

# **The Vatican Knights**

## **Vatican Knights, #1**

**by Rick Jones, ...**

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## Prologue

### ***Washington, D.C. Fifteen Years Ago***

When Shari Cohen's grandmother was confined to Auschwitz, the sky always rained ashes.

At the peak of the camp's existence, 20,000 Jews were summarily executed on a daily basis and burned in the ovens, a tragedy that was memorialized by the photos lining the walls, galleries and glass cases of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

People milled noiselessly about, zigzagging across the hall from one display case to another, regaled by Iron Crosses and German Lugers. Beneath recessed lighting hung German and Hebrew banners, as well as framed paintings that the Nazi regime had appropriated from Jewish owners.

At the end of a corridor, Shari walked along a memorial wall lined with numerous black-and-white photos, studying each one carefully.

And then she found it, a grainy black-and-white print of detainees standing together wearing garments draped over limbs no larger than broomsticks. The despair on their faces was obvious, the wallow-eyed sadness speaking volumes.

With the tips of her fingers Shari traced the image of a young woman who stood with her chin raised in defiance. The points of her shoulders, her cheeks, the paleness of her flesh and the death rings surrounding her eyes all bore testament to her will and courage in the face of adversity. It was the photo of Shari's grandmother.

Immediately she felt the sting of tears, her grief and pity mixed with overwhelming pride.

She moved slowly along the cases, examining every photo and imagining the atrocities behind them. In one picture she noted lifeless bodies hanging from the gallows. Shari remembered her grandmother saying that the bodies would swing there for days, as a reminder to Jews within the camp of their impending fate.

To be a person of Jewish faith, her grandmother told her, was a fate that assured death and never a reprieve.

Even at this moment, within her mind, Shari could hear the slight accent of her grandmother's voice, the sweet clip of her tone. The way she spoke, with the courage and pride of making it through one of the blackest moments of history, was in itself a demonstration of the old woman's fortitude.

When Shari was too young to understand the palpability of her grandmother's suffering, but on the cusp of learning, her grandmother showed her the stenciled numerals on her left forearm. Viewing the numbers from one side read 100681, but when the forearm was viewed from the opposite side, the numbers became inverted, reading 189001. Same tattoo but different numbers. Her grandmother always referred to these as the magic numbers.

Shari smiled. In her mind's eye she could see her grandmother smiling back, amused at the astonishment on Shari's young face as the numbers changed before her eyes.

And then Shari's smile faded, the corners of her lips withering into a straight line. The woman who was so brave and cavalier about her struggles in Auschwitz died of heart failure a week ago in a D.C. hospital, at the age of seventy-nine. Shari missed her deeply.

Moving along the displays, Shari observed more photographs, including pictures of charred and broken bones from the ovens filling deep trenches between the residential quarters—another constant reminder to the Jews of their imminent fate.

How her grandmother was able to maintain her sanity was beyond Shari's comprehension. How could anybody live under the mantle of an Auschwitz sky, wondering on a daily basis if her ashes would one day rain down and cover the landscape with a horrible grayness?

She could not even begin to fathom the terror of not knowing.

Through the museum's photos, Shari witnessed a chronology of events that reminded her that even though she was a Jew in a land of tolerance, her country, too, was not entirely without its prejudices. She recalled her grandmother's words from two years before, when Shari turned sweet sixteen.

"You're a young woman now," she told her. "Old enough to understand the things a young woman should know. So what I'm about to give you, my littlest one, is the most wonderful gift of all. The gift of insight and wisdom." It was then that her grandmother leaned closer and beckoned her to join her in close counsel, as if what she was about to say could only be passed on in whispers. "I'm one of Jewish faith," she added, "as you are. But I was proud and refused to give up. To be a Jew in Auschwitz was certain death. But if you fight from here," she said, placing an open hand over her heart, "if you're truly proud of who and what you are, then you will survive. But never forget this one thing: there are terrible people out there willing to destroy you simply because evil has its place. If you want evil to take hold, then stand back and do nothing. But if you want to make a difference, then fight, so that all can live in the light. Does this make any sense what I'm telling you?"

Shari could remember giving her a quizzical look. So her grandmother held her forearm out, the ink of the magic numbers having faded to an olive green color.

“Because I was a Jew, I was given this mark—even though I was a good girl who never hurt anybody. My parents, your great-grand parents, were good people who never received a mark, because they were told to go to “the left,” which, in Auschwitz, meant a quick death in the gas chambers. I never saw them again.” She smiled—the creases of her face many—but the lines so warm and beautiful, the lines of a person who truly loved life.

She then reached for Shari’s hand and embraced it with a maternal gentleness. “There is goodness in you,” she told her. “I can feel it. It’s people like you who can make a difference in the lives of all, whether they be that of Jewish faith or not. These marks on my arm are a constant reminder of good people who turned a blind eye and did nothing to help me or others when life was at its darkest. And because of it many people died unnecessarily, because evil was allowed to succeed. But in you, my littlest one, is a fire so bright I can see it in your eyes. You want to do good for those who can’t protect themselves, yes?”

At that moment Shari realized that she did, though her newfound zeal may have been motivated as much by a desire to please her grandmother as by a determination to protect the powerless. This was a new feeling for her, since she was, after all, only sixteen, and her greatest concerns hitherto had involved boys.

Her grandmother’s smile widened. “Not to worry,” she said. “Just remember that when the time comes there will be obstacles. But don’t give up. Determination and perseverance will get you there all the time. I was determined to survive Auschwitz. And I did. Now it’s your turn to make sure what happened to me never happens to anyone else ever again.”

Shari lifted her grandmother’s forearm and turned it over, then traced her fingers softly over the washed-out tattoo. “No one should have suffered like you, Grandmama. And I’ll make sure no one ever will.”

Her grandmother maintained an even smile.

Shari often wondered if her Grandmother believed her promises were merely the offhand remarks of a sixteen-year-old girl, telling an old woman what she wanted to hear, or if she believed Shari had true conviction. But Shari could not have been more sincere, since her love for her grandmother trumped everything at that moment, even if she was sixteen and preoccupied with boys. Good people like her grandmother deserved better.

“This is my gift to you, my dear. Sometimes the best presents don’t come in a box, but as a lesson. So take it and use it well.”

Shari had never forgotten the lesson taught to her by her grandmother on her sixteenth birthday.

Now, two years later, at eighteen years of age, Shari had been accepted into Georgetown University on a full scholarship. Less into boys and more career-minded, Shari was working toward her pledge to never let atrocities happen to “those who could not help themselves” by enrolling in Criminal Justice courses, with an eye on greater achievements.

To her right Shari noticed three teenagers, roughly her own age, dressed in black, with matching black lipstick and fingernail polish, their hair raven with dye and their ghostly faces powdered. They chattered noisily, excitedly referring to the photographs with adjectives such as “sweet,” “awesome,” and “cool,” words that bit her deeply.

And Shari had to wonder. If they were subjected to the same tortures and suffering as those in the photos, would they still think it was sweet, awesome and cool?

She thought not.

Moving along and leaving her unenlightened peers behind, Shari thought about her grandmother and the way she carried herself courageously through the remainder of her life. By surviving Auschwitz, her lineage continued. Her grandmother gave birth to three children, who extended the line further with seven grandchildren, Shari being the youngest. Without her grandmother's will to continue on in one of history's most notorious travesties, none of them would be alive today.

*Thank you, Grandmama.*

Shari stood over a glass case with her reflection staring back. She was attractive, with an errant lock of hair curling over her brow like an inverted question mark, just to the left of her widow's peak. And her eyes, a dazzling copper brown that shined with the luster of newly minted pennies, gazed back with something inquisitive about them. *Why was there such fanaticism in the world to warrant the murder of over six million Jews?* In Shari's mind it seemed all too tragic that mankind had not matured enough to see its own downfall.

Sighing, she looked beyond her reflection and saw the Nazi flag resting within the case. The red and white colors were crisp and clean as if new, and the swastika stared back at her as the symbol of intolerance.

"Because you're one of Jewish faith," her grandmother told her, "you'll always be persecuted. But never forget who you are and always be proud, because one day you will be reminded of what you are, and you'll need to fight back to survive. Never forget that, my littlest one."

"I won't, Grandmama."

Shari smiled delicately, a small curvature of the lips in remembrance of a remarkable woman. Coming to the Holocaust Museum was not only an homage to her grandmother, but also a reminder to Shari of what her grandmother instilled in her—to be proud and bold and never forget where you came from, or those who didn't make it. But more importantly, always remain strong in the face of adversity, which is inevitable.

"Remember, my littlest one. There will come a time. Believe me."

In a country where religion was a constitutionally protected freedom, Shari doubted that being Jewish would cause any marginalization of any kind. But she couldn't quite dismiss it either.

If it became an issue, then it would be one more obstacle to conquer in order to champion the cause for many, she considered. She knew she would always persevere, because persevering was a part of her grandmother; therefore, a part of her, genetic or otherwise.

Walking along the cases from one display to another, Shari spent most of the day reflecting on the courageous people who survived the camps, and praying for those who didn't.

# Chapter 1

***Six miles northwest of Mesquite, Nevada  
September 18, 1416 hours***

Two Humvees and a canopied cargo truck in the color scheme of desert landscaping moved quickly across the desert floor, kicking up plumes of dust and sand. The forward Humvee, easily equipped to handle the environment, escorted an M-Series cargo truck deep into the valley while the aft Humvee kept pace, making sure those held within the truck's cargo bay did not escape.

As the Humvees took the rises and falls of the desert floor with little bounce, the cargo truck, which lacked certain capabilities for such terrain, was less cooperative. With difficulty, the commando inside tried to steady the point of his MP5 on the eight Arabs sitting along the benches, their wrists bound by flex-cuffs.

The farther they moved off-road the more barren and inhospitable the landscape became. Enormous rock formations poked through the parched wasteland as windswept dust sped across the plain like sea swells. The clay was worn and brittle, the surface fragmenting over time from the elements of searing wind and unforgiving heat. And the caretakers—the snakes, scorpions and lizards who adapted to a wasteland that offered little rainfall and blistering sun—inherited a kingdom that no one cared to rule.

It was a place of no contrition.

Once the vehicles had negotiated the miles of ruts and rises and the topography finally leveled, the forward Humvee slowed to a stop, with the other vehicles coming to a halt in its trail. As the dust slowly settled, nine commandos, clad in desert camouflage, goggles and helmets, exited the Humvees and seated their magazines into their assault weapons.

In the forward Humvee, a commando stood through the open roof to the gun turret with a Laser YardagePro, the range-finding system making the binoculars so heavy he had to use both hands to steady them as he made a slow scan of the horizon. After confirming no movement, he lowered the binoculars. "Clear!"

At that moment the team leader, sitting in the rear of the cargo truck, lifted the canvas flap and, with the barrel of his MP5 pointed to the desert floor beyond the tailgate, shouted for those bound by flex-cuffs to exit the vehicle. When he spoke he did so in fluent Arabic, a language he had become accustomed to, by living in the Middle East his entire life.

One-by-one the captives leapt from the cargo hold, their eyes narrowed against the severity of an unforgiving sun, as the remaining soldiers barked orders, knowing full well their captives had little command of the English language. Yet the prodding with the tips of their weapons was language enough as they goaded the Arabs to a clearing of dead brush and sun-baked clay.

From the rear of the cargo hold, the team leader looked on dispassionately while his unit led the hostages before a stone structure shaped like a half shell, its surface having been worn smooth by the winds. He then turned to face the two Arabs still sitting along the hardwood benches, their ankles shackled to a steel

ring welded to the floor. With cold fortitude, Team Leader directed his weapon on them.

“Today marks the beginning of the end,” he told them. “So consider them—” he tipped his head in the direction of their brothers standing before the half shell—“the lucky ones.” With mechanical slowness, he pointed his weapon ceilingward. “I’m afraid Allah has a far greater destiny for you both,” he said, “so your Paradise will have to wait.” There was nothing cynical in his tone. It was simply a straightforward statement that death had its place and this was not their time.

Recognizing the Islamic scripture, Team Leader, previously so self-possessed, became incensed.

“If Allah truly hears you, then ask Him for divine intervention for the sake of your brothers. And if He truly is your savior, then have Him strike me down before you as a show of His almighty power. I will grant Him one minute to do so,” he said. And then he held up his forefinger. “He has *one*... minute. Not a second more.”

He abruptly jumped out of the truck and slammed the tailgate shut as a sign of his resentment. He walked toward the half shell, his eyes fixing on the Arabs, and then gestured to his troops to force the captives to their knees.

Having regained his composure, Team Leader gripped his weapon and took stock of his enemies, exhibiting little emotion as they pleaded for clemency. But their words fell upon deaf ears as he looked skyward.

*Allah, You now have less than a minute.*

Before him the Arabs pleaded in earnest, either to show them mercy or to send them to Paradise.

After removing his goggles and helmet, he turned his face skyward to bask in a warm streamer of light that lit upon him and spotlighted his pale complexion that was in stark contrast to his raven hair and even darker eyes. On the base of his chin was a wedge-shaped scar, a vestige from a suicide bomber several years earlier in Ramallah. The damaged tissue served as a constant reminder of a constant struggle.

After putting his helmet back on and tucking the goggles beneath his shoulder strap, Team Leader leveled and balanced his weapon for the kill shot, inciting hysterical pleas from two Arabs who cried out for redemption, their will to enter Paradise having escaped them.

When the minute was up and Allah was nowhere in sight, and with the mouth of his MP5 shifting from one Arab to the next as if deciding who would be the first to enter Paradise, he spoke to them in a manner that was flat and desensitized.

“When you see Allah,” he said, the point of his weapon now leveled, “tell Him that Yahweh sent you.” With no hesitation or sense of remorse, Team Leader pulled the trigger.

When it was over, the gunshots echoed toward the far reaches of the valley, then dissipated into a distant and hollow cadence until nothing sounded but the soft sougning of the desert wind.

With the smell of cordite hanging cloyingly thick and metallic in the air, Team Leader closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath through his nostrils, relishing the moment.

The moment, however, was hastily interrupted by the voice of one of his commandos.

“You want us to bury them?”

Team Leader opened his eyes, the moment gone. “I want you to pull two men and have them spread the bodies out,” he said with a clipped foreign accent. “And bury them deep. The last thing I need is for the coyotes to bring them to the surface.”

“Yes, sir.”

Team Leader took a step toward the bodies and measured the looks on their faces. Not one seemed to have the repose of gentle peace. Instead, each face exhibited what Team Leader interpreted as surprise at its own mortality. Or was it the sudden revelation of standing before the true face of Judgment? Considering this, he once again turned toward the sky as if seeking answers but got nothing in return except diminishing warmth, as the ribbon of light that had cast upon him was suddenly cut off by a passing cloud.

Turning his attention back to the Arabs, he could only wonder if they truly believed that their god-driven causes would be rewarded with a heaven full of virgins.

It was a mindset Team Leader never fully understood, believing when man stood erect and walked away from the primordial soup he took with him the concept of self-preservation. Yet these factional groups of people were driven by suicidal fascination that clearly eclipsed their need to survive. Fighting for a cause was one thing; dying for one was another.

With the tip of his weapon Team Leader prodded one of the Arabs, the action causing the man’s head to loll to one side.

“Now the battle begins,” he whispered to the dead man in Arabic. “So tell me, who will be the stronger god? Allah or Yahweh?” Expecting no answer, the man with the scar turned and headed to the rear of the cargo truck, where he would take his place in the cargo hold for the long journey back.

With his MP5 trained on his human cargo, and with al-Hashrie and al-Bashrah continuing their mantra with newfound urgency, Team Leader contemplated the fate of the two men before him, anticipating the impact they would have on the future of the civilized world.

Yes, Team Leader considered. These two have a much greater role in the eyes of Allah.

## **Chapter 2**

### ***Somewhere Over the Atlantic Ocean September 22, Morning***

*Shepherd One* is the Vatican’s version of Air Force One, but without the luxurious trappings of the presidential office such as a wet-bar and expensive Corinthian leather chairs. In actuality, *Shepherd One* is a regular commercial jetliner owned by Alitalia Airlines, which is often set aside for papal excursions.



The only true modifications to the aircraft were safety features that were built to stave off attacks from insurgent weaponry. The plane featured flares to attract heat seekers, interceptors to take out ground-to-air missiles, and a laser jammer designed to confuse any laser-governed sources, most notably laser-guided missiles. After the attempt on the life of Pope John Paul II, the Vatican decreed the necessary precautions, which Alitalia Airlines was more than happy to comply with.

Sitting in the fore section of the near-vacant 747 as it made its westbound trajectory to Dulles from Rome, Pope Pius XIII looked over the itinerary for his two-week visit on American soil. Often he looked up and gazed out the window, the ocean below him a glittering seascape of tinsel and glass, and thought about the challenging task before him.

He realized that religion was a business that provided faith as its commodity. And with politics and banking becoming the core and support of the Vatican, and him serving as the State's head, it was his responsibility to create a demand for faith among the people. Pope Pius needed to close the ever-widening gap between the Church and its constituency, since, for years, congregates had been abandoning Mass due to a growing liberalism and the Church's refusal to relent its conservative values, resulting in empty pews across the world.

What Pius wanted to do, what he needed to do, was follow in the footsteps of his predecessor and rekindle the spark of religious hope.

He did not want to commercialize the Word of God, but to let it be known that God has not abandoned His children, but loves them unconditionally. He was not given to preaching fire and brimstone, nor was he inclined to sermonize in terms of "God loves you. But He would love you more if you went to church and accepted the ways of old."

He would not preach with admonishment.

After rubbing his eyes, the pope sighed as if suddenly realizing that this undertaking was too much for a man of his age. But despite his fatigue and his occasional discouragement, he held a deep-rooted determination to win back the Catholic citizenry and resurrect the waning faith. He was committed to this aim, no matter the demands levied upon him or the struggles that were sure to come.

His challenge was to show the relevance of the age-old precepts of Christendom in a world crying for evolution. Whereas the Church had survived insurrections in the past, the pope knew it would survive in the future. How to promote unity, however, was truly a conundrum. Pope Pius XIII returned to the itinerary and scripted speeches for further study, concluding that it would most likely come down to convincing verbiage to win back the masses. And to help him were five of his best orators, all bishops from the Holy See, the administrative arm of the Vatican. The bishops of the Holy See were groomed for such occasions. They would serve as advisors and hold mock forums, each man devising scenarios like a Hollywood director.

And then the implication of his thoughts struck him hard. *Has religion finally come to this? Has it come to theater?*

The pope refused to acknowledge this disheartening idea by returning to the schedule and re-reading the attached speeches proposed by his administration. Closing his eyes and seeing the print burned as an after-image behind the folds of

his lids, Pope Pius XIII decided he would speak from his heart rather than to grandstand from the papal soapbox.

He would speak from the soul.

“Your Holiness?” The words were spoken too softly, as if the speaker was contrite at the prospect of disturbing the pontiff.

Pius opened his eyes to see Bishop Angelo take the seat opposite him. He was a man of cherubic appearance, with soft and doughy features that gave him a child-like quality, and when he smiled he did so with a set of teeth that was ruler-straight and designer-white.

“I’m sorry,” he said, apologetically. “You were sleeping, yes?”

The pope shook his head. “I was just thinking.” Then, after a brief moment of deliberation, he said: “Trying to win back the masses will be no easy task, Gennaro. I know this. But these—” he raised the documents “—sound a bit scripted. Now I know the Holy See means well, but these documents seem without substance.” The pope suddenly reached over and patted Bishop Angelo on the forearm, his smile all-encompassing. “And please, my friend, don’t be offended. Your writing has much merit, but this effort needs something more. It needs more of a direct truthfulness. I need to approach the people without feeling as though I’m trying to sell a pitch rather than instill lost faith.”

“Then perhaps, Your Holiness, these documents will be more suited to your needs.” The bishop removed a thin sheaf of papers from his case, and handed them to the pope.

“What are these?”

“Let’s just say a more direct approach to address the current concerns of the people and the Church... and perhaps less of the pitch.”

The pope’s smile widened. “You always know what I want, Gennaro. Thank you. I would be more than happy to look them over.”

“I hope they meet with your approval, Your Holiness.”

“Let’s hope so, because America is only hours away and I need to be duly prepared.”

Bishop Angelo bowed his head and returned to the rows behind the pope where the bishops of the Holy See sat judiciously debating the best way to handle the media. Sometimes their voices swelled in disagreement, but mostly they united in solidarity.

Tuning his eyes to the new set of documents, the pope once again began his studies.

The time was 10:47 a.m., Eastern Standard Time.

## **Chapter 3**

***Dulles Airport, Washington, D.C.  
September 22, Late Afternoon***

When *Shepherd One* landed at Dulles, the plane taxied under the watchful eyes of thousands who waited to gaze upon the pontiff from cordoned-off areas within

the terminal. Hand-painted signs waved, people cheered, and the air became electric as the pope exited the plane and made his way down the breezeway in full decorative vestments. After reaching the terminal and giving the sign-of-the-cross as a papal blessing to the masses, he then offered his hand to the political principals who either kissed the Piscatorial Ring in greeting or simply shook his hand.

In an area set aside for the media, cameras and news networks recorded the moment of the pope's arrival, capturing the pontiff's first celebrated appearance upon American soil, as he and his papal team made their way to a procession of limos.

Raising an arm toward the masses, Pope Pius XIII waved, inciting a cheer, before ducking into the governor's vehicle.

One man, however, appeared indifferent.

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From the crowd's front line, a man of light complexion neither smiled nor showed any emotion as he studied the pope. He gave the impression of being deep in thought, an effect caused by the act of tracing his fingers over the scar beneath his chin.

Just prior to the pope's arrival, Team Leader received intel that the president of the United States had assigned a detail of four battle-tested agents, a highly skilled contingent team, along with the usual police security, to guard the Governor's Mansion where the pope would be staying.

But Team Leader's unit was honed to the level of an elite force. And despite the president's confidence in the capabilities of his agents, Team Leader knew that taking the Governor's Mansion would be nothing more than a nominal exercise performed at minimal risk. By morning, Pope Pius XIII would be within his authority, and the president's detail would be nothing more than a list of names on the obituary page of the morning news.

With inwardly-turned enthusiasm, Team Leader envisioned his unit moving through the halls of the Governor's Mansion with stealth and precision. He had trained his team repeatedly until their motions became involuntary acts rather than practiced maneuvers. This, in turn, developed a higher degree of instinct in decision-making, which now took nanoseconds rather than moments. The infinitesimal time difference could mean the difference between success and failure in such an operation.

As the Governor's limo and its supporting motorcade started toward the airport exit, Team Leader began to move against the crowd and toward the terminal doors.

## **Chapter 4**

***Annapolis, Maryland  
September 22, Early Evening***

Normally, VIP dignitaries stayed at Blair House, which is the official state guest quarters of the president of the United States. But since the residence was occupied by top Chinese officials on a mission to improve trade relations with the United States, the pope was housed at the Governor's Mansion in Annapolis, not far from the vice president's residence at the Naval Observatory.

When it became apparent that Blair House would be unavailable during the weeks of the pope's visit, Maryland's governor offered to host the pontiff at the Mansion, with provisional security provided by the president. It was not a gesture of good will. It was an opportunity for Governor Steele to promote his bid for a seat in the Senate in the upcoming election. With the pope's visitation cementing the governor's image as a conservative Christian, it would serve well as the basis of his platform in the months to come.

Campaigning alongside him would be his wife of eleven years, Darlene Steele. With azure blue eyes, pale porcelain skin, and a graceful elegance to her movements, she embodied the image of Victorian innocence. But beneath her gracious persona she had all the quintessence of a remora clinging to the underside of her husband's political belly, feeding off whatever remnants floated her way. Money, power and status were the lures that kept her in a loveless marriage with the governor.

Inside the dining area of the mansion, Governor Jonathan Steele headed a stately ceremonial dinner with political luminaries including the lieutenant governor, two state senators and a representative from the House Committee. With the pope and the bishops of the Holy See in attendance, the dining room was filled to capacity.

For three hours they sat at a table that dominated the room's center, drinking wine or liqueur or both, and eating from a rich and varied menu that gratified the palate of everyone.

Bearing witness to this cheerful gathering were oil paintings of past governors, arranged along the rich cherry paneling of the East Wall. Their faces, unmoving for all time, appeared studious and judgmental as they stared from mercury-hued eyes. From the coffered ceiling suspended a magnificent Bohemian chandelier, its multiple teardrop-shaped crystals glittering with iridescent pinpricks of light. And opposite the Governors' Gallery, floor-to-ceiling panes of tempered glass made up the entire West Wall, providing a panoramic view of the horizon as soft hues of fading light traversed the color spectrum throughout the course of the meal.

Nothing was more perfect than the moment.

As the night grew late, the time difference between Rome and Washington proving too great for the pope, Pius proposed an end to the evening by bestowing blessings all around before retiring to his room.

Everyone, including those who never subscribed to a certain denomination or faith or followed any specific religious path, found themselves in awe of this king who ruled an empire of more than a billion people.

With the dignitaries vacating soon after the conclusion of the meal, the dining hall became eerily silent as the faces of the Governors' Gallery alone watched over the room.

In time, they would watch a scene play itself out in grisly fashion with the same unflinching pose, and their eyes as dead and pale as marbles would betray nothing of what they were about to become witness to.

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After dinner, Bishop Angelo aided the pope to his bedroom and hung his vestments in the walk-in closet while Pius prepared himself for bed by putting on his sacred undergarment, a cotton pullover that covered the man from neck to ankle.

After the pope labored to the edge of his mattress, Bishop Angelo assisted the elderly man beneath the sheets, then pulled the blankets tight around him.

“Are you comfortable?” he asked.

The pope moved as if trying to settle contentedly into the mattress, his back and shoulders digging. “Well, it’s not home,” he answered, his movement slowing after finding a relaxing spot. “But it’ll do.”

Angelo laid a hand upon the pontiff’s shoulder and felt the pointed bonelike protrusion of a man having wasted away by the progression of age. “Perhaps you would like to read before you retire.”

The pope nodded. “Not tonight, Gennaro. Tomorrow’s going to be a big day for all of us and we’ll need to be at our best.”

“Then have a good night.”

On his way out Bishop Angelo took time to straighten out the pope’s pearl-white miter sitting on top of the dresser, a king’s crown, then closed the door softly behind him until the snicker of the bolt locked in place.

On most evenings Pope Pius XIII either read from the Bible or gazed through the passages of *Paradise Lost* from John Milton, finding the language and meter of the poem masterful, and looked upon the work as a liberal effort affirming that the Church would always be seen through the critical eyes of its followers.

But tonight he was too tired to even flip back the cover of the leather-bound volume and switched off the table lamp, the darkness sweeping across the room in a blink of an eye.

In an attitude of prayer, Pope Pius placed his hands together and worshiped his Lord, thanking Him for raising him from the ranks of obscurity to that of prominence.

He had come from a family of eleven, all poor, some sickly, but none without faith or hope. Never in his life had he witnessed war or famine or the plagues of man due to living in a small village sixty kilometers west of Florence, Italy. Nor did he have an epiphany to follow the Lord’s path. Amerigo was simply enamored as a boy who loved God and everything He stood for: The Good, the Caring, and the ability to hold dominion over others and lead them toward the world of Light and Loving Spirits.

He also dreamed of sermonizing, of passing The Word.

But his father would have none of it and obligated his son to work the fields of the homestead alongside his brothers knowing that the true measurement of a man was calculated by the crops he yielded rather than the knowledge of academia, which in this village took a man nowhere.

So having been taught by his mother at home, having read and memorized all the passages of the Bible, having learned the basics in rudimentary math, and having tilled the fields with his siblings for nearly a decade, Amerigo Giovanni Anzalone had become a learned man with calloused hands from driving the yolk, and came to realize that tilling the soils was not his calling in life.

Every Sunday he went to church with his mother and siblings. And for every day thereafter, as he worked the soil beneath a relentless sun, he dreamed of wearing the vestments of a priest and giving sermon. What Amerigo wanted, what he needed, was to be empowered by the Church to give direction.

Upon his eighteenth birthday, and against his father's wishes—but with the aid of the village priest, which his father was unwilling to contest—Amerigo gave up the yoke and headed to the Divinity School in Florence, his first stepping stone toward Rome.

In the years to follow, Amerigo was recognized as a cardinal and became a respected member within the Curia, which ultimately led the College of Cardinals to choose him as the successor to John Paul the Second. Upon his acceptance, Amerigo took the name of Pope Pius the XIII.

And like his predecessor, Amerigo would offer a hand to every race and religion, leaving nobody out, nobody alone. He would simply embrace the world with love and tolerance, beginning with the United States.

With that thought on his mind, Pope Pius XIII fell asleep with his hands slowly drifting apart, and then falling idly to his sides.

## Chapter 5

He was nine years old when he lost his mother and sister to a suicide bomber on a trip to Ramallah. After going to the market, the boy, his mother, and his twelve-year-old sister boarded a bus for home.

Even to this day his memories recalled the pain and confusion of the explosion with fresh intensity, as if the blast happened just the day before.

*It was a hot day in Ramallah. His mother had removed her shoe to massage her foot, and his sister sat quietly beside her. From the rear of the bus, the boy watched a man board, his coat much too bulky for such a warm day, and took a seat a few rows ahead of them. As the bus moved along its route picking up passengers and filling to capacity, he could not take his eyes off this man.*

*The man appeared nervous and uneasy, his brow slick with sweat as he took several glances around him, finally spying the boy in the back. Their eyes locked, and somehow the man knew that the boy was perceptive, while others all around him had no suspicion of what he was about to do.*

*Offering a scarcely perceptible smile, the man gave him what seemed to be an affable nod, then raised his hand. In it he held a switch that was to be depressed with his thumb. "To all occupiers of the nation of Islam, Allah is great!"*

*Just as he was about to turn to his mother and ask her who Allah was, the man pushed the button.*

*With the slowness of a bad dream, the boy watched the man break up into countless pieces. Flame and pressure blew out the walls of the bus. People sitting close to him disappeared within the licks of fire and ash. Piercing cries filled the air, hanging as thick as the acrid smoke. And propelled by the force of the blast, a piece of metal caught the boy on the chin, gashing his flesh into a horrible second mouth that seemed to open wide with the awe of confusion.*

*After that he could only remember seeing a swatch of blue sky tainted with greasy black smoke and feeling the heat of a nearby fire.*

*Only when he awoke several days later to the haggard face of his father, his skin as loose as a rubber mask, did he finally feel the agonies of his pain. With second degree burns over thirty percent of his body and the severe gash beneath his chin, the boy was incredibly lucky. The real pain came when he learned that his mother and sister had died in the blast.*

*When he asked why the man did what he did on the bus, his father told him.*

*That was the day he learned what life would be like for a Jew living in a land of open hostilities.*

Taking a deep breath, and with the images of his childhood fading, Team Leader opened his eyes to see the members of his team meditating as the van made its way to the Governor's Mansion. Every soldier, every stolid commando, as dictated by his constant training, was visualizing in detail his every movement, to assure that there would be no room for mistakes during actual combat.

Each man was equipped with an Israeli Bullpup assault weapon—a product of Israeli technology with devastating capabilities—and dressed identically, from the black tactical jumpsuit to the ski mask and night-vision monocular. Nobody on his team deviated in appearance.

Unwilling to carry a Bullpup, Team Leader opted for a Sig Sauer P220 40-caliber with suppressor and grip-attached laser sighting. It was his weapon of choice—a weapon he had become accustomed to as an assassin.

On the floor al-Hashrie and al-Bashrah lay cuffed and dressed in pressed military fatigues, the men praying softly in Arabic, which Team Leader allowed without punitive action from anybody on his team.

For the third time in the last five minutes, Team Leader looked at his watch, realizing that months of preparation would soon bear the fruit of their labors. And then he closed his eyes once again, the images of that day in Ramallah reminding him why he was about to go to war.

The time was 0128 hours.

## **Chapter 6**

***Annapolis, Maryland  
September 23, Early Morning***

The Governor's Mansion was a two-story Colonial, situated on a manicured rise. Columns and expensive fascia designs enhanced the house's appeal, while Boston ivy climbed the brick and trellises with reckless abandon.

On the gravel-laden driveway leading to the mansion's cul-de-sac, two state police vehicles sat on the perimeter with an officer in each unit. They were no match for Team Leader's recon group; they were dispatched quickly, quietly and efficiently.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agent Nedza had a good view of the grounds from the mansion's wraparound porch and examined the landscape through night vision binoculars, making a slow scan. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, he lowered the device and moved along to the porch's south side. The moment he started to ebb from sight, Team Leader's recon group scaled the wall and landed behind a row of pruned hedges.

Unslinging the world's most accurate sniper rifle, the Barrett M82A1, Team Leader's sniper took aim through the crosshairs of an emerald green lens, drew a bead, slowed his breathing, and pulled the trigger. With the sound of the gunshot muted, Agent Nedza's head snapped forward with the bullet's impact, and fell to the floor as a boneless heap.

\* \* \* \* \*

The lighting in the hallway was somewhat subdued as an agent from the president's detail walked into the governor's darkened library and stood silhouetted within the door frame, listening. The moment he raised his hand for the light switch, three muted pops sounded off in quick succession, the muzzle flashes winking intermittently from the darkest edges of the room. With cold efficiency, the perfectly placed bullets hit the center of body mass in a tight triangular pattern, dropping the agent as fast as gravity would allow.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the second-tier landing where the bedrooms were located, two agents stood vigil at opposite ends of the corridor. When one of the agents began to toy with his earpiece, a darkened shape moved along the wall with feline stealth, drew a garrote around the agent's neck, and pulled him silently into the shadows, strangling him with such surgical precision that the agent was unable to emit a sound upon the moment of death.

After the assassin lowered the body to the floor, he melded so easily with the surrounding darkness that he became a part of it. And then he was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Agent Cross stood alone at the opposite end of the corridor, unaware he was surrounded by a group of hostiles. The moment he raised his hand to adjust his lip mike, he was taken down. The action was so quick, so proficient, he was numbed by surprise.

Now, with the front line of defense taken out, all that remained was the task of securing the designated targets.

\* \* \* \* \*



Darlene Steele was unable to sleep. The sound of the wind blowing the leaves outside sounded to her like a symphony of distant tambourines. Even from where she lay she could hear the wind driving the already fallen leaves along the cul-de-sac in a cacophony that sounded like the crackle of fire.

After releasing a barely audible sigh, she turned to her husband who lay beside her, his chest rising and falling in a slow, even rhythm. Apparently the stirring of autumn winds was more of a lullaby to him than an annoyance. So she lay there for hours, watching patterns on the ceiling as sleep eluded her. Her eyes remained open and sighs escaped her. Her restless motions were unable to elicit even a single uncouth comment from her husband, as he lay undisturbed by her actions. In time she slid the covers back, got out of bed, and embraced herself against the unseasonable chill. Grabbing her robe from the post of the bed, she left the room and closed the door behind her.

In the hallway she turned up the thermostat before descending the spiral staircase of their state-funded \$650,000 home—one of many political perks that made her marriage tolerable. As the wife of a prominent governor, Darlene Steele found comfort in the prestige and material goods her husband's position provided. She knew her marriage was not about love. It was a business arrangement. Her job was to be the dutiful first lady, projecting a public image of grace and beauty and elegance. Meanwhile, her husband was mired in affairs, an acceptable vice since she no longer cared to try to fulfill him sexually. She would tolerate his violations as long as she garnered the prize in the end, the status of senator's wife.

Passing through the living room, holding the robe tightly around her, Darlene was already anticipating a warm glass of milk to exorcize the chill from her bones.

Once in the kitchen she felt for the island, found it, then made her way to the refrigerator, a stainless steel unit built into the wall. When she opened the door, a feeble beam of light shone across the kitchen, barely touching the darkest reaches of the room. It wasn't until she brought the milk to the island that she saw something black and amoeba-like standing against the far wall, something that finally took the shape of a man with a weapon.

Before her mind could register that she was not alone, her breath hitched in a tiny gasp. And just as she was beginning to sober to the seriousness of the situation, the figure stepped into the outer edges of the light. He wore a tactical uniform, black, with matching boots, and his face was partially obscured by the headgear of his night-vision monocular. In the intruder's hand, which he raised for the kill shot, was a .40 caliber Sig Sauer equipped with sound suppressor and laser-grip sighting.

"I'm sorry," the man whispered, directing the red dot of the laser sight to her chest, then to her brow. "But I'm afraid it's necessary that you become a casualty of the cause." With that he pressed the trigger, the muted sound barely audible as the well-placed bullet struck her forehead and exited out the rear. The pulpy expulsion from the exit wound cast a Jackson Pollack design of blood and tissue along the wall behind her. As Darlene Steele pirouetted soundlessly before hitting the floor, the assassin was already gone from the room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jonathan Steele was in the midst of a bad and slow-moving dream when he awoke to find his wife missing. His hand was searching the warm area of her side of the bed when he spotted the phosphorous-green circles moving around his bed like lazy fireflies. With a rare ability to speak out powerfully, he called out to the living shapes in his room.

The glowing circles stopped moving.

Then, from the depths of the shadows, an emotionless voice said, "Governor Steele." A threatening figure moved closer to the bed. "You've been deemed a moral sacrifice."

The governor galvanized himself into action by swiftly throwing the covers aside, the unfamiliar voice striking an undercurrent of terror as several hands pushed him back onto the mattress. "What do you think you're doing? You have no right to do this to me! Let me go!"

Steele could see the phosphorous eyes moving, could feel the strength of his attackers as one of the intruders lifted the sleeve of his pajama top and inserted a needle into his arm. Immediately the governor saw a nebula of light, felt the slowing of his mind, then fell into complete and utter darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

The noise was distant, but enough to wake Pope Pius XIII from a vague dream, of which he would have no memory. While he lay there he listened for the obscurest of sounds, but heard nothing more than autumn leaves blowing against the window panes.

As he labored to a sitting position, he thought he saw the shadowy movement of feet along the floor beneath the door to his room.

"Hello?"

Even though the movement stopped, Pius knew somebody was standing on the other side of the door.

And then in a more prudent tone, he asked, "Governor?"

The door opened slowly and two men in military dress stood silhouetted against the backdrop of the hallway. The only light was the faint blue glow of moonlight through the window. One man reached up and engaged a switch on his monocular headset, activating a phosphorous green light and giving him the advantage of night vision.

"Your Holiness," one of them said, but in the darkness the pope couldn't tell which one spoke. "We're not here to harm you."

The pontiff's voice remained calm. "What is it you want?"

"Your cooperation."

"For?"

The men in uniform looked at each other for a brief moment before turning back to the pontiff.

"Please, Your Holiness, don't make this difficult."

"Difficult? I'm merely posing a question."

Then one of the voices became a little less congenial. "Roll up the sleeve of your shirt."

Both men moved forward in unison, the one with the monocular holding a syringe, the other an assault weapon. To drive his point home, the commando with

the Bullpup pressed the mouth of the weapon's barrel against the pope's temple. "Roll up your sleeve... now."

"I don't understand—"

"You're not supposed to. Now roll up your sleeve." The commando forced the mouth of the weapon deeper into the soft flesh.

The pope did as instructed. He felt the prick of the syringe and gave way to its effects.

The mission was complete.

## Chapter 7

Team Leader was thoroughly pleased that the operation took less than ten minutes, with zero casualties to his team. Those dispatched on the opposing team were done so quickly and dispassionately.

Moving his operation to the dining room, Team Leader felt awash in glory as cold, blue light shone through the west wall windows. Behind him, the eyes of past governors watched the proceedings with mute detachment.

At the end of the dining table, with the wide brim of his hat casting his face in even deeper shadow, a man sat with one leg casually crossed over the other. "Your team did well," he said. "Much better than I expected."

Team Leader made his way toward the man, the green glow of his NVG monocular lending him sight as he took position before the operative. "Your job is done here, Judas. Your services are no longer needed."

"And miss the final scene of this magnificent production? I don't think so." The man remained still, the tone of his voice as cold as the stone tiles beneath his feet.

Team Leader bowed his head. "So be it."

"Then let's get this show on the road."

Al-Bashrah and al-Hashrie were ushered into the dining room and forced to their knees. The mouth of a Bullpup was positioned at the base of each man's skull. Neither captive was willing to show fear, each having resolved to meet his fate head on.

Team Leader circled them in appraisal, wondering what drove such men to give up their lives for an afterlife that he considered highly implausible. Then, in Arabic, so that the understanding was between Arab and Hebrew only, Team Leader spoke.

"You came to this soil to make history for your people," he told them. "So history you shall make. But not as you dreamed or imagined." Team Leader turned his back on them and began to walk away. "Today marks the onset of a brave new world; the beginning for some, the end for others."

Even though the man sitting in the shadows didn't understand the exchange, he couldn't help but laugh with malicious amusement.

Team Leader closed his eyes and drew a deep breath. His hatred for Judas was enormous. Judas was a mercenary whose only cause was to line his pockets with

blood money. But since Judas's presence was deemed a necessity for the advancement of the cause, he held his tongue.

"Did you tell them?" said Judas, his voice dripping with malice. "Did you tell them that they're about to die?"

"What we do, Judas, we do without malevolence, which you seem to have forgotten."

"What we do," he returned, "we do for money. Now get on with it."

The muscles in Team Leader's jaw began to work. Judas was a major player, the one who opened the door and made the cause possible. But Team Leader was not accustomed to taking orders from a man whose only motivations in promoting the cause were financially based. To Team Leader, Judas was nothing but a whore.

However, Judas was right. He needed to move this along.

The last standing member of the president's detail, a man by the name of Cross, was guided into the room with a Bullpup pressed to the base of his skull.

"The area's secured," stated the commando holding the Bullpup. "Their entire defense force has been eliminated."

Judas stood, ran a finger along the brim of his fedora in greeting, and addressed Special Agent Cross with playful sarcasm. His features were recognizable for the first time in the blue light. "Top of the morning to you," he said.

Cross turned away. His face, his eyes, everything about his manner professed disbelief that a man he knew, respected, and idolized could have maneuvered this team.

Team Leader looked at Cross. "So you know Judas."

Cross looked at him. The strength of his chin, the determination evident in the way it stood out, was a signature of stoicism. Even if it was forced, it was an action Team Leader admired.

"Judas," Cross said, as if in quiet examination. "It fits."

Judas's face remained partially hidden by the brim of his hat. "Fits? Perhaps," he said. "But unlike the real Judas who did it for thirty pieces of silver, I'm doing it for ten million dollars, and I'm sure you would, too, David, if you had the chance."

"You're wrong."

Judas clapped a hand on the agent's shoulder and addressed him again, sarcasm dripping and bleeding like a hemorrhage. "Just so you know where I stand," he told him, "I'll be at your funeral telling your wife what a good man you were, how much you'll be missed, and then maybe—just maybe—I'll sleep with her to help her fill that sudden and horrible gap in her life. So what do you think about that, huh? Sound good?"

Judas couldn't help the malice. "Have a good death, David. It's a stop we all have to make some day." Still wearing a smile of dark humor, Judas left the room with all the ease of taking a stroll through the park, his hands buried deep within the pockets of his long coat.

His lack of respect for his fellow agents only confirmed the hatred Team Leader felt for Judas—a man without honor.

Facing Agent Cross with a neutral expression, Team Leader addressed him. "Your team, Special Agent Cross, was so complacent there wasn't much sport to it. Judas or no Judas, your protection of the pope was lax. Your team would never have been so poorly trained under my command."

Team Leader turned to the commando holding the Bullpup to Cross's head and held a hand out. "His weapon, please."

The commando removed a Glock from his waistband and gave it to Team Leader.

"Nevertheless," said Team Leader, turning the weapon over in his hand to check the weight. "Since you are the only one left alive in your unit, I'm going to make you an American hero."

Team Leader examined the mouth of the barrel before removing a suppressor from his cargo pocket and screwing the device into the Glock.

"I'm sure your family will be extremely proud of you," he said in accented English. "And I'm sure you'll be awarded something posthumous for your efforts in taking down two known terrorists. I think Americans love that sort of thing, don't you?"

After the suppressor was fitted, Team Leader placed the weapon by his side so the mouth of the barrel faced the floor.

"At least your children will grow up in a safe place," he concluded. "That is something I only dreamed of."

At that moment he raised the weapon and shot al-Bashrah and al-Hashrie with shots to the chest and throat. They dropped as fast as the bullets that felled them.

Agent Cross's knees buckled, his balance wavering. The commando forced him back to stable footing. Once the agent stood on his own again, the commando stepped back.

"I'm almost jealous of what you are about to become," said Team Leader. And then he drew a silencer-equipped pistol from his holster and shot Cross in the throat. After teetering for a moment in a wide-eyed drunken stance, Cross fell to his knees with his hand pressed against his neck, then fell to the floor, hard.

While blood bubbles foamed in the gaping hole in Cross's neck and his eyes stared at nothing in particular, Team Leader, after removing the suppressor, placed the pistol in al-Bashrah's hand. The other commando placed the Sig in the hand of al-Hashrie.

After Team Leader removed the suppressor from Cross's weapon, he worked the agent's hand around the Glock. With what little strength he had left, Cross lifted his head slightly to see what Team Leader was doing. His throat rattled with an awful wetness and his eyes were beginning to lose their luster. Finally, his eyes taking on a detached stare, he succumbed to his wound.

Team Leader watched and listened as Cross took his last labored breath with somewhat of a detached stare of his own, then placed the agent's finger on the trigger and laid his hand carefully against the blood-soaked tile.

Standing, Team Leader took note of his work.

The stage had been set. Al-Bashrah and al-Hashrie had been killed in a fire-fight with Cross.

"Everything secure?" asked Team Leader.

"Cleared and sanitized. We're ready to move."

Team Leader nodded his approval. "All in less than fifteen minutes," he said. "Yahweh will be most pleased."

The time was 0259 hours.

\* \* \* \* \*

At exactly 0700 hours Eastern Standard Time, CNN in Atlanta would receive a call from someone claiming to be a member of the Soldiers of Islam. The caller would clearly state that Pope Pius XIII was now under the authority of their regime.

It was the first step of the Final Jihad.

## Chapter 8

### ***Annapolis, Maryland September 23, Late Morning***

Yellow DO-NOT-CROSS tape had been set around the perimeter of the governor's estate. The Forensics Unit had already staked their claim, combing and sweeping every inch of the interior. Using high-intensity lamps, which passed varying wavelengths and colors of light over all surfaces, the team sought to identify latent friction-ridge prints, which could point out certain types of trace and biological evidence.

Other investigators used mini-vacs, typical hand-held vacuums with sterilized bags, to pick up trace evidence such as dust, dirt and cellular matter. In the governor's bedroom, a CSI technician was carefully going over the area to acquire possible prints for the VMD, or vacuum-metal deposition device. Unfortunately, in most crime scenes, more than 97% of all prints were indigenous, 2% either contaminated or untraceable, and less than 1% traceable.

When Special Agent Punch Murdock of the president's Secret Service detail was halted at the entrance door by D.C. Metro, he flashed his credentials and was allowed to pass. He was a man of simian build and pug-like features. His nose angled badly to one side from too many years in the ring, something he never had corrected since it served as a personal badge of honor and exhibited something savage about him. His eyes also appeared wild and untamed, yet they were alert and all-seeing as Murdock absorbed every detail of the governor's bedroom. He made his way toward a technician who was running a scanner slowly over the surface of a nightstand.

When Murdock spoke, he did so with an inflection acquired from growing up in the mean streets of the city's toughest neighborhoods. His accent maintained a rough edge that served to intimidate and repel those he encountered rather than to magnetize them. Moving closer to the technician, Murdock leaned forward until he was level with the technician's ear. "How's it going, buddy?"

The forensics investigator continued to examine the surface of the nightstand with meticulous study. Beside him, the covers of the governor's bed were in disarray. "It's going," he said.

"Any traces of blood?"

"Not up here."

"Thanks."

Murdock exited the room and worked his way through a mass of investigators, some wearing gloves and paper booties, others taking photos from numerous angles and viewpoints. In the kitchen, the body of Darlene Steele lay on the floor in a supine position, the lids of her eyes at half-mast. A medical examiner was inspecting a bloodless hole in the middle of her forehead. In the back of her head, the pared flesh formed a blooming rose petal of pulp and gore. Carefully, the medical examiner picked alien particles from the edges of the wound with tweezers and placed them in a small vial.

A second examiner stood at the Jackson Pollack wall of design making a critical examination of the blood spatter pattern, trying to determine the angle of the shot from the configuration of blood and tissue and errant hairs that had dried on the wall. To the examiner, there was nothing artistic about the killing or the star-like motif that clung to this canvas.

Murdock looked on with detachment. He had seen this many times over his twenty-five years in law enforcement and had steadily learned how to disengage his emotions from the many bloodbaths visited.

A man wearing a gray suit and maroon tie moved next to Murdock with pen and pad in hand, his face having the fresh-scrubbed look of youth, movie star good looks, and frosty blue eyes that absorbed everything with photo-like retention.

“You’re Punch, right? Punch Murdock?”

Murdock stepped away without responding. The last thing he needed right now was some kid latching onto his lapels.

The young man followed, keeping up with Murdock’s quick pace. “My name’s Melvin Yzerman,” he said.

“Yeah, well, good for you, kid.”

“I’m from the *Washington Post*.”

Murdock stopped in his tracks. He knew what was coming. “How did you get in here?”

“That’s not important. What is important is a comment from you regarding your team. As chief of the president’s security detail, how do you feel about your team—”

“Okay, you’re out of here.”

“—being killed by terrorist extremists?”

“Go on, get out of here!”

“And as head of the detail, why weren’t you—”

“Are you deaf, kid? Get out of here!”

“—with your team at such a critical moment?”

“Officers!”

“Answer me that, Agent Murdock. Just give me a simple comment.”

Responding to Murdock’s call, two officers from the D.C. Metro Unit entered the room, one with an extended baton in his hand.

“Which one of you D.C. clowns let this idiot from the *Post* in here?” Murdock’s face was red, the man livid. Spittle flew from his lips as he spoke. “This is a secured area, even from the press! Get this piece of crap out of here and maintain the premises. Nobody in or out unless they’re from county, state, or law enforcement! Got it?”

The officers, galvanized by Murdock's tone, grabbed the reporter by the back of his arm and began to usher him from the room.

"Murdock!" Yzerman said over his shoulder. "Do you want to make a comment about your team's inadequate protection of the pope? Any comment at all?"

Murdock stood silent as he watched the officers force the man toward the exit. He weighed the reporter's question in his mind, the words bearing an uncomfortable heft.

Fighting for calm, Murdock closed his eyes and stood waiting for tranquility to wash over him, for the anger to melt away. He stood in silence, only for Yzerman's questions to bounce back and strike a chord that would stay with him throughout the day and establish a mood that would remain raw and irritable.

Entering the spacious dining room where the bodies of Agent Cross and the downed terrorists lay, their remains draped with sheets, Murdock examined his surroundings. From the East Wall the gallery of governors stared omnisciently at him. Murdock looked at the oil paintings with a less than appreciative eye, knowing the truth of what they had witnessed would forever remain unspoken. Dismissing the paintings, he turned a keen eye back to the scene.

Tony Denucci was an investigator for the FBI who specialized in kidnappings. As a youth he was tall and broad with strong facial features. Now he was tall and gangly with a face that had grown long and jaded from witnessing too many tragedies. When he walked he did so with a stoop, his body bowing in the shape of a question mark. Over the years he had become nothing more than a husk of his former self.

Murdock clapped his old friend on the back. They had come up together from the academy some twenty-four years ago, each rising from the trenches to become experts in their respective fields. "How you doing, Tony?"

Denucci looked at him with the red, rheumy eyes of an alcoholic. "Hey, Punch."

"Got anything?"

"Nine dead all together," he said. "Two cops, four agents, the governor's wife, and two intruders. You might want to take a look to see who they are."

Murdock already knew who they were; the whole world did. They were the self-proclaimed warriors from the Soldiers of Islam.

Murdock raised the sheet from the first body, saw it was Cross, and immediately covered him back up. Upon examining the other two, there was no doubt they were of Middle-Eastern descent. He also noticed the ink on their fingertips was still wet. Their prints had already been taken and were now being processed through the FBI's watch list and Interpol systems. Whoever they were would not remain a mystery for long.

Murdock got to his feet as Denucci continued to offer more information, using his pen as a pointer. "It looks as if the whole detail was taken by surprise," he told him. "Not a single man's weapon was drawn, with the exception of that agent lying over there."

"That would be David Cross. A good man."

"Other than him, it looks as if they were all killed before they knew it."

Murdock ambled around the scene with his hands dug deep within the pockets of his overcoat. "Are you doing the Incident Report for Pappandopolous?"

Denucci nodded. "Yeah. And you?"



“The president wants a first-hand account of what happened here. He doesn’t want to wait for the preliminaries.”

Denucci stepped carefully around the bodies and made several notations in his pad. “Sad thing, isn’t it?”

Murdock agreed.

“What’s even sadder is that we never saw it coming.”

“And there was nobody in the vicinity that saw or heard anything?”

“Nobody.” Denucci pointed his pen at the oil paintings. “It’s too bad they couldn’t tell us anything, huh?”

Murdock just laid a hand on his old friend’s shoulder. “Look, Tony, if something comes up will you let me know? Give me something to go on?”

“Sure. If something comes up.”

Murdock gave him a wink. “Thanks, buddy. And hey, don’t be a stranger. Let’s go on a booze cruise some time and tell war stories.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Murdock exited the Governor’s Mansion and took stock. Beyond the police tape, the mob of onlookers had grown exponentially since he entered the house. Vans with microwave dishes now lined up by the dozen, the emblems of major networks stenciled on their sides. Newscasters and journalists tried to press their way through the line, their mics held out in a desperate bid to pick up an informative byte from the officers that maintained the perimeter.

Murdock knew the situation was going to demand long hours on little sleep, something his body was no longer equipped for at the age of fifty-four.

For almost twenty-five years he had moved up through the ranks with the same aggression he managed in the ring, with tenacity and posturing. He was finally rewarded with a position in the president’s Secret Security detail in 1990, then became the detail’s chief in 2002.

But with responsibility comes accountability. And when one holds the reins of the team he drives, and if the team should stumble gravely in its efforts, then the accusing finger inevitably points back at the driver. In Murdock’s case, he could already sense the political finger pointing in his direction, identifying him as the party responsible for the death of his team and the kidnapping of the pope.

Reaching inside the inner pocket of his overcoat, he grabbed his pack of smokes, withdrew a cigarette, and smoked it slowly, wondering how long it would take for the ax to fall upon his once illustrious career.

## **Chapter 9**

### ***The White House September 23, Noon***

The Situation Room was the nerve center of presidential crisis management. It sat directly below the Oval Office and could seat twenty-four people.

CIA, FBI and Homeland Security dignitaries sat at the table, along with President Burroughs, Vice President Jonas Bohlmer, Chief Presidential Advisor

Alan Thornton and Attorney General Dean Hamilton. Normally a room to sequester members of the Pentagon and Joint Chiefs of Staff to determine the potential for war, President Burroughs distinguished the kidnapping of the pope as a non-military issue after a quick briefing with the military principles. The officers remained seated as mere spectators now, as President Burroughs turned his attention to the members of the intelligence community.

With his sleeves rolled to his elbows as if gearing up to engage in blue-collar labor, the president possessed the appearance of someone who was aware of being under a worldwide microscope. Despite the American policy of never negotiating with terrorists, the president could almost feel the Sword of Damocles falling on an international scale if his administration refused to bend to the will of the Soldiers of Islam.

“All right, people,” he said. “Settle down.”

The room fell silent as something indescribably awkward hung in the air. It was something like tension, but thicker and far more palpable. “Last night,” he began, “or this morning, however you want to look at it, I lost four good men to the hands of terrorists. Now can anybody here tell me how a cell could succeed in taking out *my* people in *my* backyard without any prior intelligence?” Despite his efforts to remain in control, his tone became angry, menacing, each word louder than the previous. “Anybody?”

Nobody dared to proffer an answer. The assembled dignitaries silently stared at the sheets of paper in front of them.

“Talk to me, people! I didn’t bring you in here to clam up.”

Attorney General Dean Hamilton initiated a response. “Mr. President, if I may.”

“Please.”

“After what happened at the Governor’s Mansion, we immediately processed the identities of the two Arabs found in the house and got hits on both of them.” He looked at his intel sheet. “One was al-Hashrie Rantissi, a Jordanian national with ties to al-Qaeda.”

“So al-Qaeda is behind this?”

“We’re not totally sure,” he said. “The other Arab, al-Bashrah Aziz, is a Saudi national who also has ties to al-Qaeda.”

The president appeared puzzled. “So how are we not sure that this is the doing of al-Qaeda if both men have ties to the organization?”

CIA Director Doug Craner leaned forward, placed his glasses on the tabletop, and spoke pointedly. “Because, Mr. President, our intel tells us that there was absolutely no discussion in the chat rooms prior to this incident. The only activity occurred after the incident was broadcast by the news media.”

“Which means what?”

“It means, Mr. President, that there seems to be confusion among the terrorist organizations as to who is responsible. The activity on the web indicates curiosity rather than culpability. We think this action was conducted by the Soldiers of Islam as a rogue group working independently from al-Qaeda.”

“New blood, then?”

“Yes, sir. And we don’t know how they’ll conduct themselves since we have no knowledge or insight about their activities. All we can say, Mr. President, is that

when we got the strikes on al-Hashrie and al-Bashrah, we were able to bring up their profiles.”

Craner gave stapled copies of his report to an aide, who handed them out to everybody at the table. On the front page was a photograph of al-Hashrie Rantissi, taken two years ago when he entered the United States.

“Al-Hashrie,” he continued, gleaning from memory, “is a Jordanian national who came to this country two years ago, after serving a six-month stint in an al-Qaeda training camp located along the Afghan border. The other body identified, al-Bashrah, helped al-Hashrie form a sleeper cell in Utah, along with six others. For the past two years, they have remained dormant.”

“Until now?”

“Until now—yes, sir.”

“And the other six?” asked the president.

“Through our intel sources we were able to confirm and identify each member of the cell. We obtained warrants and raided their residences. Unfortunately for us, the areas were sanitized. The computers left behind were useless; the hard drives were completely fried.”

The president remained disconcertingly quiet. After a moment’s hesitation he said, “So at least we know who the other six are—the Soldiers of Islam.”

“Yes, sir. They’re all on the FBI’s watch list.”

The president glanced at his watch, knowing that the world was waiting for a televised response regarding the kidnapping. At the moment he had nothing to offer, the Soldiers of Islam having yet to make any demands. “When they call,” he said almost too quietly, “are we to bend in our policy of non-negotiation?”

“We’re not talking about an expendable here,” said Thornton, his advisor of three years, whose numerous accolades for political achievements covered the walls of his office. “We’re talking about the pope. And if we allow these terrorists to harm him due to *our* unwillingness to bend, we would most likely come under extreme criticism from our allies. The voices of over a billion Catholics have the power to be heard.”

“I agree,” said the president.

Thornton turned to President Burroughs with an expression of defeat. “So I believe the answer is yes, Mr. President. We’ll need to make concessions. Perhaps many.”

The president seemed to focus on an imaginary point on the tabletop. “That’ll be your department, Dean,” he said. “You’re the attorney general. The FBI is your gig.”

The president turned to Hamilton with a no-nonsense look. His tone indicated that he would not tolerate mistakes. “This is not to be turned into another Waco or Ruby Ridge. Is that understood?”

“Clearly, Mr. President.”

“Options, then.”

Hamilton wasn’t through. “I say we bring in Shari Cohen,” he said. “Anybody who knows her can tell you there is no one more suited to handle this situation than her. She’s at the top of her game and perhaps the best this country has to offer.”

The president appeared to ponder this, tapping a finger against his chin.

Shari Cohen was the Bureau's top negotiator for the Hostage Rescue Team based in the Washington Metropolitan Field Office. She also held the title of Assistant Director of the FBI's CIRG, or Critical Incident Response Group. And when time permitted, she worked in collaboration with Homeland Security, educating their agents who worked in counterterrorism.

Then, "I agree with your assessment. Bring her in."

Vice President Bohlmer vociferously stated his objection. "Mr. President," he said, "Have you forgotten the demographic we're dealing with here? We're talking about a male-dominated regime that recognizes women as property. To put in a female negotiator and someone of Jewish faith on top of it—no offense to Ms. Cohen or to her religious heritage or abilities—to negotiate with Islamic terrorists is an assured insult to their principles. And in recompense for our actions, you can be certain that they *will* kill Pope Pius."

President Burroughs appeared at a crossroads. "Second option, then."

"I would suggest Billy Paxton."

"Never heard of him."

"Fully qualified. Very good."

"But he's not Cohen."

"No, sir. But Paxton is not too far behind. In fact, he committed his talents to a hosting country and Congressional approval on two separate occasions to free up American hostages."

President Burroughs remained silent and nibbled softly on his lower lip. "Then we'll use Paxton as the figurehead with Cohen working in Paxton's shadow. But I want Cohen to maintain control of the unit."

"Mr. President," Bohlmer immediately protested, "I really have to object to this. If the Soldiers of Islam find out that Cohen is involved—"

"Your objection, Jonas, is duly noted. Thank you." Then to the room in general, "Further advice as to direction?"

Thornton leaned forward with the points of his brows dipping sharply over the bridge of his nose, as if he had given the matter considerable thought. "I suggest, Mr. President, that we at least try to appear committed to the policy of not negotiating with terrorists. We don't want to open the door to every degenerate group in the country who has demands to make. We'll need to set up an international coalition and make it clear that any concessions or compromises are made by the international community. That way, if something should go wrong, the blame cannot rest solely on the shoulders of the United States."

"In other words, you're saying that we should set up a situation so that all nations are involved—just in case."

"Yes, sir. That would take care of international ostracism if the pope's safety cannot be secured."

"You don't sound very optimistic."

"I'm just covering all the bases, sir."

President Burroughs began to drum his fingers against the tabletop, his mind working. "Then get every international liaison involved," he finally said. "I want their opinions, their suggestions, and I want it understood that we'll share common responsibility in this matter whether the outcome is good, bad or indifferent."

“Understood.”

“I also want direct lines to my office from every liaison involved. And I want to know everything that’s going on, twenty-four-seven.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll inform the media of only what we want them to know. Let them know that this is an international effort. If something should ultimately go wrong, I do not want this madness to fall on our shoulders.”

The president searched the faces around him. “Per the guidelines of the Patriot Act, I want all agencies to work together on a constant basis. I want everybody on the same page. The CIA Advance Team will monitor all chat lines abroad to gather whatever intel is available and network the information to everybody involved. Is that understood?”

There was mumbled agreement.

“That’s it, people. Today you start earning your keep. So go out there and do what you do best.”

There was an immediate movement of forces, some already on cell phones instructing aides to contact international liaisons, others calling to gather a writing staff to generate material for the media.

As the Situation Room emptied, President Burroughs sat quietly digesting all that had occurred. This was strictly politics, and he recognized his own role, in spite of his subjective feelings. There was absolutely no concern about the fate of the pope. The meeting was about saving face in the eyes of the international community. The life of Pope Pius was a secondary issue.

Feeling dirty, the president closed his eyes and sighed.

## Chapter 10

### ***Mossad Headquarters, Tel Aviv, Israel September 23, Mid-Afternoon***

The Hebrew word for “Institute” is Mossad, Israel’s legendary agency for collecting intelligence data and conducting covert operations. Presently, Mossad had 20,000 active agents and 15,000 sleeper agents worldwide, including operatives in the former communist countries, the Arab nations, and the west, including the United States.

Mossad’s PALD, the Political Action and Liaison Department, was responsible for maintaining liaisons with friendly foreign services by transmitting data and updating the terrorist database. On this day, the department was like an ant colony, well-constructed and orderly, the work-pace quick and efficient. Requests for information regarding the Soldiers of Islam poured in, with the Washington, D.C. branch of the FBI and the CIA at the top of the list.

Going over reports from the Research Department, Yosef Rokach sat at his desk with a cigarette burning between his fingers, the smoke undulating lazily through the air. In the world of espionage, he was born to Hebrew parents that were killed by Hezbollah raiders and graduated from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

within the top ten percent of his class. But in reality, he was John McEachern, an American-born citizen who grew up in an Indiana suburb without a drop of Hebrew blood coursing through his veins.

Upon his commencement from Notre Dame University, where he earned a Doctorate in Systems and Networking in the same time it took most people to earn a Bachelor's degree, McEachern obtained an internship with the CIA. He worked at the lowest levels, not realizing that he was actually being monitored for strengths and weaknesses. When it was reported that he had an affinity for Middle-Eastern languages and digested them easily and with amazing rapidity, he was recruited as a sleeper. After four years of learning to improvise through tense situations and training his body to beat the polygraph and resist the constraints of sodium pentothal, John McEachern, born of Irish parents, was ready for the field.

So when a counterfeit profile was created and imbued into every known system within Israel's computerized infrastructure, Yosef Rokach was born. According to all background checks, he was devout to his religion, committed to his people, and an outstanding citizen in every respect by Hebrew standards. But after seven years within Mossad, he still had not made it beyond a low-level ranking within the PALD.

Taking a final drag of his cigarette, he stubbed it out and fell back in his chair, interlacing his fingers behind his head. The room was huge and open, with desks and monitors everywhere and not a cubicle in sight. The office boasted bomb blast glass walls and high-tech security equipment. Eye scans restricted secured areas to specific personnel. Software with facial recognition capabilities was used to identify employees on file. Everything was based on the assumption that no one could be trusted. The data handled by the office was so vital it was considered more important than a human life. And employees caught betraying the Mossad trust would find themselves before the agency's interrogation specialists.

Yosef looked directly into a homing camera.

From all points excited chatter could be heard, the urgency behind the exchanges normally reserved for attacks against Israeli interests. But this was not the case. The pope was missing. Catholics throughout the world were calling for the intervention of anyone who could bring back the Holy Father unharmed. Mossad saw this as an opportunity to show the world that Arab hostility understood no boundaries, that the Israeli plight was now the plight of all people. Israel wished to impart to its allies a better understanding of what it's like to live under the constant tyranny of a fanatical enemy.

From a bank of elevators that led to departments Yosef couldn't access emerged David Gonick. Stepping from the elevator quickly, Gonick headed toward the restroom, his face thoroughly pale and ashen. He wrung his hands nervously and appeared visibly shaken, as if he had witnessed something horrible. Gonick had been another CIA installation who had infiltrated the Lohamah Psychlogit Department. Lohamah Psychlogit, also known as Literature and Publications or LAP, was responsible for psychological warfare, propaganda and deception operations. To be a member of the LAP, one had to have Q Clearance, which was limited to those few at the top of the food chain. The CIA's infiltration of that particular level and installation of one of its own took years of maneuvering. But to

see Gonick in this manner addled Yosef since Gonick was always a man of refinement under extreme pressure.

Had he been made?

Moments later Gonick returned from the rest room. Not once did he turn Yosef's way or acknowledge him as he hastily made his way to the elevator. Upon his return, however, the knot of his tie was lowered and the top button of his shirt undone. It was a signal.

Yosef rubbed his hand vaguely over his face, sensing a long-awaited fruition. Standing, Yosef tried to look as relaxed as possible before heading for the restroom. The people around him did not take notice of his leaving. They were intimately involved in their own duties, and Yosef was just one nondescript face among many. In fact Yosef excelled at being unremarkable; he was a ghost among the living.

The restroom was empty and clean. The urinals were to the left, the toilet stalls to the right. Entering the third stall, Yosef closed the louvered door behind him and waited. While he stood there, a sense of paranoia swept over him. He breathed deeply and waited for it to pass. Quietly, he lifted the lid to the tank. Lying on the bottom of the tank, almost invisible to the naked eye, was a data stick encased in a clear jewel case. It was state-of-the-art small, but it carried a huge memory load.

Using toilet paper to wipe the case dry, he placed the stick in a special pocket within the cuff of his pants. After replacing the lid, he took a deep breath to collect himself and left the stall.

As per protocol he would decipher the data on the stick and forward it to his American associates. His value as an agent, after years of training, had simply come down to his computer skills, something he didn't see as particularly glamorous for a spy. Yosef more or less continued to romanticize the theatrical side of espionage, envisioning himself walking along fog-laden streets late at night, meeting connections hiding in deep shadows. In truth, however, he held something more important, something far more tangible than romantic ideas. The data stick in his possession, no bigger than a human thumb, contained enough information to bring the planet to the brink of global war.

Returning to his desk acting as if the day was normal, Yosef couldn't wait to get home to decipher the data.

## **Chapter 11**

### ***Vatican City***

#### ***September 23, Mid-Afternoon***

They were known as the Society of Seven, a private sect within the Vatican made up of the pope, the Vatican's Secretary of State, and five of the pope's most trusted cardinals from the Curia.

In a restricted chamber in the lower level of the Basilica, seven chairs were situated on a marble platform rising four feet from the floor. The pope's chair, a king's throne layered in gold leaf, stood vacant. The second chair, nearly as

impressive as the pope's, but smaller and less imaginative, was occupied by the Vatican's Secretary of State. Surrounding him dressed in full regalia sat the cardinals of the Curia.

The hall was grand, ancient—an underground haven in which past popes and their secret alliances had met time and again. The walls were made of lime, the ceiling vaulted and supported by massive Romanesque columns. The chamber's acoustics were poor, words often traveling across the room in echoes. And the light came from gas-lit lamps moored along the walls, giving the room a dire medieval cast.

As the Society of Seven waited, an echoing cadence of footfalls sounded from beyond the chamber door, their pace quick with urgency. At the opposite end of the chamber a door of solid oak labored on its hinges as it swung inward. From the shadows, a man of incredible height and stature walked toward the platform with a gait and bearing that spoke of power and confidence. His shoulders were impossibly broad, his chest and arms stretching the fabric of his cleric's shirt to its limit. His upper body mass, V-shaped, tapered to a trim waist and chiseled legs. When he reached the base of the stage, he removed his beret, dropped to a knee, and placed a closed fist over his heart.

"Loyalty above all else," he said, "except Honor." This was the salute of the Vatican Knights.

The Vatican's aged Secretary of State, Cardinal Bonasero Vessucci, rose with difficulty and walked the three stairs to the marble floor where the large man remained kneeling. "Stand, my friend. We've much to talk about."

Kimball Hayden got to his feet, towering over Cardinal Vessucci, whose stooped height barely reached Kimball's chest. When the cardinal placed a hand on the man's shoulder, he had to reach high above his head to do so.

"You know why we've called you." The cardinal spoke in fluent English.

"I do."

Vessucci kept his hand on Kimball's shoulder using the larger man as a crutch. "Then assemble your team and return our pope and the members of the Holy See to us. Do whatever is necessary to achieve this goal. Is that understood?"

Kimball nodded.

"If these terrorists wish to pick a fight with the Roman Catholic Church, then a fight they'll get." Vessucci lowered his hand and stopped in his tracks, the short walk too taxing for the old man. "We may be a small state, but we also have the right to protect the sovereignty of the Church, its interests, and the welfare of its citizenry. I understand that the act of engagement is complicated by its lack of rules, but you have to be discreet in such matters, if possible. Should something tragic occur, Kimball, the Church may have no choice but to disavow any knowledge of the Vatican Knights. We cannot afford your methods to draw any unwanted attention to the Church."

Kimball placed a gentle hand on his old friend, as much to stabilize the man as to express his good will. He hated to see the cardinal in this condition—a man of greatness deteriorating inch by inch, the victim of a degenerative bone disease. "When do we leave?"

"Immediately. You'll be flying from Rome into Dulles via private jet. Once on American soil, you'll need to contact Cardinal Juan Medeiros at the Sacred Hearts



Church, one mile east of the Washington Archdiocese. He'll be your intel source—a good man.”

Kimball gave a light squeeze to the cardinal's shoulder before getting to a knee and placing a closed fist over his heart. “Loyalty above all else,” he repeated, “except Honor.”

The cardinal reciprocated Kimball's gesture with one of his own, placing a hand on top of Kimball's head—an act of anointing, an act of honor. “Be safe, my friend. The Church has faith in those who believe in righteousness. May God be with you.”

Kimball stood, turned, and walked away from the Society of Seven, his footsteps echoing off the ancient stone walls.

## Chapter 12

### ***The White House September 23, Mid-Afternoon***

The total area of the White House is 65,000 square feet, including the basement and sub-basement. But as far as the president was concerned, it was not enough space. All around him, White House staff worked like drones, seemingly everywhere at once.

Voices whined and chattered, becoming an incessant buzz that hammered at his temples unmercifully, even within his private study.

All he wanted, even for fifteen minutes, was a short reprieve to regroup his thoughts and emotions.

And he found it in the Press Briefing Room, a small, closed-in area no larger than a decent-sized living room. Forty-eight theater-style chairs stood empty before him.

President Burroughs stood in front of the staging area looking over an empty audience, then rubbed the palms of his hands over his eyes until he saw bright patterns. He knew this room would soon be packed with media shouting out questions for which he had no answers.

“I knew you'd be here,” said the vice president. His voice always projected smoothly, calmly, except when he was involved in a hotly-contested political debate or lobbying for a cause. “It's an odd place to find peace and quiet, isn't it?” The vice president stood behind the podium, then hooked his fingers over the edges and took a firm grip as if he was about to lead Mass for a congregation of one. “Are you all right, Jim? It's not like you to run away from matters.”

The president pitched a sigh. “I'm not running from the situation, Jonas. I'm running from the moment.”

“You know it's only going to get worse from here, don't you?”

The president lowered one of the seats in the gallery and sat down. “When I woke up this morning,” he began, “I knew it was going to be a bad day. Call it presidential insight, intuition, call it whatever you want. But something told me

that today was going to be a challenge that I'm not sure I'm up to—that we're up to."

The vice president stared at the seamless face of Jim Burroughs. "We'll get through this," he said. "We have to."

The president offered a weak smile. "We've been through a lot together, you and me." He draped an arm over the back of a neighboring seat. "I guess that's what happens when you have Senator Burroughs from New York and Senator Bohlmer from California running on the same ticket in a race for the White House. People expect a lot from us."

"And we've provided."

"Until now," he added.

"There's nothing you could have done, Jim, to prevent what happened. You took all the necessary precautions. You put your detail in place as required."

"My detail was murdered, Jonas, by a team of insurgents who walked right into my backyard, which makes this country appear vulnerable—to the American people and to our allies. Not a good thing."

"Jim, they were highly skilled militants trained well above the level of your people. You know that."

"Of course I know that. But the court of public opinion and the people of this nation will only see a breach in American superiority. Our government suddenly appears incapable of providing the security that the nation expects."

"Which is all the more reason why we have to make things right," Bohlmer returned.

The president closed his eyes, his headache abating little. "We're doing all we can, Jonas," he answered weakly, "given what we have to go on."

"I agree. But there's still an issue we need to address."

The president opened his eyes. "Such as?"

"Shari Cohen."

The president raised his hands intuitively. "Please, Jonas, we've already discussed this matter upstairs, and your concern was duly noted. But her presence in this matter is vital."

"Her presence, Jim, is dangerous. How many people do you think are working on this right now?"

The president shrugged. "A lot."

"Exactly. A lot. And how long do you think it'll take for somebody from the Post, the Times, or the Globe to make an offer to someone who is willing to divulge the fact that a woman of Jewish faith is manning the team? You know as well as I do that leaks are caused by those who are willing to set aside their integrity for a pocketful of change. It's a fact, Jim. And I'll bet you anything that you have somebody up there right now who's willing to sell their mother upriver for a can of beer."

"We have a failsafe in place against leaks."

"Jim, a failsafe is not foolproof. You know that."

"What do you want me to do? Take the best person I have off the job because of her religious background?"

“In this case, yes! You know what the Soldiers of Islam will do to the pope if they find out Cohen is tracking them. Not because of what she *does*, but because of *who* she is.”

“If I remove every qualified person from their positions because of their religious affiliations—or any of the rights granted them by the Constitution—then the terrorists already won the battle by forcing me to make decisions based on insurgent beliefs.” The president closed his eyes, the pain beginning to erode his patience. “You need to have faith in our work force, Jonas. Shari Cohen is an unbelievable power. And when all this is over with, they’ll be kneeling at her feet. Believe me.”

“And you need to be realistic. You know we won’t be able to meet their demands, whatever they may be. And deep down you know they have every intention of killing him.”

“Jonas, if they were going to kill him, then they would have done so when they stormed the Governor’s Mansion; they’re keeping him alive for a reason.”

Bohlmer left the podium, his hands gesticulating wildly to press his point. “Jim, the Soldiers of Islam are making a powerful statement to the world that they’re in control and gathering steam for recruitment by doing what they’re doing. It’s all about giving hope to insurgents by instilling in them the belief that a battle can be fought and won on American soil.” Bohlmer took in a long breath, then sighed. “They’re going to kill him, Jim. You know that. Let’s not give the media a rope to hang us with by keeping Cohen in the game. This will doom the entire administration.”

“Look, nobody understands better than I do that saving the face of this administration is paramount. But if I remove Cohen as head of the team, the probability of finding the pope decreases immensely. With Cohen at the helm, there is a chance that he will be found. If the pope is alive, I must make every effort to save his life using whatever resources are available to me. And Cohen is a valuable asset.”

“Cohen is going to get him killed!” The vice president was becoming heated. “Think about it! The moment a leak is established, his life will be over. There will be no more opportunities to track down this cell and the Soldiers of Islam will disappear.”

The president weighed the possibility that Bohlmer’s judgment was correct. With a topic of this magnitude, a leak could most certainly occur, despite the failsafe put into place. In all likelihood the media had already attempted to contact White House moles for information that hadn’t been made public. If Cohen’s name should hit the airwaves, the odds of the pope being executed would rise exponentially. And then the accusing finger would point at his administration. The newspapers would go on a feeding frenzy, attacking Burroughs for allowing Cohen to manage the team, even though the dangers were acknowledged beforehand by his staff.

“She’s the best we have,” he finally stated.

“She’s a guaranteed death sentence for the pope if the Soldiers of Islam find out that a woman of Jewish faith is behind the investigation. I can’t stress that enough.”

“She stays, Jonas. I’m not particularly afraid if I hurt the feelings of the Soldiers of Islam. As long as the pope’s alive, she’s the most qualified to find him.”

“You may not be afraid of the Soldiers of Islam, but you are afraid of how the world community will perceive you should this blow up in your face.”

President Burroughs raked the vice president with a fierce eye. “She stays, Jonas.”

The vice president was becoming ill-tempered, his face becoming ruddy. He was not used to losing ground in an argument. “Jim, we’re never going to find him. And do you want to know why? It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack the size of Manhattan.”

He then stood back, found his calm, and spoke in a much gentler tone.

“Look, Jim, this is politics. And we both know that we need to cover our bases on this one. As much as I feel sorry for the pope, and as much as I would love to find him, we can’t let our emotions cloud our judgment. The reality is that the probability of finding him is zero to none.”

The president’s eyes settled on Bohlmer, his demeanor stern and unrelenting, but his voice remaining calm. “I know this is politics,” he said. “But it’s better politics if we put in the best there is and make a concerted effort to find him.”

The vice president looked incredulous. “I don’t get it,” he said. “The picture is right in front of you, yet you continue to put us and the rest of this administration in jeopardy because of her.”

The president remained silent.

“If I didn’t know better, Jim, I would swear you want this to happen. That you want the media to know—”

“That’s enough, Jonas.” The president held up his hand, knowing what Bohlmer was about to say. “I’m not going to argue this point with you any longer. I have based my decision on our government’s potential to find the pope and bring him back alive. If you’re afraid that my decision will determine what the Soldiers of Islam will do to undermine this administration, then deal with it. Once again, your input is appreciated and duly noted.”

Bohlmer took a step back, his jaw tight. “All right,” he said. “But you’ll have to live with your decision, Jim. When they kill him, and they will, I hope you can stand on your own two feet. I tried to reason with you.”

“I’ll stand alone on this if I have to.”

“I just wanted to let you know where I stood.”

The president nodded his head. “Noted.”

After Bohlmer left, the president wondered how much of a gamble he was taking by leaving Cohen in the lineup. He hated to admit it, but there was merit in what the vice president said.

With the ache in his temples sharpening into a stabbing bout of pain, the president leaned forward in his chair and placed his face within his cupped hands, wondering how the game of politics was going to play out.

## Chapter 13

**Washington, D.C.**  
**September 23, Early Afternoon**

Shari Cohen's greatest achievement in life was graduating *cum laude* from Georgetown University; a strong second was being selected as class speaker and representative for the highly touted group of scholars making their way into the real world. Although many graduated as physicians, attorneys, and business prodigies, Shari's proficiency was in International Studies and Strategic Counterterrorism. Upon graduation, she was actively recruited by the NSA, the CIA and the FBI.

She started in the FBI, like most agents, tarrying around the bottom rung until she was able to prove herself. But with perseverance and determination, she rose steadily through the ranks until 9/11, when her knowledge and skills immediately triggered a meteoric rise. Now, as head of the Bureau's Hostage Rescue Team, she had served as lead in dozens of scenarios in which her tactical negotiations and innovative thinking had saved numerous lives. In time, her strategic methods would become departmental protocol, helping the Bureau keep pace with evolving ideologies, especially when dealing with the Middle East.

In the living room of her brownstone, as Shari picked up her daughter's books that were scattered across the living room floor, CNN was reporting on the death of Maryland's First Lady, Darlene Steele.

Since no statement had been made by the political brass, CNN offered baseless theories about her death gleaned from "inside" sources, who informed the news media more out of speculation than fact. The end result was a constant looping of assumptive news that became monotonously redundant as she picked up books by Dr. Seuss and Mother Goose and began to stack them into the bookcase.

Gary Molin entered the room wearing a cooking mitt on one hand and holding a two-pronged fork in the other. He was tall and slender with olive-colored skin. His eyes were battleship gray, a drab color that paralleled the dreariness of his humor. For months he and his wife had been growing apart, each talking "at" each other instead of "to" each other. When they hugged or kissed or expressed any type of physical affection, it felt obligatory, insincere, even vulgar. But the true mystery was that neither could remember when they started to drift apart. There was no specific argument or event or act of lascivious impropriety that drove a wedge between them. It was something quite simple, really. The romantic glow of infatuation was simply going away, the once-burning flame barely a smoldering ember. Worse, they both knew it. Nevertheless, each tried to hang on to the other with futile gestures, such as cooking candlelit dinners with fancy French names, with chilled bottles of wine sitting in an ornately-styled silver ice bucket. Then they would sit in awkward silence as they ate, the conversation hard to come by, their passion as elusive as the proper words to initiate a simple thread of discussion.

Tonight Gary was making Greek lamb with spinach and orzo, a favorite of Shari's during their honeymoon in the Greek Isles several years earlier. It was an effort to bring back the times when they were star-struck just to be in each other's company, to hear each other's voice.

He stepped further into the room, the smell of baked meat wafting behind him. “Anything new?”

“It’s still guesswork at this point,” she said. Her tone was flat and withdrawn as she continued to place the books onto the bookshelves.

For a moment Gary’s eyes appeared saddened. Her tone seemed to confirm that their marriage was as artificial as their attempts to communicate.

When breaking news from CNN interrupted the current programming, the anchorwoman reported that a White House spokesman was about to take the podium in the Brady Press Room.

A balding man with Botox lips and a soft appearance stepped to the podium and faced an audience of reporters. Something about his demeanor evoked the impression of a troll, and he spoke in a high-pitched whine. This was not the image Shari would have presented to a world audience, a mistake on the part of the White House staff. But as Shari expected, the first words spoken were of condemnation for the terrorist regime and the obvious call for justice. Then the spokesperson slid neatly into what everybody was waiting to hear—that the Soldiers of Islam were responsible, and there was now an international effort to bring these terrorists to justice and to acquire the safety of Pope Pius the XIII. Nothing was ever mentioned of the terrorists’ identities.

As the spokesperson elaborated, the phone rang. Shari backed up with her eyes on the television and reached blindly for the phone on the wall. After talking briefly in hushed tones, she slowly placed the receiver back on the cradle. “That was the attorney general,” she said. “He wants to see me right away.”

Although Gary showed no emotion, she could tell he was seething underneath.

“I’m sorry,” she told him. “I know it was important to you that we have dinner together tonight.”

He shrugged. “Yeah... well, whatever.”

She appeared wounded; the tone of his voice was deliberately biting. “Gary, this is my job. This is what I do. I don’t have a choice in the matter.”

In a quick display of warring emotions, his face transitioned from anger, to pain, and then to a semblance of understanding.

“He said the president wanted to see me right away.”

Realizing the lamb was wasted, Gary removed the cooking mitt and tossed it on the sofa. “I understand,” he said. But his voice carried the flatness of someone too hurt to care.

“Look, Gary, I’m sorry. You know I wanted to spend tonight with you.” This was a modicum of a lie and Gary knew it. Lying was not her forte. But he knew that she wanted desperately to believe that her marriage wasn’t failing. Shari Cohen never failed at anything in her life.

He stepped forward and looked into her eyes. “Shari, seriously, help me understand what’s happening here, with us. Are you losing interest? Is it because I’m a stay-at-home dad? What? Help me out, will you?”

“There’s nothing to discuss, Gary.” She pointed to the TV, maintaining calm. “You see what’s going on. You know what I do for a living.”

He hesitated before speaking, and then softly he said, “I know you’re a mother and a wife. And I know I’m your husband. And I know you’re running away from me.” He rounded the sofa. “You wouldn’t even take my last name when we

married. I know, I know, “professional” reasons. But I guess I can’t help thinking you just didn’t want to be associated with me.”

She let her hand fall. “Gary...” She let her words trail because she knew he was right. She was running away. Even using her maiden name wasn’t escape enough.

Shari moved before her husband and leaned into his embrace. She didn’t feel any sense of love or passion, but an overwhelming sadness that brought her to the brink of tears. “You are without a doubt, Gary Molin, a good man. And don’t you ever forget that.”

He drew back and feigned a smile. And then with the back of his hand he caressed the strands of hair off her forehead so that her hairstyle completely framed her beautiful face without errant locks interrupting her features. “I’m not angry with you, honey. I’m just scared of where we’re going.”

“We’ll talk,” she said. “I promise.” There was no smile, not even a false one. And then she placed a hand over his heart. She could feel the moderate beats against her palm. “I know you’re disappointed, but I have to go.”

“I guess when your wife is the head of the Hostage Rescue Team, then this is to be expected, right?”

“Thank you for understanding,” she said.

He shrugged. “What else can I do?”

“I just need time, that’s all.”

“What we need is time to talk. And I mean *talk*.”

She remained forcibly calm. “Right now, Gary, there’s a lot on my plate and the attorney general is calling me. Please understand the pressure I’m going through right now because it’s obvious to me that I’m heading into an impossible task. I need to believe that I can do this.”

“You can,” he told her. “He’s bringing you in because he believes in you like I do.” He then pulled her close once again, this time kissing the crown of her head. “You can do this, Shari. This is what you were built for.”

When she drew back he saw the worry in her eyes and the uncertainty on her face. Normally she was brimming with the fortitude to meet a challenge head-on. But this time she was different. This time she appeared unusually troubled, which seemed to shake her normally stalwart confidence. Always keeping to the adage that a single setback doesn’t crumble an empire, she undoubtedly knew in this case that a single error in judgment could endanger not only the pope’s life, but also the stability of the world order. But how could she save the world if she couldn’t even save her own marriage?

Grateful for his vote of confidence, she hugged him, the feeling not so vulgar, and then departed to do battle against the Soldiers of Islam armed only with excellent judgment.

## Chapter 14

***Vatican City***

***September 23, Late Afternoon***

They had taken their names from the Books of the Old Testament, with the exception of Kimball Hayden, who held the moniker of Archangel but never used it. Danny Keaton had taken the name of Leviticus, Joey Hathaway the name of Micah, Lorenzo Martinez became Nehemiah, and Christian Placentia was known as Isaiah.

After years of growing up behind Vatican walls, these men had developed into a band of brothers groomed to be the Crusaders of a new age. They had been trained by the best in the world and had mastered much more than the martial arts. They also studied a variety of philosophies, from Aristotle to Epicurus, with an emphasis on the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. Art also had its place in their education; they developed insight into the subtleties and symbolism of Da Vinci and Michelangelo. For a Vatican Knight, it was believed that development of the mind was equally as important as development of the body.

Under Kimball's command they had entered the jungles of the Philippines and South America to save the lives of missionaries held hostage. Other times they had traveled to eastern bloc countries to protect priests from dissident insurgents. And often they interceded in bloody skirmishes between opposing religious factions in Third World nations.

But those who took out the president's detail did so with deadly precision and sophistication that would rival the proficiency of the Vatican Knights.

With the exception of Kimball Hayden, Leviticus was the most battle tested, having served in more conflicts than any other Knight with *mêlée* scars to prove his conquests.

Micah, Nehemiah and Isaiah were less rough-hewn, though their fresh-scrubbed appearances made them no less deadly. Their acquired skills marked them as some of the most formidable combatants in the world. Micah was an expert in double-edged weapons. Nehemiah and Isaiah were masters of silent killing. But all these men complemented each other like connected pieces of a puzzle.

Spiritually, there was no one more deeply entrenched in their faith. Mentally, there was no team more dedicated to doing what was right. And physically, they were the finest any commander could ever hope for. Kimball was fully confident that they were the best in the world, not only as soldiers, but as men.

He was proud of his team.

Walking along the path that divided the Old Gardens, Kimball moved with urgency until he reached Divinity House, the garrison of the Vatican Knights, an uncharted building situated between St. Martha's Chapel and the Ethiopian College, about 200 meters west of the Basilica. The building itself was simple and nondescript, its purpose to draw little attention.

The building's interior was constructed of stone and rock shingle. Located along the walls where torches once burned were electric sconces. Natural light came in through stained glass windows that signified the Stations of the Cross. In the center of the structure was the Circular Chamber, a huge rotunda that separated the building into two distinct wings. It was a room of ceremony where men became knights of the Vatican and where viewings were held for knights who had fallen in battle.



The floor was a masterpiece of mosaic tile, majestically cobbled together to form the emblem of the Vatican Knights. Centered within the coat of arms was a Silver Cross Pattée set against a blue background. The colors were significant. Silver represented peace and sincerity, and blue signified truth and loyalty. Standing alongside the coat of arms were two heraldic lions rising on their hind legs with their forepaws against the shield, stabilizing it. The lions were a symbolic representation of bravery, strength, ferocity and valor.

The emblem appeared repeatedly throughout Divinity House. The coat of arms also appeared as a branded insignia on their uniforms and berets. It was even acid-etched on the stone wall of their living quarters above the door.

For the moment it was quiet, the Knights either at prayer or in meditation. Kimball wished to take part in neither of these activities, since he struggled to find his faith. By blood he was a warrior; by nature, a patriot. But as a child of God he found himself in constant turmoil. Peace eluded him like something flitting at the corner of his vision, something close but unobtainable. What he sought could not be found at the altar or within the confines of a confessional. What Kimball truly wanted was to be more than what he really was—a killer.

What he sought was salvation.

Opening the door to his chamber, the hinges squealing, the sound echoing throughout the hollow halls of Divinity House, Kimball began to pack for his journey to America.

His room was small, with the barest necessities. Other than a single-sized bed, nightstand and dresser, there was a small dais with a Bible upon it that had gone unread, and a votive rack and kneeling rail meant for prayer, but the candles had never been lit and the rail never knelt upon. High on the wall, a stained glass window provided the only light into the room. The pieces of leaden glass formed the colorful image of the Virgin Mother reaching out to him with outstretched arms.

After carefully folding his cleric shirts and placing them in a backpack, the act itself homage to the cloth, he made sure he was equally careful with the pristine white Roman collars. Whatever else he and his Knights would need, they would receive from Cardinal Medeiros in the States.

After running the zipper along the backpack, Kimball stood before the mirror and appraised himself, noticing the telltale signs of age beginning to show. After arranging his beret so it tilted to military specs and making sure the Roman collar was straight and clean, Kimball grabbed his backpack and headed off to confront his new challenge. He felt invigorated, a feeling he hadn't felt to this degree since he was a member of the US Force Elite, the one-time assassination squad covertly sanctioned by the president of the United States.

## **Chapter 15**

***Route 1, Boston, Massachusetts.***

***September 23, Late Morning***

Team Leader had divided his unit into two groups: Alpha Team, consisting of five of his most seasoned combatants, and Omega Team, left behind in D.C. to monitor the political maneuverings of the White House and its law enforcement constituencies.

To secure the hostages, Alpha Team placed them in a military cargo truck that had been modified with a false floor. Beneath the cargo bed was a compartment capable of carrying up to nine people in tight quarters. To ensure safety throughout the transportation process, the muffler system was customized so the noxious fumes were directed away from the cargo space at all times. And since the hostages were immobilized by a ketamine derivative, it was highly unlikely they would wake and panic and find themselves cloistered in a dark compartment during the drive north.

Team Leader sat on the passenger side of the cab, the radio tuned to an AM news station, just one of many he had listened to during transport. He stared at the passing landscape with eyes that seemed detached, yet fully aware.

Earlier that morning he had a member of Omega Team place an easily-traced call to CNN from a D.C. pay phone. By then, the transport team was already nearly three hundred miles north, the distance covered before a dragnet could be extended from the nation's capitol.

The timing and location of the call was a red herring. He wanted Washington to believe that the Soldiers of Islam were still in the D.C. area, so that the scope of their search would be concentrated to a smaller radius. But the ruse failed. According to the news, road blocks had been set up on all major highways north, west, and south of the capitol, stretching as far as New York, Florida, and Texas.

Though he had considered his strategy carefully, Team Leader was concerned about the blockades after their military vehicle was stopped by law enforcement on two separate occasions in New York. But when he showed them counterfeit documents claiming their vehicle to be from the 75th Ranger Regiment, a division of the US Army Special Operation Command, the vehicle was waved through without so much as a cursory examination.

Once the truck exited the turnpike and entered Boston central, the driver passed Government Center and negotiated the narrow streets to a pre-established safe house located in Boston's Historical District.

The isolated building was an old and vacant depository made of aged brick, which had cracked and discolored from time and neglect. The first-floor windows were bricked over. The second- and third-story windows, however, were merely boarded over with weathered plywood. The trees surrounding the building were either dead or dying, their limbs knotted like the arthritic twists of an old man's hands. The area had simply gone to waste.

A wrought-iron gate bearing a *No Trespassing: All Violators Prosecuted* sign was securely locked with a thick garland of chain wrapped firmly around the bars. Team Leader got out of the vehicle, searched his pocket for the proper key, and undid the lock. Once the vehicle passed through, he closed and relocked the gate.

The vehicle drove slowly down the weed-laden driveway. Wispy branches from the trees above snapped as the top of the vehicle forced its way through the canopy of skeletal limbs. At the end of the driveway the truck turned into a vacant area behind the building.

There stood a dented fire door, the only way in and out of the building. The entry had been reinforced prior to the mission with a state-of-the-art titanium lock. Reaching into his cargo pocket, Team Leader removed a remote unit and aimed it at the entry. When he depressed a button the bolt mechanism drew back in a series of hollow, metallic clicks, and then the red light on the remote's faceplate turned green, an indication that the door was unlocked.

Moving toward the entry, Team Leader turned the handle, opening the door to a world that was truly blacker than pitch.

## Chapter 16

### ***J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C. September 23, Mid-Afternoon***

The FBI's conference room was much larger and less constrictive than the White House's Situation Room. The room had twenty-foot ceilings and was nearly 1600 square feet. The walls were covered in dark walnut paneling, and serving as the room's focal point, an oil painting of J. Edgar Hoover watched over everyone with his patented scowl. In the center of the room was a large table that held up to three dozen people comfortably, with pitchers of ice water spaced every three feet along the table's length.

The FBI's Deputy Director, George Pappandopolous, sat at one end of the table. Normally a man of good cheer, he seemed somewhat detached and disenchanted, his smiles false, his greetings insincere. It seemed to Shari as if he had already resigned himself to losing the battle over the pope's abduction. She hoped this wasn't the case.

Taking her assigned seat opposite the deputy director, Shari knew that she was about to become the lightning rod of attention.

To her right sat Billy Paxton, who appeared displeased. He had always played the back-up role, never taking the lead—always the electric violin to her Stradivarius. She had become an insurmountable obstacle in his life, preventing him from elevating to the next level. He was always being compared to her but never measuring up. So when she said "Hello," he simply ignored her.

As chatter circulated around the room, Deputy Director George Pappandopolous leaned forward and clasped his hands. Securing the attention of the room, he went directly to the core of the matter.

"As you all know, the president's detail was dispatched by a radical terrorist cell who call themselves the Soldiers of Islam. The incident falls under FBI jurisdiction, but we will nevertheless be working with all international intelligence sources that are ready to aid in the search and rescue of the pope and the governor. So let's get one thing straight: I don't want anybody on my team sitting on vital data. There are fifteen intelligence agencies in this country and dozens more worldwide, and we're to work closely with all of them. Is that clear?"

There was a unified murmur of agreement.

“Here’s what I’ve got so far, just to update you as to what’s going on,” he continued. “We haven’t received any demands from the Soldiers of Islam as of yet. The only call received was the one to CNN at approximately zero-seven-hundred hours. We do know, however, the identities of all terrorists involved. You’ll find their cover sheets and bios in front of you.”

The assembled agents opened the manila folders before them and began examining the documents inside.

“We also know they had ties to al-Qaeda and are presumed to have gone rogue, so we’ll need to develop a strategy to communicate and make the necessary concessions without any foreknowledge of their methods. By the direct authority of the attorney general, Ms. Cohen, who is sitting opposite me, is to take command in this situation with Mr. Paxton acting as speaker.”

Paxton winced as if a gas bubble had lodged painfully in his chest. Is that what he had been reduced to? A mouthpiece? It just seemed disrespectful. Especially for someone who received Congressional approval to act on behalf of the American government in distant lands.

“For those of you who may not know, Ms. Cohen is an expert in counterterrorism and psychoanalytical strategy. Therefore, the attorney general feels that Ms. Cohen is best qualified to command this post. In other words, first there’s God and then there’s Ms. Cohen who will be in direct contact with Chief Presidential Advisor Alan Thornton. There is no other chain of command. *She... is... it.*” Pappandopolous eased back into his chair. “Good luck,” he added, “because we’re going to need it on this one.” He offered Shari the stage by directing a hand toward her. “Ms. Cohen.”

Shari tilted her head in the direction of the deputy director and thanked him. She opened her manila folder and began to peel a page at a time from the stack of papers.

“All right,” she said. “The first rule of thumb is to never assume anything, because everything changes and changes quickly. Therefore, you have to make adjustments and decisions according to the moment. We know the insurgents are Islamic and have an unyielding conviction to die for a cause. So... what else do we need to know?” She raised her hand and ticked off a finger with each question.

“One: How have they or their associates operated in the past? Two: Will they release the hostages when their demands are met or not? Three: Have their dealings with past HRT units been consistent or not? And four: Can we possibly predict a safe outcome based on their past dealings? In other words, *know your enemy.*”

She lowered her hand; her voice had gained strength and momentum with every passing sentence.

“We’ll need to get on this as soon as possible. I want as much information on the remaining operatives as I can get my hands on. Contact the CIA abroad, Mossad, the CTC, whomever it is you need to contact to create the most complete dossier on each individual involved with the Soldiers of Islam. Then we’ll need to create several strategies to deal with them. And I’m going to need all of this at my fingertips when the time comes to negotiate. We’re dealing with the human element here, which is always difficult, but at least we’ll be in a position to act when the terrorists make their next move.”

Shari's speech was well-versed and never missed a beat, which was more of a natural skill than a learned one.

Paxton, on the other hand, seethed with contempt and rolled his eyes.

"Past history is usually a great indicator of future behavior," she continued. "If the group is rogue, we don't have a lot of past accounts, so we'll have to come up with a format based on their individual dossiers. Psychology, in this case, will become paramount. And that's where I'll come in."

Shari peeled off another page, but never referred to it.

"We'll play this based on our data and according to the situation. If the situation seems to be heading in the wrong direction, then we'll have to shift course. That's why we'll need to develop a series of schematics to deal with whatever scenario may arise."

Shari gave each face a quick examination. "Questions?"

There were none, the team apparently resolved and ready for duty.

"Then let's get to it," she said. Her briefing was quick and to the point.

During the next hour Shari moved the staff to a workroom filled with personal computers, terminals, and phones, then divided the assembled experts into groups of three and designated each group a specific task according to their skills and strengths.

In essence, Shari Cohen was flexing her muscles.

## **Chapter 17**

### ***Somewhere Over the Atlantic Ocean September 23, Evening***

Kimball Hayden sat alone in the front of a Gulfstream jet cruising along at twenty-nine thousand feet. The four members of his team were situated throughout the cabin, sitting quietly, their moods matched by the depressive gray of the Atlantic sky.

After drawing a deep breath and releasing it in an equally long sigh, Kimball closed his eyes, trying to attain a moment of peace. But when he closed his eyes, the images always returned: snippets of his life, from his days as a teenager, trying to become an appreciative glimmer in his father's eye, to the moment of his epiphany in Iraq as a member of the Force Elite.

His father, Daryl Hayden, was a man of minimal presence. As a widowed father, having no social standing of his own, he relied on his son's achievements to confirm his own importance. By the time Kimball was seventeen, he was a foot taller than and twice as broad as his father. But Daryl didn't credit his son for being strong, handsome, or charismatic. The way he saw it, these were accidents of nature, not achievements. In fact, Kimball felt his father resented rather than valued these attributes. He spent his entire youth wondering why it was so easy to please others—his classmates, his teachers—but so impossible to please his own father.

He remembered in vivid detail the night he first saw the glow of appreciation in his father's eyes. He was playing linebacker for his high school football team. It was Friday night. The stands were full. And in front of thousands of people, he was being knocked off his assignment by a center that was smaller than him. Repeatedly, Kimball was sent sprawling as the running back ran to daylight through the gaping hole Kimball was supposed to fill. Catcalls erupted; the coach was on the brink of benching him.

When the tailback scored a second touchdown, running through the seam that Kimball was supposed to fill, it all proved too much for his father. So when Kimball went to the sidelines, his father grabbed his facemask and twisted it, the man looking like a child before his behemoth son. Spittle flew from his mouth in rage as he openly chastised his boy, telling him he was an embarrassment to the Hayden name.

More wrenching of the facemask followed, the violent tugging almost causing the coach to intervene. It appeared Kimball's father had lost his way in disciplining his son; the incident appeared to border on abuse.

"Do not embarrass me!" he screamed. "I want you to go out there and make something of yourself! You hear me? Push yourself to the limit, Kimball! And when you think you reached that limit, then push yourself some more! You got me?"

Kimball nodded.

"You look like a pansy out there! I will not have a pansy for a son! You got me? Not one more time on your backside!"

Another nod.

"Then get out there and act like you belong!"

When he released Kimball's facemask, Kimball returned to the sidelines ready to prove himself.

When the next defensive series began, Kimball became an animal. This time when the center approached him, Kimball hunkered down to a low center of gravity and launched himself forward, hitting the center so hard that the player fell backward and knocked the running back off his route, causing other players to swarm in for a tackle of a loss. As the pile cleared, it was apparent that the center was severely injured. Blood foamed at the edges of his mouth from an internal injury, and he had to be carted off the field. When Kimball looked up into the stands, he saw his father standing there bearing a smile of approval and pride. It was the turning point in Kimball's life, the pivotal moment in which he finally shone bright in his father's eyes. Kimball had finally discovered the key to his father's approbation.

He was courted by numerous college football programs; coaches around the country loved his aggressive tenacity on the field. However, Kimball shunned the scholarships and decided to join the Army Rangers instead. It was here that he caught the eye of the military hierarchy. They noticed his determination and his remarkable strength and agility. They also noticed that he seemed to thrive on pressure. The more challenging the task, the more committed he was to completing it.

Soon, Kimball found himself under a new command in the Force Elite, a governmental Black Ops unit known only by the president and the Joint Chiefs of

Staff. In the Force Elite, Kimball assailed insurgents with incredible efficiency, earning a reputation as an unstoppable warrior.

Since targeted assassinations were banned by the Ford administration in '76, Kimball had become the first of a new breed. Secret meetings were the norm in the Situation Room, where the ban went unnoticed by future presidents and the JCS. At these meetings, Kimball was often the focal point, spotlighted for his ability to carry out even the most difficult missions with stoic precision.

In 1990 he was assigned to kill three key members of Saddam Hussein's Cabinet responsible for brokering deals with Russian dissidents for high-grade plutonium. Not only was the plutonium never delivered, but the Iraqi brokers were found shot to death in Chelyabinsk, Russia by a Rav-.22LRHA, which happens to be Mossad's weapon of choice for assassinations. This weapon was the red herring that made Israel the scapegoat for the killings.

From that moment on Iraq never attempted to develop a nuclear arsenal in earnest.

In December of that same year, Kimball was asked to commit another assassination. This time the target was Saddam Hussein.

When Iraq ventured onto Kuwaiti soil to pillage the country in August, the United States and the UN coalition ordered Hussein to withdraw from the country immediately. However, several months of wasted negotiation evolved before the commencement of the counterattack by U.S. and coalition forces. It was during this period that President Bush and the Joint Chiefs of Staff called upon Kimball to take out Hussein before the allied assault began. They believed war could be averted if the rank and file of the Republican Guard fell into disarray without Saddam Hussein's leadership.

Kimball asked no questions. He only needed to know what he had to do, not why he had to do it. It was this icy-cold fortitude that led his employers to consider Kimball practically inhuman. He seemed to possess no conscience, no remorse, no care. He was a perfect killing machine that seemed to take pride in that image. His commanders saw him as larger than life, the same way his father saw him that night on the football field. The feeling was indescribable.

As the window of opportunity lay open and the negotiations continued, Kimball breached Iraqi territory.

Just then the Gulf Stream hit an air pocket, causing the plane to dip sharply. When it leveled off Kimball recalled the moments of his pride, a deadly sin in the eyes of God. And his fall had come to him quickly.

He had been in Iraq for seven days and was making his way toward Baghdad when he happened upon a flock of goats herded by two boys, the older no more than fourteen, the younger perhaps ten, each carrying a gnarled staff of olive wood.

Kimball remained out of sight, with his back pressed against the sandy wall of a gully, listening to the goats bleating only a few feet away. And then a shadow cast over him from the younger boy, who had spied Kimball from above. The child's small body was silhouetted against the pure white sun, a diffusion of light shining from him like a halo. And then the boy was gone, shouting, the sun assaulting Kimball's eyes with a sudden and terrible brightness.

Kimball stood, immediately engaged his weapon, drew a bead and pulled the trigger, the bullet's momentum driving the boy hard to the ground. The older boy stood unmoving with his mouth open in mute protest, his eyes moving to the body of his brother, to Kimball, then back to his brother. When he took flight Kimball took a single shot, the bullet killing the boy before he hit the surface.

Another bump of turbulence, this time stronger, jarred Kimball from the memory. But when the plane settled back into a smooth flight pattern, he closed his eyes once again and remembered what he had for so long tried to forget.

He had buried the boys and their staffs in the trench. Wordlessly, Kimball Hayden covered their bodies with sand and scattered the goats. Once done, he sat beside the two small rises in the earth and considered that maybe the White House brass was right after all. Maybe he was inhuman.

And suddenly it was no longer a game. The memory of his father's approval on that Friday night when Kimball openly maimed another player, the smile on his father's face, and the subsequent pats on the back no longer seemed to matter. He could not go on living life as a game in which those around him were merely targets—especially innocent children.

At that moment Kimball was greatly tormented by what he had done. His cold fortitude was gone. He had reached his limit. And though he could hear his father rage on about pushing further, he could not. Every man has his limits.

If his father had been alive on that fateful day rather than buried in a nondescript grave in an obscure township, he most likely would have turned his back on his son, but Kimball didn't care anymore. His father was dead. Why was he still living for his approval? Why had he ever fought so hard to please a sadistic man who required him to deny his humanity? Kimball didn't want to be emotionless anymore. He deserved to feel pain, to feel guilt. He wanted to suffer.

Kimball remained by the makeshift graves all that day. Even with the sun blistering his lips, he refused to take cover. He recalled the moments when day turned to night. He laid between the two mounds with a clawed hand on each rise of soft earth and prayed for forgiveness—not from God, but from the boys.

His only answer was the soft whisper of wind through the desert sand.

As he lay there watching the moon make its trajectory across a sky filled with countless stars, Kimball Hayden made a fateful decision.

On the following morning he headed back for the Syrian border with President Bush and the JCS never to hear from him again. The White House believed that Kimball Hayden had been killed in the commission of his duty. Less than two months later, the man who was considered to be without conscience was posthumously honored by the Pentagon brass, though the true nature of his contributions was never made public.

Two weeks after his defection, however, while Kimball sat in a bar in Venice drinking an expensive liqueur, the United States and the Coalition Forces attacked Iraq.

He had been drinking and doing little else since his defection, but he was becoming restless, anxious. It was not in his nature to be idle, but he didn't have the first idea what to do next. A few days later at this same bar, a man wearing a Roman collar and a cherubic smile took the seat opposite him without permission.

"I really want to be alone, Father," he told him. "It's too late for me, anyway."



Nevertheless the priest continued to smile. “We’ve been watching you.”

Kimball could only imagine the look he gave the priest. “I’m sorry... you’ve been what?”

“Kimball Hayden,” the priest said, offering his hand. “My name is Bonasero Vessucci... Cardinal Bonasero Vessucci.”

And a new alliance was born.

Kimball drew another deep breath and let it go. The Gulf Stream was flying at an incredible speed.

The time was 1834 hours, Eastern Standard Time.

## Chapter 18

### ***Boston, Massachusetts September 23, Early Evening***

Steve O’Brien was second in command of Alpha Team and used the moniker of Kodiak, for the giant bears of Alaska. Prior to his induction into the squad, O’Brien had been an Army Ranger, an elite soldier in terms of combat, courage and duty. Now he was a mercenary, recruited for the tools he had to offer.

He stood six-four and two-hundred-seventy pounds. His body was pure rippling muscle, his biceps larger than most men’s thighs. And to keep with his military heritage he wore his flattop to specs, closely cropped and ruler straight. Running from the edge of his right eye to the corner of his lip, forever drawing his mouth into a sneer, was a puckered scar from a wound laid open by an al-Qaeda rebel hiding in the hills along the Afghan border. The rebel’s victory, however, was short lived once Kodiak took the knife away and used it against him. He ended up hanging the rebel’s head on a pike for several days.

The other members of the Alpha Team had taken the tags of Boa, Diamondback, King Snake and Sidewinder, monikers assigned by the Joint Chiefs of Staff indicating stealth, poise, and deadly precision. But Kodiak saw the tags as degrading, since snakes make it a lifelong journey to crawl along their bellies, something he saw as lowly and undignified.

Like him, Boa and King Snake were former Army Rangers, while Diamondback and Sidewinder were Green Berets.

But to this group, Team Leader remained a mystery.

Nobody knew who he was or where he came from, but he exuded such raw power nobody dared to consider challenging him.

Kodiak glanced at his team lying on the floor around him, sleeping. This was a moment of luxury. He closed his eyes, then rested his head against the wall. Finding comfort in the fact that he was surrounded by the deadliest men on the planet, he fell into a much needed sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

He was having a wonderful dream—the happiest, perhaps the best he had ever had—and then it went away when an alien sound brought him back to a baffling

awareness. Pope Pius XIII finally opened his eyes, his lids fluttering—the world, the ceiling, still clouded from a drug-induced haze. And then he realized that he was no longer in a wonderful dreamscape, but awake in a large room choked with dust and darkness. The internal walls were gutted, revealing bare studs underneath, and the floor was trashed with broken plaster, litter and waste. Here was abandonment.

When he turned over on the mattress he could feel the weight of the chains that shackled him to the brick wall. On the other side of the mattress lay a coffee can to accept his bodily wastes during his confinement.

The pope propped himself up on his elbows and tested the strength of the chain by tugging at the mooring. The links rattled like a pocketful of coins, but the chain held firm.

“I’m afraid it’s no use. The plates are anchored firmly to the brick.”

Pope Pius XIII narrowed his eyes in an attempt to pierce the darkness. What his sight finally settled on was the vague outline of a man, standing against the opposite wall. If the man had chosen not to speak, the pope would never have known he was there.

The figure stepped into a shaft of wan light, with his hands clasped behind his back. He wore a black tactical jumpsuit, a black ski mask, and combat boots. “How are you feeling?” the man asked, speaking in a clipped accent.

Pope Pius XIII raised his bony hand, the chained hand, the movement itself imploring and fragile. “Please,” he said. “Why are you doing this?”

The shape took a step closer, the toes of his boots nearly touching the edge of the pope’s mattress. “I do this,” he answered, “to end the madness once and for all.”

The pope gave him an inquisitive look.

“Whereas your Christ was the King of Kings who readily embraced the world, Pope Pius XIII shall become the Martyr of Martyrs who will divide it.” The shape took a step back and was again swallowed in darkness. “You will be the catalyst for the beginning of the end.”

The pope was unable to grasp the meaning of what was being said, the words cryptic, the voice hollow and growing distant. The shape spoke in riddles, while his mind was still numb from the ketamine in his system.

“I don’t understand.”

The shape illuminated one thing further. “Tomorrow you will begin to usher in a new age,” he said.

And like a wispy comma of smoke in a blowing wind, the shape was gone.

## **Chapter 19**

Team Leader made it a point to separate the pope from the bishops of the Holy See and the governor. He wished to evaluate each man on his own mettle, without any support, encouragement, or comfort from the pope.

He wanted to see if the bishops truly believed in a paradisiacal afterlife, if they would readily accept death as a graduation rather than the end. He would watch

them with studious appraisal to see if their eyes reflected hypocrisy or genuine belief in the moments before he pulled the trigger. In this fashion Team Leader was an observer, a scientist, a searcher for truth. Does an afterlife of absolute peace and tranquility exist? And is blind faith the wings that carry humankind to such a place? If he could discover the truth, he would gladly surrender to it.

But Team Leader had grown tired; his searching always ended in disappointment. He had seen nothing more than cowardice in the faces of all the men he had killed. Still, he searched for a spark of hope that a better life than this existed. *Everybody wants to go to heaven*, he considered, *but nobody wants to pay the price of admission*.

Shaking his head in disappointment, Team Leader walked into the dank and hollow corridor. In the slivers of fading light that penetrated the edges of the boarded-up windows, he walked to the room where his team had anchored the governor and the bishops of the Holy See to a wall with lengths of chain. The stench of their filth hung on their garments and in the air, constant and unyielding.

On the mattresses, still affected by the sedative, the bishops were moving humorously about like corpses in a George Romero film, as they reached mindlessly for the purchase of something not there. On the last mattress lay the governor, a silver thread of drool spilling from the corner of his lips as he lay unmoving.

"Tomorrow, my dear governor," whispered Team Leader, "we'll start with you and write a new chapter of history." And then he turned to wake his team from their short, but granted time for rest.

## Chapter 20

***Washington, D.C.***

***September 23, Late Evening***

The distance between the Archdiocese of Washington and the Sacred Hearts Church was less than a mile. The Vatican Knights walked through the soup of an early morning fog, their footfalls quiet and catlike.

When they arrived, the church's brownstone walls bore the greasy sheen of wetness. The stained-glass windows emitted a faint glow from candles burning within, flickering with the rhythm of a heartbeat.

When they stepped inside the church, the fog did not follow, as if the hallowed interior prohibited its wisps. Kimball closed the door, the snicker of the bolt echoing throughout the church.

The church's interior was a magnificent blend of Gothic and Baroque design with a few medieval touches. The altar, adorned with alabaster statues of angels and cherubs taking flight above a crucified Christ, served as the focal point. The surrounding rows of pews remained empty and waiting.

Kneeling before the altar, Father Juan Medeiros, in full vestments, prayed silently with his head bowed, his lips moving and his hands held together. When

finished, he gained his feet, gave the sign of the cross, and turned toward the Vatican Knights, who stood in the shadows by the archway.

“How can I help you at so late an hour, my brothers?”

Kimball stepped into the sallow light, the candles’ flames throwing odd shadows along the walls as he and the other Knights made their way to the altar.

“You would be Cardinal Medeiros?” asked Kimball.

Medeiros came forward and lifted the sleeve of his cleric robe to offer a hand. “Kimball Hayden. I’ve been expecting you,” he said.

“And this is my unit.”

Cardinal Medeiros smiled, his face hardly seamed by age. “Yes, of course,” he acknowledged. He observed the Knights’ black berets, each bearing an embroidered coat of arms, the symbol of their unit.

“Please,” he said, pointing toward the rear of the altar, “this way. We’ve much to do and talk about.”

The Knights followed the priest through a warren of hallways to a door. Crossing the threshold, they descended a staircase, then maneuvered through a dank corridor cluttered with discarded furniture destined for Goodwill Industries. Finally, they halted before a metal fire door.

“No doubt Cardinal Vessucci has told you of my position here in the States.”

Kimball shook his head. “Only that we were to contact you for intel, nothing more.”

The cardinal felt slighted at being identified as “nothing more” than an intel source, but he said nothing.

To the left of the fire door, Cardinal Medeiros typed in a numeric code on a keypad, which drew back an electronic bolt. When the door opened, the men descended another set of stairs leading into sepulchral darkness. With every step the air became noticeably cooler and damper, carrying the smell of must and earth. At the bottom of the stairwell was a brownstone wall with several outcroppings of fieldstone arranged like diamonds set within a pendant. Prudently, Cardinal Medeiros began to push certain stones while ignoring others, causing the false wall to slide inward and grate against the concrete floor.

“The stones act as a combination,” he said. “It’s a safeguard against unwanted entry. Very few people are authorized to see what’s in this room.”

Once the wall closed behind them, the darkness becoming complete, Cardinal Medeiros called out a voice command and tracks of bright fluorescent light flicked on, illuminating a room with antiseptically clean white walls. Behind numerous glass cases were a displayed range of weapons, from handguns to automatic rifles. Some of these were modified firearms, unrecognizable even to Kimball, who considered himself an authority on weaponry.

Kimball and the rest of the team moved toward the displays, mesmerized by the quantity of weapons. In several display cases were state-of-the-art Kevlar vests, engineered with fiber resilient enough to stop high-caliber bullets. In the center of each vest was the embroidered coat of arms of the Vatican Knights. Other cases held headgear, laser sights, double-edged weapons, gadgetry and attachments. To the company of soldiers, the chamber seemed more like a museum than an armory.

“This, my friends, is what I do,” said Medeiros. He walked along the displays with satisfaction. “You’ll find that for this mission the HK XM8 with the baseline carbine and common side-loading 40-millimeter X320 grenade launcher will suffice. The weapon can be quickly modified to a compact carbine, a sharpshooter variant, or an automatic rifle, depending upon your needs. The only drawback is that you must carry all the segments with you to make the necessary adjustments.”

Kimball examined the myriad displays of weaponry and turned to Medeiros. “You engineered these?”

“Not the HK XM8,” he answered. “But most of the others that you see here.” The priest traced a finger along a glass case featuring his designs. “Like you, Kimball, I am a former covert operator, but now my skills are employed to craft the instruments you use.” And then he sighed, almost dreamily. “My years of soldiering are long behind me.” Kimball thought he picked up a sorrowful hint in the man’s tone. “Now I engineer weapons of defense for the Society of Seven.”

“I didn’t know the Society of Seven had any say in weapons development.”

“I’m sure there’s a lot that goes on within the Vatican that you and I don’t know about,” Medeiros said. Then, after sliding back a glass panel to access the HK XM8s, he said, “As you know, the Society of Seven is the Pope’s true line of defense. Although the Swiss Guard is the official army that protects the fortress of the Vatican, it is the Vatican Knights who are considered a very special group with very special needs. Therefore...” He let his words trail as he held out his hand toward the exhibit. “Your special needs.”

Suddenly, the cardinal became somber. “If the pope is killed,” he said gravely, “the world will truly be divided.”

Kimball understood. If the pope was killed, he would become a martyr, dividing Christians and Muslims, almost certainly triggering retaliatory attacks, and putting people of all faiths in danger.

“For the sake of everybody on this planet, Kimball, bring him back.”

“I will.”

Within an hour the Knights had received their equipment and learned to break down and reassemble the modified HK XM8 with little effort. When his team was geared and ready, Kimball proffered a hand to Cardinal Medeiros.

“Remember, Kimball, do what is necessary to accomplish our goal... bring him back.” Medeiros lowered his hand. His face now appeared haggard beneath the lights, the deepening shadows under his eyes giving him the look of a man aging by the minute.

“Now for the details,” said Medeiros. “The powers that be have assigned Billy Paxton of the FBI to negotiate with the Soldiers of Islam, but our sources say that Shari Cohen is the true head of the investigation over at the Bureau. She’s the one you need to contact, Kimball. She’s the one you need to create an alliance with.” Medeiros handed over a dossier. “Everything you need to know about her is in there.”

Kimball glanced over the pages of text, then over the eight-by-ten photo. He noted Shari’s almond-shaped eyes, her smooth features, and how her widow’s peak came to a point on her forehead. After a moment, he closed the file.

“God be with you, Kimball. And good luck.”

In a unified act, each Vatican Knight placed a closed fist over his heart, bowed his head, and got on bended knee. “Loyalty above all else,” they said, “except Honor.”

With another blessing from Cardinal Medeiros, the Vatican Knights left the church, disappearing into a living fog that immediately enveloped them.

## Chapter 21

### ***Tel Aviv, Israel*** ***September 24, Early Morning***

It was night.

Yosef Rokach sat before his PC in the darkness of his apartment, the light of the monitor casting ghoulish shadows upon his face. During the six hours he sat before the computer, trying to decode the encryptions on the data stick, Yosef’s studious eyes hardly looked away from the screen.

On average, it took approximately two hours to decode a single page of data, leaving three pages remaining, which would take him into the dawn hours. So far he had been able to bring up photos of the Soldiers of Islam and their personal histories—low-level material. In fact, this same material had already been forwarded to multiple intelligence agencies that day. So why would such data be protected by the LAP?

With rapid fingering on the keyboard, Yosef undid the visible stitching and continued to open the cyber gates, producing readable material.

And then the first of the security lights came on, blinking.

A security screen to the right of the PC monitor was divided into quarters, showing a different part of the residence on each segment. The top left portion showed three men scaling the small gate to his building, which was always kept locked. The second security lamp lit up. The intruders were now at the front door of the building, one hunkering by the lock to disengage it.

Yosef typed even faster, realizing that he wouldn’t have time to decipher the rest of the encryption. He saved the partially decoded document onto his desktop.

The third security lamp began to blink, the intruders now in the hallway making their way up the stairs to his apartment.

Yosef quickly brought up the email addresses of Washington’s FBI office and the CIA and attached the desktop document. As the file uploaded, the computer suddenly appeared to work with glacial slowness. The message, when received by the American constituencies, would be from a Mossad ISP address in order to protect the identity of the operative. Mossad would appear as the direct sender.

The fourth and final lamp lit, the amber bulb blinking in rapid succession. The intruders were now milling at his doorstep, their voices hushed, talking, deciding.

Just as the document loaded, Yosef hit the SEND button.

At that moment, the door to his apartment crashed inward.

After hitting the reset button to quickly clear the computer screen, Yosef stood to face his aggressors. “What is this? What do you want?”

Three men stood silhouetted against the light of the hallway.

“I demand to know—”

“What you demand means nothing to me,” said the first man. Even silhouetted, the man appeared slight—hardly a physical threat, but his voice possessed something strong and unyielding.

The small man stepped closer, his features clearer. His hair was dark and his face was lined with age and wisdom, the creases also denoting years of pain, anger and persecution. Here stood Yitzhak Paled, head of the Lohamah Psichlogit.

“How much did you decipher?” he asked calmly. “And who did you send it to?”

Yosef shook his head. “I don’t know what you’re talk—”

Paled reached out with a quick hand and cuffed Yosef in the face. “How much did you decipher?” he repeated. “And who did you send it to?”

Yosef stood there with his hand to his face, the thrill of espionage no longer a romantic ideal, as reality set in like an anchor. His gut was churning.

“If I have to ask you again, Yosef, which I doubt is your real name, then I’ll break every bone in your body until I get what I want, starting with your fingers. Is that clear?”

Yosef didn’t respond, his tongue bound by paralytic terror.

“Case in point,” said Paled, removing three Polaroids from his shirt pocket and splaying them across the table in the glow of the computer monitor. Even in the feeble light, Yosef could see the brutally battered face of his LAP contact, David Gonick. His features were bloodied, his mouth slightly agape, teeth missing. His eyes had rolled up into their sockets before he died. “He was caught on tape dropping the data off on your level,” Paled added. “And you were caught on tape picking it up.”

Yosef’s eyes traveled back to the photos.

“If I don’t get what I want, Yosef, then I’ll be adding three more Polaroids to this set.”

Yosef broke down. *Some spy*, he thought, *crying like a ten-year-old child*. But he held true, revealing nothing, even until the moment Paled took Yosef’s pictures to add to his collection.

Spurred on by a single hand gesture from Paled, the two toadies grabbed Yosef and forcefully ushered him out of his apartment.

“If you play, Yosef, then you have to pay.” It was Paled’s final statement to a man who held no hope of seeing dawn’s early light as he had anticipated.

With a gloved hand Paled shut off the security monitors and wondered who Yosef’s liaisons were. To find out, he would take the PC, examine it at Mossad Headquarters, and get the answer that way.

Once he did find out, he’d instruct Mossad’s department heads to deny everything on the document to all United States constituencies, especially the FBI and CIA.

Removing the data stick from the PC, Paled examined it, turning it over between his fingers as adeptly as a magician passes a coin from one digit to the next. It was incredible how something so small could hold enough information to start a war, he considered. Then, with little effort, he snapped the data stick between his fingers and placed the broken pieces in his pocket.

\* \* \* \* \*

One of Shari's team members heard the annoying ping indicating that an email had been received. Taking immediate notice that it had been sent to the FBI and the CIA, she burned the document onto two CDs. Per protocol, she then deleted the email to minimize the risk of misappropriation by hackers, despite the FBI's state-of-the-art firewalls and anti-theft software. She marked one CD to be placed into the vault as a backup file.

The other CD was placed into a jewel case marked VITAL and hand delivered to Shari's team leader, who, after signing the chain of custody log, hand delivered it to Shari per departmental procedure.

Within moments, Shari was in possession of the disc that initiated from Tel Aviv.

## Chapter 22

### ***J. Edgar Hoover Building, Washington, D.C. September 24, Early Morning***

Laces of red stitching had formed within the whites of Shari Cohen's eyes. Not even her fourth cup of coffee was strong enough to drive away the exhaustion, as she operated on compulsion and willpower alone. The only thing that kept her motivated was her direct communication with national and international intelligence agencies, including the DST from France, the SIS from Britain, the BND from Germany, the AISI from Italy, the SVR and FSB from Russia and, of course, Mossad. Not a single moment was wasted.

"So now what?"

Shari turned to Paxton, whose face sported the beginning of a new beard. "Go home," she told him. "Get some sleep."

"And miss the biggest day of your career?"

She immediately picked up the undertone of sarcasm. "Look, this wasn't my call, okay? So get over it. If you can't, then take it up with the attorney general or deputy director."

Paxton stared her down for a brief moment before turning away. "I'm just tired," he said. It was a poor cop out, but he didn't care.

Shari glanced at her watch; it was 6:15, a new day.

The conference room staff, in communication with Mossad throughout the night, remained at full force. The emailed encryptions given to Shari regarding the Soldiers of Islam were at best incomplete.

According to the compiled dossiers, the Soldiers of Islam were only marginally capable of any type of military sophistication. Although they did spend time training in al-Qaeda camps, they were primarily groomed for their computer expertise. Their central purpose was to search for soft spots in the American defense system and then relay those weaknesses to their superiors for possible exploitation.

Paxton saw the wheels turning. "Got something?"



Deep lines of deliberation creased Shari's forehead. "The Soldiers of Islam," she said, "or at least what we know of them, doesn't make any sense."

"How so?"

"You read the files, the dossiers. These guys are computer geeks. They hardly have the military capacity to take out the president's Special Security Force."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe Mossad doesn't have all the answers?"

Shari shook her head. "Mossad is legendary," she said, "and thorough. I don't think these files are incomplete. I think we have everything there is to know about the Soldiers of Islam."

"Meaning what?"

She chewed softly on her lower lip for a moment before answering. "I don't know; I'm not sure. I just don't see these guys, outnumbered as they were, taking out such a highly trained force. I just don't."

Paxton leaned forward and rubbed his raw, fatigued eyes. "Well, apparently they did."

Shari wasn't totally confident in this assessment.

Paxton loosened the knot of his tie and undid the top button of his shirt. "Maybe you should head home for a bit," he told her. "I'll call you if we hear anything."

"Sure you don't want to go home?"

"Positive. There's no point in both of us falling asleep on the job, right?"

She feigned a smile. "I guess." She gathered the files and placed the recently-burned CD into its jewel case.

"Where're going to need those," he said.

Shari shook her head. "I'm going to the DHS Building to see if they can help me with these encryptions."

"They're just dossiers."

She smiled out of cordiality. "Maybe. But ask yourself this question: why are there encryptions in these dossiers?"

Paxton agreed with her in principle. Encryptions exist solely for highly-sensitive information, and dossiers are open biographical histories of certain subjects—not exactly top-secret material.

"Shari, you need to take a break. I can handle this."

"I'm sure you can, Billy. But I'm still in charge." She gathered the files and the disc before heading toward the door. "Call me if something comes up."

And then she was gone, moving rapidly toward the elevators at the end of the hall.

Paxton immediately got on his cell phone, punched in a speed-dial number, and waited for a response. When the line was picked up on the other end, Paxton spoke in a tone that was flat and emotionless. "We may have a problem," he said.

"And what would that be?"

"Cohen is starting to think that something's wrong. She took the files and the encrypted CD from Mossad. She plans to take the disc to DHS for them to break it down."

"There's nothing in those files worth worrying about," the voice said. "And I don't think there's anything on the CD to lead her in any specific direction, either. But destroy the backup disc, just in case. If she discovers anything from the CD in

her possession that we need to worry about, we'll deal with her then. Let's just play this out."

"Understood."

"Is she still there?"

"She just left."

"Then get moving."

## Chapter 23

Just as Deputy Director George Pappandopolous made his way to the monitoring room, where a guard sat watching a bank of security screens, Shari Cohen was getting into her Lexus. The screens depicted every hallway and door leading in and out of the JEH Building, including every entrance in and out of the garage. After dismissing the guard for a ten-minute break, Pappandopolous searched the monitors observing the garage area until he spied Shari's car. As she pulled away, Pappandopolous dialed a single digit on his cell phone, waited, then spoke as if his call was expected. "Cohen's leaving the building."

"Yeah. So?" Judas sounded apathetic.

"So I want you to keep an eye on her," he returned sharply. "She'll be driving a white Lexus through the northwest gate. Do... *not*... lose her."

"Why? What's up?"

"Paxton thinks that Cohen suspects something, which may prompt her to dig into places where she doesn't belong."

There was silence on the other end.

"If she does," added Pappandopolous, "you know what to do. But for now just keep an eye on her. Paxton thinks she's heading for DHS."

"What for?"

"More information," he said. "Paxton mentioned that she's in possession of an encrypted CD sent by a CIA leak in Mossad. The DHS has the capability to decode those messages, and she has unrestricted access to their decoding terminal."

Pappandopolous could hear an audible sigh from Judas' end. "This is already turning into a cluster."

"That's because we planned for Paxton to take the helm, not Cohen."

After listening for a moment longer, Pappandopolous grunted his approval of something Judas had said and hung up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shari laid the files and the burned CD on the passenger seat of her car. After leaving the garage she checked her appearance in the rearview mirror and noticed the half moons forming beneath her eyes.

Behind her a blue sedan followed but stayed a fair distance behind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Getting into the vault without detection would not be an easy task. There were cameras with facial recognition software, and individualized access codes were

required to record employees' times of entry. Since there was no way to bypass the system, Paxton could only acquire the backup disc by following protocol and hoping not to raise suspicion.

After typing in his PIN, the door opened and Paxton entered the vault, a massive chamber bearing thousands of CDs. From the tiled ceiling, fluorescent lights bathed the room. From every corner of the vault, cameras spied on him, their software deciphering the landmarks of his face.

There was no doubt in his mind that the security tapes would be examined if it was established that the backup file was missing. But with any luck, it would take weeks before the missing disc would be discovered. By then, he would be gone, living in Rio de Janeiro with his ill-gotten commission of seven million dollars.

Earlier he had checked the chain of custody log, noted the number associated with the burned disc, created a bogus label, and attached it to a blank disc. Now, the difficulty would be locating the proper disc in a library of CDs numbering in the tens of thousands. Inspecting the bogus label, he looked for a shelf that contained CDs bearing the proper range of numbers. After a moment, he found what he was looking for. He traced his finger along the CDs until he found the backup disc. He held it next to the bogus one. They were an exact match. Then, placing the bogus disc into the slot, he slid the original into the pocket of his sports jacket.

Refusing to look into the cameras, Paxton exited the vault. He could feel his heart racing, the sweat of his brow beading. He was sure that somebody would inquire what he had hidden in his pocket. But nobody did. After all, he did have clearance to enter the vault. It was simply his own paranoia attacking his nerves.

After removing the disc from his jacket, he looked about the cubicles and aisles. Sensing that no one was suspect, he fed the backup disc to the shredder, the whirring of its grinders much louder than he would have liked.

## **Chapter 24**

### ***Boston, Massachusetts. September 24, Early Morning***

Team Leader sat against the wall of his chamber, alone, separated from his team. Though he did not fit in with the American-derived band of brothers, he knew they would not question his leadership.

At the onset of his commission as Team Leader, his authority had been immediately tested by a member of the Force Elite who went by the moniker Nomad.

Nomad's rawboned features appeared more simian than human from steroid use, his forehead sloping from chemical evolution rather than ancestral inheritance. His brutish attitude appointed him the team's Alpha male, and he considered Team Leader an outsider who was infringing on his right to rule.

At the commencement of training, Team Leader bore the brunt of Nomad's derisive remarks, the members of the Force Elite following his lead. The men mocked Team Leader, letting him know that Nomad was their true commander.

By the end of the day Team Leader issued a challenge, offering to pass the mantle of leadership to Nomad if he should win.

The challenge was accepted.

Nomad removed his shirt, exposing impossibly large muscles as an exhibition to intimidate his opponent. But Team Leader remained standing at ease, his hands pressed against the small of his back. Team Leader knew Nomad's size was his liability, diminishing his speed and agility. As the larger man circled and goaded Team Leader, calling him vile names and spitting at his feet, Team Leader remained in his stance, watching Nomad, absorbing every detail of his movements, and waiting for the opportune moment.

Within fifteen seconds of attacking Team Leader, Nomad lay dead on the ground, his neck broken and his eyes staring at nothing in particular. From that point on, no one questioned Team Leader's authority.

A jingling of chains from the hallway told him that the members of the Holy See were testing their bonds. He stood.

The time was early, not yet dawn, the rooms and hallways still dark. After fitting an NVG monocular around his forehead, he switched it on.

He easily navigated through the darkness, stepping over discarded debris that couldn't have been seen by the unaided eye. He stood before the bishops and the governor, the captives seeing only a green phosphorous eye hovering over them.

"Good morning, gentlemen," said Team Leader.

The bishops stopped rattling their chains.

"Your propensity for making noise is quite unsettling."

Team Leader moved along the mattresses with his hands behind his back, as if studying his prey. "In a moment the sun will come up, and you'll all be fed," he told them. "And then one of you will be challenged to a test of faith. Please don't disappoint me."

No one dared question him.

A moment later the green phosphorous eye winked out and Team Leader was gone, swallowed by the shadows.

Outside, the sun barely crested the horizon.

### ***Homeland Security Operations Center, Washington, D.C. September 24, Mid-Morning***

The Department of Homeland Security Center was a series of brick annexes converted from existing military barracks. The building she was looking for was one of several unmarked structures on the government campus, but since the Operations Center was one of Shari's teaching venues, she knew exactly where to go.

After parking her vehicle, she walked through the entrance, flashed her credentials and signed the LEO log. After politely accepting small talk from the desk personnel, she asked to be escorted to the decoding terminal.

Within moments she was accompanied by two officers to a subterranean room bearing three large TV monitors, a PC the size of a small server, and an ergonomically-shaped chair with a keyboard attached to a pivoting arm that maneuvered from the chair's side pocket to an upright frontal position. Used exclusively for government decoding, this state-of-the-art machinery had an attached cost of nearly a billion dollars and had the capacity to out-crunch and out-run any super computer in existence. For Shari, this installation was the first line of defense in fighting terrorism.

"Well, if it isn't one of the FBI's biggest slackers," said Toby Hansen of the DHS computer posse. "And to what do I owe the dubious honor of your presence in my café?"

Shari smiled as she approached him. "Be nice," she said, and gave him a quick hug. "So how're you doing, Toby?"

"Now that your pretty little face has graced my laboratory, I'm doing much better."

Toby Hansen was a portly man who always appeared unkempt. His face was never clean-shaven and never held a full beard, but was always somewhere in between. Often he was gruff and sometimes rude to upper management, but his prowess behind the keyboard was respected and celebrated throughout the agencies. There was nobody faster, better, or more knowledgeable when it came to code deciphering or government hacking. Here, he was king.

"Now I know you're not here to sweep me off my feet."

"Well, yeah, you're right about that."

"So again, to what do I owe this dubious honor?"

She held up the CD. "This was sent to us by Mossad."

He took the CD. "What is it?"

"Dossiers."

"You can download this anywhere."

"Not this one," she said. "They're encrypted."

"Dossiers?"

"My sentiment exactly. You think you can scan them quickly for me?"

"If it doesn't take too long."

"I'd really appreciate it."

After placing the encrypted CD in the drive, the two side screens immediately lit up. The symbols on the left screen differed from those displayed on the right screen.

#### **LEFT SCREEN:**

```
%PDF1.4%ããÏ490obj<</Linearized1/O51/H[660294]/L306278/E610401
1/N10/T305180>>endobjxref4911000000001600000n0000000567700000n0
00000095400000n000000110800000n000000124800000n00000012870000
0n000000140400000n000000408100000n000010378200000n0000000660D
0000n000000093300000ntrailer<</Size60/Info470R/PHOTO500R/Prev305
170/ID[<36c246bfc6476f5c308f5c2e63b5cb29><2762c3250372a1bfbb31598
3df8285b>]>>startxref0%%EO500obj<</Type/Catalog/PHOTO460R/Metadat
a48/PHOTOS4300eLabel450R>>endobj580obj<</S155/L227/Filter/FlateDec
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**RIGHT SCREEN:**

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PHOTO/ExtGState<</GS2570R

The left and right screens communicated with one another to formulate and display the true message, which would appear on the center screen. Numbers, letters and symbols finally began to scroll on the center screen. When the decoder deciphered a character, that character remained on the center screen until a full message in English was displayed.

Shari carefully read the screen. The data gleaned from the CD actually gave little information beyond the initial dossiers. This disappointed her greatly, but after scrolling down to the final three pages, she discovered that the data remained partially encrypted, despite the software’s attempt to break the cryptograms. For some reason, Mossad had decided to keep the final elements hidden, even from their foreign associates, the Americans.

But why?

Toby continued to scroll through the text, illuminating further transcripts. And Shari noted two things. First, at the end of each coded page was a name: *Abraham Obadiah/Restriction Chief Operator for the Defense & Armed Forces Attaché/Embassy of Israel/WDC*. The second was a typed anomaly placed just above the encryptions, a phrase that seemed out of place: MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE!

Shari cocked her head like a puppy trying to grasp the meaning of something odd.

After powering down, Toby removed the CD. “Sorry, but this CD needs to be decoded through hours of manual labor, which I don’t have time for, Missy.” He tried to give the CD back to Shari.

“Please, Toby, it’s important.”

“It’s always important,” he said with a brusque air. “But right now I’m working twenty-four-seven on encryptions from every agency across the globe regarding the kidnapping of the pope. Dossiers, little lady, are at the bottom of the priority pool.”

“Toby, please, I know these documents appear low priority, but I believe they may be connected. After all, the subjects are the Soldiers of Islam.”

“Sweetie, look, if you want me to decode this CD when I have time, fine. I’d be happy to. Just leave it behind.”

“When can you get to it?”

“When I’m finished with everything else on my plate.”

“And how long will that take?”

“As long as it takes—days, weeks. Who knows?”

Shari sighed. Even a day may prove to be too long. She had to acquire the data immediately. Taking the CD from Toby, she held it toward the light as if to glean something from it. And perhaps she did. At least she had a starting point. She had the name of Abraham Obadiah.

She would contact Obadiah at the Israeli Embassy in Washington. Perhaps he could enlighten her as to why certain segments remained encrypted after both nations had readily agreed to share all information regarding terrorist activity.

She said a quick goodbye to Toby and placed the CD back into its jewel case.

## Chapter 25

Judas waited for the Lexus to exit the DHS parking lot, often checking his watch. It had been more than thirty-six hours since he had any sleep, going on adrenaline since being instrumental in the deaths of the president's Security Detail at the Governor's Mansion. He had considered them his friends, having bellied up to the bar with some and dined at the houses of others. But since Judas was about to benefit financially beyond his imagination, he had no remorse about diverting their attention as Team Leader's men systematically killed them. After all, money always seems to lessen the effects of a tragedy. If anything, he wanted to smoke a cigar in celebration.

With an eye on the gate, he saw the Lexus stop at the guard post, then exit. When Shari turned east onto Nebraska Avenue, Judas made a U-turn and followed at a fair distance, wondering if she had discovered anything. If she had, he would gladly kill her, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

Within the twenty minutes it took Shari to return to the JEH Building, traffic had picked up noticeably. Twice she found herself nodding off, only to snap awake with her fingers white-knuckling the steering wheel. After that she rolled down the window and turned up the radio, the station DJs talking about the Soldiers of Islam. Who were they? Where were they? Why haven't they made contact? All questions that Shari had asked herself repeatedly over the past twenty-four hours.

Trying to keep one eye on the road, Shari grabbed her cell phone and thumbed a number on the keypad. After three rings the line was connected.

It was the president's Chief Advisor. "Al Thornton."

"Hey, Al, it's Shari."

"I know what you're going to ask," he said. "And the answer is no. They haven't made contact."

"I know. I've been listening to the news."

"Then you're calling to make a proposal?"

"Absolutely. By not contacting us, they're trying to show the world that they're in total control of the situation and that the United States has been rendered impotent. We need to show them that we're not as powerless as they think."

"I agree. The staff has been kicking around a few solutions, but hasn't settled on anything."

"We need to broadcast their photos," she told him. "We need to let them know that this country isn't spinning in panic but motivated to bring down the Soldiers of Islam."



“We’ve considered that approach,” he said. “But if we do, *Aljazeera* will spread the news like wildfire across the Arab world. And that, my dear, would make legends out of the Soldiers of Islam, most likely fueling tension rather than suppressing it.”

“Believe me, Al, they’re already legends over there. I think it’s the best, if not the only alternative.”

“I’ll forward your proposal to the president,” he said. “And for what it’s worth, I agree. I think we need to show these bastards that they’re no longer without a face. Once they realize that we know who they are, maybe they’ll reconsider their intent. After all, there won’t be a spot on this planet where they can hide.”

“Thanks, Al.”

“We’ll keep you posted, either through Pappandopolous or Hamilton.”

“Good luck.”

Turning into the garage of the JEH Building, she found a parking stall, grabbed her items, and made her way to the elevator doors. Judas pulled silently into a spot several stalls away. As soon as the elevator doors closed behind her, Judas called Pappandopolous to inform him that Shari was back in the building.

After a few moments of discussion, Judas was relieved of duty for a much-needed sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shari was so tired that she labored in her steps to the Operations Room, which was now at full staff for the new day. The files that she carried seemed much heavier, the distance to the office much further.

Lying on a couch in the hallway with his sports jacket draped over him like a blanket was Billy Paxton, his slack-jawed features indicating that he was fast asleep.

After dropping the files onto her desk, she called her husband to touch base with him and ask about the girls. Everything was fine, he told her. The girls missed her. He missed her. The family pooch, if they had one, *would* miss her. The goldfish missed her. The world in general, according to Gary Molin, missed her deeply. And Shari, being so fatigued, snorted in laughter. It was a wonderful moment, without any of the tension that had been brewing in their relationship. After a few more moments on the line, she hung up, placing the phone gently onto its cradle.

Exhausted, she fell into the chair, looked at the stack of files scattered across her desktop, and released a sigh that was equal parts frustration and fatigue. Finding the pope’s whereabouts would be a long, hard process. And with so little time, there was no guarantee he would be found alive.

Staring at the CD, she picked up the plastic disc and examined it as if she had never seen it before, turning it over and over, watching the iridescent streaks of color move across the surface.

“Abraham Obadiah,” she said to no one in particular and then picked up the phone.

Fanning herself with the CD, she dialed the number for Information. The operator then directed her call to the Embassy of Israel.

“Embassy of Israel, how can I help you?”

"This is Special Agent Cohen of the F.B.I. I would like to speak to Abraham Obadiah, please."

"I'm afraid Mr. Obadiah is out of town at the moment," said the receptionist. "But he's scheduled to return by—" The sound of tapping on a keyboard came over the line. "According to his schedule, he'll be back sometime tomorrow."

"Is it possible to get a message to him right away?" she asked. "It's crucial that I speak with him as soon as possible. It's regarding the kidnapping of Pope Pius."

"Just a moment, please." And then the piped sound of Muzak played for nearly a minute before the receptionist returned. "Agent Cohen?"

"Yes."

"If you give me a number where you can be contacted, I'll make sure that Mr. Obadiah gets the message as soon as he comes in."

"Is there any way that you can contact him today?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "Mr. Obadiah is a difficult man to get in touch with when he's out of the country."

"Out of the country?"

"Yes, for the past two weeks."

Shari released a heavy sigh. "Well, could you give me the contact numbers so that I can try to get in touch—"

"With all due respect, Agent Cohen, Mr. Obadiah's matters are of a delicate nature. Therefore, we do not, and cannot give further information. But I'll pass your number onto him stating that you need to be contacted immediately."

"Ma'am, I understand your position, but you have to understand mine. This is regarding the welfare of the pope, and Mr. Obadiah may hold information critical to the situation at hand."

"I'm sorry," she said. "But our policy strictly states that due to the delicate nature of Mr. Obadiah's position—"

"—we do not and cannot give further information," Shari finished. "Yeah, I know. Can you at least tell me what time he's due back tomorrow?"

There was another round of tapping on the keyboard. "His itinerary states that he'll be here tomorrow for an afternoon meeting."

"Then can you pencil me in for a morning appointment?"

"I'm afraid Mr. Obadiah makes his own appointments since his schedule is so erratic."

Shari clenched her jaw in frustration. "Just have Mr. Obadiah contact me as soon as possible."

"I'll certainly give him the message."

"Thank you." She gave the receptionist numbers to her cell phone and office line and hung up.

Shari fell back into her chair in resignation. Of course she could pass the CD onto the NSA, since they were the cryptographers of the American government, but decoding would most likely take days, even weeks. Her only other viable option, and one she detested, was to wait for Obadiah to call.

And with every moment wasted, the clock was counting down the moments of the pope's life.

## Chapter 26

Team Leader moved to the end of the governor's mattress and nudged it with the toe of his boot. "Get up, Governor. It's time to put your best face forward and make history."

The governor lifted his head, his eyes narrowing to penetrate the semi-darkness but failing to adjust accordingly. A haze still gathered in his mind, the effects of the ketamine derivative finally dissipating. To him, Team Leader's voice sounded like a distant cry from the end of a long tunnel, the timbre muted and hollow.

"Get up, Governor."

This time the voice was closer, stronger, the articulation clearer.

"Governor, it's time."

Governor Steele saw the phosphorous green light suspended in space above him. And then he remembered the green lights, moving like fireflies in his bedroom. He remembered the struggle and the bite of the needle. He remembered it all. "Where am I?"

"It's time, Governor."

Steele struggled for coherency, trying to get his bearings.

Team Leader moved closer. In a voice far more affable than menacing, he said, "Please, Governor, it's time."

Steele raised his head enough to see a gray morning light working its way through the ribbing of thin boards that covered the windows like the slats of vertical blinds. Dust motes were floating in slow eddies in the shafts of light. The combination of feeble light and floating dust cast a tomblike pall.

Team Leader switched off his monocular and flipped up the eyepiece assemblage. In the dim light, Steele couldn't make out the color of the man's eyes, only that he was wearing a ski mask with piping around the eye holes.

"Governor, we're ready for you."

"I demand to know—"

"Kodiak!" Team Leader called out.

"—who you are!"

From the adjoining room, a man entered the holding area and stood silhouetted against the backdrop of a boarded-up window. He was tall, foreboding and massive. There was no depth to his shape, no indication that he was anything but two-dimensional. There was something preternatural about him, something blacker than black. In the governor's mind, this thing was Death.

Team Leader took a step backward and gave a wide berth to the behemoth beside him. "I do believe it's time to move along," he told Kodiak. "Please bring the governor into the next room and set him before the camera."

There was no noise from the shadow man. Nothing told the governor that Kodiak was more than a shape until he felt the large man grab him with unnatural strength and unfasten his shackle. While the governor rubbed his wrist, Kodiak lifted him to his feet and escorted him to the next room, sometimes giving a healthy shove to goad him in a certain direction.

"Where are you taking me?" asked Steele.

"You really want to know?"

“I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t.”

“You’re moving the mile, Governor.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re a dead man walking.”

The governor finally understood. He was going to be executed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Oval Office was rife with tension as Vice President Bohlmer vented about the complacency of the Secret Service members who were killed during the abduction of the pope. Their guns hadn’t been drawn, nor had a single shot been fired in defense, except those from Cross’s weapon. The agents were simply caught unaware, and the Secret Service had no answers. There was no trace evidence, no physical evidence, nothing. Three hundred sixty degrees of direction and no one knew where to begin.

President Burroughs sat behind his desk listening to Bohlmer voice his anger. They had become one of the few political tandem teams who had a truly symbiotic relationship. The vice president was not chosen because his constituency was strong enough to garner electoral votes, but because the two shared a mutual respect and an awareness of the country’s needs.

Now that Day One had turned into Day Two without so much as a word from the Soldiers of Islam, the heads of the political machine were considering their next course of action. The word in the media was that the FBI had one of the nation’s best working on the situation—Billy Paxton of the Hostage Rescue Team.

There was no mention of Shari Cohen.

“Jonas, take it easy before you have a stroke,” the president finally said.

The vice president raised his hands in submission, fought for calm, and took his rightful chair located on top of the Presidential Seal on the bright blue carpet.

Also in attendance were several of the president’s advisors, including Chief Advisor Alan Thornton, Attorney General Dean Hamilton, CIA Director Doug Craner, and FBI Director Larry Johnston.

“So what have we got so far from the intelligence community?” asked the president.

CIA Director Doug Craner didn’t look at the sheaf of papers in front of him, but held it there for reference. “Our intel abroad is picking up nothing from Aljazeera or any other Arabic news agency, other than praise for the Soldiers of Islam. The Arab chat rooms are loaded, but no significant leads have been gleaned from them thus far.”

“What about intercepted emails and messages from those on the FBI watch list?”

Johnston shook his head. “Same thing,” he said. “There’s really nothing out there of any significance. Just a few dangling carrots that have already been discredited.”

“But you’re following up?”

“Yes sir. Every lead, no matter how insignificant it may seem, is being investigated.”

“And what about you, Dean? You’ve been pretty quiet.”

Attorney General Dean Hamilton sat in a tack-studded leather chair with one leg crossed over the other. “Well, Mr. President, I’m afraid that these Soldiers of Islam, for whatever reason, wish to remain unseen and unheard. I’m afraid that I have nothing to add to what these gentlemen have already submitted to you.”

“Which means that we now have to take the initiative and ferret out these animals on our own?”

“I would say so, yes.”

President Burroughs turned to his advisors. “Options?”

Thornton leaned forward, his hands raised and ready to gesticulate as he spoke. “We know the terrorists’ identities,” he said. “So I think it’s time to play to the media and post their photos. Maybe somebody—a co-worker, a friend, anybody—will contact us with reliable leads.”

The president rubbed the base of his chin, one of his many contemplative habits. After a moment of awkward silence he made his decision.

“Obviously, we need to initiate some type of action to at least appease the international community.” He rose slowly from his chair and gazed out the window overlooking the Rose Garden and jogging track. “Dean?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Inform Paxton. Get him in front of the camera for a live update as soon as possible. And inform Ms. Cohen, too.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let’s see how the snake reacts when it knows the mongoose is on its tail.”

As the room emptied, the president continued to stand at the window looking out at the Rose Garden. His favorite was Joseph’s Coat.

## Chapter 27

***Boston, Massachusetts  
September 24, Noon***

The camera room was just as dusty, tomblike, and unkempt as the holding area. The walls were gutted, broken plaster laying in pieces along the dust-laden floor. Pop and beer cans lay discarded with old condoms that were now nothing more than dried husks, and dust motes floated with hypnotic grace. Against the west wall a canvas tarp was nailed to a header beam, providing a neutral backdrop for the camera. A twelve-amp generator hummed, providing power for two lamps stationed on either side of the staging area.

As Team Leader entered the room with Kodiak prodding the governor along, Boa was making the final adjustments to the camera’s tripod.

“Are we ready, Mr. Boa?” asked Team Leader.

Boa nodded. “We are.”

Although Team Leader turned toward Kodiak, he didn’t have to issue an order; Kodiak knew exactly what to do. Moving to a marked spot ten feet in front of the camera, Kodiak shoved the governor to the stage and forced him to his knees.

Removing a pair of handcuffs from his duty belt, Kodiak cuffed the governor from behind and stood back. The stage now belonged solely to Governor Steele.

Here, Team Leader did a peculiar thing—he moved onto the stage and patted the governor on the shoulder, giving him a reassuring squeeze. “Whenever you’re ready, Mr. Boa.”

Boa turned on the camera and directed the lens to Team Leader, who stood with military erectness in his black tactical jumpsuit, boots and ski mask. After counting down on his fingers from three to two to one, Boa directed a finger at Team Leader, who began speaking in perfect Arabic. “No doubt the nation is wondering what happened to your Devil’s Advocate, Pope Pius the Thirteenth.”

The camera slowly zoomed in for a close-up of Team Leader and the governor, a predetermined shot. The governor’s blanched face held the sallow color of a fish’s underbelly. The pallor of his face made the new growth of his beard appear darker, more dramatic.

“My name is Abdul-Aliyy,” said Team Leader, “of the Soldiers of Islam. Your nation has degraded our culture, murdered our children, and continually supported the evil Zionist state of Israel. If you do not meet our demands, then your Devil’s Advocate will die. There will be no discussions, no debates, and no negotiations. All terms are to be met without delay. For every day the demands are not met by your lying government, we will kill a member of the Holy See for your government’s resistance.”

Team Leader reached down and unsnapped the strap of his holster. “Our intent is not simple murder,” he stated. “Our intent is to enlighten the governing forces of your country that our demand for Arab sovereignty must be met. You and your allies will remove all occupying forces from the Middle East, release all prisoners from any custodial institutions, and most importantly, you will aid in the removal of the Zionist state of Israel from Arab soil.”

Team Leader paused for dramatic effect, then continued with harsh resolve. “You are no longer safe within the borders of your country,” he said firmly, evenly, with a hint of derision. “Nor are you safe in your schools, your churches, or within the confines of your own homes. The subjects we hold are proof that we can get to you anytime, anywhere.”

Team Leader reached down and grabbed a thatch of the governor’s hair, forcing his head in line with the camera, a pre-established cue for Boa to zoom in and capture the governor’s terrified features.

“Governor Steele is to be our first moral sacrifice,” Team Leader said. “A sacrifice which, in the eyes of Allah, is justified to gain what is right.”

Team Leader released the governor, who fell to the floor in a fetal position. From the camera’s right side, Kodiak entered the video and lifted the sobbing Steele back into a kneeling position, then disappeared once again beyond camera range.

Team Leader stood behind the governor and brandished a pistol. Within view of the camera, he securely attached a suppressor and held the gun by his side.

The governor barked something undecipherable, then pleaded for his life, first calling on God, then on his assassin. “Please don’t do this,” he said. “Please.”

Team Leader pressed the mouth of the barrel against Steele’s temple. “This is because your government is a lying whore dog,” he said.

At that moment, the governor doubled over, a writhing, sobbing mass. Team Leader grabbed him by the collar of his pajama top and yanked him back into a kneeling position. Then, with one deft move, he grabbed a hank of the governor's hair and forced his head back, making it compulsory for the governor to look deep into his assassin's eyes.

The governor didn't understand Arabic, but the intentions behind the Team Leader's words rang clear. "Please," he whispered. "Don't."

The hatred within the assassin's eyes seemed to fade, with perhaps a softening in judgment, but Team Leader acted without conscience and pulled the trigger. The Sig went off in a muted report as the governor's head snapped hard to the direction of the shot, then recoiled. With a detached gaze, the governor continued to kneel there as if deciding whether or not he was dead. When the governor fell hard against the floorboards, Boa zoomed in to catch the blood pooling in a halo around his head.

Team Leader stepped back into the camera's frame, the weapon by his side, the mouth of the barrel smoking, a dramatic effect.

Off camera, Kodiak dragged the governor's body from the stage and began wrapping it in plastic sheeting and duct tape. On camera, Team Leader continued his address.

In perfect Arabic he reiterated the policy of "no discussions, no debates and no negotiations." If their demands weren't met in a timely fashion, the pope would be executed for the sins of the Great Satan.

The message was clear. Allah required that every last man, woman and child not of Arab heritage be eliminated from Arab lands. In Allah's eyes, the blood of Arabs is sacred, the blood of all others expendable.

Boa rewound the tape, ejected it from the camera and handed it to Team Leader.

"It's absolutely necessary," he told Boa, "for this to work. We must all share the same passion. If we're without a shared passion, the cause will founder."

Boa and Kodiak understood. If they didn't become dehumanized, they would fail.

Looking down at the body, neither showed any evidence of remorse.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shari Cohen stayed active in the Operations Room trying to glean current information from the Italian, Russian, French, and German intelligence agencies. So far nothing had come from the Islamic sources residing in those countries besides praise for the Soldiers of Islam, which only fueled her frustration. She was trying to track something that seemed to have no substance.

Needing time alone to regroup her thoughts, she returned to her office when the phone began to ring. "Special Agent Cohen."

Pappandopolous's bass-heavy voice was unmistakable. "Paxton's about to address the nation on behalf of the president," he said, "and the attorney general wants you to sit up and take notice. When Paxton gets off the dais, the AG wants you to take over the reins."

"Why? What's going on?"

“Just watch,” he said. “You got a couple of minutes before Paxton goes on.” He abruptly hung up.

She placed the receiver back into its cradle and rubbed her eyes. Looking into a full-length mirror on the wall and not liking what she saw, she retrieved a brush and compact from her purse and did a cursory makeover. After trying to smooth out the wrinkles in her skirt that had grown into pleats, she gave up and went to the luncheon area where TV screens projected from every corner of the room.

Billy Paxton appeared on each monitor, looking polished. He wore a fresh shirt and tie, the colors matching, a dark blue tie against a baby blue shirt. His hair no doubt had been coiffed by an on-site stylist.

Once at the podium he went into the scripted diatribe against the Soldiers of Islam. He revealed who they were, where their cell group initiated from, their backgrounds, and then the photographs of the six remaining terrorists.

Shari was pleased. Now the Soldiers of Islam could no longer hide behind their masks.

For thirty minutes Shari watched Billy Paxton take center stage before returning to her office, her mind racing, only for her thoughts to come to a startling halt when she saw Punch Murdock sitting in her office. She recognized the man by his broken nose, the appendage leaning noticeably to one side of his face.

“Can I help you?”

Murdock stood holding his hat in one hand and a manila envelope in the other. “Ms. Cohen?”

“Yes.”

Murdock smiled and gave a perfunctory nod in greeting. “My name is Marion Murdock,” he said. “I’m here because—”

“Punch Murdock,” she interrupted.

His smile broadened. “You know of me?”

“Of course.” She held her hand out to him.

“Oh, yes.” He laid his hat on the chair and took her hand warmly. “I’m so pleased to finally meet you,” he told her. “I’ve always heard about the great things you’ve done for the department over the years.”

“And the same goes for you,” she said. “I’ve finally met the man behind the myth.”

Murdock nodded, his face flushing just a bit. “I think perhaps the legacy has been embellished,” he informed her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “The word in the White House corridors is that you’re the real deal.”

All of a sudden the man’s smile left him, making him difficult to read. “Not anymore,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve heard about my detail?”

She nodded. “I have. And I’m sorry for the families who have lost a loved one. Please accept my condolences. I know it’s never easy to lose team members who have become friends.”

“They were good people. They didn’t deserve this.”

“Nobody deserves something like this.”

Then, pointing to the seat where he had just laid his hat, Murdock asked if he could sit down.

“I’m sorry—yes, of course. Please, have a seat.”



After removing his hat from the chair and placing it on the corner of Cohen's desk, Murdock handed her the manila envelope.

"What's this?"

"CSI reports regarding the findings within the Governor's Mansion and the complete and extensive dossiers on the Soldiers of Islam. I understand you're to be privy to all the facts. And just to let you know, Ms. Cohen, the president has the same set of paperwork, as does the attorney general and the other responding agencies who want to know where the blame lies so they can cover their asses."

She looked directly into his eyes and noted the solemn despair behind them. "I'm truly sorry for the loss of your team," she said.

"I appreciate it, but you know as well as I do that all political fingers will be pointing in my direction. That's the business we're in, Ms. Cohen. So that legacy you alluded to earlier seems a bit less meaningful, don't you think?"

"It's not your fault, Punch. You weren't even there."

"That's the point. As team leader on such an important detail, I should have been."

Shari observed the classical signs of survivor's guilt. "Nobody knew this was going to happen."

"Of course not, and that's why my team became complacent. They should have been better prepared. And if I had been there, they would've been." He raised his hand as if to apologize for his sudden rise in volume. "I'm not yelling at you," he said. "I'm just frustrated, that's all."

He then pointed to the envelope in her hand. "You'll probably want time alone to read that over," he added. "So I'll be on my way." He stood, grabbing the fedora off her desk. "I just wanted to meet the Shari Cohen that I've heard so much about," he added.

She smiled. "You're very kind."

At that point he raised a finger, indicating one last thing. "As a courtesy to me," he began, "and since the hammer is about to fall on me because of the failure of my detail, all I ask is that you keep me in the loop if you should come across anything."

Shari hesitated, her shoulders slumping in apology.

Murdock understood. "Don't worry. Nobody wants to jeopardize his own career by dealing with damaged goods," he stated, putting on his hat. "I can't blame you."

"It's not like that at all."

"Really."

"Protocol dictates that we deal only with the agencies directly involved in this matter, for fear of misappropriation. You know that."

Murdock feigned a smile. "It's nothing personal, Ms. Cohen. I was just asking for a favor, and I fully understand your position. I probably would have done the same if I was in your shoes." Before closing the door behind him he made one last remark. "I was told to bring that report to you because it appears I have been relegated to the role of gofer. So much for the myth you were talking about earlier," he said. "I guess you're only as good as you were the day before. So be careful, Ms. Cohen. Even though you're a legend today, you may be a has-been tomorrow. Have a good day."

After he closed the door she opened the flap and took out a manuscript at least seventy pages thick.

She began to read. The report covered every aspect of the crime scene testing.

Only indigenous prints had been found; however, there was absolute proof that some areas had been sanitized. She had to wonder why the Soldiers of Islam had concealed some facets of the slaughter and then deliberately left behind the bodies of al-Hashrie and al-Bashrah as a calling card.

She then cross-referenced the dossiers with the assassins' methods. The president's men had been murdered either by garrote or by well-placed kill shots, methods of specially-trained assassins. Yet the dossiers of the Soldiers of Islam stated that they had gone through nothing more than basic training. Even if she assumed that their basic training was a precursor to more specialized military training, the facts did not add up. According to the timeline, after their basic training was completed, they were immediately shipped off to the States to become computer jockeys for recruitment purposes and cyber spying. They were not soldiers of elite status.

Yet they were.

She closed her eyes. Nothing seemed to make sense. After reading the report in its entirety and finding other evidence of sanitation, all she could do was nibble on her lower lip in bewilderment.

## Chapter 28

The wrapped body of the governor had been placed in the false bottom of the cargo hold. Team Leader drove the vehicle southbound on Route 1 without complication. The roadblocks had thinned considerably since their northward trip, the troops having been redistributed to more centralized positions near D.C.

Apparently, that was where the body politic assumed the Soldiers of Islam to be. Team Leader found himself unable to dispel the preamble of a smile that was forming on his face.

By nightfall he reached the outskirts of Washington, D.C., and drove the vehicle into a storage unit large enough to hold the truck and a sedan. Team Leader lifted the corpse from the hold and placed the body in the trunk of the diplomat-registered car. Once done, he checked the packaged video of the governor's execution to make sure everything was neat and untraceable then drove away from the facility.

Since D.C.'s populace is strictly a workforce, the streets had emptied by eight o'clock. By ten o'clock it was a ghost town.

Team Leader then drove the sedan to M Street where he parked on the top floor of a parking garage, tucked the video into an inner pocket of his combat fatigues, and took the stairs to the entrance to rendezvous with his contact.

As he waited in darkness, police cruisers made their rounds, which was why he hadn't parked the sedan outside. A car bearing diplomatic tags parked along M street at such a late hour would only draw suspicion.

"You're getting sloppy," a voice said.

Team Leader turned and drew a stiletto with the quickness and agility of a cat. An eight-inch blade shot from the hilt, the point directed at Judas' throat.

"Take it easy," Judas said, throwing up his hands. "No need to get your bowels in an uproar."

Team Leader pressed the knifepoint into Judas' throat and indented the flesh. "Do that again, Judas, and I will kill you. I don't care what your position is or what Yahweh will think when I tell him why I cut your throat."

Judas backed away from the knife. "Relax."

"You're a lucky man." The blade fell back into the hilt and Team Leader packed it away.

"You're still getting sloppy," Judas told him. "Letting an old man like me creep up on you."

Team Leader curbed his anger and removed the keys to the sedan from his pocket. "You know where the car is," he said. "You know what to do."

"How come I get all the crap jobs?"

Team Leader couldn't see Judas' face, obscured as it was by the brim of his hat and the deep shadows. "You do it for ten million reasons. I do it for only one. And in this case, my one outweighs your ten million."

Judas accepted the keys. "What about the video?"

"Yahweh wants to see it before we send it off to the proper authorities."

"That's macabre-ish of him." Judas slowly backed into the shadows and was gone, silent, quick, and wraithlike.

Team Leader worked the muscles in the back of his jaw, admonishing himself for letting a man like Judas sneak up on him.

## Chapter 29

### ***Washington, D.C. Tidal Basin September 25, Early Morning***

Unlocking the sedan and opening the door, Judas was met by the faint odor of body rot. As he descended the levels of the garage, he decided on his route to the Tidal Basin, the path of least resistance. He wanted to scope the area to see if it was heavy with law enforcement.

He paid the garage fee and drove west, then north, making sure he kept below the posted speed limit and used his blinker at every turn. Driving along South Capitol Street to Independence Avenue, he turned east, then north, passing the Library of Congress and the Supreme Court. After making a single pass and sighting no one, he moved south to Independence, then west to the Tidal Basin.

The time was now 2:17 a.m.

Judas drove to the Basin and parked the vehicle right at the water's edge.

After placing the vehicle in PARK, he moved quickly to the rear of the sedan, opened the trunk, and pulled the governor's body to the ground. With adrenaline coursing through his veins, Judas feverishly peeled away the plastic wrap that

covered the governor. As he pulled back the plastic, his nostrils were assaulted by the stench of death. Disgusted, he tossed the materials back into the trunk.

Standing over the exposed body, Judas hardly recognized the man. The governor's pajamas stretched too tight across his flesh, the methane gas build-up beneath the tissues bloating the body. The fluid in his skull provided pressure so great that the eyes bulged fantastically from their orbital sockets. And his skin, having marbled, held the purple arterial lines of lividity, marking the regions where the blood had ceased to circulate. To Judas, the governor didn't even come close to resembling the person he was when he was alive.

Cupping his gloved hands beneath the governor's arms, Judas dragged him to the edge of the Tidal Basin and set him sailing across the water, the body floating dreamily across the surface from the gases still trapped in his lungs and tissue.

After checking the area thoroughly for anything he may have left behind, Judas got into the vehicle and worked his way northbound.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yahweh sat at the upper echelon of the American political pecking order, one of the most powerful men in the world. In the light of day, he was beloved by the people, devoted to his country, and willing to fight for the cause of justice. But in the darkness he was corrupt and vile, willing to do anything necessary to achieve his own aims, even if that meant bypassing the laws he was sworn to protect and killing innocent people.

As far as Yahweh was concerned, the pope was a pawn in his scheme—a man whose death would usher out the ways of old and serve as a new beginning. Regrettably, he saw no other way.

Yahweh was a man who catered to the public and reveled in their cheer. He found no excitement in the obscurity of clandestine meetings. But Team Leader insisted that all matters pertaining to the cause be discussed in a sterilized environment, free of any type of surveillance. A federal limo in constant motion apparently fit the bill.

Yahweh's chauffeur drove his black Fleetwood to the front of the M Street garage and stopped. The limo's door opened in invitation, and Team Leader stepped inside, taking a seat opposite Yahweh in the darkness.

"Is it done?" asked Yahweh.

Team Leader nodded. "Judas is dealing with the governor's body as we speak."

"Good." Yahweh's voice remained impassive. "And was it quick?"

"What?"

"The killing."

"Of course."

"Did you look in his eyes before you killed him?"

"I did."

"And what did you see?"

Team Leader leaned forward. "I saw in him what I have seen in the eyes of all men," he said. "I saw a man who was terrified of dying—someone who didn't believe in anything beyond the moment of his pathetic life."

Yahweh nodded, then turned to view the passing terrain outside the window.

While the limo continued through the empty streets, a moment of silence passed between them before Yahweh spoke again. "I do believe you have something for me."

Team Leader reached into the inner pocket of his combat fatigues and produced the videotape. "When will the proper authorities get this?"

Yahweh took the tape and held it close. "After I view this for myself and after they find the governor's body. I'll distribute the tape to a CNN affiliate. And then the world will cry like frightened children, knowing there is no hope for the Holy One."

Team Leader tried to look through the tinted windows, but could only see the faintly glowing orbs of the street lamps as they passed. "And the world will finally be divided."

Yahweh leaned forward. "When you return to the holding ground, I want you to kill off the members of the Holy See quickly, at least one a day. Build the world into a fast and furious frenzy. Let them know the end is near."

"You need to be patient."

"Patience is a virtue I can't afford. Get it done."

Although Team Leader couldn't see the man's eyes, he knew Yahweh was measuring him.

The limo continued on.

## Chapter 30

***Washington, D.C.***

***September 25, Morning***

Kimball Hayden had followed Shari Cohen home from the JEH Building the night before, in a sedan borrowed from Cardinal Medeiros. While Kimball tailed Shari, the rest of the Vatican Knights rested at the archdiocese.

He recognized the white Lexus and the federal tags leaving the parking garage and followed her to a leafy, upscale neighborhood north of D.C., where she lived in a two-story brownstone with wrought-iron railings leading to the double doors and a picture window that offered a perfect view of the park across the street. Often he looked at her dossier, especially at the black and white glossy photo that resembled a Hollywood headshot.

He knew he had to gain her trust, but to do that he would have to violate the trust of the Vatican. To draw her into an alliance he would have to tell her who he was and where he came from, which was against the policies of the Vatican who wished the Knights to remain anonymous. But Hayden saw no other way. If he wanted to gain the trust of Shari Cohen, he would have to tell her the truth.

He could only pray she would keep his secret.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shari's phone rang several times before she picked up, her hand searching blindly for the receiver. She finally lifted it from its cradle and pressed it to her ear. "Hello?"

"They found the governor's body."

Shari recognized Pappandopolous' voice. "Where?"

"At the Tidal Basin. They're pulling the body out now."

She shot up in bed, disturbing her husband, who raised himself onto an elbow. "I'm on my way," she told him.

Pappandopolous hung up. Without so much as a word to Gary, she got dressed as fast as she could. Within five minutes she was hopping toward the front door, trying to put on her last shoe.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Shari arrived on the scene, the governor's body had already been pulled from the Tidal Basin. A perimeter had been established along the shoreline. Behind the tape, the police were holding the media at bay. Shari flashed her credentials, and an officer lifted the yellow strip to allow her passage.

The weather was mild, the sky blue. Before her the surface of the Tidal Basin rippled with the course of a light wind, the motion calm and soothing. But Shari noticed none of this as she made her way to the coroner's van.

The vehicle's rear was parked at the basin's edge, the doors open, a sealed body bag inside. When Shari got there she badged the medical examiner.

"Show me what you've got."

The examiner unzipped the body bag to expose the governor's face.

"Single gunshot wound to the head," he said. "By the size of the exit wound I would have to say it was a medium to large caliber. The amount of antimony, barium and lead will help us determine what type of weapon was used when we do a gunshot residue analysis." The medical examiner pointed to the entry wound, to the burns circling the hole. "Definitely execution style," he added. "Up close and neat. The mouth of the barrel couldn't have been more than two inches away when it went off." He turned to Shari. "Anything else you need to know before we get him on the table?"

Shari examined the governor's face. It was severely swollen and unrecognizable, his skin marbled to a purple-gray. "This is the governor?"

"Yeah, it's him all right," he said, zipping up the bag. "We did a cursory identification through body symbols: scars, moles, and so forth. Of course we'll leave the official ID up to the examination, but there's no doubt in my mind that this is the governor."

"He looks kind of... well—"

The examiner nodded, intuiting her question. "Methane gas build-up," he answered, "which bloats the skin. There's really nothing anomalous about it. But it's him." He closed the door to the van. "Anything else?"

Shari looked across the basin. "Could the water throw off the timeframe of the murder?"

"Absolutely," he said. "The body normally cools about one-point-five degrees per hour. As cold as this water is, it's my guess he was sent adrift to corrupt our findings. We're really not going to be able to pinpoint a time of death with any true

accuracy on this one. Hopefully we can learn more by examining trace elements, if they haven't been washed away."

Shari closed her eyes, her mind working. The same question kept surfacing at every turn of the investigation: why were the Soldiers of Islam sanitizing their actions when the authorities already knew their identities?

She opened her eyes. "You know who found him?"

"A jogger," he said, pointing to the edge of the basin where a young woman wearing a spandex suit stood speaking with three officers. "The one wearing the outfit that looks like it's been painted on."

"Thanks. I'll be in contact for the autopsy results."

Shari moved through the group of CSI investigators and made her way to the water's edge where the jogger was nervously ringing her hands. "Excuse me," said Shari, presenting her badge, "I'm Special Agent Cohen of the FBI. I understand that you're the one who found the body?"

She nodded. "I am."

The three officers didn't relinquish their territory as they stood with pens and pads in hand, scrutinizing Shari as an intruder. But after ten minutes of questioning the jogger, Shari concluded that nothing of value could be deduced from the witness and thanked her, letting the officers re-stake their claim.

She then questioned the crime scene investigators and learned that there was no perceptible sign as to when the governor's body was set adrift. The area was clean. This brought her back to the question of why the Soldiers of Islam would leave the two bodies behind in the Governor's Mansion, letting the world know who they were, only to turn around and cover their actions as if trying to protect their identities?

It just didn't make sense.

After scribbling a few notes, she checked her watch.

It was time to see a man about a CD.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kimball Hayden watched from the sidelines as Shari Cohen held a brief discussion with the medical examiner. Then, after moving on to talk to the witness and the crime scene investigators, she returned to her Lexus. Just as she was about to insert the key into the door lock, Kimball Hayden intercepted her.

## Chapter 31

As a government official, it was Yahweh's duty to understand the enemy and its mindset. However, it truly escaped him why the enemy was so willing to surrender its life for its god, without fear or hesitation.

Was the enemy's belief in the afterlife so strong, so rooted, that it considered the corporeal life less substantial than the spiritual one? Was the true reward death? It was amazing how cultures viewed the difference between the virtues of living and dying.

Yahweh had watched the video repeatedly. The tape made it apparent that the governor did not share the same convictions as his Arab enemies, the fear of his impending murder evident. He was clearly unwilling to die for an afterlife that he may or may not have believed in. The governor, in fact, was representative of the weak principles of faith in this country.

After placing the video in an envelope, he sealed it using a wet sponge and had Judas drop it off at an affiliate station of CNN shortly after the governor's discovery.

Once done, Judas made a call to the station and played a taped recording, first in Arabic, then in accented English, advising that the Soldiers of Islam were claiming responsibility for the governor's death. Further statements demanded that their conditions be met or the pope would soon be lying beside the governor. End of message.

When Judas clicked off the tape, he calmly hung up the receiver and walked away with a ten-million-dollar smile.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ms. Cohen?" The tall man emerged seemingly from nowhere. "Shari Cohen?"

Shari looked up into the face of a man who, by her estimate, stood a full foot taller than her, and she was five-six. He was wearing black tactical pants that blossomed at the top of military boots and a cleric's shirt bearing a starch-white Roman collar. "Yes, Father."

He offered his hand and gave her a genuine and pleasing smile, which heightened his handsome features. "My name is Kimball Hayden."

For some reason that name struck a chord with her, but she couldn't quite match the name with the face. "What can I do for you, Father Hayden?"

"To begin with, ma'am, I'm not a priest. I think it's important that you know that."

She looked at the Roman collar.

"It's part of our uniform," he answered.

"What exactly do you want, Mr. Hayden?"

"Your help."

She got the key into the lock and turned it. The door lock popped up. "And what help might that be?"

"I understand you're the one spearheading the investigation into the kidnapping of Pope Pius the Thirteenth, and that Mr. Paxton is simply following your lead."

She now felt uneasy and gave a quick glance over to the police presence along the basin.

"Ms. Cohen, please. It's important you understand that I'm an emissary sent from the Vatican. You can check this out with the archdiocese in Washington. Cardinal Medeiros will verify who I am."

"How do you know me?"

"I don't. I just know what your role is."

"Then how do you know that?"

"Ms. Cohen, the arms of the Vatican are long and wide, even within your own political branches. I'm not going to reveal your secret. I'm simply here to earn your



trust so we can work together to achieve our mutual aim—to bring home our pope.”

Shari cocked her head slightly. “Are you a Swiss Guard?”

“No, ma’am. I’m part of a group of operatives known only to the pope and a few others. Our job is to preserve the lives of the innocent. I can’t tell you too much more than that, I’m afraid.”

“Then I’m afraid I can’t help you.” She opened the door to her Lexus. “Good day, Mr. Hayden.”

“Ms. Cohen, please. Call the archdiocese. They’ll confirm who I am and the nature of my visit.” He gave her Cardinal Medeiros’ business card. “Please.”

Shari got into her vehicle, started the engine and cocked her head out the window. “I don’t know who you are, Mr. Hayden, but this is strictly a federal matter. Misguided vigilante groups like yours, well-intentioned as they may be, only make matters worse. So stay away.”

“All I’m asking is for you call the archdiocese and confirm who I am. You’ll be able to contact me through them.”

“I’m a busy person, Mr. Hayden. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

As she drove away, she quickly crumpled the card and tossed it into the recess of the ashtray. Her only thought at the moment was to see Abraham Obadiah.

### ***Boston, Massachusetts September 25, Morning***

Kodiak had sent King Snake and Boa to check the perimeter for possible breaches in the system. Lasers had been installed along the first floor of the abandoned building in a series of intertwining networks; a single line broken would automatically trigger a warning to the bank of security monitors situated on the third floor. So far the system did the job; the amber light on the monitor flashed occasionally when a rat crossed the eye of the laser and broke the beam. They had prepared the building well.

After examining the monitors, Kodiak checked on the bishops of the Holy See, who cowered in his presence. Not a single man dared to look him in the eye. At the end of the row lay the empty mattress of the governor. The bishops could guess why the governor had never returned. And soon, they feared, the whole row would be empty.

Walking down the hallway, the cadence of his footfalls casting a hollow, foreboding echo, Kodiak entered the pope’s room, removed his pistol, engaged the laser sight, and placed the red dot in the center of the pope’s forehead. He then bounced the dot from one eye to the other in a malicious game of eenie-meenie-minie-moe. But the pope refused to flinch.

Tiring of the large man’s game, the pope faced him. “Do what you must and be done with it.”

Kodiak stopped the taunting and holstered his weapon. “Just a tune-up before the real thing, Padre.”

Pope Pius XIII leaned forward, his aged face caught half in light and half in shadow. “Will you be the brave soul that kills a defenseless old man chained to a wall?”

The muscles in the back of Kodiak’s jaw tensed. “I’m afraid that privilege is for somebody else.”

“The man who speaks with an accent?”

Kodiak remained silent.

“I see that you have no such accent. In fact, you sound American. Why would that be?”

Kodiak leaned forward as if to step up to a challenge. The size discrepancy between the two made the pope look like a small child within the larger man’s presence. But somehow the smaller man seemed to bear unimaginable strength.

Kodiak knelt until he could clearly see the weathered face of the old man. “You really think this is about meeting certain conditions to gain your release?” He leaned forward and beckoned the pope into closer counsel. “When the bullet finally penetrates your skull,” he whispered as if sharing a secret, “the Arab world will fall in the wake of your death.”

The dark truth dawned on the old man like a sudden epiphany. His jaw dropped and his eyes held sudden recognition.

“That’s right,” said Kodiak, a smile forming on his grotesquely scarred face. “Now you’re getting the whole picture, aren’t you?”

When Kodiak refused to retreat, the pope drew his hands to his face and recalled the cryptic words of the man with the accent: *whereas your Christ was the King of Kings who readily embraced the world, Pope Pius XIII shall become the Martyr of Martyrs who will divide it.*

The meaning was all too clear.

“That’s right, Padre. You’re the best weapon the twenty-first century has to offer.”

The old man wept.

## Chapter 32

### ***The White House September 25, Noon***

While on her way to the Embassy of Israel, Shari received a text message from Chief Advisor Alan Thornton, requesting her immediate presence at the White House Situation Room. There was no further explanation.

Upon her arrival Shari sat with the president, vice president, attorney general, FBI director and key advisors, including Alan Thornton. The discomfort was palpable.

“This morning,” said President Burroughs, “we received word that the Soldiers of Islam had made contact with CNN’s affiliate station, providing them with a tape of the governor’s execution. We immediately issued a warrant to get the tape into our possession, but not before the station had broadcast snippets of the tape on

the air. By now it's probably on every website throughout the world." He turned to Alan Thornton. "Damage assessment?"

Thornton glanced briefly at the contents of a single sheet of paper in front of him. "According to Aljazeera, terrorist groups in the Middle East are targeting foreign nationals in homage to the Soldiers of Islam. The CIA is picking up messages from chat rooms of potential plots to kidnap foreign dignitaries aligned with the United States and its allies. There are reports of hate crimes being perpetrated against Arab citizens throughout this nation. And predominantly Catholic nations, especially those in Europe and South America, are burning you in effigy, Mr. President, for allowing this to happen."

President Burroughs sighed. "Has the tape at least provided us with anything we can use? Anything at all?"

Attorney General Dean Hamilton proffered what he knew. "The executioner on the tape called himself Abdul-Aliyy, which is a pseudonym. We already know the names of the six remaining Soldiers of Islam, and Abdul-Aliyy is not one of them. In fact, Abdul-Aliyy in Arabic means 'Server of the Most High.'"

"A religious moniker that would motivate the Arab world into a frenzy, since they've captured the so-called apostle to the Great Satan," stated the president.

"Exactly, sir."

"Calling himself Abdul-Aliyy indicates that the tape may have been made prior to the media exposing their identities," added the president. "They obviously couldn't doctor the tape at that point because they had already committed the execution. But why provide a false name if the world already knows who you are?"

"For martyrdom," said Shari. "In Arab culture religion is everything. By giving themselves a moniker such as Abdul-Aliyy, they're anointing themselves as martyrs. In the Arab world, martyrs are heroic fighters of Allah who are promised eternal heaven. But from a practical standpoint, it also incites the Arab public into a zealous passion, cultivated by millennia of religious beliefs."

The president rubbed the fatigue from his eyes. "What else have we got?"

Hamilton spoke. "The tape is in fluent Arabic. And, of course, there are the demands."

President Burroughs closed his raw eyes once again; his tension headache was coming on like a bull. Hamilton continued his summation of the video, citing the demands. All occupation by American and Allied forces was to cease immediately, all Arab prisoners held by the occupying forces were to be released, and Israel was to be removed from Arab soil.

"They're not asking for much, are they?" the vice president offered sarcastically. "And I'm sure Israel will just get up and leave in a heartbeat."

"They know we can't meet their demands," said the president.

"What about the tape itself?" asked Bohlmer. The vice president leaned forward. "Has anything been determined from the background noise, or perhaps the visual background?"

"The lab is still working on it, sir. But right now—"

"But right now we have nothing," the president interrupted angrily.

"All we can do, Mr. President, is beef up law enforcement in this area to keep them from slipping in and out like they did last night."

“They won’t follow up their actions with a repeat performance,” said Shari. “What they did last night was in return for showing the world their identities. It’s point-counterpoint. Even though we tagged them, they still came into our front yard and placed the governor right on our doorstep. They’re showing the world that they’re still in control. And now that they’ve achieved their objective, they know that the net will tighten. They’ll be much more careful next time.”

The president slapped an open palm against the tabletop. “There will be no next time, people, which means I want answers! Not guesses!” He released a frustrated sigh before regaining composure. “What I want to hear,” he said evenly, “what I want to know is what we’re doing right now to find these people.”

“Mr. President, if I may,” said Attorney General Hamilton. “As Mr. Johnston already pointed out, we are examining the tape further. However, given that the tape seems to show a background consistent with an abandoned building, we’ve engaged the services of county and state law enforcement to search all vacant buildings within a hundred-mile radius.”

“That may take forever,” the president commented.

“Yes, sir, but we have nothing else to go on.”

The president’s headache came on in a rush. “Ms. Cohen, you know these people, their culture. What do you expect to happen next?”

Shari held nothing back. “I expect, Mr. President, that they will kill a member of the Holy See.”

“Not the pope?”

“No, sir. I believe the Soldiers of Islam are trying to build momentum. They want to push this country into a state of panic. Their dominance is fostering pride within Arab nations who are uniting against a common enemy, which happens to be the most powerful nation on earth. They are, Mr. President, trying to create their own sense of invincibility.”

The president had never felt so impotent. “God forgive me, but I really don’t know what to do at this point.” He turned to Thornton. “Al?”

Thornton shook his head. “For the moment, Mr. President, you need to address the world and tell them what they want to hear.”

“What? That the pope is going to die unless we get a break?”

“No, sir. You need to tell the world in an official statement that we are working with the nations of the world in a unified effort to secure the release of the pontiff.”

“They already know that!”

“Yes, sir, but the world needs to be reassured that every possible effort is being made.”

“I agree,” said the vice president. “Right, wrong or indifferent, Jim, we need to show the world that we’re still a pillar of strength.”

The president turned to Shari. “Ms. Cohen?”

“Right now the Soldiers of Islam definitely have the upper hand. But the image we project to the world must be one of confidence and unity.”

The president chewed his lower lip. “How long do you think I can play this game, Ms. Cohen, until the international community figures out our strategy?”

“As long as it takes to buy us some time.”

“Does that mean you’re confident in your ability to find this cell?”

“It means, Mr. President, I need time to look deeper into the matter.”

The president remained silent. The whole room was silent.

“Ms. Cohen, we’re running out of time, and the world is running out of patience. What can you tell me that would be fact rather than conjecture?”

“I can safely say, Mr. President, that there’ll be more executions before we get a handle on this.”

It was not what the president wanted to hear. “Have the staff draw up a positive news release,” he said. “And let’s hope the world buys it hook, line and sinker. And, Ms. Cohen?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Your expertise in this matter hasn’t impressed me much, thus far. I need facts.”

“Yes, sir, I’m working on it.”

He leaned forward. “Work faster.”

## Chapter 33

There are options in every situation. Since Shari had not agreed to an all-out alliance and the timeframe to secure the pope’s well-being was becoming increasingly limited, Kimball opted to appropriate information from Agent Cohen.

Pertinent information took time to gather and analyze, and not a moment was to be wasted.

In the vault beneath the Sacred Hearts Church, Kimball Hayden aided Leviticus in sorting through the electronic gadgetry required to maintain surveillance on Shari Cohen. Although Kimball had the skills to set up shop, Leviticus was the expert in computer and electronic surveillance.

He meticulously studied every component necessary to capture pertinent data. First he chose a Keystroke Logger program, a downloadable disc that records and obtains passwords and encryption keys and bypasses all security measures.

Next was a laptop computer, a Plexiglas parabola dish, a receiver, wireless headsets, several tiny audio bugs, and a mini-thermal imaging camera.

He mentally ticked off the items and shot a thumbs-up to Kimball. “That should do it,” he said.

“How long to get in and out?”

“The camera and dish can be set up inside the mobile unit here at the archdiocese. The bugs will have to be placed in the high-traffic areas of her residence and inside the phones. You can do that. But to download the software—” He cut himself off, his mind calculating. “I’d say anywhere between twenty minutes and half an hour. It all depends on the speed of her computer, not to mention the time I’ll need to disable any detection ware she may have.”

*Too long.* “You have fifteen minutes... tops.”

Leviticus wasn’t sure of the targeted computer’s specs or whether it had the capacity to download his program that quickly. “I can’t force this, Kimball. It’ll depend how cooperative her computer is.”

Kimball stared at the wild tangle of gadgetry on the table. "Do what you can," he said. "We'll need to be in and out of there quickly."

Leviticus nodded agreement and gathered the equipment.

Kimball's option was about to be initiated.

***Washington, D.C.***

***September 25, Early Afternoon***

Shari fumed. She understood the president's frustration, since he was the one under international scrutiny, but to humiliate her in front of everyone in that room was wrong. Given what little she had to go on, she was doing her best.

Her anger subsided as she turned her Lexus onto International Drive, the street where Israel's largest embassy in the world was located.

After showing her credentials to the guard at the gate, she was detained until every facet of her identity could be confirmed through the international data banks. Once done, she was finally waved through.

When she entered the embassy she was amazed by the immensity of the building's rotunda. The cathedral ceiling was several stories tall with tiers of floors visible from the foyer. Alongside the information booth a massive directory was anchored to a black onyx wall. The directory stretched almost twenty-five feet in length. Shari traced her finger along the pane until she came to Defense & Armed Forces Attaché. The first name listed was that of A. Obadiah in Suite 312.

After taking a crowded elevator to the third floor, she got out and made her way to an open reception area. Sitting behind a semi-circular Lucite desk, a receptionist with a well-cultivated smile greeted her.

"May I help you?"

Shari flipped open her credentials wallet. "I'm Special Agent Cohen of the FBI. I called yesterday asking to speak with Mr. Obadiah the moment he returned from his trip."

The receptionist nodded her recollection. "Yes, of course, I remember. He did receive your message because I gave it to him personally along with his other messages. Is he expecting you?"

"Actually, he never returned the call."

The receptionist's plastic smile evaporated from her overly cosmetic face. "Well, that's probably because he's very busy."

"I'm sure. But could you please ask him if I can have a moment of his time? It's important. I promise it won't take too long."

"I'll let him know you're here," she stated.

After dialing Obadiah's extension the receptionist spoke into the lip mike in a falsely jovial tone, and then informed Shari that Mr. Obadiah was on his way to greet her.

In less than a minute, Abraham Obadiah entered the reception area wearing a smile that appeared genuine and pleasant. The contrast between his pale complexion and raven dark hair gave him a vampire-like quality which made his lips appear redder than they actually were. Beneath his chin was a horrible pink scar in the shape of a wedge.

“Agent Cohen,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

With a gesture of his hand, Team Leader directed Shari to his office.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leviticus was not only quick, but meticulous. He had placed the Keystroke Logger program within Shari’s PC to obtain addresses and information that would enable him to hack into every database she visited. Hopefully, enough data could be gleaned to provide them with some solid leads.

While Leviticus downloaded the program, Kimball was securing the audio bugs in high traffic areas, when he came upon a curio cabinet bearing nothing but framed photos. In one shot Shari was alone, smiling, beautiful. In another she posed for a family portrait with the husband and kids, but the smile appeared false, a mere gesture for the camera. Other photos showed snippets of time, captured mostly when they were on vacation: at Disneyland, at Sea World, at Lion Country Safari. And another photo stood alone off to one side, as if in homage.

The photo showed an older woman whose face had seen harsh times. Kimball knew the look well. He had seen it many times in Third World countries where innocent people often fell prey to the harshest brutalities. But what this woman had witnessed must have been something beyond human comprehension. It was written all over her face. Yet there was toughness about her, an unfeigned courage. And Kimball had seen the same thing in Shari’s picture, a certain strength imbued with beauty.

He opened the door to the cabinet and traced a gloved finger around the edges of Shari’s photo. Her smile was dazzling, her teeth pure white, and her almond-shaped eyes gave her a truly exotic appearance. Underneath it all he could see the strength handed down to her by the old woman. They were both magnificent.

Then, “How much longer?”

Leviticus never pulled his eyes away from the monitor. “Almost there,” he said. “I’m running a scan to see if everything’s doing what it should be.”

Once everything was in place, the hardware tested and the computer downloading the program faster than anticipated, Leviticus shot a thumbs-up. Everything seemed to be in order.

Whatever information Shari Cohen possessed would soon be acquired through cyberspace. But Kimball knew this was an absolute long shot, and so did Leviticus.

Once the location was sanitized, they left the premises as quickly and quietly as they had entered.

\* \* \* \* \*

Abraham Obadiah spoke with a thick accent. “I apologize for not getting to you earlier,” he said. “But I’ve been busy... just getting back and all.”

“Of course.”

“I understand you wanted to see me regarding the pope, yes?”

“I do.” She reached into her purse, pulled out the CD, and held it up in plain view. “As you know we are working with several intelligence agencies throughout the world regarding the pope’s kidnapping, and Mossad sent us information regarding the eight members of the Soldiers of Islam.”

“And I do hope you found what you were looking for.”

“To a degree,” she said, placing the CD on the desktop.

“So why come to me?”

“Well, for one thing, your name is on the disc.”

Obadiah’s features remained neutral as he unknowingly traced his fingers across the scar at the base of his chin. “I was the one who created the data?”

“Your signature is on the CD, yes.”

He shrugged and flipped his hands into the air as he spoke. “It’s possible,” he said. “And you say Mossad sent you this information?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, that’s simply because all agencies in Israel work in collusion with one another. Information gathered is accumulated into a single informational body. And, of course, data from Mossad is often shared with the Attaché and vice versa.”

“I understand that, but my question is why would Mossad send encrypted data on low-level documents such as dossiers, knowing that valuable time is being wasted trying to decode encryptions that our equipment can only fractionalize?”

“You’d have to ask Mossad.”

“But it’s your name that’s attached to the encryptions. I thought maybe you could help me break this down.”

Obadiah looked steadily at Shari. His fingers continued to stroke the scar on his chin.

“Mossad sent you information that was attached to the body of text regarding the Soldiers of Islam but not specifically related to it,” he said. “The reason why it’s encrypted is because the non-related issues hold no value for you or your investigation. Only for Mossad. Therefore, Mossad makes decipherable only the information your agency asks to see.”

“But why would Mossad attach such data to the body of information regarding the Soldiers of Islam if the data itself is not related to the topic? That doesn’t make sense.”

Obadiah was losing patience. She was pressing him, and hard.

“The encryptions are somewhat similar to your Freedom of Information Act, which, if I may candidly say, is a joke since more than seventy-five percent of your government’s documents are blacked out before they reach the public eye, leaving the balance of the information useless.” Obadiah set his eyes on the CD. “The encryptions work on the same principle.”

“Then it does have something to do with the Soldiers of Islam. Something you wanted blacked out.” She leaned forward. “Mr. Obadiah, we’re talking about three pages of encryptions here. I need you to tell me what’s on those pages.”

His black eyes snapped at her, then back to the disc. “Those three pages contain nothing regarding the Soldiers of Islam. That is the truth.”

“Then what does it contain?”

“Information that is not for your eyes, so if I may have the disc—” He reached for it, but her arm reacted with the quickness of a serpent’s strike as she snatched it from the desktop.

Obadiah shook his head in response, thinking her action to be juvenile. Then, coldly, he said, “That information is the property of the Israeli government.”

“That was given freely to the American government.”



After a slight hesitation he waved his hands at her. “No matter,” he said. “The data cannot be decoded by your software, as you have already stated.”

She placed the CD in her purse, hardly believing the turn in the conversation. One moment he was congenial, the next he was distant and uncooperative. “You still want to be evasive as to what’s on this disc, Mr. Obadiah?”

“As a representative of the Israeli government, I’ll file a grievance with your government if you wish to pursue this further. We gave you the requested data regarding the Soldiers of Islam in good faith. And now you wish to hold us accountable for the part of the informational body that, as I have already expressed to you, has nothing to do with the terrorist regime.”

“Mr. Obadiah, we both know you’re being vague for a reason. What that reason is I don’t know. But I’m going to find out. If you wish to file a grievance, then do so.”

Obadiah didn’t move from his chair as Shari stood.

“I’ll see myself out, thank you.”

The man had no intention of showing her the way but added one last comment. “I will get that disc, Ms. Cohen.”

“That’s between you and my government. So have fun with your grievance.”

As she was leaving, Team Leader once again traced the tips of his fingers across the blemish of his scar.

He now had a thorn to contend with.

## Chapter 34

Shari was frustrated beyond belief. Her meeting with Abraham Obadiah didn’t go as planned, and she was no closer to decoding the CD than when she first received it.

As she left the building, she examined the CD and let out a guttural moan of annoyance that drew the attention of those within ten feet of her.

After picking up her weapon from the gatekeeper armory, she drove back to the JEH Building and parked the car. For a moment she fought back tears, overwhelmed with frustration. When she finally gained her composure, she grabbed her purse, got out of the car and made her way to the elevator.

After speaking with Obadiah, Shari felt uncertain of the affinity between Mossad and the American government. With Mossad being the proxy eyes and ears of American espionage in the Middle East, Obadiah could have enough pull to reclaim the disc. In case she did have to turn over the original, she had to secure the backup CD.

Obadiah may get one disc, but not both. Shari was determined not to relinquish the data unless a direct order from the Chief Commander required her to surrender all forms of data contained on the disc for the sake of political camaraderie.

Before heading to her desk, Shari went to the vault and quickly punched in her PIN code. When the bolts pulled back and the door opened, she zeroed in on the correct aisle and shelf and retrieved the backup CD.

The jewel case felt good in her hands; the disc shined like a newly minted coin. Even if Obadiah filed a grievance, she still had this.

When she returned to her desk she immediately loaded the CD. What came up on the monitor caused her heart to hitch in her chest.

The data was gone.

“No, no, no...” She tapped furiously on the keyboard, trying to pull something up, anything. And then the realization set in that the CD held no data to recover. It was simply blank. It was possible that the disc was improperly burned, but she highly doubted that. And with these discs bearing embedded codes that cannot be duplicated, she was down to the original disc, which she would somehow have to safeguard before it ended up being appropriated.

Apparently, Abraham Obadiah’s influence ran deep within the American government, she thought. He was capable of getting results, and quickly.

More than ever, Shari was suspect.

For a long time she sat there staring at the blank screen, stewing over the possibility that the American government was involved in a cover-up.

***Embassy of Israel, Washington, D.C.  
September 25, Mid-Afternoon***

Abraham Obadiah sat in the embassy’s conference room with captains of industry from Russia, Venezuela and Israel. Under normal circumstances, collaboration amongst this group would be a geopolitical impossibility, given the anti-American sentiments of the Russians and Venezuelans and their open disdain for American allies. But on this day, commerce took precedence over prejudice.

The conference room was designed to be impervious to information appropriation, devoid of any listening devices.

There were three representatives from Russia, two from Venezuela, and four from Israel. All held an air of self-importance.

“Gentlemen, please, the news is good,” said Obadiah. “We’re on track with the cause, and everything is running smoothly.”

Vladimir Ostrosky, a reigning member of the Russian Parliament, examined Obadiah, with studious eyes, trying to penetrate his veneer. He found the man enigmatic and difficult to read. “According to our sources,” Ostrosky said, “that is not entirely true.”

“Really? And what exactly are your sources telling you?”

Ostrosky leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table. Slowly and deliberately, he clasped his hands and interlocked his fingers. “I’m told, Mr. Obadiah, that a certain agent from the FBI is looking into corners where she should not be looking.”

Obadiah nodded in affirmation. “There’s no need to concern yourselves with Ms. Cohen,” he stated. “She will be dealt with and the problem will be quashed.”

“If I may ask, how so?” This came from Hector Guerra of Venezuela, a man with soft, doughy features and a pencil-thin mustache that complemented a set of

equally thin lips. His collar was so tight around his neck, folds of flesh curled over its edges.

Obadiah hesitated, seeking a politically correct response that would allay these inquisitive concerns. Apparently the Russian and Venezuelan sources were quick and accurate. And these men were well-armed with damaging information.

“It’s true that Ms. Cohen is looking beyond the box, but that’s her job.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Guerra insisted.

“Let me finish,” Obadiah said, raising a hand. “I assure you, I assure all of you, that Ms. Cohen will be factored out of the equation by the American principals.”

“And the CD?”

Obadiah was startled by this question but tried not to show it. Apparently their sources produced as well and as quickly as Mossad, who was the best in the business. To know about the CD was impressive. “We’ll have the CD in our possession soon,” he said.

“And the copies?”

“There are no copies. Our people at the CIA intercepted all incoming data from the Mossad leak and destroyed it. And the leaks themselves have been dispatched. The backup copy within the vault of the FBI has also been destroyed. The only disc in existence is the one Ms. Cohen possesses.”

Ostrosky measured Obadiah with eyes so black they were seemingly without pupils.

“Gentlemen, please relax,” said Obadiah. “Everything I tell you is the truth. Within a year there will be no more economic hardships for our countries and no more dependency upon Arab states. Our industries will flourish and enjoy the full support of the international community.”

“And Yahweh?”

“He continues to be the forerunner in the cause and will use the United States to spearhead the change, since alternative fuels are still fifteen to twenty years away.”

Ostrosky leaned back in his chair. “And you can guarantee our anonymity?”

“Yes, of course.”

“That’s good,” said Ostrosky, “because I would hate for history to remember me as a monster rather than a prognosticator of a better future.”

“The pope’s death will not be tied to any man in this room. I assure you.”

“You better, Mr. Obadiah, because our political reputations, if not our lives, would be in jeopardy if the truth of our participation was known.”

“I agree.”

“If that CD is worth the life of the woman who possesses it,” said Ostrosky, “then it must hold damaging evidence, a record of what we are doing.” Suddenly his brows dipped sharply over the bridge of his nose, punctuating his point. “You must not fail to repossess the CD before she has a chance to turn her battle into a crusade.”

“Trust me,” Obadiah said. “Ms. Cohen will never get that opportunity.”

“Make sure that she doesn’t.”

Hector Guerra reclined in his seat. “There is also the matter of a Venezuelan leader who is quite anti-American. Bringing him into the circle will be impossible.”

Obadiah was quick to respond. “Our American constituencies will see to it that a Venezuelan leader who is *pro-American* will be in place within ninety days of the pope’s assassination.”

The Venezuelan nodded. “I don’t think I want to know how that’s going to happen.”

“Let’s just say that everything has been examined from every possible angle. Any more questions?”

There were none.

“Then let’s talk about the future of our countries.”

## Chapter 35

### ***Washington D.C. September 25, Early Evening***

The last trails of light from the sun’s westward trajectory dispelled into magenta twilight. It was a magnificent view apt even for an artist’s canvas, but Shari didn’t notice the beauty of the colors painting the heavens as she made her way home. Her eyes were focused elsewhere beyond the road, her movements to steer the car in the right direction governed by reflex and habit alone, since she had driven the same course for years.

Since her debacle meeting with Abraham Obadiah, she made constant calls to Mossad and got nowhere. She even went as far as to talk to the Director of Mossad, who was no different from Abraham Obadiah, just another stone wall who denied everything.

For the first time in her life she felt like she was spiraling downward into an abyss that held nothing but a deep despair. The actual mindset of ‘not knowing’ terrified her.

As soon as she turned into her neighborhood her eyes focused the moment she spotted her brownstone. After turning into the garage she knew that she should regroup and train her thoughts on her family. But she found it impossible. So she sat there with her mind working to the point where her thoughts detained all the vagueness of a drunken stupor, that sense of feeling utterly lost and alone.

As brilliant as she was, she stood by alone in this political nightmare.

And for a moment she felt a deep and shameful pang of self-pity.

In her mind’s eye she could see her grandmother’s hardened face that was much older than her given years. Yet her voice was strong and gentle and carried the weight of courage and resolve. It was a voice recalling a moment when the sky over Auschwitz rained ashes for days on end—the buildings and camp becoming laden with gray soot, the image somewhat ghostly and pale, the demeanor somber and cold. And of course there was the repugnant odor of burning flesh, which no one dared to speak of. Yet she never became hollow, always propelling herself mentally, believing that willpower overcame the abhorrence of those who cruelly bound her. In the end, she was right.

Shari closed her eyes and pulled deep with her nostrils, taking a lungful of air to soothe her, then released the air in an equally long sigh. She had no right to feel dismayed when her grandmother had suffered through much greater. So she admonished herself quietly and thanked her grandmother for all the stories that held lessons to draw from in moments like this.

Reaching for the key in the ignition, she saw the crumpled business card in the ashtray, untouched since she placed it there earlier. Grabbing the card and unfolding it, she smoothed out the creases. It was just a simple business card—no fancy fonts or styles—just sophomoric typeface with the phone number of the D.C. Archdiocese. She brought the card to her brow as if she might glean something from it through osmosis and tried to recall the man who gave it to her. For a brief moment she struggled for clarity. Then it came to her: Kimball Hayden, a name from the past she had heard before only in whispers, forgotten until now.

Approximately six years ago as an upstart in the counterterrorist program, Shari was in the company of men who didn't realize her presence until after the name of Kimball Hayden was spoken with a measure of reverence and referred to as "a man who was as deadly as he was without conscience." When the attorney general at the time and top-ranking official from the Joint Chiefs realized her presence, they immediately drew upon another topic. But Shari had already taken in snippets of conversation that had painted Kimball Hayden as a brutal killing machine.

She placed the card back into the recess of the ashtray. This man, professing to be an emissary of the Vatican, couldn't have been the *same* Kimball Hayden. The man she recalled was an unrelenting and remorseless killer.

With the thoughts of Kimball Hayden ebbing, she decided to research data on the CD and scrape together whatever information she could. At best, she may open a gate that would lead her down the right path. At worst, she would resign herself to the fact that there was nothing she could do to save the pope. It was literally a crap shoot.

After making the rounds with the children and sharing an awkward moment with her husband, by shying away at the notion of joining him in bed, Shari sheltered herself at the work station in the den area and booted the PC. Within moments the screen downloaded the dossiers and, while fighting fatigue, probed every page until she finally nodded off into a deep sleep.

***Washington D.C.***  
***September 25, Late Evening***

At 10:39 Yahweh received the call in his study. Outside, the moon was in its gibbous phase which cast an eerie glow upon the land that was the color of whey. It was the only light granted as he sat silhouetted in front of the window overlooking the grounds. As the phone rang, his mind was drifting, when he reached for the phone and lifted the receiver. "Yes."

"It's Obadiah."

Yahweh's spoke without emotion. "Yes, Mr. Obadiah, what do you want at so late an hour?"

“I’ve been trying to reach you all day.”

“You know I am a man-of-position. And the situation with the pope is taking up a majority of my time.”

“We seem to have a problem.”

“Which would be?”

“Shari Cohen,” he said.

Yahweh remained quiet.

“I’ll come directly to the point,” said Obadiah. “It appears that Ms. Cohen has some rather delicate information that could prove catastrophic, if she’s able to make the proper ties. And our associates supporting the cause are not happy with that situation.”

“The proper ties with what?”

“Apparently, someone from Mossad sent the United States Government an attachment of encrypted pages holding something of value to the project.”

Yahweh’s attention was fully captured. “I’m listening?”

“The pages hold the graphics that could tie a lot of people involved with the cause, including prominent leaders in the United States, Russia, Israel and Venezuela. It was never meant to be seen outside of the Defense and Armed Forces Attaché and the Mossad Director.”

“Then why is it in the possession of Ms. Cohen?”

“It was passed through black channels without the knowledge of the Director or the Attaché. It seems that American sleepers within the Lohamah Psychlogit and the Research Department obtained and forwarded the information to the FBI.”

After feeling his neckline prickle with heat, Yahweh undid the top button of his shirt. “What exactly is in the encryption?”

“Diagrams,” he answered, “and some photos. But if a connection between the diagrams and dossiers are made, then the matter could open up a Pandora’s Box.”

Yahweh wanted to strangle something, anything. “We need that CD back,” he finally said. “And I think we both know what needs to be done. I want you to contact Judas immediately and have him direct Omega Team to dispatch Ms. Cohen *tonight*... And get that CD before it ends up in the hands of the NSA.”

“I have no problem with that, but so you know, the encryptions contain inbred viruses. If anyone outside of Mossad or the Attaché tries to decipher the code without having the proper knowledge to do so, then the viruses will ignite and completely wipe out the file, dossiers and all.”

Yahweh closed his eyes and slowly dropped his head into his hand. “I don’t care what toys you put into the program, Mr. Obadiah. I just want you to put Ms. Cohen out of my misery.”

“I understand.”

“Do you, Mr. Obadiah? Then understand this.” Yahweh slammed the phone down as a measure of his discontent.

## Chapter 36

***Washington Archdiocese, Washington D.C.***

## **September 25, Late Evening**

*He lay between the two mounds of sand with a hand on each mound, his eyes looking skyward for the face of God. In between the great distances of the stars, he tried to glimpse something celestial, to make him believe there was something heavenly beyond the blind faith that led men to believe an existence beyond the five senses. All he saw was the glimmer of stars shimmering like a cache of diamonds on black velvet.*

*Beneath his hands the soil began to undulate, the tenants below trying to force their way to the surface. Applying great strength through his massive arms, Kimball employed himself to keep them below the depths of the plane and, as always, failed. When their heads broke through the layers of sand, Kimball tried to force them back down, their strength far greater than his. Their faces, remarkably similar to his own in shape and contour and with eyes the color of ice, held the mottled skin tones in the putrescent hues and shades of decay.*

*Crying out against the surge, Kimball exerted all the power he could call upon. But the shapes continued to rise, the jaws of his own rotting features opening to impossible lengths and revealing a darkness in the throat that was blacker than black.*

Kimball always woke at this juncture and searched his surroundings for the reality of the moment. Once calm settled in and the moment less surreal, he would always ask this question: *Could You ever forgive me for the things that I have done?* But Kimball believed forgiveness would forever elude him, since he gave up one war to wage another against his personal demons. And these demons never allowed him to forget, coming night after night and eroding what little hope of someday being free of a past laden with the bloodshed of others committed by his hands.

It would take him almost twenty minutes to shake off the images, and ten more before he could commit himself to his duties.

Kimball sat in the van outside the Cohen brownstone, with Isaiah in the back monitoring the audio receiver and listening to every movement within the Cohen household.

As Kimball sat with his back against the paneled wall, he wondered why Isaiah's faith remained so entrenched after living in a culture of hardcore misery.

Isaiah, or Christian, was born in 1984 to a family who lived in makeshift huts of discarded wood and corrugated tin in a Mexican shanty town. Dung piles and rancid water drew mangy curs and blow flies. And as time went on and their world a constant state of suffering, the only possession they held was their faith in Christ.

After Christian's father succumbed to the ravages of dysentery, wasting away until his body withdrew into itself, the rack of his ribs threatening to burst through flesh, he was buried with little ceremony in a scratch of earth marked for the dead not far from the dung heaps. The stark-white crosses, too numerous to count, seemed to saddle the small stretch of land. But after six months, as the land dwindled, the family was forced to pay homage from a distance, since additional grave markers took over the trails leading to his father's burial site.

As Christian and his faith grew, he never questioned his abject poverty, but accepted it as a test of diversity to achieve a higher level. But when his mother was taken from him—her body found in a muddy waterway with her skirt hiked up to reveal unspeakable violations—he became lost and frightened, and sought union with anybody who would have him.

He found himself alone and unwanted, however, just another mouth to feed in an already famished world. So he migrated to the north through hot winds and an unforgiving sun, his mind falling into delirious bouts of fog and images.

Sometimes he imagined the worried faces of his parents as they beckoned him with ghostly hands to follow a certain path. But when his body could push no more, the environment having sapped him dry, he surrendered to the elements and took to the earth.

Two days later when he awoke he knew he was in heaven. The angels surrounding him were smiling and wore habits. Around their necks they wore chains bearing the symbol of the Catholic crucifix that was as gold and as bright as the emblazoned sun. When Christian sat up his eyes searched for his parents, who had led him to this wondrous place that smelled of clove and burning candle wax.

“You’ll be fine, my child. You were lucky that a missionary found you,” said one of the angels. Her face was aged and tanned, her eyes sparkled with alertness. “You came from such a long way, so God must have something very special in store for you.”

“Where are my parents?” he asked, the pitch of his tone that of pubescent.

“I’m afraid you were alone.”

Christian shook his head vehemently. “I saw them. They showed me the way.”

But when his mind sobered, he came to realize that his parents were truly gone, and that God had used them as vessels to save his life.

As he grew to manhood during his tenure at the mission, the boy’s body took on an athletic tone. His hunger for knowledge became as urgent as his need for sustenance. This caught the eye of a stranger who came from a faraway land called the Vatican. After holding counsel with the heads of the mission, he recruited the boy.

The stranger’s name was Cardinal Bonasero Vessucci.

Christian, upon learning his fate, cried and refused to leave the only true slice of heaven he had ever known. “To do this is a great honor,” said Father Hernandez, who held the boy in the clutches of a strong embrace. Even the Father was choking back tears. “On the day you came to us we always said that God had a purpose for you. And now that time has come, my son. You must go with the cardinal who is a messenger of God and fulfill your destiny. You are special.”

Christian left the mission behind, never to see or hear from the angels and orphans again.

Now, at such an early hour, Christian—Isaiah—was on the front lines of the most important and noble battle of his life. He was a Vatican Knight.

And Kimball watched him, wanting desperately to know how Christian found faith in such hardship, when Kimball held little after growing up in privilege. Reason would indicate that it should have been the other way around—that those



of good standing would have faith and be thankful for their bounties, whereas the disadvantaged would hold none.

But Isaiah was lost in his own world, listening through his headphones and hearing what sounded like the slight passing of air through a seashell.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leviticus was in the vault of the Sacred Hearts Church working at the computer terminal. Highly adept at his craft, he also had the unethical dexterity to tap and hack into programs and networks to obtain information without leaving a trail.

After loading the Keystroke Logger, he expertly moved his fingers across the keyboard and began to draw data from Shari Cohen's PC. By logging the sequence of keystrokes that enabled her access to certain sites, Leviticus was able to obtain her password, which afforded him entry into restricted areas of information.

Numbers and symbols relating to computer vernacular came and went as the PC spoke to other networks along the information highway, pulled data from files established in ISP address records, then left a bogus trail in its wake. By the time the hacked parties learned of the breach, the trail would lead the tracking experts to a desktop computer located in a library at a prestigious California college. It was a wonderful red herring on the part of Leviticus, which was also a part of the game he enjoyed too much, almost impishly so.

After establishing the link to Shari's PC, he realized she was live with booted information regarding the Soldiers of Islam. And with all the ingenuity of a practiced hacker, he downloaded the data.

But it the information was coming in much too slowly.

## Chapter 37

Along with Omega Team, Judas stood in the shadows provided by the copse of trees in the park across from Cohen's brownstone. Each man was dressed in tactical gear except Judas, who wore his wide-brimmed fedora and long coat. The tails of his jacket moved slightly in a course of faint breeze.

Judas turned to Dark Lord, the lead for the three-man unit of Omega Team. The commando appeared without emotion, a killing machine waiting to act without question or reservation.

"You know your duties," said Judas. "And I don't want you going in there like a bunch of ball-swinging commandos, either. Get the CD, take out Cohen, and get the hell out of there. It's that simple—one-two-three. Now go."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kimball saw movement, a mere motion from the outermost range of his peripheral vision. At first it was brief, then nothing, then movement once again as living shadows stayed close to the darkness and made their way to the brownstone. From his point of view he saw only two, but his mindset knew there were more. After telling Isaiah to stay behind and maintain watch for other

insurgents, Kimball was out of the van and sliding toward the brownstone as quietly as the shifting shapes around him.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had taken Dark Lord a moment to work his way into the Cohen residence. Moving silently across the room, he withdrew his knife and used the point of the blade to push the door open. Shari was asleep at the desk with the pages of encrypted code on the monitor.

*It can't be this simple*, he considered. *It just can't be*. Dark Lord seemed contrite in his thinking because of the lack of opposition, especially from someone like Cohen who was held in such high regard from the political elders. *It's like stealing candy from a baby*.

Slowly and prudently, he entered the den, knife in hand, with the stealth of a learned assassin, and moved in for the quick kill.

He was about to grab her hair and force her head back to expose her open throat when Shari's husband ran into the den and slammed himself against the intruder's back, causing the knife to fall from Dark Lord's hand, driving him to the floor. The surprised assassin immediately maneuvered to gain advantage and grabbed Gary's wrist. With a deft and sudden move, a simple flick of his hand, he snapped the twin bones in Gary's arm, causing white-hot agony to race along its length and to his shoulder.

Having yet to register the magnitude of danger, Shari snapped her eyes wide. But it wasn't until Gary's cry of absolute pain that she propelled herself into action. While both men battled for position in a drunken tango, Shari reached out and hit the assassin on the back of his head, only to receive a savage backhanded blow that sent her across the table and knocking the PC to the floor, smashing its outer casing.

In the heat of panic she tried to get to her feet, failed, her sight dizzy from the blow. Dark Lord thrust a left fist into Gary's abdomen, a stinging blow, and then a right cross to his chin. For a moment Gary seemed detached, his conscious mind suspended between darkness and light, and then his eyes rolled up into his head as he hit the floor as a boneless heap.

In an quick move, Dark Lord swept up the knife and exhibited the chrome polish of the blade and sharpness of its tip. "It'll be painless," he told her, then began his approach. "And just so you know, there are worse ways of dying than bleeding out."

Through the haze of her sight, she noted that the assassin was not alone. Two shadows joined alongside him, each brandishing a knife.

Shari crawled to her husband and held him close, tears coursing her cheeks as she thought of her children. "Please, don't hurt my babies," she pleaded.

Dark Lord placed the blade of the knife within inches of her throat and smiled maliciously through the opening of his mask, as if to indicate he was doing this for simple gratification. "First I'll take you, then the hubby, and then the kiddies. How's that?"

Weeping uncontrollably, Shari pulled an unconscious Gary close to her.

With a quick move, Dark Lord grabbed her hair and pulled her head back to expose the soft tissue of her throat.

Slowly and deliberately, he raised the blade for the final cut.

***Washington, D.C.***  
***September 26. Early Morning***

Donning familiar and comfortable black fatigues, Abraham Obadiah changed his game face back to Team Leader, then drove northbound on Route 1, toward the Massachusetts border. The truck moved smoothly, hitting the occasional pothole. But his trip went without incident.

At 0245, a coordinated effort was scheduled by Judas and Omega Team to assassinate Shari Cohen. Knowing Omega Team was always punctual in their endeavors, Obadiah considered the matter closed, and that Agent Cohen was no longer a part of the equation. The constituents from Russia and Venezuela would be happy to hear that damage control had succeeded, and that Cohen would no longer be a troubling factor.

Now that he had quelled the suspicions of his foreign liaisons, there would be no reason for Obadiah to return to D.C. until after the death of Pope Pius. Within a few hours he would assassinate a member of the Holy See, and remind the world that the list of people leading to the pope was getting shorter. And with every death, with every symbolic assassination of faith, came dwindling hope.

Believing Ms. Cohen was no longer among the living, Team Leader drove on.

\* \* \* \* \*

Judas stood within the grove of trees, the collar of his jacket hiked against the cold, the vapor of his breath an indicator of a chilly night.

From the corner of his eye he saw movement. A single man, larger than most men, moved past him beyond the trees with the grace of a feline—smooth and sleek with the purpose to make a kill.

“Well, well, well,” whispered Judas. “And whose little boy are you?”

It had become obvious that Cohen was under surveillance from someone outside his circle. And then he realized he had no way to warn his team. No matter, he thought. It was still three against one.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dark Lord held the knife blade at the point of its zenith for the final downswing, a macabre display to incite paralytic terror. “This is for looking in places you shouldn’t have,” he said. Just as the blade fell toward the openness of Shari’s throat, Dark Lord and his two companions were sent sprawling across the room. The rear assault hit like a hammer blow. But each man got his feet at once. And with athletic grace and practiced agility, they spun toward their attacker. Their knives poised to kill.

A lone man, impossibly tall and broad shouldered, black-faced with streaks of grease paint, stood between the Cohens and Dark Lord’s commandos. Around his neck he wore the starched white collar of a priest. His chest was protected by a black tactical vest that held the emblem of the crest and silver Pattée.

Omega Team did what was natural; they banded together in a refined area and converged on their target, a priest, an unlikely savior.

In response measured in milliseconds, Kimball withdrew knives from sheaths attached to each thigh and stirred one of the black-bladed commando knives about in an act of distraction, first in circular motions, then in figure eights, a practice that kept the attention of his opponents from focusing on the second blade, the strike weapon.

Omega Team moved slowly into the danger zone, close enough to engage, to slash, to kill the priest knowing when and where to strike.

Circling, Dark Lord studied this man, his opponent, and noted similarities of a man he once knew and coveted as a mentor and leader—the build, the height, the breadth of the man’s shoulders, all reminiscent of a hero in the judgment of the Pentagon brass. And then he looked into the man’s cerulean blue eyes and the gold flexes that peppered the irises like glitter. For a brief moment his chest grew cold, the reality surreal and sobering at the same time. And then realization set in. There was only one man who held such remarkable eyes.

Dark Lord stopped his advance. The other two followed, as if attached to an umbilical tie in which their hesitation was simultaneous.

“Kimball?” he said almost too softly. “Kimball Hayden?”

Kimball’s eyes flared. Recognition came on his part as well. At one time he and Dark Lord worked closely together in covert operations as an unholy alliance.

“Word is... is that you’re dead.” Dark Lord lowered the point of his knife, but not enough to appease Kimball, who kept his weapon at the ready. “So what’s this about?”

Kimball said nothing.

Dark Lord’s lips curled visibly. “It’s about redemption, isn’t it? Goddammit, Kimball Hayden has gone religious. Look at that collar.” Dark Lord’s smile vanished as quickly as it appeared. The tone of his voice suddenly took on a level of managed anger. “This isn’t your fight, Hayden. Now get the hell out of the way before you get hurt by the big boys.”

Kimball stepped closer, his attractor blade continuing to slice deliberate figure-eight patterns through the air. Hesitation flickered in Dark Lord’s eyes.

“Don’t do this,” warned Kimball. “You know you’re no match for me.”

“Still the same old cocky son-of-a-bitch, aren’t you, Hayden? Think your two blades can match our three? I don’t think so.”

Dark Lord inched closer, his actions matched by his two imitators. “Last time, Hayden. Get out of the way and let us do our job.”

“I’m not going to let you hurt these people.”

“Then you’re crazier than I thought.” Dark Lord suddenly struck.

The commandos of Omega Team struck out and slashed with killing blows, but Kimball met their strikes with blinding speed, deflecting the knives, the contact coughing up sparks as the blades pounded against each other as metal struck metal. Shari’s mouth dropped in amazement as she watched her champion ward off deadly blows with fluid effort.

With uncanny skill Kimball’s motions became faster, his circular motions repelling the blows that seemed to come faster and with far more brutal force. By inches he pushed back the Omega Team, who was losing ground, the strikes coming to the point where everyone’s arm was moving in blurs and blinding

revolutions. Sparks radiated in numerous pinpricks of flame before dying out. And then came an opening.

With surgical precision Kimball drove the edge of his blade across the bicep of a commando, severing the muscle. The man screamed in agony, took a knee, then tumbled out of the battle line and was gone, disappearing into the hallway and into the night.

As the fight waged on Kimball seemed to pick up steam rather than lose it. His motions were deft, and with purpose. The odds of two blades warring against two appeared to favor Kimball as he pushed his opponents back to the far wall. They were running out of room.

In another motion Kimball bent down to a lower point of gravity, and made a horizontal slash just above the patella of the commando standing to the right of Dark Lord, nearly severing the muscle that attached the upper and lower leg. With a banshee-like wail the commando moved surprisingly well on his good leg, dove through the study window, and landed on a parked car below. His weight caved in the roof and shattered the windshield; then, after rolling off the vehicle and getting to his feet, he half ran, half limped for the cover of trees.

\* \* \* \* \*

Judas watched from the shadows across the street as a dark figure smashed through the second story pane of the brownstone in a spray of glittering glass and landed on a parked car, caving in the roof and shattering the windshield. The man rolled off the vehicle, got to one foot, and hobbled toward the copse of trees. Moments later Judas watched a second man run through the front door of the brownstone holding his arm. The wounded commando crossed the street and merged with the shadows beneath the trees.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dark Lord was backed against the wall, his will to complete the battle ingrained from years of tough mental training. To surrender would be a cowardice brand against his moniker, losing the respect from his peers.

“Put the knife down,” said Kimball.

“Not on your life.”

“Then I’ll make this a fair fight.”

Without taking his eyes off Dark Lord, Kimball returned one of the knives back into its sheath.

Dark Lord sized Kimball for an opening, the man circling, then found what seemed to be an opportunity and tried to cut the man with a sweeping horizontal arc across Kimball’s abdomen, before Kimball could realize that he had been gutted. But Kimball grabbed the attacker’s wrist, forced the man’s arm over his head, exposed the armpit, and drove the sharpened point of his nine-inch blade deep into the unprotected area, until the pommels of the knife could go no further.

Staggering, Dark Lord reached for the weapon’s hilt, gave minimal effort to withdraw the knife, found it impossible to do so, and fell to his knees coughing blood from a perforated lung. “I knew this day would come,” he managed. “But I didn’t think it would be by your hand.” He fell onto his side with his eyes taking on a detached gaze.

After dropping to a knee, Kimball pulled Dark Lord close to him.

“Why these people?” he asked.

Dark Lord’s gaze shifted to the smashed PC lying on the floor beside him, and extended his hand. “For the truth,” he said. And then he was gone, his hand falling to the floor as a blood bubble burst from the corner of his lips, his eyes fixing on a point of no importance as he expelled his final breath.

In homage Kimball held him for a long moment, somewhat saddened by old memories, before laying the assassin gently to the floor.

“You knew him?”

Without facing Shari, he answered her evenly. “At one time,” he told her. After taking a deep breath, Kimball jerked the knife free from Dark Lord’s body and sheathed the weapon.

Shari’s eyes took on the size of communion wafers. *Her children!* Kimball had seen the same look many times before, just before he killed his quarry. It was *the look* of abject terror, and of not knowing as to what existed on the other side of life once he took away their final breath. But this was a mother’s torment of not knowing if her children were still alive. “Your daughters are fine,” he assured her.

But her maternal instincts were not comforted. She ran to her children’s bedroom and opened the door, allowing light from the hallway to spill into the room. Her daughters were sleeping soundly, their chests rising and falling in peaceful rhythm. Upon seeing this she instantly brought a hand up to stymie a cry of gratitude, but failed as a tearful sob escaped her. When she gained control of her emotions she turned to Kimball with the repose of appreciation. “You saved my life, Mr. Hayden, and the lives of my family... Thank you.”

Kimball took a position beside her at the door, his figure casting a long shadow. “As I once told you, this is what I do. I save lives. Now... are you willing to let me help you?”

Shari focused on the whiteness of the Roman collar, then on the man. “Yes, Mr. Hayden, I will allow you to help me.”

A new alliance was born.

\* \* \* \* \*

Isaiah was hiding in the late night shadows in front of the brownstone when he heard the sound of glass breaking, and seeing a commando take flight through the window and land on the roof of a parked car before hobbling away. A second commando quickly followed through the front door and ran in the same direction, where they met a third man standing within a grove of trees. Then they were gone, each man swallowed by the darkness of the landscape.

\* \* \* \* \*

The limping commando was in absolute agony, his adrenaline rush released as Judas guided him into the back seat of his sedan parked beyond the copse of trees. With the commando pressing his hands against the gash above his knee to stem the blood flow, he could almost hear the panic bell going off in his head. The other commando fell into the front seat and held his good hand against his torn bicep, his face going pale as blood flowed between the gaps of his fingers.

“What happened in there?” asked Judas, putting the sedan in gear. “Where the hell is Dark Lord?”

“This guy,” said the commando in the back seat. “This guy came from nowhere and took us out like no other.”

“And he was fast, too,” added the commando with the torn bicep. “I mean, this guy was the best I ever saw with double-edged weapons.”

“I’ve never seen anything like him,” said the first commando, shifting his weight to assuage the pain.

The commando with the torn bicep glanced into the distance to assure no one followed. “This guy wore a priest’s collar,” he added.

Judas gave the man in the back seat an inquisitive look through the rearview mirror. “He was wearing a what?”

“A Roman collar,” he said. “The guy was wearing a Roman collar.”

Judas fought for calm. “What about the CD?”

“Didn’t get it... this guy came in just as Dark Lord was about to take out Cohen.”

“You left the CD behind?” Judas brought a hand up and massaged his temple with the calloused tips of his fingers. Yahweh wasn’t going to like this.

Neither commando spoke, their eyes pinched against excruciating pain.

Heaving a sigh, Judas ran a hand along his face as if to wipe away his frustration. It didn’t work. ““What else can you tell me?” he asked.

The commando with the injured leg repositioned himself in the back seat. There was no way for him to get comfortable. “Dark Lord knew him... called him by name... He called him something like Hayden... Yeah... Kimball Hayden.”

Judas’s eyes shot to the rearview mirror. “Are you sure about that?”

“I’m positive.”

Judas stopped the sedan in its tracks, tires skidding along the dry plane. The sudden lurch of the vehicle stopping caused both men to cry out in pain. “Are you sure he said *that* name? He said Kimball Hayden?”

“How many Kimball Hayden’s can there be?”

Judas looked back to the area where they had just come from. The lights from the brownstone seemed so far away. *Kimball Hayden: a name synonymous with the art of killing, a man without conscience or remorse.* He heard the name many times during his tenure within White House circles. He’d even seen the man on many occasions but dared not speak to him, afraid that the wrong look, the wrong word, might have been his last since the man’s brutality had levitated him to legendary status, whereas his reputation was as intimidating as his size.

Judas pressed softly on the accelerator and the sedan began to roll.

*But you’re supposed to be dead, Hayden.*

Now the mystery of what happened to Dark Lord was a mystery no longer. It was obvious to Judas he would never see him alive again.

“That name means something to you?” asked the commando in the rear seat.

“A long time ago,” he said, “when soldiers became legends.”

## Chapter 38

**Washington, D.C.**

### ***September 26, Early Morning***

“There were three men,” said Isaiah. “One was waiting across the street hidden among the trees.”

“Which puts the count to a minimum of four,” said Kimball. “Obviously he was maintaining watch.”

Kimball moved to the couch where Gary sat with an ice wrap on his broken arm. Shari sat beside him, patting his forehead and jaw with a damp cloth. The body of Dark Lord lay on the floor covered with a sheet.

“Ms. Cohen, if I may, I think it would be best that your family be taken out of harm’s way as soon as possible,” said Kimball.

“I agree.” She pointed to Gary. “Perhaps to his mother’s home in California—”

“No, ma’am. If your attackers are who I think they are, then you’ll only place them in jeopardy as well. These people will stop at nothing to gain whatever it is they want.”

“I don’t have anything.”

“Obviously you do.”

“Then where would my family go?”

“To the archdiocese,” said Isaiah. “Your husband will be treated for his injuries, and your children will be absolutely safe.”

Shari turned to Gary. “I’m sorry you’re in this mess, but I think it best that you and the children are in a safe place.”

“You won’t get no argument out of me,” he told her. He turned to Kimball. “So when do we leave?”

“Isaiah will take you there as soon as you’re ready.”

“And what about you?” asked Gary, turning to his wife.

She looked at the contoured sheet stained with the dead man’s blood. “I’ve got to find out why this happened.”

“Mr. Cohen, I don’t know why, but for some reason they’re trying to kill your wife. And I believe the answer is here in this apartment. Obviously she possesses threatening information of some kind.”

The bulb of enlightenment went off in Shari’s head as she turned to the smashed PC. “And I think I know where.”

Kimball followed her gaze to the floor, at the computer. Good girl, he thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

With Gary and the children safely on their way to the archdiocese, Kimball lifted the PC back to the tabletop and strengthened his alliance with Shari by telling her untold secrets.

“His name was Shady Tippet,” he said, examining the crack in the casing. “He was somebody I used to work with a long time ago.”

“Worked with? Where?”

Kimball gave a sidelong glance to Dark Lord, and then turned away. “With the government,” he replied. “And should the truth be told, The White House.”

“The White House! Doing what exactly?”

He knew she was pressing him for as much information as possible, which was fine. Brutal honesty, regardless of its content, was the first step toward trust. “We



were assassins,” he told her, “working specifically under the orders of the White House, most notably the president.”

Shari remained quiet, her mind theorizing, and then she understood that Dark Lord, was sent to kill her by the most powerful man on Earth. *But why?*

Her voice began to shake. “Is he still...” And then her words trailed.

“An assassin for the Force Elite? I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Is that what they’re called? The Force Elite.”

“They are.”

Kimball gave a brief synopsis of the history and development of the Force, the nature of its existence and the targets involved, including a statesman who posed a threat to a one-time incumbent during his term of office, a political local.

Shari suddenly felt overwhelmed and had to fight back the sting of tears. “How do I fight against something like this? How do I fight the president of the United States? I can’t!”

Kimball gently gripped the triceps of her left arm. His voice was soft and soothing, his touch tender and supportive. “You *can* do this,” he told her. “You’ll never be alone in this. The Vatican is behind you. And believe me; I don’t think the United States government will want to take on the Roman Catholic Church. Do you?”

“But why? Why come after me?”

He released her arm and placed a hand on top of the PC. “I guess that’s what we’re about to find out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

A distant chime, hardly perceptible, the incessant ringing finally gaining strength and awakening Pappandopolous from a dream that he forgot the moment he opened his eyes. Slowly, and awkwardly, he grabbed the receiver and placed it against his ear. The digital clock read 3:49 a.m. “What?”

“It’s Judas.”

Pappandopolous propped himself on his elbow. “This isn’t a secured line. You should have waited until tomorrow.”

“Don’t be paranoid. Nobody’s tapping your line.”

“Do you know what time it is?”

“Shut up and listen,” he demanded. “Have you ever heard the name Kimball Hayden?”

“No... never.”

“The name Kimball Hayden is synonymous with a ‘one-man wrecking machine.’”

“Why are you telling me this?” Pappandopolous lay back down on the pillow.

“I’m telling you this because he just took out half of Omega Team by himself... And Dark Lord is dead.”

Pappandopolous was back onto an elbow. “What about Cohen and the disc?”

“She’s very much alive and still in possession of the CD.”

“Why is this Hayden guy in the picture anyway? Who is he?”

“He’s bad news.”

Pappandopolous sat up on the edge of the bed. The bottoms of his feet touched the cold, hardwood floor. “Use whatever is left of Omega Team to get that CD. And

don't fail me again, Judas. Managing the ground troops in this matter is your responsibility."

"I know my responsibility," he stated defensively. "But nobody expected Kimball Hayden to be involved."

"How much of a problem can one man be?"

Judas shook his head. It must be nice to be stupid and ignorant at the same time, he thought. *If you knew Kimball Hayden, then you would know he was more than just one man.* "A lot," he finally said.

Pappandopolous sighed in obvious frustration. "You know what you have to do." He stared briefly at the receiver before placing it back onto its cradle. For the rest of the night sleep eluded him. He lay there wondering why the cause was teetering on the balance, when it seemed to work without deficiency on paper. The answer simply escaped him. He didn't know the name Kimball Hayden or the danger he presented.

Expelling a long, drawn out sigh, Pappandopolous picked up the phone and dialed another unsecured line. "Mr. Obadiah? George Pappandopolous. I'm afraid I have some bad news," he said. And then he began to explain in earnest.

\* \* \* \* \*

The PC was cracked and not in good shape. The monitor came on, but the unit did not fire up. Working his knife blade into a seam on the computer case, Kimball was able to force the CD tray from the plastic cabinet.

After extracting the CD, he held it up. "Bingo."

Shari took the disc from Kimball. "I hope it's not damaged," she said, sensing something of a loss. "Everything was on this CD."

"What about backup files?"

"Nothing," she said. "Whatever is sent to us by colluding agencies is copied then deleted for fear that the information might be hacked by foreign entities. This is the only hard copy available."

"Isn't it standard policy to make more than one copy?"

"If the information is classified and graded for high level—always. And per protocol we did burn a backup CD that had been placed in the vault. But it was either improperly burned or the disc was appropriated and replaced with a bogus one. I'm not sure which. But when my people get a chance, they'll look into it."

"Then re-contact the source."

She shook her head. "I did. But Mossad resent the information minus the encryptions," she told him. "When I contacted their director, I got nothing but excuses and denials. And since the original CD was not classified as important due to it being labeled as dossiers, it wasn't copied since dossiers can be copied anytime. Mossad knew that when I contacted them." Shari looked at the disc. "This CD is unique, Kimball. Any information that came with it may be lost."

Kimball laid a hand on the broken computer. "Is there any way you can take information from what's left on the PC?"

She surveyed the large hole broken into the side of the machine. The circuit boards inside were clearly cracked. "Maybe, but I doubt it." She pointed to a circuit board inside the computer. "The memory board is busted. All we can do is hope that the CD wasn't damaged."

She fell back into the couch and tried to keep her chin from quivering and her eyes from welling, but the stress became overpowering. In a sudden mood shift that took her from being totally composed to a totally fragile state of mind, Shari broke, which shocked Kimball.

“And what the hell are we going to do with him?” she said, pointing to the body. “We can’t leave him here, you know!” And she quickly cracked, almost without warning as her hands flew to her face.

Kimball was at a sudden loss. He was never one to provide emotional comfort with a hug or cooing words. To him, showing emotion was somehow a vulgar display. Nevertheless, he took the seat beside her. “Ms. Cohen, I need you to be at your best,” he said. “I’ll take care of the body, but we need to take care of business.”

She turned to him, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You’re expecting me to conduct business as usual knowing that the most powerful man on this planet has just sent his goon squad to kill me?”

“We’re only guessing that Shady Tippet *may* be from the Force Elite,” he said. “This really doesn’t make sense since the president wants you to find information regarding the Soldiers of Islam. So why send somebody after you when you’re making progress? Because on one hand, we know that the principal of Israeli’s Defense Attaché was resistant to your efforts—at least to a degree—which may mean that he had more motive than anybody else. But on the other hand, it doesn’t make sense that Shady would leave the umbrella shield of the Force Elite to join a league attached to Mossad. He wouldn’t work as a mercenary for foreign liaisons after fighting against them for so many years.”

“So what you’re saying is you really don’t know where he comes from?”

“I can only tell you where he *came* from. Right now the pieces of the puzzle aren’t fitting properly. Maybe the Force Elite folded or maybe the stove got too hot in the political kitchen for the White House to keep it going, forcing him to apply his skills elsewhere.”

For a moment she said nothing, then, “I’m scared, Kimball. I’m really scared.”

“I know,” he said. “The fear comes from not knowing who or what is out there.”

She placed a hand on his forearm. “Have you ever been afraid, Kimball? I mean, really afraid?”

Kimball appeared wounded by the question. “I’m afraid every day of my life,” he admitted. “I barely sleep because I’m afraid of what I see in my dreams. I’m afraid because of the horrible things I’ve done in the past. And I’m afraid that on Judgment Day He’s going to turn me away . . . I’m afraid of not knowing.”

She squeezed his forearm. “You’re a good man, Kimball Hayden. Whatever darkness you inherited from your past is gone... I can see the light in your eyes.”

Kimball doubted her, but nodded his appreciation regardless. “We can beat this,” he told her. “But I need you to keep on doing what the president has asked.”

“Kimball, we’re right where we started. We’re at squat. The information may be totally lost.”

“Did you download the CD into the PC?”

“It was the first thing I did after putting the girls to bed.”

“Then perhaps we’re not at squat after all,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He remembered the Logger placed to the circuitry by Leviticus. “It means that an opportunity may still exist, after all.”

She gave him a dumbfounded stare.

\* \* \* \* \*

Team Leader fumed after finding out that Omega Team failed in its task to remove the target. There was no doubt Yahweh would be displeased. But even more so, his international constituencies would grow increasingly uneasy knowing that slight bumps in the road were forming into formidable knolls.

The name Kimball Hayden meant nothing to Team Leader. But apparently it threw tremors into Judas. If this man Kimball Hayden posed a threat to the cause, Team Leader would apply his own skill set as an elite killer to take out Ms. Cohen’s champion.

*Fail me one more time, Judas, and I’ll run my own blade across your throat as testament to your repeated failures, so that everyone can see that failing is not an option.*

He turned the cargo truck onto the New Jersey Turnpike, his anger lasting until he arrived in Boston.

## Chapter 39

The wrapped body of Dark Lord was taken to the archdiocese where church authorities would give it a private service and burial.

People like Shady Tippet had no family ties or connections that adversary groups could associate him with. The man had no identity, no background, and no history; nothing that could bind him to the human race.

This was also the case with Kimball Hayden before he united with the Vatican Knights. Per protocol, Kimball was nonexistent to the outside world. But when he laid Tippet’s body to rest on a slab within the sub-basement of the archdiocese, he gave the man identity by recalling events they had shared as companions.

He remembered the times they laughed, and joked—and killed. He even recalled the moment he saved Shady Tippet’s life in Palestinian territory, only to take it away almost seventeen years later in the den of a brownstone apartment. How ironic was that? How much more twisted could fate be?

Bowing his head in respect while placing his hand on the breastplate of Shady’s Kevlar, Kimball prayed in hushed tones. When finished, he left the chamber in a solemn mood wondering how many more of his old group he would have to kill.

### ***Six Miles Northwest of Mesquite, Nevada September 26, Early Afternoon***

A band of coyotes moved in crisscross fashion looking for mice, voles or ground squirrels beneath a hot Mojave Desert sun. In their wake, as the sun felt white hot against their coats, a battery of heat waves shimmered off the desert floor.

The temperature was unbearably hot, the air oppressive, the climate in general inhospitable as the earth gave off scents that caught the coyotes' acute sense of smell, drawing them closer to the unmistakable odor of carrion that no doubt cured over time.

The single sexed pack moved back and forth, searching, then pawing, trying to gauge the location of the carcass detected by their olfactory senses. The smell appeared to be rising from several locations, confusing them, and then they collectively realized there was more than one source of meat. So they dispersed into small groups, each unit wending and following a scented trail.

To the east, next to a rocky embankment stemming from the ground like a half shell, the smell of carrion radiated strongest from a point where the soil appeared recently tilled.

Being natural burrow diggers, the coyotes began to dig and paw at the sand, kicking up clouds of choking dust and digging to a depth of nearly two feet before they uncovered a bounty of meat.

Hands, paired together by flex-cuffs, the flesh having aged and gone tender, proved to be a ripe harvest as one of the coyotes began to yip and bay, announcing its find.

Before the day was over, however, five more bodies would be unearthed and the coyotes would gorge themselves with the true Soldiers of Islam.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Shari met her husband, it was in a small bedroom inside the rectory located next to the archdiocese. He was wearing a cast and slept in a high-back chair in quarters too tight, too cramped, yet simple. Lying asleep on a twin-size bed were her daughters, still wearing pajamas, and both huddled together in a tangle that only children could sleep through, as their arms and legs crisscrossed each other as they slept. The adornments were simple—a crucifix hung over a characterless bureau; a watercolor depiction of Christ holding a lamb hung over the bed, his face kind and gentle; and a single window provided a view of a wonderfully bright flowered garden in the center of the courtyard.

When the sun finally crested the horizon, a priest came for Shari and escorted her to the neighboring archdiocese and to the cardinal's chambers next door. The room was large and well decorated with scarlet drapes that swept down from the highest reaches of the windows and touched the floor, the scalloped bottoms lined with gold tassels. In the room's center sat a desk so large, so magnificently rich in style, Shari knew it was top dollar. Standing along the walls was a gallery of busts supporting casts of past popes.

Kimball sat in one of the two leather chairs before the cardinal's desk wearing a neatly pressed cleric's shirt and Roman collar, and gave her a nod of acknowledgment when she entered the chamber.

On the opposite side of the room the cardinal was washing his hands at a gold-plated wash basin, the sleeves of his robe rolled up as he cupped his hands in the water for his daily cleansing. After his morning ritual of purification, he wiped his hands dry with an embroidered cloth and approached Shari with his hands offered in greeting. "And how are you, my dear woman?"

Shari had seen the cardinal on television many times, and found herself to be in awe of his presence. "I'm fine. Thank you." She allowed the man to close his cool hands over hers.

"I'm glad you and your family are all right."

"If it wasn't for this man," she said, glancing at Kimball, "I wouldn't be here—my family wouldn't be here."

The cardinal escorted her to a high-back chair beside Kimball, then rounded his desk to take his own seat. "Ms. Cohen, obviously you know who I am."

"Of course."

"Then I must ask a favor of you. You must assure me that what we say here remains in this room. No one can ever know the secret of Kimball and the Vatican Knights."

"You have my word."

"Then let me say this: The Vatican Knights are a very special group of people. And sometimes in order to accomplish their duty, they have to use methods that seem—well, brutal. Now I'm sorry you had to bear witness to such aggression earlier this morning, but if the Vatican Knights could have accomplished the task at hand without violence, they would have done so."

"I'm not judging the Vatican, Cardinal, or its methods. Believe me."

"My point, Ms. Cohen, is if the media should ever gain knowledge that the Vatican was sending forth its own group to handle insurgent factions, then the media would most likely paint us in the most unfavorable light, which we cannot afford."

Shari nodded understanding.

"The bottom line, my dear, is that the Vatican does not judge; it simply acts when it has to. Unfortunately, killing sometimes becomes a necessity." And then he shot her the disclaimer. "It's not up to the Vatican on whether or not someone lives or dies. We can only assume that it's God's will. Therefore, we will do *whatever* it takes to bring the pontiff back alive and well. Please understand this, Ms. Cohen. The pope is truly a good man who preaches freedom and tranquility in all its forms. But until all men are like him, we often have no choice but to engage in methods not consistent with the teachings of the Church to achieve the means."

"Cardinal, not only do you have my solemn word on this matter... but also my gratitude."

"Then what I'm about to say to you now, my dear, is this: We hold steadfast to our alliances and never betray our allegiances." He leaned forward in his chair. "For the moment you are one of us and for that we say, Loyalty above all else, except Honor. It is the credo the Vatican Knights live by."

Suddenly she felt an overwhelming sense of commitment. Even when she took the Oath of Honor as a peace officer, she never felt allegiance surge through her as now. In a strange way she felt an obligation unlike any other, an inexplicable sense of oneness that created a sour lump at the base of her throat. "I feel... honored."

"No, my dear, we are the honored ones." Cardinal Medeiros leaned back into his chair. "So we will follow your lead."

Kimball stood, his height towering over the cardinal's desk. "I know I'm cutting matters here," he said, "but we have work to do." With that he took to his knee, placed a closed fist over his heart, and said, "Loyalty above all else, except Honor."

"May God be with you both," replied the cardinal.

In a matter of moments Kimball and Shari were in a sedan on their way to the Sacred Hearts Church, where Leviticus was working his magic trying to decode the encryptions on the CD taken from the damaged PC.

### ***Boston, Massachusetts***

Bishop Angelo was terrified of his own mortality. Worse, he was afraid of how he would appear before God knowing that God could look inside someone and see the smallest imperceptible detail of any man no matter how much he tried to hide or deny the truth about himself. And that truth, at least for Bishop Angelo, was that he was struggling with his faith in God.

After he prayed and waited for something in return, the answer was always silence. And then he would weep because He was not there to comfort him; therefore, a sense of abandonment washed over him. After toiling to find his faith, he instead found himself feeling hopelessly lost and alone in the company of his brothers who were chained to the same wall as he. He had been reduced to nothing more than a frightened shell of a man who was certain that his fate was paved with the same dark intentions as the governor's.

Looking over at the governor's empty mattress, Bishop Angelo closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath through his nostrils, then exhaled with an equally long sigh. "Have you prayed to the Lord, Giacomo?"

Bishop Antimonna didn't bother to face him, his eyes fixed on a guard leaning against the opposite wall holding an MP-5 that bore an attached suppressor that was as long as the weapon itself. "Of course," he finally answered.

"And did you receive an answer?"

"He may have given one," he said. "I only need to be patient to find out what it is."

"In other words, if you are to be executed, then His answer was 'no.'"

Bishop Antimonna gave him a gingerly smile before closing his eyes. It was as if he was drifting off to someplace wonderful. "No, my friend. If I am to be executed, all I pray for is that I be welcomed into His glory."

It was not the answer Bishop Angelo expected. "Are you not afraid?"

Antimonna opened his eyes and nodded. "Of course I am. But my faith keeps me going and gives me hope. As it should you. If God wants me to appear before Him in Judgment, then that is His will for which I have no control. What I do have control over, however, is my faith."

Bishop Angelo made a cursory examination of all the faces of the bishops and was quick in judgment to note that their repose, at least for the moment, appeared meditatively calm. "I'm afraid," he finally admitted. "God forgive me, but I'm so afraid."

Bishop Antimonna turned to him, then laid a hand on Bishop Angelo's forearm, the links of his chain rattling in a ghoulish chime. "Being afraid is good," he told

him. "It reminds us of who we are. For without fear, we would either be foolish or disillusioned, of which we are neither."

He then gazed along the dark hallway, then at the guard posted across from them. "When the soldiers finally come," he whispered, "that is when we seek our faith and prepare ourselves for Glory. But faith does not carry us to false courage. Every man here bound to this wall is terribly frightened. But we never lose sight of our commitment to God, because the moment we lose our faith, is the moment we lose sight of who and what we are."

The back of Bishop Angelo's head fell back against the wall, his eyes looking ceiling-ward, searching. "I'm ashamed of myself," he said. "I'm afraid I've lost my faith."

"We all question our faith, Angelo. There isn't a man here who hasn't."

Angelo lifted his hand and the trailing links of chain. "Faith or not, we need to do something to get out of here. Prayer alone *will* not save us."

"And what do you expect us to do, Angelo? Tear these chains from the wall, and then take on armed guards?"

Bishop Angelo began to visibly shake. "We just can't sit here and let them murder us one by one."

"Then pray, Angelo. Pray for divine intervention."

"I have. And I'm afraid that His answer is 'no.'"

"Then find as much comfort you can in your faith. If you cannot do that, then seek it out."

Angelo let his head fall until his chin touched his chest, his point to help them lost. His faith lost. "Why hasn't God answered my prayers?"

"Perhaps He has, my friend. Only you don't know it yet."

From the darkness came footfalls, and Bishop Angelo saw Team Leader bearing down on them from the stairwell at the end of the hallway with purpose in his stride and his firearm firmly gripped in his hand.

"No," he whispered gravely. "I don't think He did."

\* \* \* \* \*

After Team Leader parked the cargo truck beneath the trees behind the abandoned building, he entered the building knowing his presence would set off the alarms. Once the rats cleared and gave him a wide berth, Team Leader stood within eyeshot of the cameras until an ID confirmation was made by those manning the monitors on the third floor. Once done, the bolting mechanisms slid free and he entered the stairwell.

Boa, Kodiak and King Snake were on the top landing standing sentinel. Their weapons and bandoliers were festooning across their chests, their manner casual. Sidewinder was at the end of the hallway keeping watch over the bishops with his MP5.

"So how'd it go?" asked Boa.

Team Leader removed his pistol and installed a pneumatically snapped-on silencer that reduced the decibel count of the report to a loud spit. "Our associates appear somewhat worried at the moment," he finally answered. "And for good reason."



Boa didn't question the man further. There was no doubt in his mind that Team Leader was irritated.

Walking with urgency to the row of mattresses, Team Leader stood before the bishops of the Holy See. With his weapon held against his body, he then used it to point out Bishop Angelo. The mouth of the barrel seemed as wide as a viper's deadly yaw as Angelo cast his eyes away in submission. "Take this one and set him before the camera," he said.

Boa stared at the bishop who refused to look him in the eyes. After a moment of appraisal, Boa spoke in a tone that held a hint of sarcasm. "I guess you're the lucky man of the day."

With Kodiak forcing a struggling bishop to his feet, Angelo shouted nonsensical words of protest and fought a futile battle against a much larger man by rapping his fists against Kodiak's Kevlar. Without hesitation, Kodiak struck the bishop with a well-placed blow that knocked him senseless, his cries evolving to guttural sounds as the bishop went boneless. To the Force Elite it was strikingly comical to watch. For the bishops, however, they pulled their knees up into acute angles and embraced their legs, each man terrified of his fate.

After removing the manacle from the bishop's wrist, Kodiak half-dragged, half-carried the semi-conscious man along the hallway.

With the bishop's head cast forward and his eyes at half-mast, a fine thread of his own spit lengthened with every foot he was dragged toward the killing chamber.

The mere action of rendering the bishop impotent enabled Team Leader to study the four remaining bishops of the Holy See, who remained submissive as Bishop Angelo was led into shadows so deep and profound, there would be no returning, and another mattress would lay empty. At the very moment Angelo was led away, Team Leader studied the bishops and determined that they all possessed faith in an afterlife that promised incalculable peace. But they were also undoubtedly afraid to reach for it due to the only avenue to obtain it, which was by dying.

In a moment of loathing, Team Leader viewed them as hypocrites and cowards. Nevertheless, he would look each man in the eye just before the killing moment to see if any regained the blind faith incumbent upon men of the cloth.

As Kodiak led the bishop down the hallway, Team Leader's trigger finger began to itch. Not in a physical sense, but in a manner of contained excitement. In a few minutes he was about to write another historical chapter for the cause, using the blood of an innocent man as the ink to chronicle the event that would alter history. This he was sure of.

Leaving his station by the bishops of the Holy See, Team Leader followed Kodiak into darkness.

## **Chapter 40**

***Six Miles Northwest of Mesquite, Nevada  
September 27, Morning***

He had been riding his dirt bike for nearly three hours. The rooster tail plumes of sand kicking up from behind his wheels left the area in a constant haze in which the ring of mountains surrounding him were hardly perceptible.

Jo-Jo Michaels, only thirteen, demonstrated skill and dexterity in maneuvering his dirt bike over the rough terrain. He guided his machine through the natural moguls and dips with the ease of someone twice his age and experience. But today in the midst of roiling dust clouds he struck a hidden mound, lost his balance, and tumbled off his bike which settled in an explosion of dust and sand.

After getting to his feet and trying in vain to brush the loose grains from his clothing, the dust began to settle. When it did, Jo-Jo froze with mind-numbing terror when he realized that the makeshift mogul was actually the half-gnawed torso of a man covered with a fine layer of the valley's dust.

Later that day five more bodies would be found, half-eaten, baked and exposed to the elements for weeks, their carcasses riddled by gunfire and found by scavengers who would leave just enough for CSI to determine their identities.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ethereal brightness of the Vault, and the antiseptic whiteness of the floor, walls and ceiling, definitely cast something divine about the room. To Shari it seemed as if it was created to resemble the surreal world of the afterlife. But the black tactical outfits of the Vatican Knights provided contrast to the earthbound surroundings, making it less dreamlike, more real, less heavenly.

She was intrigued the moment she had entered the Sacred Hearts Church, and her intrigue was heightened by the wall that when engaged by the play of stones, slid aside to reveal the Vault. Once inside she was fascinated, yet disturbed by the display of weaponry behind the glass casings. Somehow the arsenal seemed blasphemous, the weapons magnificent in design and engineering, but assuredly deadly in intent. And since most were created for a special purpose, Shari couldn't even begin to conceive some of the principles of their operation. They seemed too fantastic to be functional.

As she stood in awe looking at the arsenal display case, Kimball grabbed her lightly by the back of her arm and escorted her into the computer lab where Leviticus danced his fingers across a keyboard with the speed of a pianist. On the twenty-one inch plasma flat screen, she recognized the dossiers and encrypted code taken from the CD. She immediately forgot the weaponry in the other room.

"Anything?" asked Kimball.

Leviticus released a long sigh as if to vent fatigue. "Well, there is some damage, and I've been at it all night trying not to set off the viruses."

"Viruses?"

He nodded. "I've seen this before from Mossad. They set up their encryptions with pathway viruses. They're basically a failsafe against hackers who try to appropriate data. If the hacker initiates the virus, then the information is lost."

"So you know what you're doing, right?" asked Kimball.

"I guess we'll find out," he said, his fingers moving over the keys. "Right now I'm finding openings in the most difficult routes—you know, a gate opening here, a gate opening there—but it's more of a maze-like path that's incredibly time consuming to decode by conventional means."

Kimball rolled his eyes, wishing he wasn't totally computer illiterate. But he could see Shari wasn't lost in this communication as her eyes studied the screen without the same look of perplexity as his.

"Are you at least close to bringing this whole thing up?"

"I think so," he said. "But I do know this. I know whatever is decoded is nothing but photos."

"How do you know that?" Shari asked.

"Some of the pixel imprints have already come up like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle," he answered plainly.

"I didn't think photos could be encrypted," she offered.

"Sure they can. Now the question is: Why would somebody encrypt photos unless they were vital to national security? And if that was true, why attach it to low-level documents such as dossiers?" He continued to type at a rapid pace.

Kimball leaned toward the screen. "Maybe they're additional photos of the Soldiers of Islam?"

"Not likely," said Shari. "Why would somebody encrypt some photos and not encrypt others?"

"Well, we'll soon find out," Leviticus said, keeping a hovering finger above the ENTER key. "I just want you both to know that one of two things is going to happen. Either the photos will load or the viruses will initiate. With this type of safeguard, I cannot guarantee success."

"You did the best you could, Leviticus. Go ahead."

He dropped the finger on the ENTER key and the monitor winked out. A mote of light remained alive in the screen's center. Just as Leviticus was about to apologize for his failure, the monitor flared up and the pictures began to download. Shari celebrated his success with brief applause. Kimball clapped Leviticus on the shoulder in gratitude of work well done.

The first pictures to load were that of groupings and congregations of men in apparently warm weather climates. No one seemed to be aware their photos were being taken.

In one photograph, the wall in the Gaza Strip could clearly be seen. In another, a tropical beachfront property in which Shari recognized Hector Guerra, who was the leading principal of Venezuela's leading oil producing conglomerate, the Petr6leos de Venezuela or PDVSA, sitting inside the cabana with several foreign dignitaries. The tie between Guerra and the Soldiers of Islam, however, didn't quite register. So in vague consideration she thought that maybe Obadiah was telling the truth. Perhaps there wasn't a tie as he suggested. But if that was the case, why send a death squad to get the CD?

She stepped closer to the monitor as the pictures continued to download.

Faces of other dignitaries began to appear on the screen. Vladimir Ostrosky appeared in conversation with Hector Guerra standing along the surf of Guerra's estate, a drink in each of their hands.

"I don't get it," she finally said.

"I don't either," said Kimball. "I recognize Vladimir Ostrosky from DUMA, but the other guy—"

"That's Hector Guerra from the PDVSA."

"The PDVSA?"

“It’s Venezuela’s oil conglomerate. Mr. Guerra is its minister.”

“So why would a guy from Venezuela’s oil producing giant meet with a man from the Russian Parliament?”

“Good question. But even more so, how does this tie in with the Soldiers of Islam?”

No one had an answer. The pictures continued to load in slow progression.

More recognizable dignitaries from Russia, Venezuela and Israel snapped in congregation. The Israeli principles were from political and military circles. Obadiah was among the gathering seated at a suit-and-tie affair with Ostrosky sitting on one side, Guerra on the other.

The second batch of pictures was that of the Soldiers of Islam in what appeared to be surveillance photos. There were pictures of them coming and going from stores and shops in Ogden, Utah, from their residences, from places of worship, but nothing that shed anything beyond the dossiers.

The third batch was even more intriguing. Maps of Russia, Venezuela, Israel and the Palestinian territories surfaced on the monitor with black amoeba-like shapes that seemed to be overlays spotting the charts.

“Now what is this?” Shari muttered. “We have photos of foreign dignitaries, photos of the terrorists, and maps of—what?”

Leviticus interjected. “I know what they are,” he said. “I’ve seen this before. They’re maps of geological surveys for tracts of oil.”

Kimball and Shari leaned closer to the monitor. “What does this have to do with the Soldiers of Islam?” he asked.

“I haven’t a clue,” she answered.

They waited in silence, watching and hoping that additional photos would provide more insight, but didn’t.

Feeling the pinch of a headache coming on, Shari took a seat and wondered what she was going to tell the president. She had photos that told her little, but in actuality, spoke volumes as to why the pope was kidnapped.

While studying the screen, her cell phone rang. The caller was Alan Thornton. She was to meet with the president and his staff inside the Oval Office within the hour. And this time, Thornton told her, the president wanted answers.

## **Chapter 41**

### ***Boston, Massachusetts***

Team Leader walked urgently into Pope Pius’s chamber. And in a deft move that appeared slight-of-hand, produced a key seemingly from thin air and inserted it into the lock of the shackle, undoing the metal cuff. “I want you to watch something,” he said. With little effort Team Leader yanked the pope to his feet and pulled the pontiff so close to him his lips nearly touched the old man’s ear. “Be prepared,” he whispered. “Because you’re not going to like what you’re about to see.”

The pope raised his chin in an act of defiance.

And for the first time, Team Leader noted genuine faith and strength in the man's eyes. "Good," he said, and then he led the pope toward the killing chamber.

\* \* \* \* \*

"That was Alan Thornton," she said, snapping the cell phone closed. "My presence is needed for an update. Apparently the president is going 'live' this afternoon."

"Be careful," Kimball said.

She turned to him. "What do I give the president? I can't give him this," she said, pointing to the images on the monitor.

"Why not?" said Kimball. "If the president and the Force Elite were trying to get that CD, then there will no longer be a point to further any action against you if you hand it over to the president."

"But they could also be calling me to the meeting to find out if the data has been interpreted. If they learn it has, then they may send another response team to keep me from delving even deeper."

"True, but why put you in a position to discover the necessary information only to put you down? It doesn't make sense."

"For cosmetics," she answered. "The president can say that he did his best as an administrator by putting his money player to work. So if my team fails, then the accusing finger points directly at me and not at him. I'll be the one who'll end up the scapegoat. But now that I'm getting close, they're apparently having second thoughts and want to undo what they did. And now that it's all unraveling, the president needs to cover his tracks before whatever he's hiding becomes public."

"Which is why he sent the Force Elite after the CD," said Kimball.

"Exactly. It also means that Obadiah is somehow connected with his administration."

Kimball stepped away from the computer, the lines on his face registering deep thought. "Not only Obadiah but Mossad, the White House, Russia, Venezuela, Israel—they're all connected. But how? And why?"

"Good question. What I can't figure out, though, is how they tie in with the Soldiers of Islam and the kidnapping of the pope. Or why the White House administration would even be supporting this act."

Kimball ran his hands across his face as if to wipe away the frustration." All right," he finally said, "so what do we have here?"

Shari raised her hand and began to tick off events on her fingers, starting with the thumb. "The men who tried to kill me last night were from an indigenous force. Obadiah, who happens to be from the Israeli attaché, wanted that CD. That ties him to the White House since they sent in Dark Lord. Then there are the photographs of political and big business dignitaries mixed in with the dossiers of terrorists." She lowered her hand. "That CD, Kimball, holds more than just the profiles of terrorists."

He nodded in agreement. "It's also a schematic."

"But of what? There are pieces still missing and we're running out of time." Shari nervously paced the room. "And in one hour I have to go see the man who's trying to kill me. How ironic is that?"

"He's not going to hurt you."

“That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one he’s gunning for.”

“Shari, it’s unlikely you’re going to go missing at the White House door. If anything, they’ll wait for an opportune time, like last night—when it’s unexpected.”

“Then I’ll draw them out,” she said. “I’ll copy these photos and dangle the carrot before the mule. So if there’s anyone in that room who is part of this, and if *these* photos are worth killing me over to keep me from finding out the truth, then they’ll send a second attachment to finish the job. You agree?”

Kimball gave a nod. “If they think you can expose them, then they’ll come after you like the Hounds of Hell.”

“If the president and his administration are somehow involved in this, we need to know now. We’re running out of time. Just be ready to take prisoners when they come for me.”

Shari could tell by the look on his face that he wasn’t too keen about her proposal.

“Look, Shari, this isn’t child’s play. These people are dangerous. And this time they’ll be waiting for me.”

“Right now I don’t see any other option.”

Kimball hesitated, his cerulean blue eyes connecting with hers. “Just be careful.”

Shari drew closer to him. “Just don’t fail me when I draw them out.”

He didn’t move. He could smell the hint of her perfume. “We’ll be there.”

“Then let’s draw the flies to the honey.”

The time was exactly 11:30 a.m.

### ***Boston, Massachusetts September 27, Late Morning***

Boa was manning the camera when Kodiak carried the bishop into the room with a gloved hand across the man’s mouth. The bishop, barely cognizant, put up feeble resistance swinging a clawed hand errantly through the air.

The stage was comprised of a canvas backdrop and a splintered wooden floor. Kodiak forced the bishop to his knees on the chalk drawn X in front of the camera.

Whining and whimpering like a dog, the pain of knowing he was about to die so fundamental, the sounds issuing from his throat so primal, the members of Omega Team felt nothing but cold detachment for Bishop Angelo.

“We ready to rock?” asked Kodiak.

Boa shot a thumbs-up. “We are as soon as the main man gets here.”

Kodiak took a piece of duct tape and strapped it across the bishop’s mouth. “You won’t feel a thing,” he assured him, and added cruelly. “But then again, I’ve never been shot in the head with my brains spilling out all over the floor, either.” This brought malicious laughter from Boa, who panicked the condemned man into exposing hugely white eyes filled with terror-stricken madness.

When Team Leader entered the room with the feeble-looking pope by his side, the laughter quickly subsided. The old man looked as if his legs were about to buckle, his knees shaking and unsteady. With hardly any effort at all, and with

the pope unable to provide any resistance, Team Leader forced the man to his knees. “For the man of the hour,” said Team Leader, “the best seat in the house.”

He then removed his holstered weapon and held it by his side, the Sig hardly perceptible in the shadows due to its black brushed steel. Then, without any sense of remorse or guilt or conscience, or anything that would brand him as remotely human but rather cold, said, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

The bishop began to sob uncontrollably as Team Leader approached him.

## Chapter 42

***Washington, D.C.***

***September 27, Early Afternoon.***

Shari sat in the chair located atop the Presidential Seal in the Oval Office, as Attorney General Dean Hamilton and Chief Advisor Alan Thornton quietly sat on either side of her, watching President Burroughs, who sat at the presidential desk, preparing his first address to the international community. In that moment an awkward silence fell over the room as the president quietly read from the script. Sitting on a couch against the curve of the wall were Vice President Bohlmer and two of the president’s senior advisors, each man carefully pouring over the data received from Shari’s team. The only sound was the turning of pages.

The president pitched a sigh, and then looked about as if he was the only one present in the room, until he laid the pages on the desk and rubbed his temples with the tips of his fingers. “All right, people,” he started. “In about an hour I have to address the world on the status of the pope. What I want from you is a plan as to how I’m supposed to address the international community without causing our alliances to find fault with the United States. In other words, I need to base my decisions on fact rather than speculation. What I need is something positive. And from this drafted garbage in front of me, I’m getting the feeling that we’re making little progress, if any at all.”

Shari took the initiative. “Mr. President, I have something, but how it relates to the Soldiers of Islam isn’t quite clear.”

“And what would that be, Special Agent?”

“I’m talking about these,” she said, producing photos from a leather briefcase. “Yesterday I was able to burn and decipher the encryptions of a CD given to me by Mossad—a CD holding the dossiers of the Soldiers of Islam and other information that I believe ties in with what’s going on. Right now the connection is thin at best, but given time, I’ll be able to figure it out. I just need a few more pieces of the puzzle.” While she spoke she looked around the room and examined the faces for micro-expressions, such as the perceptively surprised look, a nervous tic or wandering eyes, anything that would betray their sentiments. All she saw were poker faces.

“May I see those?” asked the president, extending a hand.

Shari proffered the bait. “They’re photos of high-ranking business officials, all from oil conglomerates, and politicians from Russia, Venezuela and Israel, which I

assume to be clandestine meetings since they're surveillance photos. The second and third batches are surveillance photos of the known members from the Soldiers of Islam, and photos of tracts of oil beneath these countries and the Palestinian territories. These were all tied in with pertinent information regarding the terrorists."

The president examined the photos. She carefully watched his expression unfold until he shook his head in bewilderment. "And how exactly does this tie in with the abduction of the pope?"

"On the surface, nothing," she told him. "However, when I went to the Embassy of Israel to see the man responsible for creating the data, he wanted the CD back. I refused. Later that night... a team was sent to retrieve that data and they tried to take me out."

The president's face took on what Shari read to be guarded concern. "Take you out?"

"Someone tried to kill me over that information, Mr. President. On paper it looks like nothing, but when somebody comes into my home and tries to kill me for something that appears meaningless, that tells me there's something damaging in those photos."

The president continued to examine the pictures. "And what happened to the perpetrator?"

"There were three, sir. However, law enforcement got involved and they exited as quickly as they entered," she lied. "Just mild damage committed to the home, sir, nothing else." It was porous at best, but it was the only thing she could come up with.

"I didn't hear anything about this."

"It's minor considering the issue at hand, Mr. President. Again, the matter was taken care of long before it got out of control."

"Thank God you're still with us then." He shuffled from one photo to the next, giving each close scrutiny.

"Mr. President, I'm not sure how they tie in with what's going on, but I know there's a connection."

The president tossed the photos on the desk. "I disagree," he said. In Shari's mind a contradiction was as good as an admission of guilt. The president was now trying to downplay the photos. So Kimball was right after all, she considered. The man was trying to find out what she knew.

"Special Agent Cohen, I have to address the world in less than an hour, and you want me to offer those photos of politicians, businessmen and tracts of oil to the world community as evidence of the pope's well being? Is that what you're asking me to do?"

"Mr. President, I'm not offering a solution as to what you should present to the world. I'm saying that this is a key to what happened—*why* it happened."

"Special Agent, we know why it happened. They're holding the pope so that certain demands can be met. And these photos have nothing to do with that."

Vice President Jonas Bohlmer walked quietly to the president's desk and held his hand out. "Can I look at those, Jim?"

The president nodded and turned his attention back to Shari. "I don't know if it's your lack of progress in this situation, Special Agent, but I cannot afford to



have my time wasted by someone who's grasping at straws. What I want to know is if you have anything besides these pictures?"

"I also have a report from CSI stating that the Governor's mansion was sanitized."

"What does that mean?"

"It means the Soldiers of Islam purposely left no trace evidence, yet they leave behind two members whom they knew were traceable and would tie them in anyway. So if that was the case, why sanitize the area? It's a contradiction of actions, Mr. President, which tells me the Governor's mansion was staged to provide us with a red herring, so we won't look beyond the box."

"And why the red herring?" asked the vice president.

Shari turned to him. "I don't know."

The vice president shook his head in admonishment. "Ms. Cohen, you seem to have more questions than answers. That's not why you were put into this position."

"I understand that, Mr. Vice President, but I'm doing the best I can with what I have."

The vice president turned to the photos, then back to Shari. "Special Agent Cohen, I'm going to be candid with you," he said. "From the beginning I was against you being a part of this at all. And now you're proving me right."

"How so?"

At first the vice president said nothing, his glaring demeanor saying it all. "For the fact, Ms. Cohen, that you are a Jewish counterpart in a situation that can be deadly should the Soldiers of Islam find out that a woman of Jewish faith is manning the helm."

"Mr. Vice President, with all due respect, I am quite qualified to perform my duties... whether or not I'm Jewish or a woman."

"You know better than I do, Ms. Cohen, that you're a lethal combination when dealing with such people. Not only are you failing in your tasks, however, but if these terrorists should ever gain the truth that you're the one spearheading this charge, then that only compounds the difficulty. Wouldn't you agree?"

Shari was seething. Her grandmother was right. In some peculiar way, in a land where freedom was paramount, she was still being persecuted on some infinitesimal level, even with impeccable credentials to back her up. And then her grandmother's voice rang true in her head, a prophetic aphorism she recalled as a child, then later in the Holocaust Museum. *Because you're a Jew you'll always be persecuted. But never forget who you are and always be proud, because one day you will be reminded of what you are and you'll need to fight back to survive. Never forget that, my littlest one.*

Shari started to rebut. "Mr. Vice President—"

"These photos, Ms. Cohen, with all due respect, are worthless. And I agree with the president that you're grasping at straws." He returned the photos to Shari. "We've no use for these. Keep them."

Remaining composed, she took them without hesitation. At least the bait had been laid.

With time the discussion took a new direction: Global hate crimes against those of the Arab population, riots in South American countries, murders within the

States. Shari knew her diligence was about to be met with deadly force, regardless that the photos were being cast off as worthless. The president's tactic of demonstrating indifference was simply a cosmetic cover. She knew this. What they didn't know was she was thoroughly prepared to take them on.

As Alan Thornton and the vice president prescribed their recommendations for addressing the world, Shari glanced at the photos again, as if finding enlightenment. She nodded, as if perceiving something of importance about them. If somebody in this office was involved with the pope's abduction, she was sure her actions were under scrutiny.

While the president readied himself to go on air with nothing more than an overview rather than gospel, she sat quietly. She considered she was pretty much invisible to the administration at the moment as the principals discussed the image of the United States in the eyes of the world. The welfare of the pope wasn't mentioned at all. And this, she told herself, was politics at its worse.

Once in awhile the president asked Shari a question, but only because she was the counterterrorism expert, of which she responded appropriately. She noted the president was creating a mental script of half-truths with her aid, which also made her feel dirty. After all, this is the world of politics in which truths are often woven into fables and fables woven into truths.

As time drew near for the president's address, Shari appraised the faces around her one last time and spotted nothing.

The only thing she could do now was to wait for someone to kill her.

### ***Boston, Massachusetts***

The dampness of the New England air had seeped into the marrow of the pope's bones. Wearing only his undergarments, he embraced himself against the chill, and waited for the inhumanities against his bishop to unfold before his eyes.

Team Leader stood before the camera at center stage and spoke in Arabic. "To the people of this country, and to your allies: It is unfortunate that the world of Islam must endure the political machinations of a government motivated by corruption rather than do what is right, such as to stop the oppression of Arab nations by your needless occupation. If you think this is a unique situation, think again. The political machine that drives your country is stimulated by those who have the finances to maintain political camps in other nations and bullies allied support." Team Leader then placed his hands behind the small of his back and stood at ease.

"It has come to our knowledge that the United States has no intention to abide by our demands, but continues to fight for the support of allied nations who do not have the courage to stand against them. Therefore, since the Great Satan has not met our demands, we will take the life of a bishop as an action praised in the eyes of Allah." Team Leader hesitated, chose his next words carefully, and continued. "Those on Capitol Hill, those in the White House, those in American democracy, must understand that your way is not the Islamic way."

Beside him the bishop began to beg for his life in earnest.

Team Leader ignored him and spoke over his cries.

“We will continue to maintain our edict that there are to be no discussions, no debates and no negotiations. The death of your bishop will serve to motivate the politicians of the world to see things differently and to work accordingly with the demands offered by the authority of the Soldiers of Islam.”

Team Leader removed his hands from behind the small of his back until the Sig was in full view of the camera. “Under the watchful eye of Allah, it is with honor that I kill a minion of Satan before Satan’s own eyes.”

Team Leader beckoned for someone off stage.

Kodiak jerked the pope up and dragged him to the stage and forced him to the floor next to Bishop Angelo. The pope winced when sharp splinters of wood bit into his knees. On the monitor, the pope appeared emaciated and disheveled, his garments soiled, his limbs wispy thin. The wrinkles on his face were deep, long and more profound. To view him on tape, many would consider the man who was king to look more like a skid row bum.

The pope turned to Bishop Angelo, held his hand out to him and wrapped his fingers around Angelo’s, whose movement was made minimal by the cuffs. He received the contact, a conduit tapping into the pope’s power.

“Be not afraid,” he told him. “For God holds a special place for you in His kingdom.”

For a brief moment their eyes met. And for that concise passage of time, Bishop Angelo seemed suddenly at peace. His faith was no longer alien.

The pope squeezed his hand, a gesture that everything was fine—would be fine, and Bishop Angelo gave a nod of perception.

“Allah is great,” cried Team Leader. In a deft move he pointed the pistol at the base of the bishop’s skull and pulled the trigger. The bishop slumped forward, dead, a quick and merciful kill. At the same time blood sprayed against the pope’s face, warm and wet, the fluid causing the pope to flinch, as if in pain.

Boa turned off the camera.

Team Leader immediately pulled the stunned pope to his feet and pushed him toward Kodiak. “After you hook him up, return for the bishop’s body and lay him at the feet of the pope to rot.”

Temporarily lobotomized by the trauma, the pope was guided from the room.

After holstering his pistol, Team Leader removed the videotape and examined it by turning it over in his gloved hand. “We must move quickly,” he said, then handed the tape back to Boa. “Make sure this gets to Yahweh.”

“Understood.”

When Boa left the room, Team Leader stood alone in silence. With the smell of cordite still in the air, he drew in the scent as if it were intoxicating, and then expelled it with an equally long exhale. He then turned to view the bishop who sat there with the back of his head pared open like petals of a rose. Gore and blood lay everywhere.

With his hands clasped behind the small of his back, Team Leader left the room.

## Chapter 43

**Washington, D.C.**  
**September 27, Mid-noon**

Shari appeared pale when she reached her Lexus. Since being dismissed from the Oval Office, she had looked over her shoulder for someone following her. All she saw were people coming and going, never the same face, not a single person even looking in her direction, as everyone seemed preoccupied by their own circumstances.

With her hands shaking, the keys jingled as she started the car. But when her cell phone rang she jumped before picking it up. "Yes?"

"You're clear," the voice said. "There's no tag behind you."

"Are you sure?"

"No doubt about it."

Shari's shoulders slumped as if a great weight was lifted, but the painful muscle strain at the base of her skull continued. After pulling out of the parking space she placed the phone on speaker.

"So how'd it go?"

She set the phone on the opposite seat; her practiced eye glancing often into the rearview mirror looking for something the Vatican Knights may have missed. "I'm not sure," she told Kimball. "Of course they dismissed it, which we knew they would. But at least the chum is in the water."

"So who was there?"

"The norm: The president, the vice president, the attorney general, the chief advisor and two senior advisors."

"All of whom would know about the existence of the Force Elite."

"So it could be any one of them?"

"Or all of them."

Shari looked into the rearview mirror and saw a van pull in behind her. "I hope that's you."

"It is."

Her tension headache eased. "Let's hope they bite, Kimball, because I'm fresh out of answers, theories and pieces of the puzzle."

"Trust me," he said. "If there's a chance of exposure, they'll send somebody and send them fast. I'm a little surprised they didn't send along a tag."

"Maybe they did—maybe you just don't know it."

"I've got Isaiah and Micah following me. There's no tag."

"Then I hope I'm not wrong about this," she told him.

"After what happened last night, I doubt it."

They drove on for a minute. Neither spoke. Shari looked into the rearview mirror and noted Kimball's chiseled features, the movie-star looks. In return Kimball smiled and waved. And like a school girl caught looking at a boy she had a crush on, she immediately turned away and chided herself for making the act so obvious. She was, after all, a married woman with two children. Nevertheless, through the corner of her eye, she stole another peek.

"Kimball?"

"Yeah."

"How safe is my home?"

"I'm thinking it's still a hot spot."

"Good," she said. "Because I want them to know where they can find me."

"It'll be dangerous."

"I know. But at least you'll be there."

"We'll all be there. Leviticus is already at the house with Nehemiah keeping it under surveillance. So far it's clear. The audio bugs are picking up nothing inside."

She hesitated, looked into the mirror again, then wondered if a man like him, a man considered to be without any semblance of conscience or soul or morality, had the capability of loving anybody. Was there anything remotely and truly human about him? "Kimball?"

"Yeah."

She wanted to ask, *Are you capable of loving someone?* but thought against it. "Never mind," she said, and cancelled the call.

\* \* \* \* \*

"She was obviously lying as to what happened last night," said Yahweh over the phone. "All this crap about law enforcement showing up at her house at the most opportune time. Bullshit. And she failed to mention this Kimball Hayden."

"I can tell you he's a man you don't want to mess with. Three elite members were taken out last night by this guy alone... Enough said."

"I know about last night. I want to know about him."

Judas was surprised to receive a call from Yahweh. He had always worked through his conduit, George Pappandopolous. "His code name was the Professor," he began, "because no matter how good anybody else was as an assassin, they were nothing but students compared to this guy. At that time he was the most lethal weapon the White House had to offer in its day—a solo black op whose skills were far superior to anyone else."

"And?"

"In 1991, during the outbreak of the Gulf War, George Bush sent Hayden to dispatch Saddam Hussein hoping to cause turmoil within the ranks of the Republican Guard, so they would vacate Kuwait before the United States and its allies moved in. But the guy dropped off the grid. And it was believed that he was killed during the mission."

"Yet he surfaces at the doorstep of an FBI agent years later. How very interesting. Was he alone?"

"I saw only one man, just a shadow—big, tall."

"Then take him out."

Judas could feel his scrotum crawl. Asking him to take out Kimball Hayden was like asking to wrestle a full grown bull to the ground with just your bare hands—a huge feat. "I don't think you understand—"

"What I understand, Judas, is that you're getting a large sum for your services. Special Agent Cohen is getting dangerously close to the truth, which is evident by the materials presented today at the Oval Office. If she gets any closer, the cause will falter and your money will be pissed away because you, me and half of Capitol Hill will be in Club Fed or worse."

"I can't do this alone. And I'm not sure the remaining members of Omega Team can do it either."

"For chrissakes, Judas, Hayden isn't a god. He's one man."

Judas shifted uncomfortably from one leg to the other. Normally he was seldom rattled, but he met Kimball Hayden personally and unlike Yahweh, was not blind to the man's deadly skills.

"You're the field general in this cause. See that the job gets done. Take out Cohen. And if Hayden is there, take him out as well. Start earning your money!" The call concluded with the definite click of disconnection.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pope hardly looked like the man whom kings and queens bowed before. His face was partially crusted with blood, and the one-time sparkle of life and hope in his eyes, all but gone.

Sometime within the last half hour, he didn't know when, Kodiak had laid the body of Bishop Angelo beside him. The pulp and gore of his wound was a disturbing sight to the pontiff, enough to feel a twinge of fading hope.

Reaching for the bishop's hand, which was still warm to the touch, the pope embraced it with both of his. "There was nothing I could do," he told him. "Nothing at all." He closed his eyes and prayed, his lips moving silently.

For the first time in his life Pope Pius wondered if God had abandoned them, then admonished himself for even considering such a notion. After all, He always had a design. But whatever it was, Pope Pius didn't have a clue.

\* \* \* \* \*

While Shari was at JEH working under the watchful eye of her staff, Kimball was at the archdiocese recharging his strength by catching a quick catnap, a two-hour respite to wash away the fatigue that been accumulating for several hours.

For the first time in a long time he didn't dream of his own demons surfacing from the sands of Iraq, but envisioned the lovely and almost too perfect face of Shari Cohen as she smiled to him, her face surrounded by a nimbus of light. When she spoke he couldn't hear her, although her lips moved gracefully. And her smile, above all else, intoxicating.

She would try to communicate with him, her hands held out in invitation for Kimball to come forward. But he found it impossible to approach, his feet riveted by the force of his own cowardice, as he stood there damning himself for not acting on her encouragement. And then she began to retreat into a light that was all-consuming, Kimball watching with regret as she moved on without him.

It was here that Kimball awoke with his mouth cotton dry. Staring at the ceiling, his tongue lapping his parched lips, Kimball found himself admitting that he was becoming deeply infatuated with her, a married woman, and another sin in the eyes of God.

But he believed she forgave him for what he was and what he did, of which he was grateful for. So he gravitated toward her, feeling a pull unlike any he had ever felt before. She embraced him with her mercy.

However, he felt a conscience pang unlike any other as well. He felt ashamed for his unrefined thoughts, especially when clerics walked the hallways of the dormitory where he rested.

Shari Cohen was becoming the centerpiece of his world.

Getting to his feet, he wondered why God continued to look favorably upon him, especially when he seemed to constantly test the limits of His rules. The answer was simple: play now and pay later on Judgment Day.

There was no doubt in Kimball's mind that redemption was unsalvageable in the eyes of God, and that he was doomed to damnation in which his Deliverance would be a dark one. For the moment regret overwhelmed him, causing him to close his eyes and plead for mercy.

Beside him, the clock on the night stand seemed to tick louder than normal; a reminder that time was always working toward Judgment Day for us all. It was not a day Kimball was looking forward to.

***Washington, D.C.  
September 27, High-Noon***

Shari Cohen's team worked diligently throughout the day trying to acquire whatever background information was available regarding the principles of YUKOS Oil and Venezuela's PDVSA. As Shari expected, further information on Abraham Obadiah was non-existent.

Although the information was plentiful, there was nothing ascribed to the primary players in the photos that indicated they were involved in improprieties—another block wall. So Shari wondered if she was wrong in her conjecture that there was a tie between the encryptions, the dossiers, and the pope's kidnapping.

With the sting of pain between her shoulders subsiding little, she took a seat and watched the conclusion of the president's address. The man looked dramatically agitated; the gesticulations of his hands a visual technique noting that the kidnapping of the pope was a violation to religious freedom everywhere and that intolerance was the true sin. Other than that, he offered nothing more than false hope as hate crimes escalated. Riots against Islamic communities within Christian nations felt the wrath of their anger as mosques burned to the ground, and people dragged through the streets. With a heavy heart, Shari felt an uneasiness creep over her as the world began to unravel before her eyes.

Working tirelessly as the day waxed on, she examined every bit of data coming in from all sources, national and international. Al-Qaeda was recruiting through the Internet, the volume of responses overwhelming. Devotion to Jihad was suddenly at fever pitch. The word through the international chat rooms was that threats were being fostered against the United States and its allies by insurgents from Muslim and Islamic faiths. But there was nothing intercepted that shed any light as to the location of the pope. The Soldiers of Islam, if nothing else, were careful in their communication.

Outside, the sun had set, the street lights illuminating in shades of gold and amber. With sheaves of documents littering her desktop, Shari stared out the window as if there was something hypnotic about the landscape. But in reality she was thinking. Somewhere in the darkness of those D.C. streets, Leviticus and Nehemiah were watching over her with spying eyes. But was she also being watched by the Force Elite? She could only wonder.

After a moment of reflection, she cast a sidelong glance to a framed photograph of her family that was situated at the corner of her desk. With Gary smiling his boyish charm and the girls smiling with teeth either missing or sitting irregular along the gum line, she picked up the photo and gave it her full attention. She had fallen in love with Gary only after he had fought for her affection and suffered her countless refusals. Perhaps it was his determination, or perhaps his perseverance, that finally won her over. Either way, their love had grown together and created two beautiful daughters.

Then comes Kimball Hayden, larger than life, seemingly a poster child for the bad-boy image who had somehow worked his way into her emotions, but without the tenacity Gary had shown.

She traced her fingers over her husband's image and quietly asked his forgiveness for feelings she could not control. Her answer, of course, came in the form of total silence.

Slowly, she placed the photo back on the desk unable to stop the image of Kimball Hayden's face from entering her mind. For the second time that day she felt dirty.

***Clark County Coroner's Office, Las Vegas, Nevada,  
September 27, Early Evening***

The Coroner's lab was an infusion of alcohols and chemicals, which was far better than the stench of the corpses lying in gathered pieces on stainless steel tables.

Clothing from the bodies were removed and bagged as evidence. Body parts were matched to torsos by sorting through the corresponding sizes and densities of the pieces. Rib cages lay open revealing the lack of internal organs, the lumbar column fully visible. Femurs and fibulas were separated, but matched to individual corpses. Nevertheless, there was enough left to cobble together IDs which garnered immediate strikes from Interpol, the Department of Homeland Security, and other top-worldwide agencies.

After piecing together their identities, the coroner's office immediately prioritized their work to establish a ninety-nine-point-ninety-seven percent probability of the identities on the corpses and sent the results to Special Agent Cohen of the FBI, according to the red-flag status in their network, which was protocol.

The identities of the bullet riddled bodies found in the Mojave Desert were about to provide major pieces to Shari Cohen's puzzle.

## **Chapter 44**

When Kimball received the call from Shari, he could tell she was elated. "You're not going to believe this. Six bodies were discovered in Mesquite, Nevada, this morning, about four hundred miles south of Ogden, Utah."



Kimball recognized the name Ogden, the station point for the Soldiers of Islam, nothing more. "Okay."

"I just received a preliminary report from the Clark County Coroner's Office identifying the bodies as the six remaining members of the Soldiers of Islam."

Kimball pressed the phone closer to his ear. "They know this for certain?"

"Over ninety-nine percent certain, which means I'm definitely on the right track. The bodies, according to the findings, have been in the desert for at least three weeks, or for as long as five. This means they were dead before the pope was kidnapped."

"Execution style?"

"They were able to find two bullets from an MP5, so it looks that way."

"Military issue," he said. "Not the kind of weapon you'd see Joe Blow carry around."

"No, not at all," she returned.

"So they were executed, dumped, their residences sanitized—"

"—and the Governor's mansion was seized with the military precision incapable of the Soldiers of Islam," she interjected. "But better managed by—"

"—the Force Elite."

"Yes! They still exist." There was a period of stunning silence before Shari spoke again. And then, "We have him, Kimball... Our own government took the pope."

"But why?"

"To start a war," she said. It was all too clear. "Who is the one man on this planet, the one man, who by the power of his presence can incite a world?"

"To start a war though? Again I have to ask, why?"

"For oil," she said without hesitation. "It's all about oil."

\* \* \* \* \*

After receiving the videotape through his connections, Yahweh viewed it several times in the darkness of his study. The only pool of light in the room came from the TV screen.

Sometimes he played the tape in slow motion and watched the bishop's skull erupt in a fountain of blood frame-by-frame, trying to understand why the cleric was so terrified of dying, when an Islamic terrorist readily gives up his life as if it was meaningless.

In the first few clips it was obvious that the bishop was alarmed, his sense of self-preservation so animalistic in display by the way he thrashed in the chair or the way his eyes widened with absolute terror. It was as if the man held no faith. But when the pope reached out to him and whispered a few words of contentment, words not heard over the video, the bishop seemed somewhat pacified.

Although he considered it gruesome, he replayed the tape over and over, trying to differentiate why a man of cloth was afraid of making the graduation to a greater level of being, when a man from another culture was not. No matter how many times he played it, the answer or understanding never came.

Finally shutting off the tape, he sat in utter darkness and mused over the brilliance of the video.

Bringing the pope on stage was a brilliant stroke on the part of Team Leader—an obvious ploy to provoke the masses and encourage anger. Watching the pope in

his disheveled state would no doubt work wonders on the emotions of Christians worldwide and wreak havoc long before Shari could do anything to quell the matter.

“Brilliant,” he whispered, then once again, but in a softer tone and with far less emotion, uttered, “Brilliant.”

Within four hours the tape was displayed on the Internet by *Aljazeera*. Within five hours the world community was in an uproar. The international news media played the edited version of the execution over... and over... and over again.

Yahweh was pleased.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Oil?”

“Think about it,” she said. “Those photos of the Soldiers of Islam weren’t on the dossiers as mere surveillance shots; they were being targeted. And now they’re dead—all of them. So now we know *who* doesn’t have the pope, but can surmise who *does*, which leads us to question number two.”

Her voice picked up momentum as she spoke. Kimball was sure he would have to tell her to slow down. “Members from the president’s own assassination squad tried to take me out for having that CD given to me by the attaché of the Israeli government.”

“Which ties them together—we know that.”

“True, but now we know why there were photos of the oil tracts, and business and political principals from the oil producing countries,” she said.

Kimball didn’t see the connection. “I’m not getting you.”

“Not only is that CD a schematic, Kimball, it’s also a political agenda.” Shari pressed the phone closer to her mouth. “Israel, Russia, Venezuela and the United States are countries with implausible political ties with Venezuela harboring anti-American sentiment. But according to the agenda, and from what we have seen, forced changes may be ahead to better serve the economies of the nations bound by foreign accords by changing the geopolitical landscape and to form new alliances with nations who are starting to tap more of their fossil reserve, like Russia, or in the case of Israel, sitting on top of an oil bonanza that happens to be under Palestinian territory.”

Kimball disagreed. “No way. Venezuela’s way too anti-American to consider an accord with the United States.”

“Their president is anti-American, Kimball. Not the people. And by forced changes, I mean a sudden removal of the incumbent who is replaced by someone who is pro-American.”

“You’re thinking assassination?”

“I’m thinking the purpose of the Force Elite—and this is according to you—is to go into foreign nations and manipulate world leaders to be more conducive to American interests? So yes, I’m thinking assassination is probably somewhere down the road in order to make this work. Geopolitical landscapes are changed by the act of war.”

Kimball knew that she was right. Ever since the Force Elite was reinvented after President Ford disallowed the CIA to commit assassinations abroad, subsequent presidents saw differently. In fact, they saw a crucial need for the Force Elite in

order to maintain an edge over leading powers. Assassinating a political hostile was exactly why the Force Elite was reestablished. This was their game.

“Alternative fuels,” she continued, “at best, maybe twenty, thirty years away. But in the meantime, the Middle East maintains an exclusive franchise now that China and India have a need for their resources, as well. Therefore, the principals are growing concerned and believe it’s time for a new order to be created, since co-dependency on Arab nations with ties to the west appears to be growing more tenuous every day, whereas their ties with China and India become stronger. And with demand between those two countries about six times greater than that of the United States, this country may be finding itself going silently to the back of the bus when the need for oil here is still great.

“So the principals decided upon a final agenda,” she added. “The Soldiers of Islam weren’t soldiers at all, but patsies. And our government used them to point the accusing finger at so the world community would clearly make a rush to judgment as to who committed one of the most grievous acts of terrorism without question, which it did. And what better way to do this by attacking the international psyche by using the most recognizable religious figure as a tool of war. Our governments, Kimball, were using the pope to create new boundaries by trying to muster global support through propaganda for something horrible that’s about to happen. And that’s to start an illegal war against Arab nations in retaliation for kidnapping the pope. But then you’d have to ask yourself this: Who would benefit most from such a war?”

Kimball remained silent, letting her roll.

“If Israel takes over the Palestinian territories, they would do so with little condemnation from world leaders, stating it’s their right to secure boundaries and protect themselves from a common enemy, when in fact they’d be tapping into the oil tracts and filling their coffer with unimaginable wealth to rival the Saudi’s. The United States would benefit if the geo-political landscape in Venezuela changes, which would fall into the CIA’s hands with a pro-American leader sitting at the political forefront who is more trade friendly, and a country that’s swimming in oil. Everyone benefits because the need for oil is not going away anytime soon. And with a need such as this country has, along with China and India, the theory is that economies that have separated from the co-dependency of Arab nations would grow exponentially if they can secure accords with nations promising competition with OPEC in order to keep prices stable. And who now has the oil to compete? Russia, Venezuela, and now Israel. Everything’s about money, Kimball. Everything. But religion is a potent weapon that can generate hatred so personal and deep that there can be no forgiveness, no matter what.

“Think about it. Israel and the United States would like nothing better than to break ties with nations who are steadily growing hostile against them. And Russia and Venezuela would like nothing more than to corner a market with China and India vying for cheaper costs to offset OPEC’s sliding scale.”

“And if there’s war...” His words trailed.

“Then millions would die, which I assume the principals would look at as collateral damage if the means are achieved. But what’s truly ironic about this whole thing is that we’re the ones who initiated this holy war, not them. *We’re* the ones using the fear of terrorism as the weapon against our own masses to trick the

world in believing that the terrorists initiated this whole thing, because that's what's expected. And what's even scarier is wars like these usually give rise to ethnic cleansing. I just wonder if the leaders involved had the foresight to see that the Final Agenda held some of the same principles as the Final Solution."

"I would like to think that we've gone beyond that."

"If there's one thing mankind has yet to learn, Kimball, is that past history bears little lessons if the powers that be are unwilling to learn from them."

Kimball sighed. "Touché."

## Chapter 45

As Shari was prepping to leave the JEH building, her cell phone rang. "Ms. Cohen."

Shari could immediately tell by the deep resonance that it was Punch Murdock. "Yes, Special Agent Murdock. What can I do for you?"

"Actually, it's what I can do for you," he returned. "I'm at the Governor's mansion and I think I may have found something that could prove vital to your investigation."

"And what's that?"

"A snow globe," he said simply.

Quizzically: "A snow globe?"

"I'm in the governor's bedroom. And on the dresser is this snow globe of New York with the World Trade Center as its scenery. I can tell that the shell has been dusted for prints, but it's what's underneath the base that's quite interesting."

"And what would that be?"

"Arabic script," he said. "Of course at the time of the initial investigation we didn't know that an Arabic faction was involved with the case, which is why it was never a consideration. But now that we know that an Arabic faction is involved, and there's script scrawled on the base of a snow globe of New York City—the World Trade Center in particular—may give us an indication as to where the pope is."

Shari could literally feel her pulse pounding as she slowly got to her feet, her eyes staring at nothing in particular as her mind searched for the proper wordage, only to find no word play at all. The Arabs only play was to become patsies. Did she miss something?

"Are you there, Ms. Cohen?"

"Do you read Arabic, Mr. Murdock?"

"Call me Punch, and the answer is 'no,' which is why I called you. If it's vital to the investigation, then it's vital to maintain the integrity of the evidence by maintaining a proper chain of command. Now it might not be anything at all, mind you. But on the other hand, why would there be Arabic script on the bottom of the snow globe?"

*As a red herring*, she considered.

She answered his question with another question. "You said the snow globe was dusted?"

“Yeah. It still has residue all over it, but no discernible prints, as if it was wiped clean.”

“But you’re sure it’s Arabic script?”

“Looks like it, although I could be wrong. Just a few words, though—enough to fit on the base.”

“Have you found anything else?”

“No. I’m thinking this could some kind of message, that perhaps Pius is somewhere in New York.” When he said this it sounded more like a question than a deductive statement.

“But that wouldn’t make sense,” she told him. “Why tip us off to his whereabouts unless it was some kind of red herring, which would make better sense.”

“That’s why I called you,” he said. “You need to see the writing.”

Shari picked up the undertone of heavy sadness, of burden. “Punch, why are you even there to begin with?”

Another pause, lengthy, and then: “Because you know as well as I do that there’s no such thing as *the* perfect crime, Ms. Cohen. There is always that something that is overlooked. And I believe I may have found it.”

His burden seemed to grow with every subsequent word spoken. So she had to ask: “Are you all right?”

There was another pause, and then she could hear him sigh over the line, a sigh that was overly exhaustive. “I guess what I’m really looking for, Ms. Cohen, is closure. My team was murdered—my friends, people I’ve come to know as family, people I have come to share my privacies with. And here I am left standing with this incapability to do nothing about it.”

“We already had this discussion, Punch. It’s not your fault.” She could almost picture him feigning a smile on the other end as he spoke.

“It’s something you’ll never understand,” he told her, “unless it happens to you. And I pray that it never will. I can’t retire with this hanging over my head, Ms. Cohen. I need to close this any way possible. It’s just something I have to do. Does this make sense? To want closure on something like this?”

She didn’t have to think before answering. Everyone wanted closure for peace of mind. “Of course not,” she said.

“I don’t want to be as ‘good as I was the day before,’” he added. “I want to be a part of this and not be retired to the sidelines because the brass has lost faith in my abilities.”

“How long are you going to be there?”

“For a while,” he said. “I’m hoping this globe will lead me to something else, like the first breadcrumb in a trail of breadcrumbs. But I can’t decipher what’s written on the bottom of the base.”

“I’ll do that for you,” she said. “Keep looking, but compromise nothing. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I’ll be here,” he returned. And then he hung up, leaving her standing there with her cell phone droning in her ear.

\* \* \* \* \*

Judas stood in the shadows of old abandoned buildings with chicken-wire windows, most of them smashed and indented with the constant pounding of thrown stones, and charged his Glock semi-automatic pistol.

The sun had fallen, and in the pool of darkness he was surrounded by members of Omega Team whose faces were concealed with grease paint. They were heavily armed and donning black military fatigues, becoming shadows within shadows, things blacker than black.

“All right, gentlemen,” said Judas, “the objective is clear. We’re here to take out Target Red. And FYI, the guy who took out half of Omega Team last night is no novice to the game. He’s ruthless. He’s deadly. And one man alone doesn’t stand a chance against him. I’m assuming he’s now a part of Cohen’s protective detail, so he’s a number-one priority for takedown. You will find them, and maintain a constant visual on both targets. You will also be in constant communication with one another through your lip mics to alert your position to supporting team members at all times. If a unit member does not respond, then I want you to assume that Target Red has compromised Omega Team. I need you to be prepared, people. I need you to keep your heads up because this guy is serious business and not to be taken lightly.”

One of the commandos charged his weapon, a testosterone gesture that he was more than ready to take on all competitors.

“Do your job, gentlemen, and you’ll all be rich men living off the coast of Belize. If not, then you’ll be keeping company with Dark Lord in whatever hole Hayden pitched him in. Happy hunting.”

Omega Team instantly gathered inside of a van of dark gray primer to blend in with the surrounding darkness, started the engine, made its way out of the complex of aged buildings, and began their journey to the interception point to take out Target Red.

When the van was out of site, Judas entered his vehicle with an agenda of his own.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shari was displeased, if not disgusted, with the savagery behind the highly doctored video aired over CNN and other stations. There were sidebar videos of the aftermath regarding Muslim and Islamic populations being tormented, abused and harangued in predominantly Christian nations, even when devout Muslims and Islamists believed peace was the true virtue, whereas violence an abomination in the eyes of God. It was totally unfair to the sincere religious practitioners, she thought. They didn’t deserve this.

What was even worse was to show the world in chronic repetition the pope’s ordeal. Showing these pictures repetitively played into the hands of the terrorists. The media knew this, but Shari realized that macabre events such as this appeased the insatiable appetite of the public for news as entertainment.

After getting off the phone with Murdock, Shari checked her watch and couldn’t help the light stirring of anxiety creeping up like the trace of a cold finger down her spine. There was no doubt in her mind that the Force Elite was going to make a move soon, if not tonight.

Shari flipped back the screen of her cell phone and dialed a quick-dial number.

“Yeah, Shari.” It was Kimball.

“I’m leaving the building,” she told him. “Through the West End gate.”

“We’ll be there.”

“Kimball?”

“Yeah.”

“Please, stay close. I’m really scared.”

“We’re here for you,” he assured her. “You’ll be fine.”

“I’m heading to the governor’s mansion.”

“The governor’s mansion?”

“I got a call from Special Agent Murdock,” she told him. “He may have found something that would benefit our cause to find the pope. But I think it’s a red herring.”

“Be careful.”

“You think they’re following me?”

“To some degree, I’m sure. Just because we can’t see them doesn’t mean that they’re not there. They’re nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Does that make sense?”

“In an odd way, yes.”

“Don’t worry. My team will be riding dark behind you. Isaiah will be wearing the NVG headgear that night pilot’s wear while flying nighttime missions. No one will see us. So if there’s anyone following you, then we’ll get them.”

“We need the insurgents alive, Kimball. I need to mine them for information.”

“Then cross your fingers and hope they’ll comply.”

Shari sighed, but there was no relief as her stomach clenched into a slick fist.

“If we’re not alone, Kimball, if they are following me, remember that this is for all the chips. So make *sure* they become compliant. Their death will serve us no purpose. We *have* to learn the location of the pope.”

“Shari, this is not a game. My team will do what they can to preserve the lives of the opposition. Preserving lives is what we do. But you have to understand that we’re working with a mentality in which there is no option other than to kill or be killed. I know the consequences if we fail, and my team knows the consequences, too. If we fail, we at least did all we could. You did all you could... Just don’t expect miracles because I don’t believe in them.”

“Kimball?”

“Yes.”

“You need to have faith.” She hung up.

***Boston, Massachusetts  
September 27, Evening***

Team Leader was rejuvenated and in full command after watching the video of the execution on television. Despite the progress of Shari Cohen, there was no doubt the cause waxed toward the ultimate goal to create an absolute schism between the Middle East and the rest of the world. He knew hatred, like fear, was a great motivator if used wisely. And if used wisely enough, hatred could reshape the balance of world power.

Team Leader moved down the dank corridor, pompous as an athlete who considers himself unbeatable, his arrogance laying the groundwork of invincibility. He had nursed this seed of thought to fruition. With huge tracts of oil beneath the soil he walked upon in his native Israel, as well as huge tracts in Russia, Venezuela and the Palestinian territories, there was no telling how rich their economies would become. OPEC dependency by wealthy nations would vanish once non-OPEC nations produced more products for less money. There would no longer be \$120 barrels of oil.

Using Pope Pius XIII was certainly the tool of propaganda that had moved mountains in ways Team Leader never dreamed of. Political landscapes were on the verge of rising or falling, the balances of power were being manipulated by the prejudices of people of all countries by tapping into their fragile national psyches: *all due to the use of a religious icon in the shape of an old man.*

These thoughts massaged Team Leader's ego as he congratulated himself and was proud he was able to use the hatred buried in his heart to such magnificent advantage. After all, he just happened to be the one to promote it since he was a realist and not an idealist. *Peace in the Middle East was never more than a pipe dream. Why not precipitate the inevitable?*

His face didn't betray his inner smile as he walked past the four remaining members of the Holy See who huddled solemnly on their mattresses, their heads bowed in fear of the man who held the decision over life or death.

When Team Leader entered the pope's room a vague scent of blood, copper and bodily waste wafted like something tangible, like something dead but floating freely. But Team Leader had the scents pinpointed for what they were, prerequisites for decay and body rot. It had been several hours since Bishop Angelo had been murdered, his body placed at the foot of the pope. And somewhere within the darkness flies alit, buzzing in incessant drone.

Team Leader engaged his night-vision monocular and the room took on a clear and phosphorous hue. Vague shapes were no longer mere images or shadows, but held depth and width and height. And Team Leader, no longer feeling detached from the darkness, was now a part of it as he gazed down at the pope.

The old man lay beneath two layers of blankets. The contours of his body poked like broomsticks through the fabric, thin and wispy. Beside him, Bishop Angelo lay beneath a blanket, the pulp of his head barely exposed as a black mass of flies assembled to lay their eggs. Team Leader guessed the pope had covered him for the sake of reverence.

"I owe you an apology, Your Holiness, but the killing was absolutely necessary to the cause. I hope the pain is not too considerable."

"What kind of a person murders an innocent man?" the pope asked from underneath the covers.

"A person with an agenda," he stated. His voice was calm, reserved and full of confidence. "A person who is going to change the world one government at a time."

Team Leader rounded the mattress and looked down at the pope, who was laboring to rise from beneath his blankets.

"You think what you are about to do is salvation for the world?" the pope asked, the blankets falling to his waist. In the green cast of the NVG lighting, the man looked impossibly emaciated.



“No, not at all,” he said. “But I do believe it will be salvation for *my* people.”

“With my death you will get what you want—a war that will cost millions of lives and burden your conscience and soul.”

“What I see, Your Holiness is the means to achieve the effect. There are always sacrifices in causes, you know that. Think of your own history and the Crusades.”

“What you’re doing will only foster rage to the point of hatred so great that it could generate a new world holocaust. It’s not worth it.”

“In my eyes, Your Holiness, it is. Your eyes have not seen what mine has. Your eyes didn’t witness your family murdered. Your eyes didn’t cast themselves upon a loving, gentle father who died a slow death because of one man’s deep-rooted hatred for Jews one sunny day in Ramallah. You speak, but you know nothing. You live in a world where your tea may be too hot to sip or perhaps the air is a little too humid for your comfort. But in my world, having blood on your hands is the norm. And I’m going to stop it.”

The pope shook his head. “I feel sorry for you,” he said.

“Why? Because my ideologies are not in line with yours?”

The pope closed his eyes and shook his head. “It’s because you’re damning your soul for all eternity.”

“Maybe, but when that day comes, at least I know I did all I could to make a change. And perhaps my God will understand that.”

“We have the same God,” he said, “The God of Allah, of Mohammed, of Yahweh—they’re all the same, and I doubt that God will look upon you favorably.”

“My God is not the God Allah,” Team Leader said, the pitch of his voice rising. “My God will favor me for my actions against the transgressions of others.”

“By killing innocent people?”

“If that’s His will.”

“Then if that is the case, you pray to a false God. Because there is no God who would condone the killing of men.”

“And if that is the case, then Allah is a false God since men kill openly in His name.”

“Men kill openly because they are ignorant. Not because they believe their God is astringent.”

“My God is not the same as theirs.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, my son. Although God has many faces, He has but one voice.” The pope released a rattled cough of phlegm from deep within his lungs.

“Your war will not come out the way you plan it,” he added. “There will be awful consequences on both sides, and your people will suffer like no other. Can you live with that? Can you live knowing that your actions may cause other children to watch their families die? Just like you did one sunny day in Ramallah?”

Team Leader turned livid. The veins in his neck stuck out like cords. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to stop. And I’ll succeed.”

“God won’t let you,” muttered the pope. He lay back down, pulled the blankets over him, and whispered, “God... won’t... let you.”

*We’ll see. Tomorrow, when you die, we’ll see which of us is right.*

## Chapter 46

**Washington, D.C.**  
**September 27, Evening**

Shari mustered the courage to set herself in motion. She took deep breaths and released them as if in a Lamaze class. When her mind calmed to the point of clear cognizance, she called Alan Thornton, the presidential advisor.

“Where are you?” he asked.

“That’s not important.”

“Shari, what’s wrong? You don’t sound right.”

“Alan, please, I’ve got something to tell you.”

“What?”

Shari confided with him about the Soldiers of Islam having been identified from the Clark County Coroner’s Office in Nevada, and about the CD being a covert schematic of war involving US and allied interests. Thornton remained quiet, taking in every word as Shari spoke in a quick clip.

Then Shari dropped the bomb shell. “I know about the Force Elite, Alan. I just didn’t think that after what we’ve been through together that you would support my eradication.”

“Eradication? What the hell are you talking about?”

“My attackers. The ones I told the president about as he was looking over the photos in his office just before he went on the air. They were the Force Elite.”

The line was silent a moment. “Are you telling me that you were attacked by the Force Elite in *your* home?”

“Then you acknowledge that they exist?”

Thornton paused again. He sighed. “I won’t deny it, Shari. They’ve existed since the CIA was no longer granted permission to commit assassinations after the Ford Administration, but I’m sure you already know that. But to send them to your house to eradicate you, that’s absolutely out of the question. The top guns in this administration, me included, have to come to a mutual agreement to dispatch them. And believe me, nobody would be in agreement to eradicate you. In fact, the team is dormant.”

“What about the president? Could he dispatch them without your knowledge?”

“Possibly, but I doubt it.”

“How would you know?”

There was another pause. “I guess I wouldn’t.”

“Then it could be possible that he’s working in collusion with others without your knowledge, knowing that some of you may disagree with his, shall we say, illegal machinations, perhaps putting his trust only in *those* he knows will support him unconditionally.”

“I would hate to think that of our president.”

“Is it possible, Alan?”

“Anything is possible.”

"I think he had something to do with the kidnapping of the pope." She outlined the theory of his disappearance, of how it colluded with the contents of the CD, the execution murders of the Soldiers of Islam, the connection between Abraham Obadiah and the sudden attack against her life by the Force Elite. In an odd way, Thornton thought, it made sense now that she had pieced it together for him.

"If what you say is true, then you have to be careful."

"I am."

"You can't fight this alone."

"Then fight with me."

Thornton mulled this over. "I'll get on it," he finally said. "There are people on Capitol Hill I can trust. Honest people. But I pray to God you're wrong, Shari. I really do. President Burroughs is a good man."

"That you know of, anyway. But I guess we'll both see. And Alan?"

"Yeah."

"Don't screw me because I have friends in high places too. And to get to me, you'll have to go through them. And I don't think you'll want to do that."

"Shari, I'm on your side, believe me. If there are improprieties going on in this administration, I want to know about them just as much as you do."

"We'll see." She hung up, staring at the phone and wondering if she had done the right thing. Either Thornton will send forth the Force Elite or he'll examine the truth with a clear conscience. Either way, the ball was rolling.

Shari snapped her vision between the rearview mirror and the road as she drove toward her mark. True to his word, Kimball kept a buffer zone between her Lexus and his van. Other than catching glimpses of his headlights in the long stretches between them, the roads were clear.

"They know what we know," she told him over the speaker phone. "If Alan's a part of this, he'll definitely inform the president."

"If the Force Elite aren't there yet, then they're certainly on their way."

"Any news from Leviticus?"

"It's all quiet on the 'Western Front,'" he said. "But that's to be expected. They won't make themselves known until it's time to do so."

Shari's heart began to palpitate. Although a post-certified officer, she had never been a first-team responder, always arriving at the scene of the crime after the crime had been committed. But this was different. She was going right into the line of fire by placing herself within the crosshairs. Even the presence of Kimball Hayden did little to alleviate her fears. Every mile closer seemed to drive her heart rate faster.

"Shari?"

"Yes."

"I think it would be best that I come inside with you to assure your safety. The rest of the team is more than capable of taking on whatever comes their way on the outside."

An image of Gary entered her mind and left, only to return in a series of flashes and snippets of their intimate times together. She saw the moment when they made love for the first time in the back of his car, the seat too small but they made it work. She remembered the two of them picnicking on the bank of a river, feeding ducks, and the lingering kiss that followed. She recalled other good times, loving

times—times that cemented their relationship that had over the years flourished rather than diminished, until recently.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” she told him. “I think it’s better served that you command the first line of defense. I’m more than adequate at taking care of myself. Believe me, I’m ready for them.”

“Shari, you don’t know what you’re up against.”

She thought of Gary and felt confused. “I know exactly what I’m doing. So please, Kimball, please do it my way. I don’t think it would be a good idea to be—” She cut herself off, about to say alone with you but finished with “—in there knowing you weren’t out there watching over me.”

She could hear Kimball’s audible sigh over the phone. “Be careful,” he told her.

“I will.”

For the rest of the trip she remained silent and tried to recapture those images of her husband that had cropped up in her mind earlier. But all she saw now was Kimball Hayden and the way he smiled, the way he carried himself or cocked his head when thinking about something—and the way he looked at her with those expressive eyes that told her how much he cared for her.

Edgy and confused, she snapped off the cell phone and continued the drive, wondering if she was lying to herself about her feelings for Kimball. She prayed she was wrong, that she wasn’t slipping further away from Gary, whose gentle soul was overshadowed by a man who had made killing his vocation. During the remaining trip she prayed for truth. Perhaps, she thought, the lie in itself was the truth.

She felt like crying.

## Chapter 47

### *En route to the Governor’s Mansion*

Kimball and his team drove behind Shari, maintaining the buffer zone as her vehicle neared the governor’s mansion. The roads were dark with trees lining both sides of the road, the constant highway sentinels.

From a distance of three-hundred feet, Leviticus was able to track Shari’s vehicle from his Comm monitor in the back of the van, her car lighting up on his screen as a red blip, a signal from the attached GPS system.

As Shari drove up to the governor’s gate she noted Punch Murdock’s sedan parked to the side and the yellow DO-NOT-CROSS-TAPE he apparently ignored to gain access. The night, however, remained ominously silent as she left her vehicle and went to the gate. In the distance a single lamp was lit in the governor’s mansion. And she saw an image pass by the window. Even from this distance she could tell that it was Murdock.

She opened her cell phone and dialed Kimball’s number.

“Yeah.”

“Where are you?”

“Nowhere and everywhere.”

More tersely: "Where are you?"

"We have you in our sights," he said. "You're fine."

"There's no one?"

"No. You're good."

She closed the phone, lifted the tape, passed through the slight opening of the gates, and headed toward the mansion.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the rear of the van at the Comm Center Leviticus watched the video monitors, the sensitivity of the equipment able to pick up any visual or audio event within a defined perimeter around the mansion. Micah and Isaiah took up respective positions approximately one hundred meters to the northeast and southwest of the residence, placing the home within their vision at all times. Their shapes blended in so perfectly with the shadows that they didn't even cast an outline of being blacker than black.

They *were* the landscape.

In the rear of the vehicle Leviticus continuously panned the micro-thermal imaging camera mounted on the roof, picking up Micah and Isaiah, and perhaps the occasional stray dog or nocturnal creature. So far the perimeter was clear. If the Force Elite was out there, they were a mist before the lenses. Without a doubt the attackers would be as much a part of the landscape as the shapes and shadows that harbored them.

Maintaining vigilant surveillance, Leviticus panned the camera to all points of the compass, feeling confident the Knights were alone as Kimball and Nehemiah became one with the shadows as they headed for the trees.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Shari ascended the stairway of the mansion, she felt a sudden chill crawl along her backside like a centipede inching its way up her spine, the sudden coldness causing the fine hairs on the back of her neck to rise.

When she opened the door it did not whine or squeal on its hinges like a B-horror movie. In fact, it opened with the ease of a well-oiled machine. When she stood there looking up at the second-tier landing, she saw Murdock standing there looking down on her. He was a mere shape against the backlit of the bedroom light.

"I saw you drive up," he said. "You were quicker than I thought."

She took a step towards the stairway. "Did you find anything else?"

He shook his head. "Fraid not. It looks like the globe may be it. I just hope it means something to you."

She started to take the steps. "Let's hope so."

\* \* \* \* \*

Omega Team watched silently from the shadows as they watched Shari park her vehicle and enter the mansion. With one eye on her, they kept a second eye on the van that was parked approximately 300 feet away from the governor's gates.

"Candidate One," whispered Viper. "Do you have a lock?"

"That's affirmative. Target Red is in the castle," confirmed Mamba. "It's a go. Converge with senses open in the front and rear. She's not alone."

“Copy that,” said Cobra.

Omega Team moved with the furtiveness of serpents, scooting and crawling along the ground on their bellies in disciplined and patient fashion. They took to the dark shadows, often stopping and listening for anything alien or hostile. Once the terrain was judged clear, they moved on, constantly tightening the perimeter.

What had been a recon line providing a wide view of the mansion was now closing to a point as the members of Omega Team converged on the residence. The members drew close to one another as they moved in from three directions, their weapons drawn, then stopping and sweeping the area, and then advancing once more in total silence.

Once they were within thirty meters from the entry point, Omega Team hunkered down with the collective thought of a single mind—keep low and appraise the situation. Don’t move until the command is given. And look for shadows, because if the shadow isn’t one of your own, then it’ll probably kill you.

\* \* \* \* \*

“We have Tangos,” said Leviticus.

“Where?” Kimball asked through his lip mike.

“Three Tangos approximately thirty meters apart converging to the entry point. Each Tango proximity is to the north, northeast and northwest sector.”

“Micah’s already in position. Isaiah, move in from the southwest sector and back him up. Nehemiah and I will come in from behind and flank them.”

“Copy that,” said Isaiah, already on the move to provide a skirmish line.

“If they’re thirty meters apart, then it’ll be man to man. Be careful that one Tango isn’t the bait while another lies in wait. Is that the case, Leviticus?”

“That’s negative, sir. Each man stands alone, obviously appraising the situation.”

“That means they’re expecting us, or at least somebody. We won’t disappoint.”

Kimball and Nehemiah picked up the pace, knives drawn, bodies folded at the waist to maintain a low profile. With the aid of night vision goggles, they moved quickly through the darkness.

“Status,” whispered Kimball on the trot.

“They’re maintaining position. The defense forces are in position and waiting for the cavalry.”

“Copy that. Do you see us in relationship to the Tangos?”

“Affirmative. You’re approximately fifty meters southwest of the targets.”

“Copy.”

Kimball and Nehemiah made an abrupt northeast turn and headed in the direction of Omega Team to out flank them. When they were within thirty meters, Kimball broke toward the middle target. Nehemiah stayed the course and crept toward the commando at the northwest position.

Omega Team waited.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Candidate One and Two,” whispered Omega Team’s Mamba into his lip mike. “You have two hostiles moving in from the southeast. Each of you has been targeted and is drawing a one-on-one situation.”

“Copy that,” said Viper. “What’s their twenty?”

“Approximately twenty meters behind you and moving closer.”

“Copy that... I don’t have a visual yet.”

“They’re moving up on ten meters.”

“Roger that,” confirmed Viper.

“I’m closing the gap.” Mamba left his position and padded silently to intercept Kimball.

In the north sector, Nehemiah was advancing on Viper. The Omega Team commando was almost drooling with anticipation as he quietly attached a noise suppressor to his carbine.

Like drawing a fly to honey, he thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

“We have movement,” said Leviticus. “Tango Three is moving toward the center position. Be careful, Kimball. You might have been made.”

“Copy that.” Kimball hunkered down behind a gnarled hedge and withdrew a second knife.

\* \* \* \* \*

“One hostile has stayed,” Mamba said into his mike. “I’m moving into position. The second hostile is still on the move.”

“I see him,” whispered Viper. “It’ll be like shooting fish in a barrel.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kimball hunkered low. Something wasn’t right. And then he gazed toward the dark form of Nehemiah who was almost on top of his target, his knife drawn.

And then it occurred to him that Leviticus was right.

They’d been made.

\* \* \* \* \*

Viper moved in a fluid motion with the barrel of the carbine coming around and targeting Nehemiah. In rapid succession, muted bursts of gunfire lit up the night like a strobe light as bullets stitched across the chest and abdomen of Nehemiah’s Kevlar, pocking and pitting the material as the bullets’ impact drove Nehemiah back, but not to the ground until Viper found the objective of Nehemiah’s legs. Once Nehemiah went down he was severely crippled as he lay there bleeding, the knife no longer within his grasp, his agony sweeping. In a motion that was fleeting and graceful, Viper withdrew his blade and moved in for the kill.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kimball saw starbursts of light from Nehemiah’s position and knew a firefight was on. From his position he could see Nehemiah being driven back, then to the ground. And in a scene that seemed somewhat disjointed with the slowness of a bad dream, Kimball could do nothing as he watched the commando withdraw his knife, pounce upon Nehemiah without mercy, and drive the blade across his throat.

Kimball was beyond rage.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mamba and Cobra met up with Kimball no more than ten meters away, each knowing their target was cognizant of their presence, and they to his. Once Viper wiped the bloodied blade against Nehemiah's Kevlar, he began to converge on Kimball's point.

But Kimball was more than ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Move! Move! Move!" Leviticus cried into his lip mike. With Isaiah and Micah moving into position to flank Omega Team from behind, Leviticus grabbed his HK XM8 that he had already broken down to the carbine style and exited the van to take position alongside the body of Nehemiah.

\* \* \* \* \*

Viper was coming in from the right, and Cobra and Mamba were directly in front of him. With the point of his commando knife held between the tips of his thumb and forefinger, Kimball took aim, and with precision that had been honed by years of practice, let the weapon fly until it buried itself deep within Mamba's throat. With an unnatural gurgle, Mamba drew his hand to his neck and fell to the ground like a rabbit.

Cobra never saw the flight of the knife or heard the punch of the blade into Mamba's esophagus, but realized that the man was dead when he reached down and felt the slick hilt of the knife sticking out from the base of Mamba's throat.

By the time he looked up, an immense shadow of a man stood over him. It was dark and foreboding, something that exuded dread like a slap. Then in an act too fast for Cobra to register, Kimball rendered the commando impotent with a single blow that sent him into eternal darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Viper crept toward the mansion with all the prudence of a skilled assassin, fully aware that a combatant was to his fore and two others to his right. Immediately his instinct took over when he saw Mamba and Cobra lying within the brambles, the limbs of their bodies lying askew as if boneless, and then he dropped to a single knee, carbine raised, and surveyed the ground ahead of him. The area was eerily quiet, all shadows locked in place, the hostiles nowhere in sight. With caution he moved toward the mansion sighting nothing, his carbine sweeping the area as if on a swivel, all the time considering the hostiles to be as silent as the night since they had vanished like eddies of mist in a strong wind. But he knew they were watching, waiting, targeting; perhaps drawing a bead from no more than arm's length away.

Suddenly Viper felt the sharp point of a knife stabbing beneath the Kevlar and into his kidneys, followed by an intense burning sensation that swept across his lower back as the blade twisted and diced his entrails. With a feeble bark more out of surprise than in pain, he turned to view his killer, his carbine dropping to the ground. He looked into the man's face but saw only shadows. When his eyes dropped to the starch whiteness of Kimball's Roman collar, he thought God had forgiven him for his transgressions. Then with a gradual slowness like ice gliding along a hot surface, he slid downward along Kimball's body and to the ground with his eyes burning their last embers of life.



Now with the Force Elite eradicated and no one to question, Kimball was beside himself. He allowed his emotions to carry him to the point beyond reasoning, where killing was the panacea to quash his anger rather than to commit to the mission to capture the insurgents and mine them for information.

In his dismay, as he wiped a hand vaguely over his face, he understood a single fact. It seemed all but certain the pope was going to die.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shari managed the final step and stood before Murdock, who still leaned forward with his hands against the banister overlooking the foyer below.

“Where’s the globe?”

Without looking at her he pointed his thumb in the direction of the governor’s room. “It’s on the dresser,” he said. “After I realized what it was I called you immediately. I haven’t touched it since, afraid that I might compromise the evidence.”

She headed for the governor’s bedroom. “It’ll be all right.”

He nodded. “I know it will.”

When Shari stood in the room’s center and looked upon the dresser, she could have sworn that her heart misfired.

There was no snow globe.

Punch Murdock had lied.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kimball stood in the shadows feeling regret like no other. Letting his emotions go the way he did only made him consider that he hadn’t changed at all, but became a throwback and killed with the cold fortitude of a machine, making him no different than the men who lay dead at his feet.

“Nehemiah’s gone.” Leviticus’ confirmation was flat and spiritless, the voice of grieving.

“And there’s no one left of the Tangos,” said Kimball. “I bear all responsibility for my actions.”

“It’s not your fault, Kim—”

“It is my fault!” he interceded angrily. And then more calmly as if he caught himself and tried to make amendments of change, said, “I was wrong. I gave way to emotion even though I knew we needed these people alive. And *I’m* the one who always teaches against losing control. Everything I base my experiences on is *all* about control and now we have nothing.” He stepped away and bowed his head in self-admonishment. *Why*, he asked, *can’t I do anything right?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Punch Murdock stood in the doorway with the point of his weapon directed at Shari’s center of body mass. “I can’t really say that I’m sorry it had to be like this,” he told her. He then stepped into the room, his eyes on the pistol in her shoulder holster. “You scared a lot of people, Ms. Cohen. But now it’s all coming to an end.”

She cocked her head in disbelief. “I don’t get it. Why are you doing this?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

And then it came to her in a sudden rush. “You’re Yahweh, aren’t you? And you’re trying to start a war by using the pope as a catalyst.”

Murdock's lips curved into a wry grin, and in her honor his fingers tipped the brim of his fedora. "I'm impressed," he said "You are perceptive. I am the catalyst. But I'm not Yahweh."

She looked past him, a miniscule glance, but Murdock picked up on it and shook his head.

"Kimball Hayden?" he asked. "Is that who you're looking for? Well, I'm afraid he has his hands quite full at the moment."

Shari was surprised by his insight.

"Oh, yeah," Murdock said, moving closer. "I know all about Kimball Hayden. Why he's here is beyond me, though—a mystery actually. But I don't think his presence is going to matter much since he's out there and you're in here." He managed the weapon so its aim was directly in line with the cleft of her breasts and pulled the trigger in rapid succession. The bullets hit her with such fierce momentum that she was lifted off her feet, over the bed, and sent to the floor on the other side. It was a perfect strike. Then, tipping the brim of his fedora one last time, Murdock gave a cocky smile and said, "Good night, Gracie."

\* \* \* \* \*

Three loud reports came from within the mansion, the gunshots spaced in rapid succession. And all Kimball could think about was Shari's welfare. If something happened to her, he knew he would never forgive himself for allowing her to go inside the house alone. But in his heart, he knew it was over.

## Chapter 48

***Washington, D.C.***

***September 28, Just After Midnight***

With the odor of cordite rich in the air, Shari rolled on her side and undid the strap securing her Glock in the pancake holster.

She pulled the weapon and pointed it in the direction of Murdock's approaching footfalls that seemed to fall with the slow and measured cadence of a man who thought he had all the time in the world. When he rounded the corner of the bed his mouth gaped in surprise, his hooded eyes informing her that he had made the critical mistake of thinking he had completed the job, thinking he had killed her on the first volley of gunfire.

In recompense he tried to raise his weapon to finish the job, a headshot this time, but Shari squeezed off round after round. Bullets flew until her clip was empty, the hammer striking an empty chamber in a series of dry clicks until she realized she had exhausted her ammo.

As she laid there, the air thick with roiling blue smoke, she could hear the vague sound of something shuffling along the floor, like a serpent slithering. After she ran her fingers across the three impact points along her body armor, she struggled to her feet and managed a wavering stance over a writhing Murdock, his kneecap ruined.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kimball spun toward the brownstone. More shots. Ironically the reports rekindled his hope as he raced up the stairway and into the foyer, these last shots no doubt a response to the first barrage. He just hoped it was a defensive reaction from Shari.

He entered the den following the odor of cordite and ran along the hall and into the bedroom. Sitting on the edge of the bed, massaging the Kevlar vest with her hand, Shari offered Kimball a strained smile. It was the most beautiful smile he had ever seen.

Murdock, screaming in agony, broke the spell between them. His long wailing cry pierced the brownstone and the night.

### ***Boston, Massachusetts***

Team Leader sat with his back against the cold brick wall, his mind in deep thought when his satellite phone vibrated in his pocket. After switching ON, he placed the cell to his ear. "Yes?"

"They're gone," said Yahweh, his voice deeply riddled with agitation. "Omega Team is gone and Judas is in the custody of the FBI. This whole thing is out of control! Abort the cause. It's done!"

"I don't think so. You knew there was the possibility of the stove in the kitchen getting too hot. Now you're going to have to deal with it."

"I don't think you understood what I just said. I said the cause is aborted!"

"And you listen to me. I don't care what your position is in this country. You were well aware of the risks and consequences before you agreed to go along with the movement."

"That's because you assured me every contingency was thought out to the point where any and all matters could be curbed or adjusted to fit *our* needs."

"And they will be. Your panic is premature, I assure you."

"My panic—you listen to me, Obadiah, Omega Team is gone and Judas is a wealth of information to draw from, if he chooses to talk."

"Then the answer is simple," he said. "Remove Judas from the equation. He's been nothing but a boil anyway."

"To you everything has an answer. Well there's no answer to this!"

"Oh, but there is," he said. "You have George Pappandopolous and Mr. Paxton waiting in the shadows as field backups. I suggest you utilize them since they have the clearance to approach Judas without suspicion."

Yahweh was silent.

"You have no other choice," said Team Leader. "The cause will go on with or without you. It's up to you to mop up the mess, so I suggest you keep your wits and command yourself in the manner in which your position requires."

"My position requires the cause to succeed. But now that it's been compromised, it's time to abort and cover our tracks."

"Aborting the mission is not an option," he insisted. "You fail to understand that I'm in a win-win situation. If they intend a search and destroy mission of this post, then the world will know that factions *within* the United States government was

behind the taking of the pope, which the White House will want to keep secret. And since they'll want to keep this matter undisclosed to the worldwide public, then we'll continue with the cause. When I said there'll be no discussions, no debates and no negotiations, then there will be no discussions, no debates and no negotiations. We will follow this to the end."

As displeased as Yahweh was, he couldn't find the courage of rebuttal.

"Remember, Pappandopolous and Paxton are our last line of defense. Make sure they don't fail." Team Leader hung up the cell phone, looked at it briefly, then tossed it into the darkness. It was obvious to Team Leader that Yahweh was no longer a main player in the picture, his mettle dwindling like a sandcastle in the wind. Nevertheless, the cause would remain stalwart without his support.

Within a minute the phone was ringing, its faceplate lighting up.

Casually Team Leader stood and walked to the phone with his hands clasped behind the small of his back. He tilted his head to one side, as if in a manner to study, and then with the heel of his boot crushed the phone into shards of broken circuitry.

*As I said: There will be no discussions, no debates and no negotiations. Your pope is as good as dead.*

Once the phone was completely disintegrated, Team Leader walked away feeling assured that the United States government wouldn't try to compromise the cause for fear of media discovery. In truth, he knew the Americans would allow the cause to run its course and set the world metaphorically on fire by fueled passion rather than take the blame for the pope's kidnapping. He truly was in a win-win situation.

Team Leader turned and walked into deeper, darker shadows, his shape blending with the all-consuming pitch as his footfalls echoed in cadence until they dissipated into steady silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once Kimball had established that Shari was all right, he began the task of doing what the Vatican Knights do best. Before the arrival of law enforcement, Kimball and the rest of the Knights policed the area, removing any evidence of the skirmish by placing the bodies in the back of the van. The Force Elite, along with Nehemiah, had simply vanished. Within moments, the shadows held nothing more than the obvious nightshades.

The Vatican Knights and their targets disappeared as quickly as they had emerged.

## **Chapter 49**

***Washington, D.C., Southeast Washington Hospital  
September 28, Early Morning***

Murdock lay in a hospital bed. The lower portion of his leg had been removed just above the knee with the stump bandaged and elevated. Although under the

haze of pain killers, Murdock was barely cognizant. "You have to protect me," he said lazily. "You know they'll be coming for me."

Shari went to the bedside and stood with her arms folded, her body English that of little remorse for the man who lay before her. In fact, she tried to kill him; it's just that she was never much of a sharpshooter.

"Who?" she asked. "Who's coming for you?"

His eyes wandered until they settled on her. "Oh... it's you."

"That's right. It's me. Who's coming for you?"

FBI Director Larry Johnston moved in behind her.

"Them," Murdock said, "whoever is left of Omega Team—the Force Elite. Whoever is left under the command of Yahweh."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Johnston.

"The cause," he said above a whisper. In his condition the effort was equal to yelling.

"You're talking about the pope's kidnapping?"

His eyes rotated back to her. "I'll give you whatever you want," he told her. "But I want a deal."

"No deal," said Johnston.

Murdock rolled his head on the pillow and stared at the ceiling.

"Were you there that night the Secret Service detail was murdered at the Governor's Mansion?" Johnston asked.

Murdock remained silent.

"What kind of deal are you looking for?" asked Shari.

Murdock fashioned a lazy smile. "That's my girl," he said. "I want clemency."

"Impossible." Johnston took the request as an insult.

"It's your call, bonehead. But keep in mind that the pope's life is hanging in the balance and you're running out of time."

Johnston, humbled, turned a deep shade of red. "You know we have to keep the Oversight Committee out of this."

"I know that. All I'm asking is that I don't end up in potter's field once I give you what you need to know. In other words, don't make me suddenly disappear."

"And why should I give you the benefit of the doubt?"

"Because I'm a coward at heart," he said. "That's why."

Johnston turned to Shari. Although the communication between them was silent, it was also as vociferous as if the exchange of ideas couldn't have been louder. He turned back to Murdock. "Life in a military installation under solitary conditions," he offered.

The corner of his lip twisted into a smile. "A courtyard," he said. "I want a courtyard."

Johnston knew the term didn't refer to an actual courtyard, but a barred window offering a view of the grounds. He rolled his eyes and fought for calm. "Granted."

"I have your word?"

"You have our word," said Shari.

"Shouldn't we notarize this or something?"

"Don't get cute, Murdock. You got what you want."

Murdock chortled in lethargic glee before falling into a coughing jag, and then he began in earnest to talk about the cause. He explained his role, his taking the moniker of Judas, and the Soldiers of Islam and their executions. He explained his responsibility at the Governor's Mansion, of how he had drawn his detail into complacency and aided in their deaths by allowing Omega Team to breach security. At times he was graphic, other times evasive, but a picture was drawn and light cast upon the kidnapping of the pope. Situations and events were beginning to fall into order, and all led to principals on Capitol Hill, especially Yahweh.

"Is the president involved in this?" Shari asked. "Is he Yahweh?"

A mirthful grin surfaced. "Perhaps," he said. "But that would be giving up the prize, now wouldn't it?"

"You made a deal."

"And so did you."

"What more do you want?" asked Johnston.

"I'll give you two names in good faith—two names who are the last line of defense for the cause who will be pressed into duty to take me out. Yahweh will no doubt send them forward to kill me to keep his identity safe." Murdock had to labor to roll his head so he could look directly at Shari and Johnston. "You know what has to be done since you know that the courts will play no role in this... it's always been the political answer to everything."

"You're asking us to take out two people?" asked Shari.

"Are you surprised?"

Johnston said nothing.

"You know what has to be done to keep the truth buried," added Murdock.

"We *don't* do that," Johnston said. "Get your head straight." But Johnston knew Murdock was correct in suggesting that those with damaging secrets are doomed to a short life. Shari, on the other hand, hadn't worked long enough for the FBI to know of the possible existence of black op groups working within government agencies who conducted such tasks. The Force Elite was one such group. Were there more?

"Save my life," he said, "and I'll give up Yahweh. He's the only one who can give you the location of the pope, since he's the only one who actually knows where the pope is. The ball is now in your court."

Johnston placed a hand softly on Shari's shoulder and ushered her toward the door. "Give me a moment alone with him," he told her. "Let me see if I can reason with him about what we want and assure him of his safety. I'll have him moved to an installation immediately."

"Don't push him into a shell," she demanded.

"I won't. Trust me." Once she was in the hallway, he closed the door.

"What's the matter?" Murdock asked in snide accusation. "You don't want her to know the truth?"

"No, I don't. She's a good officer with a good heart, which is more than I can say for you."

"Bravo. So what is it you want to say to me that you couldn't say in front of Girl Wonder there?"

"You know what I want."

“You want names.”

“Exactly. And you know why?”

“To keep the deep, dark secrets of the good ol’ US-of-A out of the hands of those who couldn’t bear to hear them,” he said.

“The names.”

Punch Murdock looked Johnston in the eyes and saw nothing but conviction. He gave him two names that, judging by his grimace, seemed to wound Johnston. “That’s right. Pappandopolous and Paxton are the eyes and ears within the agency who report any red flags to Yahweh or Obadiah.”

Johnston’s features hardened. “This better pan out.”

Murdock’s head rolled lazily back so he was staring at the ceiling again. “It will,” he said. “It most certainly will.” And then he closed his eyes.

“I got one last question.”

Murdock’s eyes labored to open. His lids fluttered briefly then stabilized. “Go ahead.”

“Those men on the president’s detail—you knew them, and you knew them well, so how could you set them up?”

A dreamy smile washed over Murdock’s face. “For two reasons,” he said. “One was for the money. It’s always been about the money.” He seemed to drift. “I picked out a small island off the coast of Belize. A beautiful place you can only dream about. Sandy beaches, a beautiful view of the sunset.” His gentle repose turned to forced calm, the muscles in the back of his jaw suddenly working. “And now it’s gone,” he said. “All of it. My dreams, my life... everything.”

“How much money are we talking about?”

“You said one question.”

“I was mistaken. How much money?”

Murdock ran a dry tongue over even drier lips. “Ten million,” he managed. “That was to be wired to my account in Belize.”

Johnston had to wonder. “Where was this money coming from?”

“From the oil companies,” he said. “It was to be an upfront fee for services provided.”

“And your purpose was to infiltrate the Governor’s mansion and set the stage while the Force Elite went through the back door that you left unlocked for them, theoretically speaking?”

“You’re not as dumb as you look. But you’re ugly.”

“So what’s the second reason?”

Murdock shook his head. “It’s the rule of thumb for this city,” he said. “You know that.”

“Actually, I don’t. So suppose you enlighten me.”

Murdock sighed as if being burdened. “We do illegal things,” he started, “because we don’t think we’ll ever get caught. Ask any politician. They’ll tell you the same thing.” He raised his hand to reveal the handcuff that bound him to the bed rail. “And is this necessary? Do you really expect a one-legged man doped to the gills to get up and walk out of here?”

“You know the procedure.”

The standoff was long and silent, each man trying to read the thoughts of the other, their poker faces unreadable.

“You gave me your word,” said Murdock. “Life with a courtyard view.”

“And I’ll keep it, providing that what you gave me pans out. But I want Yahweh.”

Murdock’s features softened, then fell into a dismal appearance. His eyes and mouth took on the appearance of the Greek Mask of Tragedy. “And you’ll get him.”

Johnston remained impassive. “Just so you know,” he told him. “This agreement continues only as long as the pope is alive. If he dies, then there’s no point in keeping the bargain. If the bargain goes away, so does the man who wields the secret—unless you want to tell me now who Yahweh is.”

Murdock nodded. “I’m trying to prove my loyalty to you by providing you with two names in good faith.”

“You’re doing it to save your pathetic life.”

Murdock had to agree. “Yeah, well—”

“Give me Yahweh.”

“I can’t. It’s my only leverage.”

*For now*, thought Johnston. There was no way Murdock was going to live once all information was gleaned. After that, the man was as good as dead regardless of whatever good faith deal he thought he had arranged. Murdock was simply buying time. For the most part, death was the panacea for all problems, the unwritten rule for those who have no chance of redemption in the eyes of the government. Murdock was a doomed man, and both men knew it.

“Have it your way, Murdock. If the pope dies—”

“Yeah-yeah, I know, so does the man who wields the secret. You already told me.”

Johnston exited the room and met Shari waiting in the hallway.

“I know why you made me leave,” she said.

“Really?”

“There’s truth in what he said, isn’t there?”

“About what?”

“About his concern of being taken out because he knows about the involvement of *our* government in this situation, and perhaps *that* information getting out to the world community.”

Johnston sighed. “Shari, the man has a viable fear because of the Force Elite. He sees this one organization and now all of a sudden the government is loaded with them. Don’t start looking in shadows for something that’s not there.”

“I looked in one shadow and found the Force Elite.”

“Yes, you did. And you did a fine job on this, believe me. You really made this agency shine. But don’t take the yammering of one insurgent and start believing that there are assassins hiding around every corner.”

“Then why did you make me leave?”

“I told you, so I could reason with him and assure him of his safety.”

“And you couldn’t do that while I was standing there?”

“Shari, you shot the man’s leg off! You think I can make a promise like that with you standing two feet away from him?”

Shari wasn’t convinced, but decided to drop it nonetheless. Deep inside she knew the truth—Murdock was as good as dead. All of a sudden she wasn’t so sure she wanted to be part of a government entity. Johnston picked up on this.



“Look,” he said, “it’s a big government in a big land with big responsibilities, okay? It’s not perfect and sometimes things have to be adjusted right, wrong or indifferent, and sometimes against moral idealizations. It may not be ideal; Shari, but you, I or any citizen in this country wouldn’t give it up knowing this is probably the best government in the world. And yes, the Force Elite is apparently active. And we’ll get to the bottom of that, but you have to understand that things like this will happen, and when they do, we’ll correct it.”

“And by correcting it, you mean by erasing somebody?”

“Of course. You know that something like the Force Elite can’t get out. But if you’re talking about Murdock, yes. What he knows could prove costly to this government and you know it. So again, yes. His erasure will come in the form of a lifetime sentence in solitary confinement in a federal pen until the day he dies,” he lied, and started to walk down the hallway with Shari in tow.

“Sir?”

He turned to her. “What?”

“Are you going to have Murdock killed?”

Johnston’s features didn’t flinch. “Absolutely not.”

*He’s no different than those involved on either side*, she considered. As far as she was concerned, they all shared the same core.

Without saying anything more, Shari exited through the door at the opposite end of the hallway.

## Chapter 50

### ***Washington, D.C. Washington Archdiocese September 28, Early Morning***

Below the Vault within the archdiocese where the temperature is naturally cool, Kimball laid the body of Nehemiah onto a rectangular marbled block, a slab every bit as cold and immovable as the body that lay upon it. Kimball placed one hand on Nehemiah’s heart and the other over Nehemiah’s forehead. Closing his eyes and bowing his head, Kimball moved his lips wordlessly as he recited prayer after prayer from words of his own choosing. Twice, when his cell phone rang, he continued with prayer, refusing to acknowledge the call, even though he knew it was Shari.

Nehemiah’s body lay stiff. The fabric on his legs glistened with blood beneath the pool of feeble lighting. His throat was horribly slashed and his eyes pale.

Behind Kimball on stainless steel gurneys lay the bodies of the Force Elite, their tactical masks removed, their faces also carrying identical expressionless stares. Kimball recognized none of them.

Each would be given a proper burial provided by Cardinal Medeiros under covert conditions. Nehemiah, on the other hand, would be flown back to the Vatican and given a stately sacrament by the Society of Seven, then be interred within the catacombs beneath the City.

When the phone rang a third time he answered. “Yes?”

“Kimball, I’ve been trying to call you,” said Shari.

“I’m in the prep chamber with Nehemiah,” he told her. Silence followed.

“I’m sorry,” she finally said. “It can’t be easy.”

“It never is. So what did you find out?” Kimball moved away from Nehemiah and closer to the gurneys, hardly acknowledging the bodies.

“Murdock gave us two names involved with the cause. This will hopefully lead us to the top officials involved.”

“Did he tell you where the pope was?”

“No. He says the only one who truly knows the location is a man going by the name of Yahweh. Apparently he’s the one spearheading the cause.”

“Did he tell you who this Yahweh is?”

“No. Murdock won’t give us any more information unless he has a guarantee by the government that his life won’t be placed in jeopardy.”

“Does he have a guarantee?”

“It was given to him by my director, and I’m sure the attorney general will—”

“He’s a dead man,” Kimball interjected. “He knows it and he’s just playing for time.”

Shari knew he was right. Murdock was a desperate man playing whatever hand he had to prolong the inevitable. If he had given up the identity of Yahweh, then he would have conveniently disappeared. “We’ll find him,” she told Kimball. “We’ll find Yahweh.”

“Shari, we’re running out of time. Whoever this guy is, then we better find him fast. And if Yahweh also happens to be Obadiah, then forget about it. We’ll never find him.”

The thought never occurred to Shari that Yahweh and Obadiah could be one and the same. Obadiah didn’t have the credentials to motivate or recruit the backing of members from Capitol Hill. It had to be somebody with a strong and influential presence, somebody of top ranking. “I don’t think so,” she said, and told him why.

“Well, I hope you’re right. But if we’re going to find the pope in time, we’ll need to know who Yahweh is as soon as possible.”

“Trust me, Kimball. The director’s working on it.”

“So long as he doesn’t drag his feet.”

Shari smiled. “Knowing Larry the way I do... he’s not.”

\* \* \* \* \*

George Pappandopolous was perfecting the length of his tie tying when his phone rang. “Yeah?”

“Have you heard?”

Pappandopolous immediately recognized Yahweh’s voice. His tone took on a more respectful manner. “Heard what?”

“Omega Team has been eliminated and Judas is in the hands of hostiles, alive.”

Pappandopolous remained silent; he knew what would come next.

“You and Paxton are the last line of defense,” said Yahweh. “Either you, or Paxton, or both, I don’t care which, take him out before he has the opportunity to flip on us. Both of you have clearance, so clean up the mess.”

“Where is he?”

Yahweh gave him the information in a rattled, fast-paced tempo. Pappandopolous thought he seemed extremely nervous since his primary strength was maintaining grace under pressure.

Pappandopolous had barely pulled the phone away from his ear when he heard multiple telltale clicks. Suddenly his face went as white as alabaster. His line was tapped.

He dropped the phone onto the bed, went into the closet, grabbed a carry-on bag, dove deeper, and came up with a shoebox containing wads of bills and two pistols. As far as he was concerned the gig was up. With more than seventy thousand dollars he was sure he could hide out in the South American jungles for a long time. After all, taking on malaria was a far better option than taking a bullet to the brain.

He threw some clothes into the carry-on and hastened from the bedroom to the living area. Two men stood in the shadows, each a clone of the other—same height, same weight, same build. Both wore the same long coat and both held similar weapons with attached suppressors.

Pappandopolous immediately dropped the carry-on and instinctively held his hands out, as if this action would ward off what he knew was coming. The guns flashed in muted, rapid succession, lighting up the room long enough for Pappandopolous to note the almost waxy appearance of his executioners' faces.

He felt himself falling, and his world slowed to a surreal level of movement much like being under water. With every passing moment the beat of his heart decelerated, the drumming in his ears slowing to the point where the next beat might be the last. And in his throes he was surprised that his life hadn't passed before his eyes, nor was he granted the opportunity to look into the Great Light. In fact, he was disappointed, wanting to believe there was so much more than approaching confusion and unbearable coldness.

Casually, one of the assassins walked to Pappandopolous, took position over him, and aimed his weapon for a clear headshot. Without hesitation he pulled the trigger.

\* \* \* \* \*

Paxton took the stairway from his D.C. apartment to the parking lot, his morning coffee in hand, unlocked the door, and slid into the driver's seat. After he lowered his cup into the beverage receptacle, he checked his appearance in the mirror and raked a hand through his hair. After blowing himself a kiss, he inserted the key into the ignition and turned the switch. When the engine caught, a wall of flame surged through the dashboard, followed immediately by an explosion. The car leapt upward nearly two stories before twisting over and crashing onto its roof.

Paxton never knew what hit him.

## **Chapter 51**

***Boston, Massachusetts***

“Now you know,” said Team Leader, walking into the pope’s chamber and standing over the body of Bishop Angelo. “Now you endure the pain of having a loved one deposited at your feet just like my people have endured over a lifetime.”

Pope Pius reached for Bishop Angelo’s body and tried to pull him close, but lacked the strength to do so.

“Look at me,” said Team Leader. “Look at me and tell me you don’t hate me for what I’ve done.”

The pope acted like he didn’t hear Team Leader at all. He simply caressed what was left of Angelo’s hair like a despondent father.

Team Leader reached out and grabbed the pope’s wrist, demanding his attention. “Tell me you understand,” he stated firmly. “Tell me that you now see the madness behind what I’m doing. Tell me you can no longer turn the other cheek now that I’ve brought this to you.” He released the pope’s wrist. “Tell me that you’re not a hypocrite and that hatred, true hatred, has consumed you... Tell me that *you* understand me!”

The pope shook his head. “What I understand is that your hatred runs so deep and is so corrupt, that no matter how well you think your vision may be, you’ll never see beyond your own contempt, which is the only part of you that is pure. And for that I *pity* you... I don’t *hate* you.”

Team Leader stood up. “Then you are a hypocrite,” he told him. “There’s no man on this earth who can honestly sit there and tell the murderer of a loved one that he doesn’t hate him, not even you.”

The pope went back to caressing Angelo’s hair and then the tears, the sobbing, came. Team Leader felt he had won a moral victory. He had, in essence, broken a man who was the showcase of moral fortitude and a pillar of strength.

“As a reminder of your own stubborn will to refuse to acknowledge what makes us human, I’ll let your bishop sit beside you and rot. Maybe with each passing moment you’ll grow to understand further what my people have gone through for years.”

After Team Leader left, the pope wept and prayed and asked for forgiveness. What the man in black had said was true. For the first time in Pope Pius’s life he felt the pressure of hatred and understood the need for retribution by a hand other than that of God. Even worse, he understood the man’s embitterment and saw the reasoning behind his lunacy.

*I won’t give in to your way of thinking, he pressed upon himself. I will not.* But Pope Pius knew he couldn’t bury the truth deep enough. And if he couldn’t hide the truth from himself, there was no way he could deceive God. The truth was he *did* hate the man for what he did to Bishop Angelo. And as much as he tried to find forgiveness in his heart, he could not.

The pope bowed his head and pleaded for His understanding. *Forgive me, Lord. Please, forgive me.*

The old man wept.

**Washington, D.C., Southeast Washington Hospital  
September 28, Morning**

Punch Murdock lay in a quasi-daze pumped up on morphine. Incessantly, like an army of ants crawling over his flesh, he often reached to scratch away the itch, but the itch was a phantom, the leg no longer there. Often he would depress the button, self-injecting morphine whenever he felt the beginnings of a throbbing ache budding from the stump of his leg. Then he would sleep, dreaming of images he forgot about the moment he awoke. On one occasion he awoke to find FBI Director Larry Johnston standing beside his bed, his face bearing the same unyielding features as before.

“Man, don’t you ever smile?”

Johnston tossed a photo onto Murdock’s chest. It was a picture of Pappandopolous after the hit. “What you said panned out,” he said.

“And Paxton?”

“Too messy to show.”

Murdock handed the photo back. “Now I suppose you want Yahweh?”

“That was the deal, but I’m not here to pay you a courtesy visit. I’m here to tell you that through the simplicity of technology, you gave us more than we expected from our deal.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that we tapped the lines to Pappandopolous’ and Paxton’s residence and we intercepted a call from Yahweh. A voice print proved who the caller was. We know who Yahweh is.”

Murdock’s mouth opened with mechanical slowness, his trump card gone.

“Just thought you’d like to know that,” said Johnston.

Suddenly Murdock understood the mockery behind Johnston’s tone, behind his visit. It was something akin to the Grim Reaper taunting him with a slight brush of his bony talons across his cheek before the final fall of the scythe. “Now wait a minute,” Murdock said. “You gave me your word! *You agreed to give me life with a courtyard!*”

Johnston turned and headed for the door.

“You gave me your word!” Murdock shouted, struggling against the cuff that held him to the rail. “*YOU... GAVE... ME... YOUR... WORD!*”

Although the door closed behind him, Murdock’s shouts could be heard all the way down the hall.

## Chapter 52

### ***The White House***

#### ***Noon***

Alan Thornton reached up and straightened Shari’s collar. They were standing in the presidential hallway leading to the Oval Office. With them stood Attorney General Dean Hamilton, FBI Director Larry Johnston, and a force of the president’s own security detail.

“You’ve done an outstanding job so far,” Thornton told her. “You really have. Whether or not we get the pope back safely, at least it couldn’t be said that Shari Cohen didn’t do her best.” He smiled at her.

“And thank you, Alan, for following through. I’m ashamed to say that I thought you were a part of it.”

After their last discussion, Thornton had waded through heavy political water to find the truth about the Force Elite, and whether the group had been dispatched by executive command without knowledge of select administrators. But he found nothing. Tension was so high on Capitol Hill most officials refused to say anything for fear the ‘accusing finger’ would tie them to the cause. Political careers were on the chopping block. But when the FBI produced the tape of Yahweh’s call to Pappandopolous, it was as good as a written admission from the perpetrator himself. Political futures would be eliminated later under certain conditions.

“This is your game,” Thornton told her. “And the right to do this belongs to you.” He handed her a manila envelope containing a digital recorder, transcripts and records. The evidence was literally in hand. “You ready to do his?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

“Good girl.”

Thornton took the initiative and knocked on the door leading into the Oval Office. Once inside he stood directly on the Presidential Seal with Shari and the entourage alongside. Vice President Bohlmer sat in a high back chair looking over documents and President Burroughs was looking out the window, his hands deep within his pockets.

“Mr. President,” said the attorney general.

The president gradually turned around, the movement a statement in itself as to what he was feeling at the moment. There was no surprise on his face, no features that betrayed his thoughts. When he finally stepped forward he stared directly at Shari. “Special Agent Cohen,” he said. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“Mr. President,” her tone lacked any note of sincerity. “You know why I’m here?”

“I’ve been informed.”

“Then you know we’re running out of time.”

“We’ve been running out of time since this began.” He made his way back to the window, his disposition more melancholy than angry. “Let’s get this over with.”

Shari opened the manila envelope and laid the contents on the president’s desk. “What I have here, sir,” she said, picking up the digital recorder, “is a conversation between two parties plotting the assassination of an official of this office. An official captured in the compromising position of putting this government in jeopardy, should the truth about the pope’s kidnapping be known to the world community.”

“Do what you have to do,” he said dourly.

She pressed the ON button of the recorder.

*Yeah.*

*Have you heard?*

*Heard what?*

*Omega Team has been eliminated and Judas is in the hands of hostiles, alive.*

*Silence.*

*You and Paxton are the last line of defense. Either you, or Paxton, or both, I don't care which, take him out before he has the opportunity to flip on us. Both of you have clearance, so clean up the mess.*

*Where is he?*

*He's in the Southeast Washington Hospital, room two-twenty-four. There'll be guards there, of course, but you have clearance. Just be subtle about it.*

*Is the whole Force Elite gone?*

*Except for those pulling duty in the north.*

The voice was clear and distinct, even to those listening from across the room.

Shari shut off the recorder. "We were also able to obtain warrants for telephone records. Ma Bell gave us a printout of the phone numbers, and the time the call was placed based on the legal tapping. The time corresponds exactly to the addresses of the parties involved." She pulled out another document. "And this, Mr. President," she said, holding up a sheet with spike-line etchings, "is a printout confirming the voice of the speaker based on tone patterns. In other words... we know who the lead conspirator is."

The president rounded the desk and reached for the printout. "Well, Ms. Cohen, it seems that you've covered all your bases after all. I must say that's impressive." He took the printout and examined it. The recognized name and the voice probability of over ninety-nine percent were printed at the page's bottom. He handed the printout back to her. "Is this indisputable?"

"In a court of law, I believe so, sir. Absolutely."

The president sat on the edge of his desk. "Go ahead," he told her, "finish this off."

Shari thanked him and stood with confidence before the vice president. "Mr. Vice President, I have one question and one question only. And the question is: Are you Yahweh?"

Vice President Bohlmer didn't answer. His eyes darted about, his mind searching for a practical response. But he could only remain silent.

"Mr. Vice President. I'll ask you again: Are... you... Yahweh?"

The vice president's shoulders fell in defeat.

"I take that as a yes," Shari said.

"Take it however you want," said Bohlmer. "I don't think it matters much anymore."

The president lifted himself off the edge of the desk. "Why, Jonas? Why place this entire administration under the strain of impropriety in the eyes of the world community? The United States is supposed to set an example of credibility and trust, not backdoor thuggery!"

The vice president turned to the president, the shame of getting caught evident on his face. "I'll tell you why I did it," he began. "I did it because your administration had grown weak. I did it because we need to take a step forward and renegotiate our standing as a lead nation rather than being held hostage by accords with countries tied to terrorist regimes. Whoever has the oil holds the scepter of rule. And we can shift that balance of power by changing the geopolitical landscape. Within ten years, Jim, this economy would flourish without the

dependency of the Middle East. And history would record the people of this administration as the chief principals who implemented change.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about reevaluating how we think about the accords that hold this nation hostage to foreign fuels. We need to change the current situation, Jim. We need to regain our foothold that’s been slipping in the world community for some time now.”

The president could only stare incredulously. “You mean to tell me you were willing to start a war and kill millions of people by using the pope as a catalyst?” He leaned back, his face flushing. “Did it ever occur to you that maybe, just maybe, fossil fuel may not be readily available after our separation from the Arab states? That fossil fuel may skyrocket in price before it has a chance to stabilize? And by *that* time economies may be ruined, including our own? Did you ever think about those contingencies?”

“We considered all of those scenarios,” he returned. “As far as we were concerned, the rewards outweighed the risks.”

President Burroughs gazed at him with eyes that seemed sorrowful rather than judgmental. “You had me second-guessing myself,” he told him. “You wanted me to believe that Special Agent Cohen was the wrong person for the job because of her faith. But you knew if I kept her on, and if given the time, she would have discovered the truth as to the governing force behind all this. Thank God I didn’t listen to you.”

“What I did—I did for the future of this country.”

The president closed his eyes in disgust. “I chose you, Jonas, because I thought you would be a good successor with a good head on your shoulders. Apparently I misjudged you.”

The president walked back to the window and stared outside for a while before speaking again. “Of course you understand we’ll have to keep the Oversight Committee out of this.”

Vice President Bohlmer closed his eyes. In so many words, the president had just given him the death sentence. The vice president nodded. “I’m not beyond insight, Mr. President. I realized the ax had fallen on my career when Ms. Cohen played that tape.”

“Before you leave, Jonas,” he said, turning and placing the flats of his palms on top of his desk. “Tell us where *he* is.”

The vice president turned away.

“Jonas, *where* is he?” the president repeated.

The vice president turned back, his eyes vacant and unreadable, the lack of expression behind them denoting that he was not about to crack.

In turn the president pressed him with a stare that was clear, if not determined.

Then finally, after a whittling away of perseverance, the vice president conceded. “In Boston,” he finally said, his tone weighted with defeat. “The pope’s in Boston.”

“Boston? Where in Boston?”

“Behind the Granary Burying Ground. There’s a depository there that has been abandoned and marked for demolition years ago, but never was. We knew that as soon as the news got out about the kidnapping, a dragnet would have been sent for hundreds of miles from the epicenter of D.C., which is why the operation was



moved north. We even went as far as to place the body of the governor here in D.C. as a red herring to keep the search limited to this area.”

Shari stepped forward. “The Granary Burying Ground—that’s part of the Freedom Trail.”

“It’s an old section of Boston managed by the historical society where Paul Revere and Samuel Adams are buried,” said the vice president. “Most of the buildings surrounding that particular site are either condemned or too far gone for revitalization, which means activity in that area is minimal. You’ll find him on the third floor,” he added.

“And how long before they kill the pope?”

The vice president hesitated, as if his conscious was vacillating on whether or not he wanted to continue. Then in the same defeatist tone, he relented. “They’re going to kill him today,” he said.

The president stood there looking nonplussed. “Today?”

The vice president nodded.

“Then we’ll negotiate a peaceful surrender. And you, Jonas, will be the negotiator.”

“That’s unlikely,” he said. “I already tried to abort the mission once Murdock was in custody. But the Boston faction refused to hear me out.”

“Then contact him again.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” said the vice president. “They’re in a win-win situation. If you try to compromise their position by trying to negotiate a peaceful solution, they know the media will be all over this like a pack of dogs on a three-legged cat, which the United States can’t afford. On the other hand, if the cause runs its course, then the accusing finger is pointed directly at the Arab world and the United States isn’t labeled as the culprit, since the truth is unbeknownst to the worldwide public. Our image is maintained.”

The president looked at Alan Thornton, then to Shari. “Is what he says true?”

“It all depends upon the Boston faction,” said Thornton. “It depends if their command leader is willing to hold this country hostage by calling upon the media. If that’s the case, then it would be devastating to this country.”

President Burroughs began to pace the room, his eyes cast to the carpeted floor, thinking. “Obviously this can’t get out,” he said. “Is there any way we can quash this without the media knowing? Anything we can do?”

“Unfortunately, Mr. President, we’re at the mercy of the Boston faction. Who knows what they have, or what equipment or contingencies they planned for.”

The president turned toward the vice president, who sat unmoving in his seat. “Jonas, tell me, tell us, what they have?”

“I can’t help you,” he said. “All I know is what I told you—what the Boston commander has already informed me of. He stated quote-unquote, that there will be no discussions, no debates and no negotiations. The cause will go on.”

The president slapped an open palm against his desk. “Dammit, Jonas!”

The vice president didn’t even flinch.

Once again the president addressed Thornton. “Alan, what’s your stance on trying to negotiate a peaceful solution to all this?”

Thornton’s face screwed into a semblance of wrinkles, seams of complete loss. “Perhaps, Mr. President, you should ask Special Agent Cohen.”

“Ms. Cohen?”

“I don’t know the commander of this Boston faction or his capabilities of what he can or cannot do. But I do know that he’s in a win-win situation as the vice president states. If he knows that we suspect his location and try to negotiate a deal, all this does is allow him time to strategize and defend his position.”

“But?”

Shari hesitated before speaking. “I believe, Mr. President, that a surgical strike is needed. We need to catch them off guard and take away their advantage.”

“I still think we need to try to negotiate a peaceful solution to this.”

“Mr. President, we don’t have time. They’re going to execute the pope today. So we need to act accordingly.”

The President turned back to the vice president. “Jonas, is there any way—any way at all, to negotiate this without anyone getting harmed?”

“As sure as the sun sets,” he said, “this man will follow through and kill the pope. If you interfere, then he will retaliate by bringing this country down... a win-win situation.”

The president stood straight. And everyone in the room could tell that the man was calculating. “Then we have no choice,” he finally said. “We strike.”

The president was then quick to direct orders. “Contact Boston’s FBI field office immediately,” he told Johnston. “I want them to set a perimeter around the district with trained law enforcement personnel and assault teams. I want our team from Quantico to conduct the mission. You do agree, director, the Quantico Team is the best we have to offer?”

Johnston nodded. The Quantico CIRG Team, the Critical Incident Response Group, trains for hours on end for such scenarios. “They can do it in their sleep. It’ll take an hour, maybe an hour and a half to get the team assembled, and perhaps another two for transport.”

“Too long,” piped Shari. “I have a CIRG Team already assembled and willing to go as soon as transportation is ready.”

Johnston looked at her quizzically, not sure what she was talking about. The CIRG Team is always posted at Quantico until called to duty.

She continued. “Mr. President, as far as I’m concerned, this team is the best in the world. If they can’t pull off this mission, nobody can.”

For a brief moment the president looked at her in an appraising manner, neither good nor bad. And Shari had to question him.

“What is it this time, Mr. President? I know it’s not because I’m Jewish, so is it because I’m a woman? You don’t think I have the capabilities of a man to put forward the effort of a combat-trained soldier?”

“Forgive me, Ms. Cohen. I’m simply old school. Perhaps my own prejudices have tainted my insight a bit.”

“I understand, Mr. President. But old school or not, what is your answer?”

“Do it,” he said. And then, “You’ve surprised me, Ms. Cohen. I might have been hard on you in the beginning, but you’ve made a believer of me. I have complete faith in your abilities.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Just bring the pope back to us.”

“I will.”

“How long do you think it will take for your CIRG Team to be ready?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

“We’ll have transport ready.” He turned to the vice president. “As for you,” he said, “you’re under house arrest until we can figure out what to do with you.” The president motioned to his detail to escort the vice president to his residence at the Naval Academy. “I’m sorry it has to be like this, Jonas. I really am. And it’s for mismanagement reasons like this that the Force Elite has to be disbanded... and it will be.”

The vice president remained seated while the president’s detail surrounded him. When he was ready he stood, straightened his tie, and tried to walk out of the office with dignity. It would be the last time he would ever see any of them again. And he wanted to be remembered as someone who went out stoically rather than cowardly.

As the vice president passed his former allies, many refused to acknowledge his existence.

## Chapter 53

“Kimball?” Shari asked over the phone.

“Yeah.”

“Yahweh confessed to the whereabouts of the pope.”

“Where?”

Even though he couldn’t see her, he could envision her gesticulating with hand motions on her end of the line as if he was standing in front of her. “He’s in an abandoned depository in Boston.”

“Boston!”

“They moved their operations to avoid the dragnet,” she said. “The president wanted a Quantico Team to move in and do the chore immediately, but it would take too long to assemble a team and get them ready for transport. So as of right now, Kimball, you’re it. You and the rest of the Vatican Knights. I need you pressed into duty and ready to go.”

“We’re ready now.”

“I know you are. I already informed the administration that I have a team who’s prepped. But as far as they know,” she told him, “they think it’s a Quantico squad. So you’ll need to lose the Roman collars to avoid questions.”

“Understood. Where’s the depart point?”

She told him. Within twenty minutes they had met at the point of departure, and in twenty-five minutes they were airborne and heading for Boston.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vice President Bohlmer sat in his study, his eyes vacant, but his mind toiled. Before him lay shelves of books he’d collected over his lifetime. There were law books dealing with torts, corporate and criminal law; biographies of every politician and statesman ever published; and books about political theories of this country and almost every other nation with a respectable government. In the

process of growing in a political entity as an official, he had learned from these books, studied them and even gleaned theories to make the political machine run more efficient. Ironically enough, he was now shelved like them.

A fire was burning in the fireplace, the wood snapping every so often and sending sparks up the flue. But the vice president found no comfort in such warmth.

His cause was dead, taken by the cancer of his own aggression, his politics forever gone.

In self admonishment the vice president released a regrettable sigh, not for what he did, but for getting caught. He had shamed himself before the eyes of his peers and was thankful his wife, having been dead six years, did not have to suffer the pang of being branded a political pariah.

After getting to his feet, the vice president walked to the foyer and checked on the Secret Service detail posted there by the president.

An agent stepped forward, his face as rigid as his posture, his professionalism forced. "Is there anything I can help you with... sir?"

*Sir? An hour ago it was Mr. Vice President.*

"No. I'm fine," he said. "Thank you." Brandishing a false smile, he closed the door to the study with a soft click and returned to his chair.

Beneath the nightstand by the lounge chair laid a .38 caliber revolver hidden within a drawer, its chambers loaded. Its chrome-plated barrel shimmered in hues of red and orange and yellow, the colors of the burning fire. He picked up the pistol and examined his reflection in the chrome, turning his head to the left, and then to the right, his image warped in a funhouse mirror sort of way. And then in a quick and fluid motion, as if without considering the consequences, he brought the gun to his temple and pulled the trigger.

### ***Boston, Massachusetts September 28, Late Morning***

The distance between Washington D.C. and Boston is exactly four hundred and forty-eight miles. The time it took for the Vatican Knights and Shari Cohen to arrive at Logan Airport took just over an hour. Since the confession of the vice president, the Response Team had been assembled and transported to their debark-point in less than ninety minutes.

During their flight they had gone over the schematics of the depository, committing every nuance of the floor plans to memory. They drew up plans for entry and engagement and theorized the location of the pope and the bishops of the Holy See. But no matter what, they knew the Force Elite had prepared for every conceivable contingency regarding a breach of hostile forces and counterattack. This would not be an easy assignment since the pope would most likely be heavily guarded.

That catapults the probability of a teammate dying great.

So as required by papal order before any mission, the Knights prepared themselves with prayer—except Kimball, who only found confidence in the

weapons he carried. And Shari knew that such a man as Kimball Hayden could never be weaned from the savagery of his lifestyle. It was simply a part of him.

As the aircraft sped toward Boston's Logan Airport, Shari felt a pang for a man who was willing to commit a single selfless act to save the life of the pope by putting his life at risk. No matter his past, no matter the brutal force of nature that propelled him to commit the atrocities he did, Shari hoped that Kimball Hayden would find the Light before he died.

She prayed he would find it soon.

## Chapter 54

### *Boston, Massachusetts*

Although posted at a distance, Boston's Metro Assault Units developed a perimeter around the depository disguised as city workers, by blocking off connecting streets and avenues with flashing sawhorses and orange utility cones. Troops in full riot gear were ready in unmarked vans within the periphery. And by redirecting the masses in such a subtle manner away from ground zero, the area had been cleared without so much as drawing a curious eye.

The city had set their ducks in a row.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Vatican Knights had dressed accordingly by removing the Roman collars to avoid questioning, but continued to wear the embroidered crest of the silver Pattée within the powder blue shield on their body armor. Their black titanium assault helmets with tinted faceplates acted as night vision viewers, a technical creation from the brilliant minds of the Vatican Division Armory where the safety of each knight was mandatory and never a choice. The faceplate acted as a window that provided night vision capabilities with a 180 degree peripheral view, which was unlike the NVG monocular that granted less than 45 degrees. Each of the Vatican Knights was armed with the HK XM8 special assault rifle, which were configured in carbine form for close combat. Kimball, however, opted for the grenade launcher.

Once the gear had been checked and double checked, once Kimball reexamined Shari's combat gear for fit and maneuverability, the Vatican Knights set forth with Kimball on the point and Shari in the rear.

They would start at the wrought-iron fence.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Master lock was new, as well as the chain that held together the gates leading to the rear of the depository.

Removing a canister from his cargo pocket, Kimball sprayed a corrosive acid on the links, the chain bubbling and boiling until the metal gave way. After removing the chain as if it was a delicate rope of garland, he opened the gate just wide enough to allow his team passage. Quietly, they maneuvered their way to the rear

of the compound where they found the military transport truck hidden under a bevy of heavy boughs.

Using hand motions to communicate, Kimball balled his fist and pulled down like a trucker blowing a horn, pointed to his eyes, then at the truck—a signal to Leviticus to scout the vehicle while the Vatican Knights held back.

Leviticus moved in, prudently, his head and weapon on a swivel. After he scouted the truck, he offered a closed-fisted gesture indicating *all clear*. The Vatican Knights moved quietly ahead.

Behind the depository was a dirt lot bearing weeds as tall as a man's waist, a good spot to hunker close to the three-story building without being seen. From their vantage point they could see the windows of the first level filled with brick and mortar. Also in view was a fire escape that hung tenuously from rusted bolts, its stability absent and too dangerous to mount. The windows on the second and third level were boarded over with sheets of plywood or planks, leaving the fire door on the first level a possible entryway. But the area surrounding the door was refurbished with new building blocks, meaning the area had been reinforced with steel rods before being re-bricked.

That left the roof.

Kimball withdrew into a wild tangle of bushes for cover and motioned his team close for conference.

“Isaiah and Micah, you got the rooftop. One enters from the south, the other from the north. Once done, descend and converge until you locate the pope. Then report back with his pinpointed position. Questions?” There were none. “Go.”

Isaiah and Micah moved swiftly across the drive and stood at the base of the building looking skyward toward the roof. Inside of Isaiah's backpack was a pneumatic launcher geared to fire pitons. And after Isaiah locked and loaded a piton into the tube with an attached line, he aimed and shot the weapon so the piton embedded itself firmly into the wall about a foot below the edge of the roof. He then tested the hold of the line by pulling himself up the cord a couple of feet and suspended himself, the piton unyielding in its grip. Confident in the piton's ability to hold, they climbed the cable until they reached the rooftop, then disappeared over the edge.

After giving the rooftop unit enough time to find a breach to enter the building, Kimball loaded his grenade launcher and took position with Leviticus standing alongside him with his HK XM8 directed at the target point. There would be no mistaking that their knock on the door was going to be noisy, since their intention was to cause enough of a distraction to drive the Force Elite to a single point of defense, while Isaiah and Micah converged in flank maneuver to hem them in. Since the site was fortified, there was no other option. The Force Elite had chosen well.

Kimball directed the grenade launcher to the left of the fire door where the brick was old and aged, the weakest point, rather than to take on the newly reinforced area.

“I'll go in first to neutralize any immediate threat,” Kimball said to Shari. “Then Leviticus will follow and sweep the premise. After the area has been secured, I need you to stay behind and maintain a secure position to ensure that we didn't miss anyone. Leviticus and I will move against any hostile attack from the upper

levels. By that time the rooftop units should be moving into position to flank the hostiles. Questions?”

“You want me to lag behind?”

He stared directly into her eyes. “You’re not trained for this, Shari, and you know it. Leave this to those who’ve been there and done that. I need you to take the rear and look for those we may have missed. Leviticus and I are going to draw the attention from the upper levels. And I’d like to do that without worrying that somebody is flanking us from behind.”

She cocked her head. Kimball was right; this type of tactical work was way above her.

“Good. Glad to see that everyone understands,” he said. Then, “Does everybody know their game plan?”

Shari and Leviticus nodded. Their expected actions were clear.

“Okay, people, this is what it’s all about.” Kimball aimed the launcher and pulled the trigger. To the left of the door the wall disseminated into carnage that sent shattered rock, brick and mortar in all directions, and then boiling plumes of smoke and dust exploded outward and upward, rendering visibility to zero.

After loading a second grenade, Kimball moved in and disappeared into the smoke.

\* \* \* \* \*

The explosion shook the whole building, galvanizing the Force Elite into combat mode. Each man grabbed his assault weapon and seated a bullet into its chamber as they took position along the third floor corridor. Diamondback manned the monitors, watching the dense smoke and dust on all screens. “We have a breach!” he hollered.

“How many?”

“Unknown!”

Kodiak, Boa and King Snake took position along the top of the stairwell and aimed their weapons into the mushroom cloud boiling up at them at a furious pace. In a hail of gunfire hundreds of rounds were fired into the cloud, the bullets ripping out chunks of brick from the walls of the stairwell and sent them scattering into the billowing smoke cloud that roiled up the stairs like a geyser. In the time it took them to reload their weapons in the aftermath of the first volley, a second explosion rocked the building.

Kimball Hayden was making a statement.

\* \* \* \* \*

Team Leader moved like the wind down the corridor, his Glock tightly within his grasp. When he reached the bank of monitors he shoved Diamondback aside in order to position himself in front of the viewing screens. Managing the joy stick, Team Leader directed the remote camera lens toward a position where dust and smoke were minimal, and noted a large man enter swiftly through a hole in the wall on the first-floor level. Watching the figure load another grenade into the launcher, Team Leader zoomed in on the man’s features.

Although the commando’s head gear included a tinted face shield, it did not cover the man’s face totally. Team Leader thought he saw the man’s lips curl into a sardonic grin before aiming the launcher at the camera, then pulling the trigger.

The second explosion was far more brutal than the first.

\* \* \* \* \*

After hearing the explosions, Metro's Assault Teams were immediately deployed as backup units. They dispersed from the cube vans and closed the perimeter until the depository was absolutely the epicenter of all activity.

With the noose drawing tighter, even a cockroach would have had difficulty breaking through the column unseen.

\* \* \* \* \*

After the first explosion, Micah and Isaiah entered the building from opposite ends through holes in the poorly maintained roof. On the south end Isaiah lowered himself onto a rickety header beam, the wood groaning under his weight as he dangled from the girder, then let go, his body landing with natural grace on the hardwood floor of a corridor leading to a stairwell.

Directing his HK XM8 in front of him, he scoped the area for hostiles and noted the south stairwell had collapsed to rubble all the way down to the first level.

Knees slightly bent and body bowed forward, Isaiah moved along the corridor viewing the scene through the crosshairs of his weapon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Micah found a passage through a hole in the roof barely big enough to pass through. After gaining a handhold on a rotting joist beam, he carefully took position within a tangle of rotted wood where he watched the Force Elite take position on top of the stairwell and fire off several rounds to deter any hostile advancement.

Micah noted Isaiah was nowhere in sight. And with no one to cover him he felt highly vulnerable.

Further down the hall, crouched and shackled against the wall, were four members of the Holy See.

The pope was nowhere in sight.

Snaking into position between rotted beams, Micah clicked on the laser sighting and focused the dot onto one of the commando's holding position at the stairwell. He could easily clear the area with three quick shots.

Taking careful aim, the red dot landing squarely on the back of Boa's head, Micah began to squeeze the trigger.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leviticus moved in with Shari in tow and scouted the entry area. Once he established that the area was secure, Shari instinctively swiped at the swirling dust as if to drive the cloud away. She had no success.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gunfire continued to erupt from the north end of the stairwell, the ammo taking pieces of concrete from the walls and stairs—a strong message to the advancement team that the stairwell was not a consideration for encroachment.

Kimball brought his hand to his lip mike and drew it closer to his lips. "Isaiah?"



*So far the corridor's clear, he returned. I haven't been able to pinpoint the packages. My guess is that they're probably at Micah's end.*

"Copy that... Micah?"

There was no reply. Micah was either occupied or dispatched.

"Isaiah, Micah's right on top of them!"

*I'm moving, Isaiah said.*

"Be careful!"

It wouldn't be long before Isaiah and Micah were in position to draw the attention of the Force Elite, considered Kimball.

\* \* \* \* \*

The red dot wavered ever so slightly on the back of Boa's head, a zone that promised a quick kill. Slowly, Micah pulled back on the trigger, the tension set lighter than most assault weapons, and slowed his breathing to steady his aim. After killing the first one, he would kill the other two while they were caught in the grip of their own surprise. The trigger slid farther back, the mechanism about to engage, the red dot as steady as a tattoo.

And then the kill shot.

Micah's face shield exploded into spider's web cracks as a single bullet penetrated the plastic guard, a single hole placed dead center. Micah's head reared back as if trying to understand the moment of his sudden death, and then he fell from the beam and landed on top of another joist. His midsection was draped in such a way that it looked as if he was momentarily suspended in midair trying to touch his toes, before sliding noiselessly from the girder and to the floor.

From a distance Team Leader had seen the red laser dot from Micah's weapon, a microdot floating in space, and then he took careful aim and fired his Glock. As he closed in, a ribbon of smoke was rising from the tip of his pistol, the weapon directed right at Micah as he lay there. After he examined the body to confirm the man's death, he noticed the silver Pattée within the shield and the flanking heraldic lions that supported the crest on his body armor. No doubt the squad emblem, he thought.

Looking ceiling-ward he noted the poorly constructed roof. He had always known of its porous quality, having absorbed the rains for several years and gone unkempt. It was obviously the opportunity the combatants had found in order to breach the building silently. The first-floor entry was simply a diversion tactic that nearly worked, his team maintaining their concentration on what they thought was the only point of advancement while others entered unseen from above.

Taking a deep breath and closing his eyes, Team Leader realized that his aspirations of dividing the world into warring factions were now idealistic rather than a reality. If he was to kill the pope now, and the truth be known to the world community that it was a top Israeli commando who actually pulled the trigger, then that would only isolate his beloved Israel rather than propel it to the fore.

His dream was dead and he knew it.

Team Leader quickly made his way down the corridor. Without a doubt the building would soon be overwhelmed, since the operative he killed was sent to pinpoint their exact location. Whether or not the man succeeded in his mission he didn't know. But one thing was for sure—it was time to jump ship.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pope clung to Bishop Angelo's hand, Angelo's digits having locked into place, unable to bend to embrace the hand of the man whom he had come to love as a father. Nevertheless, the pope cupped his hands over the bishop's and held on as if he'd never let go.

In the background was gunfire, a lot of it. And in the back of Pope Pius's mind he truly believed his time on earth was coming to an end.

So he prayed.

He prayed for the forgiveness of those who would take his life, and for those who would take the lives of those surrounding him. He prayed for his own salvation, ashamed for hating the man who forced him to witness Man's darkest side. He had come to realize that the Light of his world was imbibing the Darkness of someone else's.

From the corner of his eye, as he held Bishop Angelo's hand, and the gunfire never lessening, Pope Pius spotted the Dark Man of his hatred standing silhouetted in the doorway against the ongoing muzzle flashes in the background. With his weapon drawn the man entered the room. And in a look of defiance, Pius courageously raised his head.

For a moment they stared at each other, the firefight in the background becoming a drone as they appraised one another. Each man had learned some insights of the other, perhaps the Light imbibing as much of the Darkness as the Darkness imbibed the Light, making each man equal since they now shared qualities of both. How they exercised those qualities would still come from each man's independent will. It was all about making the choices that suited them most—good, bad or indifferent.

Team Leader looked him in the eyes and was pleased with what he saw. Here sat a man who was not afraid to die, a man whose conviction of faith was strong enough to break the chains that bind him, if only he had the physical strength to do so. And then Team Leader did something uncharacteristic; he bowed to the pope in what Pius took to be a measure of respect. "For centuries my people have been persecuted," he said. "But no matter what, we'll eventually persevere. You're a good man, Your Holiness, but until all become like you, only then will this end. I could only dream of such a day."

Raising his weapon, the laser finding its mark, Team Leader pulled the trigger.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Isaiah." Kimball's voice was loud, as if to cry out over the noise. "Have you detected the packages?"

*That's negative. I'm coming to a doorway leading to the north corridor. So far the south side is clear. It seems that Micah might have come straight down into their laps since the point of defense seems to be at his entry.*

"Copy that." And then, "Micah?" There was no answer, which concerned Kimball. And then again, but this time louder, "Micah?"

When he didn't answer, Kimball turned to Shari, the Incident Command Deputy, and gave her a gesture of circling his hand in the air as if twirling a lasso. "To the south sector maneuvering to the north!" he hollered to her.

Shari pulled her lip mike close and barked an order to the Incident Command Post. *Bring in the Descending Angels.*

The cavalry was on the move from above.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kodiak glanced up from reloading his weapon and saw Team Leader run toward the south end of the hallway and disappear in the shadows. His mind immediately clicked on the realization that Team Leader was bailing. He had been so focused, so diligent to duty; he had drawn himself into tunnel vision and was hardly aware of his surroundings beyond the stairwell. After firing the last clip into the dusty shaft, he pulled back along with Boa and began to retreat. King Snake maintained his position.

“King Snake, let’s move!”

“I’ll hold off the advancement! GO!”

Boa and Kodiak went to the monitor room where Diamondback and Sidewinder were arming their body armor attachments by loading up with as much ammo as their duty belts would carry. Boa and Kodiak followed suit, knowing that King Snake would soon be out of ammo.

“Where’s Team Leader?” asked Diamondback.

“Gone,” said Boa.

“Gone? Gone where?”

“Just gone!”

All four had geared up to the max as if they knew there would be no tomorrow.

In the hallway at the top of the stairwell, King Snake had run out of ammo.

The sudden quiet seemed somewhat odd.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two choppers lifted off from Logan Airport’s Air Operations helibase, flew over the depository and hovered over the rooftop. Ropes and cables were thrown from the bays and the assault commandos began to rappel from the choppers until a Strike Force of twelve had secured the rooftop. With a gesture from the top commando the choppers veered off and returned to base.

The Descending Angels had landed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kimball and Leviticus immediately advanced up the north stairwell with Kimball holding his weapon forward, while Leviticus prepared flash bangs to disorient any hostiles who may be maintaining position.

Reaching the second level they saw a single hostile standing on the third floor level charging a Sig, his lone weapon. Taking careful aim, Leviticus locked onto the man with his weapon and immediately pulled the trigger. The quick burst found its mark. The commando, dancing like a marionette, jittered as each bullet punched into him, and then he collapsed to the floor.

When the area was clear Leviticus made his way up the stairs with Shari Cohen behind him. Kimball maintained cover by keeping the point of his weapon steady, as they made their way to the final level. After they maneuvered into a safe position at the top of the stairs, Leviticus was close enough to the dead man to

reach out with his fingers and place them against the man's carotid. There was no pulse, the man was dead.

Kimball pushed his mike button. "Leviticus?"

"One down, at least five..." He cut himself short. To the right of him lay the body of Micah; unmoving, twisted in such a way that Leviticus knew he was dead.

"Leviticus?"

"We lost Micah," he whispered. "And I don't see Isaiah."

*I'm Code-4 and working south,* Isaiah returned.

"Copy that," said Kimball. "Leviticus, any visuals?"

Both Leviticus and Shari peeked around the corner of the wrought-iron banister and surveyed the hallway. Huddled against the wall were the remaining four members of the Holy See, all alive—and absolutely terrified.

"That's affirmative on four of the packages," Leviticus whispered. "But I don't see the big picture, though."

"Hostiles?"

"Negative."

"They've pulled back into the shadows. Maintain your position," Kimball told them. "The Descending Angels will be moving in from the south with Isaiah."

"Copy that." Kimball pulled his lip mike even closer. "Shari, go ahead and send in the ground troops as backup. I'm going to take over your position as rear guard and secure the second floor."

"By yourself?"

"I've got to make sure that there are no surprises since we're unable to maintain a visual of the hostiles," he said. "They have to be somewhere."

"Copy that."

When Shari made the call, the rear of the depository quickly filled with Metro's Assault Unit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Team Leader saw Isaiah moving stealthily down the hallway, clinging to the shadows with his weapon aimed directly in front of him. Quietly, Team Leader melded into dark shadows and pressed himself against a false wall leading to a ladder that led down to the second level. When he pushed the wall it gave way, providing an aperture large enough for him to pass through, and quietly slid the wall back into place before Isaiah could have noticed him.

Cramped by the small area, Team Leader shuffled sideways between the inner and outer walls until he reached the crudely constructed ladder of lath and broken boards. After descending to the second floor he found himself in a tight space identical to the one above. With some effort, he pushed on another false wall that opened into a dusty room.

Stealthily making his way to the hallway, keeping his head on a swivel, he was all but home free.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leviticus had often been in combat before, and quiet was not a good sign. Right now it was too quiet. Hunkering close to the floor, he crawled to Micah and removed his helmet. His comrade's eyes stared at nothing in particular. A

bloodless bullet wound marred the center of his once porcelain-like skin on his forehead.

He gently placed his fingers over Micah's eyes and closed them, then recited The Lord's Prayer in hushed tones, the words carrying the length of the corridor in haunting whispers. The remaining members of the Force Elite froze at the sound of Leviticus' voice.

"What's that?" hissed Boa.

Kodiak shushed him. The whispers echoed from all points of the hallway as if they came from more than one entity.

Then finally: "It's definitely not King Snake," whispered Kodiak. "He wouldn't know a prayer if it slapped him in the face... So I guess it's time to rock and roll, boys."

Diamondback leaned close. "What about the hostages?"

"We do what we were hired to do," Kodiak muttered. "If we get the chance, then we kill them... Starting with the pope."

\* \* \* \* \*

Isaiah had the bishops of the Holy See within sight. Like Leviticus, his hackles rose instinctively over the silence, but he pressed on.

When Leviticus saw Isaiah coming in from the south, he moved in to converge, but motioned Shari to keep position and provide cover.

When Isaiah nearly reached the Monitor Room, all hell broke loose.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kodiak exited the room first, unaware Isaiah had quietly worked his way down the corridor and hid behind the door. Kodiak, however, immediately saw Leviticus pressed tight against the wall and coming toward him. As he trained his weapon on Leviticus, Isaiah sprang from behind the door and rammed the butt of his assault weapon to the lower part of Kodiak's spine. The big man dropped to his knees, twisting toward his attacker and leveling his weapon as he fell. Isaiah kicked the pistol away, the firearm skating across the floor.

Kodiak came immediately to his feet and with a roundhouse kick, knocked the much smaller man's weapon aside. With a straight forearm jab Kodiak placed a powerful shot to Isaiah's face shield, shattering the plastic and sending Isaiah to the ground.

The helmet no longer an asset, Isaiah ripped it away, leapt to his feet and assumed a stance reminiscent of tae-kwon-do.

Leviticus held his fire for fear of shooting Isaiah and maintained his position in the corridor as the two men sized each other up. Kodiak, with incredible agility for such a large man, came across swiftly with a roundhouse kick that missed Isaiah and hit the wall like a cannonball, causing chunks of plaster and lath to scatter across the floor. Kodiak's follow up punch missed as well, hitting and fracturing the wall as if it was constructed of aluminum foil.

More explosions reverberated through the depository. The Descending Angels, having breached the rooftop at the north and central sectors, began rappelling into the building.

Both men continued to square off, obviously intent on one another. "It's all over," hollered Isaiah. "Give it up."

“Are you kidding?” said Kodiak. “I would die with a smile on my face knowing that I broke your neck.” He came at Isaiah with savage forearm thrusts and deadly kicks, each missing its mark as the much nimbler Isaiah dodged or deflected the blows in seemingly effortless fashion. Kodiak, in what he thought was an opening, lifted his massive arm to strike a crushing hammer blow to Isaiah’s skull, but Isaiah lashed out with his foot and drove Kodiak backward.

Quickly employing kick after powerful kick, blow after powerful blow, Isaiah attacked the much larger man with such incredible speed and skill, Shari, watching from the corridor, was transfixed by the talent of his martial arts. He was smooth and graceful, the movements hypnotic, and in quick fashion had Kodiak pinned against the opposite side of the hallway with his back pressed against a boarded window. In bestial rage Kodiak screamed as Isaiah came around with a powerful kick that connected squarely on Kodiak’s chest. The impact was so great, the contact so forceful, the impetus drove the large man through the window, his body tumbling in speedy revolutions to the graveyard below. His death sounded like a melon hitting the pavement.

Isaiah immediately gathered his assault weapon. Now with Leviticus by his side, the Descending Angels swarming the hallway, and ground forces moving up the stairwell, the two Knights and Shari entered the Monitor Room expecting an all-out assault.

But the room was empty.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Force Elite had prepared well for the contingency of being surrounded by the opposition. While Kodiak combated Isaiah, the others used the opportunity to escape through a false panel built into the old floor disguised as a series of removable tiles. They descended immediately to the second level. Once assembled, they made their way down the hallway and took position beneath the room where the pope was held, and aimed their assault weapons at the ceiling with the intent to kill.

\* \* \* \* \*

After checking on the remaining four members of the Holy See and finding them justifiably shaken, Shari left Leviticus and Isaiah to tend to their needs while she continued to search the vacant rooms that bordered the corridor.

In a room that held little light, Shari spotted a lump of darkness gathered against the far wall. It was amoeba-like in its form, but moving, its breathing labored and wet, however. When she neared the shape it began to take on an outline of an old man holding another closely. The two masses together, from a distance, indistinguishable. Up close, she could see that the pope had drawn a dead man into his embrace.

“Your Holiness!” She kneeled and gently touched the old man’s forehead and felt the heat of fever. “Your Holiness, you’re ill. We’ll get you out of here as soon as possible.”

“Who are you?” he asked weakly while she wrapped blankets around him.

“FBI Special Agent Shari Cohen, I’m here with the Vatican Knights.”

His brows rose. “Kimball’s here?”

“Yes, sir. They’re acting as my Critical Incident Response Group.”

“Then it’s truly over?”

“Yes, sir, you’re safe.”

The pope raised his hand. The chain that tethered him to the wall for so long was now broken, a perfect shot by Team Leader freeing the man. “I don’t know why he did this,” the pope explained.

Shari sidestepped the body of Bishop Angelo. “We’ll come back for him. I promise.”

In that instance the floor suddenly erupted in shards of wood and bullets. So Shari grabbed the pope and forced him close to the wall, shielding him with her body. From underneath gunshots perforated the floorboards and strafed the ceiling, causing bits of wood and old tar to cascade down on them like rain. All around feathers floated in the gloom as bullets penetrated the old mattresses, the feather stuffing swirling and dancing about in lazy eddies. Bishop Angelo’s body also took multiple hits, the punching bullets animating his corpse into jiggling fits. And in desperation, Shari cried out as the room became a world of spinning lead, gently floating feathers, and choking dust.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kimball moved discreetly down the second floor corridor. Thirty yards ahead the area was lit by multiple muzzle flashes, marking the spot where the members of the Force Elite were shooting at the ceiling.

Over Kimball’s earpiece he heard Shari cry out over her mike, not an order nor a battle cry, but a shout of extreme anxiety.

He quickly converged with his grenade launcher loaded and ready. Less than a second later a grenade corkscrewed through the quasi-darkness and exploded with an eruption that scattered the commandos throughout the corridor as bits and pieces of gore. None of them knew what hit them.

At the base point of their attack, Kimball looked up and noted the perforated ceiling above him. When he called out Shari’s name numerous times but received nothing but feedback, he became particularly concerned for her welfare.

And then a voice, distant and hollow, came from behind. “You would be Kimball Hayden, I assume.” Kimball turned quickly, his finger on the trigger of an empty weapon, and then with his free hand removed his helmet and lip mike and tossed them aside.

At the end of the hallway a man stood near the collapsed stairwell, sizing Kimball.

Kimball took a step toward him, the mouth of the grenade launcher pointing downward.

“I have heard so much about you,” the man said, his accent thick. “I hear that there is no better warrior than you.”

Kimball moved closer, the face of the man clearer in the feeble light. Beneath the chin, a wedge of scarring, the distortion of tissue as identifying as a tattoo.

“And you would be Abraham Obadiah,” he said.

“That would be, at least for today, the name you would know me by, yes.”

Obadiah reached down and methodically withdrew his black-bladed commando knives from sheaths on both thighs. It was an invitation to Kimball who lowered his weapon to the floor and withdrew his own knives.

“Now,” said Obadiah, the points of his blades pointing wickedly. “I would be so honored to be the one to kill the legend.”

Kimball took a fighting stance. “Don’t count on it.”

They closed the gap swinging the blades with precision and savagery.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dust and feathers floated with cloying thickness. When Shari pulled back from the pope she saw that the floor was marked by countless holes inches apart. How she and the pope escaped the volley was beyond her, but she couldn’t quite rule out a miracle either. Removing dusty blankets from the pope, she saw he was untouched by the fusillade. His eyes were glazed with fever, his skin hot to the touch, but he smiled and raised a bony hand to brush his fingers softly against her cheek. “I thought you said I was safe, young lady.”

She returned his smile. “You are now. For some reason I have the feeling Kimball got involved.”

“You know something?” the pope said. “I think you might be right.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The blades deflected off one another as they fought viciously. With metal striking metal sparks flew abundantly before dying out, only for new ones to take their place. Each man moved with poise and skill, their actions motivated by instinct rather than deduction since their movements were too fast for the mind to comprehend the next move.

Obadiah came across in a series of upper cuts and horizontal slashes, while Kimball countered with deflections and straight jabs, his maneuvers also deflected. In Kimball’s mind he was amazed how good this man was with double-edge weapons. He had never actually been tested before, until now.

As their arms moved with blinding speed, Obadiah came across and slashed Kimball’s vest, the razor sharpness of the knife cutting easily through the Kevlar. Vests, after all, were made to stop bullets, not knives.

Backing off for the moment, Kimball reexamined his position while Obadiah paced from left to right like a caged animal.

“You’re good,” he told Kimball. “But not good enough.”

“I’m just getting warmed up.”

“Then let’s get this over with,” he said. “I’ve things to do and people to kill.”

They converged on each other for the last time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Those who had seen the perforated floor were amazed it was still strong enough to support weight. The aged and decimated wood protested beneath Leviticus and Isaiah as they carefully removed the pope and placed him in the care of the Metro Unit, who quickly ushered the man away under the cloaking of their shields. The Descending Angels examined and secured every room on the third floor, while the ground troops maintained their post on the first floor entryway and stairwell.

Leviticus drew close to Shari.

“The pope is in good hands,” he told her in hushed tones. “So we must go.” He turned toward Micah’s body. “We’ll be taking him with us. There can be no questions.”



“I understand.”

Isaiah stood beside them. “Kimball will meet us on his own terms,” he said. “But we’re thankful for all you’ve done.”

Isaiah and Leviticus dropped to a bended knee and placed a closed fist over their hearts. “Loyalty above all else,” they whispered, “except Honor.”

Shari felt absolutely flattered at this display of gratitude to the point of feeling the sting of tears. Then, placing a closed fist over her heart, said, “Loyalty above all else, except Honor.”

For her, this was closure.

Milling with the Descending Angels and ground troops, Isaiah unobtrusively lifted the body of Micah and draped it over the shoulders of Leviticus, trying to give the impression of a ‘man down’ requiring immediate medical attention. Shari watched the two Knights merge into the crowd and within moments they were gone.

Only when Kimball didn’t answer his mike did she become concerned.

\* \* \* \* \*

The blades moved faster, beyond the comprehension of human sight, their arms moving in blurs and blinding rotations as each man’s brow drew the sweat of his efforts. Neither man rescinded his space, maintaining his territory. And neither man by the plateau of his pride was willing to concede to defeat by the fatigue beginning to weigh on both of them.

Breathless, both men reached into their inner selves and mustered whatever reserve power they had left before being entirely sapped.

When Obadiah finally went in for a stabbing motion, Kimball came down and slashed his blade across Obadiah’s forearm, a score that severed the muscle that incapacitated him.

With a savage cry Obadiah dropped his knife and looked skyward, the veins in his neck sticking out in cords. When Kimball went for the kill, Obadiah rotated on his feet like a matador dodging the course of a charging bull, and came around with a solid kick that sent Kimball across the floor and over the edge of the collapsed stairwell. Dropping his knives, Kimball reached for the exposed rebar and grabbed it before plunging to the debris below. When he tried to pull himself up, Obadiah was standing at the edge of the concrete holding a hand over his wounded arm, the blood flowing freely between his fingers as he looked down on Kimball.

“You’re indeed a truly magnificent warrior,” he said. “But tell me, that crest and shield on your vest. Is it a symbol of your squad? Or is it the marking’s of something else?”

Kimball tried to pull himself up, but Obadiah placed a foot upon the rebar, his weight bending the bar downward.

“Your style is different,” added Obadiah.

When Kimball’s hands slid downward along the bar, he reaffirmed his grip.

“Who are you?” asked Obadiah. “You’re not with the FBI, that much is for certain. Your style is too unique, and I thought I had seen them all.” When Obadiah bent down, the blood of his forearm dripped on Kimball. In the background the opposing forces were moving in, but Obadiah didn’t seem too

concerned by their apparent approach in Kimball's view. "You're not the Swiss Guard, either. As good as they are, you fight like no other. So again, who are—"

Obadiah turned to check the progress of the troops. Given this window of opportunity, Kimball lunged up, grabbed Obadiah by the front of his shirt, and pulled him over the edge.

Too surprised to utter in protest, Obadiah traversed the open space to the debris below.

When the troops finally reached the precipice, a commando reached down and aided a tired Kimball Hayden to the landing.

"Are you all right?" asked the assault team leader.

"I'll live," said Kimball. He pointed to the rubble below. "You'll need to contact Special Agent Cohen of the FBI regarding the man down there," he said. "She's in the building somewhere."

The assault team leader looked over the debris. "What man?"

Kimball immediately sat up and looked over the edge.

Obadiah was gone.

## Chapter 55

***Washington, D.C.***

***September 30, Mid-Morning***

The day had been a sweeping success for the FBI. And like a deprived addict the media consumed the details. The pope was taken to Massachusetts General Hospital to recuperate from a bronchial infection. His overall prospects for recovery were rated as excellent by his doctors. Once able to travel, he would then check into Gemelli Polyclinic in Rome for a follow-up. Beyond the lead story of the pope's health were accounts of battles that procured the pontiff and the remaining bishops of the Holy See, all unharmed.

The Soldiers of Islam, however, weren't as lucky as Shari Cohen of the FBI conducted a superior assault mission, in which the Incident Command System was well established and performed with military precision. The Command's Ops Supervisor and Liaison Officer informed a special group of media members, discreetly predetermined by the president of the United States, that the Soldiers of Islam were eradicated. This, the media members were told, demonstrates to the world that terrorism will never gain a true foothold on American soil. The media went wild and unknowingly served propaganda as the main course of public news. This in turn served the government's purpose of burying the real conspiracy involving the pope's kidnapping and the true identities of the players involved.

On the surface Shari had picked up various snippets regarding Misters Paxton, Murdock and Pappandopolous—it all depended upon the source at the time. Mr. Paxton apparently took a post in the field office in the state of Oregon. But Shari knew the dark truth. This same dark truth applied with respect to the sudden retirement of George Pappandopolous, and of course, the unreported imprisonment to solitary confinement of Punch Murdock. There was absolutely no

doubt in her mind that these players shared the same feared fate as Murdock, ending up in a grave in potter's field.

The man known as Obadiah was never found. What was found, however, were several false walls and panels allowing for his escape, a contingency well thought out by the members of the Force Elite. One such panel on the first floor by the rubble led to the network of sewer lines beneath Boston's numerous streets. Obadiah's name was never mentioned to the media, but only within the smallest Washington circles. Leaks could prove deadly, so whoever spoke of him did so with caution.

Coincidental to all the positive news washing across television and reported in the major papers, America suffered the pangs of losing Vice President Bohlmer to a brain aneurysm, an imperceptible bubble along the arterial wall that finally erupted, somehow missed by physicians normally stellar in their tending of White House dignitaries. After three days of closed casket viewing within the rotunda of the Capitol Building, he was buried alongside his wife in California. Shari did not attend.

Kimball Hayden and the Vatican Knights had simply disappeared. Shari thought of him often during her trip back to D.C. When she returned to the archdiocese, she learned from Cardinal Medeiros that since the threat to her family was over, they were gearing up for the return home. The cardinal didn't mention Kimball to her at all, nor did she dare ask.

Upon her arrival home, Gary was cleaning up from the mess left by the skirmishes. When they first laid eyes on each other they simply stood quietly, as if evaluating one another to glean each other's secrets.

And then it came to them in a symbiotic rush. There was nobody else for them, nobody. And for a long time she hugged Gary hard, a reaffirmation of her love for him, something that eluded them for months. And though Gary thought she might crush his ribs, his return hug was just as affirming.

They had rediscovered each other while standing on the threshold of Death's doorway.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Shari was granted time at home to relax, FBI Director Larry Johnston called her to the downtown office to confront her on a few issues. Most notably he wanted to know who her CIRG Team was, since all valid members had been accounted for at Quantico at the time of the assault.

When she arrived at the office the director closed the door behind her and gestured for her to take a seat in front of his desk.

"You look good," he told her, his tone congenial.

"Thank you."

He examined a few documents before placing them on the desktop before him. "These are the documents by the Planning Ops Chief from the Incident Command Post."

Shari wanted to roll her eyes. *Here it comes.*

"None of your team checked out with the Incident Commander for accountability when they completed duty, which is against ICS protocol."

"I wasn't aware of that," she lied. She realized Johnston knew it as well.

“I’d also like to know who your squad was, since everybody who made up the Strike Force Team was accounted for at Quantico during the time your assault against the Force Elite commenced.”

Shari remained composed and quiet. Johnston seemed almost fatherly as he addressed her with a wry grin. “As a First-Team Assault Unit, they were fabulous in clearing the stage for the rest of the team’s maneuvers, perhaps saving a lot of lives considering who they were up against.” And then with a measure of gratitude he said, “I’m proud of you, Shari. The Bureau, the president—you’ve made this agency shine. And for that we are all proud.”

“Why... thank you.”

He picked up the papers. “The assault from beginning to end took less than eight minutes from the moment your team struck first, until the takeover by the Ground and Air Support Units. There were no casualties or injuries on our side—a job well done.”

“Eight minutes?”

“Eight minutes,” he confirmed.

“It seemed much longer than that.”

“Being on the front lines—I’m sure.”

She diverted her attention to the papers he was holding. “What else does the report say?”

He placed them back on the desk. “Nothing damaging... that’s for sure.” He paused before posing the next question. “So are you going to tell me who they were?”

Shari could only stare while her mind searched frantically for an answer. Then without so much as a quaver in her tone, “I can’t.”

Johnston’s face remained passive despite her inability to confide in him. “You know I should be admonishing the hell out of you for doing what you did. But I can’t argue the outcome of the situation. Despite the lack of protocol regarding the ICS, I’m going to send this report to the attorney general, who I’m sure will agree with the recommendation that your efforts be recognized. You and your team did a nice job, Shari. There are a whole lot of people who are really proud of what you did.”

Shari was beyond relief. “May I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Abraham Obadiah... Are we going after him?”

Johnston’s features became guarded. “No.”

Shari couldn’t believe what she just heard. “But this is the man who started all this. He tried to start a war—”

He cut her off by raising his hand. “Abraham Obadiah apparently doesn’t exist; at least that’s the viewpoint of Mossad, the Israeli government, and the attaché. We’ve already checked, even though we believe him to be a major player in Mossad’s Lohamah Psichlogit Department. However, these agencies are admitting nothing. So whoever this guy is, he’s obviously a powerful person whom they apparently want to keep away from the watchful eyes of other nations, including our own.”

“So we’re just going to sweep this under the rug?”

“And what do you suppose we do? Risk dredging up a conspiracy that could have buried this country in the eyes of our allies—of the world? I don’t think so. If this man surfaces again, we’ll handle it. Until that time, we’ll continue to work with our allies in a positive way. If they say this man doesn’t exist, then he doesn’t exist. Is that clear?”

She sighed. “Yes, sir, very.”

“Then have a good day.”

Shari got up from the chair and thanked the director.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” he said. The smile returned to his face. “You have a special engagement to attend to this afternoon.”

“An engagement?”

“The pope is being released from the hospital today. And he has requested a personal meeting with you prior to his plane leaving. I believe he wants to thank you for what you’ve done, which is an engagement most of us would envy.” He returned to the paperwork on his desk. “Your plane leaves for Boston in about an hour.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You’ll be back in plenty of time to be with your family.”

For a moment her heart hitched inside her chest. Would she get another chance to see Kimball and say goodbye? She at least wanted that privilege, to tell the man how much she truly respected him, and that their courses were taking them in two separate directions. She just wanted to say goodbye to someone whom she would never see again.

“If I were you, Shari, I wouldn’t miss the opportunity of a lifetime.”

She thanked Johnston once again and didn’t have to be reminded a third time that a plane awaited.

## Chapter 56

### ***Boston, Massachusetts. Logan Airport September 30, Late Afternoon***

The crowd along the fenced tarmac at Boston’s Logan Airport was far greater than when the pope arrived in Dulles many days before. The support was immense. But certainly far less than the Biblical proportions the pope joked about as Cardinal Medeiros wheeled him across the tarmac toward *Shepherd One*.

Shari walked alongside them, the pope holding her hand lightly in his as they moved along the stretch of pavement. “I’m so glad you made it, my dear. But as much as I want to thank you, I once again need to speak to you about the Vatican Knights.”

“I have already given my word, Your Holiness. I’ll keep their secret safe.”

“Of that I have no doubt,” he told her. “But you must understand that the Vatican Knights are not even a myth since their secret is *that* closely guarded.”

“I understand.”

“And for that, my dear, I truly thank you. And I certainly thank you for saving my life and the lives of my bishops. If you should ever want to come to Vatican City, please let the good cardinal here know when you want to visit, and I shall roll out the red carpet for the one who saved my life.”

“I truly appreciate that, Your Holiness. But there’s something I would like to ask you.”

“Of course, my dear.”

“I’d like to say goodbye to Kimball.”

The pope’s face changed to sad imposition. “As much as I would like you to, I’m afraid I cannot let that happen. The Vatican Knights are mourning the losses of those whom I consider my children. Please understand that.”

She looked up at the immense Boeing. “Is he in there?”

“Yes,” he said. And then in more sorrowful measure, “He’s in there with the others holding ceremony. In a moment I shall lead them in prayer.”

“Then I’ll respect that,” she returned, and continued to hold the pope’s hand as they moved closer to the jet. “May I ask you something else?”

“Of course.”

“The Knights,” she began. “Why Kimball? How are they chosen?”

“The Knights, Ms. Cohen, are incredibly special people who come from squalor—mostly hard-luck cases who were either orphaned or abandoned and possess no future other than what the Vatican can give them. Serving me in the capacity that they do is ultimately their decision in the end, knowing the full consequences of their choices and dangers involved.”

“And Kimball?”

The pope smiled as if reminiscing over a fond memory. “Kimball is an animal of a different breed,” he said. “He’s unlike the rest because he’s in his own personal torment and seeks redemption through his service to God. He believes his road is a difficult journey in which salvation lies at its end, but impossible to achieve in his eyes. What he fails to realize is his journey is lifelong and paved with mistakes, as well as goodness.”

“Kimball is a good man.”

“Of course he is. Although we see this, he does not. It’s up to Kimball to find his own way. We can only provide direction, but it’s Kimball who must have the faith to see it through.”

“Is there anything you can do to help him?”

The pope smiled. “I can only provide the direction, my dear. Kimball has to do the rest. You see... Kimball *needs* evil in his life in order to recognize the good, which is something I learned from the man who held me captive. I saw the side of man that I’ve been sheltered from for so long. And because of it I now understand Kimball more than ever.”

“I don’t understand.”

The pope held a hand up to the cardinal who slowed the wheelchair as they neared the Boeing. “Kimball knows one thing,” he said. “He knows the dark side of man perhaps better than anybody else, and he knows what’s needed in order to combat it. I on the other hand have lived in ignorance believing the light inside all men can be reached. Kimball knows different. He knows the darkness, has lived in its depths, and is working his way toward the light. There has to be a balance in

life, my dear. But right now I believe Kimball does not feel *that* balance in his soul. Perhaps when he finds the balance between the two, then he will find the salvation that he has been so desperately seeking.”

“I hope so.”

“Kimball has to find his own way.”

The cardinal had moved the wheelchair to the center of an entourage dressed in priestly vestments. They were standing at the base of the stairs leading into *Shepherd One*.

“Well, my dear, my gratitude for your perseverance in this matter cannot even begin to be measured by my standards. I do wish you well. And I will tell the Vatican Knights that you wish them well.”

“Thank you.”

“Perhaps we shall cross paths again,” he told her. “Next year I have a highly publicized Papal Symposium, if God allows my health to get better. And I will journey across the world once again, ending my mission in the United States.”

“After what happened, you’d come back?”

“That’s all the more reason, my dear. I cannot let a setback undermine what needs to be done. If my health holds, then I will return. I will not allow terrorism to slow the Word of God. I can’t.”

He smiled and reached out for her free hand. “God bless you, Ms. Cohen. You truly are an asset to mankind, which makes me believe there is hope after all. Even when I questioned myself that man was too far gone. It was a period in my life when I was at my lowest. Sometimes, my dear, it takes a tragedy to see the full picture. I now believe that tragedies are sometimes good for the soul that often reminds man that he sometimes needs a misfortune in life to bring out the best in him.”

“I’ve always believed in that,” she told him. “A perfect example is nine-eleven.”

“Yes, of course. Your nine-eleven brought strangers together in a cause to heal not only a nation, but one another. There was no prejudice, no animosity, all of which were forgotten due to a common tragedy. From hatred came pure love. It was a balance that formed from both the Darkness and Light of Man. Let’s hope that Kimball finds his balance, too.”

Shari leaned close and hugged the old man as he gained his feet. She barely touched him, his bones as frail as a sparrow.

“Be good, my dear.”

“And you take care of yourself.”

“Don’t worry,” he told her. “Gemelli Hospital is one of the best in the world.”

There was one last question she wished to pose to the pope.

“Your Holiness, if I should visit the Vatican someday, would it be possible to visit the Knights... or Kimball?”

“If you should happen to see the Vatican Knights again,” he informed her, “then it will be because something terrible has happened... So let’s hope not.”

Aided by the archdiocese staff, Pope Pius XIII climbed the stairs and waved his hand in loving gesture. Once inside *Shepherd One*, the door closed behind him and the mobile stairway pulled back from the Boeing.

Along with Cardinal Medeiros, Shari turned and walked away from the jet and made her way back to the terminal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kimball Hayden had been sitting inside *Shepherd One* looking out the window watching the pontiff being wheeled from the terminal to the plane. Shari accompanied the pope and became his focal point of interest as the pontiff's party made their way toward the Boeing. Since Kimball knew the pope would never allow her passage on board, he pressed his hand against the window, and with the tip of his forefinger traced the outline of her body against the pane, the closest thing to actually saying goodbye.

As the pontiff made his way up the stairway, Kimball thought Shari looked as pleasing as always, the way she smiled, the point of her widow's peak and the way her hair shined in the sun, a mental picture he would carry with him for the rest of his life. *Perhaps, he thought, if I do right, then maybe He'll grant me the right to love someone openly.*

But if anything was taught and learned, it was the fact that Shari Cohen made him see through their affinity that he was not the painted monster without feeling or remorse, but someone fully capable of loving.

Nevertheless, he knew he had a long way to go.

## Epilogue

### ***Venezuelan Coast Line October 11, Mid-Afternoon***

Somewhere off the shore of a Venezuelan beach, a luxury home situated within a heavy copse of palm trees surrounded by jungle vegetation bloomed in riots of bright colors. On the wraparound porch sat two men, both drinking specialty liqueurs and talking leisurely as the day worked toward twilight.

Hector Guerra sat in a lounge chair with his bright flower-patterned shirt unbuttoned, exposing a huge and hairy paunch. Although a breeze blew off the ocean, it barely moved his perfectly styled hair. Next to him sat a man who seemed comfortable in these surroundings. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and dark sunglasses. His most distinguishing feature was the wedge of pink scarring beneath his chin. On his arm he wore a bandage from a recent battle, with another wrapping around his chest from a fall that had broken three ribs.

"Unfortunately," said Guerra, "our economies will have to wait to see better times."

The man who was Abraham Obadiah lifted his drink in the air, then sipped from it before placing it back on the table beside his chair. "For now," he answered. "But I'll never give up the cause for my people."

"You know we could never risk another venture as we did with the pope."

"There will always be opportunities, my friend. We'll simply learn from our mistakes and better prepare from them."

"But never at the risk of placing myself in jeopardy."



“There will always be risks, Mr. Guerra, always. What you do is prognosticate the problems before they happen and plan for them.”

“Which is what you did with Kimball Hayden?”

“Kimball Hayden came out of nowhere.”

“My point exactly. Sometimes you just can’t prepare for everything.”

“Next time we’ll know better.”

“And how does one prepare against somebody who does not exist?”

“Kimball Hayden has a background. We all do.” And then more to himself. “I will find him.”

Both men remained quiet for the moment, each enjoying the light breeze coming off the surf as well as the scenery of creamy waves lapping the shoreline. Guerra queried him further.

“And when you find this Kimball Hayden, what will you do?”

Obadiah paused to think before answering. “That’s my business,” he finally answered. “Right now I have far more pressing matters to deal with.”

Hector Guerra chortled. “What? Disrupting the firm balance of national psyches by using terrorism as a vehicle to promote fears? Isn’t that wonderful?”

“It’s what the Lohamah Psychlogit does best,” he said. “It’s what I get paid for.”

“Then if you meet this Hayden, just make sure that you live to see another day.”

“I would have to,” he returned. “If I am to make a better life for my people, then I have to make progress. And the price for progress, my friend, is destruction. And the destruction of Kimball Hayden would surely remove any future nuisances from my life.”

For a moment both men stared at each other, neither of their features betraying any thought or emotion, and watched the incoming waves.

