you, Agent Showers.“

April Showers slammed the suite's door as she exited.

He gave her ten minutes to vacate the hotel. After that, he went to the lobby and spoke to the concierge.

„I'd like to rent a van. Can I get it before lunch?“ Storm asked.

„Of course. How long will you need it?“

„I'll return it tomorrow morning. I'd prefer something with no windows, or heavily tinted ones.“

„I'll arrange it immediately.“

When he returned to his suite, he could still smell the remnants of her perfume.

## Chapter 8

Storm left the hotel shortly after 12 P.M. in the rented, white Ford E-series commercial van that the concierge had arranged for him. The van had seats for a driver and a passenger, but its cargo bay was empty. There were no windows except for the windshield and the front doors. After driving through the Virginia suburbs for a half hour to make certain that he wasn't being followed, Storm bought four women's gym bags at a sporting goods store and then returned to the District. He drove to the Thomas Jefferson Memorial, located at the southern end of the National Mall, adjacent to the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park. He parked the van there and flagged down a taxi, which brought him back to his hotel with the gym bags.

Storm grabbed a shower and dressed in loafers, khaki pants, a blue shirt, and a navy sports coat. He tucked his Glock .40 caliber semiautomatic into the special holster that he wore in the center of his back and made certain he had extra ammunition. Now ready, he went downstairs and gave the valet his parking stub. A few minutes later, Storm was driving east toward the Capitol in the Taurus sedan that Jones had rented for him. He was scheduled to meet Samantha Toppers and Senator Windslow in the Dirksen SOB at 4 P.M.

Toppers was pacing nervously inside the senator's inner office when he arrived. Senator Windslow was seated at his desk.

„I've called the president at Riggs Bank and arranged for Samantha to have access to the safety deposit box,“ Windslow said. „Did you get the gym bags?“

„They're in the car,“ Storm replied.

Windslow suddenly shouted at Toppers. „Stop fidgeting, girl! And make sure you have your damn cell phone with you.“

„I've got to use the bathroom,“ she stammered. She ducked into the senator's private toilet that was connected to his office.

„You haven't told the FBI about this, have you?“ Windslow growled.

„No. I told you that I'd keep it confidential.“

„Does Jedidiah know?“

„No.“

„Good.“

A still visibly frantic Toppers joined them. „I'm not sure I can go through with this!“ she said. „What do you think is going to happen tonight?“

„They'll make us drive around the city,“ Storm answered. „We'll be sent down one-way streets and then they'll have us reverse our route so they can see if

anyone is following us. They'll probably select routes that don't have much traffic so it will be obvious if we are being tailed. And when they are convinced that we are in the clear, they'll have us make the deliveries."

"What if they take us hostage?" she asked. Storm noticed that her hands were trembling.

"Don't worry, dear," Windslow said. "You have him to protect you—and my six million."

Storm added, "I'll make certain nothing happens to you. Let's go."

Riggs National Bank was located about a block from the White House and could be seen on the back of a ten-dollar bill, behind the U.S. Treasury Building. Naomi Chatts, a senior bank official, met Storm and Toppers at the entrance and escorted them to the safety deposit vault in the building's basement. Storm stayed outside the giant walk-in chamber, which was protected by a huge swinging stainless steel door. It was an older Diebold model that was three and a half feet thick and operated on a time lock. A beefy security guard was stationed at a desk next to the vault's entrance, and Storm made small talk with him.

Ms. Chatts escorted Toppers inside the massive vault and then joined Storm and the guard outside the chamber's entrance. About ten minutes later, Toppers appeared at the vault door lugging the four gym bags, two per each hand. Storm took the stuffed bags from her while Ms. Chatts ducked into the vault to make certain Toppers hadn't accidentally left anything behind.

"Can you have two of your guards escort us to our car?" Storm asked Chatts. There would be no way for him to carry the four bags and defend himself.

"Yes," Ms. Chatts said. She had the guard make a telephone call, and by the time that Storm and Toppers had gone upstairs, there were two armed, uniformed officers waiting at the entrance for them.

"Please give my best regards to Senator Windslow," Ms. Chatts said cheerfully as they exited the bank. The Taurus was double-parked directly outside the door. Storm put all four bags into the rear seat while Toppers took a seat in the front.

So far, so good. It was show time now. He needed to stay alert. To watch for some tip off, some clue to the kidnappers' identity. Something he could use.

As he merged into traffic, Storm checked his rearview mirror and spotted an unmarked Ford sedan behind them. He drove the Taurus to K Street, which was often referred to as the city's main street because of the many law firms and lobbyist offices that bordered it. The Ford stuck with them. Storm was going West on K Street along with a steady stream of rush hour drivers.

Suddenly, he swerved off the main thoroughfare into the entrance to an underground parking garage. He turned so quickly that he nearly hit a woman walking on the sidewalk. She jumped back and shot him the finger as the Taurus raced down the lot's ramp.

As soon as the car reached the garage attendant's station, Storm leaped from it, tossed the keys to one of the workers there, and grabbed the four gym bags from the backseat.

"C'mon!" he hollered to Toppers.

"Where are we going!" she shrieked.

"Follow me! Now!"

Storm rushed down the parking ramp to a basement exit. With Toppers chasing after him, he ran up two flights of concrete steps to a street exit that

opened into an alley behind the office building. He dashed out and hurried down the alley to Nineteenth Street NW—a one-way street filled with southbound traffic. The bored taxi driver who stopped for them didn't bother getting out of his cab. Instead, he pushed a remote button to pop the car's trunk. Storm tossed the four bags into it and got into the backseat with a now breathless Toppers.

„Where to?“ the driver asked.

„State Department and we're in a hurry.“

„Everyone is,“ the cabbie said. „That's what's wrong with this country.“ The driver, whose taxi license was on display, was from Ghana, and he launched into an immediate monologue about the ills of America's rushed society. Storm ignored the mindless chatter. He was looking at the alleyway to see if anyone had followed them. He didn't see anyone.

The cabbie abruptly stopped talking, and when Storm looked at the car's rearview mirror, he saw why. The driver's eyes were locked onto Topper's breasts, which were heaving as she struggled to catch her breath from running.

„You might want to redirect your eyes to the road,“ Storm suggested.

Storm again glanced behind the cab to see if the Ford was behind them. It wasn't. He had a hunch that the men inside it were now in the parking garage having a frantic conversation with FBI Agent Showers. She would have known that a ransom drop was being made as soon as Storm traveled from the Dirksen SOB to Riggs National Bank. Why else would he go there? Storm assumed that she had immediately sent two special agents to tail them. At that point, Agent Showers had made a critical error. She'd felt a false sense of security because of the monitor in the Taurus. She had not felt a need to flood the area with agents or call in air surveillance. Storm had not only abandoned the car in the underground parking garage, he'd also left the cell phone that Jedidiah Jones had given him on the vehicle's front seat. It was probably ringing right now.

When the taxi was about a block from the State Department, Storm announced that he'd changed his mind. „Take us to the Jefferson Memorial,“ he said.

As the cab continued south into the traffic traveling around the National Mall, Storm checked for tails. There were none. They had gone „black“.

„You guys married?“ the cabbie asked when the cab stopped at a red light.

„No, we work together,“ Storm said.

The cabbie caught another peek at Samantha's cleavage. She was wearing black wedge leather slip-ons without stockings, a tight denim blue jean skirt, and a bright pink, short satin jacket that was layered over a cream-colored silk blouse and sexy black lace camisole.

„You're a lucky guy,“ the cabbie said as the light changed. „To work with such a pretty lady would be a pleasure indeed.“

Samantha smiled and said, „Thank you!“

Ten minutes later, the taxi reached the Jefferson Memorial parking lot. Storm took the four gym bags from the trunk and eyeballed the lot while the driver got out of the car to open the rear passenger door to Samantha, anxious to take a mental snapshot of those architectural marvels, no doubt.

Confident that they hadn't been followed, Storm led Toppers to the Ford cargo van that he'd parked here earlier.

„We're taking this,“ he explained, unlocking the doors. „Get in.“

Storm had just stored the four gym bags in the cargo area when the rhythmic voice of Rihanna could be heard coming from inside Toppers's Lilly Pulitzer handbag.

„Your phone?“ he asked her.

„Yeah.“ It was 6 P.M. The kidnappers were calling right on time.

Toppers was so nervous that she dropped the phone while she was removing it from her handbag. She bent forward and snatched it off the floor mat.

„Give it here,“ Storm ordered. He answered it.

A deep voice that sounded like Darth Vader said, „You got our money?“ The caller was using some sort of voice changer software.

„That's right. Where do you want us to go?“

„Arlington National Cemetery. Robert E. Lee mansion. Leave the first gym bag in a public trash receptacle about fifty feet from the house's front entrance. There's a National Park Service sign next to the trash can.“

The line went dead.

A trash container in a public park. It was an odd place for a drop. Or was it?

Pulling from the memorial's parking lot, Storm headed west across the Potomac River into Northern Virginia. He glanced at Toppers. Her face was ghost white. She looked as if she were about to faint or vomit. When he lowered his eyes, he noticed that her tight jean skirt had risen up when she'd bent over to retrieve her cell phone from the floor. She was wearing a tiny red thong with white polka dots. She'd either not noticed or felt no need to readjust her skirt.

She was a distraction and he needed to be focused. He decided to do what he always did when a woman was distracting him, especially sexually. He would talk with her. He would calm her down. Then he could focus on what was important and not her taut little body, her freshly shaved legs, her muscular thighs.

„You're doing fine,“ he said. „Think about something else. Tell me about Matthew. Where did you meet?“

„We were in the same first-year English class. He asked me to have coffee. He kept his eyes on my eyes the entire time. Not many boys do that.“

Her candor surprised him. Why? Did he think she was so naïve that she didn't understand how her figure affected men? How she could use it to manipulate them?

„What are you studying in school?“

„No one believes me when I tell them, because they assume that someone who looks like I do has to be dumb, but I'm studying mechanical engineering.“ She laughed.

Good. He was breaking the tension. Helping her relax. Mechanical engineering. Curious.

Continuing, she said, „I know Senator Winslow thinks I'm stupid. He told Matthew that I was an airhead. But I've always been good with math and designing. I'm a whiz at reading and drawing blueprints.“

„Good for you,“ Storm replied. „The senator's a jackass.“

„Where did the kidnappers tell you to stash the money?“ she asked him.

Her question set off an alarm bell. Although he'd heard her, he acted as if he hadn't. He wanted to make sure that he'd heard exactly what she'd said.

„What did you say?“ he asked.

„Where did they tell you to stash the cash?“

He had heard her correctly.

„In an outside trash can,“ he replied. „How long have you been engaged to Matthew? Tell me a little about your background.“

„He asked me three months ago. It was a total surprise. He wants to have a big wedding in Texas on a ranch.“

„You aren't getting married in your hometown?“

„No. I lost my folks when I was a teenager. In an accident.“

„An accident?“

„An awful car accident. We were vacationing in Spain, where my parents had a house. My mom and dad and a friend of mine who was on vacation with us were killed by a drunk driver who swerved into the wrong lane. It was horrible.“

„You weren't with them?“

„No. Everyone said I was lucky.“ Tears began to fill her eyes. „I had a bad cold that night and stayed home when they went to dinner. I'd rather not talk about it.“

The van reached a traffic circle. Storm turned from it into the entrance to Arlington National Cemetery.

„Is that where we're going?“ Toppers asked, looking at a house directly in front of them on a hill.

„Yes,“ he replied. „That's Lee's mansion.“

A guard stopped them at the cemetery's gated entrance.

„Sorry, you missed the last tour of the house,“ he said. „It was at four-thirty.“

„I've got friends buried here. Iraq,“ Storm said. „We'll pay our respects and tour the house some other time.“

„Take this,“ the guard said, handing Storm a pamphlet. He waved them through.

The Robert E. Lee house was built in the early 1800s, in the Greek Revival style. Designed by one of the architects who worked on the U.S. Capitol, the stone mansion had six large columns holding up the front of its massive portico. When the Civil War started, the Union began burying fallen soldiers near the house because President Lincoln wanted the Lee family, including the Confederate general's wife, who was living there, to see the graves when she looked out her windows each morning.

Storm weaved through the acres of white tablets, eventually making his way up the hill to the front of the mansion.

„There's the drop site,“ he said, pointing to a dark green outdoor trash container. It was overflowing with garbage.

Storm drove to it and scanned the area. No one was watching them. He picked up a gym bag and unzipped it. Toppers had carefully stacked one-hundred-dollar bills in neat rows. Closing the bag, Storm stepped from the still running cargo van and shoved the money deep inside the debris, covering the top with discarded newspapers.

Toppers's cell phone rang as soon as he returned to the driver's seat. It was Darth Vader again.

„Time for the next drop.“

Storm sensed that they were being watched. It was a sixth sense that had served him well in combat. There wasn't anyone near the Lee house, but there was a large group of people several hundred yards down the hill. Storm had been to enough funerals to recognize that the departed had just been given full military honors. The flag-draped coffin had been carried on a horse-drawn caisson to the grave site. A color guard had escorted it there. A military band



had sounded a farewell, followed by a three-rifle volley. It was dusk and that was late for a graveside service, which meant someone important had pulled strings to arrange it. The evening sun was setting, but from the grave's vantage point, a mourner could glance up the hill and see the white cargo van.

Had one of the kidnappers blended into the crowd of mourners? Was Darth Vader among them?

The scrambled voice said, „Head to Georgetown. The canal on Thirty-first Street. Walk down the path to Wisconsin Avenue. The first trash can on the right. Leave the second bag in it.“

Storm exited the cemetery and crossed the Potomac back into the District, where the van was immediately stuck in traffic. A woman talking on her cell phone nearly collided with them when she cut in front of the van.

„Stupid broad,“ Toppers snapped. „It's against the law to use a cell phone in the District unless you've got a hands-free device. Someone should arrest her. She could have killed us.“

An accident was all that they needed. A cop further stalling traffic. A fender bender disrupting their delivery schedule.

„Senator Windslow said you were a trust fund baby,“ Storm said, casually probing. „That's one reason why he knew you wouldn't run away with his six million.“

„It's not polite to talk about money,“ Toppers said. „My parents had houses in Connecticut, Spain, and in Palm Beach, too. I loved it there. You ever been?“

„It's too rich for my blood,“ Storm replied. „I was there but not during the Season.“

„The summer,“ she said. „That's the best time. Me and a friend of mine had a wild time there. Actually, we had a bet to see who could lose their virginity first!“ She took a stick of gum from her purse and offered him a piece.

„No thanks,“ he said. She put two in her mouth and began chewing.

The Season. In Palm Beach, that term had special meaning. It was a five-month whirlwind of parties, balls, and charity events that no one who was anyone dared miss. It was a timeless ritual for America's most wealthy, the Old Guard's most treasured social event. It was a tradition carefully passed down from generation to generation. And it was not during the hot summer months. It was when the snowbirds ventured south to escape the cold.

When they reached 31st Street NW, Storm slipped into an alleyway and left Toppers in the van while he walked briskly to the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. The man-made canal had been constructed because the Potomac was considered too unpredictable for safe travel. Merchants needed a safe way to transport tobacco and other commodities some 185 miles west. By the time the canal was dug, it was already obsolete because of the railroad. Now couples used the pebble-strewn path next to the canal for evening strolls, while bicyclists and joggers hurried by them.

Storm waited until the path was empty, and then he stuffed the gym bag into the trash receptacle, covering it with discarded cups, cans, bottles, and papers.

As had happened after the first delivery in Arlington Cemetery, Rihanna's voice greeted Storm as soon as he returned to the van.

Four kidnappers had abducted Matthew. Was it possible that a different one of them was monitoring each delivery? How else would they know where he was?

„What took you so long?“ Darth Vader asked.

„There were people on the path,“ Storm replied. „What happens if a stranger gets one of the gym bags by accident?“

„Your boy dies.“

Darth Vader told them to drop the third bag at Hains Point, located at the southernmost tip of East Potomac Park—a good twenty-minute trip from Georgetown during rush hour.

Bordered by the Potomac River on one side and the Washington Channel on the other, Hains Point was at the tip of a man-made island composed of dirt dredged from both rivers. When they reached it, Storm hid the bag in a public trash container just as he had hidden the others.

The final drop-off point was at Battery Kemble Park, a tiny area of grass and woods in Northwest Washington, smack in the middle of expensive homes. The park was a former Civil War battery built on high ground so that Union troops could look down during the fighting and fire canons if enemy soldiers attempted to cross the Potomac and enter the city. Now it was popular with local dog walkers. Storm dumped several bags of discarded poop onto the gym bag.

Samantha’s phone rang as if on cue.

„Okay, we’ve done our part,“ Storm said. „Where’s Matthew?“

„Wait in Union Station for my next call.“

„We’ve played by the rules,“ Storm told the caller. „If you don’t, you’ll never live to enjoy your money.“

The line went dead.

He looked at Toppers. She’d pulled down her skirt. She was still chewing her gum.

She had no idea that he had been interrogating her.

## Chapter 9

Storm and Toppers found seats at a bar on the main floor of the Union Station terminal. She placed her cell phone in front of them so they would not miss any calls. She was jittery.

All around the bar, there was motion. Commuters rushed to catch trains. Tourists gawked at the restored rotunda, wandered from shop to shop in search of souvenirs, and snapped photographs. A homeless man begged for quarters. Neither Storm nor Toppers paid attention to the whirlwind. Their eyes were on the pink cell phone resting on the bar. They were waiting for Rihanna’s voice.

„What’s taking them so long?“ Toppers complained.

It had been nearly a half hour. Something caught Storm’s attention. It was a news reporter on the flat-screen television behind the bar. Storm motioned for the bartender to turn up the volume.

„Park police do not believe the explosion was the work of terrorists,“ the petite blond news reporter breathlessly announced. As the camera pulled back, viewers could see that she was standing outside the Robert E. Lee mansion. Red and blue strobe lights from emergency vehicles flashed against the house’s marble columns.

The reporter said, „Once again, this does not seem to be a terrorist attack. However, a spokesman for the National Park Service said the explosion was not the result of some natural cause, such as a garbage fire. An explosive device

was put into the trash can, but it was more like a powerful Fourth of July firecracker than a bomb, the spokesman said. At this point, we don't know why someone would want to blow up a trash can here. There's speculation it might be part of a protest against the memory of Robert E. Lee and the Confederacy. However, no damage to Lee's home was done. The explosion was loud and strong enough to destroy the trash can and all of the trash inside it. But there was no serious damage."

An anchorman's face appeared on the screen, and it looked as if he were about to make a joke when his face turned somber. „I've just been told there has been a second explosion in a trash receptacle," he said. „This one in Georgetown on the C and O Canal path. There are no apparent injuries, but the blast has alarmed businesses and homeowners in the area. A bomb disposal unit is en route to the scene, and police have roped off the area and urged people to stay away from the canal path. Bomb-sniffing dogs are being sent in to search for other devices that may be hidden in trash cans by the canal."

The anchorman paused and then said, „A third explosion has been reported. This one in a trash can at Hains Point. I repeat, this is the third confirmed report of an explosion in a trash can. We have been told that the chief of police, the National Park Service, Homeland Security, and the mayor have agreed to hold an emergency meeting, but, once again, it is not believed that this is a terrorist attack. There have been no injuries because of the explosions, which the police have stressed are more like giant firecrackers than they are bombs. The purpose of the explosions, according to one fire department official, was to make a loud noise, destroy the containers, and burn whatever was inside them—rather than to injure persons or cause property damage. One source speculated that this could be a misguided prank by someone who understands basic chemistry and simply wanted to do something to frighten this city."

Because Battery Kemble Park was more isolated, it took a few more minutes before the fourth blast made the news. When the anchorman announced it, Toppers said aloud, „They're destroying the money."

The bartender and several customers gave her curious glances.

„Let's go," Storm said, gently taking her elbow and maneuvering her through the crowd that was now congregating around the bar's television.

By the time that they reached the terminal's exit, Toppers looked terrified.

„This was a mistake," she said. „Something horrible is going to happen to Matthew. I just know it!"

## Chapter 10

Storm and Toppers went directly from Union Station to Senator Windslow's SOB. Agent April Showers was already there. So were Senator Windslow and his distraught wife, Gloria, who was crying in her husband's arms.

„We found Matthew Dull," Showers said quietly.

„Is he okay? Where is he?" Toppers asked.

Then she realized why his mother was in tears. Toppers gasped and whispered, „Oh my God!" She collapsed on the floor. Storm helped her to the couch, and Gloria hurried over to hug her. The two women held each other and sobbed.

„His body was found floating in the Anacostia River,“ Showers said.

„Executed?“ Storm asked.

Before Showers could reply, Gloria turned on them.

„You two were supposed to keep my son alive! I trusted you!“ she shrieked.

Senator Windslow stepped between his angry wife and the targets of her fury.

„It would be better if you two left us alone for right now,“ he said.

Both started to leave, but the senator asked Storm to stay behind for a moment. When he did, Windslow leaned in close to his ear so that neither his wife nor Toppers could hear what he was whispering.

„What the hell happened?“ he asked. „I saw the news flash. Why did you let those bastards blow up my money?“

„Later, Senator,“ Storm replied.

„Easy for you to say. You just didn't have six million bucks blown to pieces.“

Agent Showers was waiting to ambush Storm in the hallway outside Windslow's office.

„You went behind my back,“ she said, her eyes ablaze. „We might have been able to save that kid if we'd worked together. The shit is going to hit the fan when the media finds out that Matthew Dull is dead.“

Continuing her tirade, she said, „You need to tell me what the hell happened after you ditched my men in that parking garage on K Street this afternoon.“

„Are you arresting me?“

He already knew the answer. Jedidiah Jones would not allow Storm to be arrested. Or interrogated. Survival of the fittest. Jones would not permit it because it would tie him and the Agency to this mess.

„Not yet,“ she snapped. „But if you don't come with me right now to headquarters and tell me what happened—I am going to recommend to my superiors that you be arrested.“

She was bluffing. He knew it.

„I'm not going with you,“ Storm said quietly. „I have more important things to do.“

He wanted to tell her, but he was not yet ready. There were still a few pieces that he needed to gather.

„I hope you have a damn good lawyer,“ Showers said, „because I'm going to nail your ass to the wall.“

Now she was beginning to irritate him.

„Since you mentioned it, what do you think of my ass, Agent Showers?“ he asked. „Most women like it.“

For a moment, he thought she might actually slap him. Instead, she walked away enraged, her three-inch heels smacking the marble floor like a stick beating a snare drum.

Showers finally got it. She understood that he was right. She knew that she was on the bottom of the totem pole. She was in line to become the scapegoat, the fall guy, the weakest link. It wasn't fair, but it was what would happen. What she still didn't seem to realize was that Storm was the only person who could save her.

## Chapter 11

The J. Edgar Hoover Building on Pennsylvania Avenue was considered such an architectural eyesore after it opened that there had been talk for years about demolishing it and moving the FBI's headquarters into the suburbs. Hoover, himself, had reportedly bullied the architects into adding several unusual safeguards to the building's boxy design. At the time, race riots were rocking Washington and other major cities, and 1960s antiwar protestors were threatening to tear down the „establishment“. Fearing the FBI building might come under siege, Hoover demanded that the street level of his new headquarters be constructed without any windows or offices. Built of concrete mixed with crushed limestone for extra strength, the first level resembled a castle wall. It protected an open mezzanine where there were a limited number of elevators leading to the upper floors. There was no second floor. Instead, the second level was an ugly open gap with only structural supports and reinforced elevator shafts and stairways linking the ground and third floors. The second floor was missing to deter rioters from using ladders to scale the building. At one point, rumors surfaced that Hoover had put razor wire in the branches of the trees that lined Pennsylvania Avenue outside his building to stop attackers from climbing them to reach the headquarters' upper floors.

It was two days after the trash can explosions had alarmed the city and Matthew Dull's body had been found floating in the river. Storm was sitting alone in a conference room on the FBI headquarters sixth-floor, waiting for Agent Showers. In an upside-down move that would have been unthinkable in any major city except for Washington, D.C., Storm had come to the headquarters today—not to be questioned—but to interrogate Agent Showers.

Things had played out much as Storm had anticipated. Within minutes after Dull's corpse had been found, Jedidiah Jones had started pulling strings. FBI Director Jackson had guaranteed Jones that Storm would remain invisible and untouchable—at least for now. Senator Windslow had circled the wagons around Samantha Toppers.

Agent April Showers had been stonewalled.

At a news conference held on the morning after Dull's body was found, an FBI spokesperson told reporters that the senator's stepson had been kidnapped, held for ransom, and murdered, apparently by a foreign gang. The spokesman said Senator Windslow had cooperated fully with the FBI during the tragedy. The lead investigator on the case, Special Agent April Showers, had been removed from the investigation and was going to be reassigned to a field job.

There was no mention at the press conference of the four trash can explosions that had happened that night, no mention of the six-million-dollar payment that had been destroyed by the blasts and fire. Instead, the agency mouthpiece had said that Dull had been executed by gang members, possibly from Mexico or Ukraine—even though the Windslows had agreed to negotiate.

Agent Showers walked into the conference room where Storm was waiting, with a thin file in her hands and a scowl on her face. She dropped the paperwork in front of him, where it landed with a thud.

„Are you going to sit down?“ he asked.

Showers pulled a chair from the conference table and took a seat across from him.

„They're sending me to Tulsa,“ she said.

„You're not gone yet,“ he replied.

Storm carefully thumbed through the documents that she'd brought him. The first was her final report about the kidnapping/murder. In the classified, secret section of her report, she theorized that Dull had been kidnapped because of a sour business deal between Senator Windslow and Ivan Petrov. She claimed that the Russian oligarch had paid Windslow a „fee“, believed to be six million dollars, but the senator had later broken their deal. Petrov had reacted in typical Russian fashion, by abducting the senator's stepson as a threat to force Windslow to comply. Petrov also had demanded his six-million-dollar payment back in the form of a ransom.

Although Agent Showers had been kept from interrogating Storm and Toppers, the clever FBI agent had figured out the link between the ransom demand and the exploding trash cans. In her report, Showers explained that destroying the cash had dovetailed perfectly with Petrov's criminal mind-set. Not only had he taken revenge by killing Windslow's stepson, Petrov had destroyed the original six-million-dollar bribe that he'd paid the senator.

While Showers's report was nice and neat, it did not contain any evidence to justify her theory or an arrest. Her account mentioned that immigration records from the night of Dull's murder indicated that four Ukrainians had boarded an international flight for London. Yet no one attempted to stop them from fleeing. Further investigation showed that all four were former KGB agents.

When Storm finished reading Showers's analysis, he asked, „Do you feel confident that Petrov was behind the kidnapping and it was carried out by hired thugs?“

„That's what I wrote, isn't it?“ she replied in a sarcastic voice. „Not that it matters. It doesn't appear that anyone is really interested in the truth.“

Storm removed a second report from the case file. It was an autopsy. Dull had been shot twice, once in the back of his skull and once in his heart. Both rounds had been fired behind him at close range, based on the entry and exit wounds. The shot through his head had passed completely through his skull and had not been recovered. However, the damage caused by the slug revealed it had been made by a hollow-point round. This meant the bullet's tip had mushroomed upon impact so it would cause maximum damage as it ripped through brain tissue and destroyed Dull's once handsome face. The bullet fired into his skull had been shot at a downward angle, which suggested the gunman had been standing behind Dull, who was most likely sitting in a chair. The location of the two wounds further suggested that Dull had been shot first in the back of his skull and then fallen forward onto the floor, where the gunman had fired the second shot straight down while standing over him. The second slug had entered through Dull's back, caused his heart to literally explode, and had exited through his chest. Because Dull had collapsed onto a hard-surfaced floor, the slug had been stopped when it attempted to exit his body. In an odd move—most likely caused by its mushroom shape—it had ricocheted back into Dull's chest, where it had lodged. The FBI had recovered this slug and discovered attached to it microscopic slivers of tile and concrete that had come from the floor. An examination of Dull's lungs confirmed that he had been dead before his body had been dumped into the river.

The report found that the bullets that killed Dull had been 9mm rounds. FBI ballistic and firearm experts had determined that the bullets had been manufactured by the JSC Barnaul Machine-Tool Plant in Russia, a leading maker of Russian military ammunition.

Storm returned the autopsy to the folder and closed the case file, which he pushed across the table to the still bitter Agent Showers.

„Do you have any files about the four trash can explosions that happened that night?“ he asked.

„Why would you want to see them?“ Showers asked, not trying to hide the contempt in her voice.

„Don't play dumb,“ he said. „It doesn't suit you.“

„Are you now telling me that those four explosions were related to the kidnapping?“ she asked. „Are you admitting that you and Toppers put money in those trash cans?“

„Let's just say I'm curious about everything odd that happened that night. I want to be thorough.“

„Then you should contact the D.C. police,“ she said sarcastically. „Maybe someone stole an elephant from the National Zoo or ran naked down Pennsylvania Avenue.“

„Stolen elephants and naked people do interest me,“ he quipped. „Naked people more than stolen elephants, unless midgets and butter are involved. But for now I'll settle for the file about the four explosions.“

A clearly irked Agent Showers left the conference room. When she returned, she jabbed another case folder at Storm as if it were a knife.

„You and I both know,“ Showers said, „that the kidnappers blew up the ransom money after sending you and Toppers on an elaborate goose chase. Ivan Petrov spit in Windslow's face. Petrov took back his bribe money and killed his stepson. But I can't prove any of this—thanks to the higher ups protecting you, Toppers, and Senator Windslow.“

Storm took the file and asked, „Did the FBI work the blasts that night or was it some other agency?“

„The explosions happened on parkland so the National Park Police and the District of Columbia police were responsible for the investigation. The actual bomb investigation was done by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives because of its expertise.“

Storm removed the BATF analytical report. All four explosions had been caused by identical homemade devices. The explosions had come from small amounts of ammonium nitrate packed tightly into plastic bottles. A cell phone had been used as the trigger. The devices resembled the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) used against U.S. troops in Iraq, but they packed much less power. This similarity prompted BATF investigators to speculate that the bomb maker had some military training. The IEDs were missing the projectiles that insurgents normally used to cause maximum damage. Instead the bombs had been designed to cause a loud noise and ignite fires.

Included in the report was a list of debris that had been collected at each blast site. Despite the explosion and resulting fire, numerous remnants of one-hundred-dollar bills had been found. Newspaper fragments had been collected, too, along with other debris from items commonly found in trash cans, such as plastic bottles and aluminum soda and beer cans.

Although the four cell phones used to trigger the bombs had been destroyed, investigators had been able to glean that they were identical Motorola models.

With the report still in his hands, Storm asked, „Did you read this list of remnants?“

„Of course,“ she replied. „Do you think you’re the only one who wants to be thorough?“

„Did you notice anything odd?“

„I assume you’re talking about the large amount of newsprint.“

„The report says there was four times more newsprint found at each blast site than there was remnants from hundred-dollar bills,“ Storm said.

„At first, I didn’t think that was significant,“ Showers admitted, „but then I remembered that newsprint is made of wood pulp.“

„And currency is made from cotton and linen,“ Storm said, completing her sentence.

„Which means,“ she said, „that the newsprint should have burned faster than the currency. Less newsprint should have survived. But there was more of it.“

Storm closed the file and handed it to her.

She said, „What are you saying—that something happened to the money?“

„I’m saying this case is far from over.“

He stood to leave.

„Hey, where are you going?“ she asked. „What do you mean, *This case if far from over?* What aren’t you telling me?“

„I’ll be in touch. Thanks for your cooperation.“

„You can’t just walk out of here like this,“ she said.

But that was exactly what he was doing.

„You’re a son of a bitch—whatever your name is,“ she said.

The coldness in her voice was strong enough to have chilled shots from an entire fifth of Jack Daniel’s.

## Chapter 12

Matthew Dull’s funeral was held in the prestigious Washington National Cathedral and attracted the sort of attention you would expect when the deceased had been murdered and was related to a powerful U.S. senator. The President of the United States was traveling overseas, but he sent the vice president to represent him. At least forty members of Congress took seats in the front pews. Georgetown socialites, who knew Gloria and her son, intermingled with the politicians. Every member of the Washington press corps who mattered was covering the event. While most mourners came to genuinely pay their respects, Storm knew a few had shown up simply to curry favor or rub shoulders with the city’s *crème de le crème*. He arrived late and stood at the rear of the church. He spotted Jedidiah Jones in a second-row seat.

A colleague of Senator Windslow had just started the eulogy when there was a ruckus in the front of the cathedral. Samantha Toppers had fainted and was sprawled on the floor. Everything stopped while security officers administered first aid and carried her outside to an ambulance. She was driven to an exclusive, private hospital on Capitol Hill.

After the service, television news reporters doing stand-up reports outside the cathedral could be overheard telling viewers that Toppers had collapsed because of her „broken heart“.



Storm didn't stick around for the funeral processional to the famed Georgetown Tall Oaks cemetery. Dating back to 1849, Tall Oaks had run out of room long ago, but its owners had recently dug up the cemetery's paths and walkways to create more space. Matthew's body would be interred in a double-decker concrete crypt covered with slate and used as a new footpath. A tasteful marker would be placed beside the walkway, noting who was buried beneath it.

The local newscast that night revealed that Toppers was being held overnight for observation at the St. Mary of the Miracle Hospital. It was standard procedure. She was suffering from situational depression, her doctor said, and needed rest.

Visiting hours at St. Mary's, which only accommodated fifty patients in its private suites, ended at precisely 8 P.M., which is exactly when Storm walked through the hospital's entrance. The lobby was designed to look as if it were a living room. All visitors were required to sign in with a kindly looking elderly woman stationed behind a mahogany desk. The white-haired matron would press a concealed button that opened a solid oak door that led into the ward.

„I need to speak to the security officer on duty,“ Storm told her.

„Oh, that'll be, Tyler Martin. He's a real nice fellow, but he's always late. He's supposed to be here now because my shift ends at eight o'clock.“

At that same moment, an overweight, balding middle-aged fellow wearing dark blue trousers, a light blue button shirt, and a black tie burst into the lobby and hurried toward them.

„Sorry, Shirley,“ he said, puffing from his rushed pace, „traffic is a mess out there.“

„You know it always is, Officer Martin,“ the woman replied, „especially since they got the streets around the hospital torn up with construction. You'd think all that construction work would stop drivers from racing by here, but I almost got hit last night crossing at the intersection. Someone's going to get hurt.“

„The good news is that if they get hit, they'll be outside a hospital,“ Martin quipped.

The older woman didn't smile. She said, „Officer Martin, this man wants to speak to you.“ Collecting her purse, she walked to the exit, calling over her shoulder, „See you tomorrow and please don't be late again.“

„Give me a moment please,“ Martin said as he popped behind the reception desk and put a paper bag and thermos bottle into a large drawer. Sucking in a deep breath, he looked up at Storm and said, „OK, now, how can I help you?“

Storm handed Martin a thin black wallet that contained the fake private investigator credentials that Jones had given him earlier. „Senator Windslow sent me over,“ Storm explained. „He wants to make certain Ms. Samantha Toppers is protected from the media. He's worried some tabloid photographer is going to sneak in here and take pictures of her while she's distraught.“

„I heard about her on the radio driving to work,“ Martin said, „but the senator doesn't need to worry. We keep things pretty tight around here, especially at night. I'm the only officer on duty and all the doors except the front entrance are locked. No one gets by me.“

Retrieving his false credentials, Storm extended his hand and gave Martin's a firm shake. „Officer Martin, I'm glad you're on duty. It'll be a pleasure working with you. Now, I'll just take a seat in your lobby, and if someone asks to see Ms. Toppers, you can signal me.“

Martin hesitated. „I'll need to call my supervisor about this.“

„No problem. Tell him I’m here in case one of those photographers manages to slip by you. They’re sneaky bastards, and this way, it will be my dick, not yours, on the chopping block if the senator gets angry.“

The thought of Storm taking the blame seemed to remove any doubts Martin might have had. „I guess there’s no reason to bother my boss. He gets cranky when I call at night.“

Storm smiled reassuringly. „I’ll just take a seat over there.“ He pointed to a brown leather chair near the lobby wall where he would have a clear view. „If someone comes in who you don’t know—anyone—even a doctor or someone who claims they’re a new employee on your janitorial staff—you give me a nod.“

„We should have a code word,“ Martin volunteered. „I’ll tell them, ‘You’ll have to wait a moment before I buzz you in.’“

„That would be great. I hope your boss knows how fortunate he is to have you working here.“

„He doesn’t, but you’re right, he should,“ Martin said, beaming.

Storm had dealt with people like Martin all of his life. All they wanted was a little respect, a little appreciation and some encouragement. If you gave them that, most would turn over state secrets to please you.

Storm took a seat and picked up a copy of the *Washington Tribune* from a nearby coffee table. During the next two hours, a handful of doctors arrived to see patients, but Martin recognized each of them.

Around 11 P.M., a rail-thin man, who looked to be in his late twenties, entered carrying a large bouquet of fresh-cut flowers. Dressed in blue denim jeans, sneakers, a T-shirt, and a light tan jacket, he went directly to the reception desk without noticing Storm and spoke so softly that only Officer Martin could hear him.

The next sound Storm heard was Martin’s loud voice. „YOU HAVE A DELIVERY FOR SAMANTHA TOPPERS—IS THAT WHAT YOU JUST SAID?“

So much for the code. Why would a flower shop be making a delivery so late at night?

Storm sprang from his seat. Uncertain why the security guard had hollered so loudly, the deliveryman glanced around and saw Storm. Their eyes met and Storm sensed that the man recognized him, although Storm had never seen him. The man pitched the glass bowl of flowers at Storm’s face. Storm ducked and instinctively raised his right arm to block the vase while the deliveryman scrambled out the front door. The bowl struck Storm’s forearm and exploded when it hit the floor.

The deliveryman was fast, but Storm caught him twenty yards from the hospital entrance, just as he entered a nearby intersection. Storm tackled him from behind in a move that would have made a great NFL film highlight. The two men’s bodies hit the black asphalt hard near the center of the street. When Storm loosened his tackle around the man’s ankles, the suspect kicked him in the jaw.

Slightly stunned, Storm rolled backward to avoid another punishing blow and pushed himself up from the asphalt. His target was up on his feet, too. Storm lunged forward, but the deliveryman moved quicker than Storm had anticipated and was out of reach. In a well-practiced move, the man pulled a pistol from his belt.

Completely in the open and unprotected, Storm knew his assailant couldn’t miss at such a close range. With lightning quickness, Storm dove to his left just

as the gun fired. The bullet sliced across his right shoulder, ice skating across the skin as if it were a surgeon's scalpel.

Storm rolled as he hit the street and came up in a crouched position with his Glock in his right hand. He was now protected behind a three-foot-tall concrete barrier that construction crews had installed temporarily near the curb to protect themselves from traffic while on the job.

Suddenly, from behind him, Storm heard Officer Martin yelling an expletive. The security officer was lumbering toward them, his watermelon belly bouncing with each step. His voice caused the deliveryman to momentarily glance away from Storm and redirect his pistol at the oncoming security guard. He fired. Martin froze and screamed in terror.

Storm was about to return fire when there was a brilliant flash directly in front of him that blinded him temporarily. Simultaneously, he heard the sound of steel smashing into concrete, the breaking of glass, the last-second squeal of brakes and felt a sharp pain in his shoulder.

The driver of a speeding BMW had swerved to miss the deliveryman, who'd been standing in the intersection, directly in the car's path. The driver had lost control and the BMW had smacked into the concrete barrier protecting Storm. The impact had destroyed the car's distinctive grill, peppered the air with shrapnel-sized pieces of broken headlight, and sent a narrow piece of chrome sailing into Storm's left arm like a jagged arrow. Steam and smoke gushed from the engine and the car's horn blared loudly.

Storm had not flinched or moved from where he was standing with his raised Glock. But the collision had blocked his view, and he now had a pencil-sized chrome spear stuck in his left bicep. He shifted his position for a better look into the intersection. The deliveryman had vanished. With disgust, Storm holstered his Glock and used his right hand to remove the chrome dart from his arm.

Lights popped on in the old row houses surrounding the hospital. A dog yelped. Through the car's cracked windshield, Storm could see air bags. They'd saved the lives of the male driver and female passenger, but both were bloody and clearly dazed.

Storm looked behind him. Martin was still standing frozen on the sidewalk. The bullet had missed him.

„Get a doctor!“ Storm called.

Storm tossed the tiny chrome spear in his hand to the ground and walked toward the terrified security guard.

„The people in the car need help,“ Storm said. „Go back inside and get a doctor and nurses out here.“

Martin stared blankly ahead. „I've never had anyone shoot me!“

„You still haven't. He missed.“

Martin noticed that both of Storm's arms were bleeding. „He didn't miss you.“

„Actually, he did. It's just a flesh wound. We're both lucky. Now you need to get help from the hospital. The people in the car are conscious but they're injured. I'll go check on them while you go inside. Call the police and fire department, too. And make sure no one sneaks in while everyone is paying attention to this accident.“

„OK, OK,“ Martin replied. „You can count on me.“ He started back toward the entrance.

Storm noticed a glint of light in the intersection. He assumed it was debris from the car crash until he saw that it was illuminated. As he got closer, he realized it was a cell phone. It had been knocked from the fleeing deliveryman's belt when Storm tackled him.

Picking it up, he pushed its recent calls button. Storm recognized the first name that flashed on the tiny screen.

It was the final clue that he'd needed. Now he had all of the evidence. He had solved the puzzle, or at least a key part of it.

## Chapter 13

Special Agent April Showers exited FBI headquarters and made her way to the curb on 10th Street NW at exactly the same moment as Storm arrived in the rented Taurus.

„I'm crazy for doing this,“ she said as soon as she got into the car.

„You made the call for me?“ he asked.

„Yes, the senator and his wife will meet us at six-thirty in his office, and they promised that Samantha Toppers would be with them. She was discharged early this morning from the hospital.“

Agent Showers was not as angry as she'd been during their last meeting. That was good. He'd told her earlier today on the phone that he'd uncovered evidence about the kidnapping and murder, but he'd not revealed it. He'd only asked her to get everyone together. He told her that what he had to say might redeem her with her bosses. She might not have to go to Tulsa.

„Are you going to tell me now,“ Showers said, „or is this another secret?“

„There won't be any reason for secrets after this meeting.“

„Does that mean you'll tell me your real name?“

Storm shook his head, indicating no.

He had misspoke. There were parts of his life that would always be secret, especially if he wanted to remain dead and return to Montana.

Storm made a left onto Pennsylvania Avenue and drove east toward the U.S. Capitol, whose brilliant white exterior looked slightly pinkish from the orange sun setting behind them.

Agent Showers entered the Dirksen SOB office first, with Storm trailing behind her carrying four heavy gym bags.

„What's this about?“ Senator Windslow said, rising from behind his desk. „Why are you carrying those bags?“

Storm dropped them on the carpet.

„He knows who kidnapped Matthew,“ Showers said.

Gloria rose from the sofa, where she had been sitting next to Toppers, and hurried over to Storm. „Is it true?“ she asked. „Have you found the men who murdered my son? Tell me, please!“

„I will,“ he replied, „but it is complicated.“ He took Gloria's hand and led her to a chair. „Why don't you sit here while I explain it.“ Gloria was now to his right. Toppers was on his left, and he was facing Windslow, who was seated behind his desk. Agent Showers was standing behind him near the door.

He had everyone where he wanted them. Divided.

Storm began. „Agent Showers already has solved half of this kidnapping.“

„What the hell are you talking about?“ Windslow asked incredulously.

„Yes,“ said Gloria. „What is half a kidnapping?“

„Let’s start at the beginning,“ Storm said. „The day after Matthew was kidnapped, you received a ransom note demanding one million dollars. The note was handwritten in block letters. The writing on that note was completely different from the writing on the second note, which you received the next day. The second note didn’t include a demand for money, but it did contain Matthew’s teeth.“

„We know that,“ Windslow said impatiently. „Get to the point. Who killed Matthew?“

„Let him talk,“ Gloria said.

„The second note contained a mistake,“ Storm recalled. „It identified Matthew as the senator’s son. The differences in these two notes were the first tip-off that you were actually communicating with two different groups.“

„Two kidnapers?“ Windslow bellowed. „How could two different groups kidnap one person?“

„Please, Thurston, stop interrupting,“ Gloria chided.

„Let’s call one group the real kidnapers,“ Storm said. „They are the armed men who actually abducted Matthew. The second group was trying to take advantage of his kidnapping. They didn’t have anything to do with his actual abduction. Their goal was to get your money. That’s why they sent you a third handwritten note demanding six million in cash.“

Senator Windslow glanced nervously at Agent Showers and then gave Storm an angry look. „That third note was supposed to be kept confidential,“ he said. „You weren’t authorized to discuss it. I’m going to have my lawyers—“

Gloria cut him off. „You can threaten him later. I want to know who killed my son. Go ahead.“

„Thank you,“ Storm said. „It was this second group—the criminals who wanted your money—that had me confused at first. I knew it was someone inside your inner circle, because they mentioned my name in the third note.“

„Someone close to us betrayed us?“ Gloria said.

„I had a hunch but wasn’t certain until Samantha and I were delivering the money.“

„Samantha?“ Gloria repeated. Everyone looked at Samantha, who locked eyes with Storm and then looked at Gloria and said, „It’s not me.“

„During our ride,“ Storm said, „Samantha used the word stashed. That was the same word printed in the third kidnap note, ordering the senator to use the six million stashed in the safety deposit box to pay the ransom. It’s slang that Russians don’t use.“

„What Russians?“ Gloria asked. „Are you saying that Samantha was helping Russians?“

„I don’t even know any Russians,“ Samantha said. „He’s not making any sense.“

„I’ll explain the Russians in a minute,“ Storm said. „Let’s get back to the night when Samantha and I were making the deliveries. She told me that she was studying mechanical engineering.“

Agent Showers jumped in. „Which means she knows how to write in block letters on blueprints like the ones on the ransom notes.“

„Lots of people know how to do that,“ Samantha protested.

Gloria fixed her eyes on Samantha and said, „Is this true? I thought you loved my son.“

„Yes, I do, I did,“ she stammered. „I didn't do anything wrong.“

„This is ridiculous,“ Windslow complained. „Why would she steal money from us?“

Storm continued. „The most obvious clue was that each time I dropped off one of the gym bags, the kidnappers called Samantha's phone. It was as if someone was telling them exactly what I was doing. Someone who was sitting in the van waiting while I was dropping off the bags. Someone sending text messages.“

„Why are you attacking me?“ Samantha exclaimed. „Why are you lying about me!“ She stood from the sofa. „I want to leave. I don't feel well.“

„No one is leaving,“ Agent Showers said. „Not yet.“

With a frustrated look on her face, Toppers sat back down. „This isn't fair,“ she said and pouted.

„The first time,“ Storm said, „when Samantha took a million dollars to Union Station, she knew Agent Showers had flooded the train depot with agents. So she warned her partner. That's when the two of them came up with a new scam. They thought of an ingenious way to get the money.“

„What money?“ Windslow said. „The kidnappers blew it all to pieces.“

„No,“ Storm said, „they didn't. Again, let's look at the facts. The third note instructed Samantha to take six million from the safety deposit box and put it into four gym bags. But that's not what you did when you were alone in that vault, is it, Samantha?“

„That's exactly what I did,“ she protested. „You saw me come out of that vault carrying the gym bags. You looked in the bags and saw the stacks of bills there.“

„I did. But I didn't look deep enough,“ Storm replied. „Here's what happened. When Samantha was alone in that vault, she opened a different safety deposit box—one that she had rented. She had newspapers cut in the same shape as hundred-dollar bills hidden in her box. She put those fake bills in the bottom of each gym bag and covered them with a top level of actual hundred-dollar bills. Then she put the rest of the six million into her safety deposit box.“

„My six million wasn't blown up in those trash cans?“ Windslow said.

„Those explosions blew up counterfeit bills made of newsprint,“ Storm said.

„You have no proof,“ Toppers objected, but her face looked panicked, as if she were an animal caught in a corner.

Storm picked up the four gym bags and carried them over to her. „A hundred-dollar bill weighs roughly one gram,“ he explained. „A million dollars in hundred-dollar bills weighs a hundred grams or the equivalent of twenty-two pounds. Six million dollars weighs a hundred and thirty-two pounds.“

„I can count,“ Toppers said.

„Yes, you told me that you were good in math.“ He dropped the bags at her feet. „I've placed the equivalent of one hundred and thirty-two pounds into these four gym bags. When you came out of the bank vault, you were carrying all four bags—two in each hand. You should have no problem lifting all of these bags right now—if the six million was in those bags.“

„What's this going to prove?“ Windslow asked.

Agent Showers answered. „Obviously, newsprint weighs less than currency. If she can't lift the bags, then it would have been impossible for her to carry six

million in hundred-dollar bills out of that vault. That will prove that the bags were stuffed with newsprint—not money.“

„Pick up the bags,“ Storm said. „Prove me wrong.“

Toppers didn't move.

„Damn it, girl. Pick up those bags,“ the senator ordered.

She didn't flinch.

„If you want us to believe you weren't involved, pick up those bags,“ Gloria said sternly.

Toppers rose slowly from the sofa. She looked at each of them and then reached down and put her fingers around the straps on the four gym bags. With a huge grunt, she gave them a tug.

For a second, it looked as if she were going to lift them. But they were simply too heavy and she was too petite, too weak. She nearly fell forward on her face.

Gloria shot from her chair, lunging at Toppers. The older woman slapped the young girl's face and grabbed her hair. Both women tumbled onto the floor. Storm grabbed Gloria, who was swinging and kicking Toppers. Showers pulled Toppers to one side.

„You little bitch,“ Gloria screamed. „How could you do this to us? How could you do this to our son? We treated you like family. Why did you do this?“

Agent Showers said, „Samantha, was there newspaper in those bags when you brought them out of the vault?“

Looking completely defeated, she said, „Yes. I made the switch just like he said.“

Showers handcuffed her and gave Storm an appreciative smile. „Smart thinking putting a hundred and thirty-two pounds in those bags,“ she said.

„Actually, there's two hundred pounds in them. It was a trick. I have no idea how much newsprint weighs.“

Toppers face turned bright red. She burst into tears, overcome with pent-up emotions.

„Who helped you?“ Windslow demanded. „Who was your partner? You may have written those notes, but you didn't make those bombs.“

Between sobs, she stammered, „I never liked you, and your stepson didn't like you either. You're a bully.“

Storm removed a cell phone from his pocket and pushed the last number dialed feature. The voice of Rihanna could be heard coming from Topper's handbag.

„This cell phone belongs to the man who tried to get into the hospital last night to see Samantha,“ Storm explained. „I knocked it from his belt just before he fired a shot at me. The last number that he'd called was Samantha's.“

He hesitated and then said in a sympathetic voice, „This phone belongs to your brother, doesn't it, Samantha? He was coming to see you because he wanted to get the money.“

„You have a brother?“ Gloria said. „I thought you were an only child.“

Between sobs, Toppers said, „His name is Jack, Jack Jacobs.“

„I'll be goddamned,“ Windslow said. „How'd our background investigators miss that?“

„The woman we all know as Samantha is actually Christina Jacobs,“ Storm said. „She and her brother were born in Vermont and lived there until the courts took them away from their drug-addicted, abusive mother. I'm not sure how or why, but Christina ended up living with Charles and Margarita Toppers,

a wealthy couple in Stamford, Connecticut. They had a daughter the same age whose name was Samantha.“

„You told us the Toppers were your parents,“ Windslow said.

„Charles, Margarita, and the real Samantha were killed in a car accident in Spain while on vacation,“ Storm explained. „Their bodies were burned beyond recognition. Christina was sick at home that night, and when the police told her that everyone was dead, she decided to assume Samantha’s identity. She told the authorities that the girl killed was a family friend named Christina Jacobs, an orphan.“

„How could she pull that off?“ Windslow said.

„She never went back to Connecticut. Margarita had relatives in Spain, so all three bodies were buried there. The *new* Samantha contacted the bank that was the trustee of the Toppers estate and told the executor that she was distraught and wanted to live in Europe for a while. He had dealt only with Charles Toppers and had no idea what Samantha looked or sounded like. He sent her monthly checks to a bank in Paris. She stayed abroad for six years, posing as Samantha, only dealing with the Stamford bank by e-mail and letters. By the time that she returned to the U.S., she had transformed herself—adopting the same hair color, the same signature as Samantha. She fooled everyone—it seems—but her brother.“

„I never thought I’d see him again,“ Samantha said. „After the accident in Spain, I sent word to him that his sister was dead. I’d heard he enlisted in the marines and had been to the Persian Gulf to fight in Iraq. He was Army Intelligence. Then out of nowhere, he showed up at my apartment on the very night that Matthew was kidnapped. I was an emotional wreck and I told him about what I’d done and how I was engaged and about how Matthew had been kidnapped. I thought he would be sympathetic, but he told me this was his big chance. He said, ‘You had your chance to start over. I want mine.’“

„It was your brother’s idea to write that first ransom note, wasn’t it?“ Storm said.

„He thought if we acted fast, we could beat the real kidnapers to the punch. He told me if I didn’t help him, he would expose me and I would go to jail. But then, I told him the FBI was everywhere in Union Station. There was no way for him to get the money. I thought he’d give up on the entire idea after that, but I made a stupid mistake.“

„You told him about the real kidnapers’ note, the one with the teeth in it,“ Storm said.

„I wanted him to know the kidnapers had contacted the Windslows. I told him the CIA had brought in a real expert to help the FBI. I wanted to scare him. But instead he realized the kidnapers weren’t after money. They were trying to get the senator to do something else. That’s when he came up with the idea of getting money out of the safety deposit box and making everyone think it got blown up.“

„How did you know about the six million hidden in the safety deposit box?“ Agent Showers asked her. „Did Matthew tell you about it?“

„He did more than tell me. Matthew took me to the vault and showed me all that cash. He told me it was bribe money that his stepdad got from some Russian.“

„Wait a minute, girl!“ Windslow exclaimed. „Bribe money? There’s no proof that I took a bribe. You need to watch your tongue!“



Gloria said, „What have you done, Thurston? Are you responsible for Matthew getting kidnapped? Who are these Russians and why did they pay you a bribe?“

Nervously eyeing Agent Showers, Windslow said, „This is not something that we need to be discussing right now, Gloria.“

Showers said, „Senator, I can help you if you tell me the truth about that money. We can work out a deal. It’s not too late to do the right thing.“

Windslow’s face became flush. „Don’t you dare tell me what I can and can’t do. I have no idea what this woman is jabbering about. I’ve never taken a bribe in my political career.“

Addressing Toppers, Showers said, „Did your brother rent the second safety deposit box where you put the newspapers or did you?“

„He did. The six million is still there, or most of it is. You can get it as evidence against him.“ She nodded at Windslow. „Matthew told me it was bribe money. My brother told me that taking it was like ripping off a drug dealer. I kept thinking, ‘OK, if I do this for Jack and he gets the six million, he’ll be set for life. He’ll leave me alone. Jack gave me the key to the second box on the day that we went to the bank. He told me nothing could go wrong. I thought the kidnappers would free Matthew as soon as the senator did what they wanted.“

„This is outrageous!“ Windslow declared. „She’s trying to implicate me to make herself look good. How do we know that her brother didn’t kidnap Matthew? All this talk about Russians is nothing but speculation and hearsay.“

„Where’s Jack now?“ Storm asked Toppers.

„In a motel in Virginia. After Matthew was killed, I was never alone. So he was waiting until after the funeral to get the key back from me so he could go get the money. He came to the hospital to get it last night, but he couldn’t get in. He never cared about me. All he wanted was that stupid money.“

Agent Showers said, „I’m going to send a team to arrest your brother.“ Looking at the senator, she added, „I think you better call your lawyers.“

„That money was in a box rented by my stepson,“ Windslow said. „You can’t tie it to me. You can’t prove where it came from.“

„Don’t you dare try to blame this on my son,“ Gloria snapped. „You selfish son of a bitch, how could you let this happen.“ She turned to speak to Storm. „If Samantha—or Christina—or whatever her name is—and her brother didn’t have anything to do with actually kidnapping Matthew, then who are these Russians and why did they kill my son?“

Storm looked at Senator Windslow. „About time for you to come clean, isn’t it, Senator? Tell your wife what you did. Tell us all.“

Windslow rose from his desk. „I am a United States senator and you are in my office. I think it is time for all of you to get out of here. You think you’re so smart. You’ve got it all figured out, don’t you? But you really don’t.“

Gloria screamed, „Did you get my son killed?“

A darkness settled on Windslow’s face. „This is so much bigger than you know. None of you have any idea who you are dealing with or how high this goes. These people are—“

But a thunderous crack and the crash of shattering glass cut the senator’s sentence short as the window behind him exploded. His right shoulder jerked forward as the lone sniper bullet burst from his chest. The stunned look on his face lasted only a millisecond before his body gave way and he collapsed in a jumbled heap.

Almost without thinking, Agent Showers threw Toppers to the floor, out of harm's way, while Storm leaped behind the senator's desk, where Windslow was now gasping his final breaths. As blood gushed from the exit wound and Storm peered into the eyes of a man who knew he was only seconds away from death, Windslow whispered: „Midas. Jedidiah knows.“

Just as those words had barely escaped his lips, Storm watched as the life left Windslow's eyes. The senator was dead.

Screams and shouts filled the room, but all Storm could hear were those last couple words of Windslow's, echoing over and over in his head.

Jedidiah knows.

