

Operation Hail Storm

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Dedicated to my mother:

Lois Duncan

All my skills as a writer are ensconced in her DNA

ACT I

NORTH KOREA—HILLS OF KANGDONG

Forty miles north and east of Pyongyang, nestled high in the bushy hills and just one mile from the esteemed leader's residence is a plush and opulent estate. It was thirty-nine hundred square feet, had five bedrooms, three baths, and an open patio that overlooked a generous-sized pool. Not exactly the definition of a mansion by Western standards, but in a country where 2.5 million of its impoverished citizens had starved to death, it was considered pretty damn nice.

The previous owner of the white single-level modern dwelling had been General Hyon Yong-chun. At one point, he was a senior North Korean military officer who had served the Workers' Party of Korea and had formerly served as defense minister. Retirement, as it pertains to many North Korean politicians, is iffy at best. The general's retirement from his prestigious appointment wasn't all that rewarding, considering the fact that he had been removed from his post and executed in 2015. No gold watch. No party.

The next resident of the *Castle on the Hill*, as the locals called it, lasted eight more years until he was forced into early retirement by a bullet to his brain.

The total length of the newest landlord's current political term was yet to be determined, as was the duration of his breathing privileges. Lots of people wanted to kill the current Minister of People's Armed Forces, Kim Yong Chang. There were people in his country who would like to slit his throat because they were jealous over his quick and unjust rise to power. High-ranking thugs in other communist countries, who felt cheated during Kim's bargaining for nuclear refinement tools and machines, would like to see him under a thick layer of dirt. And still, further away, dots across the globe, several military specialists wanted Kim Yong Chang dead just because the world would be a safer place. And, who in their right mind wouldn't want that?

"Look at the pretty bird," one of Kim Yong Chang's girlfriends called out from a recumbent position on her raft in the pool. She pointed up at the perfectly clear blue sky at the large bird circling overhead.

Kim Yong Chang was a major player in the race for North Korea to become a nuclear power. More to the point, a nuclear threat. For years, Kim had managed the extraction of uranium from the mine at Pyongsan. He had been instrumental in creating the concentrate pilot plant located in the northern part of the country at Pakchon. It was at this installation that the raw uranium was converted to yellowcake, a milled uranium oxide that could be enriched for use in nuclear bombs. Surprisingly, those foreigners who wanted him dead didn't care about any of that.

North Korea already had a nuclear bomb, so that cat was out of the bag and nothing less than

turning North Korea into an open vast smoking pit would put the cat back into the aforementioned bag. What scared countries located on the other side of the globe was the possibility of North Korea placing their nuclear bomb on the end of a long-range missile. Up to this point, North Korea had medium range, but not long range missiles. It would seem in this day and age anyone could create a nuclear bomb, but missile technology was complicated—damn near rocket science. Kim Yong Chang was in charge of North Korea’s program to entice talented rocket scientists to build his country enough long range missiles to become a major power, threat, and pain in the ass for anyone who didn’t live in North Korea.

“Oh, I see it,” a girlfriend said. “Is it an eagle? I think it’s an eagle!”

There are approximately twenty-one species of birds of prey that make their homes in North Korea. On this clear summer morning, a Golden eagle floated on the updrafts high above the *Castle on the Hill*. With a wingspan of seven feet, the majestic bird was the size of a small drone aircraft, which it actually happened to be. Ten feet away, it would be difficult for any casual observer to recognize that the feathery contraption was not a real bird. Every surface of the machine had been meticulously covered with synthetic feathers, each one mimicked the correct coarseness, color and weight of an actual Golden eagle’s feathers. The frame on which the feathers were attached was made from thin carbon fiber, just rigid enough to contain and support the weight of the electric motors and actuators that moved the bird’s wings and control surfaces. The drone’s wings were a marvel of engineering. The onboard computers reticulated and bent the wings at the necessary angle to catch a thermal and remain aloft. The bird’s head looked just like a real eagle’s head, with the exception that each of the drone’s eyes held an individual high-definition camera. One eye was just the plain old run-of-the-mill fifty-thousand-dollar camera, but the other eye—the other camera—contained night vision features and a plethora of ground-tracking optics.

“I think it is an eagle,” the woman floating in the pool agreed.

As the drone glided at an altitude of a thousand feet in the air. The distinction from a real eagle was negligible, and no one on the ground would notice. By design, the birdlike drone’s mouth had to remain open for air intake. It took in air to cool the solid rocket booster that ran down the core of the machine. The engineers studied eagles in flight to ensure their drone would remain undetected.

They found most birds are wizards at sensing thermals and updrafts that are caused by the uneven heating of the ground below. Eagles fly into thermals to conserve energy while migrating or looking for prey. Once inside, they stop flapping, keeping their wings extended. An eagle will slowly descend, but while inside the thermal, their rate of descent is slower as the lighter and hotter air pushes up vertically. Simultaneously, the tail feathers open like fans and the tapered feathers on

the wing's edges spread apart; both actions enhance airflow. Staying aloft requires forward motion, even when riding thermals. In order to remain inside a thermal column, the eagle will navigate in circular paths, steering with its tail and wings, thus creating lazy circles in the sky. Eventually, the bird must have some means of propulsion to regain altitude before repeating the process.

Both women on the ground watched the elegant bird fly circles. The women would have been surprised to learn the "bird" circling over the home of Kim Yong Chang was actually a drone which had to, every so often, burn a solid rocket pellet. Anatomically, around where an eagle's heart was located, a mechanism loaded a rocket pellet into a burn chamber. This operated in a similar manner as a bullet loaded into a chambered gun. To fire the rocket, a tiny glow plug started the chemical ignition, and after a thirty-second burn, a new pellet would be cocked into the rocket. Then, maybe hours later, another burn cycle would take place. The unique and tiny rocket engine wasted some of its propulsion energy by dissipating its noise through baffles. At the operating height in which the drone maneuvered, onlookers from the ground heard nothing and the propellant burned clean, leaving no telltale visual signature.

"Do you see the eagle, Mr. Kim?"

Kim Yong Chang was seated at an outside patio table in his backyard, eating a grapefruit sectioned for him by one of his two personal servants. A girlfriend was sitting across from him, a young pretty Asian, a fraction of his age, picking at a fluffy croissant. He was a thin man with black hair that was considered long in his country. He wore a casual black button-up shirt and matching black pants. At thirty-five years of age, he was young for his position in the North Korean cabinet, which made him even less popular with the older officers and politicians who wanted his job.

"Look, Mr. Kim. The eagle is right there." The attractive woman across the table from him pointed up into the sky. Kim Yong Chang's companions were not permitted to call him by his first name, Chang. No one, except his mother, was allowed to call him Chang.

Kim Yong Chang finished his grapefruit, took a sip of coffee and checked his phone, making no attempt to look at the bird.

The current bird, with the unimaginative code name of *Eagles*, had been on station for more than three days. Depending on the weather and thermals, the drone held enough rocket pellets to stay on target for up to one hundred hours. With no way to take flight without human intervention, the rocket-propelled glider had to be dropped from a drone at the beginning of its mission or slung off a ship and flown in on its own power. Depending on support logistics, flying the bird to its target from hundreds of miles away on its own power, dramatically reduced its time on station. When leaving its target, the drone could either fly out of the region under its own rocket power or the remaining rocket pellets in its chest cavity could be

remotely detonated, turning the half-million-dollar reconnaissance machine into nothing but feathery bits and colorful pieces.

The drone's outstretched wings made imperceptible corrections, as the eagle's head turned from the left to the right. The five computers inside the mechanical creature worked in concert to maintain lift and correct for weight shifts as its head moved from side to side. The bird's head dropped a few millimeters, focusing its onboard camera on new points of interest on the ground. The left wing's trim feathers lifted twelve millimeters and the tail feathers dropped seven millimeters, counteracting the weight shift of the eagle's head movements. Two feathers on each wing sensed that a thermal was pushing them up at a measurable vertical velocity. By using avian soaring performance aerodynamics, the computers could make a fuzzy logic determination if the current thermal was worth riding or if a burn should take place so another thermal could be located.

Hundreds of feet below, Kim Yong Chang's girlfriends watched the bird gracefully loop in wide circles as it looked for prey.

"Do you see the eagle?" she asked Kim again. She spoke in English as Kim had instructed her.

Kim spoke in English whenever possible, instead of his country's native Korean language. He was in the process of trying to convince two Russian missile experts to defect to his country, and the only common language between them was English. Kim knew he would be much more effective in his job if he could speak fluent English, so he surrounded himself with girlfriends, prostitutes and staff that understood and spoke some English.

Understanding if he didn't look at the eagle, the women would continue to pester him, Kim glanced up, waiting momentarily for his eyes to adjust to the bright morning sky. He saw the eagle and responded with nothing more than a grunt.

"It's so beautiful," his girlfriend said. "It must have a nest close to here. Around and around it goes. I've seen it every day for the last few days."

Since she didn't ask Kim anything, he didn't waste the energy responding with another grunt.

"Did you see it?" asked the young Asian woman on the raft. Her bikini was so small that it didn't make much sense to Kim why she wore anything at all.

She then said loudly enough to be heard over at the table, "Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if you could just float on the air like that? No worries. No problems."

Kim laughed under his breath. Neither of the girls had any problems. They provided him companionship and sex until he tired of them. At that point, they would move out and do the same for one of the other cabinet members. If they had an iota of comprehension of what he went through on a daily basis, then they would comprehend the true meaning of *worry* and *problems*.

Kim Yong Chang had promised his leader that he would either steal, buy or build an intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach the United States by the time the snows came or—or—he hated to think about the ‘ors’. The *ors* are what worried him. The *ors* are why he lost sleep at night. The *ors* had killed all the previous tenants of this house. The *ors* had been big

problems for his predecessors, and look at the way their lives had turned out. Or *turned off* would be more precise.

For no apparent reason, Kim glanced back up into the sky and watched the dark bird make its elegant loops. The women appeared happy that he had decided to join them in their ornithological pastime. He didn’t have any particular bias for most birds, but he did hate eagles. The eagle represented a country that would be the very first target for testing his new ICBM.

Kim put down his spoon and wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin.

To the shock of his two female companions, Kim turned to his servant who was removing Kim’s grapefruit bowl from the table, and said, “Get me my rifle.”

STRAIT OF MALACCA—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

The *Hail Nucleus* tanker was registered in Panama. It was a Panamax Class 80,000 deadweight ton bulk cargo ship. The vessel had taken on cargo off the east coast of the United States and was currently heading for its first offload in Indonesia. Deep inside the belly of the ship was a sophisticated command and control center.

“I can’t believe it! We’re taking fire,” yelled Alex Knox. He was sitting comfortably at a command station in front of four high-definition monitors. In his left hand, Knox yanked a control yoke to the right and pushed a pedal with his right foot. The image on two of his screens blurred as the video being sent from the drone’s cameras pointed skyward. A blast of sunlight burned the monitors white for a brief second and then a moving video of the ground came back into view.

“What do you mean, we’re taking fire?” the ship’s owner, Marshall Hail, responded.

Hail was sitting in the center of the mission room in a massive swivel chair that could be mistaken for that on the Starship Enterprise. Two twelve-inch monitors were mounted to the sides of each arm rest.

Using his right hand, Knox pulled the joystick backward and said in a sarcastic tone, “You know, like *bang-bang!* Someone is shooting a big gun at *Eagles*.”

Hail looked down at his left monitor and touched an icon on the screen, flooding the room with the audio being streamed by the drone. Most of the sound was that of wind whipping at the microphone on the birdlike drone. And then BOOM...BOOM ...two sharp cracks rattled the speakers over their heads.

“Who is shooting?” Hail asked. His voice was all business.

Of the sixteen flight and control stations that circled the room, only eight of them were being manned by Hail personnel. The current mission didn’t require sixteen butts in all sixteen chairs. *Eagles* was being flown by Knox.

“Do we have eyes on the shooter?” asked Hail in a calm but commanding tone.

Knox made a flight adjustment and answered, “I was repositioning *Eagles* when I heard the first shot. I wasn’t watching the ground feed.”

A second later Knox said, “Man-o-man, *Eagles* has suffered some sort of damage,” Knox yelled. “I can’t turn her to the right. Don’t those idiots know that the eagle is a protected species?”

Hail let out a sarcastic laugh. “In a country that kills their own people at the drop of a hat, I don’t believe that eagles, or any other living creature, is protected in any way. Renner, run diagnostics on the bird, and pull up the last minute of video that *Eagles* recorded.”

Sitting at the control station to the left of Knox, Gage Renner typed in some commands on his keyboard and responded, "Diagnostics are running, and I'm pulling up the video on large monitor number two." Renner was a hairy, thin and a wiry guy in his forties who was dressed in gym pants and a T-shirt that stated, "*I look better in 8K*". The shirt was supposed to be some sort of joke that only video nerds thought was funny, but Marshall Hail could care less. Gage Renner was an aeronautics genius and one of the original designers of the birdlike drone. He was also one of Hail's best friends and they had been roommates at MIT.

Alex Knox wasn't dressed much better than Renner. His T-shirt had a hand stenciled message on the front that read, "I'm with the stupid guy in the 8K shirt," and the finger on the hand was pointing at Renner. The antithesis of Renner, Knox was young, nineteen years old and had long, clean brown hair. He'd been recruited by Hail because he was the winner of the X-Wing Fantasy Flight Game contest. At nineteen, Knox was one of Hail's older remote pilots, and his skills with remote aircraft were astounding.

Twelve eighty-inch monitors were mounted above the sixteen command stations, creating a perfect circle of displays that looped around the room and touched end to end. The video of the last minutes of *Eagles'* flight appeared on big screen number two, directly above both Knox and Renner.

The video was high definition and crystal clear; however, the people on the ground were still very small. Even so, Hail could clearly make out a long rifle being delivered into the hands of Kim Yong Chang by one of his servants. It only took about ten seconds for the general to point the gun skyward and to fire two quick shots.

"Damn," Hail said.

Without looking up from his monitor, Renner reported, "Diagnostics show that the actuator controlling the right wing is out. Don't know if it's physically gone, wasted or the wiring is damaged."

"Losing altitude," Knox reported, talking over Renner. "We need to figure this out before *Eagles* lands in their pool."

Hail considered his options, and none of them were good. The pickup and delivery drone, code name *Fogbat*, was waiting patiently for dust off, four feet under water in a tributary of the Nam-Gang River. That placed *Fogbat's* location thirty miles away. Too far away to do them any good right now.

And then, *BOOM-BOOM*, another report from the gun on the ground popped through the speakers, and both of the video feeds from the *Eagles'* cameras went black.

"Oh, man," yelled Knox. "That was a bad one. I think they just shot *Eagles'* head off."

Realizing that his mission options were being eliminated by the second, Hail asked, “Can we make it to the river?”

Renner responded by saying, “If you want to make it to the river, *Eagles* will have to do a burn cycle to gain some altitude.”

“Can we do a burn with the bird’s head gone?” Hail asked. “Isn’t the air intake on the front of the drone?”

“I don’t know how hot things are going to get, but really, what’s the downside to it?” Renner asked rhetorically.

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” Hail agreed. “Knox, do a burn and see if you can get *Eagles* out of theater. I’d like to save that drone, if at all possible. If it flies, then fly it.”

“Will do,” Knox responded.

Pushing an icon on his control monitor labeled ROCKET IGNITION, Knox waited for something, or possibly nothing, to happen. With the bird’s cameras out of commission and with no visual reference, Knox was completely reliant on the drone’s avionic gauges and dials that were displayed on his fourth monitor. He watched the airspeed indicator rise as the rocket propelled the drone forward.

“Fifteen seconds left on the burn,” reported Renner.

“Yeah, yeah. This looks good,” Knox said in an upbeat tone. He pushed his feet into the control pedals and watched the altimeter gauge climb.

Suddenly and without warning, the avionics display went blank and was replaced with two words: SIGNAL LOST

“Ah, damn. We just lost the uplink to *Eagles*,” Knox yelled. His tone was pleading as if he expected someone to help him.

To the right of Knox sat Shana Tran, who was in charge of communications. Tran said, in a matter-of-fact yet firm tone, “You’re low and flying between two tall hills. Acquiring a signal in that area, and at that low altitude, is problematic at best.”

Unlike her two co-workers, Renner and Knox, Shana always dressed nice. Typically, she wore a dress that showed off her long legs. She was tall for an Asian woman, but she liked being tall. Tall, smart and sexy. Yeah, all that worked for her just fine.

“Well, excuse the hell out of me and my headless bird,” Knox shot back.

“Stay cool,” Tran told him. “You will be out of the hills in what—twenty seconds? And you’re still gaining altitude from the burn, so you should reacquire anytime now.”

Five seconds clicked by with nothing on the monitors but a handful of frozen words. The eerie sound of wind flapping through the room was gone as well.

Shana Tran looked confident in her assessment of the communications issue and she was far from panicking. Instead of getting all worked up about it, she inspected her red fingernail polish to make sure there were no chips. She periodically glanced back at her monitors after each finger. Tran's MIT degree focused on satellite communications and computer science. When it came to mission planning that involved network, Wi-Fi and satellite communications, Hail trusted her completely.

The avionics display in front of Knox flickered twice and then snapped back on.

"Are we good?" Tran asked everyone in the room, but her question was intended for Knox.

"Yeah, we are good." Knox said, still shaken by the outage. He was pleased to see that the bird had gained almost five hundred feet and was headed in the direction of the Taedong River.

"No, we're not," Renner yelled a moment later. "We're on fire!"

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* _ *

Down on the ground, Kim Yong Chang grunted the Korean words, "Got it," as he released the trigger of his hunting rifle.

Both of his girlfriends had yelled, "No. No," in high-pitched unison. "Don't shoot the bird," they had pleaded with Kim. But he had ignored them and shot the bird just the same.

Kim lowered the rifle from his cheek and watched the bird jerk to the left, doing its best to maintain flight while dealing with a fresh gunshot injury.

"It's OK. Look it's OK," one of the ladies said. "It's still flying."

"Not for long," Kim stated in a confident tone and put the rifle back up to his eye. Utilizing a scope, he lined up the bird in the crosshairs and then led it a little.

"Don't, don't," both women began chanting.

"Shut up," Kim told them as he squeezed off two more quick rounds.

The gun barked and bucked against Kim's shoulder as two shells ejected from the side of his weapon. He lowered the gun and waited for the effect. He thought he saw the eagle's head pop off, but as the bird flew away, he decided that it must have been a clump of feathers. After all, no bird could fly without its head. Less than ten seconds later, the tall trees at the edge of his property obstructed his view, and then the bird was gone. Kim handed the gun back to his waiting servant and noticed tears forming in his girlfriends' eyes.

"Silly women," was all he had to say to them.

Kim Yong Chang sat back down at the table, put a cloth napkin back in his lap and began to eat some toast.

* * *

“Can the bird be seen by Kim?” Hail asked, his tone measured yet urgent.

Knox responded, “No, we’re already a kilometer off the target.”

Comforted with the news, Hail smiled and said, “Well, that’s good. Nothing like shooting an eagle and watching it catch on fire. That’s normal, right? I mean that happens every day, doesn’t it?” he said sarcastically.

“About a kilometer to the river,” Knox announced.

Renner,” Hail asked, “How bad is the fire? Can it fly? Are we going to make it to the water?”

Renner checked his diagnostic screen.

Renner hummed concern in the back of his throat before saying, “I really don’t know, Marshall. It’s going to be close. When the bird’s head was shot off, the bullet must have clipped the front end of the rocket tube and angled the exhaust port into *Eagles’* tail feathers. Even though those feathers are synthetic and fire resistant, it melted the hell out of a lot of them. I think we are going to have an issue with horizontal control.”

“Check it, Knox,” Hail ordered.

Alex Knox pushed the foot pedals down and then let them back up.

“Very sluggish,” Knox reported. “Down is no problem, but up may be an issue.”

“Down is never a problem,” Hail commented. “That’s why God invented gravity.”

Turning his chair thirty degrees toward Tanner Grant, their current mother drone pilot, Hail asked, “What’s the dust-off status of *Foghat?*”

“Not going to happen in the time frame we have, Skipper,” Grant responded grimly. He typed on some keys and reported, “Thirty seconds to blow the ballast and surface and then another two minutes to get airborne. At best speed, we are ten minutes away, so—”

“So, I hate to lose *Eagles,*” Hail interrupted. His tone was gruff and combative. “A gazillion hours went into that design. If there is any way to save that bird—” His words trailed off.

Hail wanted to save the drone, but deep down he knew that it was irretrievable. The bird had to go away. It couldn’t fall into anyone’s hands, no matter whose side they were on.

Finally, giving in to the inevitable, Hail said, “Grant, keep *Foghat* under water until nightfall, and let’s get these loose ends tied up.”

“Yes, sir,” the eighteen-year-old responded. Grant was another gaming flight champion, but the boy had also mastered helicopter and car driving skills. Hail had hired him by telling him he was going to fly F-35s for the Air Force. It was a lie, but it wasn’t a complete lie. Grant had actually flown the new jet in one of Hail’s simulators.

If Shana Tran’s opinion meant anything, Grant was the best looking of the current mission crew. He was clean with blond, short-trimmed hair, good cheekbones and dressed in nice clothes, khaki shorts and a blue polo shirt that had the Hail company logo stitched into the fabric. Shana thought that Grant could even be considered cute, if he ever removed his face from a monitor long enough for someone to notice.

“Twenty seconds until splashdown,” Knox reported.

Except for the sound of the omnipresent wind pouring in from the command center’s speakers, the room was silent. No one spoke. They just waited.

“Ten seconds,” Knox said. He checked his latitude and longitude headings as he eased the drone down toward the river below. He bent the joystick to the left and pressed both pedals down half an inch.

“You got it, dude,” Grant encouraged his fellow pilot.

“Deploy the antenna float,” Hail ordered.

Shana Tran hesitated for a moment and then touched a red icon on her screen and reported, “COMM antenna float has been deployed.”

“Five, four, three, two, one and splashdown,” Renner reported as if they had just returned from space.

A large whooshing sound shot through the room’s speakers, and then the command center went deathly quiet. No wind. No water sounds. Nothing.

Hail let the room decompress for a few moments. He felt a sickness in his stomach that he got when he let people down. He had let himself down.

He asked Tran, “Do we still have an uplink with *Eagles*?”

“Yes, sir. The float is up, and the drone is online,” Tran replied, watching an active data stream on her monitor being exchanged with the sunken drone.

Whereas the mother drone, *Foghat*, who had dropped *Eagles* on station three days ago was fully submersible but *Eagles* was not. The birdlike drone was designed to contend with heavy rain. Therefore, its vital computers, cameras and control motors would remain in service, but it wasn’t designed to be under water. When Hail had asked for the communications antenna to be deployed, everyone knew why. The mission crew understood that only one signal could be sent to the drone via that communication link.

Hail took some time to think over the situation. He looked around at the eight people in front of the individual consoles. They were busy typing and pressing icons, collecting information they anticipated Hail might request.

He loved this place, this room. It had taken over two years to complete, but it was everything he had hoped for. It was his future. It was his new beginning.

Behind the sixteen command stations were two more stations that sat a foot higher on an upper tier. And behind those analysts' stations, up one more tier, was Hail's captain's chair. The stations behind the pilots were reserved for the mission analysts.

Pierce Mercier was sitting in one of them. The other analyst station to his right was empty. Pierce Mercier's main area of expertise was wet craft. He was their ocean, river, reservoir, pool and basically anything wet expert. He was also an expert in anything plant, animal or insect. Mercier had a funny French accent, and the Hail crew constantly made fun of him. He was tall, quiet, refined and polished in a manner that most of Hail's young crew was not. Marshall had hired Pierce directly from the *École Polytechnique* (ParisTech) after reading a few of his published papers on Oceanography. Mercier was in his forties and a contemporary that could talk directly to Hail. As a bonus to the mission crew, Mercier acted as a father figure to the young pilots.

"What are the chances of recovering *Eagles* from the river?" Hail asked Mercier.

Mercier had anticipated the question and instantly responded, "Not good. We are talking about twenty feet down, heavy silt, fast current and the bird will weigh at least twice its flight weight considering how much water it's taking on."

Hail didn't respond.

Mercier felt he should say something more, something positive and added, "I don't think we can save it remotely. But if we put divers into the water, we could get it back. But that is not going to happen, is it? That's not what we do."

Hail let out a big, long breath, an action as close to defeat as Marshall Hail would ever exhibit in front of his crew. He then composed himself, rubbed his chin with a long contemplative stroke and said in a poised tone, "No my friend. That is not going to happen."

Hail swiveled his massive chair toward Renner. "How much video did we record?"

Renner glanced at a screen and responded, "About 72 hours."

"That should be enough," Hail said to himself.

Marshall Hail, aboard the *Hail Nucleus* bunched his lips together and shook his head slightly, recalling how proud his avionic engineers were the day they had completed the build of the astounding birdlike drone. As the tech guys ran *Eagles* through its paces, everyone involved felt like little kids with the coolest toy on the

block. The drone wasn't perfect out of the gate, but then most ground-breaking technology is rarely good to go on the first go-around. After a few months of tweaking, the half-million-dollar bird was ready to go on its first mission. None of them would have guessed that the demise of the aircraft would come at the hands of a crazy North Korean politician who shot it out of the sky with a hunting rifle.

Hail took in another long breath and let it out slowly. It was his method of dealing with anxiety.

"Blow it up," he told Knox.

"Are you sure, Skipper?"

Hail didn't say anything; he just nodded once and tensed his jaw muscles.

Knox typed in a password and pressed an icon on the screen labeled SELF DESTRUCT. He held his finger on the icon as a timer began to count down. If he removed his finger, the countdown would be discontinued. As each digit was displayed, a bright red light pulsed under Knox's finger. A loud mechanical female voice came through the room's speakers and read off the numbers.

"Ten, nine, eight—"

No one in the room spoke. They all just waited for the end.

At zero, the drone known as *Eagles*, the first and only one of its species, dematerialized at the bottom of the Taedong River in an explosion that was heard by no one.

* * *

"*Eagles* is gone," Knox said softly.

"Yeah, but it did its job and collected the data and video we needed," Hail commiserated.

Hail checked the time on his right monitor. It was 10:30 a.m., and the *Hail Nucleus* was running on time, nearing the South China Sea. Hail suddenly felt very tired.

He turned toward Renner. "Can you copy all the video that *Eagles* shot to my NAS so I can review it tonight?"

"Sure thing, Marshall," Renner said.

The rest of the crew was looking at Hail and waiting for any further instructions.

"Do you need me here tonight when you clear *Foghat* out of theater?" Hail asked his crew.

On behalf of the crew, Pierce Mercier responded, "No, we have it, Marshall. Take whatever time you need to plan what you want to do next."

“OK,” Hail said and slid out of his Captain Kirk’s chair and onto his feet. He stretched for a moment, noticing how stiff his 40-year-old body had become from just sitting in the chair for—for—*How long had he been sitting in the chair?* It must have been at least five hours. He needed to pee.

“Let’s meet tomorrow and go over what we’ve been planning. If all the pieces fit, then I don’t see any reason why we can’t start the operation tomorrow night,” Hail told his crew. Hail looked around the room. “Does that sound good to everyone?”

There were mumblings of “*Yes, sir*”, “*Yeah*”, “*OK*” and “*That’s cool*” that drifted through the sullen room.

Marshall Hail exited the mission center and began the walk down the seemingly endless hallway of deck number six. He was both tired and exhilarated from the events that had transpired over the last three days. His lower back was bothering him, and he knew it would feel better if he did a work out. But he knew that wasn’t going to happen.

After walking about 500 feet, Hail stopped at a door that looked like all the other metal doors on the ship and reached for his badge. Thick black letters had been stenciled into the door’s shiny white paint that spelled the words: SHIP SECURITY. Hail used his proximity card to swipe himself in. The room behind the heavy metal door resembled a smaller version of the command and control center he had just left. There were four men and two women sitting behind control stations that also looked just like the control stations in the mission room.

Two of the six people were in charge of flying the drone and drone-blimp combinations. Two others analyzed the radar, images and video that was streamed back from the airborne drones. And the other two were the killers. They operated the attack drone’s weapon systems, which consisted of two AGM-114 Hellfire air-to-surface missiles, two 70mm rockets and a 30mm automatic cannon with up to 1,200 high-explosive, dual-purpose ammunition rounds.

The weapon controllers also operated the ship’s own weapons systems. The top deck of the *Hail Nucleus* had a perimeter of 2,112 feet. Spaced every hundred feet along the hull of the *Hail Nucleus* was a porthole. Behind the watertight automated porthole hatches sat two guns at the ready. Each set of guns was mounted to a reticulating platform. The Browning M2 .50 caliber Heavy Machine Gun, better known as the “Ma Deuce”, was mounted next to the XM307 ACSW Advanced Heavy Machine Gun. The Browning M2 could spit out 850 rounds per minute of armor-piercing incendiary rounds that could perforate an inch of hardened steel armor plate at a distance of a hundred yards. The XM307 was denoted as a heavy machine gun, but in fact it was a 25mm belt-fed grenade machine gun with smart shell capability. The XM307 could kill or suppress enemy combatants out to two thousand meters and destroy lightly armored vehicles, watercraft and helicopters at one thousand meters. The company who built the XM307 cancelled the project for

the gun in 2007. Hail acquired the rights and had the gun redesigned and built exclusively for his ships to protect his land-based nuclear reactor installations. Surrounding the *Hail Nuclens*, twenty sets of the guns sat at the ready, fully loaded, each gun outfitted with thousands of rounds of ammunition, waiting to be remotely pointed and fired at a target.

But the real glitz, the newest big toy that the weapon controllers liked to play with, was the ship's new railgun. The railgun used electromagnetic energy known as the Lorentz force to hurl a twenty-three-pound projectile at speeds exceeding Mach 7, or five thousand miles per hour. The weapon fire guided high-speed projectiles more than one hundred miles, which made it suitable for cruise missile defense, ballistic missile defense and various kinds of surface warfare applications. The downside to the new railgun was that it took a tremendous amount of energy to fire. The upside was the *Hail Nuclens* had a 5000-Megawatt traveling wave reactor. This power plant supplied the ship with more than twice the energy potential of an old Nimitz-class aircraft carrier. So, the electricity to fire the beast wasn't an issue. The railgun was hidden on deck inside two nuclear waste shipping containers that were connected end-to-end near the bow of the *Hail Nuclens*. The containers and railgun were mounted to a hydraulic lift that could swivel on an immense ball bearing base in a full 360-degree radius. Even though there was no warhead on the projectile, the kinetic energy of a wad of depleted uranium impacting a solid object was devastating. It typically left more dust than pieces. Either that or the shell cut a perfect hole through its target. The result from the impact of the projectile depended on the material itself. Solid objects that resisted the force were pulverized. Lighter objects with thin skins were typically bisected. A supplementary advantage to the kinetic round was that it left no trace of explosives, so that left investigators scratching their heads as to the cause of their airplane mysteriously falling from the sky.

Only one of the six people in the ship's security center looked up at Hail as he entered the room. Dallas Stone met Hail's gaze and greeted him, "Hey, Marshall. How are you doing?"

The rest of the crew then looked up and greeted their boss...their captain...their leader.

Similar to the attire worn by the crew in the mission center, everyone in the security center was dressed casually. Hail had not instituted a dress code for his crew. It was bad enough that they worked full-time and lived on a ship that was rarely docked. So as long as they did their job and were happy, he couldn't care less what they wore.

The ship had several amenities that a typical sailor would not find on a typical cargo ship. For example, there was a large pool on the top deck that could be covered by a massive sliding hunk of steel with a flip of a button. Each crew member had a cabin the size of an efficiency apartment. There was a gaming area, a

state of the art flight and driving simulator, wood shop, metal shop, sewing shop, electronic shop and an area to experiment with new creations, and a movie theater with popcorn and candy. The *Hail Nucleus* employed four excellent chefs that rotated their schedule. So, at any time during the day or night, a crew member could order a five-star meal. On the top deck, a running track outlined the perimeter of the ship. There was also a workout area with weights and treadmills, as well as an exercise room below deck in the air conditioning. On deck number seven, deep inside the ship, was a basketball court, a tennis court and a relatively small soccer field with artificial turf.

Hail understood that amenities weren't cheap, especially if it meant attracting talented minds. An attack drone could cost millions. If the difference between hiring a really smart designer who built a brilliant attack drone or a *kind-of-smart* guy whose drone crashed was the cost of a basketball court, the issue was a no-brainer. All one had to do was take a look at the Google campus, and the business sense was evident.

"Is there anything going on?" Hail asked Dallas Stone, the head of his ship's security center.

Dallas rubbed his three-day beard. He was either starting to grow something new, or he was simply too lazy to shave it off. Dallas glanced at his monitors for a moment.

"No, all quiet on the sea today," Dallas confirmed. "*Prince* is secured to the blimp above us, floating at two thousand feet. Her radar and video screens are clear. No potential threats in the immediate area."

Dallas was in his early twenties, medium in every way: height, weight, looks and dress. The only thing that was above medium was his brain and his ability to analyze and react quickly to threats on the *Hail Nucleus*. Hail's father had known Dallas Stone's father, Mark Stone, who had been a young officer on several of the ships Hail's dad had commanded. Dallas had been through the ROTC and wanted to fly jets. Mark Stone had heard about the little circus Hail was running and asked Hail for a favor. Instead of his son joining the Air Force, Mark Stone asked Hail if his son could join his menagerie. No father wants to see their son in danger. And Mark Stone knew that flying Hail's drones was a lot safer than running midnight sorties in an F-35 over Libya.

Hail looked over at Dallas Stone sitting there concentrating on his screens, and he realized that this young man might be the only person on the *Hail Nucleus* with any type of military training, albeit the training might be minor.

Without turning to look at her, Hail asked the woman sitting next to Stone, "Taylor, what does *Queen* see?"

The nineteen-year-old attractive blond sitting at the station to the left of Dallas, zoomed out her main monitor and reported, "*Queen* has been doing a 360-degree flight pattern at a fifty-kilometer distance from the *Hail Nucleus*. She is currently

flying at an altitude of fifty-two hundred feet. Radar shows three tankers, two cargo ships, four fishing boats and two pleasure craft in our vicinity. The video feed that is being streamed from *Queen* shows no unusual activity taking place on the decks of any of those vessels. The vessels' registrations are all clean and all check out."

Taylor was a refugee of sorts. Hail had discovered her living near the docks in the Port of Charleston. Taylor had tried to steal some food that was waiting to be loaded onto the *Hail Nucleus*. The girl had been busted and then delivered to Hail by the port authority officers. Hail was asked if he wanted to press charges. Instead, Hail had brought Shana Tran into the room. She had a friendly demeanor that women liked. He asked the officers to leave them alone so Hail and Shana could have a talk with Taylor. After about an hour, it was apparent to both Hail and Tran that all Taylor needed to turn her life around was a purpose. At that time, she had only been seventeen years old. And in the last two years, since the young woman had decided to stay on the ship, she had never told Hail her last name. But Hail knew it. Before they had even left Charleston that day, he had Taylor's background investigated. Hail knew what had happened to her parents—well, parent. Her father was unknown and her mother was deceased. Taylor was their only kid. But she wasn't a unique personality on the ship. Most of the crew on the *Hail Nucleus* had a gloomy history and had some issues to work out.

"So much for what's on the water," Hail responded, "but what about the air?"

A military-looking young man, Lex Vaughn, to Hail's right answered, "We have two commercial aircraft within a two hundred-mile radius and five smaller aircraft on the scope. None of their paths are vectored in our direction, but of course we will watch them closely."

Hail nodded his head at Lex, comforted that the *Hail Nucleus* and its contents were safe for the time being. Lex Vaughn acted military, but Hail figured he had picked all that up from movies he had watched. Some of his crew used military terms such as "*Roger that*" and "*Affirmative*." Sometimes they referred to distance in miles and at other times in kilometers. With no military training, Hail was always surprised how much movie talk his crew brought to the job.

"Thanks, people," he said, already turning to exit.

"Thank you, sir," his staff responded.

His security staff was wound a little tighter than his mission crew, and he liked it that way.

"If we don't see you, have a good night," Hail heard Stone say just before the door clanked shut. Hail turned to his right and began walking down the hall toward his stateroom. *Have a good night*; he had heard Dallas tell him.

"*I haven't had a good night in two years*," he thought, and a wave of depression passed through him that was so intense it almost brought him down to his knees. It happened that way sometimes. Depression jumped on him fast—like a wild animal.

He could go for days pretending that nothing was wrong—that nothing had happened—that the world had not really changed all that much, but it had.

Marshall Hail's entire world had been altered. All the people in it were different. Each one of them appeared more animalistic in some way. He understood that he had changed as well. He was different all the way down to his core. At one point, Hail would have considered himself a passive person. But now, he recognized that he had become more barbaric in the last two years. He had developed a savage side that he didn't have before. He also possessed a new ability to be cruel. He fully realized that he had turned away from the light and was walking slowly into darkness. And making it all that much more detestable was that it had been a conscious decision on his part. Before, he had been put on the Earth to help people.

Yet two years later, he had been reborn as a predator and had been left on the Earth to kill people. But in a strange way, he felt that the people he killed—their deaths would still help people in some way. He could reconcile his actions in a number of ways. But, when it came down to it, a prominent group of individuals were putting up large sums of money to make sure nasty people were removed from the planet. Hail didn't feel it was up to him to judge. Other people had already taken on that task. He was simply there as the executioner—an exterminator of vermin that fed off the fear of others.

Hail arrived at his stateroom, held up his prox card and entered his oasis. This was home. Well, this was one of his homes, but they were all identical. He had an identical stateroom on the *Hail Atom*, the *Hail Electron*, the *Hail Proton* and the rest of his full-size cargo ships. Each of his cargo vessels were exactly the same. Same mission center, same security center, same armaments, same everything. If one of his ships was upgraded in some manner, all of his ships would receive the same upgrade. The design of his ships was perfection, and even Hail, with his many flaws, knew not to mess with perfection. If one was perfect, then they all needed to be perfect.

The living room he entered was stark and minimalistic. There was a leather couch, an end table, a matching reclining chair and a coffee table placed on a hardwood floor. He crossed through the living room and entered his bedroom. His bedroom could have been mistaken for that of a hotel. There was almost nothing in the room that personalized the space. No photos, curios, knickknacks or paintings.

On his way to the shower, Hail caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He stopped and looked more closely, but he wasn't looking at himself. Stuck in the corner of the mirror was a photo of his wife and two girls. Maybe the only item that personalized the space. He allowed his hand to reach out and touch the small piece of colorful parchment. He then glanced back up at the mirror in time to see a single tear form in his left eye and then streak down his cheek, leaving a thin glimmering trail of sorrow down his tired face. Hail rubbed the tear away and then squashed his face together between both of his large hands. There was a pressure forming in his head and massaging his face provided a little relief. He was under a great deal of

stress. Tomorrow would be an important day, maybe the most important day of his life, and that was saying a lot. The billions that he had made during his lifetime were earned with a number of lifetime achievements, many great accomplishments to be proud of, but all of those didn't mean anything to him now.

Hail reached down and touched his wife's face. She was so beautiful, and she had always told him how handsome he was. Maybe he had been handsome years ago. But the man that was looking back at him in the mirror looked fatigued and worn-out, as if he spent much of his time snorting crank or shooting some other destructive drug. Hail felt he had aged ten years in only a matter of two. His hair, at one time, had been an attractive shade of light brown, but now it was turning prematurely grey. The lines in his long and strong face, *character lines* as his wife had referred to them, now appeared to be deep furrows that carved a sorrowful and cross expression into his face.

The man in the mirror looked down again and touched each of his twin girls' faces on the photograph. Blond and eight-years old forever, frozen in the photograph taken moments before their flight from Istanbul to their connecting flight to America. It had been so long since he had last seen them. He missed them so much that it made his heart hurt.

Hail removed his shirt and looked himself over again, taking in the big picture. Once in great shape, his six-foot-one, 220-pound frame, was now wilting. Just like that. A big-ole tree that was beginning to shrivel up and lean. He knew he needed to stay in shape and told himself that he would work out tonight. But as one side of his brain was already confirming the appointment, the other side of his brain knew that it wasn't going to happen. He was going to spend the evening scanning and documenting all 72 hours of video that was shot by the dead drone, *Eagles*. If the mission was on for the next day, then the intelligence that could be disseminated from the video would be vital. No actionable intelligence meant no mission. Simple as that. The workout would have to wait, but the shower was important. It would revive him. It would allow him to refocus.

Taking another quick glance at the photograph, Hail reluctantly left the image and entered the bathroom. He was met by yet another mirror above the bathroom sink. He saw something new in that mirror that he hadn't seen in the other. He saw a killer. As of yet, as of today, he wasn't a killer. But tomorrow he would be an official killer. A killer of his fellow man. A murderer? No. In his mind there was big difference between a killer and murderer. Murder implied that a crime had taken place. The person he would kill tomorrow, and those that would follow, were all murderers. Hail was the *yin* to the murderers' *yang*. He was the force that would offset the glob of human sewage that had slipped all the way down the purulent hill and just needed that little extra nudge to allow it to fall over the rim and tumble into the pit of Hell.

Hail got into the shower and started counting to 120. He didn't realize he was counting inside his head. Since he was a small child, his father, Tucker M. Hail, had made him take military showers. His father was big time military. The regulation two-minute shower got sent down the family ranks until it landed on him. He had taken a two-minute shower for so long that if he was forced to stay under the water for three full minutes, he would just have to stand there and do nothing for an extra sixty seconds. And doing nothing wasn't part of Marshall Hail's DNA. Doing nothing meant no movement. No movement meant no advancement. If you were not moving forward, then you were technically moving backward, because everyone else around you was moving forward. *If you didn't move forward, you were going to be left behind, and if that was the case, then why even exist?* He didn't know if that was yet another piece of military training his father had instilled in him, or maybe it was just his own philosophy. A suit he had grown into.

The timer in Hail's head reached two minutes, and he stepped out of the shower and dried off. He only allowed himself ten seconds for that task. The rest of the bathroom activities were allocated a scant sixty seconds, and then he exited the bathroom. Hail was thankful that his dad had not set a time limit on taking a dump. Rules like that could *really* screw up a kid.

Hail's wife and his children thought that his lickity-split showers were funny, but he didn't agree. Hail didn't appreciate feeling like an oddball. He enjoyed fitting in. Unlike the other techno-nerds at MIT, Hail felt he was one of the few who could invent as well as sit in the boardroom and sell. Most of the time, those two traits didn't exist in the same person. And if they did, they came at a price. Some other important social skillset would have typically have been omitted. But anyone who knew Marshall Hail would be hard-pressed to find a flaw in his character.

Hail stopped long enough in the bedroom to pull on some underwear and a pair of grey sweatpants. He had stopped wearing button up pants. One day, an extra inch of fat had appeared around his waist and from that point on, button up pants had become uncomfortable. Stretchy pants felt much better.

In a room adjacent to his bedroom was a mini control room—his office. It was outfitted with four large monitors and one giant monitor the size of a big screen TV. A fast computer interconnected all the gear. Hail considered lying down in bed to view *Eagles'* video footage, but he felt he might drift off and waste a good amount of the afternoon. There was still the possibility of falling asleep even if he was sitting in his comfortable high-back chair in his small office. But upright and attentive was more practical than recumbent.

Shirtless, wearing only his grey sweatpants, Hail walked into his little office. He tried to recall the last time he had slept. It had to have been sometime within the last twenty-four hours, but nailing the exact time really didn't matter, so he abandoned the query and sat down in front of his wall of monitors.

Hail logged in and clicked on an icon labelled *Hail NAS*. Inside that folder were about thirty other folders. He clicked on the folder called *Eagles Video*. Inside that folder were scores of folders that contained dozens of video files that *Eagles* had recorded from its time flying above the North Korean compound. Hail opened a text editor and then opened the first video file of *Eagles* on station in Kangdong. As the video streamed across his large screen, Hail began to type out dates, times and related notes.

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE HEADQUARTERS—LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

Three people sat around a large mahogany table. Two men and one woman. The man at the end of the table was Jarret Pepper, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. He was new to the job; appointed by the new president only a month prior to this meeting. Pepper was a tall man in his early fifties with a long stern face and a full head of grey hair that always looked like it needed to be combed. After his divorce, and not possessing the ability to match suits, ties, and shirts, Pepper streamlined to the essentials. He had thrown his old clothes into a donation dumpster and went to a man's outlet store. He picked out 7 identical grey suits, white shirts and ties. The salesperson said he looked good – now he would look good every day.

The woman at the table was Karen Wesley, Director of Analysis. She had been in the role for the last five years having risen through the ranks at the agency. Wesley was a thin woman in her mid-forties with plain-looking features and black hair cut short for efficient, easy care. Dressed in a suit that implied nothing but business, Wesley looked the part of a consummate bureaucrat. She knew she worked in an agency dominated by men and even though 4% percent of the positions were held by women, those numbers were confined largely to the GS-8 to GS-12 levels. The top senior executive ranks were still predominately filled by men. Wesley continually felt that she had to prove herself.

She could have been one of the CIA's great spies because she was totally unremarkable. This was a great trait in the spy game because no one noticed you. Potential counterspies would never think, "What a great looking woman," or "What a hideous creature." She was positively plain, and she liked it that way. Introspectively, she associated this with her quick rise within the agency. Her short black hair was just long enough to make her look womanly, but short enough where a quick comb was all it took when she got out of the shower. Her face was normal. Not pretty. Not ugly. Simply unremarkable.

The second man at the table was Paul Moore, the Director of Operations. Moore was a short and thick man—thick everywhere. The head that sat on his neck was big and bald. His lips were full, and most of the time they were moving. To Pepper, it seemed that words were always coming out from between Moore's lips. Today, Moore was dressed in a blue pinstriped suit. Pepper wondered if Moore's wife bought his suits for him. Moore's ties perfectly matched the colors in his shirts, and that indicated a female touch.

Pepper felt a tinge of envy for his Director of Operations. He appeared to have it all figured out. Great wife. Great kids. Great job. Low golf handicap. Moore was even able to squeeze in a little fun on the side. Pepper admired Moore's ability to compartmentalize his tough job. Sure, it was a demanding job, but there should still be a little time to breathe easy and have some fun. Most of the CIA's executive officers lived and breathed the coveted positions

"OK, I would like to resolve this issue during this meeting so we can move onto other matters," Pepper told his staff.

Karen Wesley was the first to respond. She cleared her throat so her voice would carry and had made a habit of inflecting a bit of bite into her tone.

"We have completed our evaluations and hammered out the entire list of bounty figures, save one. I believe the only bit of business we need to clear up is the bounty figure for our number one most wanted, Kim Yong Chang."

"What are your thoughts?" asked Pepper. "Our current reward is already at twenty-five million dollars for Kim Yong Chang."

Wesley consulted her notebook and flipped through a few pages before responding.

"Research shows that larger bounties entice greater and more sophisticated responses. It's not just Kim Yong Chang's butler that would give him up, but entire underground coordinated gangs will make a run at that kind of money. The more money to go around, the more each one gets, and the easier it is to justify the risk. I think we should increase the bounty on Kim Yong Chang up to fifty million."

Paul Moore chimed in, "Does it really matter if it's twenty-five million or fifty million? Realistically, how many times have we paid out any of these bounties? How many times has someone killed or turned over anyone on the CIA's or FBI's Top Ten Most Wanted list? Like never. It just doesn't happen. So why not just make it a gazillion dollars? It's just chump change anyway. What's the CIA's annual budget? Like sixty billion a year? And that's not including our black ops."

Being new on the job, Jarret Pepper didn't really know how to take the brash Paul Moore. In previous meetings, Paul had demonstrated that he had a big mouth. Moore said what was on his mind. Sometimes the stuff was right on the mark, and at other times Pepper got the sense that Moore just wanted to move the meeting along so he could get in a few swings on the back nine before it got dark.

Karen Wesley started to say something, but Moore talked over her.

"All of this—putting prices on terrorists' heads—seems a little *wild-wild-West* to me. Does it really work?" Moore asked.

Wesley answered, "It's more than just a figure. Our evaluation places a monetary value on the target. The size of the reward doesn't only indicate who is important to us; but it indicates who is *more* important to us. It's a method of ranking these dangerous individuals in a fashion that the public can understand. The more we want them, the higher the reward."

Pepper remained silent, absorbing the back-and-forth exchange between Wesley and Moore.

Moore said, "I don't think this is worth meeting about. We know who we want to capture or kill and we know the order, so why go through this exercise? Why not just add five million a pop, like the reward for the tenth guy on the list is ten million, number nine is fifteen million, number eight is twenty million, and so on?"

There was a long silence, and it appeared that Wesley was waiting on Pepper to add his two-cents to the conversation.

The silence continued. Moore looked at Wesley and then at Pepper.

Wesley looked at Moore, and when Moore's eyes shifted to Pepper, she looked at Pepper as well.

Pepper was in no hurry to provide his two cents. He considered the fact, that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. It was his job to predict the reaction.

Pepper finally said, "I need to brief our new president in two days. The people attending that meeting will be the Director of National Intelligence, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the director of the FBI. I would like to have a solid reason for spending more of the taxpayers' money on the outside chance that we have to pay one of these bounties. Placing arbitrary amounts on highly sought terrorists really doesn't do it for me, and I don't think it will do it for the people in that meeting either."

Pepper looked at Moore, expecting him to say something, but Moore remained silent.

Pepper continued, "So, I would like a written justification as to why some of the detestable people on our Top Ten Terrorist list are worth only five million, and why we feel that others are worth fifty million. I'm not expecting a one-inch-thick slab of paper on my desk, but we should have some research and corresponding data that backs up how we arrived at our bounty numbers. Are we good with that?"

"Sounds good to me," Wesley said.

Moore looked like he could see a light at the end of what was supposed to be a long meeting and said, "Absolutely, Jarret. Makes perfect sense."

Pepper didn't detect a tone of placation in Moore's response, but he didn't know the man all that well.

"So, are we all good with fifty million dollars for Kim's head?" Wesley asked.

“Sure, but make sure you justify how much we’ll pay for the rest of him,” Pepper joked.

No one laughed.

Tough crowd, Pepper thought.

JAVA SEA—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

Hail had reviewed a few hours of *Eagles'* video when an instant message popped up on his screen. The message was from Dallas Stone in the ship's security center.

It read: *Hey Marshall, we have a security situation that may require your attention.*

Hail checked the time on the corner of the monitor. It was about two in the afternoon. Hail's stomach grumbled, reminding him that he had not eaten in the last twelve hours.

Hail typed a reply to the instant message: *On my way.* He hit send and logged off his computer.

Hail left his little office, walked back to his bedroom. After getting dressed, he left his stateroom. It took him about three minutes to walk the 700 feet to the security center. He knew this because he was kind of a math guy and knew that the average person walked about four feet per second, and the security center was on the other end of the ship. Simple math yielded the solution—175 seconds for a one-way pedestrian trip.

Seven hundred feet later, Hail held his proximity card to the scanner, and the lock inside the bulkhead door to the security center clanged open.

Unlike the last time he had walked in and hardly anyone had paid attention, this time six happy faces were all looking at him and smiling.

Hail looked confused. "What the heck is up? And what's so funny?" Hail asked.

Six laughs accompanied six devious grins. Other than Pierce Mercier, who was sitting at one of the analyst's stations, no one in the room was older than 22 years of age.

"Pirates," Dallas Stone told Hail.

"What?" Hail heard himself say, but he already knew what Dallas was telling him. He simply didn't believe him.

"That's right," Dallas said, laughing. "Some dumb-ass pirates are approaching us in a twenty-foot wooden fishing vessel. What are they thinking?" Dallas slapped himself on the side of his head.

The expressions didn't change on his crew's faces. His pilots and analysts just stared at Hail with big grins plastered across their animated faces. Working in the security center was a pretty boring job. Up until now, the *Hail Nucleus* had never been attacked, so this minor low-risk diversion from the monotony had his young crew excited.

"This should be interesting," Hail laughed, clapping his hands together.

Taylor informed Hail, “Oh, they also have a mother boat sitting about a mile off our port side, but it looks like they only have a single .50 caliber machine gun mounted on its bow.”

Dallas turned to look at his monitors and said, “Check it out.”

Hail squeezed in between Dallas’ and Taylor’s stations. Dallas pointed at a set of screens that had a video playing on them. One screen showed a view from a camera on *Prince* shooting directly down on the small wooden boat. The small craft appeared to be powered by an outboard motor. A driver was muscling the tiller through four-foot waves. Hail saw five men on the boat—some with shirts, some without—but all of them had a rifle of some type slung over their shoulders. Stone’s other monitor displayed a video being shot from one of the *Hail Nucleus*’ gun ports. The camera mounted in that particular port was sitting at an angle of forty-five degrees to the sea below. A crisp and clean image of the approaching vessel was being electronically streamed from the port camera to the security center. Hail estimated that the pirates’ wooden boat was about a thousand yards off the *Hail Nucleus*’ port side.

“Is our deck clear? No one is up top, are they?”

Dallas answered, “The deck has been cleared, and we are locked down.”

“*Queen* has a close-up of the mother boat, and I have that video on this monitor,” Taylor told Hail, pointing at the screen closest to her boss.

Hail turned his attention to Taylor’s monitor. Her screen showed a white boat that was much larger than the wooden boat. It was newer in design and age. The mother boat appeared to be made of fiberglass. It was white and shiny and sat low in the water. Only three men could be seen on its deck.

Hail realized that a fiberglass boat wasn’t the best attack vessel, but then these dirt-poor Indonesian people didn’t have the luxury of being picky. They had probably liberated it from pleasure seekers or fishermen who had entered an area of the Java Sea that they now regretted. Hail thought about how desperate these pirates must be to think they could pull up next to a massive cargo ship in a dinky wooden boat and try to take over. He actually admired them in a way. What balls.

“What do you want to do, Skipper?” Dallas asked.

Indecisiveness wasn’t part of Hail’s character. He was raised by a decisive man in a decisive manner. Indecision had been interpreted as a weakness by his father. But Hail had to think this situation over for a moment.

“I don’t know,” he said to buy some time. “It doesn’t even seem fair—” and he let his sentence trail off.

He started again, “I mean; I really don’t want to vaporize these poor fools unless we have to. Does anyone have any thoughts?”

Lex Vaughn, one of the two weapon controllers, suggested, “We could get close and personal to scare them away.” Vaughn had just graduated from high school and

had recently joined Hail's crew on the *Hail Nucleus*. He had tested very high on the online flight simulator exercise that his team had developed, and so far, Hail thought that Vaughn was fitting in nicely.

Titus Penn, the other weapon controller, suggested, "Or we could just open up with one of our ship's fifties in front of them. That would scare the hell out of me if I was a pirate in a crappy wooden boat."

Penn's addition to the crew had been much different than that of Vaughn's. Titus Penn had been orphaned years ago in an atrocity that had taken his parents' lives. With no other living relatives, Hail had become Penn's guardian, as he had for many of the young people on board. Penn was only fourteen when his parents had left his life. For the last two years, he had been schooled, fed, housed and nurtured aboard the *Hail Nucleus*. The ship had become his home.

Marshall considered both options for a moment. He watched the small pirates' boat bounce across the waves under full power. Water was shooting up from the sides of the boat as the pirates closed within 500 yards of the *Hail Nucleus*.

His next question was directed toward both of his weapon controllers.

"What do we have in our medium-class drone that is charged, armed and ready to fly?"

Penn and Vaughn began to flip through screens on their monitors.

Penn was the first to report, "I have *Ratt* and *Scorpion* ready for launch."

Vaughn said a moment later, "And I have *Poison* ready to go."

"That sounds good," Hail said, his tone balanced and assertive. "Handoff *Ratt* to Stone so each of you is flying a single drone. Open the hatch on the deck and get them airborne."

"Yes, sir," Penn said, transferring the *Ratt*'s flight control to Dallas Stone.

The assignment made sense, because Taylor was still controlling the in-flight attack drone, code-named *Queen*. And Dallas' drone, *Prince*, was static and clipped to the underside of a blimp thousands of feet above the *Hail Nucleus*.

Vaughn pressed an icon on a screen and reported, "The deck hatch is open, and we are good to spin up."

The three pilots, who had each been assigned a weapon, pulled in a bar from the sides of their stations that swiveled into place in front of them. The bar had a combination of joysticks and flight controls mounted to its stainless-steel surface. Each of the young men placed their feet on control pedals under their stations.

Hail asked Taylor, "Can you please bring up the video on the hatch camera and track the group until they go over the rail?"

"Will do," Taylor said, transferring the video from the hatch camera to the monitor closest to Hail.

His stomach growled loud enough for everyone in the room to hear.

“I think we should get some popcorn,” Hail told his crew.

“Yeah!” squealed Alba, clapping her hands together. “Popcorn and an action movie.”

Alba was occupying the second analyst’s station next to Pierce Mercier. Both the analyst’s stations were built behind the pilots’ stations and were elevated on the second tier. Behind the analysts’ stations was a third tier that held Hail’s big captain’s chair. Alba was the oldest of the young crew in the room. She was twenty-two, but Hail thought she acted more like sixteen. She had graduated from Stanford University with a degree in Foreign Language Study. His analyst had short dark hair, and Hail couldn’t recall ever seeing the vivacious woman without a smile on her face. Alba Zorn was a security analyst. Specifically, she was the ship’s language specialist.

“Of course, you guys are flying,” he told the pilots.

“And your hands are full too,” he said to Taylor. “So that leaves me, Mercier and Alba to share the popcorn.”

For the first time since Hail arrived in the security center, the two data analysts looked pleased to be sitting one row back from the action.

“Can you do the honors?” Hail asked Pierce Mercier.

Mercier picked up the phone, dialed a six-digit number and requested a bowl of popcorn.

Hail watched Dallas’ and Taylor’s monitors. He considered climbing up the two tiers behind them to sit in his chair, but he had done a lot of sitting today and felt like standing. Standing burned more calories, and this might be the only exercise he would get today.

The cameras from *Poison*, *Ratt* and *Scorpion* were transmitting videos to each of the pilot’s stations. Each of the weapon systems lifted off from deck two and began flying toward the light above.

“Don’t forget the lemonade,” Hail told Mercier before he hung up the phone.

“Yay!” Alba yelled, clapping her hands together again. “Popcorn and lemonade and an action movie. Dang, most people would have to be on a cargo ship in the middle of the frickin’ Java Sea to get an afternoon of fun like that.”

“Clearing the hatch in three, two, one. The hatch is cleared,” reported Taylor.

“What do you want to do, Skipper?” Dallas Stone asked.

Hail looked at the monitor that showed the pirates’ boat slowing as they approached the port side of the *Hail Nucleus*.

“Take the drones over the starboard side. Stay low, circle around the back of the ship and come up behind the pirates. I think a surprise meeting would be best.”

“Roger that,” Dallas said.

In a tight group, the three weapons traversed the width of the ship, flying just feet above the white cargo containers. Hail watched the videos streaming until the drones disappeared over the starboard railing.

Hail looked at Mercier sitting in front of his station, doing nothing except waiting for the popcorn, and asked him, “Mercier, please get a camera on these pirates and let’s see if we can ID their country by what they are wearing.”

“Sure, Marshall,” Mercier said, “But you don’t need an analyst to tell you that it doesn’t matter where they are from. They are here for the money. If they can take control of the ship, they will hold it until they receive a ransom.”

Hail huffed and said, “Well, we know that isn’t going to happen. Please humor me.”

Mercier touched his screen and opened another gun port on the port side of the *Hail Nucleus*. The angle from this camera was much better than the previous view. Mercier zoomed in so close that instead of five nondescript pirates, five ugly men with stained and rotten teeth appeared on Mercier’s monitor.

“Transfer it to big screen number two, please,” Hail requested.

Mercier touched a few icons, and the video from his small screen appeared on one of the big screens mounted on the wall above the crew.

“Maybe I won’t have that popcorn,” said Alba cynically. “Can you zoom out a little,” she asked Mercier. “Sometimes close is just too close.”

“I just want to see their clothes, or whatever clothes they have on,” Mercier said. He zoomed out about four feet.

Mercier studied the pirates for a moment and said, “I can’t tell anything by the dirty rags they’re wearing. Indonesian or Malaysian maybe. It is so damn hard to tell. They are all carrying AK-47s if that helps at all?”

“Yeah, right,” Hail laughed. “Every man, woman and child in this hemisphere carries an AK-47.”

“Just coming around the stern of the ship,” Dallas reported.

“Stay low; stay low,” Hail told him. “I want you guys almost touching the water. What’s the status on the mother boat?”

Taylor moved her joystick and refocused *Queen’s* camera on the boat.

“They are still a long way away,” she said. “I don’t think they’ll be able to see *Ratt*, *Scorpion* and *Poison* from that distance. And even if they do, they won’t have a clue what they’re seeing.”

The pirates’ boat touched the hull of the *Hail Nucleus*. At twenty knots, a light touch from the massive cargo ship was amplified into a violent jarring of the small pirates’ craft. The pirates all fell down in the middle of their boat and then scrambled back up to their feet.

“What are they doing?” Hail asked.

“Not much,” Mercier replied. “If they have done this before, they are expecting our ship to start making sharp turns. The other thing they would anticipate is getting hit in the face by a firehose shot from a panicked crew on deck. None of that is happening and they’re wondering why.”

“OK, so what are they going to do next?” Hail asked Mercier.

“If they follow “*International Pirate Protocol*” or IPP,” Mercier joked, “then they’re going to swing hooks up to the railing and climb aboard.”

“Well, we can’t have that, can we?” Hail said emphatically.

“Where is the popcorn?” Alba asked.

“We’re almost up to them,” Dallas informed everyone. “Thirty meters.”

“Pull back on the camera about five feet,” Hail told Mercier.

Mercier zoomed out until it showed the wooden boat next to the *Hail Nucleus* with a perimeter of five feet of water surrounding it. The waves were hammering on the little boat and Hail wondered how long the pirates could hold out under those current conditions.

“Are you guys ready?” Hail asked his pilots.

“Ready,” they said.

“All right, bring up the drones and meet our pirate friends.”

There was a lot of commotion down on the sea below. The pirates’ little boat was tipping from side to side and bouncing around from the five-foot wakes that rolled off the *Hail Nucleus*. The pirates didn’t seem to notice the three remote flying machines that had just appeared above the dirty lip of their boat. The flying saucer-like aircraft, roughly the size of a big hula hoop, hovered above the water, keeping perfect pace with their boat. *Ratt* was flying in front of the bow of the pirates’ boat, and *Scorpion* and *Poison* maintained a measured three-foot distance on each side of the pirates’ wooden craft.

For what seemed like a minute to the security crew, but was closer to fifteen seconds, the pirates remained oblivious to the strange objects that hovered and surrounded them. The pirate who was in the far back of the boat wrestling with the powerful outboard engine was the first man to notice *Ratt* hovering directly in front the boat. An instant later, his expression turned from confusion to fear when he noticed the other two air machines on either side of his boat. The pirate working the tiller yelled something to his men who scanned their surroundings and took in the strange sight as well. Initially, the grimy and water-soaked pirates looked at the objects as if they were alien invaders that had come to earth from outer-space, which wasn’t far off the mark from their perspective. Then the pirates all seemed to recognize the outline of a weapon hanging underneath each of the flying saucers that they were very familiar with. Each pirate in the boat had one hanging over their own

shoulder. The only difference was the .45 caliber, fully automatic mini-gun mounted under the remote-controlled drones could fire at double the rate of the pirates' AK-47s. The flying guns also held a hundred and twenty rounds of barrel-fed ammunition. The pirates' AK-47s had a single magazine of thirty rounds.

One of the pirates was so startled by the sight of the strange contraptions that he inadvertently squeezed off a burst of fire. Two of his six rounds hit the top of *Poison's* Kevlar cover, the part the pirates would describe as the top of the flying saucer. Those two 7.62 rounds harmlessly skidded off *Poison's* domed surface and bounced off the side of the *Hail Nucleus*, making movie ricochet sounds. Two more rounds hit the mini-gun mounted under *Poison* and went pinging off into the ocean. The last two rounds missed everything entirely and harmlessly disappeared into the distance.

The blast of gunfire drew the attention of the rest of the pirates, and they raised their guns up to their shoulders and took aim at the closest alien.

Each of the cameras mounted to each of the flying weapons streamed the video back to the security center on the *Hail Nucleus*. The video that arrived showed five pirates that looked both scared and angry.

"What do you want to do, Marshall?" Dallas asked. "We have them at gunpoint."

Hail looked at the pirates. They stared back at him through the eyes of his avionic soldiers.

"God, what would it be like to be one of these guys?" Hail thought. Born into abject poverty; having to scrape by for the very basics of life. And the kicker was that their lives would never change. No retirement. No relief. Day after day, doing whatever they had to do to eat and keep a cardboard roof over their heads. Death might even be welcomed after a lifetime of that. Hell, maybe even after a decade of that type of existence. Today, however, the Hail crew would not be the answer to those prayers or any of their problems.

"Alba, do you know Indonesian?" Hail asked.

Alba put down the bowl of popcorn that had just arrived and said, "I know a little of the Bahasa Indonesia form of the language. It is the official modified form of Malay."

Hail responded, "I don't know what any of that means, but it has to be better than nothing. Open a microphone and speaker channel on *Ratt*."

"Give me a minute," Alba said.

On the water, the pirates appeared both confused and paralyzed. They stared at their flying captors, apparently trying to make up their minds about what to do next. Their choice was to either continue on with what had become a very odd abduction scenario or cut their losses and return to the mother boat.

Hail looked over the Indonesians closely, trying to determine which one was the leader. Their body language was being continually interrupted by the bumps and dips in the ocean. The man sitting at the back of the boat and operating the outboard engine had it easy. The others were trying to remain standing while keeping their guns trained on the targets surrounding them.

Hail decided that it really didn't matter who was in charge. There were no decisions to be made by the pirates. Hail was making all the decisions on their behalf. Live or die. It was all a matter of one command that exited his mouth and entered the ears of his pilots.

"I have comms open, Marshall," Alba reported.

"Tell them this: 'This is the captain of *Hail Nucleus*. Turn your boat around and go home. If you do, no harm will come to you or your men,'" Hail said.

Alba made an adjustment to the TC Helicon Voice Modulator and set the dial for BARITONE MALE. She slipped on a headset and adjusted the microphone in front of her mouth.

She then translated Hail's words.

Hail and the crew waited for a reaction.

The pirate closest to *Ratt* was so startled when the weird thing started talking, he fell back into the boat and opened fire. His volley of lead wasn't aimed well, and the rounds uselessly shot skyward.

Hail shook his head and said to Alba, "Tell them this: 'Turn your boat around right now. Go home or we will open fire.'"

Alba repeated the phrase in her best Indonesian.

The mechanical Indonesia voice that came out of *Ratt* was low, loud and clear. Hail could tell the men in the boat had understood Alba's instructions. They just didn't like the message. They began arguing with one another. There was a rapid fire of curt exchanges that didn't appear to resolve the situation. The pirate who had fallen down in the boat got back to his feet and purposely pointed his weapon at *Ratt* and appeared to be ready to fire.

"Screw this," Hail said. "Vaughn, what kind of angle do you have on their bow gunwale?"

"I'm good," Vaughn said, "But Dallas needs to move *Ratt* out of the way."

"I'm on it," Dallas said, tilting his joystick to the right. "I should be clear now."

The pirates looked happy when the flying gun-alien-thing that had hovered over their bow began to move away from the front of their boat. To Hail, he sensed they thought that their recent gunfire had scared the thing away.

"Fire," Hail ordered.

Vaughn lifted the safety latch and slid his finger onto the trigger of his left joystick. On his screen, he centered a red laser on the top rail of the pirate boat. Confident with the fix on his target, Vaughn fired the machine gun. The speakers in the security center crackled with loud static as the barrage of brass and lead peaked and distorted the drone's microphones.

The pirates jumped and launched themselves toward the back of their boat as *Poison* spat out bullets. Chunks of wood and flying splinters chattered off the vessel's bow. The pirate driving their boat cranked the motor hard to the right. As the roar of gunfire subsided, it veered away from the *Hail Nucleus*. The barrel on *Poison* smoked, leaving a dull grey cloud behind it as the flying weapons maintained their original speed and position next to the *Hail Nucleus*.

"Should we pursue them?" Dallas asked.

Before Hail could respond, Taylor, who was still flying the attack drone *Queen* high above, said, "The mother boat is on the move and closing rapidly on our position. There is one guy manning the .50 caliber and they are vectored to reach us in about forty-seven seconds."

"Get one of the port cameras on them," Hail requested.

Being one of the few crew members with free hands, Mercier pulled up the console and took control of the camera that had been tracking the pirates below. He pointed it up and out toward the sea. It took him a few second of scanning, but he finally acquired the inbound boat, drew a crude box around the vessel with his finger and set the camera to AUTO TRACK.

Hail studied the fiberglass boat that was approaching the *Hail Nucleus*. From the front, it looked like a twenty-six-foot Boston Whaler; year unknown. The only modification from the stock craft was the addition of a large .50 caliber Browning machine gun that pivoted on a stand mounted on the front deck. As Hail scanned the pirate boat for other weapons, puffs of smoke began appearing from the barrel of the machine gun. A second later, the sound of gunfire was heard over the drone's microphones which was piped up to the security center.

"We are taking fire from the mother boat," Dallas reported.

"Range?" Hail asked.

"Two thousand yards," Dallas answered.

"We're still out of their range. Those .50 calibers won't hurt us." Hail said.

Hail told Dallas, "Pop a few grenades in front of them to see if that slows them down."

"You got it, Skipper," Dallas said. "I'm putting *Ratt* on auto-suspend."

In avionic terms, auto-suspend for a drone was similar to autopilot on a plane. By suspending the drone, the aircraft continued at its current direction and speed,

unless it encountered an obstacle, in which case its programming would run an avoidance sub-routine.

Dallas took control of the ship's porthole that was already open and shooting video. He touched his screen and activated the gun cluster control. Dallas switched aiming control to his right-hand joystick, and the servomotors on the gun turret jumped to life. A thick red laser beam shot out across the sea.

"Bringing the XM on target," Dallas announced. He then focused the tip of the beam about fifty yards in front of the oncoming Whaler.

"Let me know when Marshall," he told Hail.

"Fire a burst," Hail told him.

Dallas pulled the trigger, and the XM307 grenade launcher chugged out four metal bombs that spiraled through the air like tiny footballs. Two seconds later, the tight group of grenades exploded with such force that the drones hovering next to the *Hail Nucleus* juddered.

In front of the Whaler, water hurtled into the air, and thunder rolled across the ocean. The grenades had all exploded underwater. The shock and awe were a firework show. All the shrapnel from the grenades sank safely to the bottom of the Java Sea. The mother boat remained intact.

The Hail crew expected a reduction in speed or possibly a change in direction. But to everyone's surprise, none of that stuff happened. The Whaler kept pouring on the juice, and the gunner opened up again with the big fifty-caliber machine gun.

"Distance?" Hail asked.

"Fifteen hundred yards," Taylor responded.

"Where is the little boat?" Hail asked.

"Heading back toward the mother boat," Dallas answered.

"Screw these guys," Hail said. "Bring up the railgun."

"Yeaaaaaah, the railgun!" Alba yelled, grabbing the bowl of popcorn again. "This movie just keeps getting better."

For the second time, Dallas switched weapon devices and assigned himself the railgun control set.

Dallas pressed some icons on his monitor, and somewhere far away from the security center they heard a loud metallic KA-THUNK that reverberated throughout the ship.

"The containers are unlocked, and we're elevating the gun," Dallas said.

The pirate manning the machine gun on the Whaler was the first man to see a new and disturbing sight. A door on the end of a large cylindrical cargo container flapped open. And then, seemingly defying gravity, two huge containers, connected end-to-end, began to rise from the deck of the huge ship.

The pirate gunner on the Whaler turned and yelled something at his fellow pirates who all rushed up to the bow. The cargo containers began turning in the Whaler's direction, slowly, like the head of a lethargic snake. When the barrel finally came to rest, its dark mouth was pointed directly at them. Now the pirates on the Whaler could clearly see that the containers were not floating in midair. In fact, some sort of massive lift had moved the containers into this threatening position.

More urgent words were exchanged on the Whaler.

More bullets sprayed out of their machine gun at the big ship in front of them.

More distance was reduced as the pirate ship continued to close on the *Hail Nucleus*.

"Charge the capacitors," Hail ordered.

Dallas looked for the correct icon and replied, "Bringing up the grid."

A deep 60-hertz hum began vibrating the hull of the *Hail Nucleus*. The heavy harmonic tone came from the transformers as they sent thousands of volts into the huge capacitor farm. During all the test firings of the railgun, the exact same sound of corona discharge had been experienced. The weird sounds of fluid being ionized around a conductor had been anticipated inside the security center. Everything was as it should be.

The pirates watched as a glow appeared from inside the dark cargo container that pointed its enigmatic opening toward them. At first, a blurry blue hue could be seen inside the black hole. As the gun began to take on a charge, the hue mutated into a red and yellow type of fuzzy static that jittered around inside the tube.

The pirate who was at the wheel of the Whaler pulled back on the throttles, and the bow of their craft dipped and dug into the waves. The pirates were now clustered up front on the bow of the Whaler, staring so intently at the *Hail Nucleus* that the pirates on the small wooden boat came to a stop as well. The men in the little attack boat turned to look over their shoulders at the strange sight, apparently wondering what the hubbub was all about.

The sound coming out of the weird metal tube was terrifying only because it was like nothing the pirates had ever heard. In nature, the only thing comparable would have been a beehive strapped to a pirate's head. But there was more to it than just that. Each of the pirates could physically feel the sound. Their skin prickled. Their teeth vibrated. The insane buzz was accompanied by a low hum that seemed to move the air around them.

The pirate standing next to the gunner on the Whaler dropped his rifle on the deck, and without warning, jumped into the water. The other pirates didn't seem to notice. The glow inside the container was getting brighter. Two semicircles of red and yellow, with a vivid core of blue, took on a physical form. The colors were more than just a shape. They were alive somehow. The sound got louder, and the pirates on the Whaler were still hypnotized. None of them were moving. Everything

seemed to stand still. Their boat was immobile. The waves that had been lapping at both of the pirates' boats had been vibrated into nothing more than faint ripples. The breeze died away and was replaced with the faint smell of insulation being burned on a wire.

The gunner on the Whaler turned and screamed something at the other pirates, but his voice had been reduced to nothing more than queer vibrations of indiscernible tones. That's when two more pirates on the Whaler jumped into the water and started swimming for home. That left four pirates on the Whaler and five on the wooden boat. But now, the pirate that was driving the wooden boat turned and began distancing themselves from the white mother boat.

Aboard the *Hail Nucleus*, Marshall asked, "What's the firing status?"

Dallas checked his screens and replied, "Almost charged. About another fifteen seconds."

Back down on the water, the buzzing bees had been replaced with the sound of a thousand woodpeckers hammering their beaks on the inside of the metal shipping container. The air around the vessels became electrostatically charged. The pirates turned to look at one another as the hair on their arms and heads began to elevate. The thick anchor chain on the deck of the Whaler rattled and then scuttled across the deck, magnetically snapping together and forming a huge metal ball. Two more of the pirates had seen enough. They dropped their guns on the deck and exited the Whaler. That left two combatants on the mother boat—the gunner and the driver.

The edges of the cylindrical container had become less defined as the atmosphere surrounding the railgun became murky with ozone and electrons. The light inside the hole was so bright that the pirates had to shield their eyes. The gun's fire warning tones blared from the ship's horn and the last two pirates, who were literally shaking with fear, threw in the towel and bailed off the boat head first, so scared that they forgot to unstrap their guns.

"Fire!" Hail ordered.

Dallas pressed the button.

There was a deafening sound like a redwood tree being broken over God's knee. A bolt of lightning shot from the container, followed by a depleted uranium projectile and a ring of purple fire. The concussion and transfer of energy rolled the *Hail Nucleus* twenty-degrees to its starboard side. At 5000 miles per hour, the projectile took less than a tenth of a second to impact the Whaler. The kinetic energy was so immense that it looked like a magic act had been performed. One second the Whaler was there, and a tenth of a second later it was gone. The boat had been turned into a fiberglass dust cloud that hovered for a moment before breaking up and dissipating as the ocean breeze returned.

Inside the security center, Hail grabbed onto the back of Dallas and Taylor's high-back chairs, riding it out as the ship rolled back and forth, trying to find its equilibrium.

"Holy smokes!" Alba yelled. She set the popcorn on the floor next to her, stood and started clapping. "Damn, that was one of the best movies I've ever seen."

Hail looked up at the monitor above him. There wasn't much to see. The small wooden boat had stopped, and it was picking up the pirates who had abandoned their vaporized craft. They all looked shaken. The Indonesians looked like they could hardly wait to put some distance between them and the cargo ship from outer space. Hail thought they might even consider retiring from this line of work.

Hail smiled and instructed Dallas to secure the railgun.

"Let's get the drones back on board," he told his pilots.

Hail took a moment and mulled over the events, thinking that he may have missed something.

"Does anyone need me for anything else?" Hail asked his crew.

"No, we're good, Skipper," Dallas responded. "We'll let you know if there is more fun to be had. Don't worry."

"I'm sure you will," Hail said.

Smiling, Hail turned and walked to the door.

Once in the hallway, the walk to his stateroom seemed longer than it had thirty minutes ago. His stomach growled. His eyes were tired and his back hurt. But, it had been years since he was in this good of a mood.

NIZHNY NOVGOROD, RUSSIA—VOLNA HOTEL

Whereas Karen Wesley, the Director of Analysis for the CIA, attributed her climb in the agency to her ordinary looks, Kara Ramey knew her climb was for the exact opposite reason. She was supposed to be noticed.

She was just like all other CIA operatives, except for her undeniable beauty. She, too, had trained at Camp Peary, also known as “The Farm,” and Kara graduated at the top of her class in physical conditioning and vehicle handling. She excelled in firearms, surveillance, interrogation and could dispatch her male counterparts in hand-to-hand combat. She could outshoot and outride them, but none of that mattered. Sure, all that talent was useful to a CIA agent; but in reality, it was seldom used, except for maybe in the movies. If it ever got down to the hand-to-hand stuff, there was a greater chance of some other actor taking a gun and blowing her head off while she was grappling.

The CIA found intrinsic value in Kara’s inherent good looks, and that’s what had brought her to the bar in the Volna Hotel. The city of Nizhny Novgorod was the fourth largest city in Russia. Located about four hundred kilometers east of Moscow, it was the administrative center of the Nizhny Novgorod region. The Volna Hotel was a continental four-star establishment with modern accoutrements and amenities.

Shoulders back, chest out and sitting perfectly straight, she poised on her bar stool sitting at the bar of the Volna Hotel. Men who saw her were supposed to think, “Wow, what a great looking woman!” Kara’s primary role in the CIA was to draw attention to herself. Her secondary role was to use that attention to extract data and get men to reveal to her their clandestine secrets.

It was summer in Russia. The temperature outside at cocktail hour was in the 70s. If it had been winter, Kara would have had to rethink her outfit. But it was warm with the pink one-piece skin-tight dress hugging her generous curves in the way that all men who looked at her would love to hug them. She wasn’t alone at the bar and her curves were certainly being admired by her new date. The man had recently excused himself to take a phone call out of earshot. That was disappointing.

Her CIA intelligence team had been searching for her new admirer for quite some time. He was a man known as the Russian Liquidator. Victor Kornev was a hard man to find. He was always on the move, constantly changing identities and always brokering arms deals. After more than a year of looking, the CIA’s analysts had finally found him. Kara was immediately activated and sent in as a deep cover agent to find out what intel she could dig up.

Beauty wasn’t all it took to burrow into the hearts and minds of bad men who were suspicious by nature. It also took a great deal of acting. Dumb and beautiful

were disarming traits that went together like ice cream and chocolate. Beauty was the attraction and dumb implied no agenda. She was just a pretty girl out having fun, looking for a rich guy that liked to also have fun. Kara had done her best to ditz it up to the point where the Russian would let his guard down. But so far, no luck. Maybe she had overdone it, but she sensed that wasn't the case. After all, Victor Kornev had not become the world's largest arms dealer by blabbing critical business snippets to a spoiled rich international floozy he had just met.

Kara took a compact from her purse, put it in front of her face and took a snapshot of a queer little smile she flashed in the mirror. The picture had been sent to her controllers who understood the code. If they received the queer little smile, "the smirk", where one side of Kara's mouth turned up while the other side remained normal, Kara was OK. If she didn't check in regularly every hour, or if she sent any photo other than that strange smile, her handlers knew she was in trouble, and they needed to call in the cavalry.

Kara took a moment to touch up her makeup, which didn't require much. Adjusting beauty was like trying to determine how shiny the Ferrari had to be. It was subjective. Some men liked makeup, even on a fashion model. Others found it more attractive for the beautiful to just be themselves, au natural. Kara still didn't have a read on what the Russian liked, so she didn't overdo it. She just applied some clear gloss on her thick lips. Her red hair was natural with a slight curl. It puffed out around her shoulders and framed her elegant face. Her cheekbones were prominent, and Kara wasn't all that happy about that. She shared the same cheekbones and beautiful ivory thin skin as her mother. It was a great look when you were young, but it didn't last.

Kara had noticed a startling change in her mother's face when her mom had reached her forties. As the natural elasticity decreased, those prominent cheekbones looked more like a skeleton holding up pasty chicken-looking skin. Not attractive in the least. Thin, loose skin on sharp bones just didn't work. But she never told her mom that. What was the point? Her mom was a beautiful person on the inside, so who cared about the outside? Kara was in her late twenties, so she had some mileage left before they stuck her behind a desk and life became boring. But she would be long gone from the agency before that ever happened.

The Volna Hotel's bar was a tight little place. Situated just off the lobby, it was dark, wooden and had only a handful of tables that had been pressed into all the accessible crevasses of the room. Kara was sitting at the bar, more or less on display, perched on a bar stool, using her best posture. And the good posture thing wasn't feeling all that good. She wanted to rest her elbows on the bar and slouch. But what refined woman would do such a thing? She wanted to kick off the six-inch pink stilettos, grab a bag of popcorn and a beer, and stay in bed for a few days. She would argue the point with anyone that told her this pretty girl stuff was an easy job.

Kara glanced around the bar and saw her assignment in the lobby still talking on his phone. Kornev looked back in her direction and waved, which was a positive acknowledgment, indicating he wanted her to wait for him to wrap up his call. But then who wouldn't? Kara had never met a man that wanted her to leave, which was both a blessing and a curse. Her looks had opened many doors, but now, as she watched this Russian scumbag negotiate a meeting with a North Korean scumbag, she understood just how many doors her looks had closed.

Kara's father was an international banker, and she was a rich spoiled socialite that fluttered along beside her father wherever his business journeys took him. Of course, all of that was a lie. That was the life of Tonya Merkalov, her fictitious cover. But her papers, passport, visa and her background cover story were in place and even searchable on Google. Tonya had a Facebook page that showed all the wonderful places she had been and all the wonderful people she had hobnobbed with. Photos of dozens of dresses, scores of fake parties, fancy cars, stunning people, amazing nightclubs and exotic beaches. All had been photographed and photoshopped in a single day. Some of it was shot in front of a green screen and the people and places had been added into the background, while other photos were of real Kara with real people in real places. The CIA had the staff to turn a no one into a someone in a matter of twenty-four hours. They worked with Google to directly seed its powerful search engine with all sorts of links that pointed to Tonya's past, her fake dad's history, her fake mom's social events, but nothing about fake brothers and sisters. Why create more work for the agency than what was absolutely required? No, Tonya was an only and beautiful child. Only a spoiled child wouldn't think anything more of taking a lover for a night than taking a cold remedy.

Kara saw her new acquaintance click off his phone and begin walking toward her. Tonya sat up rail straight and rolled her shoulders back and pressed her chest out. "*This beautiful stuff is for the birds,*" she thought as she held out her hand like a princess, waiting for it to be kissed by her returning Russian target.

"Я надеюсь, что я не оставаю вас слишком долго?" Kornev said, taking her hand into his, softly touching his lips to her skin.

"Мне было интересно, если вы когда-либо собирались вернуться," Tonya responded, flashing what looked like an annoyed smile.

Victor looked at the empty drink in front of Tonya. Starting from the glass sitting on its moist napkin, Kornev's eyes moved up her lithe frame. His gaze slowed to a crawl when he reached her full breasts. Hesitating for a moment, his eyes began moving up to her perfect white neck, then to her strong chin. Finally, his eyes came to rest at her striking green eyes.

Once again, his brain confirmed her undeniable beauty. But creatures this beautiful didn't appear out of the blue. He couldn't say that it never happened, after all, he was an attractive man, dressed nicely and exuded wealth and prosperity. All those traits tended to attract single pretty women as well as high-class prostitutes. It

was more of a timing thing, and for some reason that bothered him. Typically, someone this beautiful wasn't inexplicably this available. Just sitting there alone and sipping on a drink with no suitors in the immediate area. There were a few single men checking her out, but she was alone. At least for now. He had emerged from his work and wanted a drink, and there she was.

Kornev thought about the chain of events. He realized he had been the one who had approached her, not the other way around. He had ordered his drink and then a minute later had made an excuse to exchange conversation with the beautiful woman sitting alone at the bar. He assumed that any of the other men in the bar, or possibly even men walking through the lobby, would have approached her eventually if he hadn't introduced himself first. Based on that fact, Victor began to think that he was being overly paranoid. But then paranoia had kept him alive. It had been his friend for the last decade. And what works, works. What doesn't work, makes you dead.

They had drunk and chitchatted, and she had told him her name was Tonya Merkalov. She was the daughter of an international banker and traveled around with her father because he went to so many wonderful places. *Was it a lie?* Probably. Everyone lied. It was a worldwide epidemic. No one wanted to be who they actually were. What fun was that? But Victor didn't care if she was lying. What he really cared about was *why* she was lying. It was apparent she carried no hidden weapons under her thin and tight dress, so his paranoia relaxed. Paranoia told him there were no threats in the immediate area. So, that left Tonya to simply be a beautiful woman who was alone and available. Did she work for the American CIA or possibly the Israeli Mossad? Could be, but if any complications arose from his meeting Ms. Universe, he would take care of it the way he always took care of such matters. A double tap to the head, and he would be gone like a ghost.

Tonya smiled at the Russian, knowing this was all a game. All acting. And there was no award based on her performance. No Oscar or Emmy. If she was perfect, executed her role marvelously, then the payoff would be information that the CIA could use to save millions of people's lives and she would enjoy more tomorrows. If she was having a bad day, and her acting wasn't on point, then her award would not be a Golden Globe, but more likely in the shape of a lead bullet. It would be presented to her while she was asleep via a handgun with a silencer with a double tap to the head. A high-class whore wrapped up in bloody silk sheets and found by the morning hotel staff. The Nizhny Novgorod police would chalk it up to another woman who played too close to the fire and got burned. Things were dangerous in the reformed USSR. Her fictitious father and mother would probably not make a big stink about it; therefore, the police would not work themselves to death figuring out the who and the why.

But Kara had no intention of ending up a silk mummy. This wasn't her first rodeo. Victor Kornev was a *dangerous* man, but he was just a man. And men were her specialty. They always had been. For as long as she could recall, boys were just big,

hairy goofballs that melted in her hands. Life was simple when you were beautiful because men were simple. Since men ran most of the world, the logic was easy. If you owned the men, you owned the world.

Kornev released her hand and said, “Я извиняюсь, но мой бизнес очень требовательны. Я надеюсь, вы понимаете.” Kara quickly translated the Russian in her mind, which translated to, “*I’m sorry, but my business is very demanding. I hope you understand.*”

She calculated her response and said in Russian, “I don’t like business. I like to have fun. So, are you all about business, or do you like to have fun too?”

Tonya’s Russian was satisfactory. There were inflections of German, English and even a little Australian in her pronunciations of the hard-edged language. Kara was a language major in college. She had a knack for it but didn’t know why. Neither her real mother or father spoke any language other than English. However, her father was proud that he spoke a little Pig Latin. Some people were great at math; it just clicked for them, and the same could be said for Kara when it came to languages. By the time she had left college and had joined the CIA, she could speak more than six languages conversationally and understand many others, which made her even more desirable as a spy.

Kornev switched to French and asked, “Que pensez-vous de venir jusqu’à ma chambre pour un peu de champagne. Peut-être peut regarder un film à la télévision.” It was an invitation to go to his room to watch a movie. Of course, he didn’t intend to turn on the TV.

“*Yeah right,*” Kara thought to herself. An invitation to go up to your room to watch a movie and drink some champagne. The French language was a nice change from the stilted Russian. French had a mellifluous and wonderful softness that few other languages possessed. French had lyrical phrasing and a sophisticated elegance, but still, Kornev was saying basically the same thing in any language.

Kornev glanced around the room, looking for something or someone out of place. He constantly scanned for predators. Just recently he had been arrested in Thailand for the delivery of anti-aircraft missiles and providing aid to a terrorist organization. A large sum of money had been paid to people who could open his cell and look the other way for a few moments, allowing him to slip away and into Afghanistan where he delivered shipments to the post-Taliban government. Kornev knew how to perform counter-surveillance and was very good at it.

He had graduated from the Military Institute of Foreign Languages where he became fluent in six languages including Persian and Esperanto, which he had mastered by age 12. In the early 2000s, he had become a member of the Esperanto Club in Dushanbe. As a former Soviet military translator, Kornev had made a significant amount of money through his multiple air transport companies, shipping cargo mostly to Africa and the Middle East during the 2000s and early 2010s.

His old military connections and expansive wealth gave Kornev the opportunity to buy specific military items that no one else on the face of the planet could get their hands on, let alone have available to sell.

From Africa, Kornev's Air Cress service delivered surface-to-air-missiles to the airport in Burgas, Bulgaria. This was the first time that Kornev appeared on the CIA's radar as an arms dealer. Kornev was suspected of supplying heavy arms for use in Sierra Leone, the Congo, Kenya, Lebanon and Libya. But by far the most disturbing alliance, detected by cellphone chatter taps, was with Kim Yong Chang in North Korea.

Tonya considered Victor's invitation. She would be surprised if the TV was even turned on. There was a time element involved with this assignment. From the briefing she had received from her handlers, Kornev was always on the move. It was uncommon if the man spent two days in the same country, so the timetable had to be advanced. She didn't want to come across as an expensive prostitute, but she didn't want him getting bored and frustrated and move on. In a perfect world, she would do what she needed to do tonight and be out of the country before he awoke in the morning.

Tonya responded in French, "OK, mais bas les pattes," (*OK, but no funny stuff*).

Kornev looked like he was ready to place his hand on The Bible. His face was constricted with sincerity.

"Oh, non, non, non—" he said.

Tonya believed him—NOT! He would probably have her thin dress pulled off before she had even reached the couch, but that was a calculated risk. There really was no other choice. All the talking was done. She had spent several hours sitting pretty on her bar stool and telling Kornev about her delightful fictitious life. How she, like Kornev, had a predisposition for learning languages. They began doing the back-and-forth flirty thing in different languages, both laughing, both drinking and generally pretending they were enjoying each other's company. Hell, they were now old friends and trusted one another implicitly. If only it were that easy...

Kara wished she could have been activated twenty-four hours earlier, but this was the situation and she had to work with it. She sensed that Kornev wanted to get the show on the road.

"So, yes a movie?" he asked the indecisive woman in heavily accented English.

Tonya acted as if she was thinking about it.

Kornev lifted his scotch and drained the last few drops from the glass.

He asked Tonya, "그래서 당신은 갈 준비가 되셨나요?"

Tonya laughed and asked in English, "What language is that?"

"I'm trying to learn Korean," he said, returning the playful smile.

“It sounds funny when spoken by a guy with a Russian accent.”

Kornev shrugged and smirked.

Tonya picked up her small handbag, removed her gold compact, opened it and made her trademark funny little smirk as she checked her lipstick.

“Sure, let’s go, But, remember, no funny stuff.”

JAVA SEA—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

The conference room on the *Hail Nucleus* could have been mistaken for any high-tech super-duper Fortune 500's boardroom if it wasn't for the two distinct steel portholes welded into the shiny white wall. Those small openings in the hull had been tinted with a dark film so the outside light didn't interfere with the room's complex and sensitive display devices.

Gage Renner (mission analyst), Shana Tran, (mission communication analyst), Pierce Mercier, (oceanographer and meteorologist) and Marshall Hail were putting the final touches on the plan to kill the North Korean, Kim Yong Chang.

"We have a few choices in which to deliver the death blow," Hail reminded his staff.

They had been over this a number of times, but Hail wanted to make sure that everyone was in agreement on the most effective way to carry out the mission. After all, none of them were military experts. They were technological wizards that built some very advanced weapon systems. Tactics and mission planning, all rested in the lap of Marshall Hail.

He had read all the military books that any person should read if they were interested in getting into this line of work. There was, of course, the old stuff such as *Patton*, a study of a master strategist, in addition to the *U.S. Army U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. And then there was the really old stuff, like Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and the *History of the Peloponnesian War*, which was written in 400 B.C. But there were also other methods of attack, which meant that Hail had his nose in the book, *The Command of the Air*—perhaps the most often referenced work on air power and air strategy. But he couldn't forget the sea, and that would dictate that he read the old book, *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* as well as the newer book, *Modern Sea Power and Tactics*. And once on the ground, Hail found the book, *The Mission, The Men, and Me: Lessons from a Former Delta Force Commander* of great help. But there were no books, no classes, no instructional references, virtually no help at all when it came to the new type of war tactics Hail and his staff were about to unleash. This would be the first assassination of its type, and after it was over, the world may never be the same.

"My vote is we bring in the *B-52s* and drop the payload on the target," Gage Renner said.

Hail thought it was the most logical decision, but he wanted to consider any dissenting opinions. He placed equal value on the recommendations of all his analysts.

“Is there any issue with communications if we call in the *B-52s*?” he asked Shana Tran. Shana had changed her dress and her hair was up. She looked very fresh, considering they had been hammering away at the mission for six hours and were only minutes away from the formal launch of the ground mission.

“We have leased time on the Chinese Tianlian data relay satellite and have tested the uplink, and we are good to go. Once *Led Zeppelin* is in place, it will link up to the Tianlian and then use radio or Wi-Fi to communicate with the hubs. I don’t see any reason why we would have problems unless the weather is an issue.”

Hail looked at Pierce Mercier and waited while he flipped, pinched and expanded screens on his iPad.

Mercier scratched his head and said, “Things are looking really good, but as you know the weather in North Korea can change in a matter of hours. No fronts are moving in. My projection is light cirrus cloud cover at 10,000 feet with maybe five-knot winds out of the east. At mission time, 8.a.m., the temperature will be in the low 80s, and I would estimate the relative humidity to be around eighty-two percent.”

Hail appeared satisfied with all the answers.

“OK, all of our systems are ready to go,” Hail said to no one in particular.

This was the last chance for Hail’s crew to tell him he had overlooked something, but no one spoke up. Hail looked at each of his crew members, waited another moment, stood and began walking toward the door. The others followed.

After walking 400 feet down the white iron hallway, they arrived at the door to the mission control center. Hail used his badge to gain access through the bulkhead door, and the others followed him inside. Of the sixteen control stations, thirteen were occupied. There were just enough empty stations left to accommodate those who had been in the meeting.

Renner, Tran and Mercier each took up their control stations, and Hail sat in the big chair in the middle of the room. There were a number of fresh faces that Hail didn’t see very often. The missions they had run before had not required this many pilots and analysts, but this one would. Hence, there were more pilots on the sticks.

Alex Knox, Hail’s lead mission pilot, greeted Hail, “Hey, Chief, hunting will be good today. I can feel it.”

At that moment, “today” was 2 a.m. in North Korea. The first part of the mission would be done in the dark. No lights, no rocket burns, nothing that could be seen within the backdrop of Kangdong’s hills, trees and indigenous vegetation. The drones they would be flying were equipped with night vision cameras. That meant green would be the color of this evening’s viewing.

“Let’s do this,” Hail said, adjusting the monitors on each side of his chair.

Hail swiveled his chair toward Tanner Grant, the drone pilot in this mission flying *Foghat*.

“Where are we, Mr. Grant?” Hail asked.

Grant looked at a monitor that showed the real-time digital coordinates of *Foghat*. The numbers were changing quickly like a Vegas slot machine.

“*Foghat* is about three miles southeast of the target and currently circling some crop fields. We are awaiting further instructions.”

Hail checked his right monitor to verify the drone was in the correct position.

“Is *Led Zeppelin* operational and ready to be released?” Hail asked.

“Yes, sir,” Grant said. He pulled up a screen that monitored the vitals of the drone, code-named *Led Zeppelin* which was connected to the underbelly of the drone *Foghat*.

Grant continued, “*Led Zeppelin* was attached fifteen miles off the coast of North Korea in the Yellow Sea by the crew of the *Hail Laser*. *Foghat* was launched at 11:00 p.m., and it has been in flight for approximately four hours. It is on station. As far as I can tell, we have not attracted any hostiles. Weather is good. All systems are nominal.”

The *Hail Laser* was a mechanical ship that supported the Hail cargo ships. But it was also the perfect ship to slip in and out of discreet areas that were not large enough to attract attention. During the mission planning, it had been decided that it would position itself in international waters, situated on the latitude line that separated North Korea from South Korea. There were so many Hail support vessels in the fleet, operating in many of the world’s waters that it would hopefully not draw much attention. When the mission was over, *Foghat* would recover *Led Zeppelin* and return to the *Hail Laser*. At least it would all work out that way if Hail and his crew lived in a perfect world. The recent loss of *Eagles* proved that the world was indeed imperfect.

“OK, bring *Foghat* in for its drop approach,” Hail ordered.

Hail looked at each member of the mission crew and wondered if they would do what they needed to and when they needed to do it. After all, most of these kids were kids. The closest they had come to killing someone was mowing down a gangster while driving Adder in *Grand Theft Auto*. But then, on the other hand, this type of killing wasn’t much different than the simulated version where they flew remote aircrafts and delivered deadly payloads. They were not in danger, and his young pilots were physically thousands of miles away from the action. Still, they all understood that this wasn’t a game. It was the real thing. But making their country a safer place had been done by young people for hundreds of years.

“One mile,” Grant reported.

Anticipating Hail's next question, Shana Tran added, "Communications are good and the uplink is hot."

Hail swiveled his chair toward Dallas Stone.

"What's the status of *Led Zeppelin*?" he asked the pilot.

"We're good, Marshall," Dallas responded. He flipped through a few technical screens until he located a page splattered with data that was labeled DRONE DASHBOARD. "We are fully charged and communications are online. Data streams are good. No dropped packets. No collisions."

"Excellent," Hail said. So far everything was going like clockwork.

"Dropping *Led Zeppelin* in five, four, three, two, one, and *Led Zeppelin* is away," Tanner Grant announced.

Hail pressed some icons on his left monitor. A moment later, the video being streamed from the nose camera of *Led Zeppelin* appeared on his right monitor. There was nothing much to look at. A green blur was dancing across the screen as the drone descended and accelerated to 122 miles per hour, or roughly 178 feet per second. *Led Zeppelin's* thousand-foot free fall would be over in less than eight seconds.

"X and Y look good," Dallas said. "Drifting a little north maybe, but not too bad. The parafoil is going to pop in three, two, one—"

Hail watched the green blur stop for a brief second. The shock of the 4-g deceleration scrambled the communications and whited-out the screen as the parafoil yanked up on the drone. Then a beat later an image returned. Hail could make out a distant tree line on a hill maybe a half mile away. Everything was still green, many shades of green, similar to an old-fashioned black and white TV with shades of grey differentiating the colors.

Hail pressed an icon on his screen labeled BELLYCAM. *Led Zeppelin* had a total of five video cameras mounted to its black, carbon fiber frame. The aircraft was round and thin, and if it had flashing lights and was seen from the ground, it would be recognized as a flying saucer. But the drone was black and had no lights and would never be seen from the ground. Since it was round, there was no real front and back to the machine, but for practical purposes the designers had cameras assigned front, back, left and right.

The video from the bellycam was much better than the forward camera. The forward camera was having difficulties maintaining focus while the parafoil's cords untwisted. The bellycam was mounted directly in the center of the drone. This allowed the camera gimbal to rotate on a fine set of German ball bearings, keeping its lens pointed forward no matter how the aircraft twisted and turned.

"We have a visual on the landing zone," Dallas said. He twisted his right joystick to correct for wind driftage. A small motor on the drone wound in five inches of the

thin clear line that was tied to the airfoil twenty feet above. The line pulled down the left corner of the plastic material, changing the aerodynamics of the winged shaped parafoil. *Led Zeppelin* responded accordingly and turned ten degrees to the north. Once the direction had been corrected, Dallas released the joystick and the same motor unwound exactly five inches of line and the aircraft flew straight and true.

“Where is the landing point?” Hail asked. “I don’t see it.”

Dallas touched an icon labeled MARKER and then touched his finger to his video screen and circled a dark green area which appeared in red on Hail’s monitor.

“Right there, that’s the spot you indicated during the briefing,” Dallas said.

“Great,” Hail said.

The parafoil had slowed the drone from a descending speed of 190 miles per hour to 17 miles per hour.

“Systems check,” Hail ordered.

One of the junior mission pilots that Hail knew, but didn’t see often, fielded the request.

“Checking—” said Oliver Fox. The other pilots called the young man Oli if Hail remembered correctly.

Hail was proud of the job his programmers had done designing the ship’s command and control network. All the communications with the drones were done through the application. Since there was no direct access to a drone except through the ship’s software, that meant that any drone, or even any part of a drone, could be handed off to another pilot to operate weapons, flight control, system checks, or damage reporting.

Hail had all sixteen seats filled with pilots and analysts for just that reason. A few of the pilots would not be flying drones on this mission, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t help out with the hundreds of parameters that had to be monitored and adjusted. Currently, no less than six pilots were monitoring *Led Zeppelin*’s vitals and watching for any indication the machine was having problems.

“Approaching 200 feet,” Dallas announced. “Preparing to cut the chute. Spinning up the propellers.”

Dallas reached over and pushed forward a thick lever that had a small stencil on it that read THRUST. A gauge on his control panel began to change. Inside the small rectangle were two sections. There was a red section at the bottom and a green section at the top. Each of these sections was overlaid by ruler marks. As Dallas pushed the thrust lever forward, the red section began to move up and the green section began to retreat. When the red section and the green section were identical, Dallas said, “We have reached equilibrium. Cutting the chute.”

He pressed an icon that looked like miniature scissors cutting a kite string.

“Chute is away and we are in free flight,” Dallas announced.

Dallas turned *Led Zeppelin* to the right until he could verify the airfoil was loose and drifting off to the east.

“It would be nice if it made it to water,” Hail said, but he knew it really didn’t matter.

It was the difference between minutes and hours. The parafoil was made from a hydro-degradable plastic that was up to three times stronger than polyethylene. Once exposed to the atmosphere, the parafoil, its control lines and every part of the chute had already begun to dissolve. If directly exposed to a body of water, such as a lake or a river, the parafoil would dissolve in a matter of minutes. But even if it landed in the middle of a farmer’s field, considering the humidity level in Kangdong, in a matter of hours the chute would look like a thousand snails had left a thin patch of clear slime on the ground. Hours after that, even the slime would have evaporated. Hail was confident the parafoil would leave no telltale sign that it ever existed.

“Status report?” Hail requested.

Shana Tran was the first to respond, “Communications are five by five with both *Led Zeppelin* and *Foghat*.”

The term five by five was a radio communication expression that meant “loud and clear”. Tran, at one time, had explained to Hail that one five represented the S units of reception strength. The other five was a rating of signal clarity. Thus, five by five meant there was a good and clear signal.

Oliver Fox was the next to report that all systems were nominal.

Hail suspected that Oli didn’t know the difference between the term normal and nominal. He guessed that he had heard it used in a movie and had adopted the expression. The use of the phrase "all systems nominal" was a term used by NASA and indicated that the telemetry was reading as expected from historical data trends. Over the years, it had become a response that covered all parameters of flight systems and controls. However, normal and nominal meant two very different things. Normal reported the condition of the flight parameters when the machine was at rest. Nominal meant that the parameters were within flight specifications for the current mission with the drone underload.

Hail watched as the dark green patch on the ground grew closer. The dark green began to break up and pixelate into lighter splotches of green as the drone’s camera began to differentiate between bushes, plants and grass.

“Twenty-five feet until touchdown,” Dallas reported, pushing the pedals under his feet to change the angle of attack of the propellers.

“Do we have any company?” Hail asked Tanner Grant.

Tanner Grant was still on station flying *Foghat* in tight circles over the house below. He looked at his screen that showed *Foghat*’s Star SAFIRE HD FLIR system.

He adjusted the multispectral SWIR system until it focused on the landing zone and the surrounding areas. Anything that was hotter than the ambient earth below would show up as a white light on his monitor.

“There is nothing in the immediate area except some wild dogs about a mile away. I’m going to reposition so I can scan the residence.”

Grant pinched and swiped and rotated his screen until he was happy with his view of Kim Yong Chang’s house, backyard, front yard and additional property on both sides of his home.

“Putting it up on big screen number three,” Grant told Hail.

Hail glanced over the control stations to see the new forward-looking infrared radiometer image that had appeared on the big screen.

Hail saw large rectangular objects, undoubtedly cars, in front of the house. The engines glowed brightly under the hoods. On the side of the house was a smaller box that glowed white as well. Hail decided that this was an air conditioning unit. The well-heated pool glowed brighter than the bricks surrounding the pool which had cooled in the night air. In the backyard, some smaller objects—some round and some square—were glowing but not with the same intensity as the cars or the air conditioner. Hail came to the conclusion that it was probably pool equipment—the pump, the motor and possibly a water heater.

“Does anyone think it’s weird that Kim Yong Chang doesn’t have any guards at his house?” Hail asked his crew.

Gage Renner, the mission aeronautics analyst and Hail’s close friend offered his two cents, “I don’t really see the need. I mean the entire country is guarded. No one gets in, and most of its citizens want to get out.”

Pierce Mercier offered, “The entire complex is surrounded by a twelve-foot chain-link fence. Look at the glow on that thing.” Mercier nodded up toward the big screen, “I don’t think a fence like that glows with heat unless it’s electric.”

Hail remained silent.

“And the fence has razor wire on top of it,” Renner added.

“And we have already seen that Kim is good with weapons,” Mercier said.

Hail agreed, “I guess so. I don’t think I’ll ever understand this country. It’s like a throwback to the sixteenth century with a bunch of nukes thrown in to make things even more complicated.”

Dallas got everyone’s attention with the words, “Three, two, one and touchdown.”

Hail checked the FLIR screen again and didn’t see any glowing moving objects. No people. No dogs.

“So far, so good,” Hail said, relieved the first part of the mission was successful.

As the crew looked at the FLIR screen, they noticed that another object now glowed in the darkness. It was *Led Zeppelin*. A few days before, the dead drone *Eagles* had scouted out the perfect landing zone for *Led Zeppelin*. Outside the wire of Kim Yong Chang's property was a tangle of thorny bushes Mercier had called *Poncirus trifoliata*, known as the Flying Dragon. A circle of these thick, green bushes had naturally formed around a rocky area in its center. The stems of the Flying Dragon created a contorted and twisted thicket no person or animal would readily venture into. The landing site was perfect at one hundred meters outside the electric fence and completely hidden from view.

"Do you want me to fly *Foghat* back to the *Hail Laser*?" Tanner Grant asked Hail.

"What's your fuel supply looking like?" Hail asked.

Grant double-checked his gauges.

"I have about six hours," Grant said.

Hail did some math in his head and determined that *Foghat* could stay on station for about one more hour and still have plenty of fuel to make it back to their support ship.

"I'd like you to stick around until the hubs are deployed," Hail told Grant.

"No problem, Skipper," Grant said. He took his finger and drew a red circle around the top of the complex. He then set the *Foghat's* autopilot to lock onto that hand-drawn path and to maintain its current altitude and speed.

"All right, Alex. You're up," Hail said. "Let's make this clean and silent."

Alex turned to his two junior pilots—Oliver Fox to his right and Paige Grayson to his left.

"Let's do this like we planned," Alex instructed. "I'll go first, then Oli, then Paige. Are we good?"

The other pilots acknowledged Knox, and they began to prepare their aircraft.

Three grossly misshapen objects sat atop *Led Zeppelin*, which was the size of a mini trampoline and, in comparison to its smooth and conical black surface, the hubs that were connected to its top were bizarre in appearance.

One hub wasn't even a shape. It was more like a blob of clay the size of a softball that had been overworked by an angry mental patient wearing oven mitts. It was brown and lopsided. A rough texture had been applied to its surface. A flat black area the size of a golf ball had been infused into one of its unnatural sides.

"OK," Knox said in a predatory tone, "Undocking now."

Knox checked his gauges, checked his cameras and verified his flight controls were working and said, "And liftoff."

The brown blob hummed, its three small propellers spinning furiously as the machine rose from the back of *Led Zeppelin*.

“Put *Aerosmith*’s camera on big screen number two,” Hail requested.

Oli fulfilled the request, and the video appeared in time for Hail to see the small drone, code-named *Aerosmith*, clear the top of the Flying Dragon bushes. The bushes were green; the big berries on the bushes were green, but then so was everything that was shot by the night vision camera. The crew that wasn’t actively flying a drone watched the main monitor as the bushes became increasingly smaller.

“I’m at a hundred feet. *Aerosmith* feels good and is responding nicely,” Alex Knox commented.

“Well, as nicely as this hunk of wood can respond,” he added.

“Take it slow,” Hail told Knox.

“With the weird shape of this thing, I don’t think I have much choice,” Knox replied. “It’s amazing this drone can even fly.”

Knox worked the flight controls as the electric fence came into view. A moment later, the fence disappeared underneath the camera as the drone passed over it.

“OK, approaching the LZ (landing zone),” Knox said, looking worried.

“Oh, damn. This is going to be harder than I thought; especially at night with nothing but this stupid green screen. Too bad I can’t light it up.”

“It is what it is,” Hail told his pilot. “You’re doing a great job. Just take it slow.”

Knox shook his head in disagreement.

“I can’t take it too slow, Skipper. Not if you want to get this drone back to *Led Zeppelin* tomorrow. I’ve already burned through 25% of my battery.”

Hail said nothing.

Aerosmith was quickly approaching a tall tree. Specifically, Mercier had told them during the planning meeting the tree was a *Pinus densiflora*, also known as the Japanese red pine. In the winter it became yellowish, but during the summer, it happened to be the exact same shade of brown as *Aerosmith*.

“Here goes nothing,” Knox said, tensing slightly on the controls as he made his final approach.

Not a single aspect of this mission had been left to chance. *Eagles* had scouted the landing zone, and the precise spot where *Aerosmith* would land had been predetermined.

Knox maneuvered *Aerosmith* between two limbs of the enormous red pine. Similar to the other hub drones, the propellers on *Aerosmith* were internal to the machine. Hollow on the inside, the propellers twirled internally in a chamber that resembled a cylindrical chimney, creating lift by blowing air down and sucking air in from the top of the drone. All of the electronics were built into a ring that circled around the interior chimney. The lithium-ion battery was circular as well. There wasn’t a centimeter of wasted space on *Aerosmith*. A microchip crammed in here, a

servomotor stuffed in there—beautiful it was not. It *was* an amazing piece of flying technology.

The camera rocked to one side, taking a hard, jarring hit from one of the branches.

“Damn,” Knox cursed. “Man, it’s tight between these tree limbs.”

No one said anything. Knox knew what he needed to do. He had performed this landing flawlessly in the simulator a number of times, but doing it in real life was different. Unlike the simulator, he was experiencing lighting issues. In the live setting, the different shades of green were more diffuse and indiscernible than in the simulator. As he guided the drone between the branches, some of the smaller twigs were almost invisible on his monitor. Compounding his problems, there was a light breeze and small pine branches were fluttering in and out of his flight path. Right now, the design of the drone was saving him. Since the propellers were located on the inside of the aircraft, the small drone could be bumped around a little because there was no chance of the propellers coming into contact with the obstructions. Too much bumping would scramble the internal computer. The chip made thousands of tiny flight adjustments per second, keeping *Aerosmith* at the proper height and angle of attack. Too many unanticipated disruptions would overwhelm the computer managing the drone’s flight characteristics. At that point, the computer would reset. If that happened, then *Aerosmith* would drop to the ground like a log.

A few more *damns* were muttered by Knox as he closed in on the landing point.

“You are down to 55% battery life,” Gage Renner informed Knox.

“Almost there, just another foot,” Knox replied. “Almost there—”

The misshapen drone slowly lowered onto a thick limb of the red pine, centering itself over the widest part of the branch before gently touching down.

No one said anything.

Aerosmith joined the branch of the Japanese red pine—literally.

Everyone held their breath until the green video being sent by *Aerosmith* froze in place. It reminded Hail of when he had watched the old video of the first lunar landing on the moon in 1969 with his dad. Seconds before touchdown, a whirl of activity could be seen on the footage; movement, dust and shapes came into view before being cast aside for new shapes. And then, like someone had switched off a light, nothing but stillness. *Tranquility Base. The Eagle has landed.*

Hail let out a breath he wasn’t aware he had been holding.

Knox let go of his control handles, changed screens and pressed an icon labeled DOCK.

A second later, four brown fish hooks dropped down from the sides of the *Aerosmith*, hooked into the tree and tightened, attaching the drone to the tree.

Aerosmith had been designed to look like a bump on a log. The drone was an illusion. Notched into its side was a shallow cavity that looked like a small limb had broken off. That circular dark section was a camera port that could be shuttered open or closed, depending on when the drone was actively streaming video. *Aerosmith's* surface was so meticulously modeled with bark that from any angle on the ground, it was invisible sitting silently on its limb.

“Are we locked?” Hail asked.

“Yes, sir,” Knox said, leaning back in his chair. He inhaled deeply, exhaling slowly.

“OK,” Hail said, turning his chair toward Oliver Fox. “Let’s bring in the next micro-hub.”

The term micro-hub didn’t have much to do with the size of the drones. It was nomenclature Hail’s crew used to refer to a drone’s heritage. The main drone was *Fogbat*, which dropped off the hub called *Led Zeppelin*, its mini-drone. The next group of hubs released by *Led Zeppelin* was referred to as micro-hubs. If those hubs parented more hubs, then those would be called nano-hubs and so on until pico- had been used. Hail’s drone laboratories had never nested drones deeper than pico-, so there was no need for any further extended classification. The inventors of the metric system in 18th century France had little need for any terminology smaller than micro- because they didn’t have instruments fine enough to measure more minute increments. But in later years, pico-, femto-, atto-, zepto- and yocto- metric increments had been established and would be used when and if Hail’s team ever needed them.

Oliver Fox situated himself in his chair, placed his hands on his controllers and his feet on the pedals under his station.

Knox touched an icon that mirrored the green video being sent from *Styx* onto the big screen mounted directly over Fox’s control station. Now the entire crew could see the video being streamed by his drone.

“Liftoff,” Fox announced.

From the top of *Led Zeppelin*, an object that could only be described as a bird’s nest began to rise into the humid night. This micro-drone was a mass of plastic sticks woven haphazardly together to form a bird’s nest. The nest didn’t have any affiliation to a particular bird in the area. Unless one of Kim’s servants or girlfriends happened to be an expert in ornithology, it should go unnoticed.

Hail thought that *Styx* appeared to handle a little better than *Aerosmith*. It certainly climbed much faster.

“I’m at 100 feet and moving toward my LZ,” Fox told the crew.

The video looked the same as when *Aerosmith* had passed over the electric fence—green, murky, and not much on the horizon other than distant trees.

Having Fox fly a patch of sticks into a tree would have been a disaster. The sides of the drone would have certainly snagged on something. Thus, the landing point chosen for *Styx* was much easier to manage.

Fox smiled. “All right,” he said. “I’m over my touchdown point and the surface looks clear.”

Hail nodded and remained silent.

“Coming down, down, down—” Fox said as he nudged his foot pedals deeper into the floor.

The video streaming from *Styx* wasn’t as shaky as it had been with *Aerosmith*; therefore, the touchdown wasn’t as dramatic. Inch by inch, *Styx* descended until it came to rest atop a power pole that fed one-inch-thick electrical cables into Kim’s property. The pole was about twenty meters behind the pool in the backyard. The landing zone for *Styx* was in a perfect line of sight to the pool and the patio area.

“We’re down,” Fox announced with little fanfare. “Docking *Styx* now.”

Three thin brown fishing lines lowered three tiny brown, tri barbed fish hooks about an inch down the pole. A second later, the hooks were reeled back in, and each of the hooks dug into the weathered pole and secured *Styx* to the top.

“That’s the way to do it,” Hail told Fox. “Two in place and one more to go.”

Paige Grayson was up to bat. Without hesitation, Grayson pushed her feet into the flight pedals and twisted both of her flight controllers to the right. The micro-hub known as *Stones* rose into the air and hovered over *Led Zeppelin*. Grayson oriented the craft so its main camera was pointed in the direction of Kim’s compound. She increased the speed of the propellers and ascended quickly to 100 feet.

Knox patched Stone’s camera into the big monitor above Grayson, providing Hail and the rest of the crew a view of her drone’s streaming video.

Grayson navigated *Stones* along the same vector that *Aerosmith* and *Styx* had taken. First out of the bushes, then up higher and over the fence, and now down lower as Grayson brought the drone within twenty meters of its landing zone.

Above Hail, the image on two of the large monitors being sent from *Styx* and *Aerosmith* was still and only *Stones*’ video stream was on the move. The dark green pool came into view. It was surrounded by lighter green bricks. A spillway adorned by cement and rocks was cut into the side of the pool. The opening released water into a small brook that ran downhill. Rocks had been methodically placed in a specific pattern to create a babbling brook that meandered throughout the backyard. The brook terminated 50 meters downhill where a hidden pump sent the water back into the pool via a buried pipe.

“Almost there,” Grayson said. She kept glancing down at the bottom of her screen for her altitude. The other micro-hubs had never descended lower than twenty feet. Grayson’s drone was now only two feet off the ground.

Grayson glanced at her navigation screen.

“My X and Y show this is my LZ, but it looks pretty wet to me,” Grayson said. “What do you guys think?”

Hail shook his head. “How can you tell it’s wet?” he asked. “It’s all green.”

Grayson shrugged without taking her hands off the controls.

She said, “It looks like there is some luminescence coming off the rocks like they are reflecting the moonlight.”

Gage Renner, who had designed the drone, spoke up. “The hub can take some water, but it would be best if we set it down somewhere dry. It looks like there may be some water splashing from the stream right there, so why don’t we land to the right a few feet?”

Hail said, “We want to keep *Stones* surrounded by rocks so it doesn’t look out of place. If we want to set it down on the periphery of the brook, that would be OK, but it needs to be surrounded by rocks.”

Renner said, “It’s not like anyone except the gardener walks this far down the brook, and we are only talking about for 24 hours. I think we have to depend on stealth here and take a chance.”

“OK,” Hail conceded. “Set it down, Paige.”

“Roger that,” she said, and tilted one of her flight controllers to the left. “There’s a patch of rocks further down the stream that looks dry. I’m going for that.”

Grayson maneuvered *Stones* to the left a few yards and said, “This area looks good and dry. I’m coming down.”

A foot above the edge of the stream, a drone that looked like a river-worn stone, lowered into place, nuzzling itself between four other river stones. The doors on its cylindrical propeller shaft irises closed, and the micro-hub turned into a rock.

Unlike the other two drones that had touched down and were still streaming a video, the instant that *Stones* touched down, its stream went dark. Hail knew that the camera was still sending an image, but the camera was looking directly at a rock sitting next to it. That was no big deal. *Stones* had a specific purpose and sending back surveillance video wasn’t it.

Hail stood up and began clapping his hands. The sound was loud in the quiet room.

“That was a fantastic job, everyone,” he told his crew. “Everything worked out the way we planned it. I couldn’t ask for a better phase of this mission.”

The rest of the crew pushed back from their stations and relaxed.

“Let’s put all the hubs into sleep mode to save power, and I’d like all of you to put yourselves into sleep modes as well.”

There was a smattering of laughter. A few of the pilots got up and stretched and began with idle mission chatter, burning nervous energy.

Hail yelled out over the noise, “I need everyone to be back on station in five hours—that’s 7 a.m.”

On his way out of the mission room, Hail shook Renner and Mercier’s hands.

“So far so good,” he said to them.

“Let’s just hope the big show tomorrow morning goes as well,” Mercier said.

“Yep,” Hail agreed.

Hail opened the massive iron door, left the mission center and headed toward his stateroom for a few hours of sleep.

“*Sleep,*” he thought to himself. “*Yeah, right.*”

NIZHNY NOVGOROD, RUSSIA—VOLNA HOTEL

The hotel bed was soft, the sheets smooth and cool. She was lying on her side facing the Russian who was staring at the ceiling.

Victor Kornev turned his head to look at her. He said, “Tonya, I have to attend a video meeting downstairs.”

Kara said nothing. She looked at him inquisitively.

Kornev repeated himself, softening a little, “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but I have to attend a business meeting downstairs. Do you have a room at this hotel?”

Kara said nothing again and waited right up to the point where she felt that Kornev was becoming agitated.

Finally, she responded, her voice soft and sexy, “Yes, I have a room here; did you want me to leave?” she asked in a tone that sounded as if the mere suggestion of asking her to leave would hurt her feelings.

Kornev thought about it for a moment.

Kara could tell he was mentally walking through his hotel room, analyzing it to see if anything on the premises could be compromised. He had made millions being careful, and this situation was no different. At that moment, she didn’t suspect that Kornev thought of her as anything other than a lucky one-night stand.

“Sure, you can stay,” Kornev finally said. His body language changed, and he appeared more relaxed.

That was a good answer. That meant she would have time to do what she needed to do. If it wasn’t for the sake of keeping up appearances, she would be gone before he got back from his meeting, and he would never see her again. But that might cast suspicion upon her and make a cautious Kornev very nervous.

Kornev pulled Kara’s head close to him and kissed her forehead.

“I will see you very soon,” Kornev said, getting out of bed, making no attempt to cover his nakedness.

The Russian’s clothes were piled in a heap on his side of the bed. Kara watched as he pulled on his clothes. All the while, Kara made mental notes of everything she saw. Kornev had two distinct tattoos and several scars.

High up on his right arm was an inked Hammer and Sickle, a symbol of the USSR. Black and red. The ring around the sickle, as well as the star that interlaced through the sickle, was black. The sickle itself was red, with a smattering of white starbursts. The white gave the impression the sickle was made of metal and the sun was glinting off its edges. It looked military and had aged. The colors were faded enough that she suspected the work dated back a decade or more.

On the inside of his left arm was a name. As Kornev dressed, the name flashed into view and then was gone. After two more sightings, Kara pieced together the Russian letters as Кристина, which translated to *Kristina*.

Kara also noticed an ugly wound that had not healed well on Kornev's left shoulder. It looked like the result of a gunshot from a large caliber weapon delivered at close range. It had made a hole big enough that a shallow indentation remained after healing. The area at the top of Kornev's pectoral muscle had been cut away and improperly sutured, leaving his chest uneven. As Kornev turned to locate his socks, she noticed an equally ugly scar on the opposite side of his shoulder where the bullet had exited.

Part of Kara's job was intelligence gathering. Being able to positively identify Kornev under any circumstance was important. Positive physical identification was critical, and indexing tattoos and old wounds was much better than trying to match a face to a photograph. If one of Kornev's many enemies got ahold of him and left him dead in a field, maybe even decapitating him and taking his hands, the CIA would still be able to make a positive ID from the tattoos and scars that Kara documented in her mind. After her assignment had been completed, all that information would be typed up and added to Kornev's file in the CIA database.

It took Kornev less than two minutes to get dressed. He leaned over to kiss the top of Tonya's head. He didn't say goodbye or see you later. He simply walked out of the bedroom. A moment later, Kara heard the front door of the hotel suite close with a light click.

She waited for a minute in case Kornev had forgotten something. When she was relatively sure he was gone, Kara whipped off the satin sheets and quickly hustled out into the front room of the suite. Wasting as little time as possible, she adjusted her dress while walking over to a small desk-like piece of furniture. The table looked like something you could buy at IKEA, but sturdier. It was made of blond wood, chrome and glass. The table could suffice as an extra surface to hold an opened piece of luggage, but Kornev had been using it as a desk.

Kara went directly for his phone charger that was plugged into the socket on an ornate lamp. Moving quickly, she unplugged the charger from the lamp and removed the white iPhone cable that was plugged into its port. His phone charger was a little different than most of them she had seen. In a perfect world, it would have been the common white charger that Apple sold in the millions and provided in the package with each iPhone. But this was an aftermarket unit. It was black, not white, and smaller than the original Apple charger.

Kara knew that time was her biggest enemy. Kornev had not told her when he would be back. He had said, "I will see you very soon," *But how long was very soon?* Five minutes? A half hour? Kara tore a few sheets of paper from the notepad sitting next to the lamp. She folded them over once, twice and then once more, creating a thick square of paper.

Not bothering to put on her shoes, Kara cupped the iPhone charger in her hand, picked up her purse from the floor and opened the front door to the room. Trying to look casual, she glanced into the hallway. Kara looked left for a moment and then right. She was pleased that the hallway was empty. She was also pleased that Kornev didn't have any type of security detail. He must have felt that personal security wasn't needed since he was in his hometown of Nizhny Novgorod, colloquially shortened to Nizhny by most Russians. She was told by her intelligence handlers that Kornev employed bodyguards if he ventured to foreign lands. If Kornev had his guards with him at the Volna Hotel, they could not have prevented her from completing her current assignment. But guards would have certainly made it more difficult.

Kara stood up straight and pulled her shoulders back. Her mother had always told her that posture was everything when it came to finding a good husband. "What man in the world would want a slouching woman?" *What man, indeed?*

With perfect posture, Kara stepped into the hallway. She checked the hallway again, turned around and inserted the folded paper into the area of the doorjamb where the bolt met the strike plate. Being careful not to smash her fingers, she closed the door gently on the paper sheets.

Testing her work, she pushed on the door and it opened a few centimeters, indicating that the bolt was being held open by the paper. Confident that she would be able to get back into the room, Kara again closed the door carefully, turned and began walking briskly toward her own room four doors down the hall.

Kara reached into her purse and removed her room's keycard. Her room number was 407, and it was closed and locked as it should have been. Afraid she would see a mystified Kornev come around the corner, she hurriedly opened her door and entered. During her entire stay at this hotel, she had spent less than five minutes in this room. When she had arrived, she had done some touchups to her makeup but went directly down to the bar. Her mission had been dependent on being on display when Kornev went to the bar for Happy Hour, just as he had done the night before.

The first night that Kornev had spent in the bar had not been very exciting for him. Her CIA support team had told her that Kornev had sat at the bar and watched a high school hockey game on television. The only other people that had been in the bar were two old couples that sipped wine and retired early.

Kara found her large green suitcase still sitting next to her front door where she had left it. She would have loved to jump into the shower and cleanse the Russian's scent off her, but there was no time for that. She tossed her suitcase onto the bed and turned on the wall lamps on either side of the bed.

It had a central zipper that circled the main section. She unzipped the suitcase completely and opened the flap. Inside were a few clothes and a massive selection of phone chargers—hundreds. Each charger was inserted into a plastic slot fused into a

thick plastic sheet. Each sheet had ten rows and five columns of chargers with chargers on the front and back. There were ten sheets of plastic. The CIA tech who had packed her bag had not told her how the chargers would be organized. As she gazed down at them, the only order Kara could make out was that they were arranged by color and size. That would seem to make sense if whoever was trying to locate a charger was in a hurry, which she was, so the arrangement worked in her favor.

The charger she held in her hand was black, so she removed all the white sheets of chargers until she found the first selection that had nothing but black phone chargers. She began the process by holding up Kornev's charger in front of each charger nestled in its clear pocket.

Nothing on the first sheet. They were all too large. She flipped over to the backside of the first sheet and repeated the comparison with each of the new candidates.

Nothing again. She set that sheet aside and began on the next batch. She was optimistic about finding a match. The next set of black chargers were still too big, but they continued to get smaller. She completed her scan, found nothing that matched, flipped over the sheet and searched the backside.

Halfway through, she said, "Yes," as she reached down and pulled open the Velcro seal that secured a small black phone charger.

Under the direct light of the lamp, she held up Kornev's phone charger against the one she had selected. They looked identical. She placed them next to one another and inspected them from every angle until she was confident the chargers were an exact match.

Confident in her find, she placed Kornev's charger in the night table drawer next to the bed. She put the replacement for Kornev's phone charger in her purse. Her watch told her that five minutes had expired since she had left Kornev's room. Not bad. Kara collected all the sheets of chargers she had removed and returned them to the suitcase. She closed the flap but didn't bother zipping it. She moved quickly to the door. Rolling her shoulders back into pretty girl position, Kara stuck her head out and performed a quick hallway inspection. Seeing no one, she stepped into the hallway and pulled the door shut behind her.

An older couple unexpectedly exited their room as Kara was passing. Kara greeted them with the Russian salutation "Добрый вечер," which meant good evening and was used any time after 6 p.m. The old man's eyebrows rose when he looked at Kara. Dressed in a cocktail dress, her red hair in disarray and not wearing shoes, she guessed she looked like a high-class hooker that was sneaking out of a room with her trick's wallet. Nevertheless, the couple politely returned said "Good evening" in Russian, and they walked down the hallway in the opposite direction, whispering to one another.

Kara made it back to Kornev's room. She gently pushed on the door and was relieved to see that the paper holding open the bolt was still in place. Using her index finger and thumb, she held the edges of the paper and opened the door. Once inside, she placed the paper in her purse. No sense in leaving strange folded objects in plain sight. She walked over to the desk.

Instinctively, Kara looked back over her shoulder at the front door. Her paranoid side told her that Kornev could walk in on her at any moment. She retrieved Kornev's original charging cable and plugged it into the new CIA phone charger and plugged the charger back into the lamp. Still paranoid, she checked the door, but Kornev had not walked back into the room. Nor did he walk into the room an hour later, or even an hour after that.

Kara took the time to pen a letter she would leave when she ditched Victor Kornev to jump on a plane headed for the States.

My Dearest Victor,

Alas, I needed to leave on an important invite to attend the Telluride Bluegrass Festival. Drop me an e-mail the next time you are someplace fun and want some company. Russia ... not so fun.

Your new friend, Tonya (Tonya.Merkalou.123@gmail.com)

Four hours later, Kornev opened the door and entered the room.

Kara had her dress on, her shoes off and was watching Russian television; a fate worse than death as far as she was concerned. The show was a Russian sitcom called *Univer*. Continually translating the Russian to English was making her tired and agitated.

Kornev saw her sitting on the couch. He said nothing. He walked to the couch and sat next to her. He reached over and took her hand in his. There was an uncomfortable silence when two people, two strangers had just been intimate.

Kara remained silent. It was her method of control. She wanted Kornev to talk first so she could gauge his demeanor. Anything could have happened while he was gone; up to and including some source of Victor's telling him that there was a CIA spy in his room. Kara had to remain vigilant and be able to react quickly and decisively if things got ugly. Her high-heeled shoes were sitting next to her on the couch. These were not shoes that could be bought from Macy's. These were CIA-issued shoes. The long heels in each of the shoes were metal spikes. If swung into a semi-solid mass, the heel would peel away, allowing the spike to go deep into the target.

Kornev was the first to talk.

"How are you?" he asked in English.

"Fine, and you?" Kara replied politely.

“I’m good,” Kornev said, but his heavy Russian accent made good sound more like guwt.

Kara was silent.

“Are you hungry? Would you like something to eat?” he asked.

Kara was hungry, but she really didn’t want to hang around with Kornev any longer than she had to. If there had been no restrictions on her assignment, she would have ordered a big thick steak. And as she finished her last bite, she would have jammed the steak knife deep into Kornev’s neck, severing his jugular vein. She would have then calmly watched him bleed out as she slipped on her shoes, picked up her purse and exited the room without looking back.

But they wanted Victor Kornev alive. Her bosses, and their bosses, wanted the man to continue breathing. If he was dead, then they wouldn’t know who he was working with. If Kornev was discovered with a four-inch steak knife sticking out of his neck, the CIA wouldn’t know what countries and terrorist organizations were actively buying arms and of what type. If Kornev was planted six feet under, a new arms dealer would take over the trade and they would have to start all over.

The CIA’s phone charger—Kornev’s new phone charger—would indeed charge Kornev’s iPhone. But it was so much more than that. It was a very expensive, very special piece of CIA hardware. The first time that Kornev plugged his phone into the CIA charger, several unique things would happen. First, the charger would set up a peer-to-peer network with a similar charger that was plugged into Kara’s lamp in her room. The PLC, or power-line communication protocol, allowed a high-speed network to be established over hotel power lines that joined the rooms. The second thing that would happen was a small backdoor program would be installed on Kornev’s iPhone. That program would instantly start copying every bit of data to the empty phone in Kara’s room. The copy program would create an identical image of Kornev’s iPhone onto Kara’s phone.

Once back in her room, Kara would connect her phone to the hotel’s Wi-Fi and securely transmit all the data to CIA headquarters. The CIA techs would create a virtual image of Kornev’s phone that would be mounted on the CIA’s computers. In essence, his phone now existed in the virtual world and could be accessed in a virtualized state on a CIA computer. No physical phone was required. From that point on, anytime Kornev charged his phone or connected to a Wi-Fi signal, the virtual phone at CIA headquarters would be instantly updated with any new or modified information. As long as Kornev took his charger with him, his iPhone would continue to update its virtual counterpart. With that information, the CIA intelligence team could access and review all of his chats, texts, e-mails and photos.

And lastly, the little program that had installed itself on Kornev’s phone would silently record every phone call he made. Each time Kornev plugged it in for a charge or the phone discovered an accessible Wi-Fi signal, all recorded calls would be transferred to the CIA.

Kara looked at Kornev for a moment, wondering how best to break his heart. She wanted to repay Kornev with just a fraction of the hurt that he dished out to the rest of the world. His occupation was to provide very dangerous weapons to those who wanted to use them to create terror around the world. And Kornev couldn't care less. It was all about money. It was all about compensation for devastation. What happened after that was none of his concern. Even if it meant providing surface-to-air missiles that could take down a commercial aircraft that had women and children aboard.

Kara looked admiringly at the man with disgust in her heart. She hoped her smile was convincing. She surmised that Kornev didn't see the person behind the smile that was thinking how exposed his neck was at that moment.

She thought, "*Where is a steak knife when you need one?*"

How long ago had Kornev asked her if she was hungry? And how long had she been simply staring at him with that dumb smile on her face, fantasizing about killing him?

"Not right now," she said, her smile fading into a dainty frown. "I've got a little bellyache," she added. "Maybe too many fruity drinks." She held her stomach to emphasize her words.

Kornev looked at her, and she could see something other than hunger far back in his eyes. The look didn't bother her much. She had seen it hundreds of times. It was the look of longing. The look of a man who had found a lovely gold watch, then just hours later, he had lost it. But Kornev's look wasn't of gold, diamonds or even money. It was the look of lust. He wanted to have sex. No doubt about it.

But the bellyache excuse worked well in situations such as this. He would have to be an ogre to force sex on someone who was sick to their stomach. Kara sensed that Kornev was a lot of nasty things, but a sex ogre was not among them. And if he was, then a swat from the heel of her shoe would shut him down pretty fast.

"Maybe you will feel better in the morning," he said.

Kara replied, "I'm sure I will." But in actuality, she was thinking, I will be out of Nizhny before you even wake up.

Kara stood from the couch and held out her hand, allowing Kornev to take it in his and kiss the back of her knuckles. It was a European thing and took some getting used to.

He tried to move in closer and kiss her on the mouth, but Kara was prepared with a little burp that stopped him in his tracks.

She put her hand up to her mouth and said, "Excuse me," with a diminutive look and an embarrassed smile.

Kara walked over to the door and waited.

Like a perfect gentleman, Kornev opened the door for her, and she walked into the hallway.

He said something to her in Korean.

Kara guessed it was a salutation of some sort, and she smiled politely.

She took a chance and responded with the phrase, “*Go screw yourself,*” in her best Mulluk-Mulluk. She turned and walked away. Since she didn’t hear anything other than Kornev’s door closing, she assumed that he didn’t know Mulluk-Mulluk.

CELEBES SEA—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

There was no difference in time zones between that of North Korea and the current position of the *Hail Nucleus*. North Korea was in the forty-degree latitude range, and it was south at seven degrees, but their longitudes were roughly the same. The distance between the two points was 4,115 kilometers, but the satellites that sent the signals from the *Hail Nucleus* to the drones surrounding the Korean's house didn't care about all that. It could have been floating in North Korea's Taedong River or even Kim Yong Chang's swimming pool, and it would have made no difference. A signal was a signal, no matter how far away. As long as it was five by five.

The *Hail Nucleus*' mission crew had reassembled in the mission center. Gage Renner and Pierce Mercier were acting as the real-time data analysts for the mission. They were also convenient as a second set of hands, if needed. Both analysts could assist in switching displays, looking up flight data, verifying coordinates and other tasks that didn't directly involve flying a drone. Both men were seated at the analysts' stations on the second tier behind the pilots.

Shana Tran was manning the communications console. Her job was straightforward. Make sure the drones all received a clear signal from the Chinese satellite. Unlike the other pilots that seemed wound up, Tran looked cool and almost a little bored. She would have liked to have redone her fingernails before the mission, but she had overslept.

While Tran was sleeping, Tanner Grant had flown *Foghat* back to the *Hail Laser*, where its crew had already begun the refueling process. For now, Grant was an observer, but he would soon be back online and responsible for returning *Foghat* to theater to retrieve the drones.

Alex Knox was responsible for the actions of the micro-drone known as *Aerosmith*. The drone was currently sitting high up in the red pine tree that looked down on the Korean compound below. Alex understood that he had the toughest part of the mission, but he had practiced it, not only in the simulator, but also in a special room that was set up for just that purpose. A section of a pine tree had been hauled aboard the *Hail Nucleus* and erected in the special room. Knox had then practiced flying in and out between its branches. He was comfortable with his part of the operation and confident he could pull it off.

Junior pilot Oliver Fox was manning the controls of the drone called *Styx*. It was the main *eyes-on* drone responsible for streaming the main camera angles to the mission center. The vantage point *Styx* had atop the power pole, less than twenty meters from the compound, could not be improved upon. If *Styx* became inoperable, then *Aerosmith* could also be used as the spotter drone, but its camera angle could be compromised. Even now, when the wind blew, the video being sent

from *Aerosmith* was periodically being blocked by tree branches and pine boughs as they fluttered in front of its camera lens.

Junior pilot, Paige Grayson, was operating the drone known as *Stones*. Like its name, *Stones* was a stone. It sat on the ground near the manmade brook and did nothing. It saw nothing. Its sole purpose was to provide backup to *Aerosmith* in case that drone had a technical problem, and it could not complete its mission.

The other seats in the mission control center were occupied by more junior pilots. Some were in training and others were ready to take on missions. Hail thought it was important all the *Hail Nucleus*' mission pilots were in attendance. He wanted them to see and feel and experience what a mission was all about. Even though most of the pilots had firsthand experiences with death, it was important that they really understood the finality of taking someone's life. He wanted to watch his junior pilots' reactions as their target fell. Hail had to know if there were any weak links in the chain and if his crew was sincere and dedicated.

The youngest member of his crew was sixteen, but Hail knew that children as young as seven years old had served in the Revolutionary War. As many as twenty-percent of the Civil War soldiers were younger than eighteen. Of the more than 58,100 Americans who died in Vietnam, 11,465 of those listed as KIA were less than twenty years old. Hail understood young people had been fighting and dying for what is now the United States since the first colonists came over from England. Hail didn't have a problem with that; if his young staff wanted to fight, at least he knew they would be safe on his ship.

Hail sat in his big command chair. Everything was in place. Thousands upon thousands of hours of intelligence gathering, development, design, construction and planning had all come down to this. Ten minutes from now, this mission would be over. Hail didn't know how long all of the future missions would take to complete, but he really didn't care. After the success of each mission, there would be one less terrorist in the world, and that was just fine with him. A world with no terrorists sounded like a pretty good place to live.

The video feed from *Slyx* was being sent to the large screen above Knox. It was more or less in the center of the room with Tran's station to the right and Grant's, Fox's and Grayson's stations to the left. That left five stations to Tran's right that were being occupied by junior pilots and four more stations to Grayson's left that sat four more junior pilots.

Hail watched the feed from *Slyx* for a moment. The video being sent from the drone on the pole was a wide-angle shot of the backyard of Kim's compound. At the bottom of the frame, the pool had been bisected. Only half of the pool could be seen. That left room at the top of the frame that showed the patio and the porch.

One of Kim's servants was outdoors setting the breakfast table. Neither of Kim's girlfriends or Kim had exited the house this morning. Up to this point, the video that *Eagles* had recorded coincided with Kim's normal morning schedule. If yesterday's schedule matched today's schedule, then Kim would emerge from the back-sliding doors in about five minutes. His girlfriends would drift out of the home whenever they wanted. In the three days that *Eagles* had shot video, the girls had never emerged from the house before him. That was an important timing element for this mission. He was always the first one out, first to sit down at the table and first to start eating.

Typically, Hail would ask for a weather briefing from Mercier, but Hail could tell from *Stryx*'s HD video feed that it was a beautiful morning in Kangdong. The sun was shining brightly, and in the background the trees and bushes showed little signs of wind. The sensitive microphone on *Stryx* picked up birds chirping, dishes at Kim's table being set and somewhere in the distance a dog barking.

"Is everyone good to go?" Hail asked his crew.

"Yes, sir," was heard all around.

"OK," Hail said in an uplifting tone, "Here goes nothing."

"What's the status of *B-52s*?" he asked.

Knox flipped through a few screens, read some data and said, "The *B-52s* is ready to strike."

Hail nodded his head.

"Please open the hatch on *Aerosmith*," Hail ordered.

Knox pressed an icon labeled HATCH RELEASE and announced, "Hatch is open."

"OK. Launch the *B-52s*," Hail told him.

"Lifting off now," Knox reported.

From the top of the micro-drone called *Aerosmith*, a pico-drone code-named *B-52s* emerged.

The pico-hub was twelve millimeters long, or roughly half an inch. It was oblong in shape and seven millimeters wide. Two tiny rotors spun ferociously at its sides and made a sound like a bee. The craft even looked like a bee, hence its name *B-52s*. The tiny drone was light blue and off white. If it were viewed from the ground, the light blue would blend with the sky, and if it was viewed against the pool bricks, then the white would help to mask its appearance.

"Communications?" Hail asked.

Shana Tran checked the signals and responded, "We are five by five."

"Bring up the feed from *B-52s* on large screen number one," Hail instructed.

Renner touched a few icons on his monitor and a bouncy video appeared above them.

“Wow,” Hail exclaimed. “Having a little trouble there, Alex?” Hail asked.

“Man, this bee drone is a bitch to fly. It’s too small to hold any auto-correcting electronics, and even the slightest wind wants to blow it away.”

“And—” Hail asked.

“And there is no problem flying this little thing,” Knox told him. “It just takes a lot more flying skill than the other drones.”

“Good man,” Hail told him.

The crew watched the video as a clump of pine boughs drifted to the left of the screen and then disappeared from sight behind the drone.

“This is the hairy part,” Knox told them. “If I just touch one of these itty-bitty rotors to a single pine needle, then this thing is toast.”

Ahead were more bunches of pine needles. To the tiny drone, they were massive obstacles that had to be negotiated and avoided.

The video wasn’t smooth or stable. The little drone seemed to jump and drift as Knox did his best to make his way out of the tree.

“Almost there,” Knox announced as he jammed his feet deep into his foot pedals.

Hail could see bright sunlight ahead, and only a few of the green shafts of sharp needles were still in their way.

Knox bent both of his control sticks to the right, and the video rocked and tilted violently to the right before Knox corrected by angling both sticks back to the left.

Hail was getting dizzy watching the feed. He wondered if the others were as well.

“Clear,” Knox said, and the pico-drone entered open sky for the first time in its short life.

Each of the *B-52s*’ prototypes were so small and delicate that after two flights, they were completely worn out. The heat created from the intense load on their rotors burned through their bearings like they were made of butter instead of metal. This was the first flight for this particular unit, so the entire crew had high hopes and kept their fingers crossed for luck.

A round of applause erupted and then quickly died away as *B-52s* darted out into the open.

“What’s the status of the target?” Hail asked.

Oliver Fox put four fingers on his screen and pinched them together, zooming *Slyx*’s camera in closer to the breakfast table.

“At this exact moment, we are all clear,” Fox reported. “The table is set and no one is sitting at it. Drinks have been poured. No one is in the backyard.”

“Great,” Hail said. “Proceed with the bombing run,” he told Knox.

Renner said, “Good, because we are running out of flight time. *B-52s* has used up 65% of its battery.”

“Let’s go, let’s go,” Hail told Knox.

“Right, Skipper,” Knox replied, pushing both of his flight sticks forward.

The edge of the green grass disappeared from view. Now all that was in front of them was a pool, the bricks that surrounded the pool and further ahead the outdoor table.

“Commencing the bomb run,” Knox announced.

Knox was making less flight corrections as he had been while escaping from the tree, but the video was shakier than it had been with the micro-drone, *Aerosmith*. Knox understood that the tiny flying drone wasn’t very stable, but then it was only designed to last five minutes.

Unknown to Hail and his crew, their tiny drone *B-52s* was being observed.

From far up in a tree and on the other side of the pool; a pair of eyes watched the bee fly toward the table. A mind plotted an intercept course and an action was taken.

From the view atop the power pole, the camera on *Syx* recorded a colorful bird flying into the frame and plucking *B-52s* right out of the sky.

“What the hell?!” Knox yelled.

B-52s’ camera was still in operation. It was transmitting video of the ground below; however, the ground was going by sideways.

“What’s going on?” Hail yelled.

Fox had seen the whole thing happen in real-time on *Syx’s* main monitor.

He told Hail, “A bird got *B-52s*.”

“You have to be kidding me?” Hail groaned.

“Sorry, but I’ve got it recorded. Check it out.”

On Hail’s right was the live video still being transmitted from *B-52s* that was tracking a crazy path over ground, and then a moment later all he could see was sun and sky. On the left large overhead monitor, Fox began playing the video of the bird strike. It happened just as Fox had said. In the time it took fifteen video frames to click past, a bird could be seen snatching the tiny dot out of the sky and then disappearing to the right.

“What the hell—” Hail said, totally exasperated.

“Told you it was a bird,” Fox said.

“It was a Summer Tanager, to be exact,” Pierce Mercier piped in. Then like analysts do, Mercier went into a big long explanation. “There are not many birds that eat bees, but the Summer Tanager happens to be one of them. They also eat wasps, hornets, and dragonflies. The birds are mostly found in Africa, Asia, southern Europe and Australia. Their main habitat is—”

“That’s enough,” Hail interrupted.

Video was still being streamed from the captured *B-52s*. Hail turned his head sideways to reference what he was seeing. It appeared that the bird had the tiny drone in its mouth and was flying back to the tree from which it had come. With his head still sideways, Hail recognized the pool and the courtyard twenty feet below. Then the screen went crazy with motion. *B-52s* took three jarring hits that scrambled the video, and then a fixed image appeared on the screen. The drone’s camera was now focused on several thick blades of grass.

“Looks like the Summer Tanagers do not like *B-52s*. The bird dropped it,” Mercier said.

“Perfect,” Hail snarled, infuriated.

There was silence in the room as the crew regrouped.

Then the timeline kicked in.

Renner informed everyone, “We have probably less than three minutes to complete the bombing run before Kim walks out that door and sits down.”

Hail asked, “Is there any way to get *B-52s* off the deck?”

Renner answered, “It doesn’t matter. It’s already exhausted more than 80% of its battery. Even if it could fly, it may not even make it to the target.”

Knox added, “And there is no way to spin up when the drone is lying on its side. Those are external propellers, and one of them is pinned to the ground.”

“All right, quickly,” Hail told the crew. “Let’s go with Plan B.”

Paige Grayson moved into action mode. She made some selections on her screen and said, “Opening the hatch on *Stones*.”

“Switching control to *Beatles*,” Knox announced, pulling up a new screen and pressing the corresponding icon.

From inside the core of *Stones* rose the drone called *Beatles*. It was identical in every way to *B-52s*, except that it had a fully charged battery and had not been chewed on by a big bird.

“Anyone watching for the bird?” Knox asked as he carefully flew the drone toward the breakfast table.

“Does it matter?” Hail said. “Just complete the mission, and be quick about it before he comes out. If the bird makes another run, then it makes another run. There is nothing we can do about it.”

Knox didn't reply. He simply concentrated on keeping the drone flying low to the ground. After traversing what seemed like miles of bricks, Knox began to gain altitude as he neared the table.

The tiny drone buzzed louder as Knox increased thrust and spun the rotors faster. Plates, silverware and glasses of various shapes and sizes filled with liquid of different colors came into view as the drone crested the edge of the table.

"All right, easy now, Alex. We only have one shot at this," Hail cautioned.

"But no pressure, right?" Knox shot back sarcastically.

The dishes and glasses on the table were so close to the drone that they looked like small buildings in front of the camera.

Knox found the glass of orange juice in the spot where it had sat the last three mornings. He worked the controls until *Beatles* was hovering directly over the glass.

"Are you sure you're in place?" Hail asked.

"As close as I'll ever be, Skipper," Knox confirmed.

"OK," Hail said, "Bombs away."

Since Knox's hands and feet were busy, Hail pushed the icon on his monitor labeled BOMBS AWAY.

A tiny valve opened and allowed a small amount of compressed air into a chamber inside *Beatles'* tail. The air pressure pushed out a squirt of clear liquid that landed directly in the glass of orange juice below.

"We've got company!" Fox warned.

On *Stryx's* monitor, Fox noticed the sliding glass door was being opened. "It's Kim," Fox added.

"Go, go, go!" Hail yelled at Knox.

Knox whipped both flight sticks to the right. The tiny drone whirred and buzzed and went rocketing off, totally out of control.

"Get it out of there," Hail told Knox.

Knox squeezed both triggers on his controllers, pouring full power into the drone's rotors. The video was nothing more than colorful static that flew by. Knox made no effort to fly the drone; he just needed to get it as far away as possible. Seconds later and five feet in the grassy area, the drone struck a tree at full throttle and disintegrated on impact. It went from a buzz, to a pop and then to complete silence. The big screen that was showing the video being streamed from *Beatles* went black, and a message popped up that read NO SIGNAL DETECTED.

"Are we good?" Hail asked his team.

Knox released his controllers and shook out his cramping hands. He checked his instruments and saw that everything was dead.

Satisfied that *Beatles* was dust, Knox announced, “We’re good here,” and gave everyone a thumbs-up.

“We are good up here too,” Fox said. “Kim didn’t see anything. He is sitting down now.”

The loss of both *B-52s* and *Beatles* was inconsequential. Even though each drone cost ten thousand dollars to build, the crew understood that their mission was only a one-way trip. Neither drone was designed with enough battery life to make it back to their mother drones. It was a suicide mission for the pico-drones. They were the kamikazes of Hail’s fleet of drones.

The crew watched the video feed from *Stryx*. Everyone in the mission center was quiet and pensive.

“If anyone wants to leave, then feel free to do so. There are no judgements here. What you are going to see is not going to be fun or pretty.”

Hail looked at the faces of his crew. They continued to watch the video feed from *Stryx*. No one left.

* * *

Fox refocused the camera and zoomed in tight on Kim seated at his table. It was understood that there was a certain degree of error involved with *Beatles’* mission. There was really no way to know for sure that the liquid dispensed from *Beatles* had found its mark and had landed inside the glass. The drone was too small to have more than one camera, and the camera it did have only showed a view from the front. There was no camera underneath the drone. But the rim of the glass had been right in front of the camera, so if the load had exited the craft the way in which it was designed, gravity should have done its job.

Kim sat back and allowed his servant to place a napkin in his lap and then reached over for the glass of orange juice.

“Here it is,” Hail said, realizing that he sounded a little too happy.

But he picked up his coffee mug instead and took a tiny sip. The coffee must have been hot because he quickly pulled the cup away from his mouth and made a face.

The sliding glass door opened again, and one of Kim’s girlfriends came out to join him at the table. She was wearing a bikini under a colorful sheer cover-up.

She said some words that sounded like good morning in Korean.

He didn’t respond or even look at her. Instead he picked up a butter knife, sliced off a thick slab of butter and began to work it into his toast.

“What an asshole,” Shana Tran said.

“That he is,” Hail agreed. “And if he drinks his O.J. like a good boy, he will soon be a dead asshole.”

His girlfriend took a moment to look over the table. Drinks had been poured for him, but as of yet, nothing had been poured for her. She looked directly at the single glass of orange juice that had been poured and began to reach for it.

“Oh, no,” Mercier said. “I think she’s going to drink the orange juice.”

The woman’s hand closed around the glass.

A split second later, like lightning, Kim flipped over his butter knife and rapped the woman on the back of her knuckles with the knife’s thick handle.

She flinched, let go of the glass and cried out in pain. She held the back of her hand and teared up, and Kim yelled something at her that could only have been, “Get your own orange juice.”

The little Asian woman’s body visually shrank as she meekly leaned back in her chair and lowered her head.

His servant had heard the commotion and came outside.

Kim pointed at the orange juice and then pointed at the woman and told the servant to get her a glass.

The woman raised her head and did her best to smile appreciatively.

“Really teaching her a lesson, huh?” Shana Tran commented. “What a jerk.”

A moment later, Hail’s team watched Kim reach over and pick up the glass of orange juice. He held it up in front of his girlfriend. Making sure she was watching him, he greedily drank half of the glass.

“You haven’t seen jerking yet,” Hail remarked.

Hail looked down and pressed his finger to his screen and started a digital timer on his right monitor.

The servant returned with more orange juice and topped off his glass and filled an additional glass for the woman.

The crew looked on, readying themselves for the spectacle to follow.

“Are we still recording?” Hail asked Fox.

“Yes, sir,” Fox responded.

The image from *Stryx* showed what would appear to be a common breakfast being consumed by a common Korean couple in a picturesque surrounding.

But what was really happening 4000 miles away from the *Hail Nucleus*, a prostitute was about to witness the horrific death of a maniacal terrorist in a picturesque surrounding.

At that exact moment, the metabolic compound was breaking down in Kim’s body.

Hail looked at the timer on his monitor.

“One minute,” he announced.

During the planning of Kim’s death, his lab staff explained to Hail that cyanide poisoning created a form of histotoxic hypoxia. The cells of the surrounding organism were unable to use oxygen. Once the brain no longer received oxygen, then it was lights out. This particular form of cyanide was more concentrated than the pill form, due to the fact that the pico-drone could only carry a tiny amount. Time was the tradeoff. It would take longer to do its damage, but Hail’s chemists assured his team that it would work just fine.

“Two minutes,” Hail announced.

Kim reached across the table and picked up his coffee cup again. Apparently, the man was confident the dark liquid was now cool enough to drink. As the cup touched his lips, Kim made another strange face; similar to the one he had made when he had burned his lips the first time. He pulled the cup back from his mouth an inch or two and grimaced. The coffee cup began to tremble in his hand slightly. He cleared his throat with a single cough. Brown hot liquid slid over the edge of the coffee cup and onto the table. Without warning, he stood up from the table with his coffee cup still in his right hand. His eyes were now wide, and he looked panicked and began to shake. A few seconds later, the coffee cup fell from his hand and landed on the glass table with a crash. Hot coffee splashed up from the table and landed on his girlfriend who began to scream.

Both of his hands flew up to his neck, and he clutched at it as if he were trying to choke himself. As he stood there, immobile, trying to choke himself, his entire body began to shake and convulse. His face had turned beet red. One hand flew away from his neck and began to reach across the table toward the woman, as if beckoning her for help. The screaming she had let out when the hot coffee had splashed on her was nothing compared to the scream she belted out now. Kim looked like he was trying to speak, but all that came out of his mouth was some guttural choking sounds as if he had swallowed his tongue.

He had now become a zombie. He let go of his throat and both of his hands rose out in front of him. His eyes widened and his eyeballs looked like they were ready to pop out of his red face. His girlfriend scuttled her chair backward across the bricks and continued to scream. Two servants opened the sliding glass doors and came running out. One of them approached him and tried to assess the situation. The servant quickly determined there was very little he could do for his boss, who couldn’t talk, couldn’t walk and was making weird zombie choking sounds. The servants had good intentions, but they were not fast enough to catch their boss when he fell.

In one great convulsive act, he straightened up as if a rigid pole had been driven up his spine. He then grabbed at his chest with both hands and fell forward onto the glass table. Kim’s face smashed into the bowls, plates and glassware. The force of

the North Korean's body landing on the table shattered the glass top inward, and he continued to fall forward. His feet came off the ground, and his body cartwheeled over the thick table rail that had supported the glass. With all his weight on the rail, the opposite side of the table lifted off the ground, and the frame went shooting up onto its side.

The microphone on *Stryx* had been optimized to pick up speech at a distance. The sound of Kim falling through the table was so loud inside the *Hail Nucleus* that one would have thought that a car had crashed into a glass factory.

"Damn!" Knox yelled, verbalizing what everyone else was thinking.

Kim's body finally relaxed and came to a rest faceup, his white suit covered in crystal shards of colorful china, brown coffee stains and orange blotches from the deadly juice. His face was still bright red, which was a telltale sign of cyanide poisoning.

On the screen, Hail watched his former girlfriend jump out of her chair and run inside the house. The servants began picking their way through the rubble, negotiating broken glass and what was left of the misshapen frame of the table.

Mercier used his right hand to trace a cross over his heart.

Tanner Grant said, "Damn, if the cyanide didn't kill him, then the glass table sure the hell did."

Under her breath, Shana Tran said, "Goodbye to bad garbage."

Gage Renner stared in disbelief as if he was waiting for someone to rerun the footage so he could be sure that the man was dead.

The remainder of the crew began to talk amongst themselves. Some conversations were animated; others were factual and a few were stilted and sullen.

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Hail looked down at the timer. He pressed STOP, and the meter read 00:03:23.

Hail told Renner, "Please save a copy of Kim taking his table faceplant to my NAS. I have an e-mail to write."

"No problem," Renner responded.

"If he comes back to life, you will notify me immediately," Hail joked.

"You will be the first to know," Renner smiled.

The hubbub in the mission center wound down and then drifted off to nothing. Everyone wanted to hear what Hail had to say.

Hail got to his feet and looked around the room, nodding his head in approval. He bunched up his face and then smiled. For a moment, to the crew it looked as if Hail was a little choked up and was trying to hold back a tear.

Hail rubbed his stubbly chin and thought about his wife and his kids.

When he spoke, his voice sounded distant, as if he were physically in the room, but his soul was a million miles away.

“We are all here for the same reason,” Hail began softly. “We all do what we do for the same reason. And, today we have done something good. Something that will make a difference. Something that will change how the game is played. And don’t fool yourselves for a moment. *This is a game* to all these tyrants. A game played with human lives.”

Hail paused for a moment and looked back at the screen. His servants were slapping him softly in the face; a rudimentary method of revival.

“*Not even your supreme leader is going to be able to bring that guy back,*” Hail thought.

* * *

Hail continued addressing his crew, “You should all be very proud of yourselves and what we have accomplished. Your loved ones would be proud of you. I can guarantee that. Your country is proud of you, and I’m proud of you.”

The crew in the *Hail Nucleus*’ mission room began clapping and cheering.

Three thousand miles away, the crew in the *Hail Proton*’s mission room clapped and cheered.

And five thousand miles further around the globe, the crews aboard *Hail Laser*, *Hail Electron*, and *Hail Atom* also celebrated a successful mission.

They had all been watching the feed. They had all shared the same experience.

Hail stoically walked to the door, pulled it open and stepped through to the other side.

He turned around to make sure the watertight door was closed securely.

He no longer heard the crew and knew they couldn’t hear him. Only then did he allow himself to scream the word “*YES*” and pump his fists in victory.

MOSCOW, RUSSIA—SHEREMETYEVO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Kara saw the man, the guy who had been following her since she flew out of Nizhniy Novgorod at 05:00 a.m. on Aeroflot 1223. He was good. Better than most tails she had encountered during her time as a spy for the CIA.

“Spy for the CIA,” she hummed, thinking it could be a glitchy pop song. “I was a spy for the CIA, something... something... something because crime don’t pay.” Maybe not. She was pretty happy right now. She had taken a Valium and a Xanax. It wasn’t great tradecraft to be super stoned while still on the job, but her fear of flying was debilitating enough that without the drugs, she would have either been climbing the walls or simply not flying.

The guy that was tailing her was dressed in summer Russian attire, which for most Russians was anything they could afford. The man was clad in Levi’s 569 loose straight jeans, Kara observed. But the ironic thing about this particular man was his choice in black T-shirts. The one he was wearing had three big letters that read KGB.

Kara stifled a laugh. How audacious. Some people, even Russians, might not know that the KGB on the man’s shirt stood for *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, which translated to English meant *Committee for State Security*. Following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the KGB had been split into the Federal Security Service and the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation. The original KGB no longer existed.

The KGB guy was having coffee at the tiny café that looked out at the crowd waiting to board the connecting Aeroflot flight to Fairfax, Virginia. He was pretending to either be texting on his phone or possibly playing a game. But he was holding his phone at an odd angle. Most people typically held their phone so the back of it pointed toward the ground. But Mr. KGB was holding his phone almost perpendicular to the ground, so the back of the phone was pointing directly at her. Kara surmised that the man had the camera turned on and was watching her using his phone. Not the most inventive method of observation she had seen, but the man was wearing a T-shirt boasting a spy agency that had been dead for forty years. So, what could she expect?

The T-shirt was kind of brilliant when she thought about it. After all, what spy would wear a shirt that said, “Hey, I’m a spy?” No one, that’s who. So, it was the perfect camouflage. Maybe she should consider wearing a CIA T-shirt.

The airport was busy. Kara guessed more than 500 travelers were clustered between the two active gates preparing to board. She knew the man wouldn't make a move with the number of witnesses around. And there could be other agents lurking around—men or women aligned with other countries that also had a vested interest in Kara and her mission.

Kara couldn't worry about all that, or she would go insane. The best way to deal with a clinger was one of four methods: Lose him, confront him, kill him or ignore him. Right now, Kara was tired. And she knew the man, so she opted for the fourth option. She ignored him.

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In her hotel room in Nizhny, she had waited until Kornev had plugged his phone into the CIA's charger for the night. Five minutes later, the data from the Russian arms dealer's phone had been mirrored to her phone. In order to draw as little attention to herself as possible, she had dressed in comfy, baggy grey sweatpants with a matching shirt and white tennis shoes. All of her curves disappeared under the baggy fabric. Before she left, she removed as much makeup that came off with only soap and water. The bulk of everything she had brought went into her big suitcase. Ten minutes later, she was in a cab and headed for the airport. That resulted in zero hours of sleep. This assignment was starting to wear on her.

By now, Kornev would have inquired about her at the front desk to get her room number. The desk clerk would have looked her up on his computer and told Kornev that Ms. Merkalov had checked out and handed him the envelope that Kara had instructed to be given to Mr. Kornev.

Psychologically, this worked out better than her simply disappearing in the middle of the night. People who checked in and checked out were responsible people with places to be. People who just left in the middle of the night were much more suspect. Kara understood that Kornev would still be suspicious about her, and she didn't want to freak him out to the point where he possibly panicked, leaving his luggage, toiletries and, God help her, his new iPhone charger in his room. Hopefully, Kornev would read the note and assume she was what she appeared to be; a flighty and kooky, silly yet horny woman who had too much money and not enough brains. If the situation played out in her favor, he would e-mail her, and they might develop a relationship of sorts. This was a one-way street, however. Kornev had to contact and invite her to meet him. There was no way that she could run into him a second time by mere coincidence. That could get her killed.

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Kara's boarding flight was called and her stomach did a little flip-flop. She considered taking another pill but quickly dismissed the thought. There was a difference between mellow and comatose, and her mission was far from over.

Kara casually checked her periphery and noted that the man was no longer at the café. No longer hovering where he could be seen. That didn't mean he wasn't still around. She knew he was. Hiding behind a pole, in the bathroom or watching her from a distance. She guessed he would probably be on her plane, having had plenty of time to purchase a ticket for the flight that was only three-fourths full.

First class was announced and boarded, even before the handicapped people. Wasn't Russia wonderful?

Kara had already checked her bag that contained one million phone chargers. If the security officials would have asked what one million phone chargers were doing in her luggage, she had a business card that indicated she was a reseller for an electronics supply company that specialized in iPhone accessories. These wonderful units would function seamlessly in any country and on any electrical grid. The name of the company on her business card, if she recalled correctly, was something like *One Million Phone Chargers*. Of course, there weren't a million of them in her bag, but who cared about the specifics.

Other than her checked bag, she had nothing to carry on but her ticket, a small purse and her cellphone. Kara stood from her chair and without glancing around she went to the boarding gate and handed her ticket to the lady. Kara then got in line and walked down the cramped jetway.

The Airbus A330 was a medium, long-range, wide-body jet. It could accommodate 335 passengers in a two-class layout. First class had several rows with single 27-inch-wide seats positioned by the windows. In the middle part of the plane, the first-class seats were separated by something that looked like two padded ice chests.

Kara checked her ticket and confirmed her seat assignment. Second row in first class. She seated herself on the right side of the plane. Kara picked up whatever magazine was in the cubby under her armrest. She flipped to the middle of the magazine and pretended to be fascinated by the gadgets in *Sky Mall*. Glancing up to adjust her air nozzle, she watched and waited for the Mr. KGB to make an appearance. It took a long time. A lot of air conditioning adjustments. At one point she began to second-guess herself and think for a moment that he wasn't going to make the flight. But then, just as the line of passengers was beginning to thin out, he rounded the bulkhead and stepped onto the plane.

He wasn't a bad looking guy. Mid-thirties. Had a long face. Maybe a little too long. He had a prominent snubbed nose, but not too snubbed. Not hooked, but it looked like a Russian or Slavic nose. He had good cheekbones and kind eyes. He was

of average height and had a good build. The man was carrying nothing but his phone.

“*Traveling light*,” Kara thought.

Her new friend had a two-day’s growth of beard, or it was one of those *trying to look cool things*? Kara thought the new name for it was the thin facial hair style. It looked good on the man.

His kind eyes met hers, and he immediately looked away.

Kara was used to that look. Men would look at her and try to drink her in. She would then look at them, and they would shyly look away. *Busted*. But this man wasn’t doing the *shy* thing. He looked away for an entirely different reason.

It should have been a surprise when he took the seat directly behind her. But it wasn’t. He had apparently done some social engineering with the ticket ladies and found out where she was sitting. The air hags had probably thought it was a sex thing, male and female attraction at its finest—the steamier side of biology. It was the entire animal kingdom courtship ritual unfolding right there in first class. With all their travelers safely on the plane, the ticket ladies were probably gossiping, telling tall tales of their matchmaking, wondering if the mile-high club was in the cards for the young couple.

The engines began to spin up, and a flight attendant handed Kara a glass of champagne. Kara was surprised since she hadn’t ordered the drink. After a moment of observation, she realized that all the first-class passengers were being handed a glass of champagne. It must have been one of those unexpected novelties the airline offered to make you feel as though the thousands of dollars you paid for your seat were worth it.

Kara tasted the fizzy drink. It wasn’t Cristal, that was for sure, but nonetheless she downed it in a few gulps. It could only help to further anesthetize her from her fear of flying.

The jet was pushed back, and the massive machine began its long lumbering taxi toward the runway.

Kara wanted to look behind her to see what the man was doing, but that would have been a bad idea. It was up to him to make the first move.

The engines roared, and all of the passengers were all pressed back into their seats. The passengers in the rear of the plane were pressed into worn out 16”-wide seats. Kara and the lucky rich people in the front of the plane were pressed back into new wide seats with silk pillows. After more noise and more mysterious mechanical sounds that planes make, the engines calmed down and the plane leveled off. Kara began to breathe again.

Emerging from the narrow space between the window and her seat, she was startled when a hand appeared. Her reflex action was to reach down, bend it

backward and snap it at the wrist. But she didn't. Instead, she watched the hand come to a rest on her armrest, with palm open and unmoving. She saw an iPhone resting in the hand.

Kara looked around to see if anyone was watching her. Seeing no one, she removed the cellphone from the hand and replaced it with Kornev's imaged iPhone. The hand closed around the cellphone and withdrew, disappearing back behind her.

A disembodied voice whispered to her, "Great job, Kara." After a pause, he asked, "Or should I say, Tonya?"

She turned her head to the right and spoke softly out of the side of her mouth.

"Call me whatever you want, Jack," she whispered into the space between the window and her seat. "Just don't call me late for dinner."

She added in a whisper, "I'm going to get some sleep. Watch our backs."

"You got it," the voice said. "See you back at the office."

Kara said nothing. She reclined her big, wide comfortable seat back as far as it would go and did her best to relax. The drugs did their thing, and she fell asleep before the flight attendant could bring her a refill of the crappy champagne.

CELEBES SEA—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

The computer in Hail's stateroom spun up his e-mail program. The screen was bright in the dark room, and it took a minute for Hail's eyes to adjust. He sat in front of the PC and took a moment to compose his thoughts. It had been years since he had corresponded with his friend. Their last meeting had been sad and dispiriting.

Hail placed his hands on the keyboard and began to type.

To: TrevorRodgers@fbi.gov

Hi Trev:

I hope you have been doing well. I'm writing to inform you of the demise of the Minister of People's Armed Forces of North Korea, Kim Yong Chang. Under my direction, his life was terminated as of about ten minutes ago. Attached is the footage of his final minutes on Earth. I'm sure that your sources, or your CIA counterpart sources, will be able to confirm this information. The FBI website has offered a reward of twenty-five million dollars for his termination. I'm officially requesting payment of this reward. You can make the check out to Hail Industries and send it to my main office. Please address the envelope to me.

Unrelated, I can't tell you how much it meant to me that you showed up at the funeral. I'm sorry I was such a mess. I would like to say that I'm doing better now, but I would be lying. I miss seeing you. I'm very proud of you and your new job as the director of the FBI. You deserve it, my friend. Your dad would be beaming proud as well.

Take care,

Marshall

Hail hit the SEND icon and pushed away from his desk.

He had about eleven hours until nightfall. and he wanted to be present for the extraction of the drones. He stood, went into his bedroom and got dressed in workout clothes. He removed a bottle of water from the refrigerator, grabbed a towel and headed for the ship's gym. He had an abundance of nervous energy to burn off, not to mention a couple inches of flab that had mysteriously grown over his belly when he hadn't been looking.

THE WHITE HOUSE OVAL OFFICE—WASHINGTON, D.C.

It had taken Trevor Rodgers and his staff ninety minutes to assemble the digital dossier on Marshall Hail. Dozens of FBI analysts had used Google and the FBI's powerful servers to download everything they could find about Marshall Hail. Compiled onto the tiny USB drive that was sticking out of Rodgers's computer was an extensive history of Hail's company. The identity and backgrounds of all of Hail's friends going back to childhood had been researched and itemized. Birth records, death records and a complete genealogy of Hail's family and extended family were on the flash drive. An overview of Hail's lifestyle had also been provided, which included his police record and current medications he was on, as well as any known extracurricular activities Hail was involved with. Every bit of the data that had been collected were zipped into an encrypted file and then had been spat out onto a flash drive.

Confident his team had done all they could do in the short time frame, Rodgers reached down and removed the flash drive from his computer. He pulled on his dress coat and placed the plastic stick of information in his coat pocket. The director of the FBI then had his secretary call for his car so he could make his meeting with the president at the White House.

Now, ninety minutes later, Rodgers removed the USB drive from his coat pocket and stuck it into the slot on the president's big screen TV. It was showtime, and Rodgers hoped that he had all the answers to all the questions that would soon be asked.

Rodgers had an advantage in this briefing because he and Marshall Hail had been childhood friends. Their fathers had both been in the military and had ended up being stationed at many of the same locations. Thus, the Hail and the Rodgers families were neighbors much of their time growing up during their formative years. Trevor recalled little Marshall coming to his birthday parties and vice versa. Guam, Berlin, Japan, so many places, and Rodgers had so few memories of each of those countries because they moved all the time. But Marshall Hail was the one constant in Trevor Rodgers' life. Marshall was just about the only thing he remembered from his childhood.

Trevor Rodgers cleared his throat and began to address the room of the most powerful people on the planet.

"First, I would like thank you all for your support in my new position as director of the FBI. I will do my utmost to make you pleased with that decision. Thank you, Madam President for allowing me to update you and your staff with an issue that has recently come to my attention."

The newly elected president, Joanna Weston, responded politely, “Thank you, Mr. Rodgers for accepting this difficult assignment. We look forward to you bringing us all up to speed.”

Rodgers glanced around the room at the other attendees. A few of the men he knew, a few he knew of, but he knew none of them very well.

Sitting on the couch was a four-star general who was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His name was Quentin Ford. He was a big and imposing guy. Ford was outfitted in full military dress. Rodgers felt that was appropriate, considering this general was the highest-ranking military officer in the United States Armed Forces, president excluded. Ford looked battle worn and hard as nails. He had a big face. His thick cheeks sagged like an old hound dog. General Quentin Ford was large and overbearing. Rodgers had heard a rumor that the president thought that General Ford was a big teddy bear. Rodgers knew better, but she would learn those things for herself in due time.

Seated on the couch to the general’s left was the Director of National Intelligence, Eric Spearman. He had been sworn in four years earlier by the previous administration. Spearman was a short, bald, meek-looking man—the antithesis of the general sitting next to him. Rodgers suspected, in a fight, the general could beat the snot out of Spearman without ever getting off the couch. Spearman looked more like a banker than a bureaucrat. He had round glasses and a round gloomy face. He was dressed in a dark blue suit that was similar to the suit Rodgers was wearing. Rodgers certainly hoped he looked better in his. Spearman’s sad face was buried in his iPad.

The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Jarret Pepper, was sitting on the other side of the coffee table, across from Ford and Spearman. Pepper’s grey hair went this way and that. It wasn’t all that long, but each follicle seemed to have a mind of its own. Being new to the job, Rodgers hadn’t seen Jarret Pepper very often. But thinking back, he couldn’t recall ever seeing Pepper dressed in anything other than a grey suit. Maybe his tie was the same as well. Pepper also had an iPad down by his side, but he wasn’t currently using it.

President Joanna Weston, who had only been on the job for four months, was sitting behind her big desk. She was wearing a black pantsuit and had a little golden American flag pinned to her breast pocket. Weston was from good political stock. She had strong features was strong willed with strong opinions, but she was equally strong in allegiances and was a good friend to have. She was in her late forties. She had a shock of grey hair that sprang directly from the middle of her forehead. The grey streak meandered backward and was eventually lost in her thick mass of brown hair. The streak thinned like a river’s tributary would if dispersed over a great distance.

Rodgers had no idea why she didn't dye that strange grey snake out of existence. It was disconcerting when you were looking at her or talking to her. But the woman had become the President of the United States, so the bolt of grey must have had some positive impact on the voters.

Rodgers had requested this special meeting to inform the president of the international incident that needed to be discussed. None of the other attendees had any idea what he was about to share with them, and he liked that feeling. It felt like power.

Pressing his finger on the tiny remote control, the first of many PowerPoint slides popped up on the screen. The introductory slide was a photo of a handsome looking man in his late thirties. The picture appeared to be a professional photo taken for publicity or possibly from a magazine cover.

"His name is Marshall Hail," Rodgers began, pointing the remote control toward the photograph of his friend on the big screen. His audience waited for the explanation.

Rodgers pressed the button and another photo flashed onto the screen.

"His name is Kim Yong Chang. He is—well, he was the Minister of People's Armed Forces of North Korea. Marshall Hail e-mailed me less than two hours ago, and Hail is claiming responsibility for the assassination of Kim Yong Chang. Hail is also making a claim for the twenty-five-million-dollar bounty the FBI placed on Kim."

The president looked stunned.

"You have to be kidding me?" General Ford said. "Kim Yong Chang never steps a foot out of North Korea. And as we all know, no one ever steps a foot into North Korea."

Rodgers shrugged. "I would have thought the same thing," Rodgers told the general. "But this snippet of video was included in the same e-mail."

Rodgers pressed the button on the remote control, and a video began playing on the screen. The quality was excellent.

The video showed an Asian man and an Asian woman sitting at an outside table. It appeared to be someone's backyard. The edge of a pool could be seen at the bottom of the frame. The woman was picking up a drink of what looked like orange juice. Without warning, the man leaned forward and rapped the woman on the hand with a piece of silverware.

Rodgers pressed the PAUSE button on the remote and said, "Our analysts ran facial recognition software on the man in the video, and it came back as a ninety-five percent match for Kim Yong Chang. Either this is the real guy, or they have a great double for him."

Rodgers pressed PLAY on the remote and the video continued.

There was a nasty exchange between the couple at the table, and the woman retreated into her chair and sulked. A servant came out, and the man who Rodgers had identified as Kim pointed at his orange juice and then pointed at the woman and said something in Korean.

A moment later, everyone in the Oval Office watched him reach over and pick up the glass of orange juice. He held it up in front of the woman. Making sure she was watching him, he greedily drank half the glass's contents.

A server returned and topped off Kim's glass and filled an additional glass for the woman.

For two long minutes nothing happened. The man chewed on some toast. The woman looked like she was afraid to drink her orange juice. She remained in her chair with her head down.

The man who was supposed to be Kim reached across the table and picked up his coffee cup. As the cup touched his lips, he made a strange face. He pulled the cup back from his lips, and he made another face that looked more like a grimace. The coffee cup in his right hand began to tremble slightly, and he coughed once.

Everyone in the Oval Office appeared to be spellbound.

The president and her staff quietly watched the video as Kim stood up, his coffee cup still in his hand. He began to shake, then tremble, and then the cup fell from his hand. Hot coffee splashed onto the woman, who screamed out in pain. Both of Kim's hands went up to his neck, as if he was trying to choke himself and his face turned beet red. One hand came away from his neck and he began to reach across the table toward the woman. The woman screamed louder.

The president was tempted to look away but sensed the train wreck approaching.

Kim made loud choking sounds and staggered a few steps forward, arms extended in front of him. The woman scooted her chair away from the table as two servants appeared from the sliding glass doors. Kim straightened up as if he had been Tasered and grabbed at his chest while falling forward onto the glass table.

"Oh my God!" the president called out.

Joanna Weston was an attractive woman, but for those few seconds she looked anything but attractive. Her face was warped with shock.

Rodgers guessed that she hadn't watched many men die during her career in government.

The director of the CIA and the Director of National Intelligence looked concerned but remained silent, opting to gauge the president's reaction before committing to a position.

The general, on the other hand, looked pretty damn happy. He smiled and muttered the words *down you go, asshole* as Kim finished his table dive.

Rodgers pressed the PAUSE button on the remote and explained, “The video continues for about ten minutes—long enough for us to know that the man on the video is dead. Our best guess is that a fast-acting poison was delivered into a drink or possibly a dart.”

“A dart?” the president asked. She had recomposed herself but still looked shaken.

Well, we’re just guessing here,” Rodgers said. “We can rule out a few things. This wasn’t a gunshot. A gunshot would look much different than what we just saw. Our analysts believe what we saw was the result of a poisoning. All the pieces fit. Kim’s weird motions, his choking, his loss of muscle control. Our experts say that his blushing or red color would indicate that a cyanide compound was used.”

The general stood up and pointed at the frozen screen.

“OK, let’s say for the sake of argument that this man is Kim Yong Chang, and he was poisoned and he is dead. My first question is how?” The general held out his arms, hands up, as if waiting to receive the answer in the form of a thrown football.

Rodgers noticed that the general liked to use his hands when he talked, at times using great swooping gestures and pantomime.

“If it was indeed Marshall Hail who did the hit, then we don’t know how he got to him,” Rodgers responded in a confident tone.

“How did they get the video?” the general asked, tossing his hands in the air. “The video is high quality, maybe even high-def. Did Hail have a goddamn camera crew sitting in the North Korean’s pool?”

“We don’t know that either,” replied Rodgers, inadvertently taking a small step back from the large general who was crowding him.

The general looked back at the screen and shook his head. He pointed at the screen again.

“This just doesn’t make sense. We have known where this scumbag Kim has been for years. We’ve known that Kim Yong Chang is the mind behind obtaining missile technology for his esteemed leader. But what we didn’t know was how to get to him.”

The general paused for effect. He had the room’s attention. His voice was loud and imposing.

Continuing, the general said, “So, you’re telling me that the combined power of the United States Armed Forces couldn’t get to Kim Yong Chang, but a—a—” the general trailed off.

He started over, “Other than nuclear power, what the hell is Marshall Hail into?”

The general turned and looked directly at Rodgers, staring him down, daring him to say something other than what they all wanted to know.

Rodgers responded by pressing the tiny button on the remote control. A biography of Marshall D. Hail came up on the screen. The photo contained within the data looked like it was taken by a professional photographer. Hail was holding up a miniature model of a traveling wave nuclear reactor. Hail was smiling and looking very proud of his accomplishment.

Rodgers continued, “This photo was taken when Hail won the Nobel Prize in Physics. Hail was in his early thirties. He was on top of his game, but not yet a billionaire. That came later.”

The director of the CIA, Jarret Pepper, opened his iPad and began flipping through screens.

Rodgers considered reading all the data on the screen and then decided to go in another direction.

“OK, almost everyone in this room knows something about Marshall Hail, unless they have been living under a rock. So why don’t we cut to the quick and find out what we all know so we can focus on what we all don’t know? Does that make sense to everyone?”

Without waiting for a response, Rodgers looked at the man in uniform and asked, “General Ford, can you please start us off, considering that you knew Marshall Hail’s father?”

The general turned away from Rodgers and softened a little. He looked at the president and softened a little more. Rodgers guessed that must have been the teddy bear face the president saw in Ford.

“I’m sure that we all know that Marshall Hail’s father was Tucker M. Hail, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He was a four-star Fleet Admiral. For those of you who are not familiar with the military ranks, that is the highest rank the Navy has to offer. It is equivalent to the General of the Army.”

Ford paused for a moment and considered what else he could say about Tucker Hail that had any relevance to the matter before them.

“I was a few years behind Tucker — actually a decade,” Ford corrected himself. “By the time I was moving up in the higher ranks, Tucker was on the verge of retiring from both the service and politics. From what I heard, Tucker was proud of his son, but not proud like a life-long tough military man would be of a son who opts to go to MIT instead of West Point. Don’t get me wrong, I suspect that Tucker was proud of his son. I mean, hell, his boy was a Nobel Prize winner, but Tucker would have much preferred Marshall to be a soldier. Does that make any sense?”

The president spoke with a measure of aversion in her tone, “Not really, General. Marshall’s father sounds like a piece of work to me, although I’m sure his service to our nation was impeccable.”

No one argued the point with the president.

“What I know about Marshall Hail,” the president continued, “is that he was some kind of whiz kid. He went to MIT and was a marvel in physics. He then took the TerraPower traveling wave reactor design, the nuclear company Bill Gates chaired around 2015, and redesigned the reactor so it would efficiently burn our old nuclear waste. I know from reading probably the same stuff you gentlemen have read over the years, that Marshall Hail made a fortune by installing his new reactor in dozens of countries. To my knowledge, five of his new reactors have recently been installed and activated in the United States.”

“Well, that’s not exactly where Hail made his money,” General Ford said. “We can’t forget the contribution the United States made to Hail Industries.”

“And what’s that?” the president asked.

The general considered how best to phrase his facts. After a moment, he decided there was no way to sugarcoat it, so he said, “Hail bargained a deal with the United States government to collect and remove all of the nuclear waste we had stockpiled since our first reactors went online in 1958. Hail agreed to transport our entire nuclear waste stockpile out of the United States. Where? We didn’t care. And that stockpile included the 700,000 metric tons of depleted uranium hexafluoride we had in our storage yards.”

“And what’s the significance of that?” the president asked.

“Well, Hail’s new traveling wave reactor burns nuclear waste as fuel. Our nuclear waste as fuel. So those new Hail Nuclear power plants you were referring to, we’re actually buying back our own nuclear waste from Hail’s company. Sure, Hail Industries packaged it up so it will burn correctly in their reactors, but it cost Hail virtually nothing, and he is selling our own nuclear waste back to us for millions.”

General Ford looked at everyone looking at him. He finished up his little speech with, “So that’s where his fortune came from. All the countries around the world acquire Hail’s reactors cheaply, but the fuel bundles cost them a pretty penny and Hail owns it all.”

The room was silent for a moment as they all absorbed the general’s information.

“How was he able to set up that deal?” the president asked.

“It was a combination of things,” the general told the group. “First, it was perfect timing. The Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository near Las Vegas was a total bomb, no pun intended,” the general laughed. No one else did.

“We spent billions of tax payers’ money on literally a hole in the ground and never put a single neutron of nuclear waste into the facility. So along comes Hail who says he will ship every stick and barrel of nuclear waste off of our continent, as long as he gets it for free.”

“You said it was a combination of things. What were the other factors?” the president asked.

“His father was the appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time. Do you have any idea how much political power Marshall could bring to bear on the issue? It was a no-brainer for the administration at the time to green-light the deal. We had a problem with storing our nuclear waste, and Hail was the solution. What no one understood at the time was that Hail already had a solution, but he didn’t have any fuel to burn in his reactors, and that was his problem.”

Finally, Rodgers spoke up. “We can’t fault Hail for inventing a brilliant reactor, or understanding the lay of the land better than all us non-MIT graduates. His reactor takes high-level nuclear waste and burns it for a decade until it’s low-level waste that can be literally thrown away. Just the stockpile of nuclear waste fuel that Hail has right now can safely power the world for the next hundred thousand years. And I want to emphasize that his traveling wave reactors are a completely new design and they are safe. They don’t come with any of those scary problems that people are always afraid of when they think of nuclear.”

“Are you referring to the meltdowns, the China syndrome?” the president asked Rodgers.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Rodgers confirmed. “The first safety design change is that the Hail traveling reactor operates at atmospheric pressure, so there is no chance of blowing the roof off the containment vessel, which happened in the Chernobyl disaster. Another safety feature is the reactor uses liquid sodium as the coolant instead of water. That means the plants don’t have to be built next to large water supplies such as rivers and oceans. This eliminates flooding and tsunami issues, which happened in the Fukushima disaster. This eliminates the issue of water contamination, and by way of design, Hail’s new reactors cannot meltdown. We need to face the fact that Hail built the perfect energy machine. Drop in a fuel bundle of our own nuclear waste and you can power an entire large city for ten years. It’s pennies for power instead of dollars. We are as close to the end of the world’s dependence on fossil fuels as we have ever been.”

The people in the room looked at Rodgers for a moment and studied him.

The president asked, “And how do you know all of this?”

Rodgers looked uncomfortable for a moment and then confessed.

“Marshall Hail is a personal friend of mine. But everything I told you is general straightforward information. You can read about it in *MIT* magazine. I’m just a little more versed on it because Marshall told me about it over and over and over, throughout the years as he was developing the technology.”

Rodgers looked at everyone, looking at him, judging him.

Rodgers added, “But to tell you the truth, I never fully believed Marshall. You hear all the time about a medical breakthrough that’s only a decade away or that we can travel through black holes to other dimensions, if we can only figure out how to fly at the speed of light and not disintegrate. Marshall’s new reactor was a lot like that. I thought he was close, but I really didn’t think he had it all figured out.”

“Well, we all believe it now,” General Ford said. The big man was still on his feet and slowly pacing around the perimeter of the room. “Can we get back to the question of how Hail infiltrated North Korea, killed their top general, filmed it and still got out alive?”

The president looked around the room. “Anyone have any ideas?”

Rodgers raised his hand like he was in first grade.

The president rolled her eyes. “Yes, Trevor.”

“Well, one of the concerns our government had in allowing Hail to transport all of our nuclear waste out of the country was security. It was the same concern we had when we were considering transporting our own nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository. But Hail had an answer for that. He hired dozens of MIT’s best aeronautic minds and their specialty was building drones.”

The president nodded that she understood and Rodgers continued, “You see, Hail’s answer to the security problem was to build drones that could protect the shipments. The drone would fly above the trains, barges and even above his own ships that transport the waste overseas.”

The general jumped in, “And we wanted this project to work. We wanted all the nuclear waste removed from U.S. soil, so we offered to provide Hail Hellfire missiles and other armaments that he could mount to his high-flying drones. That took the onus of security off of our government and made it a private contractor issue. If anything went wrong, then it would all be pinned on Hail Industries.”

“I’m still not following what you just told me. How did Hail get into Korea?” the president asked.

The director of the CIA, Jarret Pepper, who had been using his iPad to look up Hail in the CIA computers, finally added his voice to the conversation. “I think that Hail’s drone technology has matured beyond what we can imagine. I mean, common sense would indicate that he didn’t have boots on the ground in North Korea. He doesn’t own an army; he owns a business. A business that has top-of-the-line laboratories, manufacturing facilities, shipping and God-only-knows-what-else. For all we know, Hail has his own munitions factory. After all, ninety-percent of his facilities are located in foreign countries. And the countries in which he does have brick and mortar locations are indebted to him for the power he provides them. A red carpet is probably rolled out every time one of Hail’s ships docks in these poor countries.”

General Ford added, “And he sells those reactors to the poor energy-starved countries at a discount. Hell, he may even give them away for free. There is no way for us to know the specifics. That’s why these third-world countries provide access to their ports and free land where Hail can build his plants.”

The Director of National Intelligence, Eric Spearman, asked, “What kind of drone sits in a pool and takes high-def videos. Is it like a magical invisible drone of some sort?” he asked cynically.

There was a lull in the conversation. Lots of questions had been asked and not many answers had been provided.

The president tapped her pen on her desk. She looked contemplative and then she said one word, “Why?”

“Why what?” Rodgers asked.

“Why did Hail want to kill Kim Yong Chang? What’s his motivation?”

“Oh, that,” Rodgers said, looking down at the floor.

“What do you know, Trevor?” she asked.

“Well, Marshall Hail is kind of damaged goods.”

“Aren’t we all?” Spearman said, and then looked around the room nervously, as if he had divulged a personal secret.

“Hail lost his wife and his twin daughters in The Five,” Rodgers told the group.

“Oh, my lord,” Joanna Weston said, putting her hands up to her face and shaking her head from side to side.

The rest of the room paused for a moment of silence, which was a typical reaction when someone mentioned The Five.

The president then slowly lowered her hands from her face and took in a breath so deeply that it made her rise in her big chair. In a quick huff, she let out the breath and said more than asked, “So we’re talking about revenge as the motivation; a billionaire that has his finger on the nuclear pulse of the planet and is out for a little payback. That has disaster written all over it. Does anyone agree?”

“I don’t know,” General Ford stated. “I mean if we were to look at Hail as a weapon, then he is only as dangerous as where he is pointed. If Hail has developed technology that can kill anyone, anywhere, at any time, then that could be a great benefit to our nation.”

The president looked at General Ford as if he were off his rocker.

The general looked mystified.

“Hail is an American,” the general said, as if Hail’s allegiance to the United States was absolute.

The CIA man, Pepper, looked at the screen of his iPad.

“His ships are registered Panamanian,” Pepper said. “His business is incorporated in Ireland. Hail doesn’t even own a home or property in America. Hell, Marshall Hail hasn’t entered the United States in over two years.”

“He did have a home here,” Rodgers said, defending his friend. “But after his family was killed in The Five, after the funeral he never returned to the United States. But that doesn’t mean he is not an American. He simply lives on his ships. He has everything he needs on his ships.”

The president said, “But something doesn’t ring true with what we’ve been discussing.”

“Rodgers, you just said he has everything he needs. Let me ask you this. ‘Why is a billionaire asking us to send him a check for a measly twenty-five million dollars?’”

Rodgers thought about it and remained silent.

“See what I mean?” the president said. “Hail needs something from us. I don’t know what it is, but the request for the money is an olive branch of some sort. He wants to open a dialogue. No, the man who has everything still needs something, and I think we need to find out what that something is.”

The room was quiet. Either the men in the room were still thinking over what the president had just said or they were all think out.

But Joanna Weston, the new President of the United States, was not done thinking.

“Trevor, do you know if Hail told anyone else about this assassination? My fear is this will turn into a much bigger issue if Hail wants the North Koreans to know that he was the man who killed their general.”

Rodgers shook his head. “No, that doesn’t sound like Hail’s style. He understands the political fallout. Hail’s a business man. I’m sure he doesn’t want to paint a big target on his back, unless he’s forced into a corner.”

The president appeared to be pleased with that response. She considered the situation for a few moments. The CIA and NSA directors went back to perusing their iPads. The general, being in the military his entire life, was accustomed to staring blankly at walls while decisions were being made. He appeared to be content doing so now.

“Rodgers,” the president finally said. “I want you to contact Mr. Marshall Hail and tell him that I would be happy to hand him that check in person. Please have him provide you a date when he and I can have lunch together out in the Rose Garden. Tell him I would be happy to work my schedule around his visit.”

Rodgers looked at the president. He couldn’t come up with a reason why it was a bad idea or why Hail would turn down such an invitation. Unless Hail had become a recluse and was afraid to leave the sanctuary of his ship.

“I will do that immediately, Madam President.”

“Great. Now, gentlemen, if we’re done with this issue let’s move onto other matters.

And they did.

MAKASSAR STRAIT—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

Hail was back in his big chair, back in the mission control center and back in charge. The time in Kangdong, North Korea was about 1 a.m. The *Hail Nucleus* was entering the Makassar Strait. It was now only two hundred miles south of their destination which was Balikpapan Bay located in the East Kalimantan province of Indonesia. The time zone of the *Hail Nucleus*, in its current position, and that of Kangdong were still the same.

With the success of their first mission, Hail had gotten some good sleep. Downtime Hail would consider *real* sleep. His normal pattern of sleeping was problematic at best. He would fall asleep for an hour and then be jarred awake for absolutely no reason. Falling back asleep wasn't a problem. All he had to do was read a book or watch TV, and he would eventually drift off. But as soon as the next hour of REM clicked by, bang, back awake again. The pattern would repeat and repeat and repeat again, until he was tired of the farce and got up and went on with another day of living.

But last night was the best sleep he had in years. He felt alive and exhilarated. Who would have guessed that the death of someone would bring so much life back into someone else?

His mission crew had reassembled for the final part of the mission, the extraction phase. "Were there any problems during the day?" Hail asked his mission specialists.

Pierce Mercier, who had stayed most of the day to observe the events that had taken place after Kim had gone down, reported, "No. None whatsoever. The response was just what we predicted. Slow. After several hours, the North Korean security police arrived and went through all the commonsense steps. They started by searching the grounds and of course found nothing. None of them wanted to venture into the thorny bushes where *Led Zeppelin* is hidden. They cuffed Kim's girlfriends and his servants. The security police yelled at them and smacked them all around a little before taking them away. The same men removed Kim's body. The house wasn't investigated, and there hadn't been anyone back on the property."

"Good," Hail said. He removed a mug of coffee from a holder on his chair and took a sip.

"What's the status of *Foghat*?" Hail asked, setting the cup back in its hole.

Tanner Grant answered, "I'm circling about two miles south-southwest of the compound. I made a couple of passes over the property, and everything is nice and quiet. There is nothing moving down there but squirrels, chipmunks and some rats licking up his blood under the table."

"I hope they didn't get glass in their little tongues," Hail quipped.

The rest of the crew chuckled. Gruesome, but funny. That was the mental space they were in. Each person in the room had their own reason for wanting Kim dead, but they all agreed on one thing. They all wanted him dead. And he was. The aftermath was just that. Simple math. Lots of monsters, minus one monster, makes one less monster on the planet.

“Who wants to go first?” Hail asked.

“Let me get *Aerosmith* out of this tree before any wind comes up,” Knox suggested.

“OK with me,” Hail told him. “Feel free to clear *Aerosmith* when you’re ready.”

Knox pulled the control surfaces in front of him and brought up *Aerosmith*’s control panel on his monitor. He took a moment to check power levels, communications and then spun the rotors to make sure they were free of obstructions.

Hail brought up the video from *Aerosmith*’s camera onto the big screen above Knox. Just like all the other drones, the night vision camera was powered on and the screen was green.

“Damn, am I sick of green,” Hail commented to no one in particular.

“*And—*” Knox sung out. The *and* was long, and Knox drew it out for several seconds before he terminated the phrase with the words, “*we’re up.*”

“I think the fastest way out is forward,” Knox said to himself.

Knox worked the controllers, making tiny adjustments as he crept the aircraft forward inch-by-inch. It was critical to the mission that all three micro-drones made it back to *Led Zeppelin* intact. If they crashed and were discovered, then not only would the technology fall into the wrong hands, but the North Koreans would know that someone on the outside had killed their general. It was better all the way around if they suspected that he was killed by one of their own. The North Korean government operated like the ancient Roman government hundreds of years ago. If someone didn’t like his boss or he felt the need for advancement, he would simply kill his boss and move into the vacated position. Casting suspicion inside the North Korean government helped fuel their own death machine. Paranoia was a great catalyst of death.

Hail had a great deal of respect for his pilots. He didn’t think he could do what Knox was doing right now. Take, for example, the tree. The pine needles were green. The screen was green. The tree was green. The night vision optics were green. Hail didn’t understand how the young pilot could determine how to fly through minor shades of green. The air was one shade of green and the darker hue was that of a solid object that could turn *Aerosmith* into a very expensive weed whacker.

“Almost out,” Knox said, afraid he might be jinxing himself. Twelve hours ago, he had been flying *B-52s* out of the tree and that hadn’t turned out all that well.

“I’m out,” Knox reported. “Unless some huge frickin’ pterodactyl flies down and takes me away to feed to its babies, then the rest should be easy.”

And it was.

Less than sixty seconds later, Knox slowly lowered *Aerosmith* down onto the frame of *Led Zeppelin* and then locked it in place.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Knox boasted.

“Great job,” Hail told his pilot.

“Are you ready to go, Oli?” Hail asked Oliver Fox.

Fox had been the original pilot that had flown the micro-hub known as *Styx* atop the power pole.

“I still have eyes on the house. I think it would be better if I stayed and watched until *Stones* gets out.”

“That makes sense,” Hail agreed.

Hail swiveled his chair in the direction of Paige Grayson.

“Are you ready to go, Paige?” Hail asked *Stones*’ pilot.

The young woman responded, “Yes, sir. I’ve already run pre-flight diagnostics and everything looks good. The only problem we may have is the damn sprinklers are on, so I’m going to blow some water around.”

“Is the water going to cause any flight issues?” Hail asked.

Grayson shook her head and grabbed the controllers.

“It shouldn’t. We have tested the ground laying drones in these types of conditions. If it were raining cats and dogs, I would say wait it out. But all I have to do is gain four feet and I’m out of the water.”

“Let’s do it then,” Hail ordered.

Hail switched *Stones*’ camera over to the big screen. There wasn’t much to see until the craft rose a few inches above the grass line.

“All right,” Grayson said, moving her controls, rotating the drone clockwise while it was still ascending. “Now we’re in business.”

Hail watched more shades of green dance around on the screen. He could tell that *Stones* was at least fifteen feet in the air and still climbing. The pool came into view, and a moment later *Stones* was looking down on the white house below.

“This sure is a squirrely little drone to fly,” Grayson commented. “But it’s still fun.”

For Hail, it was like he was watching the movie from yesterday in reverse. He now saw the grass, then the electric fence, then wild growth and then the four infrared diodes that glowed white atop *Led Zeppelin*.

As smooth as silk, Grayson approached, hovered, set down, locked on and turned off the power to *Stones*.

“Two onboard,” Hail said.

“All right, Oli. Let’s make it three for three.”

Since *Stryx* was taking off from the easiest launch point, it only took Fox a couple of minutes to dock *Stryx* on the back of *Led Zeppelin*.

“Not to minimize all your efforts,” Hail said in an apologetic tone, “but that was the easy part. Are we ready for the hard part?”

No one said *no*, so Hail pressed forward with the extraction.

“It’s important that we get the timing right on this,” Hail warned his crew.

“How much flight time do we have left on *Led Zeppelin*?” Hail asked Knox.

Knox looked over some battery data and responded, “About five minutes depending on how fast we ascend. If we climb slowly, maybe another minute.”

“That should work. Right, Renner?” Hail asked his analyst.

“It should,” Renner responded, having already done the math hours earlier. “I’m just concerned about the humidity.”

“Clarify?” Hail asked.

“The thicker the air, the harder the rotors have to beat to put air through the aircraft. Harder means more power and that means it will consume the battery faster. I still think we’re going to be OK.”

“Shana, how are comms?” Hail asked his communications specialist.

The attractive young lady checked the strength of the satellite feed and replied, “We are looking good. We’re five by four and the atmospheric disturbances are minimal.”

Believing he had covered all the bases, Hail announced, “OK, then let’s do this thing. Blow the balloons on *Led Zeppelin*.”

Knox pressed an icon labeled TETHER LAUNCH.

Hidden behind the mounds of Flying Dragon bushes, a hatch in the middle of *Led Zeppelin* opened and a helium balloon began to slowly fill. After thirty seconds, the black balloon had filled to the size of a watermelon. Three plastic fingers, no larger than toothpicks, retracted and let the balloon rise into the sky. A few seconds later, a second balloon began to fill on top of the drone. After another thirty seconds, the second balloon was released into the sky.

“Balloons are away,” Knox reported.

“What height did we agree on?” Hail asked Renner.

“A hundred feet should be good,” Renner responded confidently.

“You heard him, Knox,” Hail said. “Spool the line out to a hundred feet.”

“Will do,” Knox said, watching a red digital meter on his monitor count upward from five.

On top of *Led Zeppelin*, a monofilament line unreeled and the dark balloons disappeared into the night. Each of the balloons was connected to one another by the same line, creating a triangle of heavy-duty line that would soon be floating a hundred feet over the top of *Led Zeppelin*.

The mission room was quiet. Everyone was doing their job, and it didn't require a lot of chatter.

Knox watched the meter as it finally reached a hundred, and he pressed the icon STOP on the reel control.

“Tethers are in place,” Knox reported.

“We all understand that we only get one shot at this, right?” Hail warned his crew.

The question didn't require an answer.

Hail told Grant, “As we discussed during the mission plan, we need to bring in *Foghat* as slow as possible. We can't break the line or *Led Zeppelin* is screwed.”

“Understood,” Grant said.

“Beginning the pass,” Grant announced, disconnecting *Foghat*'s autopilot and taking manual control of the drone. “We're one mile out and will be on target in two minutes.”

“Let's spin up *Led Zeppelin*,” Hail told Knox.

“Rotors are turning,” Knox replied, pressing his index fingers into the triggers of each control stick.

“Coming up,” Knox added.

Hail and the rest of his team watched the green and fuzzy video on the large screen as *Led Zeppelin* cleared its hide and began to climb into the thick Korean night.

“Half a mile out,” Grant reported.

“Hundred feet and climbing,” Knox added.

In Hail's mind, he began calculating the speed of the drone, the distance to intercept and the climb rate of *Led Zeppelin*.

“What's your altitude, Grant?” Hail inquired.

“I'm at nine hundred feet and descending,” *Foghat*'s pilot responded.

Hail looked down at his right monitor and pulled up *Foghat*'s video control panel. He touched his finger to the screen. The video feed being sent from the nose camera of *Foghat* popped up on the large screen above the crew to Hail's left.

“I’m at three hundred feet and climbing,” Knox said. “Man, this thing is climbing like a pig,” he added, looking concerned. “You were right about the humidity, Renner.”

Hail spun his chair around toward his flight analyst, Gage Renner.

“How much flight time does Knox have left, Gage?” Hail asked.

Renner glanced over *Led Zeppelin*’s flight data, energy reserves, power on the rotors and he looked troubled.

Almost imperceptibly, Renner shook his head just once, and then looked up at Hail and shook it again.

“Not looking good. Maybe thirty seconds of spin time left.”

“I’m at four hundred feet,” Knox stated.

“Level it off,” Hail ordered. “Grant, you have to get in there fast. *Led Zeppelin* is going to drop in about twenty seconds.”

“Roger that,” Grant said, pushing both controllers forward, putting *Foghat* into a controlled dive.

“I have a visual on the diodes and I’m plotting an intercept,” he added.

On the big screen, two white dots glowed brightly on the dark green screen. They were separated by several meters and appeared to be hovering in the darkness. Each of the balloons had tiny infrared diodes affixed at their bases. The light spectrum from the diodes could only be seen by the night vision camera on *Foghat*. If not for these points of reference, *Led Zeppelin* and its snatch rig would be invisible to the approaching drone. The pickup procedure was nothing new. As Renner had explained during the mission planning session, the Fulton surface-to-air recovery system (STARS), was developed by the inventor Robert Edison Fulton, Jr., for the Central Intelligence Agency in the early 1950s. But it had never been used on a drone before. Making it even more complicated was the fact that it had never been used on a drone to retrieve another drone.

Grant’s task was to drop the hook from under *Foghat*, and then fly *Foghat* between the balloons. The hook would catch the line suspended between the balloons that were tied to the hovering *Led Zeppelin* below. Once the snatch had taken place, then *Led Zeppelin* would be reeled up to *Foghat*’s belly and secured for the flight home.

“This is going to be tight,” Grant warned. “Keep it still, Alex,” he told his fellow pilot.

“You have about ten seconds of *still* left and then you will have to scoop this thing off the ground,” Knox shot back.

“Almost there,” Grant said in a strained tone. He began feverishly working the control sticks, first one way and then the other; making tiny adjustments as he zeroed in on the blinking lights.

“Beginning to lose power,” Knox called out. “Starting to descend.”

“Hold it steady, just another few seconds,” Grant pleaded.

“Hook deployed,” Grant announced, “and passing in three, two, one—”

Everyone in the room, including Tanner Grant, held their breath.

The video being sent from *Led Zeppelin* was still for an instant and then it went haywire. The video turned into a pixelated green hue of static, but still presented a sense of motion.

“Got it!” Grant yelled. “Switching to the belly camera.”

“Out of power and shutting down,” Knox said. “I hope you have me, Tanner, or *Led Zeppelin* will be a bucket of bolts in a few seconds.”

“I got you, man,” Grant assured him. “Look.”

With Knox’s control panel now dark, he looked up at the big screen above him and saw *Led Zeppelin* being reeled in from below *Foghat*.

“Yeah. Hell, yeah!” Knox yelled, jumping to his feet and clapping his hands together. He then shook both of his fists in the air in victory. “Yeah, we good, we good, we got it going on!”

Hail watched Knox do some sort of circular happy dance in the confines of his control station. Knox smiled and shook his hips and worked his arms.

Hail couldn’t help but laugh at the young man. It was as if Knox had caught a touchdown pass in the Super Bowl.

“Work it,” Shana called out. “Shake that bumpety-bump, Knox.”

Grant would have loved to have taken part in the festivities, but he was still flying *Foghat* and trying to clear the drone from theater.

Dallas Stone’s voice came on the comms over the mission control speakers.

“Hi, Skipper, just an FYI. We have verified the takeoff of two Chengdu J-7s from Hwangju Airfield in Pyongyang. If they spotted *Foghat* on their radar, you have about two minutes before they’re onto you.”

Hail took in the information and quickly did his best to interpret its meaning. The Chengdu J-7s were MiG-21 clones made by the People's Republic of China. The Chinese jet was built as a fighter interceptor and easily had the firepower to turn *Foghat* into fog. But Hail also knew that all of his main drones were built with the latest stealth capabilities. Radar-absorbing paint, weird surfaces that bounced radar waves harmlessly into the stratosphere and his drones flew low and at subsonic speeds. They left only a hint of emission footprints in the sky. Hail seriously doubted

that the scramble of the Chinese jets had anything to do with his operation, but it was a good thing to know.

Hail spoke into the room knowing that the room's sensitive microphones would pick up his voice and transmit his words back to Dallas in the security center.

"Do you have a vector on the jets yet?"

"No, sir," Dallas replied. "They just took off. I'll update you in a few minutes."

"Didn't you say they would be here in two minutes?" Hail asked.

"Wait one. I'm watching the flight path as we speak."

"Thanks, Dallas," Hail said in a calm tone.

For this mission, days earlier several micro-drones similar to *Stones* had been deployed at Taetan Airfield, Onchon Airport, Pyongyang Sunan International Airport, as well as the field that Dallas had just referred to, Hwangju Airfield. All of those airfields were close to Pyongyang, and thus close to Kangdong. Hail didn't expect an interdiction from these locations, but better safe than sorry.

"Let's keep *Foghat* low and slow until we get some distance between us and Kangdong," Hail told Grant.

"Roger that," Grant confirmed. "Dropping down to 200 feet. I will be threading through the hills for a while."

"That's fine," Hail told him. "I mean what else do you have to do tonight?"

"Good point," Grant agreed. "I was going to get some time in on the flight simulator, but I think that would be superfluous at this point."

Dallas came over the speakers again.

"False alarm, Skipper. The J-7s are headed south toward Chollima."

"Thanks for being on it anyway," Hail said.

Hail took a sip from his cold coffee, made a face and stuck it back in the cup holder.

"I'll be in my quarters if any of you need me," Hail told his crew. "Great job, everyone."

"*I wonder if I have any new e-mail,*" Hail thought as he exited the mission center.

ACT II

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE HEADQUARTERS: LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

Four people sat around a large mahogany table. Two men and two women. “We didn’t stop Kim. We were too late,” the director of the CIA, Jarret Pepper, told his staff.

Pepper’s mind was in a strange space. He was pleased that Kara had obtained Kornev’s phone and that his agency had acquired critical intelligence. On the other hand, he was extremely disappointed that the intelligence they had gathered indicated that they were too late.

“The deal is already done,” Pepper said. “The shipment of missile parts, pieces, gyros, fuel cells, and everything it takes to assemble an ICBM is already being shipped to North Korea, as we speak.”

Kara was pissed off. She didn’t do what she did, take the risks she took, and sleep with the scumbags she slept with for no reason. It sure as hell wasn’t for the pay. It was more for the payback. She felt as if she should say something, but knew the director had more to say. So, she bit her lip and bided her time.

“As most of you know, Kim Yong Chang is dead. We’ve all seen the data chatter over our intelligence channels and know that to be a fact. What you don’t know, and what I found out during a meeting with the president yesterday, is that a man named Marshall Hail killed him. Assassinated him.”

Pepper paused for the reaction.

Kara went from looking pissed to looking intrigued.

The Director of Analysis, Karen Wesley, went from looking concerned to looking even more concerned.

Paul Moore, the Director of Operations, said, “You’ve got to be kidding. I don’t believe it. No one gets into North Korea.”

“Believe it,” Pepper huffed. “Hail produced a video of Kim dying by some sort of poisoning in his backyard. The NSA has updated our file on Hail to include the video. You can go watch it when we’re done. I’ve already seen it and don’t care to watch it again. I just ate breakfast. I might not be drinking orange juice for a while.”

Karen Wesley was upset. She was considering the big picture and the consequences for the nation at large.

She told Pepper, “If what you are saying is true, then this is the most significant action I have ever witnessed since I’ve been at the CIA. A private citizen assassinated a top official in another country. How can we allow that?”

Pepper laughed cynically.

“How can we allow it?” he sneered at Wesley. “You’re kidding me. We put a goddamn bounty on the heads of each of these terrorists. We encouraged this type of response. So, based on our incentive program, Hail put together some sort of magic show with lots of smoke and mirrors. And Kim dies. And you are asking, *what are we supposed to do?* Do you think we should slap him down for it? Get real.”

Wesley looked pissed but said nothing.

“Do we know how Hail pulled this off?” Moore asked calmly, trying to ratchet down the tone of the meeting, but it didn’t help.

Louder than before, Pepper responded, “That’s the smoke and mirrors stuff I was talking about. No one knows how it was done. I would bet my job that the North Koreans don’t know how it was done. Their execution wall is probably absorbing a lot of hot lead over this thing. But that really doesn’t matter. The Minister of State Security, Trang Won Dong, has already stepped into Kim’s job. The North Korean national defense is like a whack-a-mole government. Knock one fuzzy head down, and another mole pops right back up from the same hole.”

Pepper paused to take a breath.

“This isn’t good,” Wesley said.

Pepper looked at the woman and was tempted to tell her to leave.

Instead, he did his best to compose himself and said, “Karen, can you be a little more insightful in your comments, or do I need to remind you that’s why you make the big bucks?”

Wesley looked hurt but restated her position.

“First, our bounties are in place to encourage people who are in close proximity to our Top Ten Terrorists to provide us information so we can apprehend them. It was never intended to be an incentive for full military action by private entities.”

She looked around the room to make sure her point was understood.

Wesley continued, “Second, from what I understand, Hail is an American citizen, and if the North Koreans ever figured out what *really* happened, they would conclude—erroneously—the attack on their government was an American-sponsored attack.”

No one said anything, but Pepper eyed her coolly.

Wesley continued.

“And third, any organization, whether it’s an army, a militia, a rogue group of separatists, a gaggle of boy scouts, or even a billionaire with an international business—any organization that has the wherewithal and technology to pull off something like this, they are a threat to everyone.”

Pepper sat quietly and mulled over Wesley's three points. It didn't take him long to come to the conclusion that Wesley was right. He wanted to say, *well where do we go from here*, but he was the guy in charge and was supposed to have all those answers.

"So where do we go from here?" Paul Moore asked.

Everyone looked at one another.

Kara kept her mouth shut. So far, even though everything they had been hashing out was remarkable, none of it was in her wheelhouse. She had finite responsibilities, and upper-level policy making wasn't one of them. She was starting to wonder why she had even been invited to the meeting.

"I have some ideas," Pepper told them. He had calmed down considerably. His voice was back to a normal volume.

"During the meeting I had with the president, two interesting items came to my attention. One of them is a fact about Hail. I would like you all to study Hail's file after this meeting. That fact was that Hail's wife and two young twin daughters were killed in 'The Five.'"

No one in the room looked upset by this information except for Kara.

The fact hit her like a physical blow to her solar plexus. She found it difficult to breathe for a moment. A zap of anxiety flooded her system, and she felt a flash of sweat break out across her forehead.

Pepper wasn't looking at anyone but Kara. He noticed that his words had impacted her. He knew they would.

He continued, "The other point of interest is that the president is going to set up a meeting with Hail so she can personally hand him his twenty-five million-dollar check. The president asked if representatives from the CIA, NSA, military, and that new little worm, Rodgers from the FBI, could wait in the Oval Office while she and Hail had lunch. If Hail wants anything or needs anything in order to continue his valuable work, then the POTUS wants us to help him out. The president doesn't feel like this is a one-time deal. She thinks Hail is going to do more of this vigilante stuff, and he might ask for some assistance."

Pepper glanced at everyone and then his eyes came back to rest on Kara.

Kara looked at him indifferently. She was sure that the other shoe was getting ready to drop and sensed it would affect her in some way. After all, why else was she there?

"I would like you to be at that meeting, Kara. I want you to accompany me while we wait in the Oval Office with the others."

"Why?" she asked, but she could have guessed the reason. She knew the reason. She wished she could withdraw the question.

“Why?” Pepper responded rhetorically. “Well, let’s rundown a few of the facts. Hail’s wife was killed over two years ago. He has been on his ship for over two years. He has possibly never taken a step onto dry land in all that time. My guess is he’s been pining over his wife and has probably not thought much about female companionship during that time.”

Pepper looked at Kara. Kara looked down at the table. She knew her value to the agency, but she resented it being spelled out so directly in front of all the other directors. She was a damn good agent, and it wasn’t all about her looks. But like any sensitive organic surface that has been continually irritated, Kara had built up callouses over *what people thought of her*. She really didn’t care what prissy Karen Wesley thought of her. Wesley probably demanded a tissue and an aspirin each time she had sex, if she ever had sex. And, as for the two men that were currently staring at her—Hell, if she had a dime for every man that lusted after her or resented her because they couldn’t have her, she would own her own island.

Pepper said in an emphatic manner, “My plan is to get you onto Hail’s ship.”

“*No kidding*,” Kara thought.

She said nothing.

“Can you think of anyone more qualified than yourself to do this assignment?”

Unfortunately, Kara could not. She stayed silent.

“I didn’t think so,” Pepper said.

Kara said nothing.

“The only way we’re going to find out about Hail’s capabilities is to get someone on the inside. If we can’t pull that off, then we’re just spinning our wheels.”

Another long silence.

“Do you understand, Kara?” Pepper asked her directly, expecting a response.

“I understand, sir,” Kara said in a voice so lenient that if someone didn’t know her they might have thought she was always soft-spoken.

“Good,” Pepper said, standing up and collecting his papers off the table. “Right now, I would like all of you to study Hail’s file. Let’s spend about four hours on it and then meet back here to further discuss strategy.”

Kara was still staring at the shiny brown and endlessly long table top. She saw the faces of all the directors looking back at her in the reflection. She shifted her eyes and looked at the floor.

“That’s all,” Pepper said.

BALIKPAPAN BAY, INDONESIA—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

There was an e-mail waiting for Marshall Hail when he got back to his stateroom.

To: MarshallHail@HailIndustries.com

Hi Marshall:

I hope you've been doing well. It came as somewhat of a shock when you took responsibility for the assassination of Kim Yong Chang. Needless to say, it really shook up some people here in Washington, but in my short tenure as director of the FBI, I've learned that nearly anything shakes people up down here. I spoke with the president about this issue and she said she will hand you the check personally. All you have to do is come to Washington and pick it up. She would like to have lunch with you in the Rose Garden and will work her schedule around yours. Just let me know the date and I will arrange the lunch with the POTUS. Unrelated, I wouldn't have missed the funeral. You know that. We have a lot of history between us. I miss our dads too. I miss seeing you as well, and hopefully we can get caught up when you're in DC. See you soon.

Your bud,

Trev

Hail checked the time on the corner of his computer. Fuel consumption, airspeed, time zones and other travel-related data sifted through his mind.

He took his phone out of his pocket and dialed a six-digit number.

The phone was answered on the first ring.

"Yes, sir," the male voice said.

"Hi, Daniel. Is the Gulfstream fueled and ready to fly?"

There was a pause on the line. Something on the other end was being checked and verified.

"It can be, Marshall. How soon do you want to be wheels up?"

"Well, help me do some math so I know if I can make a lunch date tomorrow in Washington, DC."

There was a chuckle on the line, as if to say, *Oh, another one of those trips.*

"It would be tight," the pilot said. "Let's see. The Gulfstream G650 flies at almost Mach 1. With a 7000-mile range, we would have to refuel somewhere."

"How about the Dakhla Airport in the Western Sahara of Morocco," Hail suggested. "If I remember correctly, it's about six thousand miles from Balikpapan Bay as the crow flies."

There was a pause as Daniel confirmed that information.

“That’s doable. Let’s see, Washington is about 10,345 miles, so in the time it would take you to get off the ship and over to the Sultan Aji Muhammad Sulaiman Sepinggan International Airport here in Balikpapan—” and the pilot started laughing. “What a ridiculously long name for an airport,” he said and then composed himself. “Anyway, you get here quick and I think we can put you on the ground at—” another pause in the conversation and then Daniel asked, “Where do you want to land?”

“I want to land at what used to be called Andrews Naval Air Facility in Maryland. I’m going to ask the president to pick me up in *Marine Two* and take me to the White House.”

“Your dad was a military guy, right?” Daniel asked.

“Yes,” Hail said.

“Well, *Marine Two* is a call sign. It’s only called *Marine Two* when the vice president is on it. Any other time, it’s just a helicopter.”

“Well, in that case, have them pick me up in *Marine One*,” Hail said with a laugh.

Daniel chuckled and said, “I still don’t think you get it.”

“I got it,” Hail said. “I’m just messing with you.”

“Are we going to have clearance to land at Andrews Naval Airbase? I mean, I don’t want your beautiful sixty-four million-dollar Gulfstream to get shot out of the air. Oh, and you would be dead as well, so that would-be kind of a double bummer.”

“Don’t worry about any of that. I’m going to write a quick e-mail jump into one of the ship’s helicopters and hop over there. Just be ready to fly.”

“Well, I feel much better about the Gulfstream not getting shot down landing at Andrews because you sent an undependable e-mail message,” Daniel said, this time making sure the sarcasm in his voice was rich and thick. “Why don’t you just send a text? You could text something like, landing a strange plane on your secured air force base with no flight plan.”

“I’ll be there in a few,” Hail said and clicked off the connection.

To: TrevorRodgers@fbi.gov

Hi Trev,

Got your invitation. Tell the president I will be there tomorrow for lunch. You did say she would work around my schedule? Also, tell the boys at Andrews that my Gulfstream 6650 will be touching down tomorrow around 11:00 AM your time. Tell them not to shoot us down. Also, if the VP isn’t using his helicopter, then I would appreciate a ride to the White House. I’m in a crunch for time.

Got to go if I’m going to make the lunch with the POTUS.

See you tomorrow,

Marshall

What to pack, what to pack, Hail mumbled to himself. He then realized that his Gulfstream had everything he needed. It had its own bedroom, and all the drawers in his plane were stuffed with all the same stuff his stateroom drawers were stuffed with.

Hail left his quarters and began walking down the long hallway toward the hangar.

He took his phone out of his pocket and dialed another six-digit number.

This time the phone rang twice before Gage Renner answered.

“Hey Gage,” Hail said. “I have to go to Washington to get paid by the POTUS herself.”

“Wow, that was quick,” Renner said.

“Yeah and I want to keep it that way. I want our momentum, the momentum of our mission to keep going forward. Things like this take forever, and I’m going to shorten forever to one day.”

“Do you need any company?” Renner asked.

“No, my friend. I have some private stuff I need to take care of, and it would just bore you.”

“I understand,” Renner said.

“As usual, I need you to run things while I’m gone.”

“I can do that,” Renner replied confidently.

Hail tried to think if there was anything else that needed to be said.

Finally, he offered, “That was a great first mission today. Wasn’t it?”

“Perfection,” was Renner’s one-word response.

“See you in a couple of days,” Hail said and hung up.

He had to climb several decks of steps and traverse the entire length of the ship, but in real-time it took Hail less than four minutes to reach the ship’s door that was labeled FIGHT DECK. He spun open the bulkhead’s wheel handle and stepped inside. Parked in front of him were several commuter helicopters. He walked past two of them before selecting the AgustaWestland AW101 VVIP.

The helicopter’s skids were sitting on wheeled dollies. One of the mechanics noticed Hail climbing into the eighteen-million-dollar aircraft. The mechanic walked over to a small tractor, got in and fired it up.

The helicopter mechanic didn’t need to know why his boss wanted to fly the machine; he just understood that he was going to fly it. But first the helicopter had to be pushed over to the flight elevator. Once the helicopter had been positioned on the elevator, the mechanic would then pull back the tractor and press the elevator

button on a remote control attached to his belt. Huge hydraulic cylinders would lift the helicopter to the top deck, and it would be ready to fly.

As the tractor pushed the AgustaWestland onto the elevator pad, Hail began to go through a preflight checklist. He had never actually flown the AgustaWestland before, but he had over forty hours of simulator time in this model, and these days the simulator was just as good as the real thing. Maybe even better. The simulator offered a dozen different flight scenarios which included many combinations of adverse weather conditions.

The darkness and gloom of the artificial light on the lower deck turned into happy sunlight on the top deck as the elevator lifted the massive chopper to the top deck.

Hail pressed dozens of buttons and flipped another dozen switches. He stopped flipping and pressing when he heard the three turboshaft Rolls-Royce/Turbomeca RTM322 engines come to life and saw the rotor beginning to spin. The AW101 was a big helicopter, but Hail didn't care. Once they were in the air, they all pretty much flew the same.

With the main rotor twirling furiously, Hail placed the stick in the neutral position and raised the collective. The helicopter became light on its tow dollies and then lifted off, leaving the dollies on the deck below.

Hail knew that the Sultan Aji Muhammad Sulaiman Sepinggan International Airport was east from his position. Basically, all he had to do was fly over ten miles of the Balikpapan peninsula, and he was there. As a standard protocol, the Gulfstream was always flown ahead to the next port of call from whatever ship Hail was on. That way it was always available. Since the death of his family, Hail refused to fly on commercial aircraft. Psychologically, it was more involved than a simple choice. He couldn't fly on commercial aircraft. He had developed some phobia that was all encompassing. But strangely enough, he didn't have an issue either flying his own aircraft or being flown by someone in his employ. For some reason he felt in control under those specific conditions, and control was what his life was all about these days.

In stark contrast to the unending greenery of the Indonesian jungle, the land Hail was currently flying over was highly industrial. Other than warehouses and homes that were all crammed in against one another, there wasn't much to see. Five minutes into the flight, Hail observed the area of the airport that was reserved for Hail Industries. The Gulfstream sat gleaming on the tarmac, all porcelain white with banded blue stripes running from its nose to its tail. Other than the plane's registration numbers, the only markings on the aircraft was the *G650* model number written in big blue letters on its tail. The machine looked fast just sitting there on the ground.

Hail checked his power to the rotors, checked his airspeed and looked for a wide space near the jet to set down the big helicopter. Swinging the tail around to his

right, he thought the 23,000-pound helicopter was more sluggish than it had performed in the simulator. But then most of the simulated flights Hail had taken were located in the mid-west of the United States. The thick Indonesian air probably had something to do with lethargic response to the controls, and Hail poured on extra power in order to set the beast down gently.

Hail touched the AgustaWestland down lightly onto the hard and black surface, he reached up and killed the engines. He opened the pilot's door and stepped out into the heat. One of Hail's mechanics began walking toward the chopper, meeting Hail halfway between the helicopter and the jet.

"How did she fly, sir?" the greasy man asked Hail.

"I'm not sure," Hail said honestly. "It's the biggest chopper I've flown and I didn't know what I expected, but I guess it was OK. It's kind of like driving a huge bus. A huge airbus."

"Like a bus, right?" the mechanic repeated.

"That's right," Hail said. "Is the Gulfstream ready to go?"

"Yes, sir. Topped off, preflight checked and ready to fly."

"Great, thanks," Hail said and reached out to shake the mechanic's hand. The mechanic hesitated, and Hail realized that the mechanic's hands were covered with grease. He reeled his hand back in.

"No hard feelings." The mechanic laughed.

Hail settled with patting the man on the back and then turned and started walking toward the jet.

The plane's stairs were down, and Hail went straight up into the craft. As per international regulations, the cockpit door was closed and locked, so Hail turned right and stepped into the cabin.

When Hail had purchased the plane, he had been offered a number of different seating combinations. He had opted to start with four white CEO seats that faced one another at the front of the aircraft. Tables could be pulled up from the wall to create a desk in between each set of seats. Past that seating area was a long, white leather couch and a fixed inlaid mahogany coffee table that ran another ten feet down the side of the craft. Opposite the couch, on the other side of the aisle, was a full bar, sink and wine collection. Deeper into the aircraft was the bedroom area and a bathroom. This area was separated from the rest of the cabin with inlaid veneer wall panels and a formal sliding door. Mounted in dozens of spaces were various sizes of flat panel displays. The design of the multimedia system was laid out so a screen could be seen from any seat in the aircraft. No passenger had to strain their neck to watch a movie, take in a sporting event, check a computer display or attend a video conference.

Hail plopped himself down in one of the thick CEO flight chairs. The big overstuffed chairs were more like La-Z-Boy recliners with seat belts than aircraft seats. The main difference was these thick chairs were bolted to the fuselage.

The cockpit camera was already on, and his pilot Daniel Chavez was sitting at the controls. Hail could see the pilot on the video screen mounted to the bulkhead wall in front of him.

“How are you doing today, Marshall?” Chavez greeted him. “I see you survived your helicopter flight from the *Hail Nuclens*.”

“To tell you the truth, Daniel, I’m getting old and I’m kind of tired,” Hail replied. “At least I feel like I’m getting old. Maybe I need to work out more.”

The pilot said nothing.

Hail looked at his young pilot over the video link and thought to himself, “*Daniel has no idea what I’m talking about.*” Hail recalled when he was the same age as his pilot. Was he ever tired at that age? Did the word tired even enter his mind back then? Getting old certainly didn’t, but at that age, you thought you would live forever.

The pilot checked over his controls and pressed a few buttons, and Hail heard the engines begin to spin up.

“All righty,” Chavez said. “Well, you get some rest, Marshall. I’m sure you’ll wake up when we touch down at Dakhla for fuel. You might want to get out and stretch your legs a bit.”

“Sounds good,” Hail responded. He retrieved a remote control from a hidden compartment under his chair’s armrest. The pilot clicked off, and Hail switched the input of the screen to CNN. He didn’t think that the North Korean’s death would make prime-time news, but then he didn’t know how the North Koreans would play it. They would either keep Kim’s death an internal matter and no one would ever know the man was dead, or they would try to blame it on someone and make an international incident out of it.

Hail watched CNN until the wheels of the Gulfstream left the ground and the plane climbed. The video began to show static, but Hail was already sleeping comfortably in his big white chair. As he slept, his dreams drifted in and out between love, death and heart-crushing loss.

MANSION ON THE CHAIN BRIDGE ROAD—FAIRFAX, VIRGINIA

The poor little rich girl went home to her mansion. At least she was sure that's what her co-workers at the CIA thought of her. And she couldn't argue the fact. It was true; all of it except for the fact that she wasn't little. At five-foot-eleven, she was taller than most women, but the rest was true. She was rich. Well, her parents had been rich. Being the only child when they had died, she had inherited it all. Everything. The Virginia mansion, the vacation homes, the cars and the millions.

But when her rich neighbors walked by the mansion, walking their dog Fifi or Fufu, they would probably assume that the property was vacant or maybe even abandoned. The only reason they might suspect that someone was living in the estate would be the dirty McLaren F1 her father had driven and her mother's Pagani Huayra. The luxury car and supercar sat unused on the circular paved driveway, neglected to the point they were literally rotting away. She drove the dirty Aston Martin One-77 that was only a tad cleaner than the more expensive cars.

The poor little rich girl had never been one of the tidiest people in the world. She never had to be. Even as a young little rich girl, she could never recall a time when there hadn't been a maid around to pick up anything she had dropped onto her bedroom floor. She would leave a huge mess in her bathroom, and minutes later, she would come back from getting clothes out of her massive walk-in closet, and the bathroom would look like brand new. It was kind of spooky. It was like little cleaning ghosts were always floating around the mansion just looking for messes to descend upon. For the longest time, she thought Mr. Clean, the guy who did those funny old commercials for some cleaning liquid, was real. She thought he lived in the mansion and followed behind her, magically cleaning messes she had made.

When her parents had died, all the upkeep on the mansion just kind of went away. The sad little rich girl neglected opening mail and paying bills, and one day those ghosts just stopped cleaning. The outside ghosts that mowed the lawn, trimmed the hedges, tended to the pool, cleaned the scum out of the pond and all the other things that grew stale—well, they all went away. The yards encircling the mansion were overgrown to the point where trick-or-treaters were too scared to walk up to ring the doorbell.

Not knowing how to clean clothes, make food or perform most of the other skills humans learn when growing up, she was operating in a world that was very foreign to her. She bought clothes and threw them away when they were dirty. She ate at restaurants or picked up take-out to eat at home, alone. And all of those workarounds made her feel like she was dumb—that she wasn't a real person. She had been the beautiful doll that had been kept in the immaculate dollhouse her entire life. And dolls didn't have to know how to do anything. Everyone knew that.

The poor little rich girl had turned into an unhappy rich adult. She had become consumed by the deaths of her wonderful parents. They were good people. She knew they had cared about her a great deal and had always told her how much they loved her. When they had died, the purpose of her life had died as well.

Like everything else in her world, her life had already been planned for her. She didn't have to worry about that. She would go to college and become a famous doctor like her father or maybe a real estate mogul like her mom. That's the way her parents told her things would work out, and she always believed them. Her parents had always been in control and very much in charge of their own lives. Therefore, when they said something would happen, it normally did. But her folks hadn't counted on a natural talent being ensconced in their child's DNA. And that was the ability to learn languages very quickly.

So, what are parents supposed to do when they plan for one thing, but then a natural talent pops up, and their plans go askew? It probably happened to other kids who weren't rich kids. Boys who could throw a football or shoot a basketball into a hoop were redirected into such ball throwing and basketball shooting occupations.

Her parents would have liked her to do something other than learning languages, but her particular skill did have a value associated with it. Not the kind of value that could make millions of dollars, but then she didn't really need to have a profession that made a lot of money. After all, she would inherit all her parents' money if they were to ever die. But long before that, she would marry Richie Rich and go on living her fairytale life.

Now the poor little rich girl was all alone in the big world with no one to clean up her messes. No one to mow the lawns. No one to advise her on what to do or how to do it. The only thing she had to go on was an instinct to avenge her parents' deaths. Her gut instinct wasn't to save lives, in contrast to what her father had spent his career doing. Her overwhelming desire was to take the lives of those responsible for screwing up her life so badly. The only thing she had truly taken responsibility for during her entire life was to leave college and join the CIA in hopes that her looks and language skills could get her close to those she longed to kill.

Someday it would happen. Not long from now, she would find those responsible for her parents' deaths, and then she would not be the poor little rich girl. Instead, she would be the happy and merry assassin. And, she would make sure that there was no one left alive to clean up that mess.

JOINT BASE ANDREWS—MARYLAND

Hail's Gulfstream had not been shot down prior to landing on the tarmac of Andrews' 11,300-foot western runway. Hail was happy about that. He was also happy that the local time in Washington was 10:30 a.m. With a little luck, and a big helicopter, Hail would be on time for his lunch with the president.

Hail had slept wonderfully on the flight across two oceans. After the first hour of trying to sleep in the chair, he got up, drank a glass of orange juice and crashed on the comfy bed in the rear of the plane. He never even stirred when they had landed and refueled in Dakhla. By the time they had arrived in Washington, Hail was cleaned up and dressed for his meeting with the president.

Although Hail had never liked wearing suits, he was going to lunch with the President of the United States, and anything less than a suit would have been disrespectful.

The Gulfstream taxied to the area where the president's VH-60N White Hawk was located. Of course, both helicopters used by the president and vice president had been modified for comfort rather than military use. Hail deployed the Gulfstream's stairs, and grabbed the handrail and eased himself out into the dry cool air, careful not to hit his head on the doorway.

In the background, he heard the helicopter start its engines and was pleased that his taxi was waiting. He just hoped that the pilots wouldn't be too pissed off when he changed the destination once they were already in the air.

Hail made his way over to the big red, white and blue chopper. Out of habit, Hail saluted the lieutenant who was dressed in ACUs and waiting at the open door of the helicopter. The soldier looked at Hail funny and then returned the salute.

Hail immediately felt foolish. He knew why he had saluted the man. It wasn't because Hail was in the military or had ever been in the military. It wasn't because he was intimidated. It wasn't from an outburst of patriotism. Hail had saluted the man because his father had always made him salute officers since he was a little boy. Instead of a hug, he was instructed to salute his own father every time he came home from work. Just about any uniform with important insignia got Hail's hand moving up to his forehead. Old habits were hard to break.

"Step in please, sir. Sit down and buckle up," the lieutenant said.

Hail did as the young officer instructed. The chairs were not nearly as comfortable as they were on his plane, but it would be a short flight and he thought he could endure it. The lieutenant followed Hail into the helicopter and sat to Hail's left.

Two pilots could be seen via a video camera and monitor. The lieutenant made a twirling signal with his finger. The rotors increased in speed and the door was drawn shut. The White Hawk rose straight up from the ground, made a 180-degree twist and then leaned forward and began to gain speed.

Hail had flown the same model helicopter in the simulator on the *Hail Nucleus* and actually had more simulator flight time on the White Hawk than on the AgustaWestland. He considered asking the lieutenant if he could fly it, but realized he might think Hail was crazy and throw him out the side door. Hail didn't like that idea very much, so he kept his mouth shut. It was only a short fifteen miles from Andrews to the White House, and it was a nice ride. Hail looked down at the old and proud city below and felt absolutely nothing. It didn't inspire him in the least and that worried him. Hail actually felt sick about visiting the nation's capital, but he knew why, and he would confront those issues in about five minutes.

Hail leaned over to the lieutenant and yelled, "Put me down there." Hail pointed at a spot on the ground below at what was rapidly approaching.

The soldier looked at him, then looked at where he was pointing and then asked, "What are you talking about? My orders are to take you to the White House."

Hail shook his head *no*.

"I'm going to walk to the White House. I want you to drop me off there, in that clearing between the Vietnam Memorial and the Constitution Gardens."

The lieutenant shook his head adamantly, no. "No way, my orders were to—"

"I don't care about your orders," Hail growled at him. "Either you drop me off right there, or turn this tub around and take me back to my plane. I'll let you explain to the president why I didn't make my lunch date with her."

The lieutenant looked confused and worried.

The lieutenant said, "Even if I wanted to, look, there are people down there."

"They'll move," Hail argued. "I mean, if you saw a massive helicopter coming down on your head, wouldn't you move?"

The lieutenant hoed and hummed, and Hail could tell that the soldier wanted to tell the pushy man to go screw himself, but the thought of being responsible for canceling a lunch with the president had the lieutenant conflicted.

In the end, the lieutenant put on a headset and talked into a microphone to the pilots up front. Through his headset, the lieutenant instructed the main pilot to set them down in the grassy area in front of the memorial.

At first, the main pilot looked confused, and Hail thought he was going to have to argue with him as well. But after a moment or two, the pilot simply rotated the craft into a position directly above the grassy area very slowly lowered the machine down to earth. The few people that were lunching, sleeping or drinking below scattered as the wind turned into a breeze, into a squall, which turned into a tornado.

By the time the Sikorsky's skids sunk into the Washington soil, Hail couldn't see a single person anywhere in sight.

The lieutenant looked pissed as he yanked open the door.

"Don't wait for me, I'll walk," Hail told the soldier.

Hail jumped out of the chopper, and before he could even clear the blade wash, the rotors began to spin up. It's just natural that almost everyone ducks in the proximity of a helicopter taking off, which was silly. The machine's giant blades are well above head level, and when they began to take on lift, they actually bend up toward the sky moving even further away from head-level. Even so, Hail ducked his head as he walked out from under the big helicopter blades. Paper, sticks, leaves, trash—anything that wasn't heavy or growing into the earth went flying. Hail shielded his face as dirt and dust tried to sneak into the tiny slits that had become his eyes.

MEMORIAL FOR THE FIVE—WASHINGTON, D.C.

As the wind began to die down, Hail was able to open his eyes and see where the hell he was walking. Directly in front of him sat five small monoliths. The tips of each tower were about thirty feet high. Each tower was a different color, the stone having been mined from the countries where the incident had taken place.

That's the way it was commonly referred to—an incident. But it wasn't an incident to Marshall Hail. It was the rapture. It was a million nuclear explosions. It was the planet being hit by a meteor the size of the moon. It was too big to even put into words, and the word *incident* was an insult to him.

Then it had been referred to by the date, similar to 9/11. But that wasn't how it got its name. It got its name by way of introduction. It got its name by reference. It got its name by every person who ever brought up the subject, starting with the words The Five.

FIVE commercial jets were shot down in FIVE different countries, by FIVE surface-to-air shoulder-held rockets, by FIVE separate terrorist organizations, within FIVE minutes of one another. When newscasters talked about the *incident*, it always began with THE FIVE *airplanes that were—etc.—etc.—etc.—*

The horror, the outrage, the crimes against humanity, against families, against children, against the civilized world would become something as simple as THE FIVE.

Hail didn't really care what it was called. There was no pleasant way to refer to the carnage that had taken place that day just two years ago. The families of those souls who were lost didn't give a damn what it was called. They just wanted their loved ones back, and no name, no matter how caring or elegant or compassionate, was going to do that. Hail thought that THE FIVE was just about as good as any other name.

On the highest point of this manmade hill was the only reference to his wife and little girls that he would ever see. He had never had the strength to come visit the Memorial for The Five. Hell, he barely had the strength to get out of bed. People might argue that time heals old wounds. Hail knew that time didn't heal his old wounds. Each year the scars healed, but his heart got heavier. He felt one day it would fall out and become as inert as stone. The only way to stop that process was to reverse the process and that's why Hail was in Washington. That's why he had built up his business—his arsenal. That's why he still got out of bed every day. That's why he hadn't stuck a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger. It sure as hell wasn't to go on living. He had done enough of that, and where had that gotten him?

Hail trudged up the hill. His back hurt, but his heart hurt more. He could already feel the tears beginning to form before he had walked up to look at the first of five stones.

It was made of Colorado Yule Marble, the exact marble used to carve the Lincoln Memorial. The white obelisk sat in a perfectly straight line with the other four. Large slabs of black slate had been laid on the ground, creating a base in which the five pillars had been set. It was a pleasant 75°F outside, but Hail guessed that any kid who had stepped onto the shale surface in bare feet during a hot summer day had not stayed long.

The monolith he was standing in front of stood far left of the remaining memorial stones. It represented Virgin Atlantic Flight 1082. Hail regarded the gleaming marble's surface, but none of the letters carved into the stone indicated the flight number. In fact, it didn't give any indication of the flight, country or any other information. Just a list of names—lots of names. Each name represented someone who had perished on that flight. But Hail knew that it was flight 1082 originating from Orlando, Florida returning to Gatwick Airport in London. It had been a huge airplane, a Boeing 777, flying at full capacity with 660 passengers and crew on board. Embedded in the bright marble were 660 names, chiseled in long endless columns. The first name started down low. And when the last name had been etched in high enough where it was difficult to touch or see, then the engravers had started in on another column of names. When there was no more room for more columns, the chisel moved to another side of the pillar.

Hail reached out and touched one of the names, *Sarah Gartner*. He didn't know her. He didn't know any of the people on this flight, but in a way, he knew them all. He knew how their relatives felt about their deaths. Every name on all five shafts of stone were intertwined at some level, a specific frequency of consciousness that those who had not been affected by the horror could never comprehend. Hail worked his big index finger inside the channel that formed the *S* in Sarah. Some sort of gold material, either gold leaf or maybe just golden paint, made each of the names stand out against the white marble. He snaked the tip of his finger from the top to the bottom of the *S*. *Sarah Gartner*. She was someone's child, maybe someone's wife, maybe a mother, maybe a grandmother. But she sure as hell didn't deserve to end up on this slab with all the other meaningless deaths that this monument represented.

Hail removed his hand and took a few side steps to his right, centering himself in front of the next stone. He had watched the news when The Memorial of The Five was being built. Hail knew what airline, what flight, what country and what group of human beings were being memorialized just by the colors of the stones. The obelisk he was standing in front of was cut from a beautiful piece of red granite. The reddish feldspar gave the granite its color, but it was broken up with quartz crystals that were semi-clear greyish and purplish in color. This stone represented the Paris to New York flight Air France 1082. Its destination had been John F. Kennedy International leaving out of the Charles De Gaulle Airport, but it never made its

destination. None of the flights represented by these stones had ever made it. Like the Orlando flight, the Paris aircraft was a huge Boeing 777 with 451 passengers on board. Without counting them, Hail was certain that there were 451 names chiseled into the surface of the red granite in front of him and been colored in golden paint. It listed 451 people who never thought for a single second that this piece of hand-worked stone would represent their final resting place.

Hail looked around and didn't see any other people around him. He guessed that the helicopter might have scared off some but didn't sense that was the case. He looked to his left, down the hill toward the Vietnam Memorial. There were maybe a hundred visitors at that site. And it made perfect sense when he thought about it. There were roughly 60,000 names inscribed into the walls of that memorial but only a fraction of that number on these five columns in front of him. Sixty thousand families lost someone in the Vietnam War. If ten family members loved each of those soldiers that yielded a potential of 600,000 visitors from them. That didn't take into account all the other friends, soldiers, tourists and the general public that wished to pay their respects. In contrast, there were only 1,716 names on these stones, a mere 3% of the names compared to the adjacent memorial. But each of the names on the stones were just as important as the names on the memorial. Every death mattered to someone, except for the terrorists who had caused them.

Next to the pretty red stone was a grey monolith. Simón Bolívar International of Maiquetía to George Bush Intercontinental. Caracas, Venezuela to Houston, Texas. United 1045. Boeing 737. Two hundred five names burrowed into grey sparkling granite. This had been a smaller plane so there were fewer names on the stone, but the monolith was the same exact size as all the others. Its smooth, warm sides reached skyward, narrowing as it rose until it came to a sharp merciless point that seemed to want to go higher if not clipped by a chisel and a budget.

One pillar to the right was a rich, thick green granite stone. Swirls of light and dark green meandered through the stone with thin rivulets of black and grey separating one swirl from another. To Hail, it looked like a mint milkshake that had been locked in time after only a few seconds of mixing. Green had nothing to do with the doomed Mexico City International to Miami International flight, except the Mexican flag did have some green in it. The Boeing 737 had 190 passengers that were obliterated only two thousand feet off the ground. The American Airlines flight 264 had lasted less than thirty seconds before the 9K333 Verba Russian man-portable infrared homing surface-to-air missile had taken it down.

Hail spent more time at the big green rock than he had at the others. Not because the names or the stone or the flight or the deaths interested him more than any of the others. He stayed there because he didn't want to move to the next stone, the last stone in the row. He sensed his heart rate was increasing. He felt his heart push and strain to pump his thick, lifeless blood through veins he now cared little about. A rush of anxiety coursed through him as he left the green stone and approached the black obelisk to his right.

It was called Taurus Black, a limestone from Turkey. It was as black as Hail's mood. Lightning bolts of white danced on the surface and then tunneled deep into the hard stone. He looked at the top of the rock, afraid to look at the 210 names that were forever associated with this one stone. He looked up higher, past the top of the stone, past the haze that held in the city and on upward toward somewhere beyond, somewhere where life made sense and death never existed. He longed to go there. He wanted to hear his wife's laugh. He wanted to hear the word *Papa* being said from thin lips suspended on tiny dainty voices. He wanted to smell strawberry shampoo in clean blond hair and sing stupid songs and read silly books and do all that stuff he had taken for granted.

Then he lowered his eyes and right in front of him were those special names.

Madalyn Hail. His wife's name came first. Without giving it a conscious thought, Hail reached out and began running his finger through her name, tracing the lines, feeling the sharp edges of the stone press against his trembling hand. His wife's name was on the rock, and his wife had *been* a rock through all the moves, crazy business ideas, all the locations and customers, distance, and months of separation, she had kept it all together. She had kept everything running. She was a rock who had determined that the family came first, even if it meant that the girls would be tutored wherever they happened to be, and that their education and happiness always came first. She was a great woman, and Hail knew she was irreplaceable. There was no other woman on the planet for him, and he would be alone until one day when he found her again—high above the five stones, somewhere in paradise.

His finger now fell to the name below.

Tabitha Hail—one of his twin daughters. She was the one who had always called him at work, the one who had always run to meet him with a hug at the door when he came home. His finger worked through her name as if he were perfecting a cut that was already flawless. "Hi Papa, did you have a good day at work?" he could hear her tiny voice say. Tears spilled forth irrepressibly from Hail's eyes and dripped from his chin to the black slate below.

Now his finger was tracing the name of *Courtney Hail*. She didn't meet him at the door when he came home or call him on the phone at work to see if he was going to be late. Courtney prided herself on being more grown up than her sister, even though she was only five minutes older. But when the lights went off, Courtney was the one who got scared and came to her parents' bed to squeeze into the middle and snuggled close. Hail would give her a kiss on her smooth forehead and tell her there was nothing to be scared about. Then they would all fall asleep knowing that the boogeyman had been thwarted for yet another night in the Hail house.

Hail's memories jumped back to the last time he had seen them in Istanbul at the Sabiha Gokcen International Airport. It had been a long summer. A long fun summer. The family had hitched a ride on the *Hail Proton* cargo ship, leaving from the port at Norfolk, Virginia and taking the thirty-day voyage to the massive port in

Kandla, India. It took almost a month to make the passage, but the *Hail Proton* had all the same luxuries as the *Hail Nucleus*. There was the pool, sports, movies, simulators, games and the great food. It was as much fun as a family could have when surrounded by 12,000 tons of high-level radioactive waste. Once docked in India, Hail and his family forgot about business and started having more fun.

Hail's wife, Madalyn, had printed from a website, *52 Places to Visit in India Before You Turn 30*.

Their daughters were eight so that excluded them from the extremes of The Frozen River Trek at Chadar and the Backpack Across Northeast, as well as the cycling in Nilgiris and a dozen other crazy-hard outings. But Hail's family did visit the Living Root Bridges at Cherrapunji, drove through the forests of Bandipur, visited the temples and boulders at Hampi, saw the lighted Dasara in Mysore and visited the Golden Temple in Amritsar, along with about a dozen other adventures. The entire summer that year was spent in India learning about another culture.

Then the summer ended. It was time for the family to go back to America and time for Marshall to return to work. He would finish up overseeing the installation of three Hail wave reactors in India before taking the *Hail Proton* back to the United States. But school was going to start that next week, and his wife and the girls had to leave.

It was United 9257 operated by Lufthansa, flying out of Istanbul to a connecting flight in Düsseldorf at Düsseldorf International. It was a Boeing 737. There were 210 passengers aboard, and Hail didn't give a damn about 207 of them. He only cared about three of them—the three that were hidden under his hands that were pressed to the black limestone. He was certain that the other people who were in pain over their loved ones didn't give a damn about his special three names either. He found all the love that was left in his empty heart could only be spent on those three names. He didn't have any love left over for anyone else, including himself.

"Is this a bad time?" he heard someone say.

At first, he wasn't aware the voice was real. It had been so quiet. He had been so absorbed in his grief that the voice didn't even register.

Hail looked to his right and removed one arm from the stone and wiped his tears on the sleeve of his suit jacket. He then looked at it, making sure it hadn't left a stain, realizing he was supposed to have lunch with the president.

When his blurry eyes cleared, he saw a familiar face.

"I take it this is a bad time," Trevor Rodgers said softly.

"How did you know I was here?" Hail asked his old friend.

"Well, the Marines were pretty upset, and they ratted you out to the president. I was in the other room and overheard the hubbub. It's not a long walk from the White House to here."

“You’re getting some grey hair there, Trev,” Hail said, taking his other hand off the obelisk and walking over to stand next to Rodgers.

“Yeah, it’s a family thing. If you remember, my dad was grey as a goose by the time he was forty.”

“I remember. My dad used to give him grief about it,” Hail said.

“And you look like you put on a few pounds,” Rodgers scored back at Hail. “You were in better shape the last time I saw you at the—” Rodgers’s voice trailed off into an uncomfortable silence.

“You can say it,” Hail told him. “It’s OK—the last time you saw me at the funeral. That was more than two years ago, but it wasn’t much of a funeral. There were no bodies.”

“Is that why you came here?” Rodgers asked.

“Short answer is *yes*. And the long answer is “Yes because I paid for this memorial. I wanted to make sure they did it right.”

Rodgers knew Hail was lying. Not about paying for the memorial, but he was lying about the reason he was there.

“And did they do it right?” Rodgers asked. “I mean, it’s odd that there are no flight numbers or countries. Really nothing is on the stones but names. Shouldn’t there be more information?”

“None of that matters,” Hail said, turning to look back at the monument as if he were seeing it for the first time.

“Only the names matter,” he added. “No one cares about the dates or planes or countries, and at times like this, when there is nobody here, I don’t think they even care about the names anymore.”

Rodgers didn’t say anything.

“With no bodies, this is the only place for me to go. You know—to see them,” Hail said, struggling to keep it together.

Hail looked back one last time.

“But I will never come here again. It hurts too damn much,” he added in a tone as sorrowful as it was resolute.

Silence hung in the air, providing space for Hail to grieve.

“Do you want to walk?” his friend asked, “Or should the chopper come back and give you a ride?”

Hail laughed and then coughed. He wiped away moisture from the corners of his eyes with a flick of his finger.

“I think walking would be good for me, don’t you?” he asked Trevor.

“That’s what they tell me,” Rodgers said. He turned and faced Constitution Avenue and took a few steps. Hail fell in next to him.

“Remember in second grade when you tied Barbara Belcher’s hair to the back of her chair and then screamed fire?”

“Yeah, that was funny,” Hail chuckled.

THE WHITE HOUSE ROSE GARDEN—WASHINGTON, D.C.

The president was dressed in a smart tight suit; a navy-blue skirt and a navy-blue jacket over a peach colored blouse with a narrow collar. She had a tiny gold American flag pinned to her jacket pocket. She was not a young woman and allowed the streaks of grey to live within her brown hair. She felt it elegantly reflected her age and gave her a unique appearance. Her hair was shoulder length, not long enough where her constituents would consider her to be overly concerned with it, and not short enough to where they would think she was gay. She had been unmarried a long time; divorced years after the kids had gone away to college. Being the first woman President of the United States came with more baggage than her male predecessors had to contend with. Being a woman was one big bag. Being a divorced woman was another load to bear. Being a single, divorced woman was yet another suitcase. And being a woman who was quickly approaching that “hell no” age of fifty completed her luggage collection. Now she had to deal with this very weird, yet intriguing situation with Marshall Hail. Probably never before had a president been confronted with such a state of affairs.

Joanna Weston stuck out her hand to lightly shake Marshall Hail’s hand.

“Thank you for responding so quickly,” she said. But she didn’t mean it. Hail had more or less barged into her schedule, forcing her to cancel a day with the Mayor of Mumbai.

Hail took her tiny hand in his big hand and didn’t know if he should shake it or kiss it. He had no idea what the protocol was for a woman president. The president must have sensed his dilemma. She clutched Hail’s hand and gave it a firm shake.

“It is very nice to meet you, Madam President,” Hail said.

“Please call me Joanna. Madam President makes me sound old.”

Hail saw a sparkle in the woman, a glow that transcended age and appearance. He assumed that this quality must have made a positive impact on other people. Millions to be exact. Specifically, everyone who had voted for her. It was a subtle feature, maybe the way she smiled or the way she held herself. He couldn’t put his finger on it. Her eyes were inquisitive, like radar scanners that assessed people from afar. And then her eyes seemed to scan even deeper when she spoke. It was a quality that projected intellect and superiority.

After their walk from The Five Memorial, Rodgers had led Hail up to the security shack where they had been checked off the list and escorted to the White House. Rodgers told Hail that he would see him later, and then Hail had been shown the way to the Rose Garden where the president had been waiting for him.

“Please sit down, won’t you?” the president motioned with her hand toward the table.

Hail released the president's hand and waited for her to position herself behind one of the cast iron chairs. The president made her selection, and Hail pulled out the chair for her. He made sure the president was pushed in snugly, and then he sat down in the only other chair at the small table. A White House server appeared from nowhere, poured water into glasses, and then disappeared back into the rose bushes.

"How was your trip from -?" The president waited for Hail to fill in the blank.

"Madagascar," Hail lied. He saw no advantage in revealing his movements or positions in the world.

"That was a long way to go in such a short time."

"That's why God invented jets," Hail said playfully.

"I must have missed that in The Bible," the president responded with a laugh.

The president was silent for a moment. This was her show, and Hail was going to let her run it.

The woman's smile faded into a more serious expression.

"I was hoping we could discuss a little business while we eat, considering that we won't have much time together."

"Certainly," Hail said.

A waiter appeared, put napkins in their laps, put bread on the table and was gone in a flash.

"I have your check right here," the president said, pointing to an envelope sitting under her three forks. The silverware tinkled as she removed the envelope and handed it to Hail.

Hail accepted it with a thank you.

Without opening it, he slid the envelope into his inside coat pocket.

"You don't want to check it?" the president asked with a curious expression.

"No, that's OK. I know where you live," Hail smiled.

The woman looked a little unnerved at Hail's comment and quickly changed the subject.

"I think the question on everyone's mind is how?"

"Excuse me?" Hail said. He was hungry and wanted a piece of bread, but he wasn't going to be the first one to grab a piece and start buttering it up.

"How did you kill Kim?"

The president's bluntness caught Hail off guard.

Hail was quiet for a moment as he decided how to respond to the question. He toyed with the old expression; *well if I told you I would have to kill you*, but thought that was totally inappropriate considering his new pastime.

So, he decided on, “I think that’s another conversation for another time.”

The president looked disappointed.

The round lunch table had a simple white linen tablecloth covering its metal and glass frame. Hail noticed that there were no sharp knives on the table. Butter knives, yes. Steak knives, no. Therefore, he assumed that beef wasn’t on the menu, or they didn’t make a habit of putting items on the table that could be used to kill the president in short order.

Hail looked at the bread and he found himself salivating.

The president must have sensed his longing.

“Please,” she said, making a gesture toward the bread. “I think I’ll wait for the salad.”

Hail didn’t have to be told twice. He retrieved a piece of bread from the basket and used the dull butter knife to make it taste better. He took a big bite.

While Hail was chewing, the president asked him another truncated question.

“Why?”

“Excuse me,” Hail responded, taking a moment to swallow.

“Why did you want the money?”

“Everyone wants money,” Hail replied as if it were a silly question.

“Everyone isn’t a billionaire. You are.” So, let me rephrase the question, “What do you want from us? You certainly don’t need the money, so the only reason you’re here is because you want something else. What is it?”

“Are you always this direct, Madam President?” Hail asked.

“Please call me Joanna, and I didn’t make it this far up the flag pole by beating around the bush.”

“This woman was very intuitive,” Hail thought. She was right on all counts. Hail had surmised that his request for the money would be seen as a ploy to start a dialogue, but he didn’t expect the rubber to hit the road this quickly. But Hail was happy with how things were unfolding. Time was his enemy, so the faster the better was his frame of mind.

“I need intelligence,” he told the president. “I need to know where they are. I need to know where they will be.”

“And that is something beyond your means?” the president inquired.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Hail replied in a businesslike tone. “I have MIT bit-heads that could hack into your systems, but it would take hundreds, maybe thousands of them to sift through the data to find out what I need to know. You already have thousands of them. Well, to be exact, you employ 35,000 people in the FBI alone. And even though you don’t disclose the number of people who work in the CIA,

your exposed budget is \$35 billion, so I would suspect a few people in that agency could help out as well. If you were to lean on the hundreds of thousands that work under the umbrella of the NSA, then you have a lot of hands on deck that could help me out.”

Choosing not to directly respond to Hail’s request, the president asked, “What’s your goal, Mr. Hail? What are you trying to accomplish? I can’t tell you how sorry I’m for your loss, and I can’t even begin to imagine the trauma you have suffered with regard to your family, but is that what this is all about? A revenge thing?”

Hail was taken aback by the introduction of his family into the conversation and had to take a moment to compose himself.

“I tend to think of it as retribution,” he said with an edge of defiance in his tone.

“Potatoes, potátoes,” the president said softly, almost to herself.

There was a long silence as the president decided how to proceed.

She gave a tiny nod toward someone behind Hail and two salads appeared and were placed on the table.

“So, who do you need help finding?” she asked.

“All the terrorists on your Top Ten Terrorist list,” Hail said directly.

“And that’s it? After the top ten are dead then you close up shop?”

Hail didn’t respond. Instead he looked down at his salad, thinking it looked like they had picked leaves and weeds out of the Rose Garden and had placed them in the bowl along with nuts, seeds and mandarin orange slices. Hoping he didn’t offend, Hail let the salad stand and plucked another piece of bread from the basket.

The president picked up a salad fork, stabbed it into the greenery and took a bite.

They both chewed and looked at one another.

After they were done masticating, the president asked, “And what do we get out of this? And when I say *we*, I mean the American people.”

Hail thought that was an easy question to answer. He would give her the answer that she wanted to hear.

“The American people get a safer world.”

“Do they?” the woman asked. “Let’s say that you kill all the terrorists on the Top Ten list. You appear to be a smart man, Mr. Hail.”

“Call me Marshall,” Hail interrupted.

“You appear to be a smart man, Marshall,” the president continued. “Surely you’re not naive enough to believe that this killing spree of yours will end the world’s terrorist problems.”

“I don’t think it’s an ending, but I think it’s a start,” Hail countered.

“A start of what exactly?”

Hail looked at her as if she already knew the answer to her own question.

“A start to putting these scumbags, these murderers, these cockroaches on notice. If you’re a bad guy and want to run a terrorist organization, then your days are numbered.”

The president let out a short mocking laugh.

“And don’t you think that will just drive these cockroaches, as you refer to them, deeper into the cracks and crevices, making them even harder to find?”

“That makes them ineffectual,” Hail responded. “Take Osama bin Laden for example. Once the heat was turned up on that cockroach, he was forced to live in a cement compound in Pakistan, and he was relegated to the nonessential list. He was a nobody that ran nothing at that point.”

“So, a new cockroach took over? Is that what you’re implying?”

“Pretty much,” Hail agreed.

“So, you don’t see that as a problem?”

“Hey, it’s your list. You’re the one that makes it the Top Ten or the Top Hundred or the Top Thousand list. But if you believe that terror is a numbers game, then you’re dead wrong.”

“How do you mean?” the president asked.

“Terrorism is an unwinnable war.” Hail said. “It’s not about countries or groups or religion; it’s about social outcasts that are hungry, bored and have no future and no prospects. So along comes a member of some terrorist organization and finds these poor guys sitting on the curb on a street corner, out of work, with no hope, no future. He hands them a brand-new AK-47 and makes them a member of their little killing club. And what choice do they have? The curb is hard and their ass hurts and they have seen that same depressing curb for years, every morning. They have never had sex and they are young and all of their natural hormones are going off the charts. But still, they hesitate to accept that AK-47 gift and all the nastiness that goes along with it. Why? Because they know that killing is wrong; as is stealing and raping and pillaging. So, to make it right, make it acceptable, the terrorist leaders wrap it all up in a pretty little bow that they call religion. Even the poorest Muslim knows that warping the content of the Quran into a free pass to kill is wrong. The current estimate is there are 1.8 million actual Islamic jihadists on the planet today. So, the new guy with the new AK-47 thinks with that many people doing it, how can it be wrong?”

The president paused for a second before responding.

“So, you don’t think that terrorism has anything to do with religion?”

“Not at all,” Hail said, dropping the crust from his bread into his uneaten weed salad. “Religion is an excuse. It’s a tool they use to entice more downtrodden to join the club. You know, let’s go rob and rape and kill some people, but it’s cool because Allah says it is. It’s a holy war!”

The president didn’t respond.

Hail continued, “So what it comes down to is human nature. People have been killing people since they discovered the rock. It’s human nature. Survival of the fittest and all that stuff. I intend to do the exact same thing; the difference is that my rocks are much more sophisticated.”

The president finished her salad and left her utensil in the glass bowl.

“So, you just told me, in so many words, that killing all these terrorists is futile. There will always be more. So why do it?”

“Retribution,” Hail said.

“Retribution, retaliation, revenge, vengeance—really? In two seconds my smartphone can pull up a dozen more synonyms. Sounds like you have your own little killing club put together, and you’re trying to wrap it up in a neat bow of your own, a doctrine that you feel is more justifiable than all the others.”

Hail smiled. He was enjoying this back and forth.

“These days,” Hail responded, “just about every large organized mass of humanity has a killing club. You would refer to yours as your army, your navy or your air force. Then of course you have your CIA, your FBI and more black ops stuff that isn’t even on the books. So what bow do you wrap your killing club in? How do you justify your actions, Joanna?”

“I don’t,” the president responded with a coy smile. “That’s why God created the Congress.”

Hail laughed.

The president laughed.

And they finished their lunch.

THE WHITE HOUSE OVAL OFFICE—WASHINGTON, D.C.

“These are the people I wanted you to meet,” the president said as she and Hail entered the round room from the east door of the Rose Garden.

Hail saw a smiling Trevor Rodgers to his right, standing in front of a well-worn leather chair. Trevor gave Hail a *I told you I would see you again* nod and smile.

Standing in the middle of the room was a big man. He was wearing a dark uniform and just about every inch of the material was embellished with a colorful doo-dad or shining medal. The grey-haired man held out his hand toward Hail.

“Hi, Marshall. My name is Quentin Ford. You probably don’t know me, but I knew your dad. He was a good man.”

“Well, at least someone thought he was a good something because he sucked as a dad,” Hail thought. He allowed his hand to be crushed by the general. He smiled and silently thanked the man for nerve damage.

There were two couches in the room that faced one another, and two men were standing in front of each one. Hail thought it looked territorial, like if they moved to greet him they might lose their place on the couch and then have to stand the rest of the day.

Therefore, Hail walked over and stuck out his hand to a tall man who had grey hair, good bones, and wore a grey suit. The man shook Hail’s hand almost reluctantly, as if Hail had cooties.

“Jarret Pepper, director of the Central Intelligence Agency,” the man said sternly.

Hail felt like saying, *Marshall Hail, King of the World*, or some such nonsense, but decided on “Marshall Hail.” Hail took an immediate dislike to the CIA guy, but that was easy because the man was already trying to be disliked.

Hail turned to the man guarding the other couch. He was the opposite of his couch-guarding counterpart. This was a short man, no hair, bad bones and he was wearing a dark black suit. Unlike Jarret Pepper, director of the Central Intelligence Agency this man smiled cajolingly and said, “Nice to meet you, Mr. Hail. My name is Eric Spearman, and I’m with the NSA.”

Hail turned to look at all the folks in the room and said, “NSA, FBI, CIA and the general represents the good old USA, so I think we have all the acronyms covered.”

Hail said it in the way of a joke to break the ice. Everyone laughed, except for the CIA director.

Instead of sitting behind her desk, the president walked to the other side of the room where two high-backed, peach-colored chairs were positioned. To Hail, the chairs looked like something his great grandmother would have owned. The two chairs, along with the two couches, created a somewhat intimate and informal seating arrangement. Joanna Weston motioned with her hand for Hail to take the peach chair next to hers. The men guarding their spots in front of the couches plopped down, and Hail's friend and the general both sat down as well, each of them selecting the end of one of the two couches.

With everyone in place and all comfy, the president started off saying, "Mr. Hail and I just had a nice working lunch. He is aware that we all know that he and his crew, or staff, or how he would like to refer to them, were indeed responsible for the death of North Korea's Kim Yong Chang. To get directly to the point, which is the way I like to do things, Mr. Hail has requested the assistance of our combined talents to help him locate the remaining persons on the FBI's Top Ten list."

Pepper was the first to speak up, "Why the FBI's list? Why not also the CIA's list?"

Hail looked at him for a moment, wondering if the question was rhetorical. When no one said anything, Hail responded, "As far as I know, you don't post a Top Ten list. Heck, you don't even post how many people you employ, even though your agency is supported by tax payer's dollars."

Trevor Rodgers smiled. The general smiled. The banker-looking guy had his nose in his iPad. The president just looked annoyed, like *Oh—here we go*.

But Pepper looked pissed. The director of the CIA checked his tone before speaking and leveled it.

"Much of what we do is secret, as you well know, Mr. Hail. Thus, divulging how many people we employ essentially provides our enemies with our troop count, so to speak."

Pepper waited for a reaction. When none came he asked, "How many people work for you, Mr. Hail?"

"Thousands," Hail said.

"No, I mean, how many people work with you on this new, ah—how should we call it—pastime that you have undertaken?"

"Thousands," Hail repeated.

Pepper made a face, part annoyed, part irritated.

Hail stared at him blankly.

"Well, let me change the subject a little bit," the general interjected. "How did you kill Kim? I think that's the question on a lot of our minds."

"Poison," Hail said.

The general responded, “Well, son, we guessed it was poison with the video and all, but we were wondering specifically, what was the delivery device?”

“Orange juice,” Hail told them honestly.

“Well, son, we determined it was in the drink, but I guess what I’m driving at is how did you get the poison into the orange juice?”

“We had a spy working in Kim’s compound who put it in the orange juice,” Hail said.

“He’s lying,” Pepper blurted out. “There is no way he had anyone in that compound, and we all know it.”

The general looked at Hail like his father used to look at him, as if his son had just disappointed him—again.

“Well, he’s got a point, son,” the general said.

Hail was getting tired of being called *son* by the general, and he was tired of having to explain anything to Pepper.

“What difference does it make to any of you how it was done? Or even more to the point, what difference does it make to you how it will be done in the future? All you have to know is that it will be done in the future. The same way we got to Kim Yong Chang. You guys give me the location of the next person you want to have disappear, and we will make it happen.”

No one said anything.

“Isn’t that what you want?” Hail asked.

“We want to be part of the process,” Pepper said.

“That’s why I’m here,” Hail said. “So—”

“No, I mean we want to be part of the process. We want to have someone on your team. Someone on your end of the wire that works for us,” Pepper declared.

“No way,” Hail said immediately.

“Too bad,” the president said. “We really wanted to work with you on this... this...project,” she stated.

“But right now, Mr. Hail, we have more of a pieces problem than we have a people problem,” the general said.

“What do you mean?” Hail asked.

“It would be better if Pepper had one of his men brief you on it. Hopefully you can help. And if you can help us out of this jam, then hopefully we can help you,” the general said.

Pepper stood up and walked toward the waiting room, known as the outer office. Pepper opened the door and said something to someone on the other side. A minute later a woman walked in.

The first thing that went through Hail's mind when he saw the woman was "*This is the CIA's secret weapon.*"

She was so beautiful that everyone in the room looked downright ugly in comparison. Hail tried not to look at her, or more to the point leer at her, but it was a difficult task at best.

She reminded him of a movie star he had seen in an old movie. Nicole Kidman popped into his mind, but this lady was like the porn star version of Nicole Kidman. She was tall with curves that went on for miles, and she moved like a panther. She was wearing some sort of full black body stocking outfit. Over the stocking, she wore a short straight black skirt that hugged her frame. Over the upper part of the stocking, she wore a tight black vest that did little to obscure her ample breasts. The body stocking must have been put on by unzipping it from the front and then stepping into it, because a good four inches of the zipper remained unzipped showing off the woman's cleavage. Her red hair and brilliant white skin looked amazing against all of the black. But Hail guessed she already knew that.

The woman walked up to Hail and hung out her hand. Hail took it and shook it gently.

She allowed it to be shaken.

"Are you Pepper's man that the general said was going to update me," he asked, playfully.

"Yes, I am," the woman said confidently. "My name is Kara Ramey, and I catch bad guys."

"My name is Marshall Hail, and I kill bad guys."

Kara shook Hail's hand harder and said, "It sounds like we'll make a good team."

Hail didn't know what she meant by that. Hail already had a team, and he wasn't looking for any new players.

She let go of his hand and smiled at him. Something was going through her mind. Her eyes were piercing. They were set a perfect distance apart, bright green—a vivid shade of green he couldn't believe was real. He thought about accidentally poking her in the eye to see if she was wearing contacts, but he couldn't think of a way to nonchalantly pull that off.

Nothing about this woman added up. Not her timely introduction to the meeting, or her looks, or her implied notion of being on his team. This woman, this Vogue model was a setup of some type, and Hail knew he had to stay on his toes. It was so damn difficult to register this face, this body, this female package with a hardcore CIA agent. Hail half expected a cameraman to jump out from a closet and tell him he was being punked.

"Sit down everyone," the president requested.

Kara made a little scooting gesture with her hand toward Pepper, who moved to the center of the couch. This allowed Kara to sit on the end of the couch, closest to Hail's chair.

Kara was holding a rolled-up photograph in her right hand. She handed it to Hail.

Hail unrolled the paper and looked at it.

"This man's name is Victor Kornev. Have you ever heard of him?" she asked.

Hail looked at the color 8 x 10 photograph. He shook his head and began to hand it back to the CIA woman.

"I didn't think so," she said. "What if I told you that he supplied the terrorist with the missile that killed your family?"

Hail pulled back the photograph, unrolled it and looked at it again, but this time much more intently.

"Are you sure about this?" Hail asked.

"We can't be a 100% certain," Kara said, "but is 95% close enough for you?"

"I would kill this guy at 51%," Hail said in a dead serious tone. "How do you know?" he asked.

"How did you kill Kim?" Kara responded.

Hail remained silent. He continued to stare at the photograph as if he could kill the guy with pure mind control. He was starting to understand how this new game was going to be played. You don't get something for nothing; his dad had always told him. Currently, this was the most profound advice his dad had ever given him, other than to change his underwear every day.

Realizing that this line of conversation wasn't working out well, Hail decided to change tactics and take the high ground.

"The general mentioned that you had a problem with—what is it—pieces and parts? What's that all about?"

Pepper jumped in before Kara could answer.

"It's about working together as a team to prevent the United States from becoming nuclear target practice. That's what it's about."

"Seems a little melodramatic," Hail stated. Hail took out his phone and snapped a photo of the photograph before rolling it up and handing back to Kara.

"It may be a little on the melodramatic side of things," the general said, "but there is some bite in that dog. The gist of it is that Kara created a communications link that allows us to see everything that goes across Kornev's cellphone. Kornev had completed a deal with Kim Yong Chang, before you killed him, to deliver several ICBMs to North Korea," the general paused for effect.

Hail remained passive and difficult to read.

The general continued, “Well, Marshall, those missiles are already on their way to North Korea. And short of carpet bombing the entire country, we only have one way to stop the North Koreans from obtaining the missiles.”

“And how is that, general?” Hail asked.

“You,” Kara answered.

Hail thought about it for a second and said, “I would rather kill Kornev.”

“You say that, Mr. Hail—I’m sorry, Marshall,” the president corrected herself. “But, you don’t believe that. We are talking about a radical country that already possesses nukes. Obtaining ICBMs provides them with the means to fire them at the United States. No matter what your convictions happen to be at this point in time, I can’t believe that your sensibilities are that skewed.”

Hail didn’t like any of this one little bit. This was exactly why he avoided alliances and strived to be completely self-sufficient. When you worked with the government, it was inevitable that you would get sucked into their mess. And Hail didn’t need their garbage. He had a big ole pile of his own trash he had to take care of.

Hail let out a soft groan and rolled his eyes.

“What’s the deal with these missile parts?” he asked, not really wanting to know. Maybe he could figure out a deal killer if they described the situation.

Kara answered, “Kornev was able to dig up retired replacement parts for the Russian R-29RMU Sineva. This is one of the ten longest range ICBMs in the world. Its range is 11,547 kilometers. The distance between North Korea and the United States is 10,337 kilometers. Right now, the North Koreans only have medium range ICBMs that can’t reach the United States. Are you starting to see a connection?”

Hail shook his head penitently, regretting he had ever made this trip to Washington.

Kara continued, “Kornev’s real expertise is not weapons, per se. His real talent is the delivery of weapons. From the intelligence we’ve gathered, Kornev is shipping hundreds of pieces of the missiles separately, using dozens of planes, boats, ships, fishing vessels, luxury vessels and submarines. It’s brilliant because there isn’t one shipment that is a deal killer. Even if we were to stop a dozen shipments, enough parts would still get through to build at least a few missiles.”

“OK, well, right there you said it,” Hail responded. “There is not really anything you can do, or I can do. I certainly can’t stop all the shipments.”

“You are missing the point,” Kara said. “We don’t need to stop all the parts from getting into North Korea. All we need to know is where the parts are going.”

Hail started to see the logic. “So, all the parts are going to end up in the same place,” Hail said, thinking aloud.

“Yep,” Kara said. “And that’s where they are going to be assembled or moved to an assembly area somewhere else.”

“Well, where is that area?” Hail asked.

“We don’t know,” Kara said. “That’s one of the reasons we need your help.”

“How am I supposed to help with that?” Hail asked.

“We need you to track the parts to the warehouse, or wherever they take them.”

“And how am I supposed to do that? You already told me that the parts are coming in from every direction. How are you or your agency going to track them all?”

“We don’t have to track them all,” Kara said. “All we have to do is track one of the parts.”

Hail thought about the situation for a moment. “You know where one of the parts is coming in, don’t you?” Hail probed.

“Yep,” Kara said. “One of the second stage sections of a missile is in the hull of a Chinese fishing trawler called the *Huan Yue* that is steaming through the Sea of Okhotsk right now.”

“*Huan Yue*,” Hail repeated. “Doesn’t that mean joyful or happy?”

“Why, yes it does, Mr. Hail. Are you good with languages?” Kara asked, thinking they had something in common.

“Not really, I just remembered eating at a place called *Huan Yue* and their food sucked. I was neither joyful nor happy.”

The president let out a little laugh.

Hail looked at Pepper. The man was sitting on the edge of the sofa. His face kept twitching. It was obvious that Pepper didn’t like his pretty female CIA agent doing all the talking, but it was going pretty well, so Pepper was keeping it zipped.

Hail looked at Kara. She was done talking now, at least for the moment. He liked the way she talked. Direct and to the point. She didn’t posture or make the situation any bigger or smaller than it actually was. She didn’t try to jam in details that would only obscure the focus of the point she was trying to make. Her voice was nice to listen to as well. It wasn’t husky, but it carried a certain amount of weight to it. Her tone was neither biting nor nasally, but it was crisp and distinct. Her *S* sounds were precise and controlled. Her diction was crystal clear. Hail detected a hint of someone who spoke more than one language. Maybe more than a dozen languages. When he looked at her and watched the way she spoke, he was certain she had a very talented mouth and tongue—the basics of speaking many dialects.

Everyone appeared to be waiting on Hail to say something, suggest something or agree to something. But at that exact moment there was nothing on the table. There had been a request made by the United States to help the CIA with their missile dilemma, and Hail had made a request for the CIA intelligence group to help him track down more people who needed to die.

Pepper decided to frame the deal and said, “So you need our help, and we need yours. Do you think that you can put together an operation that can track this missile section on the *Huan Yue* until it reaches its final destination inside North Korea?”

Hail mulled it over.

“How many days until the *Huan Yue* reaches North Korea?” he asked, trying to sound noncommittal.

“Four days,” Pepper said. “Maybe less.”

Hail shook his head. “That’s really tight, almost undoable.”

“We would like to offer Ms. Ramey’s services to help with the logistics,” the president told Hail.

“That’s a gracious offer, but if I decide to move forward with this operation, once we have the specifics on the where the *Huan Yue* is going to dock, then we can take it from there.”

The president looked frustrated, as though her point was clear, yet not understood.

“Marshall,” she said. “We want Ms. Ramey to be part of your team. Wherever it is you are going back to—Madagascar, wasn’t it? Well, we would like Ms. Ramey to go to Madagascar as well. We need someone working for us who is also working next to you. We need a measure of control in operations that we feel is extremely sensitive. If you require information or intelligence, we would like Ms. Ramey to vet the request and contact her office for that information.”

Hail looked irritated.

The president sensed his consternation and tried to smooth things over.

“It’s not that we don’t trust you. But we can’t allow a private citizen to simply request Top-Secret CIA information without any type of review or coordination. After all, some of the people you may be targeting might already be part of a current CIA operation.”

“But, I don’t understand why you need someone physically on my team.”

“Because that’s the deal,” Pepper said bluntly. “We either have someone on the inside monitoring your missions, your planning, your requests for intelligence, the execution of your missions, or we don’t want anything to do with it.”

Hail was very close to washing his hands of these people and catching a cab back to the airport, but he knew he needed them more than they needed him. They probably felt that he was more a problem to them than an asset.

Pepper said, “Now, if there is someone other than Ms. Ramey you prefer, we could work that out. But I want you to understand that she is the best we have. She knows most of the players that you are going to come in contact with. She is also an expert in many languages. We could give you someone else, but that would be second- or third-party information you would be getting from those agents. Kara has personally interacted with the principals, and she knows what she’s doing. We trust her and hope you will as well.”

Kara looked at Pepper like, *Who the hell is this guy?* As long as she had known the man, he had never said a single positive thing about her, let alone brag about her in front of the POTUS.

Hail looked at Kara, who was looking at Pepper. It was just so damn difficult to take this supermodel for real. Hail did his best to separate his stereotyped preconceptions from what Pepper had just told him, but failed to do so. As far as he was concerned, the vote was still out on this woman. The only way Kara Ramey could convince Hail of her usefulness was by her actions. After all, her boss had his own agenda.

Hail wasn’t a stupid man. He understood that Pepper wanted to get Ramey into the mix so she could report Hail’s best kept secrets back to the CIA. That wasn’t going to happen. Kara could go back to his ship, but she wouldn’t be a very happy supermodel once she discovered the restrictions she would be under.

“Is that it?” Hail asked the group.

“Well, you didn’t give us an answer,” Pepper said.

“If we have four days then we need to leave now. Do you have any bags?” Hail asked Kara.

“No, I really don’t need anything. I assume they have stores in Madagascar, right?”

“Right,” Hail smiled.

The president picked up her desk phone. Without dialing any numbers, she said into the handset, “Please bring in the helicopter to take Mr. Hail plus one back to Andrews.”

Hail looked at a smiling and radiant Kara Ramey.

He could think of worse secret agents to have aboard his ship.

Hands had been shaken and good lucks had been thrown all around.

Now Hail found himself standing on the back lawn of the White House next to his boyhood friend, Trevor Rodgers, waiting for the helicopter. About thirty yards away and well out of earshot, Pepper and Ramey were having a conversation.

Hail looked at the two and could only imagine what was being said. He could hear Pepper in his head.

Kara, I want to know everything about Hail that you can get your hands on. I want to know about his technology, about his people, size, numbers, dollars, research, production, anything and everything you can get your hands on. I want a full update every day. I want schematics and designs and blueprints and sketches and basically everything about everything that Hail has ever done since the moment of his birth.

Or something like that.

Hail was certain Pepper wasn't telling her to go and have a good time, get a tan and bring him back a hand whittled set of ring-tailed lemurs. The CIA was the CIA, after all, and they were not hard to figure out. They did CIA stuff.

"I wish you could have stayed longer," Rodgers said. "I thought we could have had some dinner and catch a ball game or something."

"Maybe next time," Hail said.

"There isn't going to be a next time. Is there?" Rodgers asked. "I mean you haven't been back in years. When do you plan to come back?"

Hail didn't say anything.

"I didn't think so," Rodgers said flatly.

"Well, what about you taking a boat ride someday?" Hail offered. "You know, when you don't have a month of important FBI stuff to do."

Rodgers laughed. "I think you might be back before that happens. Mine is not a job you can just leave for a month."

"I didn't think so," Hail said. "And mine really isn't either."

Rodgers looked thoughtfully at his friend.

"And what is your job these days, Marshall?"

"Nuclear power for the downtrodden masses. Pennies for power," Hail said as if he was reading a Hail Industries pamphlet.

Rodgers shook his head slightly and looked disappointed.

"You don't really believe that, do you?" Rodgers asked.

"It's as good a job as any."

"No, I mean your new job is killing people. Doesn't that bother you at some level?"

Hail looked his friend square in the face and said, “It revives me, Trevor. It brings me back from the dead. It might be the only reason I’m still around and haven’t jumped off my ship on some moonless lonely night. I don’t know if that’s something you can understand or not.”

Rodgers said nothing.

The lull in conversation was filled with the *flap, flap, flap* sound of approaching rotor blades.

The private conversation between the CIA folks broke up, and Kara walked over and stood next to Hail and Rodgers. Pepper headed back up the lawn toward the White House. He didn’t wave goodbye.

Kara looked nervous and said, “I hate flying.”

“*Wow*,” Hail thought. The beautiful tough CIA woman is afraid of something. Not the first card he would have played if he had been in her shoes. Best not to show any faults until you were firmly in place.

“I’m afraid of flying as well, but only on commercial aircraft,” Hail told her sympathetically. “Don’t worry. The Marine guys fly these things in their sleep.”

Kara said nothing, and Hail let it go.

The calm day turned into a wild windstorm as the White Hawk touched down in front of them.

Hail shook Rodgers’ hand and yelled, “Take care of yourself, my friend.”

Rodgers said something that Hail couldn’t quite make out, but he shook Rodgers’ hand and nodded his head nonetheless.

Hail and Ramey turned and ducked their heads and began walking hunchbacked toward the door that had been pulled open on the helicopter. Ramey used her right hand to uselessly corral her mass of red hair. The same marine lieutenant was waiting at the door and offered his hand to Kara, who took it, and stepped into the aircraft. The soldier then offered his hand to Hail, who didn’t take it, and also stepped into the aircraft.

Both were seated, buckled and the door was drawn shut. Through the tinted glass, Hail waved at Rodgers as the chopper spun up and began to rise into the Washington haze.

Kara startled Hail by reaching over and clutching his arm as she nervously looked out the window. Hail thought the woman actually looked terrified, and he didn’t think she was acting one bit. As they got higher, her grip tightened. It was a short ride to Andrews, so Hail decided to allow her to cling to him. He wondered if he would have said something if Pepper was the one grabbing his arm. Pretty women got all the breaks.

In less than five minutes, the big helicopter touched down next to Hail's jet. The door slid open, and Hail and Ramey disembarked.

Kara looked toward the hangar to her left then began to walk toward it. Hail caught her elbow and, instead of screaming over the howl of the White Hawk, pointed toward the Gulfstream to their right. Kara began shaking her head, *no*. The White Hawk lifted off, and Hail nodded his head, *yes*. For a moment, Hail thought that Ramey was going to make a break for it and dash across the tarmac and hide inside the hangar. But she didn't. Reluctantly, she began walking toward the sleek jet, and Hail released her elbow.

When she was certain the White Hawk was far enough away so she could be heard, she said, "I hate flying. Can't we take a train or a ship or something?"

"Is that how you get around on the CIA's dime?" Hail asked.

"No, but I take Xanax before I fly. Do you happen to have any?"

"If I did I would have overdosed on it years ago," Hail thought.

Hail was getting tired of reassuring the CIA agent and said, "If you don't want to go, I understand. Just give me your phone number, and I will call for the information we need."

"That ain't gonna happen," Kara said, all of a sudden finding the courage to walk up the jet's stairs.

Hail followed her up and closed the door behind them.

"Wow," Kara said. "Nice digs!"

"It beats flying commercial," Hail said, sounding a little ashamed of the opulence of the aircraft.

"I don't think I've ever been on a plane like this. I mean when I went on trips with my folks, we went first class, but this—this is first class."

Hail didn't know what to say, so he just stood there waiting for her to sit down somewhere.

"Where should we sit?" Kara asked.

Hail gestured toward the CEO flight seats to their left.

"I really like to sit in the flight seats when we takeoff or land. Just in case it gets bumpy," Hail said.

Kara didn't look like she liked the word *bumpy* all that much. She sat down in a chair, away from the window and faced forward. Instead of sitting across from her so they were looking at one another, Hail selected the window seat next to Kara's chair.

Kara fiddled around with her seat belt, until she was sure that everything was snapped and in place. Hail noticed that her right eye was twitching a little, a nervous tic of some sort, to be sure. Besides that, Ms. Ramey still looked good. Really good.

“Where should I put my purse?” she asked.

Hail flipped open a compartment between their seats, and she dropped it in. Hail then released the padded top, and it fell shut.

“So, you said that you have your own pilots that fly your planes?” Kara asked.

Hail felt that the question was more than just idle conversation.

“Yes, I do,” Hail said.

“And they are all great pilots, I assume,” Kara said with a nervous laugh.

“I trust my life with them, and I can’t say that about just any old pilot.”

Kara winced when she heard the engines begin to start.

There was a click of an intercom being activated, and a voice above them said, “Hi, Marshall. We have received clearance to taxi and should be in the air in about five minutes.”

“Sounds good,” Hail said into the air. “Let’s make sure we keep things extra smooth for our guest here. She doesn’t like flying.”

“No problem-o,” the voice responded.

The plane started moving forward in a tight, right turn and pulled away from the hangar area. The engine’s tone rose in pitch as they strained against the still air to push the aircraft forward.

“The pilot sounds so young,” Kara said.

“Would you like to meet him?” Hail asked.

Kara shrugged indifference.

Hail pressed a button on the side of his chair. A video link to the pilot appeared on the screen mounted to the bulkhead wall in front of them. The camera angle inside the cockpit was shooting the back of the pilot’s head. Hail and Kara could see the entrance to the taxiway through the windshield of the jet. The plane completed its turn and began to pick up speed as it neared the head of the runway.

“Is this a bad time to talk?” Hail asked his pilot.

“No, I’m good,” the pilot responded.

The plane came to a stop and waited for final clearance to takeoff. Hail could hear radio chatter from the tower.

“This is Kara Ramey,” Hail said by way of introduction. “She will be staying with us for a while.”

Hail reached down and switched the camera angle so it was now looking at the pilot’s face from a camera on the plane’s dash.

“Nice to meet you,” said Daniel Chavez, looking into the camera and giving a little wave.

Kara looked disturbed and leaned over to Hail and whispered, “He looks so young. How old is he?”

“How old are you?” Hail asked Chavez.

“Almost seventeen next month,” Chavez said, smiling into the camera and giving a thumbs-up.

“You have got to be kidding me?” Kara said in a stunned tone.

“It’s OK,” Hail tried to comfort her. “He has probably 200 hours flying this bird. Well, simulated hours,” he corrected himself.

“What are you talking about?” Kara asked, panic rising in her tone.

Hail wondered how much he should tell the CIA operative, but he was having fun with the situation and decided to play it out a little longer.

“Well, this is only like the second time Chavez has ever flown this plane. I change pilots a lot as more of them become certified on this model.”

“Oh, good,” Kara said, letting out a big breath. “So, there is another pilot in the cockpit that is more experienced.”

Hail let air escape through his teeth. “Well, about that. There are no pilots on this plane.”

“What do you mean?” Kara asked, sure that Hail was trying to mess with her mind. “I see him right there. The seventeen-year-old that doesn’t know what the hell he’s doing.”

Hail made an *I’m sorry* expression and shook his head. “No, what you are looking at is a flight control center about twelve thousand miles from here. That’s where Chavez is located. He’s flying this plane via remote control.”

Kara began to frantically fumble for the latch on her seat belt.

“I’m out of here!” she screamed.

Hail clicked off the video, and the big screen went black.

He reached over and placed his hands over hers. She yanked at the seat belt latch, and Hail caught her hands and held them still.

“No time,” Hail told her.

The plane’s engines wound up, and the high pitch of the turbines screamed outside the Gulfstream’s windows. The brakes on the jet were released, and the plane accelerated forward, pinning Hail and Kara to their chairs.

“I hate flying!” Kara cried out as the jet reached rotational speed and the wheels left the runway.

“So, what are your thoughts?” the president asked the men.

General Quentin Ford spoke first. “Well, I don’t know about all of you, but I think that Marshall Hail is a godsend. By knocking off Kim, he has already proven that he is operationally proficient, and if he is able to pull off this new mission for us, then, hell, we could use him for all sorts of covert tasks.”

The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Jarret Pepper, said, “I’m not as warm and fuzzy on Hail as is the general.”

Pepper looked at the general to gauge his reaction.

The general looked at Pepper like he didn’t know what he was talking about.

Pepper continued, “Inserting Ramey into Hail’s operations was the best we could hope for. Given enough time, Ramey will gather sufficient intelligence on Hail, so we can make an informed opinion about him, not simply relying on an impression that is either correct or horribly wrong.”

The director of the FBI, Trevor Rodgers, said, “As you all know, Hail is a personal friend of mine, so my opinion is biased in that respect. However, I can tell you that Hail is one of the most respectable people I have ever met; for what it’s worth.”

Pepper laughed. “Yeah, a respectable billionaire. That would appear to be a conflict in terms. Men like Hail didn’t make all that money being respectable. I mean, what do any of us even know about this man and his operations. What kind of subterfuge was he feeding us that his operations are located in Madagascar? Does anyone here believe that?”

The Director of National Intelligence, Eric Spearman responded, “I wish we would have had more time to talk to him. I understand that time is a critical factor if we want to have a chance at intercepting this missile shipment. But realistically, how much time did we have—like ten minutes with him? I don’t think that’s enough time to hire an office temp let alone make a deal with an assassin.”

“Two things,” the general began. “I don’t think it would matter if we had ten minutes or ten days with Hail. He wasn’t going to tell us squat about his operations. And if I was in his shoes, neither would I. Also, no—I do not think that his operation is being run from Madagascar. It was pure subterfuge.”

“I don’t either,” said Pepper, “but we’ll know where Kara is going because her cellphone is being tracked, as we speak. No matter where she ends up, we will get a blip on a map, and that will pinpoint her position.”

“What if Hail takes her cellphone away?” Rodgers asked.

“It doesn’t matter. They can even turn it off and take out the battery. The phone has a hidden battery, and it will still send out its blip,” Pepper told the group.

The president, who had been listening to the conversation and absorbing the content said, “My interest is accountability. Yes, I understand that we want to collect as much information about Hail and his assets as possible, but my real interest is accountability. If Hail goes after the missiles and completely screws up, I need to know if it will point back to this office.”

The president looked at each of the men.

“Do we have any insight on that end of things?” the president asked them.

None of the men looked like they wanted to field that question but the general, who was never shy to speak up, said, “If Hail is not using people, instead using some sort of advanced drone technology, mechanical soldiers or whatever, then I don’t see how that could lead back to us. A failure would constitute no more than a pile of parts left at the scene. And what could that tell anyone?”

“I agree,” Spearman said. “Really, the worst-case scenario I can see is that Hail can’t complete the mission and the missiles get built.”

The president asked, “Do we have any concern about Kara Ramey’s safety? After all, we just let her fly out of here to God-knows-where with a man we know very little about.”

The general said, “His father was the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. So how bad can the guy be? No, he didn’t ask for Kara’s help, and I’m sure that he would be happy to cut her loose if we gave him the intelligence he wants.”

“So far, everything is working out the way we all wanted it to go,” Pepper assured the group. “Ramey has infiltrated Hail’s organization, and Hail is more or less working for us right now. How much better can it get?”

“How much worse can it get would be my concern,” the president commented.

ABOVE THE ATLANTIC OCEAN—ABOARD HAIL'S GULFSTREAM

Only a few moments into the flight, Kara started shaking uncontrollably like she was having a panic attack. And now, ten long minutes later, she still looked tweaked but was starting to calm down a little. Hail felt bad for ribbing her so badly by letting her know that no one was flying the plane. But he hadn't anticipated she would freak out so badly.

"See, nice and smooth," Hail consoled his terrified passenger.

If Kara's hair was on fire, Hail wouldn't have noticed much of a difference in her demeanor.

"See, no problems. Everything is under control," Hail said in his most compassionate tone.

"Everything except that no one is flying the plane," Kara shot back.

"No, someone is flying the plane. They just aren't on the plane."

"Oh, let me correct myself," Kara snarled. "I mean that a boy that shouldn't be driving a car, let alone flying an airplane, is flying us like a remote-controlled toy."

"That's more correct," Hail told her, "but our flight systems are much more advanced than toys."

Kara looked at Hail as if she wanted to punch him in his face. Now she was more angry than scared. "Why in the world would you not have a pilot on the plane? It doesn't make sense."

"Sure, it does," Hail responded. "He is not old enough to fly the plane. Therefore, he can't be on it while he is flying it. There are all sorts of Federal Aviation Administration rules about that. Heck, he couldn't legally fly this jet over U.S. soil."

"But he is flying it!" Kara yelled incredulously.

"But there are no laws that govern remote pilots, only pilots that are actually on board. And ninety-nine percent of the time, most planes are flying using the autopilot. It's only the takeoffs and landings that may require a pilot. And many planes these days could do it all if they were trusted to do so."

"But why?" Kara tried to reason with Hail. "Why not just have a regular old pilot fly the plane?"

"Lots of reasons," Hail said.

"Give me one."

Hail thought for a moment and said, “It’s a long flight back to Balikpapan Bay—over fifteen hours. I don’t want my pilot to fly any longer than six hours. I don’t think it’s safe.”

“Where?” Kara asked. “What’s Balikpapan Bay?”

Hail ignored the question and continued, “So I have my pilots fly in six-hour shifts. I want them fresh. If you think about it, having someone at the controls for fifteen hours is pretty crazy. Having a remote pilot fly this plane makes a lot more sense.”

Kara’s mind swam with questions, and she didn’t know which to ask first. She decided on—

“Where are they flying this thing from again? You said it was a remote command center. Is that in Balikpapan Bay? – wherever the hell that is,” Kara asked, sounding lost and scared.

Hail was quiet for a second and mulled over his response. She would soon see his ship and everything inside, so keeping its location a secret didn’t seem like such a big deal.

“The command center is in Balikpapan Bay which is a seaport on the east coast of the island of Borneo in the Indonesian province of East Kalimantan. It’s a pretty big city for that area with a population of a half million.”

Hail knew it was important to start building some trust. He felt confident that his last statement was truthful. He looked at Kara, and she looked completely overwhelmed. All her tough CIA bravado had been stripped away, and she was still freaking out. It was time to make nice.

“You don’t have to worry. I’ve done this trip dozens of times. Not to the United States, but all points around the globe. My pilots are good, and we have backup feeds from mirrored satellites if the communication link were to go down.”

Hail realized that had been a mistake. He could see the question forming in Kara’s mind before she asked it.

“What feeds are you talking about? Are you talking about the connection to the controls on this plane from your remote pilots? Is that the feed, and if so, what happens if both feeds go down?”

Hail smiled reassuringly. “Yes, that’s the feed, but like I said, the plane remains in autopilot for almost the entire trip. So, if the feed went down, the plane would just continue on until the link was re-established. No problem.”

Kara didn’t look convinced.

Hail looked serious and said, “Listen, I don’t want to die any more than you do,” which was a lie. Hail guessed that she wasn’t as damaged as he was and had more respect for her own life. “And if I thought that my technology wasn’t rock-solid, I wouldn’t fly around the globe like this. I have good people who work for me and we dazzle in this form of robotics. So, you need to *just chill and go with the flow*. If it makes you feel any better, I’m certified to fly this plane and could do so in a pinch.”

Kara understood at this point that she didn’t have much choice.

“Do you have anything to drink?” Kara asked, looking over her shoulder at the bar.

“Sure,” Hail said. “But I have to make a call to Balikpapan Bay to have them turn off the *Please buckle your seat belt sign*.”

Kara looked around for the indicator Hail was talking about.

“I’m just kidding,” Hail chuckled. “This plane doesn’t have anything like that.”

The woman didn’t think it was that funny.

Hail unbuckled his seat belt and stood. Kara did the same, taking a moment to arrange her black skirt and straighten her black vest.

Hail noticed again that she was wearing a one-piece full black body stocking. “*That should come in useful*,” Hail thought.

He motioned for Kara to sit on the white leather couch. She did so and began looking around the cabin.

“Do you think you have enough monitors on the plane?” she asked sarcastically as she began counting them.

“These days everything is video. I don’t like to carry around a tablet, so I try to make sure that most of the places I spend a great amount of time have plenty of monitors.”

“What are you drinking?” Hail asked.

“Southern and seven,” Kara replied.

“An old-fashioned girl,” Hail commented.

“Not really. I don’t drink much but my roommate in college drank southern and sevens, so that kind of became my drink.”

Hail picked up a glass in one hand and a bottle of Southern Comfort in the other.

“And where did you go to college?” he asked.

“Middlebury College in Vermont.”

“Nice place. Vermont is beautiful in the summer, but damn cold in the winter. As I get older, I find that I don’t like the cold — at all.”

Hail opened a small refrigerator and retrieved some ice cubes and divided them between two glasses. He then poured half a can of 7 Up and a shot of Southern into each glass and swirled the mixture with a swizzle stick.

“Cold doesn’t really bother me. Sometimes it’s nice, like around Christmas and such. Well, it used to be nice,” Kara corrected herself.

“Cold isn’t nice anymore?”

“No, Christmas isn’t nice anymore.”

“And why is that?” Hail asked.

He handed Kara her drink and sat next to her.

“Because I lost my parents a few years ago. They loved Christmas, and I was their only child. So now with them being gone, Christmas is just kind of a sad time for me.”

Hail considered how much of his personal life he should share with this woman. There would be common things in his life that she had already looked up in their powerful CIA computers. Therefore, telling Kara stuff she already knew was no risk at all. Plus, it would give him an opportunity to find out a little more about her. After all, he was certain that if he Googled this woman, there would not be a single hit, photo, Facebook or anything about her on the Internet. She was CIA all the way.

“I can understand how you feel about Christmas,” Hail sympathized. “I lost my entire family a few years ago as well.”

Hail watched Kara for a reaction and was surprised to see very little.

Kara said, “As you may have guessed, I already know a lot about you. I can’t tell you how sorry I am about your loss.”

Hail nodded his head once in place of a thank you and took a sip of his drink.

Kara took her first sip of her own drink and made a face.

“Too strong?” Hail asked.

“A little,” Kara said. “I’m not used to drinking, and it always catches me off guard.”

“I would assume that being a CIA agent would create a lot of missions where you would have to drink.”

“Yeah, but mostly champagne or wine. The hard stuff is—well—hard,” Kara gave a little giggle.

“So how did your parents pass on?” Hail asked, “If you don’t think that’s too personal?”

Kara hesitated and then said, “Yes, I do.”

Hail was surprised by her reaction but tried not to show it. Hail said nothing.

Kara took another sip from her drink but didn’t make a face this time.

She asked, “So how exactly did you become a kazillionaire?”

“You don’t have that information in your files?” Hail inquired.

“Sure, but I wanted to hear it from you. ‘*Get the real poop,*’ as they say.”

Hail considered giving her a little of her own medicine and saying he thought that was too personal, but instead he said, “It’s pretty simple. I’m a garbage collector.”

“Are you now?” Kara responded suspiciously. “I’ve never known a garbage man who had his own Gulfstream.”

“Well that depends on what type of garbage you collect. I collect nuclear waste,” Hail confessed.

“And that pays well?” Kara asked, already knowing the answer, but still wanting confirmation.

“The collection part doesn’t pay well. Actually, it’s downright expensive to do the collecting. You need big cargo ships to pick up the stuff, and you need to haul it across many oceans. Then, of course, you have to reprocess the nuclear waste.”

“Reprocess?” Kara inquired. “How does that work?”

“We reprocess the nuclear waste into what we call a fuel bundle. It’s probably our best-kept secret, and that’s how we make our money. Don’t get me wrong, we don’t readily give out blueprints of our wave reactors either, but the real heart of the technology comes from the science of packing the fuel bundle.”

“I thought that the fuel was just a bunch of nuclear waste, so why does it matter how it’s packed?”

“Oh, that’s really important. Pack it right, and a wave reactor can run for ten years on a single fuel bundle. In some cases, it will emit enough energy to power half a small state. Do it wrong, and you don’t get the initial reaction that starts the burn process, or the reaction dies out somewhere inside the bundle. Either way, it’s “*No Bueno.*”

“So why is your reactor so special? I’m just not getting it,” Kara said.

Hail explained, “Consider that conventional reactors only use about one percent of their energy potential. My reactor design is fifty times more efficient, but it still requires a nuclear reaction to make it work. Conventional reactors require enrichment. My reactor doesn’t. It runs off of mostly depleted uranium, which is a byproduct of nuclear enrichment. With just my reactors and the world’s supply of depleted uranium, there is enough fuel to power every country in the world for the next 100,000 years. But we also repurpose old fuel rods, liquid radioactive waste and such, and it all gets burned in the reactor.

Hail looked at the woman to see if she was following along. She still looked interested so he continued, “But the wave part of the wave reactor is the most

important. To start the power flowing, a small piece of enriched uranium ignites the nuclear reaction which starts the burn on one side of the fuel bundle. After the reaction is started, it burns through the bundle as if it was a wave washing over the sand. That's where the term traveling wave reactor comes from. The reaction starts on one end of the bundle and keeps burning depleted uranium and converting it into low-level plutonium until it gets to the other end. It's beautiful. Twenty years from now, every country will have one of my reactors, and oil-producing nations will have to figure out how to sell sand for a living."

Hail realized he was talking a lot, probably more than he should. But his traveling wave reactor was his baby, and he loved talking about it.

"So, how did you become a kazillionaire, again?" Kara asked. She understood the technical stuff that Hail was explaining, but she was more interested in the man than his machine.

"In a nutshell, I get my nuclear waste for free. I resell it along with my reactors to countries who want cheap power."

Kara was quiet and had apparently run out of questions. They both took another drink and stared off in no particular direction. The plane flew on.

Kara tried to drain even more drops out of her empty glass. Hail stuck out his hand and waited for Kara to place her glass into it. Instead, she placed it back into her lap. Hail lowered his hand.

Hail pulled at his tie and loosened it from around his neck. He stood and removed his suit jacket.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to go change into something more comfortable. You hate to fly, and I hate suits."

Hail reached down and set his half-empty glass on the coffee table. He retrieved a small remote control from a slot on the side of the table and handed it to Kara.

"We have a lot of movies, and we even get a live satellite feed for network TV, if you're interested."

"Why am I not surprised?" Kara asked cynically. "This plane has everything *but* a pilot."

* * *

The Gulfstream touched down at the Dakhla Airport in the Western Sahara of Morocco for refueling. Kara was shaken badly, knowing they would be landing via remote control by some kid in some city she could barely pronounce.

Once the airplane had made its way to the terminal, Kara asked Hail, “Why did you tell me that there was no pilot flying the plane, especially after you knew how nervous I was about flying?”

Hail thought about it for a moment.

“There are probably a few reasons. One reason that should now be very apparent to you is because I’m a devious ass and enjoy watching people squirm. I don’t know why. It’s not an admirable trait. But my father was a devious ass, and he liked watching me squirm, so maybe it has something to do with that. Another reason is that I’m nervous flying as well. Knowing that you were much more nervous about flying than I was made me feel better about my own failures. You know, like I’m not alone in this world.”

Kara looked at Hail like she wanted to punch him.

“And third,” Hail continued, “at some point if we’re going to work together, we have to trust one another. Not mentioning to you that there was no pilot on the plane seemed like a lie of some sort. You know like the opposite of telling your wife she looks great in something that looks terrible on her. But the real reason goes a little deeper than that. You not only have to trust me in the operation that is coming up, but you also have to trust my technology as well—completely—trust it with your life, because a lot of lives will depend on it. And I could think of no other way to show you how well our technology works other than proving it to you during a live 15-hour demonstration. It doesn’t matter if it is a Gulfstream or a HobbyZone Sport Cub. All the same aeronautic and communication rules apply.”

Kara looked out the window at the Dakhla Airport and its surroundings. Nothing but sand and brick and boxy looking cement buildings and asphalt and more sand. She suspected that anything that was the color of green on the outside of the plane had been imported from regions that grew more stuff than just sand.

Hail had changed out of his suit into his casual attire – green polo shirt and khakis. Kara had kicked off her black high heels when they had first sat on the couch.

Kara had insisted on buckling back up in the CEO flight chairs for the landing at Dakhla. Hail thought it was a prudent decision but had little confidence that the flight chairs would protect them in any way if the plane did a nose dive into the hot sand of Morocco. He didn’t see a need to mention that to his guest.

One of the video monitors came to life, and the face of Gage Renner appeared on the screen.

“Hi, Marshall,” Renner said. “I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“No, not at all,” Hail said. “I would like you to meet Kara Ramey. She is a superspy for the CIA.”

Kara looked at Hail like he was an idiot.

Hail continued on with his introduction.

“Kara, this is my friend and the guy running the show while I’m away, Gage Renner.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kara and Renner said at the same time. Both gave a wave in place of a handshake.

“Marshall, I’m calling to alert you to a security situation at reactor number two in Haiti,” Renner said.

Hail looked serious.

“What’s the issue?” Hail asked.

“It doesn’t look too bad, but three men have scaled the perimeter fence of reactor number two, and they’re making their way toward the control building.”

“Are they armed?” Hail asked.

“No, they look young, like between sixteen to eighteen years old. They look hungry if you know what I mean.”

Hail thought for a moment and asked, “Can you put the feed on screen number three here in the jet?”

“Sure,” Renner said, looking down at a control panel. He pressed something.

Hail and Kara looked at the screen to their right. A second later, the video began streaming images from the camera atop the control building in Haiti.

Kara was amazed at what she was seeing but remained silent.

Hail analyzed the feed. Three rail thin Haitians were about a hundred yards away and walking slowly toward the camera. One young man was tall, and the other two were relatively short. The tall man was the only person wearing a shirt, but it wasn’t much of one. It was an old T-shirt that was too dirty to make out the lettering on the front. At one time, it had been blue. All three boys were wearing old gym shorts and were barefoot.

“What quadrant are they in?” Hail asked.

Renner checked a screen and replied, “They are currently in quadrant 10-C, but they’ll be passing into 10-D in about thirty seconds.”

“Did you give them an audible warning of any type?”

“Yeah. Jack in our Reactor Security Center played them the canned blurb in Haitian that told them to leave the premises or they would be arrested.”

“That’s funny,” Hail said. “We should change that. Instead of the word *arrested* we should replace it with the phrase *hurt or be killed*. The Haitian police are a joke.”

“Sure, we’ll get right on that, but first we need to deal with these guys.”

Hail watched the boys as they passed a tall cylindrical pole that had the signage 10-D written on it in big red bold letters.

“What are your thoughts?” Hail asked Renner.

“Less than lethal is a good start,” Renner responded.

“Are you thinking of blowing the Airsoft on 10-D?”

“Yep,” Renner said.

“Is the charge prepped on 10-D?”

Kara whispered to Hail, “What’s less than lethal at 10-D?”

“In each quadrant, we have those poles you see there.” Hail pointed them out to Kara on the video monitor. “Each pole has several different colored plastic rings that go up the pole. See the rings?” He pointed to them on the monitor. “Each ring is filled with a different projectile type. Inside each ring is also a few winds of primer cord, you know, an explosive that is made out of pentaerythritol tetranitrate.”

Kara nodded her head even though she knew little about primer cord, let alone the explosive it was made from. She had gone through a short course in explosives at “The Farm” at Camp Peary, but it had only covered the basics. And the only thing she remembered was if an explosion is imminent, RUN.

Hail was still talking.

“This white one,” Hail said, pointing toward the top ring on the pole, “is filled with Airsoft BBs. The exact same kind that we kids played with when we were growing up.”

Kara nodded her head that she understood.

“This next ring down,” Hail explained, pointing at a blue ring under the white ring “is filled with regular steel BBs. And so on and so forth,” Hail said, “each ring becomes more and more lethal. The next one down is filled with broken glass, the next one down from that is filled with jacks, like the kind that kids don’t play with anymore. Each ring is deadlier until we get down to the bottom ring which is filled with ball bearings. The amounts of primer cord we use are calculated carefully for each stage of lethality.”

Kara looked concerned.

Hail said, “Needless to say, if we blow the bottom ring, then we have gone from the less than lethal to the fully lethal option.”

Kara looked at the video of the men walking toward the reactor control building. Just within the current angle of that one camera, she counted five such poles.

“All right,” Hail said, getting back to business. “Renner, tell Jack to blow ring one on 10-D.”

Renner pushed a button and said, “Jack, blow ring one on 10-D and await further instructions.”

A few seconds later, the white ring on top of the pole stenciled 10-D exploded. A ring of white blasted out into the open area as the shockwave left the pole. But it wasn't a shockwave. From every direction, 20,000 white Airsoft .20-gram BBs spat out. The concussion of the blast caused the video stream to jitter for a few seconds and then it was clear again. Kara thought it was peculiar to watch the explosion without any sound.

All three juveniles had fallen to the ground and were grabbing at different parts of their bodies. They had been stunned by the blast, peppered by the BBs and now they were just beginning to come around. One of the boys, the tall one, got back to his feet and began looking around in all directions. Hail was certain that the Haitian didn't know what had just happened or where the blast had originated.

"Don't walk toward the control center," Hail said to himself as if pleading with the boy who could not hear him.

"Do we have any Haitian speaking interpreters online right now?" Hail asked Renner.

Renner responded, "Nope. Sorry, Marshall. Our only interpreter is on the rack right now. We can get her up and online, but it will take a few minutes."

"I speak a little Haitian," Kara told Hail.

"Do you?" Hail smiled at her.

"Renner, patch our mics through to the control building speakers in Haiti. Kara wants to talk to our friends."

"Patching now," Renner said making the changes on his console. "OK, you are good to go."

Inside the jet, the sound from the jungle in Haiti came over the flat screen's speakers. It was one of those iconic sounds where the birds were chirping and the insects were buzzing, and it gave Kara the impression of only one thing. Hot. It was the sound of a hot, thick jungle. The men's dark skin glistened in the heat. They were all very thin and looked desperate. Kara felt sorry for them.

"What should I say," Kara whispered to Hail.

"Tell them to go home.' Tell them there is nothing there that can help them. Tell them that they will get hurt or killed if they approach any of the buildings."

"I told you I speak a little Haitian. Not all of that," Kara said.

Kara sat up straight in her chair. She said something in Haitian, talking loudly so she could be clearly heard.

"Ale kay oswa ou a ap fè mal." *Translation – Go home or you will be hurt.*

The boys inside the fenced area of the reactor compound heard the words and reacted with nervous stares and twitches. By now, the other two boys on the ground

had recovered from the Airsoft onslaught and were standing next to their tall friend. All their heads were on swivels, looking this way and that.

Kara spoke again, "Ale konnye a, ni n' a blese." *Translation - Leave now or you will be hurt.*

Her words seemed to convince the juveniles there were easier places to rob. They all turned and began walking back toward the fence, trying to rub away the pain from the areas that had received Airsoft hits.

"That seemed to do it," Hail said. "We hate to hurt these people unless the reactor is at risk. They are just poor people who would strip the aluminum off the door jams if they were allowed to get that close."

"Disaster averted," Renner said flippantly. "Have a good flight, and we will see you when you get back on board."

"See you soon," Hail said.

"Nice to meet you," Kara said, but the monitor had already gone black.

Kara went back to looking out her window. A big truck was pumping jet fuel under the right wing of the aircraft.

"What's up with that whole situation there?" Kara asked.

"What do you mean?" Hail responded, selecting a magazine from the center console. He flipped it open.

"I mean with the reactor security stuff. Why don't the people at the reactors handle it?"

"Well, that would be because there are no people at the reactors. No security either."

Kara looked surprised, "You mean the reactors run themselves?"

"Pretty much," Hail said, turning the page in his magazine.

"So, people don't need to monitor the reactors?"

"Yes, and they do. All of our reactors are monitored remotely from the Hail Reactor Center."

Kara looked disturbed.

"I can't believe that a nuclear reactor site doesn't need workers present to run the place."

"They really don't. The reactors themselves are very stable since they operate at atmospheric pressure. No chance of blowing the lid off the thing. They also burn their fuel bundle very slowly, so that eliminates the task of lowering or raising rods to regulate the reaction. The fuel bundle regulates the burn rate."

"Well, that's all well and good, but what about what we just saw? There is no one around to protect the reactors."

“Which is why we have the Reactor Security Center,” Hail countered.

“It’s hard to believe any government is going to allow you to plop down an unmanned and unsecured nuclear reactor in their country,” Kara stated.

“On the contrary,” Hail responded defensively, “countries beg for us to install our reactors. For example, in Haiti, the electricity sector owned by the government is called Haiti Electric. They were in a deep energy crisis with only twelve percent of the population with regular access to power. For all practical purposes, they were living in the dark ages with no chance of proliferation. We installed two reactors in Haiti; one in Gonaïves and the other in Miragoâne. Now Haiti has more power than they will ever need. Just like that. It’s wonderful.”

“And how much money did it cost those poor people?” Kara asked.

“Not one penny. That’s the beauty of providing power to underdeveloped nations. They don’t have any money, so they barter for the reactors. They write us a blank check when it comes to land. We can build industrial plants where we can make the reactors, put beta reactors online to see how they perform and have a home base for my ships as well as shipyards to build my ships. These little countries virtually throw away all the red tape that we encounter with tight-asses like the United States; countries that at the mere mention of the word of *nuclear* go running for the hills.”

“I heard that the United States has several Hail reactors that are in production,” Kara stated.

“Now they do, but they were very late adopters. They wanted to monitor these little countries for years and make sure our reactors didn’t explode or maybe even something worse — a meltdown,” Hail made a scary face and made quote signs with his fingers.

“I thought you said that your reactors can’t meltdown.”

“They can’t. It is physically impossible, and I’m saying that as a physicist.”

Hail could tell that something else was on Kara’s mind.

“Aren’t you concerned that someday a big-armed contingent of men will take over one of your reactor sites?”

“No, not at all. The sites are armed to the teeth and well protected. You saw the poles that have all the rings of explosives and projectiles?”

“Yes, I saw them.”

“Well, what you didn’t see was the .50 caliber machine gun under the camera that was streaming the video. We have two of those. One gun is on top of the control building and the other gun is on top of the containment vessel. Both of those guns are laser guided. Let’s assume there was a force of 300 men and they begin to break in through the wire. Our first line of defense is distance. We have more than one hundred yards of clear-cut all the way out to the fence line, 360

degrees with a clear line of sight. A robotic lawn mower cuts it every day to keep it clear. So, the 300 men cut through the wire and the .50 caliber could start cutting down their army even before they made it through the wire. Our guns, by the way, are belt-fed from ammunition stored in a huge box next to the gun. We're talking thousands of rounds per gun. But let's say for the sake of argument that 200 men make it in through the wire. We have fifty of our explosive poles in the ground arranged in quadrants. For nonlethal, we blow them after the trespassers walk by, so their backs are facing the poles. That way they don't get BBs in their eyes or face. For fully lethal, like for a full jailbreak, if we just lit up twenty-five of our ball bearing rings, anything in the area would be rendered Swiss cheese. So, they would have to go get another 300 men and try again."

Kara asked, "And why wouldn't they do just that? It doesn't appear that they place much value on life."

"Because the endgame for them doesn't make sense. Death would still be a win for them."

"I don't understand."

"The control buildings at our reactor sites are nothing more than thin cement towers. They are about as wide as a big closet. There are no offices or anything else inside them but electronics. They weren't designed for people; they are essentially cement cell towers that house servers and sophisticated communications. So, if the army of men somehow made it inside that control room, they would be very disappointed. There would be some weird racks of computers that they wouldn't know what to do with, and that's about it. Now if they were to break into the reactor itself, they would be immediately exposed to massive amounts of radiation and die within minutes. So, you see, there is no real win for them."

"Do they know that?" Kara asked. "All the families in the villages who live next to your reactors?"

"Yes and no," Hail replied. "They have been told pretty much what I just told you, but then the world is full of crazy people if you haven't noticed. Therefore, we have the guns and exploding poles to deal with those types."

Hail purposely didn't tell Kara about all the airborne deterrents that Hail Security deployed. She would have to earn the right to know about those things.

"And what if they destroyed the control building? What would happen to the reactor?" Kara asked.

"Like I stated before, the reactor is a stable machine. It doesn't need to be told what to do. It's just like lighting a long campfire. You light one end, and it just keeps burning until it gets to the other. You don't have to monitor the campfire to keep it burning. It just burns until there is nothing left to burn. The equipment associated with the power plant that breaks down is the steam generator, but that equipment is on the other side of the fence and is Haiti Electric's responsibility. I mean they have

to play some sort of role in the infrastructure. They are also responsible for building and maintaining the high-voltage power lines that carry the electricity to its citizens.”

Outside on the tarmac, a dark-skinned man reeled in the gas hose and drove his truck away from the jet. Kara heard the plane’s engines come to life, and a few minutes later their aircraft was rolling.

Hail thought that she looked more comfortable than she had when they had taken off at Andrews, but her face was still twitching pretty good. He wanted to ask her some personal questions, like where did she live? Did she have a family? Did she believe in God? The normal stuff that a billionaire asked a beautiful CIA agent, but he knew there would be plenty of time for that later.

Kara said, “When your friend Renner was saying goodbye, he said I will see you when you are back on board.”

Kara looked at Hail. “On board what?” Kara asked.

Hail looked at his watch.

“You will have that answer in about nine and a half hours.”

“I can hardly wait,” Kara said as she braced herself for takeoff.

The engines opened up and the g-forces kicked in. Kara yelled, “I hope that Chavez is not falling asleep at the wheel.”

Hail didn’t have the nerve to tell her that they had just changed pilots at Dakhla. The new pilot had never flown the Gulfstream before, but she had over 25 hours on the simulator for this exact model. On the simulator, she had only crashed the Gulfstream once in heavy weather.

* _ * _ *

“You have got to be kidding me?” Kara Ramey said as she stared at the massive AgustaWestland helicopter parked on the tarmac of the Sultan Aji Muhammad Sulaiman Sepinggan International Airport.

“No, it’s just a short hop to our next location, and I’m a great pilot. Look, I have no burns or contusions on me at all,” Hail said, showing Kara his arms and legs.

“How much have you flown this thing?” Kara asked, still making no effort to approach the idle aircraft.

“Lots,” Hail lied.

“Nothing in your file indicated that you are a pilot of any type,” Kara said skeptically.

“Your files are old. I learned how to fly over the last couple of years. After my family——” Hail’s words trailed off, and he wished he wouldn’t have brought that up. Each time he did, it was like taking another bullet to the heart.

Kara softened a little. As if the air that surrounded them contained some sort of anti-anxiety powder, she sucked in a deep breath, closed her eyes and mumbled something to herself. She let out an equally long breath and looked like a beaten soldier. Looking down at her purse clutched in her right hand, she threaded her arm through the thin strap, placed the strap on her shoulder and began walking toward the helicopter.

“Is this the last flying contraption I will see in a long time?” she asked Hail.

“Until you leave us,” Hail confided in her. “And when you leave us, you can take a rowboat back to the States if it makes you happy.”

Hail’s sarcasm wasn’t lost on the woman, and she flashed him a “*screw you*” expression.

Hail’s mechanic held the door open for her, but he didn’t offer her his greasy hand to help her on board.

Doing her best to cope with her four-inch high heels, Kara awkwardly boarded the chopper, found a plush seat and sat.

Hail went in after her and stood quietly for a moment, unsure if he should ask the question.

“*What the hell,*” Hail thought and said, “Why don’t you come up front and sit with me in the cockpit? It will be fun.”

Kara looked at him as if he had escaped from a mental hospital.

“I’ll be fine here,” she said. “Let’s just do this, so I can calm down.”

“Understood,” Hail said, opening the door to the cockpit.

“It will be a short flight, like five minutes,” he added before disappearing through the doorway.

Kara watched the door close and attempted to locate her seat belt. The mechanic slammed the exterior door shut and everything became very quiet. Unlike most helicopters, the AgustaWestland was built for comfort and was one of the quietest helicopters in the world—at least quiet on the inside.

Kara clicked her belt buckle together and heard the three turbofan engines whine to life. A minute after that, the big blade over her head began twirling around. A minute after that, she felt the aircraft lift off from the ground as she held her breath. The chopper tilted forward and began to pick up speed. The trees, houses, cars and people got smaller and smaller as they gained altitude. Kara sighed and did her best to stay calm. So far, Hail hadn’t killed them. That was good.

The machine banked to the left, and now all the trees and houses and cars were a blur as the aircraft poured on the speed. Just when Kara was getting used to the feel of the aircraft, she felt the nose come up a little and sensed they were slowing. She could see the ocean, sand and some sort of shipyard approaching from the east. Slower still, the helicopter finally came to a dead stop in midair. Kara looked down and saw a landing target drawn on the deck of a massive cargo ship below them. She was indifferent to where they landed, as long as they landed. The aircraft began to descend toward the painted target on the metal deck below. Kara's heart raced and her face twitched. The blue sky was replaced with the sides of strange-looking shipping containers. Each of them was white and had the bright yellow and black symbol for nuclear radiation affixed to them. Kara felt the feet of the helicopter touch down, and she would have thanked God if she truly believed that one was paying attention.

Before the propeller had stopped spinning, Hail opened the cockpit door and entered the passenger cabin.

“See, not so bad,” he said happily.

“Let me out of here,” Kara said. “Open the door.”

Instead of Hail opening the door, someone on the outside tugged the door open.

Kara clicked open her seat belt, grabbed her purse from the seat next to her and stood.

BALIKPAPAN BAY, INDONESIA —ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

The salt air and sea breeze met her as she stepped off the chopper. Her red hair flew one way and then the other as the wind wound its way around obstacles on the deck of the *Hail Nucleus*.

“What are all these things?” she asked Hail, pointing toward the white cargo containers.

“Those are the containment vessels that hold the nuclear waste we are currently transporting.”

Kara didn’t like the sound of that.

“Are they all full?” she asked, speaking loudly so she could be heard over the wind.

“Some are full—some are empty,” Hail yelled back.

Hail’s helicopter mechanic asked, “Are you going down?”

Hail nodded his head, yes, and the mechanic pressed a button on a remote control he had on his belt.

The deck of the ship dropped out from under them, and the elevator began to descend to the deck below.

Kara didn’t know what was happening and Hail explained.

“It’s a hydraulic elevator like they have on aircraft carriers. That way we can store our helicopters below and out of the elements.”

Ten feet deep into the hull of the *Hail Nucleus*, the sound of the wind died away and was replaced with the whine of the hydraulic pump that moaned in the cavernous space. The tenor inside the ship rendered every sound an echo that was sustained for a moment before turning into a lush reverberation.

The massive elevator came to a stop with a bump. Hail gestured in a general direction, and Kara began walking.

“Where are we?” Kara asked.

They were now walking down a long row of helicopters. Each chopper was a different size and a different color.

“We’re aboard the *Hail Nucleus*. Remember, that was the *on-board* question you asked about on the plane.”

“And the *Hail Nucleus* is one of your cargo ships that transports nuclear waste to where?” Kara asked.

“Anywhere it needs to go. Much of it comes here to Balikpapan Bay. I have a refinement plant that takes the waste and bundles it into the fuel cells I was telling you about. I also have a manufacturing plant that makes our nuclear reactors.”

“Makes them?” Kara asked. “I thought that nuclear reactors were built onsite using tons and tons of poured concrete.”

Hail shook his head. “That’s the way the old conventional plants are made, but since the Hail wave reactor is not pressurized, we can get away with pre-casting all the sections of the reactor. And then we simply ship them where they need to go and assemble the pieces onsite.”

“Cool,” Kara said.

They were passing the last helicopter in line and Kara asked, “So you can fly all of these?”

“Yes, I can. And if you are with us long enough, you could fly them, too.”

Kara smiled.

Hail thought she looked much better smiling than freaking out.

The pair stepped through a large metal door.

“I will need you to remove your clothes, if you don’t mind,” Hail told her.

“Excuse me?” Kara replied, both confused and wary.

“You can leave the body stocking you have on, but the skirt, your vest, your shoes, they all have to come off.”

“You’re just like all the other men I meet, Mr. Hail. You can’t wait to get my clothes off.”

The comment caught Hail by surprise. He still didn’t have a grasp of the woman or her sense of humor.

Hail explained, “Every person that enters or leaves this ship has to pass through a contamination checkpoint. What’s in front of you is a very sophisticated Geiger counter. It will measure any radioactivity that you may have been exposed to since you’ve been on this ship.”

“But I barely even—” Kara started to say, but Hail cut her off.

“It’s just one of those safety precautions we take. It will only take a second.”

Kara looked skeptical, but she reluctantly unbuttoned her vest and handed it to Hail. She then unzipped her skirt and handed it to him. Standing in front of Kara were two alloy rails set on their ends. The contraption looked like a metal detector they used at airports. A faint hum emanated from the columns.

“Shoes, please,” Hail requested.

Without reaching down, Kara kicked off her shoes, and Hail bent to pick them up.

“Purse,” Hail requested, and Kara handed her purse over to him.

“Are you going to go through the Geiger counter too?” she asked.

Hail walked over to the wall and opened some sort of metal drawer. He set Kara’s garments and purse into the drawer and closed it.

“Yes, I am,” Hail said.

“Then why aren’t you taking off all of your clothes?”

“Because you have that full body sock on, and I’m not even wearing underwear. But I will if you want me to, OK?”

Hail began to reach for the button on his pants, and Kara said, “That’s OK. No need to make this more awkward than it already is.”

She walked up to the rails and asked, “Is it OK if I walk through now?”

“Yes, you’re good to go,” Hail said.

Kara walked between the metal sticks hoping that they didn’t make that weird scratchy, static sound that Geiger counters make when they encounter a radioactive CIA agent. Thankfully, nothing happened. No static sound, no sirens. Kara heard no sound at all but that constant hum.

A moment later, Hail stepped between the rails, and the Geiger counter didn’t complain about him either.

“OK,” Kara said. “Where’s my stuff?”

Hail told her, “It’s being scanned in the room on the other side of this wall. It takes a while with objects that have metal in them, so we’ll pick them up later.”

Kara didn’t look happy with that answer, but then there really wasn’t much that she needed right now. If she was going to meet people, she would have preferred not looking like the cat woman, dressed in a black body suit. But Kara was confident in her appearance, and it was preferable to meeting people while she was totally naked.

They stepped into an elevator that was made out of metal and metal and more metal. Hail pressed a button labeled DECK 4. The elevator door closed, and the metal box began to go down.

“Are you hungry?” Hail asked.

“Sure, I could eat something.”

“What type of food?”

“What do you mean what type?”

“I mean Mexican, Italian, French or American?”

“I wasn’t aware that American was a type of food,” Kara said.

“Sure, it is. Hamburgers, fried chicken, hot dogs and apple pie. I don’t know any food more American than that.”

“All right,” Kara said, wanting to put an end to the debate. “How about Italian?”

“Italian it is,” Hail agreed, and the elevator came to a stop.

Hail took out his phone and made a quick call.

With the sound the elevator was making, Kara couldn’t discern what was said.

The door slid open, and Hail walked out and turned left, expecting his guest to follow him.

Kara looked around, observing, documenting and cataloging in her mind anything that could help with her mission. They were walking down a long white hallway. Kara knew one thing for sure. Hail could afford a lot of white paint. So far, everything she had seen had been painted white; containment vessels, hallways, bulkheads, ceilings, all shiny and bright white.

The pair reached some sort of junction where the hallway forked in two directions. One direction made a big arc to the right, and the other made an equally big arc to the left.

Hail seemed to take a moment to get his bearings before choosing the left hallway. Side by side, they began walking down the curving hallway. The first door they passed on their left was stenciled **AMERICAN**. Fifty feet further down the hallway they passed a door stenciled **ASIAN**. Another fifty feet and they arrived at a door that read **ITALIAN**.

Hail stopped and said, “Here we are.”

He unwound the wheel that was the door handle and opened the bulkhead door.

“After you,” Hail said.

Kara stepped into the room and was instantly blown away.

“Oh my God,” she stammered.

“Do you like it?” Hail asked.

“What’s not to like,” Kara said in a dreamlike voice.

In front of her was a real Italian restaurant, like the ones she had visited when she had been on vacation in Italy. Aged brick walls and hand-laid brick arches were lit by soft amber light that came from fiery iron lamps that burned in wall sconces. On the ceiling, green and yellow vines clung to the rustic stone surface, giving the appearance of not just years, but hundreds of years. Thick, dark wooden beams appeared to support the ceiling, but they also supported many types of flowering hanging plants. Garlic bunches hung from the red brick wall, and on the opposite wall was a pale wooden arch lattice that was stuffed with wine bottles.

The restaurant had about twenty tables, seating groups of twos and fours. Each table was draped with a blue checkered tablecloth and then laid over that was a smaller white tablecloth. A fine white porcelain plate sat in front of each chair, and a linen napkin sat neatly folded on each plate. Every table in the cozy room had been set. Each place setting had one knife, two forks, two spoons and one large spoon that could be used to twirl a mass of spaghetti and the other to stir a drink. There was a tall, clear bottle of oil, a bottle of vinegar, an ornate shaker of parmesan cheese and checkered bottles of salt and pepper that matched the table cloth.

Hail stopped at a table in the center of the empty restaurant and pulled out a chair for Kara.

Kara looked around and sat down.

“There’s no one here,” she noticed.

“It’s about 9:00 a.m., Indonesian time. Not a popular time for an Italian restaurant.”

Kara kept looking around.

“But through the windows it’s dark. Oh my God, this place has windows,” Kara exclaimed, noticing them for the first time.

“They are fake windows, of course,” Hail explained. “All three of the windows are the new 3D 82-inch flat screens. We recorded a full day’s and night’s footage from an actual restaurant in Italy. Each monitor has its own video player, and all the players are synchronized. We typically set the video to coincide with our local time, so it’s day on the screens when it is day on the ship. But, I called ahead and had them play the nighttime video instead. It seems cozier in here with the flame-burning lamps. Nice ambience as they say in the elite circles.”

Kara stared at one of the windows and watched Italian cars drive by. She wondered if Hail made cozy requests for all the guests he had on board, or if this—if she—was somehow different. An older lady strolled by walking a fluffy white dog. As she passed the first window, she disappeared behind a broad wooden beam that separated the windows. Then the next window (the next video screen as Hail explained it) picked her up. As she passed by that window, she vanished behind the window separation; just as she would have done in real life and then appeared in the third window. There was a street corner at the end of the third window. The woman began to go around the corner and then was lost from sight.

“This is just amazing,” Kara said both excited and confused. “What’s an Italian restaurant doing in a cargo ship?”

Hail smiled warmly. “The same thing the Asian, Mexican, French and American restaurants are doing on this same ship. They make people happy.”

“Well I can see why,” Kara said, returning the smile.

“Many of my crew members never leave this ship,” Hail explained. “Some, because they have nowhere to go and nobody to go home to. Others, because they feel safe on the ship, or they are minors and don’t have much of a choice. But that’s still kind of the same thing as nowhere to go and nobody to go home to.”

Kara nodded her head but still didn’t fully understand.

Hail reached down and picked up a fake rose off the table and inserted it into an empty vase in the middle of the table. Back in the kitchen, a light went on and a bell rang.

“A server only comes out here if the flower is put in the vase,” Hail explained. “It makes things much more efficient than the servers continually checking all the restaurants.”

“One server works in all the restaurants?” Kara asked.

“Well, a couple during the busy time. But it’s functional. You see, there’s only one kitchen for all the restaurants. Each restaurant is set up in a circular pattern on this deck. Like each restaurant is a piece of pie and the kitchen is located directly in the center of the pie. You might have noticed the curved hallway outside. It forms a large circle. As you walk around it, you would eventually see the entrance to all the restaurants.”

“That’s amazing,” Kara said. “But why again would you go to all this trouble?”

“Like I said, most of my crew rarely leaves the ship. Therefore, I wanted to build the ship with all the comforts of home, so they feel like they are still part of the world. We also have all sorts of sports facilities set up around the ship. We have a real movie theater with a lobby and candy and popcorn. Everything you would expect to see at the theater. Every once in a while, we will have a live Broadway play video streamed into the theater.”

“I can’t believe all the time and expense that must have gone into all of this,” Kara said.

“It’s not really all that expensive if you consider how much the ship itself costs. And it’s a really small price to pay if I can get talented crew members who are happy and like their jobs. Turnover is something that I try to avoid. This concept is nothing new. Check out the Google campus.”

A young black woman entered from a door at the back of the restaurant and walked up to the table. Her hair had been straightened and tied in back, creating a long ponytail. Kara thought she was pretty, but not the type of pretty that got you in trouble. The woman was dressed in black pants and a button-up starched white shirt. Around her neck was a colorful bandana that was knotted, making it look like a fluffy tie. The server was holding a small electronic notepad of some sort.

“Good morning, Marshall and—a new person I have never seen before,” the server said, taking a moment to look over the new arrival.

“Good morning to you, Sarah,” Hail replied. “This is Kara Ramey. She will be with us for a while.”

Sarah said, “It is very nice to meet you, Kara,” but the server didn’t offer Kara her hand. Instead she handed each of them a leather menu and placed a stylus pen on her tablet, ready to write.

“So, what will it be for you this morning?”

Hail and Kara opened their menus and looked them over.

Sensing that Kara needed more time, Hail said, “I would like the lasagna, a house salad and a glass of whatever wine you recommend. As you know, I don’t know much about wine.”

“That you don’t,” Sarah said smartly as she jotted down Hail’s order.

“And for you, Kara?” Sarah asked.

“I would like the pasta e fagioli, please. And if possible, can you put some extra ditalini in it?”

“Sure,” Sarah said, writing down the order. “To drink?” she asked.

“I’ll have of glass of what he’s having,” Kara said.

“So, you don’t know anything about wine either?” Sarah joked.

“I do, but I don’t want Mr. Hail to feel insecure,” Kara smiled devilishly.

The server winked at Kara and left.

Then a moment later, she came back and placed some bread and butter on the table before disappearing again.

Both Hail and Kara were quiet, neither knowing what to talk about. Kara looked out the window at the Italian cars driving by and the people taking their evening strolls. A group of six young professionals walked by gesturing and laughing.

Hail considered talking about the upcoming mission and then discarded the idea. There would be plenty of time to talk about that after breakfast, or whatever meal they were eating now.

The kitchen door swung open, and Sarah brought out two glasses of dark wine. She set them down carefully in front of Hail and his guest and said, “Bon Appetit.” The woman went back into the kitchen, and the room was silent again.

Hail took a sip of wine and didn’t know if it was good or not. He figured there should be some sort of scientific test that should yield such a result, but he figured that wine connoisseurs would sneer at such technology.

Kara broke the silence and asked, “So all of this—the ship, the restaurants, the movie theater; is it here because of Hail Industries or is it here because of your new line of work? You know, the retribution thing?”

Hail thought for a moment and said, “It started out as strictly Hail Industries. I really loved the idea of solving the world’s power problems, but then after The Five a lot changed.”

Hail took another sip of wine and continued, “My first ships were mainstream cargo ships. At that time, we hauled a massive amount of nuclear material. But once the majority of the nuclear waste had been removed from the United States, I didn’t need the entire ship to be devoted to that task. That’s when I built my new ships, like the one we’re on now. These new ships were designed from the ground up to serve two tasks. We still haul nuclear waste and deliver precast nuclear reactors. But we also serve a second purpose, which you will soon see. That’s why I needed to hire a specialized crew. That’s why I needed a Google type of atmosphere.”

“You have more than just one of your ships outfitted like this?” Kara asked.

Hail replied with a simple yes, but didn’t expand on how many such ships he had.

“So, what’s the deal with you and nuclear power? Other than the profit, what’s the attraction?”

Hail liked the question because he liked talking about nuclear power.

“Power is power,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Power can change everything. Power can make weak countries powerful. Power can solve all of the world’s problems.”

“How so?” Kara asked cynically, reaching over and tugging loose a piece of bread.

“Diamonds are expensive, right?” Hail said as more of a statement than a question.

Kara nodded as she buttered her bread.

“If you have enough cheap power, you can make diamonds inexpensively. After all, making a diamond only requires two things, pressure and heat. If you put enough pressure and heat on a banana, it will turn into a diamond. However, it takes a massive amount of pressure and heat to make a diamond, and that takes a lot of power. If the power costs more than the diamond, then it’s not practical to make them. But if the scales flip the other way, then a diamond will no longer be expensive, let alone a commodity because they would be inexpensive to make. That’s how power can turn the world on its ear.”

Kara chewed her bread and thought about Hail’s little speech.

She swallowed and asked, “Can someone make gold if they have enough power?”

Hail shook his head no. “That’s very tricky because gold was made in a cataclysmic event known as a short gamma-ray burst, such as the collision of two

neutron stars. Gold can be manmade, but none of the processes are economical and most are comical.”

“How so?” Kara asked.

“For example, gold can be made in a nuclear reactor, but the gold that would be produced would be highly radioactive. Walking around with an ounce of gold in your pocket that is burning a hole in your leg isn’t a good thing.”

Kara laughed.

“It’s also possible to make gold in a supercollider one atom at a time. Even with virtually free energy, it would take a hundred years to create one ounce of gold in a supercollider. Thus, that method is not practical either.”

“Well, at least gold is one commodity that will stand the test of time, or should I say stand the test of Hail Industries,” Kara said.

Hail shrugged off the comment and said, “But the real payoff is in solving other problems facing the world. For example, let’s take the global freshwater shortage. That’s not really a water problem; that’s an energy problem. We have an ocean full of saltwater, and all it takes is energy to turn it into fresh drinkable water. So cheap power solves our water problems as well.”

Kara looked at Hail and commented, “Interesting.” She plucked another piece of bread from the loaf.

Not sure he had made his point, Hail added, “People only need a few things to live; food, water and air. Antibiotics extend life as do other medications, but the basics are food, water and air. So, what do we do when we run out of oil? What are we going to use as fuel for the tractors to plant and harvest the massive amounts of food our world requires? What fuel are we going to burn in the trucks that bring the harvest to our inner-city stores?”

“I don’t know,” Kara said honestly. “Batteries?”

“No, but that is a good guess. Actually, I think that hydrogen will be the new fuel that will replace petroleum-based products. The only problem is that hydrogen takes an enormous amount of energy to produce. Currently, using older energy technology, hydrogen takes more energy to make than it produces. But if you have an abundance of cheap electrical power, then all of a sudden hydrogen becomes economical, and all our cars and trucks and tractors can be switched over to burn hydrogen. And the beauty about hydrogen is the waste product that falls out your tailpipe is pure water. You can drink it.”

“That is wonderful,” Kara agreed. She picked up her glass and took a sip of wine. Hail did the same.

“So why wouldn’t all cars run on electricity; you know, batteries?” Kara asked.

“Well, first of all, batteries are very heavy and don’t hold much power. They also take a lot of energy to manufacture and are made from expensive materials. And

batteries don't last very long before they have to be replaced. And second, the world has an infrastructure problem when it comes to electricity. For example, if tomorrow an electric car magically appeared in the garage of every American, and they all plugged them in at the same time, then the entire power grid in the United States would fail. See, the power companies just don't have the infrastructure or capacity to facilitate that scenario. But hydrogen could be kept in pretty much the same type of gas stations where gasoline and diesel fuel are currently dispensed."

"Interesting," Kara said.

"So cheap and clean electrical power completes the circuit," Hail said, summarizing his thoughts. "We burn our old nuclear waste in a reactor that turns that hideous stuff into low-level waste that can be stored safely. With new cheap electricity, we can create hydrogen to power our machines which only outputs water, so we're now preserving our air. With cheap and clean power, we can desalinate water from our oceans. Food, water, air—the Hail reactor solves all of our problems."

"Almost all of our problems," Kara reminded Hail.

"Yep, there is still a people problem that needs to be solved," Hail said, reading the CIA agent's mind.

"More like a people removal problem," Kara corrected.

Hail chewed on his bottom lip and nodded his head.

The door from the kitchen opened, and Sarah appeared toting an armful of dishes. Once she had reached the table, she carefully set down each dish in front of its new owner. Sarah reached across the table and removed the rose from its vase and set it on the table.

"Is there anything else I can get for you?" Sarah asked.

"No, this looks great," Kara said.

"Thank you, Sarah," Hail told her.

Sarah looked pleased and turned and left the room.

Hail used his fork to cut the corner off his slab of lasagna. As he lifted the pasta to his mouth, his phone rang. Holding it in the air, he used his other hand to take his phone out of his pants pocket. He saw it was Renner calling. He took the call.

"This is Marshall," Hail answered.

"You don't have me on speaker, do you?" Renner asked.

"Nope," Hail said flashing a *I'm sorry* look at his breakfast companion.

"Do you want the rundown on the contents of your new buddy's purse?"

"Yes, what do you have?"

“Well, the purse itself is clean. No bugs, no wires, no batteries sewn into it. Everything else is clean as well except for three items. Her phone is sending out a tracking beacon. Even if it is turned off, it is still sending out a beacon. We x-rayed her phone and it has two battery sources; one factory battery and the other is a custom job, straight out of the CIA handbook.”

“OK,” Hail said.

Renner continued. “Her compact is a communications device as well. It has a satellite receiver/transmitter and lots of different modes of sending messages. Video, audio, photo and so forth. The deal with her compact is that it has to have clear air to communicate with a satellite. So, if she is inside, then it’s useless unless she hangs the compact out a porthole on the ship.”

“Understood,” Hail said, giving Kara a little *I’ll be done in a second* smile.

“And the weirdest thing is her phone charger. It’s a sophisticated little Linux computer that has the potential of downloading data from any phone that gets plugged into it. It also has Wi-Fi and Ethernet and can even transmit on Bluetooth, if that channel is open.”

“Good work,” Hail said.

Renner said, “All her stuff is locked up in the security center in a lead-lined safe. Which means that none of her communication devices are doing any communicating, as long as they are sealed inside our safe.”

“OK,” Hail said and clicked off the connection.

“Sorry about that,” he told Kara.

Kara shrugged and said, “This is really good food. If I didn’t know better, I would say I was in Italy.”

“Well, then we did our job.” Hail smiled.

Kara paused for a moment, one of those gear-shifting silences that indicated she was going to change the subject. “You mentioned that you had minors on the ship. That’s kind of weird.”

Hail was prepared for a change of subject, but that particular question caught him off guard. Hail said in a defensive tone, “Not really if you understand why.”

Kara looked at him, smiled innocently and asked, “Why?”

Hail had to decide how much to share with the CIA. If Kara was on the ship for any amount of time, she would eventually meet most of the people aboard, most of them minors. He could always try to segregate her from the crew as well as his advanced technology. But he realized that he needed the CIA’s intelligence. He needed their help long term. It would be impractical to keep Kara bottled up for that long. She wondered how long *‘that long’* would end up being. Really, what could she tell her bosses that would impact Hail or his operation? Yes, he had drones that

delivered drones that delivered drones that killed people. But without designs and specifications and people who knew what they were doing, the United States government would still take a decade to get up to speed if they developed their own program. Realistically, he didn't want to control Kara while she was on his ship. He wanted to control her communication with anyone who wasn't on his ship, Jarret Pepper to be precise.

Hail said, "What you're going to discover is that the majority of our crew or staff or employees, whatever you want to call them, lost someone in The Five."

Kara looked surprised but remained silent.

Hail let it sink in for a moment, and then he continued.

"Sarah, for example," Hail said nodding toward the kitchen. "She lost a brother that she was very close to in The Five. She was a waitress at the time, and the loss crushed her. She didn't get along well with her mother or father, but she was very close to her brother. She couldn't function after that and lost her job. When I found her, she was living in a homeless shelter."

Kara asked, "What do you mean you found her?"

Hail responded, "I mean I assembled a team of researchers that did their best to track down all the girls named Sarah in the world. Or more to the point, all the family members who were damaged or orphaned from The Five."

"Orphaned?" Kara said, feeling that the conversation was drifting into a strange place.

"Yes," Hail said without any reservation. "Most of the minors on the ship I mentioned were orphaned after The Five. I volunteered to take care of them, protect them, make sure they received schooling and even employ them when they get older. In many cases, I'm their official guardian."

"Papa Hail," Kara said with a degree of pessimism. "I don't see it. Why would a judge give you custody?"

Hail laughed mockingly. "There weren't any other billionaires at the time that were making the same offer. Why would I be any worse than anyone else that could take care of them?"

Kara murmured something to herself that Hail couldn't make out as she looked out the fake window.

"I don't know," she said in a sad voice, not taking her eyes off the cars that passed by. She noticed that it had started raining outside; outside an Italian restaurant on the other side of the world when this footage had been recorded.

Hail could tell that she was thinking about her own life and challenges she had faced.

“It’s really nice for the kids here,” Hail told her in a kind voice, almost fatherly. “They are in school Monday through Friday, and we have our own teachers. For the kids over eighteen, they are taking college via distance learning. These days almost every college course is offered via video. One teacher and a hundred students watching the lesson via remote video connections all around the globe. It makes so much sense that I wonder how long brick and mortar colleges will actually last.”

“As long as colleges have kegger parties, then they will be around,” Kara mused. “It’s hard to do that over the Internet.”

Hail paused to see if Kara had anything else she wanted to say. She was still watching the rain shine the streets of Italy, miles away from the conversation.

“You need rain sound effects,” she said softly, like she wasn’t even aware that she was talking.

Hail chuckled. “Yeah, sure, we’ll get right on that.”

“I’m sure that everything you do for the kids is all well and good, but it’s not like having a mother and father. It’s not like having a family,” Kara said, returning from wherever her thoughts had been.

“I agree with you. It’s not like having a mother and father, but it’s like having a family. The kids on board have other kids to do things with. They are growing very close relationships with one another. We are their family. We are each other’s family. In a way, the kids are mine but, in another way, they belong to everyone on this ship. We all belong to each other. We all lost something in The Five, but I will be damned if we all didn’t gain something from it as well. And what we gained is the ability to love again. The ability to feel something again other than sorrow. Having all the kids and adults that were damaged from The Five on board is like a mass therapeutic session. You don’t have to go home to a foster mother and father that don’t have a clue how you feel and don’t understand what you’re going through, because each of us on this ship is going through the exact same thing. We don’t have to go to a grocery store and have the cashier ask how our day is going. And we don’t have to tell them it’s going like hell and not getting any better. We don’t have to listen to people telling us to have a nice day. We have nice days when we feel like it. We don’t even have to talk about how we feel on the *Hail Nucleus*. We just know. When someone is feeling down — we just know. We know how they feel, and we know how to respond to it.”

Hail stopped talking, realizing that he was rambling. But he didn’t feel guilty about it. If Kara didn’t get it, then she didn’t get it.

There were a lot of emotions going through Kara, and Hail could almost see each play out on her expressive features. The prevailing emotion she revealed was sorrow. But as Hail was talking, that emotion began to change into one that resembled hope. It was like sensing that beyond that one mountain was a greener

pasture. War and death on one side, and peace and solace on the other side. Hail knew she got it. He just didn't know *if she knew* that she got it.

"What?" Kara began to say and then stopped.

"This is all just—" and she shut down again.

"This is overwhelming," she finally said. "Does anyone on the outside know that most of your crew consists of family sufferers of The Five?"

"I don't know," Hail said. "I don't know if anyone on the outside really cares. All of these wonderful people are here for one of three reasons. One, they want to be part of the solution. Two, everyone they loved is dead. Three, there is no one left who cares about them. Well, I care about all of them. I don't want The Five to dictate the way their lives will turn out. I want them to all go on and have a good life. If they want to learn a skill and work for me, then I'll train them."

Kara pushed away her soup and set her elbows on the table. She looked directly into Hail's blue eyes. He returned the stare.

Hail could tell that she had a thousand more questions. She had questions about the crew, numbers, the ship, technology, and, of course, CIA questions. And all of those questions were swimming around in her head, each one competing in her brain to be asked.

Before she had a chance to ask any of them, Hail said, "If you are done eating, we really need to get over to our mission planning room and get the ball rolling. I'm not sure what we have in the form of interdiction equipment, and we don't have much time to build it."

Kara took all of her questions and quickly filed them away; making a note to ask them when there was more time.

"I need to get cleaned up," she said.

"No, you don't," Hail said firmly. "You smell just fine."

Kara was shocked and laughed.

Then Hail added, "And you look really good in that cat woman body stocking thing as well. I think this should be your new look."

Kara smiled demurely and replied, "I know I look good in it, but the reason you really like me in this skintight getup is because you can tell I don't have any hidden wires, recorders, cameras or communication devices on my body."

"Damn," Hail thought, "*She read my mind.*"

Hail said nothing. Instead, he stood and walked around the table and pulled Kara's chair out for her.

"No dessert?" Kara asked, facetiously.

"Later," Hail said. "First work and then the cat gets a treat."

“Where to?” Kara asked.

“One deck up. I’ve got everyone waiting for us in the conference room.”

“Lead the way,” Kara said, looking for her purse and then realizing she had absolutely nothing. It struck her for the first time that she was literally at the mercy of Marshall Hail. She didn’t like that feeling one bit. But in her line of work, she was constantly putting herself and her safety on the line. At least Hail and his clan were supposed to be the good guys. But that so-called *fact* had yet to be verified.

The conference room was situated one deck up and almost directly above the grouping of restaurants so they didn’t have to walk any great distance.

Kara walked into a stark conference room occupied by three men and two women. Instead of a conference table, there was a long stainless-steel table, shaped like a banana that sat in the middle of the room. Littering the polished metal surface were monitors, screens, keyboards, mice, styluses and speakers. Kara could tell that this meeting was going to be very different than any other mission planning session she had experienced.

On three of the four walls without a tinted porthole, there were flat screen displays taking up the bulk of the horizontal revenue. The floor was made of well-worn metal marred countless times by the wheels of the lightweight chairs that were scattered haphazardly around the room.

Hail grabbed two of the nearest chairs and slid them toward the group of people already assembled and waiting for them around the table.

Hail pushed a chair under Kara and turned his chair backward to sit cowboy style.

“What’s first?” Hail asked.

“How about some introductions, Marshall?” Shana Tran suggested.

Marshall looked embarrassed.

“Of course, I’m sorry,” he responded. “Everyone, this is Kara Ramey, our liaison from the CIA. Thus, she will assist to obtain intelligence from her agency.”

Everyone said hello in one fashion or another.

“How about we just go around the room quickly? You can introduce yourself and tell Kara what you do.”

Since Shana Tran had spoken up earlier, Hail gestured for Shana to begin.

“Hi, Kara. I’m Shana Tran, Mission Communication Analyst.”

“I love your outfit,” Kara said.

“Well thank you. I designed and made it myself.”

“You’re kidding me. I wish I could do stuff like that. A dress seems would be so hard to make.”

“Well, it’s not that hard. I mean it took me a while to—”

“OK, OK,” Hail interrupted. “We’ll have time for the fashion segment of this meeting later. Let’s continue.”

The person to the right of Tran spoke up.

“My name is Gage Renner. I’m a mission analyst, and I specialize in remote design and aeronautics. We already met on the plane. Well, we didn’t meet on the plane. You were on the plane, and I was here, but we talked—”

“We understand,” Hail told his tongue-tied buddy.

The next person said in a lyrical French accent, “Nice to meet you, Ms. Ramey. My name is Pierce Mercier. I’m a scholar with a background in oceanography, meteorology, botany and zoology. It is basically boring stuff compared to what these guys know.”

“Oh, not at all,” Kara said. “I think all of those things are very interesting. I take it that you speak French?” Kara asked.

Mercier replied, “Oui, parlez-vous français aussi?” (*Yes, do you also speak French?*)

Kara responded, “Oui. Je suis contente de faire votre connaissance.” (*Yes, I am glad to meet you*).

Mercier smiled. “*Moi aussi.*” (*Same here*).

Hail waited patiently until the exchange was over, hoping he didn’t have to cut that off as well. The French dialogue eventually stopped and the next person in line introduced themselves.

“My name is Eric Rugmon. I manage the production and customization of mission devices and control systems.”

Kara noticed that Eric Rugmon appeared to be all business. Kara thought the man looked like a minion from the *Despicable Me* movie. He didn’t smile or give a hint of wanting to be Kara’s buddy. That was OK. She never had a problem making friends, especially men. Rugmon wore a white lab coat, but he wasn’t the only person in the room wearing a lab coat.

The next person to introduce herself was a woman, and she was wearing a lab coat as well. She looked bookish and quiet. Kara considered maybe she and Rugmon might have a thing going on. They were both cut from the same cloth. At least their lab coats were.

“My name is Terry Garber. I’m in charge of the laboratory, laboratory production, new product research and product adaptation.”

Kara wanted to ask her what all that meant, but with Terry Garber being the last person in line, Hail was already taking control of the meeting.

“OK, with that out of the way, what’s our first move?”

Renner said, “We need to know exactly what we’re dealing with. What’s the scope of this mission?”

Hail looked at Kara as if to say, *you’re up*.

Kara scanned the faces looking at her.

She cleared her throat and said, “We’re currently tracking a Chinese fishing trawler called the *Huan Yue* that is steaming through the Sea of Okhotsk, and it’s headed toward North Korea.”

“Can we bring that map up on screen one?” Hail requested.

A large map of the North Pacific Ocean appeared on the screen.

“The Sea of Okhotsk is right here under Russia” Renner said, pointing to the spot with his cursor. “We’re talking about a thousand miles from North Korea, depending on the current position of the trawler.”

“Do we have any assets near there?” Hail asked.

“We still have the *Hail Laser* located in the Bohai Sea right here,” Renner said, putting the mouse pointer on the other side of North Korea. “Unless the trawler decides to loop around South Korea, we’re assuming it would dock on the east coast of North Korea. The *Hail Laser* is on the opposite side of North Korea, but we could reduce that distance by moving it to the Yellow Sea.”

Renner dragged the cursor lower on the screen. “That move would take about twenty-four hours. If we improve the *Hail Laser’s* position in the Yellow Sea, we would still have to traverse the North Korean land mass by air, which is only about 200 miles wide.”

“That’s doable, right?” Hail asked.

“It really depends on what we’re supposed to do with this trawler,” Renner said, looking confused.

Kara spoke up, “The trawler is carrying a large ICBM section headed to North Korea. The mission at hand is to track the large missile part that is on the *Huan Yue* to its final destination on land. At that point, we would like to set up some sort of surveillance to inform us when the majority of the parts have arrived. At that point, we want to blow them all up.”

Renner actually started laughing.

“Is that all?” he asked. “Maybe we should just overthrow the country while we’re there?”

Kara ignored Renner and said, “I don’t think I have to explain to anyone in this room why North Korea would like an ICBM.”

Renner’s smile faded and Kara continued, “If we all think that The Five was a disaster, then just wait until North Korea has the discretion of lobbing nuclear bombs at the other side of the planet. And to tell you the truth, my agency doesn’t

believe that your—your—company,” Kara said, “has the means to interdict this shipment, especially in the narrow time frame we have. But short of an overt action on the part of the US, we don’t have much choice in the matter. It’s you guys or nothing, and nothing is the worst choice.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Hail said, trying to lighten up the mood. “Let’s get down to the nitty-gritty. Let’s get some ideas flowing on the initial contact with the *Huan Yue*.”

Mercier asked, “Do we know where the ship will dock in North Korea?”

“No, we don’t,” Kara said. “But it will take a big crane to remove the section of the missile from the *Huan Yue*, so we would expect it to dock at one of the major ports in Rajin, Chongjin, Wonsan or Hamhung. We currently have AWACS tracking the vessel. When it turns toward land, we will have a much better idea of where it’s going to dock.”

“What time frame are we looking at?” Hail asked.

“Like I said,” Renner replied, “that depends on exactly where the *Huan Yue* is right now.”

Hail looked at Kara.

“I think it’s time to make a call,” Hail told Kara.

“I agree,” Kara said. “Where’s my phone?”

Hail ignored the question and asked her, “Do you know the number?”

“Sure,” Kara replied. “Where’s my phone? I will make the call.”

Hail took his own phone out of his pocket and handed it to Kara.

“It doesn’t matter if you have your phone. We’re surrounded by iron and steel. My phone is routed via Voice over Internet Protocol to the cellphone transmitter on deck that links to the satellite. Just use it for now,” Hail requested.

It was apparent that Kara didn’t want to use Hail’s phone, but she couldn’t think of an excuse to avoid the request.

She took Hail’s phone from his hand, pressed some numbers and waited for her boss, Jarret Pepper, to answer.

“Put it on the speaker,” Hail told Renner.

Renner intercepted the VOIP signal and routed it to the conference room’s ceiling speakers.

Kara was surprised when she heard Pepper’s voice fill the room.

“This is Pepper,” the man said.

Kara composed herself and started the conversation with, “Jarret, this is Kara. For reasons I can’t go into right now, I’m speaking on an unsecured phone that belongs to Marshall Hail. You should also know that we’re coming over the speakers

in the conference room right now, and Mr. Hail has his mission planning staff in attendance.”

There was a long pause as the director of the CIA considered the information.

Then he said, “OK, where are we? What do you need? How are things going?”

Kara got right to the point.

“Everything here is shipshape. But we need to know the current position of the *Huan Yue*.”

“Give me a minute,” Pepper said, and his phone was muted.

Less than thirty seconds later he came back on the line and said, “The *Huan Yue* is in the Sakhalin Gulf.” Pepper then read off a long string of latitude and longitude numbers and directions. Renner typed the position into the computer.

Pepper added, “It’s currently moving at twelve knots and should enter the Nevelskoy Strait in about six and a half hours if it maintains its current speed.”

Renner started plotting red graphical dots on the map on the big screen.

Kara asked, “Do we have any further information on where the ship might dock?”

“I’ll have to check the latest intercepts to see if they provide any new insights,” Pepper said.

Hail thought the man’s voice sounded upbeat and positive. This was a very different man than the one Hail had met in Washington.

Renner got Hail’s attention and made a cutting signal under his neck.

Hail whispered into Kara’s ear. “We need to mute the phone for a moment.”

Kara said, “Sure.”

“Jarret, we will be back in just a second,” she told her boss, and Hail watched her mute the phone. Kara lowered the phone to her waist and then she pressed the mute button a second time, quietly unmuting the phone.

“We need to get steaming,” Renner said to the group, but his suggestion was directed at Hail.

Renner pointed at the dots on the big screen above them. “If the trawler stays at twelve knots, it would be possible to pour on some steam to get us in theater by the time it docks.”

“That’s if it docks in the southern part of North Korea,” Kara informed everyone.

“It doesn’t matter,” Renner said. “We don’t need to be on top of the action but if we’re within five hundred miles, we can become more tactical than we are right now.”

Renner looked back up at the computer display. The crew watched as he ran the mouse from Indonesia to just below South Korea while making mental calculations.

“I think we can be somewhere here in the East China Sea by showtime. If the *Hail Laser* has any issues, their being close is a great back-up plan.” Renner said.

“I’d rather run the operation from the *Hail Nucleus*,” Hail stated. “Let’s do it.”

Since Kara was using Hail’s phone and still had Pepper on hold, Hail walked over to a phone that was bolted into the iron wall and removed the receiver.

“This is Hail. Let’s leave port immediately and proceed toward the East China Sea at best speed.”

Hail waited for a response and said, “Very good,” and hung up the phone.

Hail told Kara, “All right, we’re ready to get Pepper back on the call.”

Kara pretended to press the mute key again.

“Hi, Jarret, are you there?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m here,” Pepper played along.

“Does anyone have any more questions for the CIA?”

“Yeah, what type of fishing trawler is the *Huan Yue*?” Renner asked.

“Checking,” Pepper said.

Ten seconds later he reported, “The *Huan Yue* is a double-rig beam trawler used primarily in the flatfish and shrimp fisheries. It is a medium-sized high-powered vessel. It can tow gear at speeds up to 8 knots with 2,000 horsepower. Do you want me to send a photo of the trawler to this phone?” Pepper asked.

Hail nodded at Kara.

Kara said, “Affirmative.”

She then asked Hail’s team, “Is there anything else you need?”

Hail told her, “Have Pepper call us on this number if he gets any more information.”

She repeated the request into the phone and waited for a response.

Hail watched the CIA woman closely. He could tell she was aware of being closely observed. She looked uncomfortable. Hail knew that Pepper wanted to have a private conversation with her, but since they were both on the speaker that was impossible.

“OK, Jarret. We’re signing off now,” Kara told her boss.

“Good luck,” Pepper said over the speakers.

Renner had been busy. When Hail looked at the big screen, he could see why. Using a yellow line, Renner had plotted the projected course for the *Huan Yue* as

well as adding periodic timestamps based on its speed. He had also plotted the course of the *Hail Nucleus* using a red line.

Renner began to lay out the timelines.

“We’re looking at the *Huan Yue* reaching the heart of the Strait of Tartary in about sixteen hours. Another sixteen hours later it will enter the Sea of Japan. Then, depending on where it makes land in North Korea, we’re talking about a distance of 700 to 900 miles or about 75 hours. That means we need to be in place and operational in roughly three days before the *Huan Yue* docks somewhere.”

Hail nodded his head.

“For us,” Renner continued, “the Hail can make 33 knots, and that will put us in the East China Sea in about 24 hours. Heck, that would leave us a lot of time if we wanted to position ourselves east of North Korea in the Sea of Japan.”

“Very good,” Hail commented. “We can cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Kara was still holding onto Hail’s phone. She heard a chirp and noticed that Pepper had sent a photo of the *Huan Yue* to Hail’s phone.

“The photo of the fishing trawler was just sent,” she told the group.

“Great,” Hail said, taking the phone out of Kara’s hand. He rolled his chair over to a docking station on the table and set his phone into the slot.

“Go ahead and bring up the photo on screen two,” he told Renner.

Renner accessed Hail’s phone and opened the photo that Pepper sent.

On the monitor next to the screen that showed the map, a blue ship appeared.

“Not as big as I thought it would be,” Hail commented.

“Me neither,” Renner agreed.

The white over blue fishing vessel was a mass of jutting beams, pulleys and cables that seemed to surround the ship like a spider protecting its territory with a steel web.

Hail looked closer at the ship.

“Where the hell are they storing this missile section? It doesn’t look like there would be enough room. Are you sure it’s on there?” Hail asked Kara.

“I mean nothing is certain in this business,” Kara responded, “but I would say we’re 95% confident that our intel is good.”

Renner said, “I’m looking over the design of the ship and it has a lot of storage for fish. You could probably fit the missile section in the main holding tank, although it would be a tight fit, and I don’t know how they would get it in there.”

Hail said, “Our choices, if we want to cut to the quick, as I see them, are to drop eyes on the fishing boat while it’s out at sea or when it docks. Once this thing docks

and unloads, there is no way we're going to track a truck with eyes from the sky and not expose ourselves."

"I agree," said Renner.

"What do you think, Mercier?" Hail asked.

"I agree that we can't track the truck from the dock to its final destination from the air. Even with stealth, spending that much time over a major city is asking for problems. I also think there are too many eyes at the dock, even if it's nighttime. My vote would be to get eyes on the boat while it's still out at sea."

Hail looked at Renner.

"That's what I would recommend as well," Renner agreed.

"That makes sense," Hail said.

Kara said, "I don't understand a damn thing you're talking about."

Hail looked at her with an indulgent expression.

"Well, you will in the next few minutes," he assured her.

Hail asked Renner, "What are the challenges with a sea interdiction?"

"Same as usual," Renner said. "Darkness, precipitation, wind velocity, communications and the drones have to function perfectly."

This was the first time that Kara had heard the word *drone* mentioned, and she perked up at the word.

Hail pointed at the photo of the boat. "Can you zoom in closer on the top of the bridge?"

Renner zoomed in closer, centering the top of the ship's wheelhouse in the frame.

"Can we get any closer?" Hail requested. "I want to see what all those lights on top look like."

Renner messed around with the zoom and focus until he obtained the best look.

"Check out these amber lights atop the bridge. Do we think we could mimic this look on our micro-sized drone?" Hail asked.

Eric Rugmon spoke up, "That's not going to be too difficult," Rugmon said. "It's basically throwing an amber ring around the drone."

Kara recalled that Rugmon stated that he managed the production and customization of mission devices and control systems.

"No, it's going to be more than that," Hail said. "We have to drop this thing from a mother drone and have it land on the ship," he said pointing at the top of the ship. "I don't know about you guys, but it doesn't look like anyone would venture up on top of the wheelhouse unless there was an emergency, so I don't think the drone will be noticed up on top."

No one said anything, which Hail took that they were in agreement with him.

“I think we need to attach a wings package to the micro-drone,” Hail suggested.

“OK,” Rugmon said in an indifferent tone. “We have a few wing packages that will work with the mods you want on the micro-drone.”

“So what amount of time are we looking at? When will you have the entire drop package ready to go?” Renner asked Rugmon.

The man in the lab coat contemplated it before he answered. He looked at the ceiling. Hail thought that was funny. Kara thought it was weird.

He finally looked at Renner. “Eighteen hours.”

“I will give you twenty-four hours, so don’t work your crew to death,” Hail told him.

Rugmon simply nodded his head. His face remained slack and impassive.

Kara thought someone should check to see if Rugmon was still breathing.

“No frills on the micro-drone,” Hail told Rugmon. “Just a camera, a magnet and a pico-drone. We need this thing as light as possible. Put as much battery as you can fit on it because we won’t know how far it has to fly until it’s party time.”

Rugmon nodded again.

“When the *Huan Yue* gets to the dock, what are your thoughts?” Renner asked Hail.

“I’m expecting that a big truck with lots of lights on its roof is going to pick up the part. So, we need to fly the drone from the ship to the top of the truck and not be seen.”

Mercier commented. “Statistically, there is a lot that can go wrong with this plan. Statistically, there is a lot more that can go wrong with the plan, than can go right,” he corrected himself.

Hail said, “If I remember correctly, you said the exact same thing about the plan to kill Kim.”

“The statistics are even worse with this plan. We don’t know what the weather is going to be like, but we do know that the *Huan Yue* is moving at twelve knots. So, we’re looking at a minimum of thirteen mile per hour winds while trying to set the drone down on top of the *Huan Yue*.”

“Yeah, I understand that,” Hail said. “That’s why our pilots train endlessly on this stuff. They’ve landed micro-drones in heavier winds than that using the wing package.”

Mercier was still not convinced, but he knew that once Hail had made up his mind it was a done deal.

“What do you think, Renner?” Hail asked.

“It is not outside of our operational limitations.”

Kara laughed and then said, “I’m sorry.”

Hail looked at her and said, “No, please. What are your thoughts?”

Kara laughed again and said, “I think you guys are out of your minds, if I can be so bold. Let me break down what I understand you want to do. OK, you want to drop a toy light tied to wings to a ship doing twelve knots in the middle of the ocean, at night. Doesn’t that sound like science fiction to you?”

“We do science here,” Renner said. “not science fiction.”

“It still seems like a lot of rich kids playing with expensive children’s toys,” Kara stated, knowing the seriousness of the mission and not ashamed to state her feelings.

“Well, yes, it is pretty much exactly how you stated it,” Hail said. “But as Renner said, our aircraft might be smaller, but they essentially work exactly the way larger military versions work. You can fly anything as long as it’s aerodynamic and has control surfaces that can effectively be manipulated.”

Kara shook her head as if she had failed to make her point. She looked frustrated.

“You look upset,” Hail told her. “Do you have any other questions you would like to ask?”

“Sure,” Kara said without hesitation. “How do you plan to drop this tiny drone onto a ship in the middle of the night?”

“A mother drone,” Hail said confidently.

“Of course,” Kara cried out sarcastically. “What else would you use to drop a micro-drone other than a mother drone?”

“We could have used a mini-drone to release the micro-drone,” Rugmon piped up. “But the mini-drone doesn’t have enough flight time and it would be lost to the sea. I hate losing my drones.”

Kara looked at that man as if he had the word *dumb-ass* tattooed on his forehead.

She looked at the group and shook her head in total disappointment.

“I don’t have anything else to ask,” she said harshly.

“OK, then,” Hail said, appearing not to have a care in the world. “Let’s proceed.”

“So, if the *Hail Nucleus* is in theater, then we can launch *Queen* from the *Hail Nucleus*,” Hail stated.

He waited to see if there were any objections.

“We should have at least two, maybe even three backup micro-drones in case we have problems. I think Kara has me spooked,” said Renner.

Hail asked Rugmon, “Is that possible?”

The mellow man answered, “Making the first one is hard. Making copies is easy.”

“I take that as a yes,” Hail responded.

“What’s the role of the *Hail Laser*?” asked Mercier.

Hail thought for a moment, “I don’t think we need it. I didn’t realize we had as much time as I believe we possess.”

Renner said, “It’s still a good idea to move the *Hail Laser* closer in and get it on station.”

“Agreed,” Hail replied.

Hail looked around the room. He noticed Terry Garber looking bored. She hadn’t said anything or been asked anything the entire meeting.

“I’m sorry, Terry,” Hail said. “I promise you will get your hands wet during our next meeting. That’s when things are going to need to go BOOM.”

The woman shrugged and checked her watch.

Hail thought that was a funny thing to do. Terry Garber might be the only person he knew that still wore a watch.

“All right, we will call this meeting adjourned until we can get more intelligence updates. Also, Renner, please update your pilots, and let’s create a simulator exercise that will recreate what we discussed. Make sure to get them all into the booth. I want our pilots to be able to land a toy light on a fishing trawler during a hurricane by the time we’re ready to go.”

“Will do,” Renner said.

Hail looked at the CIA woman. She had been on an emotional rollercoaster since the beginning of the meeting. Initially, her attitude had been gracious and helpful. As the meeting progressed and she discovered what they did and how they did it, her mood turned skeptical and suspicious. Then as the specifics of the mission had played out, her mood took another sharp turn to that of confrontational and combative. And now, as Hail looked at Kara Ramey, she simply looked tired.

As everyone stood and started heading toward the door, Hail asked her, “How are you feeling?”

Kara looked up at him and sniffed once defiantly.

“Either all of you are geniuses, or I’m in a frickin’ nut house. That’s how I’m feeling.”

Hail smiled and nodded understandingly.

“I can see why you think that. It’s certainly a lot to absorb.”

He let some dead air stand between the two for a moment to see what Kara would say. When she said nothing, Hail suggested, “Why don’t we go find you some

clothes, and then I'll show you to your stateroom. You can get some rest, and then I'll show you around the ship."

Kara said nothing, but she appeared to be softening a little.

"Does that sound good?" Hail asked as if he was speaking to a spoiled child.

"OK," Kara said, getting up slowly from her chair.

Hail stood and walked over to the heavy metal door that was still standing open. He gestured for Kara to step through. She gestured back for Hail to step through first because she didn't know where she was going, so Hail stepped through, turned right and began walking toward the nearest stairs. The door automatically closed behind them with a clang.

Kara noticed that they were headed lower into the ship. The big bold numbers that were painted at the head of each staircase were going down. When they got to the number 9, Hail turned left and walked down a metal hallway that looked like all the others on the ship. The hallway terminated at yet another metal door.

Hail opened the door partially and turned to Kara and said, "I think you'll like this."

He motioned for her to step through.

Once on the other side, the first thing Kara noticed was color. Before she had walked through that door, she had felt as if she had been walking through the bland Sahara Desert with its endless white sand covering white hills. Everything on the inside of the ship was white. But as she stepped through the bulkhead doorway, she had entered a new dimension in color.

"You have got to be kidding me?" she beamed.

Kara had just entered the *Hail Nucleus*' shopping mall.

Each time Hail had the opportunity to show off the ship's shopping mall, he felt a little like Willy Wonka showing off his chocolate factory. He had spent a great deal of money on this luxury. During the ship's construction, this large two-story space had been created by eliminating a large section of deck eight. In its place, a second level of stores and a balcony looked down on the stores on the bottom floor of deck nine.

Kara walked into the middle of the mall, and the first thing she noticed was the creamy marble-tiled floor. Up until that point, all the floors she had seen on the *Hail Nucleus* had been dull metal. She kept walking toward the center of the mall. Every twenty yards, she passed a large planter that had an assortment of palm trees and bright colorful bushes and flowers. She noticed that none of the vegetation was real. They served their purpose with the palms stretching toward the open second floor ceiling as if they were yearning for sunlight. Once Kara reached what she thought was the center of the space, she turned slowly to inventory the mall. She was

standing in the middle of a massive oblong mall. At least she considered it massive since it was located in the middle of a cargo ship.

There were shops on the bottom floor and shops on the top floor.

“This is truly unbelievable,” she said, still smiling.

Hail smiled back, “I thought you would like it.”

The first store Kara saw was a Banana Republic. The store looked high class with large plate glass windows supported by thick black aluminum beams. Displayed in the windows were headless mannequins wearing the latest colorful fashions. Through the windows, she could see inside the store and it appeared to be fully stocked.

To the right of the Banana Republic was a store called Denim & Soul. All of the mannequins in the front window of this store were wearing denim pants and shirts and jackets. Adjacent to that store was a Ben and Jerry’s Ice Cream store and Kara identified a 7-11, a Bebe fashion store, a high-end Coach New York store, a Sunglass Hut—and that was just on one side of the mall. Kara kept reading the names of the establishments.

Now she was really smiling.

“Who in their right mind would do something like this?” she asked Hail.

“I would change that question to who in their right mind wouldn’t do something like this, if they had the money.” Hail responded.

“There’s nobody here,” Kara noticed.

“Everyone is in school, teaching school or training for the new mission. Morning is not a popular time at the mall. But this place really gets jumping after school is out.”

“But why?” Kara asked. “Why go to all this trouble and expense?”

“I thought that we already went over this while we were in the restaurant,” Hail said.

“But this?” Kara said, swinging her arm around in a wide swipe. “Don’t you think this is over the top?”

“Not at all,” Hail told her. “In most cases, we make port at some of the poorest countries in the world. For safety reasons, I would prefer my crew to stay on board. Many of these countries have internal strife, civil wars, power grabs and their people are suffering. We’re not talking an overnight stay in the Cayman Islands. It’s more like coming to shore at the little island in *Apocalypse Now*. Most of the time, if we leave the ship for any reason we’re forced to travel with an armed contingent, and we’re backed up by my drones that keep an eye on us. But even in the less turbulent countries, I wouldn’t allow my kids to get off the ship. Kidnappings, hostages—all that nasty stuff is present even in areas that you think are safe. So that’s why I

created a good-ole American mall where all the crew can go and have fun and be safe.”

Kara was speechless.

Hail added, “Hey, I get everything at wholesale, so it’s not as bad as you think.”

“Does your crew buy stuff? Do they have money? Who works at these stores? Who stocks them? Who—” and Kara stopped, realizing that she was rambling.

“Wow, that was a lot of questions,” Hail said. “Let’s see. Yes, my crew is paid in Hail dollars each week so the kids learn the meaning of money. If not, and all of this was free, they would simply fill their rooms with piles of stuff they don’t need. So, the answer to your first question is, ‘Yes, they buy stuff,’ but if it starts getting out of hand then we cut them off. As for your question about who stocks the stores and works the registers, all the kids are required to work in the stores a certain number of hours per week. We think it teaches them responsibility, and even though we live inside the ship in a fantasy world, I want them to understand how the real world works outside these metal walls.”

Hail waited for Kara to ask more questions. When she didn’t, he asked her, “Do you have any more questions?”

“Yeah,” she laughed, “Who is working here right now so I can buy some stuff? I don’t think this body stocking defines my style.”

“I’ll tell you what. Since you don’t have any Hail dollars, why don’t you just walk around a little and steal some stuff. I promise I won’t send the Hail mall cops after you.”

Kara looked pleased.

“That will work,” she said. “And what are you going to do during those ten hours?”

Hail laughed and said, “I have business things I need to take care of, so how about I meet you back here in an hour or so and help you carry your bags to your room?”

“Two hours,” Kara said. Then she noticed something on the second floor. “A movie theater too?” she asked, pointing up at the marquee on the second floor.

“Didn’t I tell you we had a movie theater?”

Kara thought for a moment and said, “I think you did. I just didn’t believe you.”

“All righty then,” Hail replied. “Have fun and I will see you shortly.”

Hail left the mall, stepped back into the hallway, withdrew his phone and called Renner.

Renner answered on the first ring.

“Can you meet me in security? I’m headed there now,” Hail asked.

“No problem,” Renner replied.

Hail clicked off and put his phone back in his pocket. Then he set a course for the ship’s security center. Four decks and three minutes later, Hail walked into the room. Renner was already there waiting for him.

Kara’s purse, clothes, phone charger and cable, iPhone, some makeup and her compact were sitting on a table.

“Let’s run this down again including the meeting,” Hail told Renner.

Renner said, “Like I told you before, the compact, phone and phone charger are all communication devices and have been modified. Her clothes and the purse are clean.”

“So how did she do at the meeting?” Hail asked.

“From our perspective she failed. I’m sure from her boss’ perspective, she succeeded.”

Renner directed Hail’s attention toward a computer monitor. On the screen were two audio sign waves. The line on each of the channels danced up and down erratically, indicating an audio signal was present.

“When you asked her to mute the phone, she did, but for only four seconds. Then she un-muted the phone. That’s what we see here on the second channel, which is the bidirectional send,” Renner pointed at a jagged line on the screen. “If she had muted the phone we would see nothing on this channel. It would look like a heart patient that had died. Flat line.”

Hail seemed upset.

Renner asked him, “Come on. The woman is CIA. She has no allegiance to us. Did you really expect her to pass that test and keep the phone muted?”

Hail sighed and said, “I hoped she would have. I wanted to start this partnership out with a basis of trust. Now, out of the five items she carried aboard, three of them are CIA spy devices. I would have expected more trust, but then you know me. *Mr. Gullible.*”

“Yeah, being a good guy sucks,” Renner joked, but there was a measure of sincerity in his words.

Both men were silent as Hail decided what he wanted to do.

“Do we have a method of recording all the data that leaves her phone?”

“Sure,” Renner said without hesitation. “Just like your phone, we would have to install a TCP/IP stack and proxy that routes her calls over our ship’s VOIP network. That signal can then be routed to our cellphone transmitter/receiver on deck. As you correctly told the CIA woman, since we’re in an iron tub that’s the only way to communicate if you are making a call to the mainland from inside the ship. However, even if she were on the deck, her phone is set up to connect to a CIA

satellite. But we will intercept her call and connect her to the world via our satellite. We have her phone number, her MAC ID, and she is riding our network, so we simply rip the data stream as it goes by and store it on our servers.”

Renner finished and waited for Hail to respond.

“What about the ping that is being emitted from her phone giving away our position?” Hail asked. “Is there any way to kill that?”

Renner nodded and said, “Sure. On land her voice traffic and Internet would go through cell towers. The CIA would know where she was by identifying the position of the cell tower. But out here, in the middle of the ocean, all of her Internet traffic goes through our Wi-Fi, our switches, our routers and our firewall. The blip is a common stream of data. All we have to do is packet sniff that stream and cut it out before it hits our Internet uplink.”

“It’s as easy as that?” Hail asked, being an expert in nuclear physics but not so smart in the area of advanced networks.

“The hard part is the initial setup. We will need to identify the stream that is sending out the blip and write the program to extract it. But after that’s done, the script just runs itself.”

“How long will it take to set up?” Hail asked.

“It’s already done,” Renner replied. “If not, I wouldn’t have her phone sitting here sending out blips to the world and giving away our position. It would be back in the safe.”

Hail grunted his approval.

Renner asked, “What are you thinking?”

“I think that we need to play the CIA game,” Hail told his friend.

Hail started putting all the contents back into Kara’s purse.

“You’re going to give it all back to her, aren’t you?” Renner asked.

“I can’t think of a better way of knowing what our good friends at the CIA are up to, can you? We record every call that is made and then listen to it. We’ll hear Kara’s side of the call with the bonus of hearing Pepper’s responses and orders. It’s best we know what they’re planning before it becomes a problem.”

Renner thought for a moment, “Don’t you think she could pass on some information about us that might hurt us in some manner?”

Hail looked conflicted.

“If you run down all the intelligence that she could provide to Jarret it would break down in three different categories. First, the CIA would want to know about our ship. So far, Ramey has only seen a restaurant, the conference room and the mall. She will see more, but we don’t have anything on board that the military doesn’t already have. Well, except for our drones.”

“What about our railgun?” Renner reminded Hail.

Hail skipped over that issue and continued.

“I think it’s very important that she’s not permitted access to our designs or provided access to our lab or the production and modification areas. But all of those areas are already badge access only. So, one of us would have to take her into those areas, and that’s not going to happen.”

“Makes sense,” Renner said.

“Second, I’m not comfortable with Kara, and thus the CIA, knowing our crew’s headcount, especially the combined numbers on all of our ships. I also don’t want her people to know how many ships we have or how many Hellfire drones protect our ships and such. I would also exclude the number of manufacturing plants we have on dry land, as well as the numbers of countries we consider to be our clients.”

“Sounds prudent,” Renner agreed.

“And third, I don’t want the CIA to know about any of our long-term plans. The CIA has their own agenda. We can already tell by this new operation that was thrown at us that they would like nothing more than to make us their bitch. I don’t want to become part of their agenda. As always, we want to remain as self-sufficient as possible.”

“Then why is she here?” Renner asked, but he already knew the answer. He was just calling Hail out.

“*‘You don’t get something for nothing,’* my father always told me,” Hail replied. “Most of the time my father was an asshole, but much of the time that asshole was right about the basics. I’m sure that every time we want something from the CIA, we will get a bill. And we can’t pay that bill in money. They don’t want our money. They want an action of some type. And as long as it doesn’t take up too much of our time or our assets, that’s the price we’ll pay if we want to keep getting intelligence from them.”

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE HEADQUARTERS—LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

The director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Jarret Pepper, had called an impromptu meeting with his Director of Operations, Paul Moore, and the Director of Analysis, Karen Wesley.

Instead of the conference room, Pepper had instructed them to meet him in his office. The meeting was basically an operational update, and he didn't think it would take long.

"So where did the plane land?" Pepper asked Paul Moore.

"It landed in Morocco."

Pepper looked perplexed. "Where in Morocco?" he asked.

Moore spun a globe sitting on the edge of Pepper's desk. He took a moment to orientate himself with the earth and then pointed at a long strip of tan.

"Right there," he said. "The Dakhla Airport in the Western Sahara of Morocco."

Pepper and Karen Wesley looked closely at the place where Moore's finger had been.

"Why would they put down there?" Pepper asked. "It's nothing but desert."

"They put down for the same reason that we had to break off surveillance. They needed fuel. The AWACS that was tracking them had to refuel as well. With no tankers in that area, it had to leave the theater."

"So where did they go after that?" Pepper asked.

"We don't know," Moore responded blamelessly. "We don't have assets at all in that region of the world. The closest asset we have to Morocco is a DHC-6 Twin Otter aircraft out of Spain, but that's eight hundred miles away. Too little, too late."

Pepper was frustrated.

"What about her phone?" Pepper asked Moore. "Did we get any blips off of it?"

Moore shook his head no, but said, "Yes, but we didn't get enough of them to zero in on the location. At some point, the phone stopped sending blips."

"How could it do that?" Pepper asked.

"Thrown into the water, destroyed, inside a metal room, buried...there are lots of reasons," Moore explained.

"So, what you're trying to tell me is that we have no idea where our CIA agent is?"

"The few blips we got were loosely traced to the southern part of Indonesia. Maybe Jakarta."

Pepper huffed sarcastically and said, “That’s wonderful.” He placed his own finger on the globe and drew a box. “That means we’re talking about 6,000 square miles, right?”

Moore said nothing.

“Have you communicated with her?” Wesley asked Pepper. “I’m assuming you didn’t call us here just for that information.”

Pepper composed himself.

“Yes, I did,” he said as if he was the only person who did any work around the place. “Kara called me on Hail’s phone. So that might indicate that they had taken her phone from her, but I think it’s something else. Kara used the word *shipshape* in our conversation, which is a code word that means she is on a ship. She also pretended to mute the phone, and I overheard Hail’s crew talking about making a run for the South China Sea, so they are definitely on a ship.”

Moore said, “That would account for her phone not sending blips. If she is surrounded by iron, the signal can’t get out.”

“Correct,” Pepper agreed. “Also, as predicted, Hail’s people asked for the location of the *Huan Yue*.”

“Did you give it to them?” Wesley asked.

“Yes, I did. I put them on hold and made a call to your people, and they provided me the current coordinates of the trawler.”

“What other data did you share with them?” Wesley probed.

“Not much,” Pepper said. “It’s not like there is much to give. I sent them a photo of the fishing trawler and told them that I would call them if, or when, we detected the vessel might be changing course toward land.”

“Do you have Hail’s phone number?” Moore asked.

“It was stored on my phone when they called me,” Pepper said.

“Maybe we can triangulate Hail’s phone signal.”

“Why?” Pepper asked as if Moore didn’t understand the plan. “Does it really matter where they are? Kara is on board and she will do her magic, and before you know it, Hail will be her very best friend. As long as Hail gets the job done, and Kara gets us some good intel on Hail’s operation, then who the hell cares where they are?”

Wesley and Moore thought about it.

“Then why were you so concerned about her just a minute ago?” Moore asked.

“I was more concerned about why our high-tech gear doesn’t do what it’s supposed to do,” Pepper shot back.

Wesley said, “If *Hail Storm* works, then we’ll look good simply having a presence in the operation, regardless of how our equipment functions.”

“*Hail Storm?*” Pepper asked. “What’s with—*Hail Storm?*”

“That’s what I named this operation,” Wesley told Pepper.

Pepper looked unhappy.

“What? You don’t like the name?” Wesley asked.

“I just think it’s a little over-the-top,” Pepper said disdainfully.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Every name for every operation we have is over-the-top, as are the military’s operations: Desert Storm, Bayonet Lightning, Valiant Guardian, Urgent Fury, Eagle Claw, Spartan Scorpion, Operation Overlord, Rolling Thunder—”

“OK, OK,” Pepper cut her off.

But Wesley didn’t stop, “All the names of our operations have to be over-the-top, testosterone packed, overblown black ops doozies. If we ever get called to appear in front of a special congressional committee because an operation went south, then the last thing we want to explain is why *Operation Fluffy Puppy* went horribly wrong.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Pepper said.

Everyone was silent for a moment.

Wesley said in a more forgiving tone, “I just don’t think you like Marshall Hail very much.”

“How I feel about Hail has nothing to do with the name of this operation. I just—I don’t think that—” Pepper stopped talking and looked irritated.

Then he confessed, “You’re right. I don’t like Hail, but it’s not the man I don’t like. It’s what the man represents. He’s a vigilante. And you can dress that up any way you want, but he is still a rich, high-tech vigilante. He could simply turn over his assets to us, and we could get the job done in the same manner. But *no*, he wants to rub our noses in it. I think he actually enjoys making us look incompetent. And that’s why I don’t like him.”

Pepper stopped talking and tried to recall what they had been talking about before he began his speech. “The name is fine,” he reluctantly agreed; glad to put an end to that topic.

“Of course, it’s fine,” Wesley said defiantly. “Just like all the other fine names of operations I’ve come up with.” Now she looked irritated.

“That’s all,” Pepper announced, putting an end to the meeting.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

Hail knocked on the door of Kara Ramey's stateroom around dinnertime. He had been purposely avoiding the CIA operative for a number of reasons. First, she was CIA, and she had an agenda. He knew it; she knew it. But Hail wondered if she knew that he knew it.

Second, Hail liked her. Sure, he liked her at the same base level that all men liked her. What's not to like? But there was also a vulnerability in the woman that attracted him. And for some inexplicable reason, Hail had always been drawn to people who were damaged or in need.

As a young man, Hail had become a lifeguard at the local recreation centers in the many cities and countries where he had lived. The idea of saving people had appealed to him even at a young age. He was also the boy who would pick up the bird that had smacked into the clear plate-glass window and try to nurse it back to health. Hail had married his first wife after he had broken up with her, and she had then tried to commit suicide. It seemed as if Hail was always trying to rescue those in need. He was the champion for those who cared very little for their own lives. And Hail sensed that even though Kara Ramey wasn't in that classification, she had certainly been traumatized and needed saving, whether she knew it or not. He fully recognized that his attraction to save Ramey was strong. And that scared him a little.

Kara answered the door, and Hail was once again stunned by her beauty. She was clean and fresh and young and shapely and flawless on the outside.

Kara gave him a ten-thousand-Watt smile, and Hail felt compelled to smile back. She was wearing black yoga pants and a tight red short-sleeve shirt that had a modest V-neck.

"I know that you like me wearing tight stuff," she said.

Hail didn't know how to respond. *Was that a joke or was she serious?*

Kara added, "You know, so you can tell I'm not carrying any hidden CIA cameras or microphones and such." She cocked her head to the right and smiled at Hail.

He still didn't know if she was joking and that made him uncomfortable. Then he suddenly realized that she was trying to make him uncomfortable. *Well, two could play that game.*

Hail said, "In your line of work, I'm sure you are accustomed to wearing very little."

Kara must have expected a different response. Her smile quickly faded, and her right eye twitched.

There was a second of edgy silence between the two.

“Where are we going?” Kara asked, choosing to totally ignore the previous exchange. She was smiling again, but there was little sincerity behind it.

By habit, Kara started to look for her purse and then realized that she didn’t have it.

Hail realized what she was doing and said, “Oh, almost forgot. Here are your things. I’m sorry it took so long to get them back to you.”

Hail handed Kara a clear plastic bag that held her clothes and her purse.

Kara looked surprised and took the bag from Hail. She opened the bag and pulled out her purse and dropped the bag with clothes on the floor inside her room. She unsnapped her purse and looked inside.

Hail could tell she was running through an inventory in her head. Kara confirmed that her compact, her phone, her phone charger and other smaller objects were all accounted for.

“Thanks,” she said, snapping the purse closed. “Are there any rules as to the use of my cellphone on board?”

“Would it do any good?” Hail asked.

Kara didn’t know how to respond, so she didn’t.

With a graceful wave of his arm, Hail motioned for Kara to step out into the hall. She did, and Hail pointed to the right. Kara began walking in that direction. Hail closed her door and caught up with her.

“I was wondering what had happened to you.” Kara said, “I haven’t seen you since our lunch date.”

Hail was caught off guard by the use of the word *date*.

“That wasn’t a date,” he said, and then wished he could take it back.

Kara laughed and asked, “Well is this a date?” Without waiting for a response, she asked, “Where are you taking me?”

Hail looked uneasy and asked, “Where do you want to eat?”

“It is a date then,” Kara goaded him. “Let’s see. How about Asian tonight? During the last few days, I think I’ve eaten everywhere except for the Asian restaurant.”

Hail was already feeling manipulated, and they hadn’t even made it to the end of the hallway. Dealing with this woman was going to be tricky.

They reached the first staircase, and Kara asked, “With all the money you put into this ship, I would have thought you would have installed elevators.”

“Oh, we have elevators, but climbing stairs is the only exercise I get these days,” Hail told her.

“Well, we need to get you into that fancy gym I’ve been using. How about later tonight we do a little workout together?”

She said the word *workout* almost sexually, and Hail couldn’t help but connect the dots in his mind.

“We have some other business we need to take care of first. We’ll see how our time plays out,” Hail said, reaching the top of the stairs, pulling the door and holding it open for Kara.

Kara fluttered through the opening and said, “Thank you.”

They both took a break conversing and continued to walk through the circular hallway that connected all the restaurants.

The door to the Asian restaurant had black block lettering painted on the white steel door that read **ASIAN**. The unostentatious outside of the door was the opposite of the inside of the door.

Once Kara had entered the restaurant, she actually turned around and looked at the other side of the door. No metal, no block lettering, no strange bulkhead shape; but what she did see was dark teak wood that had been handcrafted. Dozens of animals had been carved into the surface of the expensive wood, and then the entire door had been covered with a thick clear layer of varnish. The walls of the restaurant were paneled with dark wood. Modern-looking box lanterns hanging from the ceiling led deeper into the room. The chairs at all the tables were dark, but the tabletops themselves were made of a lighter colored wood. The brighter surface reflected light from the lanterns and made each seating arrangement pop. There were no tablecloths on the maple wood tables, just pairs of chopsticks folded into white napkins. Other than that, the only items on each of the tables were a single yellow sunflower lying next to a thin Chinese vase.

Hail pulled out Kara’s chair, and she sat down, setting her purse on the unused chair tucked under the table to her right.

Hail seated himself opposite Kara. He reached over and picked up the sunflower and placed it into the neck of the vase.

Hail watched Kara as she scrutinized the restaurant. There were only two other tables that were occupied. One table seated a young man and woman she hadn’t seen before. At the other table were two young men she thought were pilots. The 3D windows in this establishment were showing a night scene. Four eighty-two-inch 3D windows displayed a crisp image of the street outside. Other than people with Asian features, the pedestrians looked just like any other group of people walking by a restaurant on a chilly evening. They wore modern clothing, mostly jackets and thick hoodies. Most of the people outside were younger and instead of cars, everyone seemed to be driving scooters. There were brightly lit signs, some neon, some colorful backlit plastic advertisements in all shapes and sizes, and all of the writing was in Chinese. Kara could read and understand most of them.

“Do you know where this video was taken?” Kara asked, pointing at the fake windows.

“Sorry, I really don’t,” Hail said, checking his phone for any updates.

Hail looked up, and Kara gave him a confused expression so Hail expanded on his response.

“This really wasn’t my gig putting all this together. My friend that you met, Gage Renner, he contracted all the design elements, as well as the construction of the restaurants out to vendors who built the rooms. Part of that design was the electronics, the screens that look like outside windows, as well as the video that would be shot and played on the screens.”

Kara didn’t say anything. She waited to see if Hail had more to tell her.

“I cut the check,” Hail said, “and that was my major contribution to the restaurant buildout.”

Hail flashed a smile and then let it go.

“Who is Gage to you?” Kara asked. “Where did you meet him?”

“Have you spent some time with Gage?” Hail asked.

“Yes. I ran into him at the gym, and he was nice enough to show me around a little.”

“What did you see?” Hail asked.

“Gage showed me the school department of the ship, the classrooms and such. You have quite a large gaggle of teenagers in training, don’t you?”

“Living every day is training you for something,” Hail replied noncommittally.

Kara said, “Then Gage showed me your flight simulator area.”

Her smile conveyed a sense that she had been shown an area that was off-limits.

“Did you have fun there?” Hail asked, returning a smile that conveyed she would only be shown what they wanted her to see.

“I crashed a Lockheed Martin F-22 Raptor straight into the ground twice and once into a mountain.”

They both laughed.

Hail said jokingly, “You will not be our pilot the next time we fly.”

“You are right about that,” Kara said with a laugh.

A waiter appeared at their table. To Kara, he looked as if he were just old enough to serve and drink alcohol. He had black hair and was tall, skinny and a few zits on his face. The first thing the young man did was reach over and remove the flower from the vase. He set it on the table.

“Here are your menus,” the man said, handing a folded leather list to each of them. “Might I suggest a Banshu Ikkon Kaede no Shizuku sake for you tonight?”

Hail had a blank expression on his face.

Kara answered, “No, that’s a little dry. I would prefer Garyubia sake. Do you have it?”

“Yes, we do. I’ll be right back with that.” The waiter left, and Hail looked admiringly at Kara.

“Very impressive,” he said.

Kara shrugged it off and said, “I’ve been in a lot of countries and spent more time in bars than I care to remember.”

Hail asked, “Is that part of your job?”

Kara looked more serious and asked, “Which part do you mean? Knowing everything there is to know about sake or sitting in bars a lot?”

“Both,” Hail asked.

“They both go along with one another,” Kara stated. “It’s like knowing everything there is to know about race cars because you spent a lot of time at the track.”

Hail nodded, and there was a lull in the conversation.

Kara looked around a little more before saying, “So, we were talking about Gage,” she offered. “He seems like a nice guy. What’s Gage to you, and how did he get stuck on this boat?”

“Ship,” Hail corrected.

“How did Gage get stuck on this ship?” Kara complied.

“He was my roommate at MIT. We were on the same degree path and shared similar interests in nuclear power. After school, we kind of lost touch with one another. He was pursuing a failed marriage while I was doing the same.”

Hail stopped telling his story for a moment and asked Kara, “Have you been married?”

Then as an afterthought, he added, “Or *are* you married?”

Kara smiled like she owned the world and said, “Are you kidding? Give all this just to one man?” She laughed at her own joke, but Hail sensed that Kara had some issues with intimacy. If so, then they were similar in that respect.

Kara continued, “No, marriage is not for me. At least, not right now. I mean fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce.”

“Right here,” Hail said, raising his hand. “Done that and bought the T-shirt.”

“Right,” Kara said. “So, you know what I mean?”

“True, but then every once in a while, you get lucky and the odds turn in your favor.”

Hail’s expression oscillated from happy to sad so quickly that Kara thought he may have experienced a sudden physical pain of some type.

Hail looked away from Kara and down at the table.

Kara asked softly, “You are talking about your wife, Madalyn, aren’t you?”

Hail didn’t look up. He just nodded his head.

Kara continued, “I’ve never been married; therefore, I can only imagine what you have been through, losing your wife and both of your daughters.”

Hail looked up at her.

Kara thought that his face had changed dramatically in just those few seconds. The sorrowful lines in Hail’s face had become deeper, making him look callous and uncaring. His former kind-hearted eyes looked somewhat scary, dark and bottomless as if he had transformed into an irreverent purveyor of death.

“Do you know what today is?” Hail asked in a voice almost as scary as his appearance.

Kara looked at him straight on and with great composure, she said, “Yes, I do. You know I read your file, and they expect me to remember things like that.”

“Then you know?”

Kara decided it was best to get it out on the table.

“Your family was killed this day two years ago.”

Hail looked at her as if she were the enemy for just saying it aloud.

Then he looked back down at his plate.

The waiter arrived with a tray that had a bottle of sake and two empty glasses. He also had two glasses of ice water. He set everything on the table and asked, “So what will it be for you tonight?”

The waiter’s indifference to the situation snapped Hail out of his self-pity. Hail motioned for Kara to order first.

Kara, who hadn’t even opened her menu said, “I will have the avocado roll and the salmon sashimi.”

The waiter jotted it down with a stylus on his tablet.

“And for you, sir,” he asked Hail.

Hail said solemnly, “I will have the usual.”

“Very good,” the young man said and darted off.

Hail looked down at his plate.

“Hey,” Kara said. “Look up here.”

Reluctantly, Hail looked up at the CIA agent.

Kara was smiling in an attempt to pull Hail out of his funk.

“What’s your usual?”

“Chicken Lo Mein.”

Kara laughed. “All of this great food and you order Chicken Lo Mein? Marshall, you need to get out more and live a little.”

Hail flattened his lips and gave a little “*it is what it is*” expression.

Hail took in a deep breath and let it out slowly as if he were expelling poison gas from his fatigued lungs.

Kara redirected the conversation by saying, “So you met Gage at MIT and then both of you went through bad marriages. Then how did you two get back together?”

Hail seemed more comfortable talking about this subject.

He brightened a little and said, “The idea for the traveling wave reactor was first proposed in the 1950s. The theory has been studied all the way up to the first 600-Megawatt prototype that was built by TerraPower in 2020. But there were big problems with their design, as there are with most prototypes. Both Gage and I were newly divorced and very bored teaching at MIT. We were looking for something to sink our teeth into, something of importance. We became aware of the challenges that TerraPower was having with their new reactor and that technology intrigued us. So, Gage and I put our heads together and came up with a new reactor design, as well as a more sophisticated way to bundle the fuel. That collaboration and our new designs resulted in one of the first commercial traveling wave reactors.”

Kara poured a glass of sake for each of them and asked, “How did you get the startup money?”

Hail let out a single laugh and said, “That was the funny part of it. Bill Gates was a huge proponent of the traveling wave reactor and even sat on the board of TerraPower and funded its operations. Gage and I met with Gates and showed him our new designs. He had some people he trusted look over our designs, and within a few months Gates backed our startup, and we were in business.”

“That’s pretty cool,” Kara said.

“Yeah. The cool thing about Gates was that he just wanted the technology to move forward. He didn’t care who did it or who got credit for it. He just wanted the new technology to be successful. Gates understood that energy was the key to making a better world. A longer lasting world. He understood that free energy could help millions and millions of people who were living horrible lives.”

Kara held up her glass.

“Cheers to that,” she said.

Hail picked up his own glass and toasted her offer with a little clink.

They drank and drifted off into their own thoughts.

Kara went back to looking out the fake windows, and Hail became lost in the memory of his family.

A few minutes ticked by and Hail resurfaced. It was time to get down to business.

“Well, enough about my life history,” he said, “There are some things we need to discuss—some business-related items.”

Kara looked surprised at the sudden change of topic.

Hail continued, “I would like to know more about the man called Kornev that you mentioned in Washington. I would like to kill him.”

Kara smiled at Hail’s brashness.

“Just like that, huh? Just kill him?” Kara asked.

“No. I would actually like to know more about him and then kill him. I first want to make sure he is the right guy. You indicated he was the man who sold the surface-to-air missiles to The Five terrorists.”

Kara set her elbows on the table and placed her chin in her hands and stated, “The CIA has pretty strict rules about their agents telling non-CIA private citizens about classified information. I’m sure you understand.”

Hail knew there would be some form of bartering that would take place if he wanted the information, but his first tactic was to go dark on Kara Ramey and see how she reacted.

“How about we place you in a lonely room at the bottom of the ship until you tell me what I want to know?” Hail asked, doing his best to sound menacing.

Kara laughed, slapping both of her hands on the table so hard that the people at the other tables turned to look at them.

“You are funnier than hell,” she said, all smiles and giggles. “You are the biggest teddy bear I have ever met. And trying that sinister man behind the curtain, man, that is a riot!” She continued to laugh.

Hail felt foolish and went with what he initially intended to go with.

“After dinner tonight, we’re going to complete a very important step of the operation. Right now, as we speak, the first step is taking place. It’s your choice. Do you want to tell me about Kornev, or do you want to spend all of this critical time in your comfortable stateroom instead of our mission center where the action is taking place?”

Kara stopped laughing.

“Now you have my attention,” she told Hail. “Can I take photos with my phone of your mission center?”

“No,” Hail said, “but you will probably try anyway.”

“Probably,” Kara agreed. “I will take that deal. So, what do you want to know about Kornev?” Kara asked.

Hail thought for a moment.

“What was your part of the mission concerning Kornev?”

“What do you mean by *my part* of the mission?”

Hail thought that Kara sounded more confrontational than cooperative. He took a moment to sip some sake and collect his thoughts. He wanted to know how she collected information so he could determine if the intelligence she collected was worth considering. After all, if she watched Kornev at a distance from a hill overlooking his hotel, then how important could that information be? However, if she was intimate (to choose a word) with Kornev and his operations, then maybe her information was worthwhile.

Hail said, “I mean, when they send you in to collect information, how do you do it? Is it like electronic eavesdropping, video surveillance, what?”

Kara gave Hail a look that questioned his sincerity.

“Look at me for a second, Marshall,” she said.

Kara stood up from the table and did a slow turn as if she were an expensive porcelain doll revolving on a turntable.

With Hail watching her while still standing and still turning, she asked, “Do I look like someone they would send in to do video surveillance?”

“I don’t know,” Hail responded sheepishly.

Kara sat and placed her cloth napkin in her lap. She took another sip of sake and said, “I’m the CIA’s version of a courtesan, Mr. Hail. I’m the pretty thing they send in to get close to horny assholes. And then while I’m close, I steal their secrets. It normally takes a decade or more to become a field agent, but that was the old CIA. In the new CIA, if you look like I do and can speak more than five languages fluently, then one day you’re listening to recorded wire taps, and the next day you are fast-tracked into a country you never heard of.”

Kara stopped talking and stared at Hail with steely unblinking green eyes.

Hail wanted to look away, but he felt that shifting his eyes away from hers would be an insult of some type. So, he didn’t. He looked at Kara Ramey, looked at her beautiful face and said, “And how did you get into that line of work?”

Kara took in the question and burst out laughing.

Hail started laughing, happy that his levity could break up the awkwardness of the moment.

But as Hail laughed, he realized something very important about this woman. Part of her job was to continually keep him off balance. Hail would try to center himself in a certain frame of mind so he could get a psychological advantage, and then, WHAM, she would completely blow him out of the water with a comment or a statement. When he had first knocked on her door, it was her comment about him liking her in tight fitting clothes. Then there was her mention of this being a date. And then there was something lurking in her interaction with his friend Gage. And then she had brought up his family's death. And now, now that he was trying to figure out what she did and how she did it, again, she flattened him with this new salacious proclamation.

After the laughter had subsided, Kara asked, "You know, Marshall, what does it really matter to you? I can tell you for sure that Kornev is a bad guy. We've been watching him closely for a year or more, and he sells nasty weapons to nasty people. I mean you are content with plucking people off the FBI's Top Ten Terrorist list. So, what's the fascination with this one guy?"

Hail said, "I could ask you the same thing. You have a list of all these bad guys, yet you're concentrating your efforts on this one guy. He has to be important. He has to be important enough for you to risk your life."

Kara didn't respond. She pretended to look for the waiter.

"Put the flower in the vase," Hail told her.

"That's OK," she said, dismissing his suggestion.

Hail asked, "Why do you do it? How did you end up working with the CIA? You must have a lot of skin in the game, so to speak, if your role with the CIA is truly what you just told me."

"That's not important," Kara said. "And anyway, I'm not allowed to tell you anything about myself. As far as you are concerned, I'm a CIA robot. I don't have a personal life. I'm owned by my country."

"God," Hail said. "You got majorly damaged somehow. You're almost as messed up as I am."

Kara looked at Hail as if he had slapped her in the face. She flashed him an expression of pure disdain.

"When did you become a psychiatrist, Mr. Hail? Did you get a degree in psychoanalysis at MIT along with your physics degree? Did you get another Nobel Prize in damaged people assessment?"

"*Score one for the Hail Team,*" Hail thought. He had finally gotten to her. He had knocked her off her game and rattled her. Now was as good a time as any to see what made her tick.

"Forget Kornev," Hail said with a wave of his hand. "I'll make you a different offer."

Kara still looked angry.

Hail said, "If you tell me how you got the way you are, you know, the messed-up thing I was talking about, then I will let you into the mission center tonight."

"Go to hell," Kara's responded.

"I already lived there for two years, and I'm not going back."

Kara didn't say anything. She gave Hail a striking look of insolence.

"OK," Hail said like he couldn't give a damn. "I just thought you and I could start developing some trust between us. You already know everything there is to know about me. You even know my wife, my kids their names and when they were killed. You probably even know when they were born. But I don't know anything about you except for the fact that you have some skeletons in the closet that keep trying to escape. Your fear of flying. Your joining the CIA and being made to do things you hate doing. There is a pressure building up inside you Miss Ramey, and it takes every minute of your day to keep from exploding. I can't trust a person like that with all I have built. At some point, you'll have to level with me, or you need to get off my boat."

"Ship," Kara corrected.

"Ship," Hail agreed.

Kara finished her glass of sake and poured each of them another.

The waiter arrived with dishes of food. Some hot and some not. He placed them in front of the silent couple.

"If you need anything else, you know what to do," the man said before heading back to the kitchen.

Kara picked up some ivory-looking chopsticks from her place setting. She began lightly poking at the sushi on her plate.

Hail watched her and waited. He knew she was trying to decide if she would give it up. It was a big decision. Either she had to level with him, or she would be asked to leave.

"My parents were killed in The Five," she told Hail almost in a whisper.

Hail was shaken by her confession. He'd expected something bad, like she was raped or molested as a youngster or maybe something even worse if there was such a thing. But he didn't expect what she had just told him. Every time, without fail, when someone told them they lost someone in The Five, it badly rattled him.

"And worse than that," Kara continued solemnly, "they left me everything but nothing."

Kara looked up at Hail, and he saw tears forming in her eyes.

She looked lost, like a child who had gotten on the wrong bus and was heading out of town.

“I’m sorry,” Hail offered, but it felt as if he had said nothing. I’m sorry didn’t really mean a thing. It was just something people said. Something that was expected to be said.

Kara ignored the sentiment and said, “I mean they were rich, and now I’m rich, but only in money. In everything else that matters, I’m dirt poor. All my life I had someone taking care of me. I learned to do nothing on my own. Did you ever see the movie, *Arthur*?”

“Yeah,” Hail said softly.

“Well, I feel just like that dumb drunk. The only difference was that Arthur was happy being a rich dumb drunk, and I’m not. I want to make a difference. Just like you. I want to find out who killed my parents. Not just what group killed them; I want to find the son of a bitch that pulled the trigger on the 9K333 Verba Russian-made missile. And then once I find him, I want to shove the hardened tip of that 9K333 Verba right up his ass and pull the trigger. Does that sound harsh, demented or unstable to you, Mr. Hail?”

Hail looked at her. Her eyes were still wet, but her rage was drying them out fast.

“That may be the sanest thing I’ve heard you say since you got on my ship,” Hail said.

Kara sniffed and dabbed the edge of her napkin under each eye. She then reached down and picked up her glass and drank another slug of sake.

“So that’s why you work for the CIA?” Hail asked.

“That’s why I became a CIA agent. I dropped out of college and joined the agency in hopes that I could find my parents’ killer and bring them to justice. Again, the same as you.”

“I didn’t drop out of school,” Hail said, trying to keep the subject light.

“Yeah, I know. You had already graduated. An MIT whiz-kid that became a kazillionaire.”

Hail said nothing.

“What plane were your parents killed on?” Hail asked after a minute or two.

“Mexico,” Kara said sadly.

Hail had no response.

Kara continued talking as if she were talking to herself. “It was around the time when Mexico changed their laws and allowed foreigners to outright own properties within the restricted zones,” Kara explained. “It was a boom for the lagging real estate business in America. My mom, being a super real estate queen, took advantage of the new law and was making a killing representing rich Americans who wanted to buy cheap Mexican land and houses. The money was just rolling in. She really didn’t need to work, but she loved it.”

Kara stopped talking and looked at Hail. He looked interested so she continued.

“My mom traveled all over Mexico during the time as my dad’s medical practice was winding down. He was getting close to early retirement, so he spent a lot of time in Mexico with my mom.”

Kara tilted the little glass and drained the rest of the sake into her mouth.

“So, did all their money go to you?” Hail asked. “Are you a kazillionaire as well?”

“Money, houses, cars, boats; lots of stuff that requires up-keep and payments and all the things that I don’t care about. I’m not sure how much we’re talking about. A kazillionaire sounds about right.”

“I understand,” Hail said.

Kara turned her head and looked out the window at China, or wherever it was that this video was taken.

She said softly, “It could have been any plane. I don’t know off the top of my head how many planes fly out of Mexico every day, but it has to be hundreds. My folks were unlucky enough to be on American Airlines 264 flying out of Mexico City on that day.”

Kara paused, turned back around and tried to drain even more drops out of her empty glass. She set it back on the table. She looked down at the wonderful food and realized she had lost her appetite. She reached for the bottle of sake and then changed her mind and drank a sip from her water glass instead.

She asked rhetorically, “What are the chances of that? You know. It was only five planes out of more than 100,000 flights per day worldwide, but they just happened to be on one of those five. Go figure.”

Kara looked at Hail. She thought he looked sadder than she felt at that moment.

“I’m sure you feel the same way,” she said in a sympathetic tone.

“Yeah, I do,” Hail said.

“Don’t worry about our date tonight,” she said. “I’ll pay for dinner. Can I borrow some Hail dollars from you?”

Hail laughed.

ACT III

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE FISHING TRAWLER, *HUAN YUE*

Dingbang Wang was as happy as a captain of a smelly dirty Chinese fishing trawler could be. He hated fishing, and during the last few years he hadn't been required to do that horrible job.

Dingbang felt truly blessed to be the captain of a smelly fishing trawler. After all, he had been born into abject poverty and raised in one of the poorest areas in southwest China, the mountainous Guizhou province. The only child of a peasant farmer, as far back as Dingbang could remember, he had worked to eat. If they couldn't grow it, then he didn't eat. Potatoes, potatoes, potatoes for breakfast, lunch and dinner. His mother had died when he was five during the birth of his brother. His unnamed brother had also died still trapped inside his mother. When Dingbang turned sixteen years old, his father contracted a staph infection from a mosquito bite he had been scratching. His father had died two months later after being covered in pus-bloated sores that had gone untreated. With no family left, Dingbang felt he had no reason to stay in his landlocked prison. He collected a bag of personal items, a bag of potatoes and eventually made his way south to the city of Zhanjiang.

Before he ever saw it, he could smell the ocean—the South China Sea. It was wonderful. He had never seen or smelled or swam in anything like it. And instead of potatoes, it was possible to throw a fishing line into the sea and pull out a fish. Being accustomed to hard work, before long, Dingbang found himself a job working as a common laborer on a fishing boat. It was wonderful. He had never eaten so much food in his life. Thousands of pounds of fish were hauled in each day, and he could eat as much as he wanted. Many of the fish were the wrong kind, and the captain would want to throw them out, but Dingbang would have them set aside so he could eat them later.

The young Chinese man from the mountains of Guizhou loved fishing. He loved being on the boat. Dingbang loved it every year of his life, until one year he liked it a little less. And the next year, even a little less. And that trend had continued as he worked his way from laborer, to a fisherman working the nets, to the first mate of a boat, and then finally to captain. By the time he had become the captain of the *Huan Yue*, he hated everything about fishing.

Dingbang also hated the men he worked with. They were young and from the city and had never been forced to work as hard as he had. They didn't appreciate having a regular meal. They thought that they deserved more and looked down on Dingbang Wang and his humble background.

A few even made fun of his name because it rhymed. He had tried to explain that both his first and last names were the ten most common names in China, but they harassed him about it, nonetheless.

Most men who were around fish all day became accustomed to the smell. But as he became less enchanted with the business, he started to hate the smell of fish. The rotting smell of the dock and the fish tanks on board and the bait—it all made his stomach turn.

The only thing he really liked these days was his boss. The current owner of the *Huan Yue* had changed his life.

Years ago, around the time Dingbang had turned fifty years old, his boss had told him to bring the *Huan Yue* into the docks at Shenzhen. While in dry dock, several men worked on the *Huan Yue* with cutting torches and grinders. He watched as a big crane lifted a massive piece of the *Huan Yue's* deck off his ship. It had been cut free by the men with the torches and the grinders. The big piece of deck that they removed had covered the ship's massive main holding tank. That piece of metal was then replaced with a tank cover that rolled open and closed on rails. He had never seen anything like it before. In the wheelhouse, Dingbang could flip a switch and the huge cover would roll open, leaving a massive hole in the middle of the deck that looked straight down into the cavernous holding tank. At the time, it didn't make any sense to him. With no watertight hatches to hold in the water or the baffles that were removed from the tank, there was no way that it would ever function as a fish holding tank. And it never did. After the new tank cover had been installed, some other men had come onto his boat and had very skillfully painted the new rolling cover so it looked just like the old deck that had been removed. They painted the entire tank cover using colors that looked old to Dingbang. They even painted on fake watertight hatches using rusty hues and dirty tones. When he was standing on the deck, it was very apparent that his false deck was a painted illusion. But he assumed that the owner of the ship was more interested in what the eyes in the sky saw and not what the people on the ground saw.

Since the day his ship was modified, Dingbang's life was much improved. Other than occasionally dipping his nets into the water for effect, his boss had turned his boat into a cargo vessel. It still looked just like a fishing vessel, but it didn't act like one. Almost always in the middle of the night, something that he wasn't allowed to know about was loaded into the *Huan Yue's* main tank cargo hold.

Sometimes it was many little items, bundled and wrapped together, creating a few large and heavy items. Sometimes it was a massive box or a crate or even large pieces of metal of varying shapes and sizes. Sometimes the crates and boxes had scary markings on them. Markings that even uneducated fishermen like Dingbang understood meant danger.

After the cargo had been loaded, he would be sent a message on his new complicated encrypted radio instructing him where to drop off the cargo. Most of

the time, the *Huan Yue* was sent to a port in North Korea. The younger men who worked on his ship all hated the North Koreans. They complained that the North Koreans were scum and evil and many other bad things. Dingbang actually felt more like a North Korean than he did Chinese. Most of the North Koreans were dirt poor, hungry, and if they knew any better they would escape their long-suffering country to seek a better life. That was essentially a summary of his early life.

And Dingbang thought that the Chinese people were just a bunch of hypocrites anyway. North Korea depended on China for everything: energy, food, military equipment and China delivered it all dutifully for one primary reason. If the North Korean government broke down, then there would be a mass exodus from North Korea. And all those poor and ugly North Korean refugees would head across the border and into China. That would wreak havoc on the precarious Chinese economy. And if the Chinese economy failed, then there was a good chance that the entire Chinese communist government would fall as well.

Those North Koreans that Dingbang had met, during the times when he dropped off cargo or picked up cargo, were nice enough. Most of them, those with money, asked if he could give them a ride to anywhere but North Korea. The owner of the *Huan Yue* had made it very clear to Dingbang that he wasn't allowed to ever transport people or make his own deals.

He was being paid very handsomely not to fish, and he couldn't be happier. He was paid to take non-smelly things to other countries, and he really didn't care what they were. It's not as if anyone was ever going to stop him. Most of the time, his trawler was traversing the Sea of Japan, the East China Sea or the South China Sea. The Chinese were not going to stop him. The Japanese were not going to stop a Chinese fishing ship. The Americans, even though Dingbang was told they were always watching him from the air, certainly were not going to try to board a Chinese boat.

So Dingbang, happy Dingbang, would never do anything to jeopardize his new and wonderful existence. If his boss told him to go pick up a huge metal cylinder in an obscure port in Russia and drop it off at the port of Wonsan in North Korea, he would be more than happy to oblige.

He never wanted to go back to fishing nets, hauling smelly fish, loading and unloading the wretched mass of seafood in and out of his boat.

Now he could sit back and relax and listen to the water and the clanking of the rigging and the occasional cry of an angry seagull that was very unhappy that his fishing ship had no fish to steal.

Dingbang reached over and turned off all the running lights on his boat. If eyes were watching him from above, then he would have just disappeared into the blackness of the ocean surrounding him. Of course, this was dangerous, so Dingbang flipped on the autopilot and activated the ship's collision warning system.

If a ship got too close to him, then the collision system would sound a warning and wake him up. He could then steer around it.

Dingbang leaned back in his captain's chair and closed his eyes. An hour of sleep would feel good, since in a few hours he would be docked in Wonsan. There was no telling how long it would take to get the hunk of metal off his ship. Sometimes the North Koreans moved quickly. On other nights, they moved like they were scared of the dark.

As Dingbang drifted off to sleep, he heard the sound of the rigging slapping against the poles. But he never heard the tiny drone that gently touched down and attached itself with rare earth neodymium magnets to the roof of his wheelhouse.

PONGCH'UN-DONG, NORTH KOREA—BOAT DOCK

A little north of the heart of the city of Wonsan, Victor Kornev and Trang Won Dong, watched the fishing trawler emerge from the darkness of the East Sea. Both men noted that the *Huan Yue* was running with no navigation lights, per their instructions. The large boat maneuvered slowly into a ring of light thrown down from a sodium vapor lamp mounted on a pole at the end of the concrete dock. Sitting on the dock behind them was a lowboy trailer. The substantial truck that was pulling the trailer had a large crane attached to its bed.

“How much does it weigh?” Trang asked Kornev in poor English.

“About thirteen tons,” Kornev replied.

He looked surprised. He turned and looked at the truck’s crane behind them.

“Are you sure that can lift it?” he asked.

Kornev didn’t say anything but just nodded his head.

The evening was hot and humid, and Kornev was dressed from head-to-toe in black clothing.

He turned to look at the man next to him.

The minister of state security for North Korea was wearing his country’s traditional grey military uniform. Both the right and left lapels of the older man’s uniform were studded with a mishmash of emblems and medals that held no meaning to Kornev. He was sure that Trang Won Dong had done nothing to earn them other than surviving long enough to put on the uniform. He wore a ridiculously large military hat. It was similar to an American military hat, but for some reason, the area between the visor and the top was comically enlarged. Victor thought that the hat resembled a giant mushroom. The hat made the small man look like a real-life bobblehead that could be placed on a car’s dashboard. He perspired profusely under the thick material, and Kornev wondered why he didn’t remove a few layers; even just the jacket. But the little man didn’t seem to mind or even notice the heat.

Kornev looked away from the smiling politician and back toward the boat that had just come to rest on the side of the dock. A few Chinese men from the *Huan Yue* tossed thick ropes to the North Korean soldiers that he had brought with him. The soldiers tied off the boat, and Kornev heard the ship’s engines power down. The *Huan Yue*’s Captain gave a wave to the North Koreans from inside the wheelhouse. Kornev didn’t return the wave, but the minister did with a single crisp military flip of his hand.

Kornev and Trang Wong Dong walked over to the *Huan Yue*. Kornev looked up at Dingbang and made a twirling signal with his index finger. Dingbang flipped a

switch inside the wheelhouse, and with a piercing screech of metal and a loud KATHUNK, the deck cover on the *Huan Yue* began to slowly retract.

Kornev saw the second stage of the Russian-made R-29RMU Sineva ICBM come into view. The only thing it meant to him was money. Lots of money. This was one of the last shipments to arrive, and it would fulfill the multimillion-dollar deal he had made with the North Korean leaders.

But to Trang Won Dong, this missile section that was nestled in the hold of this ship, as well as all the others that had been successfully unloaded and taken to the warehouse, meant power. More power to him since he had taken over the deal after the demise of Kim Yong Chang. More power for his country, which meant increased power for his esteemed leader.

As the ship's deck cover reached the end of its rails, the hum of the electric motor pulling it open clicked off. The night became very silent again.

Both Trang and Kornev looked into the hold of the ship. And then almost by habit, Kornev looked up. Not up at the stars in the clear night sky, but up at the invisible planes, drones or satellites that might be looking down at them at that exact moment. Kornev knew that the chance of that was remote, especially from that distance, but for some reason, he still felt eyes staring at them.

Maybe it was just his natural sense of survival, but Kornev thought it was more than that. He scanned the buildings and docks and hills around them. His gut told him they were being watched by *someone*.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

“‘W’e’ve got eyes on them,” Alex Knox reported. Renner was sitting in the big Captain Kirk’s chair in the mission control center. He looked at the video on the big monitor being streamed from the drone code-named *Electric Light Orchestra*, *ELO*, for short. Since there was only one drone being manned, that meant that the rest of the crew in the room could also turn their attention to the monitor.

The video was not high quality. The lack of light and the distances involved were difficult for the tiny camera on *ELO* to negotiate. Before they had released the drone to be flown into action, Eric Rugmon had warned Hail that the tiny lens only let in a minute amount of light. That meant that night operations would be a challenge. It was a good thing to know, but both men understood they really didn’t have much of a choice.

“So, we have a military looking guy and a mafia looking guy dressed all in black standing on the dock,” Renner said to the room. “And in the background, we have a big truck with a big crane and long and low trailer. Well, this looks like what we expected. The next thing they should do is pull the missile part out of the boat and set it on that trailer.”

A rumbling of agreement went around the room.

The crew on the *Hail Nucleus* watched the truck start backing up, bringing both the crane and the trailer closer to the boat.

“How is our power on *ELO*?” Hail asked Knox.

“Good. We’re around 91 percent.”

There was a loud clanging sound of steel against steel, and the door to the mission control room opened.

Marshall Hail walked in with Kara Ramey.

Renner looked somewhat disappointed. He had been fully in charge of the mission to drop *ELO* onto the top of the *Huan Yue*, and he was getting used to being in charge.

Renner slid out of the big chair and greeted Hail with a handshake and Kara with a smile.

Kara looked around the room.

“What do you think?” Renner asked.

“Why does this look so familiar?” she asked, making a slow 360-degree turn.

“Did you ever see the TV show *Star Trek*?” Hail asked.

“Yes, a long time ago. Is this the captain’s chair from *Star Trek*?” she asked, touching the armrest of the huge chair.

“Yes, it is,” Hail confirmed. “Well, an updated copy of it.”

“Why *Star Trek*?” Kara asked, turning to look at Hail and Renner.

“Why not?” Hail responded with a shrug. “It’s got to look like something, and I always loved watching *Star Trek* when I was growing up, so voilà, you have the *Star Trek* bridge.”

Kara looked both impressed and confused.

Hail explained, “Kara, we’re not the military. See, look at how everyone is dressed,” he said, swinging his finger in a wide arc around the room.

Kara looked at the Asian woman to her far right. She recognized her as Shana Tran, mission communication analyst she had met earlier in the meeting. She was dressed in a colorful skirt and high heels. She smiled at Kara, and Kara nodded her head in greeting.

Kara continued to scan the rest of the crew working at their control stations.

Seated next to the fashionable Shana, in her twenties, was a teenage boy with long and clean brown hair that glistened in the dim light. He was wearing shorts and a black hoody jacket. He was intently watching his screens and paying no attention to her.

Sitting behind the most outer circle of flight stations was an inner circle of computer stations. At two of the stations sat a distinguished-looking man and a dark-haired woman. She recognized the man as the French scholar she had met, Pierce Mercier. The woman was smiling and waving at her in a childlike fashion. Kara didn’t recognize her and knew nothing about her, but she seemed friendly enough. Kara returned the wave. Pierce Mercier stood up from his station and walked over.

“Good evening Ms. Ramey,” he said, collecting her hand in his and softly kissing her knuckles.

Kara said, “Bonne soirée à vous aussi, M. Mercier.” (*Good evening to you too, Mr. Mercier*)

Mercier asked, “Etes-vous ici pour le spectacle ou la nourriture?” (*Are you here for the show or for the food?*)

Kara laughed and said, “Les deux.” (*Both*)

Mercier smiled and released her hand.

Hail, Mercier and Renner watched Kara complete her visual tour of their mission center.

“Wow, this is crazy,” was her final assessment. She said it with no emotion. It was more a statement than an observation.

Kara looked up at the big screen above the control stations and said, “Oh my God. That’s Kornev,” she exclaimed, pointing her finger at the big blond-haired man standing next to the N. Korean who looked like an Asian toy soldier.

Hail looked up at the monitor and asked, “Are you sure?”

Kara nodded her head and said, “It’s not the best video quality, but that’s Kornev beyond a doubt.”

Hail studied the image closely. He watched the two men who were watching the big truck’s crane swing out over the deck of the ship.

“What’s our distance?” He asked Renner.

“No, no,” Renner told his friend. “I know what you are thinking, but we can’t do that. At least not right now.”

Kara didn’t initially understand what Renner was referring to, and all of a sudden, she got it.

“No way,” she said loudly. “We can’t take him out now. It will screw up the entire plan.”

Hail looked like a boy who had a toy taken away from him.

“I know,” Hail said innocently. “I was just wondering what our current distance was, that’s all.”

But he knew that they knew what he was thinking. Hail was hoping that the men at the dock were within range of the *Hail Nucleus’* railgun. *Probably not, but it never hurt to ask.*

The big man in black and the little man in the grey uniform were talking.

“I wonder what they’re saying.” Hail said.

“Oh, I can tell you,” Kara replied.

She watched the Russian and North Korean intently for a moment.

“Kornev is saying that as soon as the parts have arrived, he is expecting to get paid. And the North Korean is saying that as soon as all the parts are assembled, North Korea is going to turn America into a nuclear waste dump.”

Hail looked impressed.

“Really?” He asked. “You can read lips?”

“Of course not,” Kara said bluntly. “It’s a Russian mobster and a North Korean terrorist. What else would they be talking about? They sure aren’t discussing the game between the Dallas Cowboys and the New England Patriots.”

Hail felt foolish. Exactly how Kara wanted him to feel.

“All right, let’s get to work, folks,” Hail announced.

Renner and Mercier went back to their stations, and Hail climbed into his big chair. That left Kara standing next to Hail in the middle of the room, clutching her purse.

“I can get you a chair, do you want to sit?” Hail asked.

“No, I like standing. Sitting makes your ass flat,” Kara said.

Hail wondered if she was joking, but Kara’s expression gave nothing away.

“Well, we certainly wouldn’t want that,” Hail said.

Kara watched the video for a few minutes before turning toward Hail and saying, “I think I should call my boss and give him an update.”

“Sure,” Hail told her.

Kara took the phone out of her purse and dialed a number. A moment later, she told Hail, “I don’t have a signal.”

“Of course, you don’t,” Hail said. “You’re in a big metal box. How do you think a signal is going to get out of here?”

Hail reached into his pants pocket, took out his phone and handed it to her.

“Use mine,” he said. “It’s patched through the ship’s Wi-Fi to the satellite.”

Kara took the phone from him.

“Can I get that done to my phone?” she asked.

“You need to get permission from your boss,” Hail told her. “I’m sure he wouldn’t want us messing around with your phone without his permission.” Although Hail knew they had already messed around with it.

“You can still use your phone without us messing with it. You just need to be on the deck so it can get a clear signal to our cell tower uplink,” Hail added.

Kara dialed a number, and it was answered in two rings.

“This is Pepper.”

“This is Kara,” she said.

“Are you on Hail’s phone again?” he asked.

“Affirmative,” she said.

“Am I on the speaker?” Pepper asked.

“No, but I am standing next to Mr. Hail. Thus, we are on the record, so to speak.”

“Understood,” Pepper responded.

Kara said, “I wanted to let you know that I’m watching a live video feed of the dock at Wonsan.”

“Really?” Pepper said, sounding impressed.

“I’m also looking at Victor Kornev, and it looks like the new Minister of State Security, Trang Won Dong.”

Hail listened for something of interest, but so far, he hadn’t heard anything.

Pepper asked, “How are you able to see the dock and the men?”

Kara looked at Hail and asked him, “He wants to know how we can see them.”

“Tell him that we dropped a drone down on top of the *Huan Yue*, and it is streaming the video to us.”

Kara repeated what Hail had told her.

“You have to be kidding me,” Pepper said. “How can a drone be sitting on top of the ship and not be seen?”

“The drone was designed to look like one of the navigation lights on the wheelhouse of the *Huan Yue*,” Kara told Pepper.

There was a pause and then Pepper asked, “Can you get a moment of privacy so we can talk?”

Kara turned to ask Hail, “Do you mind if I talk to my boss privately for a minute?”

“Make it quick,” Hail replied. “I’ve used up almost all of my long-distance minutes.”

Kara gave him a funny look and Hail said, “It’s a billionaire joke. It really goes over great in the Indonesian comedy clubs, trust me.”

Kara stepped away from Hail and began talking to Pepper.

“What’s the plan?” Hail asked Renner.

Renner reached out and grabbed his mouse. A cursor appeared on the big screen, superimposed over the video.

Renner explained, “What we want to do is release the magnets and fly the drone over to this truck and set down right here on top of the cab.”

Renner moved the mouse until the cursor was hovering atop the big truck’s roof.

Renner continued, “I think the best time would be when they start lifting the missile section out of the hold of the ship. That way, everyone’s attention will be on the cargo, and no one will be looking at either the front of the ship or the front of the truck.”

“That makes sense to me,” Hail said. “It looks like they’re almost ready to start the lift.”

The truck’s crane was fully extended and pointing down into the cargo hold of the *Huan Yue*. A bright light was mounted on the boom-arm of the crane pointing

down at the ship's deck, leaving the rest of the ship and surrounding area in relative darkness.

The video swayed to the left and then back to the right as the boat began to lean one way and then the other.

"They're making the lift," Renner announced.

"Retract the magnets," Hail told Knox.

"Pulling up the magnets," Knox confirmed. "We're loose."

Kara appeared to Hail's right and handed him his phone.

"Thanks," she said.

"You're welcome," Hail said politely.

"Do we have a good line of sight to the truck?" Hail asked his crew. "Are there any wires, telephone poles or any other obstructions?"

"No. We're clear," Knox said.

"All right then," Hail said. "No time like the present."

"What are you doing?" Kara asked.

"You'll see," Hail said.

"Spinning up," Knox reported, and then the video began to move.

Kara thought it appeared the *Huan Yue* was getting higher as if being raised by a massive wave. And then she realized that the camera was flying. The video tilted to the right, and Kara reached out and steadied herself by grabbing the armrest of Hail's chair.

"Nice and smooth arc," Hail told Knox. "Keep *ELO* in the dark as much as possible."

"Will do," Knox confirmed.

"What is *ELO*?" Kara asked.

"*Electric Light Orchestra*," Renner answered. "We name each of the drones, so we can keep them straight when we are flying more than one at a time."

"That's kind of a long name," Kara said.

"That's why we call it *ELO*," Hail told her.

"Coming in for a landing," Knox said, making small corrections on his flight controls.

The top of the truck's cab was an insignificant white rectangle in the middle of the video frame. But as the small drone approached, the landing zone became larger and larger until it filled the entire field of view. For a moment, all anyone could see was the dull white top of the truck. And then the camera jerked to the right and became still.

“We’re down,” Knox said. “Engaging the magnets.”

Knox made another adjustment and the camera tilted upwards toward the front of the truck. The monitor showed nothing but a dark and thick misty haze.

“Let’s turn the camera around 180 degrees,” Hail told Knox.

“Roger that,” Knox said, pressing a button on his pistol grip hand controller and twisting the handle to his right. The fuzzy dark image began to brighten as the camera rotated from the darkness and came to rest pointed at the lit *Huan Yue*. As the light flooded into the lens, the chip in the camera had something to work with and quickly sharpened the image. A clear image of the crane came into view. A massive cylinder wrapped in white plastic was hanging from the crane by several thick cables.

From this new perspective, Kornev and Kim Wong Dong’s backs were now facing the camera.

Hail watched the men for a moment and waited to see if there was any sign that they had spotted the drone. Five minutes later, Hail said, “And it would appear that we were successful again.”

Hail looked at Mercier.

“As for the dismal statistics of success that you mentioned during our planning mission—” Hail said to the Frenchman.

“We have not completed the ride to where they are storing the part yet,” Mercier protested in his thick French accent.

“That wasn’t part of your statistics. You said that we couldn’t get the drone on the boat. I even threw in getting the drone off the boat and onto the truck. Now you’re saying that your crappy statistics included getting the drone to the delivery point?”

“It always did,” Mercier said with a smile.

“Bull,” Hail told him.

Kara spoke up and said, “I think it’s amazing that you guys got this far, regardless of statistics.”

“Just good old American engineering,” Hail said.

Hail leaned forward in his big chair and rubbed the back of his neck. He then reached behind and rubbed his lower back, wincing at the pain.

“Are you ready for that workout now?” Kara asked, watching forty-year-old Hail act more like a sixty-year-old man.

“I’m ready,” Hail said. “Be gentle.”

“Yeah, like that’s going to happen,” Kara mocked.

Marshall Hail left the mission center and went up to his stateroom to change. He pulled on some workout clothes. He glanced at the mirror and thought to himself, “Man, you have really let yourself go.” He grabbed a few inches of belly fat and tried to puff out his chest to compensate for the bulge, but his effort made his stomach stick out another two inches. He sighed and left his cabin.

* * *

En route to the ship’s gym, Hail made a short detour and badged himself into the ship’s security center. Dallas, Taylor and Lex were all on duty.

Taylor was flying *Queen*, the ship’s security drone in a twenty-mile radius above the *Hail Nucleus*.

Lex was monitoring the ship’s sonar and radar for perceived threats.

Dallas had on headphones and was listening intently to something, so lost in concentration that he didn’t even notice Hail walk into the room. Hail tapped him on the shoulder.

Dallas looked up, pressed the PAUSE button on his screen and swiveled his chair around so he could talk to his boss.

“What did she say while she was using my phone talking to her CIA boss?” Hail asked.

Dallas shook his head and made a confused face.

“It’s pure gibberish,” he said. “I don’t know what the hell they were saying.”

Before Hail could ask him what he meant, Dallas said, “Here you go. Give this a listen.”

Dallas pressed an icon to pipe the sound of the recording over the security center’s speakers. He then pressed the PLAY icon.

“Zipadub zubadap sub zub zipzapadub zipadadadub zubub.”

Dallas let the recording drone on with Kara saying the nonsensical words. When she had completed a phrase, the reply would be issued by a mechanical voice that was talking in the same crazy manner.

After a moment or two, Dallas paused the recording and said to Hail, “What do you think about that?”

“That’s crazy. What do you think is going on?”

Dallas shook his head.

“It’s a language of some sort. I think we should have Alba listen to it. After all, she is our analyst in charge of language communications. Maybe she would have a clue.”

“But what’s that weird voice responding to Kara? It doesn’t sound human.”

“I don’t think it is,” Dallas agreed. “I think it’s an application of some sort that instantly translates what she has said to Pepper.”

“So, you think that Kara knows this language, but whoever responds to her replies in English mechanically translates the reply back into the weird language that Kara understands?”

“That would be my best guess,” Dallas said.

“Very interesting,” Hail said. “Every time I think I’ve seen all the dimensions of Ms. Ramey, she shows me another facet.”

“And she has some great dimensions, if you don’t mind my saying,” Dallas proclaimed.

“No arguments there,” Hail confirmed.

Hail thought for a moment and said, “Have Alba listen to it to see what she thinks. I have to go work out with her right now. It would be nice if I could ask her about it, but then I would have to start the conversation by saying, ‘So, I was listening to the phone call you had with your boss that we secretly recorded—’”

“Yeah, that could be a problem,” Dallas agreed.

“Besides Kara and her language skills, how is the Sea of Japan looking today? All quiet?”

“So far, so good. All the Asian countries are behaving themselves today.”

“That’s good news,” Hail said. “I will be in the gym if you need me.”

“Don’t have a heart attack,” Dallas quipped with a smile.

“No guarantees,” Hail said as he left the room.

* * *

The gym was on the other side of the ship, and Hail was winded by the time he got to his workout. He felt that was probably a bad sign.

Kara was already running on a treadmill, watching a TV monitor mounted to the front of the machine. A wire led from the TV to a pair of earbuds that were stuck into her ears. She didn’t notice Hail when he walked in, but Hail noticed her. Kara was dressed in black yoga pants that hugged her perfect rump like dark skin. At her thin waist, where her yoga pants ended, a patch of porcelain white skin covered up her hard abs until they disappeared under a silver bra made from spandex. At least to Hail it looked like a bra, but it was probably some sort of exercise top. Whatever the hell it was, Hail approved. The woman looked stunning. Her crazy curves bounced and jiggled seductively as she ran. Her red hair flew out behind her, being blown by

two fans built into the control panel of the treadmill. Kara was glistening with perspiration, and her face was flushed with a healthy pink hue.

Hail walked up and stepped onto the treadmill that was next to her. Kara saw him from the corner of her eye and pulled out her ear plugs with a single yank of the wire.

Hail said hello, and Kara pressed the pause button on her treadmill and it came to a slow stop.

“So, what did you think?”

“What did I think of what?”

Kara looked bemused. She smiled knowingly at Hail and said, “Come on, Marshall. Keep in mind that I’m a CIA agent. So, if I were in your shoes, the very first thing I would have done before I came down here was stop and see your techno-nerds and have them play back the recording of me talking to my boss.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Hail said, doing his best to act surprised and somewhat insulted.

“Really? That’s the trust you want to nurture between us?” Kara said, shaking her head disapprovingly at him.

Hail thought about it for a moment, gave in and said, “What kind of language is that?”

Kara smiled like she had won a small battle and said, “I call it Zub-a-dub language.”

Hail pressed the slow button on his treadmill. His machine came to life, and Hail started walking.

Kara pressed the slow button and then the up arrow until her belt was moving twice as fast as Hail’s. Kara started walking.

“What is Zub-a-dub language?” Hail asked, already knowing the answer would be as confusing as the language.

Kara smiled and increased her treadmill to a slow run. “Now, why would I tell you that? Obviously, it’s a language I can use to talk to my boss when you are secretly recording my conversations.”

“I thought we were trying to build trust,” Hail said, sounding hurt.

Kara smiled. She enjoyed this chess game.

“I’m going to tell you about Zub-a-dub only because it’s nothing that you can research or figure out. It’s not like the Navajo language they used in the Second World War that totally baffled the Germans.”

“And why is that?”

“Because I made it up,” Kara said with pride.

“You made up a language?” Hail asked skeptically.

“Yep. When I was a little girl I made up Zub-a-dub.”

Hail didn't know how to respond. He was going to ask if that was a common thing for little girls to do, but before he was put on the spot, Kara added, “As you already know, I've always had a knack for languages. Even back when I was little, they were fun. I played around with some of the common gibberish languages like Pig Latin and Ubbi dubbi, but they bored me. So, one day, I decided to make up my own language. It was like Ubbi dubbi, but instead of substituting sounds into words, I made up a unique word in Zub-a-dub that matched thousands of English words.”

“That would hurt my brain,” Hail said. “Who did you talk your new language with?”

“I don't think that was a sentence in any language,” Kara stated.

“OK. I will rephrase. Whom did you find to converse with in your new language?”

Kara laughed, but it was somewhat sad and hollow.

“I spoke it with my maid,” she said it like it was a confession and something to be ashamed of. “She didn't speak English very well, and I didn't speak Spanish very well, so we came together on Zub-a-dub. We would have fun talking about my parents behind their backs, literally. My maid was kind of like my best friend for a while.”

Kara paused for a second and added, “How sad is that?”

Hail didn't want to get sucked in too deep into Kara's personal life, so he asked, “So you taught Pepper this Zub-a-dub language?”

“Not hardly,” Kara said. “If you haven't noticed, Pepper is pretty much a doorknob. It would take him ten years to learn Zub-a-dub, if at all.”

“So how was he able to reply to you?”

“I worked with the CIA programmers to create an app for Pepper's phone that works like SIRI for the iPhone. I say something in Zub-a-dub, and it then translates it for Pepper. He then says something in English, and it speaks his phrases back to me in Zub-a-dub.”

“That's what we figured, but we didn't know you had invented the language,” Hail said.

“That's why I'm telling you all this. See, you could keep recording me and put together a team of encryption experts. They would then start to decipher the language by breaking all the words apart. After hundreds of recordings and thousands of man-hours, in about a year you might be able to hash out the language, but why would you waste all that time? I will be gone in a few days.”

“You will?” Hail asked.

“Whenever this operation is over, won’t I?”

“I don’t know,” Hail said honestly. “I’m not even sure what defines ‘the end of the operation’. Would that be when I’m done blowing up missile parts? Or is it when I rid the earth of all the leaders of terrorist organizations?”

“Good point,” Kara said.

Hail pressed the up arrow on his treadmill and transitioned into a fast walk.

Kara pressed the up arrow on her treadmill and began a medium run.

Hail looked at Kara, and she looked back at him and smiled, as if to say, “You will never catch me.”

Hail had never met a woman like Kara Ramey. Or was it that he had never met anyone like Kara Ramey that he was interested in. Was he interested in her? Because as far as he was concerned, she wasn’t his type. Hail’s type was a woman in crisis. A dependent female that needed him more than she loved him. Marshall, to the rescue. And for some irrational reason, he found solace in that type of partnership. But even though he sensed that she was damaged goods, her trauma had not undone her. In fact, it appeared that she had become emboldened by her pain, and it had given her a renewed purpose in life. Kara had emerged from her tragedy and had become reincarnated as some sort of CIA badass. And even though it went against all of Hail’s nurturing instincts, he found the independent Ramey invigorating and exciting. Who knows, maybe Hail had also emerged from his own tragedy as a different person? A better person? That was subjective. Only God could make that judgement, but for some strange reason he cared what Kara thought of him.

“After we get some good air moving through you, we’re going to start with some sit-ups and see if we can shrink that tire around your waist,” Kara said, letting out phrases between breaths.

Hail looked hurt.

Kara saw Hail’s puppy dog expression and said, “I mean it’s not bad. Maybe thirty extra pounds, but you can burn that off in a few weeks, easy.”

Hail was breathing hard and hadn’t even approached running speed.

The phone in his pocket went off, and he pressed pause on the treadmill. Once the machine had come to a complete stop, he let go of the handrails and removed his phone. He put it up to his ear.

“What’s up, Gage?”

Kara kept her machine running and kept herself running but watched Hail take the call.

“OK,” was all Hail said, but his body language told Kara that something was up.

Hail clicked off his phone and reached over to Kara’s treadmill and pressed the STOP button.

“What’s up?” Kara asked.

“The truck is pulling into a warehouse off the Pyongyang–Wonsan Highway. We’ve got to go now.”

Kara grabbed her phone, a towel and some water. Hail draped a towel over his shoulder. They left the gym and quickly made their way through the ship’s corridors back to the mission control center.

* * *

“Nice outfit,” Gage Renner told Hail sarcastically as he entered the room.

Then he looked at Kara Ramey in her workout clothes and said, “*Nice outfit*,” and he meant it.

Gage relinquished the captain’s chair to Hail and moved over to his own control station.

Hail sat down and asked Kara if she would like a chair.

“No, I like standing.”

“Oh, that’s right. It was something about your flat ass, wasn’t it?” Hail recalled.

Kara flipped him the bird.

Only the principals in the room were in attendance: Gage Renner, Alex Knox, Shana Tran and Pierce Mercier. Hail figured that Alba Zorn, their language specialist, was currently pulling her hair out trying to make sense of Kara’s Zub-a-dub recording.

Hail looked up at the large screen. The view from inside the warehouse was clear and bright. The drone sitting on the roof of the truck provided an elevated vantage point.

“Can you please do a slow 180-degree pan with the camera, so I can get a sense of the place?” Hail asked Knox.

“Sure thing,” Knox replied and began panning the camera clockwise very slowly.

The front of the truck was pointing toward the back of the warehouse. Hail estimated the building was about twenty yards deep. Crates upon crates were stacked thirty feet in the air. The ceiling above the crates was probably another ten feet higher. An aisle between the crates, wide enough to accommodate a small forklift, had been left in order to move stuff around.

“Hold there for a moment,” Hail asked. “Good. Now point the camera up in the rafters, so we can find a place to park the drone.”

Knox adjusted the camera so it was pointing toward the ceiling of the warehouse.

“Looks like it’s a galvanized roof, 18-gauge maybe, laid across the top of steel beams,” Renner commented. “It’s not insulated, so we should be able to find some good magnetic spots to land the drone.”

“Is galvanized a ferrous metal?” Hail asked.

“Galvanized isn’t a metal at all,” Pierce Mercier said. “That roof is a thin sheet of steel that has been galvanized in zinc. Zinc is nonferrous, but it’s such a thin coat that the magnets on the drone should still be able to stick to the steel beneath the zinc.”

Hail and his crew continued to watch the video, realizing every minute they watched, the drone’s battery power was draining.

“Man, this place is packed,” Hail said, as the camera zoomed back and continued to make a 360-degree pan.

Kara said, “This has to be one of the last pieces to arrive. They don’t have any more space left.”

“Unless they have more than one warehouse,” Hail suggested.

“How many missiles are they buying?” Renner asked.

“Three,” Kara said.

“I’m no missile expert, but right there,” Hail said, pointing his finger at some large cylindrical pieces to the left, “are six separate stages. Keep going with the camera, and let’s see what’s on the other side of the truck.”

As Knox rotated the camera around, their view was temporarily blocked by the backside of the crane’s boom already being positioned to lift the huge missile part off the truck.

“Keep going,” Hail instructed.

Three men in North Korean uniforms came into view. Each soldier held a thick piece of chain and were busily connecting the links to the missile section on the trailer.

“Right there—stop,” Hail said. “I see one more missile stage on the ground, right there at the bottom left of the frame.”

The group looked at where Hail was pointing.

“So that means that one more stage has yet to arrive,” Kara said.

“Would that last piece do them any good if all these stages were already blown up?” Hail asked.

“No,” Kara said, “Unless they want to make it into a big hot tub or something.”

The truck’s suspension groaned and rocked to one side as the crane hefted the metallic cylinder off the trailer and slung it out to the left. The camera tilted slightly as the load was being lowered to the ground.

“Now’s the time to get flying,” Gage reminded Hail. “Everyone’s eyes are on the cargo.”

Hail sat a little straighter in his chair.

“Unlock *Black Eyed Peas (BEP)* and fly it up to the rafters,” Hail told Knox.

“Roger that,” Knox said, reaching over and bringing up a screen that read INTERLOCK ON.

Knox moved the graphic slider to the OFF position and said, “*Black Eyed Peas* is loose and we are spinning up in three, two, one.”

The view from the drone’s camera rose as the matte black drone lifted off from the center of the yellow ring, leaving the outer ring with the outer drone still stuck to the top of the truck.

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” Kara said. “I thought the drone was called *ELO*?”

Hail shook his head.

Without taking his eyes off the big screen, he explained, “We actually landed two drones on the *Huan Yue*. The outer drone—the drone that looks like a round yellow reflector light—is called *ELO*. It’s a communications drone. It has a camera for navigation, but it doesn’t support audio. That would be too much combined weight. Inside the ring called *ELO* is another drone called *Black Eyed Peas*. The inner drone is the surveillance drone. It supports both video and audio, and it is used exclusively for observation. The outer drone functions as the satellite uplink drone.”

“I don’t get it,” Kara said. “Why do we need two drones?”

“Look at the video,” Hail said, pointing to the big screen. “Right now, those big warehouse doors are open, and we can communicate pretty well with the drones via satellite. But when those doors close, we need to switch *Black Eyed Peas*’ communications from satellite to Wi-Fi communications. Even inside the warehouse with the doors closed, *Black Eyed Peas* will be able to pick-up the Wi-Fi signal being sent from *ELO*. So, when the truck leaves the warehouse, we’ll fly *ELO* off the top of the truck and land it on top of the warehouse. Once it’s up there, it will receive a strong satellite signal. It will then convert those signals to Wi-Fi and network in with *BEP*.”

“BEEP?” Kara asked.

“*Black Eyed Peas*,” Hail told her.

“Of course. What was I thinking?”

Hail watched the ceiling of the warehouse get closer and closer. He could make out a bird’s nest about three feet away that was resting on the steel girder they had selected.

“You guys really have all this stuff figured out,” Kara said, without a trace of sarcasm in her tone.

“I’d like to think so,” Hail said. “We put a lot of time and money into these designs.”

Knox hovered BEP over the beam and turned the drone on its axis 180 degrees so it was pointing toward the front of the warehouse. Shooting down at a forty-five-degree angle, the video provided a clear view of the front of the truck. Lying on each side of the truck were the stored missile sections. Behind the truck, the warehouse doors were open and beyond that was pitch darkness. The crew in the mission center could all clearly see the yellow light ring called *ELO* that was still sitting in on the truck’s roof, lost in an array of other yellow lights and red reflectors that peppered the vehicle.

“What do you think about setting *BEP* down here?” Knox asked Hail.

“That bird’s nest is pretty close, and there appears to be a bird in it. What do you think, Pierce? Is that thing a woodpecker or something? Is it going to mess with us?”

Knox brought the camera around and zoomed it in on the bird. The medium sized bird had a narrow black head with white stripes running down its side. It had a black, sharp beak, and Hail guessed it could probably do some damage to the drone if it hammered its little feathery face on it.

Pierce Mercier looked closely at the bird and said, “It’s a Korean magpie or Oriental magpie (*Pica pica serica*), known as *kekachi* in Korean. It is a smaller bird with a—”

“We don’t need an ornithology lesson right now, Pierce. Is it going to peck on us, or isn’t it?”

“No,” Mercier said, sounding disappointed that he couldn’t provide a full report.

“Set BEP down,” Hail said, “and be sure to touch down on the edge of the beam so we can point the camera down and see the floor.”

The camera swayed from side to side for a moment. A second later, the video stream became fixed and focused as if the camera had been set on a tripod.

“We’re down,” Knox reported.

“What’s our power reserve?” Hail asked.

Knox looked up the information.

“We have about forty percent battery left on *BEP*.”

“So, taking into account the energy used to communicate with the Wi-Fi, that would give us about four hours of video streaming,” Hail estimated.

Knox flipped to another screen.

“Three hours and thirty-seven minutes,” Knox corrected.

“And if we need to move to another location, then how much flight time does that give us?”

“About six minutes, give or take,” Knox said.

“What about comms, Shana?” Hail asked Tran, their communications expert.

“Wi-Fi signal is strong between the drones, but the satellite signal to *ELO* is degraded because it is semi-indoors. But that’s to be expected.”

“How much flight time do we have left on *ELO*?” Hail asked Renner.

Renner checked and said, “We have about four minutes of flight time. But what concerns me more is that we only have about two hours of power to facilitate the communications between the satellite and BEP. When *ELO*’s reserves are gone, both drones will go black. We won’t be able to communicate with either of them.”

Hail told Knox, “Record a video for me. I want a quick 360-degree pan of the entire warehouse and then put *BEP* to sleep. Copy that recording to my NAS so I can review it later.”

“Will do,” Knox said.

Hail told his crew, “Let’s focus on getting *ELO* out of the warehouse and onto the roof. I want to put that kid to bed to save its power.”

Renner said, pointing at the big screen, “Looks like the Koreans are done with the lift. They’re removing the chains from the crane. I hope they aren’t going to leave the truck there overnight.”

“We’ll see in a minute,” Hail said.

A minute came and went and then another. And another.

“What are they waiting for?” Kara asked.

“I don’t know. I’m sure the truck driver can hardly wait to get home to his starving family,” Hail said.

Kara didn’t look amused, although Renner and Knox did.

Overall, Hail was happy with his joke.

The truck driver, a small man with a dirty baseball cap, was standing patiently by his truck door, smoking nervously and looking at the ground.

A minute later, Trang Won Dong, walked over to hand the man what looked like money. The man bowed several times and then climbed into his truck.

“Looks like he was waiting to get paid,” Kara said.

“It’s go time,” Hail said.

“Knox, are you ready?” he asked his pilot.

“Yes, sir,” Knox replied. “*ELO*’s flight systems are online. We’re good to go.”

The truck shook and the video vibrated as the engine kicked over. A dark puff of smoke came out of the dirty exhaust stack to the right of *ELO*. With no microphone built into the drone, it was like watching a silent movie.

“The truck is moving,” Renner said.

With *BEP* shut down and its video screen black, the only video in the mission center was sent by *ELO*. Its camera was pointing toward the back of the truck. The crane had been lowered, stowed and was no longer obscuring the view from the rear. The warehouse doors were wide open, and it looked as if the truck was backing into a murky abyss.

Hail glanced over at Kara standing next to him. She watched the video like Hail suspected she watched surveillance videos at the CIA office. All of her concentration was focused on it. Somehow, she looked even prettier when she was focused.

“The truck is out of the warehouse,” Renner reported.

The drone’s sensitive light detector chip transitioned into night mode. In order to let in as much light as possible, the camera lens opened to its full extent. A night-enhancement software kicked in and sharpened the image further, turning blobs of black and white into lamp poles, security lights and bright lights on top of the truck.

“If there’s no one around, then let’s get this thing in the air,” Hail instructed.

Thirty yards from the warehouse, the truck driver placed the truck into first gear, began to make a wide swooping turn through the dirt lot and headed for the front gate.

“Retracting the magnets,” Knox said. “OK, we’re loose. Taking off in three, two, one and liftoff.”

Watching the video rise and then sway to the right messed with Kara’s equilibrium. She reached over and balanced herself using Hail’s right shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she told Hail, but she didn’t remove her hand.

“No problem,” Hail responded, somewhat surprised that he found her touch comforting.

Hail understood the drone had only four minutes of power for flight and still had to use its remaining power to facilitate communications with *BEP*, so he told Knox, “No fancy stuff. There are no trees around so just get it on the roof and stick it somewhere. Flight time is power we can’t afford right now.”

“You got it,” Knox said, angling for a security light mounted on the corner of the warehouse. Knox pulled the flight controller to the right and throttled up the drone. He made his approach from the warehouse’s east side. *ELO* swung over a barbed wire fence and darted back in, gaining altitude as it flew.

“We have burned thirty seconds,” Renner warned.

A football field of sheet metal appeared under the drone, and Knox tilted the leading edge of the drone into the air to create a stall and shed speed. Once the drone had transitioned into a hover state, Knox eased off the power and lowered the drone atop the warehouse's roof.

"We're down," Knox said. "Lowering the magnets."

"Great job," Hail told everyone, but most of the praise went to Knox. "Put *ELO* to sleep to conserve power."

Renner asked Kara, "Do you have any idea how much time we have before the North Koreans move all this stuff to another location?"

Kara removed her hand from Hail's shoulder and said, "None at all. It could be days. It could be an hour from now. We don't know where their assembly facility is located."

Hail got up and walked toward the door.

"I would like to meet with the mission planning crew in the conference room in twenty minutes," he announced.

Kara followed Hail into the hall and closed the door. Hail began walking, and she matched his strides.

"Am I invited to the mission planning session?" she asked.

"Absolutely. The first thing we need you to do is to contact your people and get some aerial shots of the warehouse, so we can get a lay of the land. We need to find the most isolated area to land the drones."

"Can't you do a flyover in one of your drones to get those shots?" Kara asked.

"We can, but it's risky for us. In the daylight with slow-moving drones, we might take the risk if we were planning the mission a month from now. However, time isn't on our side, and we don't want to do anything that will spook the North Koreans. If they see the drone, they'll move the missile stash—maybe even underground. That would be a much harder target. Don't you guys have satellites that can snap a few photos for us?"

"Yes, we do, and I'll check with Pepper to see if he can take the photos at first light, weather permitting. Of course, if it's overcast it would be a no-go."

They reached a door that read SHIP SECURITY.

Hail stopped to look to Kara. "I also want to know how long Kornev will be at the warehouse. Any information you can provide will be greatly appreciated."

Kara hesitated for a beat.

"You said *us*, but you really mean *you*, don't you?" Kara asked disapprovingly. "I told you that Kornev is not part of this mission. I have not been given the clearance to remove him. He is currently a valuable conduit of information for the CIA."

Hail looked annoyed.

“Last time I checked, I don’t work for the CIA. Therefore, I don’t need permission to kill this piece of garbage. It’s not like he’s a protected American citizen.”

“You’re working for the CIA right now,” Kara shot back. “This is a CIA mission that you agreed to execute.”

“Execute—I like the sound of that. Let’s get down to some executing. Blowing up missile parts is not an execution, but killing Kornev is. You think that he sold the missiles to The Five terrorists, so he’s an asshole that needs to go.”

Kara looked like she was ready to spit fire.

“You need to get over yourself, Mr. Hail. You think you’re untouchable, but you are sitting in the middle of the Sea of Japan on a frickin cargo ship. Don’t you understand that military assets could take you out at any time?”

“They wouldn’t do that unless they were idiots. We’re currently carrying thousands of tons of nuclear waste. Do you have any idea what a cataclysmic environmental disaster that would cause? Let’s consider that for a moment.”

Hail stopped talking and thought for a second how best to frame his point.

Kara primed herself for whatever he was going to say.

Then Hail surprised her by asking, “Have you ever heard of Sado Island?”

“No, is there something special about it?” she asked irritably.

“Not unless you’re visiting one of its beautiful beaches, such as Nyuzaki, Tassha, Sawata, Sobama or Mano-Shinmachi to name a few. It’s a stunning Japanese island in the Sea of Japan. Sink the *Hail Nucleus* and a thousand years from now everyone will be saying, remember how beautiful Sado Island was before it became a barren moonscape of rock and sand. Sink the *Hail Nucleus* in the Sea of Japan and the list of countries that no longer have beach access would include Japan, North Korea, South Korea, China and Taiwan. The Russians wouldn’t be that happy either. The positive side is hardly any Russians live in that part of their country. None of them are swimming in the Sea of Okhotsk since its average summer temperature is about 50°F. What do you think those countries will do to the country that causes such a catastrophe?”

“Let me ask you this,” Kara responded austerely. “You used the word *country*, as in, what do you think those countries will do to the *country* that causes such a catastrophe?” Kara punched the word *country* in her sentence.

Continuing, she asked, “But what if it’s not a *country* that sinks the *Hail Nucleus*? What if it is a terrorist organization sinks the *Hail Nucleus*?”

“What are you implying?” Hail asked, his confusion diffusing his anger.

“You may not know this, but you are doing this mission for both the CIA and yourself. After all, terrorists love to cause disasters, and they don’t care much about

the environment. North Korea doesn't seem to care about much and are more of a terror organization than a country. If North Korea is successful with their missile program, they could easily blow your ship out of the water with conventional missiles and cause maybe even more destruction than if they had nukes strapped to them. After all, your cargo is nastier than any nuclear bomb. The *Hail Nucleus* is a terrorist's wet dream!"

Hail looked as if he had been slapped in the face.

This woman made him irate. And the flip side was that she also made him kind of happy. It felt like a young marriage.

Hail turned his back on Kara and faced the door of the security center. He swiped his badge across the sensor and opened the door. Before entering, he turned back around and asked, "How would you like to swim home?"

He then slammed the door. He left a fuming Kara Ramey with the clang of metal ringing in her ears.

* _ * _ *

The wind felt good on her face. She surfaced on the top deck around midship and began walking toward the bow of the *Hail Nucleus*. The air was warm and the night was heavy with humidity. A thick iron railing was to her left and past that there was nothing but the ocean. On her right were huge cylindrical containers of nuclear waste, each the size of a truck and painted white like innocent-looking storage tanks. They were seated and latched into cylindrical slots on the deck, like a beer can being placed into a holder on its side. Kara surmised that the containers and the matching slots on deck were designed before the ship was ever built. The massive slots in the deck were too substantial to have been an afterthought or a retrofit conversion. Part 'A' was designed to go into slot 'B'. The ship designers had then determined how many slots they could pack onto the deck and still leave room for the pool.

As she walked along the railing, she was troubled by the natural beauty and calmness of the dark sea to her left, in comparison to the unnatural and hideous toxic slurry contained no more than ten feet to her right. She inadvertently rubbed her arm, wiping off any imaginary radioactive contaminants that might have leaked out and stuck to her. She knew it was silly, but the feeling that she may be walking through invisible radioactive clouds was hard to shake. Hail was right when he had told her that someone would be crazy to bomb the *Hail Nucleus*. There were literally mountains of nuclear sludge onboard. And Kara was also right when she had told him that his ship was a terrorist's wet dream. She suspected the *Hail Nucleus* had some defenses against those who would want to sink or board her. She just hoped they wouldn't be enough if her agency was the one assigned to do that job. Kara

shuddered at that thought. This wasn't the calming walk in fresh air she had thought it would be. But she was there for work, not for pleasure.

As she neared the bow of the boat, she pulled up short and stepped in between some containers to remove her phone from her pocket. She typed in her password and brought up an app that uplinked to a secure communications satellite that was floating several miles above her.

The app took a moment to find the elusive satellite. It made a little *ding* sound when the uplink had connected. Kara dialed the number for her boss. She had no numbers stored on her phone. In her line of work, her phone could be liberated from her at any time. The first lesson in Spy School 101 was to keep your phone clean. No numbers. No history. Nothing that could provide an adversary information if the phone were confiscated.

The phone made a peculiar ringing sound, as if it were an echo of a ringing sound. The echo sounded four times before the phone was answered.

"Hi, Kara, this is Jarret."

"Hi, Jarret. How are things back at the ranch?"

"Fine, but the president is waiting on an update. I've got you on speaker right now, and I also have Paul Moore, the Director of Operations, and Karen Wesley, the Director of Analysis, in the room in case they need to ask you some questions or vice versa."

"Understood," Kara said.

There was a moment of silence while Pepper decided on how to kick off the call.

"First of all, I see you are calling on your own phone. Is that correct?"

"Affirmative," Kara replied.

"And do you feel that your phone is secure and that you are not being surveilled?"

"I do," Kara responded confidently. "Hail gave me back my phone and told me that I could use the ship's communication channels if I proxy through their gateway or connect to their cell repeater on deck. But right now, I'm on the ship's deck and connected directly to our satellite, so I believe we're clean."

"Very good," Pepper said. "Can you please provide us a mission summary?"

"I'm on the *Hail Nucleus* somewhere in the Sea of Japan. As you know, it is a cargo ship that's carrying tons of nuclear waste, destination unknown. Pertaining to the mission directly, Hail's crew was successful in flying in a drone, correction, two drones, and dropping them onto the *Huan Yue*. The *Huan Yue* then docked in the city of Wonsan, North Korea. Via the drone's camera, we then watched the center section of a Russian R-29RMU Sineva unloaded from the *Huan Yue* and onto a lowboy trailer. The trailer was then driven out of the city and exited a few miles off

the Pyongyang–Wonsan Highway. It drove three miles down a dirt road to a secluded warehouse. I will text you the exact coordinates of the warehouse. At that point, a surveillance drone was positioned inside the warehouse. I watched a live video feed of the missile stage being unloaded from the trailer. Based on observation, it would appear that almost all parts have arrived at the warehouse. There still appears to be one missile stage missing.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“Hello?” Kara said.

“We’re here. We were just waiting to see if you had more to report,” Pepper said.

Kara said, “I’m expected to be present in a mission meeting that started about ten minutes ago. I’m assuming that Hail’s plan to destroy the missiles will be finalized in this meeting.”

“Are there any complications thus far?” Pepper asked.

Kara thought about this for a moment, sifting through information relevant to the staff within the CIA conference room. Except for Hail’s constant insistence on killing Victor Kornev, there really hadn’t been any complications. But what did that have to do with the CIA? She was pretty sure she could convince Pepper to give the order to kill Kornev, but she didn’t want him dead. She wanted Kornev alive. She wanted information from the man. She wanted to know who had shot down her parents’ plane. Marshall Hail was proving to be short sighted. He really didn’t care who had pulled the trigger. He simply wanted to annihilate all the figureheads that had told their jihadis to pull the triggers.

Kara wanted—no—Kara needed to look the man in the eyes who had pulled the trigger of the surface-to-air missile that had wrecked her life. A reasonable Kara Ramey would realize there was a good chance the shooter could already be dead. After all, he was in a very dangerous line of work. The terrorist could have died a number of ways with disease and starvation at the top of the list. But for some strange reason, she felt that the man was still alive—still out there living while so many of his victims’ families were dying inside. And Kara also assumed that the shooter was a man. For no other reason than women in that region were so marginalized that the only reasonable person would be a man.

“Are you there, Kara?” Pepper asked.

“Yeah, I’m here, she said.

“*The only thing I have to report is that Hail is a pompous, power-hungry ass,*” but she didn’t say that. She simply said, “Nothing else to report.”

Pepper asked, “Can you hold for a minute?”

Before Kara could say, “Sure,” she was already listening to elevator music.

Her confrontation with Marshall Hail had upset her more than she had anticipated. And that was a strange emotion because she was the amazing Kara Ramey, master manipulator of all things created male. But there was something about Marshall Hail that was different than the other men she had mastered, and she couldn't put her finger on it. He was rich, but most of her assignments had been wealthy. Poor men didn't have much power. Therefore, they were inconsequential when it came to big world stuff. Most rich men were powerful. Either that or they had inherited their wealth which made them rich, powerful and lazy. Hail wasn't bad looking, but he was no twenty-nine-year-old male model, so that wasn't it. Hail was indeed powerful. In order to build his business, he had achieved a great many dominant and influential actions to get where he had ended up. But that in itself didn't carry any weight with Kara.

She thought about it and decided the trait in Marshall Hail that attracted her was his love for his deceased family and his crew who had become his friends. It had been so long since she had witnessed a man who could show unabated love for someone that she doubted if a man like that still existed in the world. She knew her father had loved her, but she had yet to witness that emotion firsthand in another man. Hail loved people. But the dark side of the man also hated people. It was a tarnished spot on a silver soul. Kara knew why that dull spot was ensconced in the man, because she had the exact same tarnished areas that could no longer reflect light. Her dark spots devoured evil. They actually wanted to touch evil before killing it, and she found it ugly. It wasn't her choice and inescapable. Thus, she could see her reflection each time she peered deeply into Hail's eyes. She was right there on the surface right next to him. They were so different and still so similar.

"We're back, Kara," Pepper said. Kara brushed her red hair away from her face and put the phone closer to her ear. The ship must have changed direction. The spot between the containers she had chosen to escape the wind was no longer working.

She said, "I'm here," as she walked deeper into the maze of containment vessels.

Pepper said, "After discussing the situation, our question is, do you have any idea how Hail is going to destroy the missiles?"

"None," Kara said honestly. "But I guess I will know that answer after the meeting I'm missing right now."

"Do you need anything from us?" Pepper asked.

"Yes, I do. Hail asked me to request satellite photos of the warehouse. We need them quickly. If you can get them at first light and then e-mail them to myself and Hail, we can then use them to determine the LZ for the final approach on the target."

"Understood," Pepper said. "Are you OK?"

"Affirmative."

“All right, text the warehouse coordinates, and we will get busy. Good luck,” Pepper told her.

Kara clicked off and pulled up a text message that she had already composed which contained the warehouse coordinates.

She clicked SEND and watched the message hourglass for a moment as it disappeared and flew through the air on its way to Pepper. She returned her phone to her pocket and walked to the ship’s railing.

The night was beautiful. Kara let out a breath and then breathed in the ocean’s scent. Somewhere in the dark, she heard the distant chatter of porpoises as they played and socialized. At least something was happy on this sultry night. She took in another deep breath and held it like it was her last. She let it out slowly, releasing all her frustrations out into the nothingness that lay before her for hundreds of miles.

* *_*

Hail heard the door to the conference room open, and from the corner of his eye he saw Kara walk into the meeting.

Renner was talking.

“So, the only thing we have left to figure out is how to get into the warehouse.”

Kara walked up to the conference table and nudged in next to Hail. Almost everyone was standing in close and studying still photos of the inside of the warehouse that had apparently been snipped from the video that *BEP* had taken hours ago.

“Hi, Kara,” Renner said.

Hail said nothing. He continued to study the photos, paying no attention to the CIA woman.

“Hi, Gage. Hi, Marshall,” she said purposely.

Hail turned to look at her briefly and said, “Oh, hi,” and turned back to the photos.

Lifting her mouth up toward Hail’s ear, speaking with just enough volume for only Hail to hear, she asked, “Are you still grumpy?”

Hail continued to ignore her.

Two white coats were present at the meeting; Eric Rugmon, their drone designer, and Terry Garber, Hail’s lab manager. Pierce Mercier stood quietly and patiently, knowing that his value to the meeting involved weather and nature. Therefore, at this moment he was simply a spectator. Shana Tran was the only person seated. She wasn’t looking at the photos. She was looking at her long red

fingernails. Kara was sure that if Shana had a nail file on her, she would have been perfecting her pretty nails in front of everyone.

“Does anyone have any ideas on how to access the warehouse?” Hail asked his team.

“I think in order to frame that answer, we need to define some operational parameters,” Renner suggested.

“I would agree with that,” Hail said. “I think the first parameter is silence; however, if we intend to breach the warehouse, it has to be silent. We can’t alert the guards and have them run in and start blasting away with gunfire.”

“Agreed,” Renner said.

Renner asked Kara, “Are we getting those overhead shots of the warehouse from your agency in the morning?”

“Yes, we are,” Kara said. “They will be e-mailed to Marshall and me as soon as they are acquired.”

Hail said, “To move forward with our planning, we have to assume there is a spot we can touch down within two hundred yards or else our math won’t work.”

“I agree,” Renner said. “So, our two mission parameters are two hundred yards out and we must stay silent.”

“Is that all?” Hail asked.

Pierce Mercier offered, “Another parameter is WHEN. You need a date and time when you plan to breach the warehouse. I need to know so I can check the weather and visibility and other factors.”

Shana Tran looked over the top of her extended fingernails and added, “All those weather factors can affect the satellite transmission and communications, so they are important to me as well.”

Hail summarized the input of the others.

“All right, well the date and time will be determined by other factors as well. The first factor is the time it will take to fabricate the drone that will breach the warehouse. As you all know, we currently don’t have anything like that in our inventory. We could always blow a hole in the side of the building, but that’s not quiet. The first thing we need to figure out is how to get into the warehouse.”

There was a lull in the meeting while everyone considered the problem.

Renner broke the silence by saying, “I don’t see any way that we can open the doors, so our only other option is to cut a hole in the building.”

“Is that practical?” Hail asked.

“Practical or not, I don’t see any other choice. I think we need to fly a drone in next to the building, set it down on the ground and then create a hole large enough in the side of the warehouse for our purposes.”

“How thick do you think the steel is?” Hail asked Renner.

“It is 18-gauge, maybe 16-gauge. That would be about a sixteenth of an inch thick. Not very substantial.”

“We could hook up a cutter grinder to the arm of a drone,” Eric Rugmon suggested. He made a box in the air with his finger while doing calculations in his head. “I estimate the drone could probably have about an eighteen-inch reach both horizontally and vertically.”

“That would give us a hole in the metal about a foot and a half square,” Renner said, using his hands to demonstrate the size one way and then the other.

Hail shook his head, shooting down the idea with, “It’s too loud. Can you imagine the reverberation through the sheet metal structure once the cutting wheel started in on it? The guards would have to be dead not to hear it.”

“That’s another possibility,” Renner said. “If we kill the guards then—”

“What about a laser?” Kara said. “I mean a laser is quiet and could cut through thin metal, couldn’t it?”

Everyone turned and looked at Kara.

Kara looked back at the blank faces that were staring at her.

“What?” she asked defensively.

Hail said, “We do science, not science fiction.”

Kara looked hurt and embarrassed.

“Well nobody else was coming up with anything,” she shot back.

“That’s because we haven’t had a chance to think it all out,” Hail said.

Kara wanted to tell them all to go screw themselves, but she sucked it up and kept her cool.

“I’m sure if you thought about it for a moment, you would figure out why a laser would not be possible,” Hail told her.

Nobody spoke.

Kara already knew it was a stupid idea as soon as the word *laser* left her mouth. But there were no second chances with this bunch of techno-nerds. If you said something stupid, it appeared that you were going to get called out.

“Not enough power,” she answered indignantly.

“Correct,” Hail confirmed.

Kara looked indifferently at Hail as if she had never met him before. She wished she had a nail file so she could passively work on her nails or stick it into Hail’s arm. Both seemed like a good use of a nail file.

Hail looked away from Kara and back at the others and asked, “What about a torch?”

The others thought about it for a moment.

“It’s pretty quiet,” Renner said, “but two possible issues come to mind. First, it will be bright, especially if we decide to go in at night. Second, high pressure oxy-fuel tanks weigh a lot. Flying them in will take a lot of power.”

“Not necessarily,” Rugmon said. “If we calculate the exact burn time that is required to cut the hole, we could use lightweight miniature aluminum tanks. Once the cut was done, we could release the leftover fuel and fly the drone back out.”

“Is that possible?” Hail asked.

“I need to run the math, but off the top of my head I believe the tanks would be within the lifting range of our mini-drone,” Rugmon said.

“Sounds good to me,” Hail said. “Gage, are you good with that?”

“So far it’s the best of our options. It will be awfully bright when we’re cutting, but if we cut on the backside of the building, and no guards are walking the perimeter, then it could work.”

“I’m good with that,” Hail said. “Eric, how long would it take for your team to modify a mini-drone with that configuration?”

“We could have it done in twelve hours, give or take,” Rugmon said boastfully.

Hail looked at the photos on the table and tried to think if there was anything he had missed. Not coming up with any items of consequence, he said, “OK, let’s turn our attention to the explosives.”

Terry Garber came to life like a robot that had just been activated. A moment ago, she was passive and introverted. She now smiled and waited for input.

Hail asked her, “What type of explosives do you think we should use to destroy the missile sections?”

“I think we should use a cyclotrimethylenetrinitramine-based explosive,” Garber said.

“Oh, here we go,” Renner said, rolling his eyes.

Hail laughed and said, “Terry, I know you get off on saying those long chemical words, but how about you cut that down for us non-laboratory folks.”

“OK,” the little woman said snobbishly, “How about we shorten that to nitroamine?”

“How about you shorten it to RDX?” Renner suggested. “Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Basically,” Garber said, but it was apparent she wasn’t very happy with just those three letters.

“So, will RDX do the trick?” Hail asked Garber.

“Generally speaking, it will do a good job if you stick a wad of it against a large crate of parts,” the woman said. “But it won’t be effective in destroying the thick metal missile stages without some special work.”

The laboratory woman stopped talking. Everyone waited for her to expand on her thought. When it became apparent that she wasn’t going to clarify her last statement without being prompted, Hail decided to drop another quarter into the robot and get her talking again.

“What type of special work would you need to do?” he asked.

Terry smiled and said, “The cyclotrimethylenetrinitramine needs to be molded into a shaped charge.” She gave Renner a look.

“Is that a problem?” Renner asked.

Before the woman could answer, Kara asked, “What’s a shaped charge?”

The little woman beamed with vitality, as if she had been waiting all her life for that particular question.

Before Hail or Renner could stop her, she began with, “A shaped charge is known as the Munroe effect, named after Charles E. Munroe, who discovered it in 1888. It’s the science of focusing the blast energy by cutting a hollow or void cut on the surface of an explosive.”

Terry stopped and looked at Hail.

“Go on,” Hail told her, knowing how much enjoyment she was getting out of this.

“The most common of the linear-shaped charge is conical, with an internal apex angle of 40 to 90 degrees. Different apex angles yield different distributions of jet mass and velocity. Small apex angles can result in jet bifurcation, or even in the failure of the jet to form at all, if you can believe that,” she laughed knowingly, “and this is attributed to the collapse velocity being above a certain threshold, normally slightly higher than—”

“OK,” Hail interrupted. “That’s enough.”

The woman stopped talking and looked as if something very valuable was yanked from her grasp.

“I’m sorry,” Hail said, softening his tone. “But we’re short on time. Terry, I hope you understand.”

The woman said nothing.

Hail explained to Kara, “In a nutshell, if you cut a V-shaped notch into a block of RDX, and then place the RDX on a thick slab of metal, when it blows up it will cut the metal in half.”

“Oh,” Kara said, content with Hail’s explanation.

Renner told the group, “So it’s important to keep track of the shaped charges and the non-shaped charges, because the shaped charges need to be used only on the missile sections.”

“Correct,” Garber said.

“Am I correct in assuming outfitting this mission with both types of charges will not be an issue in a twelve-hour time frame?” Hail asked Garber.

“It will not be an issue,” Garber said, making sure she kept her responses short and succinct.

Hail looked back down at the photos, not because they were of any interest to him any longer, but the tranquil bland images helped him to clear his mind. He appeared to study the photos with such intensity that his crew began to look at them again believing they had missed something.

A minute later, Hail looked up and said, “I can’t think of anything else. We need to have a quick meeting in the morning when we get the aerial photos of the warehouse. Those images will enable us to determine the final landing zone coordinates. But other than that, I think we’re ready to go.”

“I must have missed something,” Kara said. “How are you going to get the explosives into the warehouse?”

“We already discussed that,” Rugmon told her. “Remember, you were late to the meeting.”

Kara thought that Rugmon might send her to the principal’s office for being late to class.

“That’s OK,” Hail said, defusing the situation. “I’ll update you later on that. But right now, we need to agree on a time of the attack.”

Hail let the question float around the room for a moment before suggesting, “What about 3:00AM tomorrow morning?”

“I’ll check the weather,” Mercier said.

“I’ll check on the availability of the satellite,” Tran said.

“We should have all the drones flight-ready by that time,” Rugmon confirmed.

“Explosives will be ready before that time,” Garber said, one-upping Rugmon.

Renner smiled, “I think we are a go.”

“I think so too,” Hail agreed.

“Let’s do this thing,” Hail said. “Gage, please meet with the pilots. Each needs to be assigned a specific task. If we have time, we should run this solution in the simulator and see if the weight, power and flight time make sense.”

“I agree,” Renner said.

“OK, let’s get to work,” Hail said.

The meeting broke up, and the crew began heading for the door.

“Gage, can I speak to you for a minute?” Hail asked.

Kara was not heading out, remaining quietly next to Hail.

“Privately,” he added, giving Kara the not so subtle hint to leave.

“Sorry,” Kara said, and she turned to leave the room.

Hail walked across the room and closed the conference room door behind her.

“What’s up?” Renner asked.

“You tell me. What did Kara talk about with her CIA buddies when she was up on deck?”

“It was pretty straightforward,” Renner said. “She gave them a rundown on all of our mission activities since we left Indonesia.”

“If you understood her, am I correct in assuming she wasn’t talking in her Zap-dee language or whatever she calls it?”

“No, but then it didn’t sound like she was telling them anything she wouldn’t want us to know about. Like I said, it was just the facts.”

Hail rubbed his chin. He stood in the middle of the room shaking his head slightly from side to side.

“Why is it that I just don’t trust her? Is that a *me* thing, or do you feel it as well?”

Renner laughed, “That’s one of my faults, Marshall. You should know that I always trust beautiful women, no matter who they work for. I don’t think I’m the right guy to ask.”

“Big help you are,” Hail told his friend.

“I think you have some feelings for the woman. That’s what I think,” Renner said, patting Hail lightly on his back.

“No way,” Hail said, but somewhere hidden inside his brain were a few rogue cells that didn’t believe his own words.

“Right,” Renner said, his voice so mushy with sarcasm that they both started laughing.

WONSAN, NORTH KOREA—WAREHOUSE

The wooden chairs in the office of the warehouse were hard and unforgiving on Victor Kornev's tailbone. He looked at Trang Won Dong, sitting across from him. The man appeared to be quite happy with the chairs as well as his surroundings.

The office was hot, and the only relief came from a single fan that was sitting on the desk making squeaky passes as it oscillated back and forth. Dong seemed ambivalent to the heat. In a more civilized nation, what would have been called a coffee table was actually a small crate that occupied space between the wooden chairs and the desk. On the crate sat an assortment of tasty North Korean dishes. A large container of snakehead fish stew appeared to be the main entree. A bowl of rice and a smaller bowl of fermented cabbage were the side items. A jug of murky water that had specs of silver in it (maybe fish scales) was the nonchilled beverage.

The North Korean bureaucrat appeared to be comfortable. The chairs didn't seem to bother him one bit. And as he reached over the crate and began to help himself to dinner, Kornev realized that the North Korean was accustomed to it. Accustomed to everything. He was used to the heat. Content with the hard chairs. Pleased with the disgusting food. This hot, hard office was no more out of the norm for Trang than it was for Kornev to eat Russian chilled soups based on kvass, such as tyurya and okroshka. Or even pelmeni, a traditional Russian dish usually made with minced meat filling wrapped in thin dough.

Even so, Kornev couldn't wait to get out of there. After the last stage of the missile arrived and he got paid, it would be a quick ride over to the Wonsan Airport. From there, Dong would escort Kornev to a nondescript cargo plane, and he would get the hell out of this bizarre country.

Through a mouth full of food, the minister of state security asked Kornev in Korean, "When will the last stage of the missile arrive?"

The problem with that question was that Kornev didn't know. The route the last missile segment was taking was the most complicated. It entered North Korea at the mouth of the Taedong River, south of Nampo. From there it would continue its route up the narrowing Taedong, past the city of Pyongyang until it reached the fork of the Nam-gang River. At that point, the cargo would be transferred to a smaller ship or barge, and then it would slowly meander its way up the twisting Nam-gang River until it reached the town of Sinpyong. The river voyage would then be over, and the cargo would be transferred to a truck and trailer and then driven fifty kilometers along the Pyongyang-Wonsan Highway until it reached the warehouse.

Kornev was an expert at moving contraband by using many different types of routes and vehicles. But North Korea was a communication nightmare unto itself.

The biggest problem was that cellphone service in North Korea was horrible, and it always had been. Going back to 2011, no mobile phones could dial in or out of the country, and there were no Internet connections. Ninety-four percent of the population had cellphones, yet only fourteen percent of the country had cellphone coverage. That made it difficult to carry out a sensitive and specialized job, like buying and selling weapons. Kornev could handle all the complicated methods of moving materials into North Korea. The spotty cellphone service made it a bitch to monitor the progress of shipments once they had entered North Korean borders.

Kornev dialed the number he had listed for the driver of the diesel rig that was hauling the last missile part. He held his phone high in the air in hopes that the single bar on his phone would become two bars. He pressed the button to activate the speaker on his phone, so Trang Won Dong could hear the voice of whoever answered.

A prerecorded Korean voice came on the line and said, “The party you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please try again at another time or leave a message.”

Kornev listened and shook his head toward Trang. “I have a signal, but the truck driver does not,” Kornev said in his best Korean. He ended the call.

Trang nodded his head in understanding and shoved another spoonful of snakehead fish stew into his mouth.

Victor thought that he looked very happy sitting there eating his Korean crap, sitting on a wooden chair and baking in the office oven. Kornev thought about leaving to drive into Wonsan and maybe get a room at their best establishment, the Dongmyong Hotel. But that was a lot of effort to stay in a hotel that lacked maintenance and only intermittent electricity to power their elevators. But if you caught it on a good electricity day, you might even get to take a hot shower. Victor had been there once before and remembered the smell of the lobby was so bad he had to apply tiger balm to his upper lip to neutralize it. He could find the hotel’s restaurant without a problem by looking for the highest density of flies.

Trang chewed with his mouth open, smacking his lips, making disgusting gooey sounds with his mouth. Kornev groaned slightly as he leaned forward and stretched his back. His ass felt like hamburger. He was tired and wanted to sleep. He was hungry and didn’t want to die by eating what was sitting on the crate. He just wanted the last missile part to arrive, so he could get his bag of diamonds and get the hell out of North Korea.

His mind drifted back to his hotel stay in Nizhny Novgorod, Russia—at the beautiful Volna Hotel. And he also thought about the beautiful Tonya Merkalov he had met. He closed his eyes and imagined lying there in the air-conditioned room on the big overstuffed mattress with the lovely redhead in his arms. He could almost smell her female scent and feel her soft white skin against his—

“Where’s the truck?” the North Korean grunted again.

Kornev opened his eyes just in time to see a small wad of rice and fish fall out of the man's mouth, landing on the dirty floor. Kornev felt his stomach turn.

"Where in the hell was the damn truck?" Kornev thought to himself.

Sometimes his job really sucked.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

H

ail heard a knock on his stateroom door. Either that or he was dreaming that he heard the sound. Drifting back to sleep, the annoying sound resurfaced. He rolled his face out of his pillow and toward the clock on his nightstand which read 12:05. What did that mean? Was it 12:05 a.m. or 12:05 p.m.? He started to close his eyes again. Louder now, he heard three hard bangs on his door.

“Coming,” Hail said.

He swung his legs over the side of his bed. He assumed it was Renner, so he didn’t bother pulling on a robe. He stood up, tugged his underwear into its proper location and answered the door.

Through his blurry old eyes, he saw beauty.

Kara Ramey was standing there making a T symbol with her fingers. Her index finger on her right hand was pointing up, and her index finger on her left hand was pointing sideways, crossing the other finger.

“Truce,” she said with a smile.

Hail was still trying to determine the time.

“Nice tighty-whities,” Kara said as she looked at his white underwear.

Hail looked down at his bare chest and followed Kara’s gaze down to his underwear.

He quickly closed the door a few inches and stood behind it—two parts embarrassed to one part sleepy.

“What do you want?” His words came out more drowsily than pissy.

“Well, sleepyhead; if you had been looking at your phone, then you would have received an e-mail from Pepper with the aerals that you requested.”

“Ummm,” was Hail’s response.

“Can I come in?” Kara asked.

“No,” Hail said with the same tone as if she had asked to shave his back.

“Believe it or not, Marshall, I’ve seen guys in their underwear before. They look just like white Speedos. What’s the big deal?”

Hail held his ground and asked, “Why are you here again?”

“Two reasons. The first is to ask you out for breakfast or lunch or whatever you want to call it. The second is that Gage organized a meeting at one o’clock to discuss the new photos. He told me to come get you up.”

“Ummm,” Hail grunted again.

“Can I come in?” Kara tried again.

This time Hail shrugged his shoulders and said, “It’s your funeral.”

He stepped back from the door and turned and began walking toward his bedroom.

Kara pushed the door open the rest of the way. Before Hail had disappeared into his room, Kara commented, “Nice ass!”

Hail ignored her. “I would ask you to make yourself at home, but I don’t think you have any issues with that,” Hail called out.

“That’s OK,” Kara called back. “I have plenty of other issues to compensate.”

Kara plopped down on the couch, somewhat disappointed that there was so little to look at in Hail’s stateroom. She scanned the walls and surfaces for something of interest. Nothing. Hardly a single item that would differentiate his room from that of an average hotel. Then she looked to her right and there on the end table, next to the couch, was a single framed 4 x 5 color photograph of Marshall Hail and his family.

Kara was actually taken aback by how young and happy Hail looked in the photograph. The family was all dressed in heavy jackets, colorful puffy coats of down and nylon. Marshall had a pair of ski goggles strapped to his forehead. His wife was pretty, blond, petite and she looked timid. Her smile was fabricated. The manifestation of worry under the smile was genuine. Hail’s wife looked like she had something on her mind. Hail’s daughters were also blond and precious. His daughters’ smiles were real, not like the fake ones that Kara used in all the photos she had taken with her parents. Hail and his girls were kneeling in the deep snow with a giant snow-covered mountain in the background. Hail had a jacketed arm wrapped around each of his girls, and his wife was propped on his right shoulder. His wife—*what was her name?* Kara thought Madalyn looked uncomfortable. Kara wondered what Madalyn was thinking about that made her appear antsy. Maybe it was the first time her girls had skied and she was afraid they might get hurt. Maybe Madalyn was afraid that her husband would get hurt. But Kara sensed there was more.

She reached over and picked up the photo and held it in her lap. She stared intently at Hail and wondered why he looked so different. Sure, he was a few years younger, but there was a fire in his eyes that Kara had never seen in him. A fire for life. A fire for being a father. And there was something deeper down under those blue eyes of his. Trapped behind that stare was the essence of what made Hail tick—the crux of what she felt Hail was all about. If she had to put it into a single word,

then *warmth* would be the one she would choose. Hail had more than a fatherly look to him, he had a humanitarian look as if he would let the entire world stay at his home if it would make a difference. And as for his wife, Madalyn, she had the exact opposite look. She would not only refuse to let anyone stay at their home, but if they did, Kara thought Hail's wife might hide under the bed.

Kara set the photo back on the end table and felt guilty judging a woman that had been killed. But not horribly guilty. Kara would get over it. But Marshall Hail, on the other hand, was still very much alive, and Kara would continue to judge the hell out of him until she was sure she knew what made him tick. Whatever it was, things were different now. Back then, Hail was all about family. Now, Hail was all about killing. *Damn, how far down the hill had he slid?* But the real question that needed answering—*was he still sliding?*

Hail walked out of his bedroom wearing a green polo shirt and brown cotton chino shorts. It was the typical outfit that she had come to expect from Hail. As Hail mentioned, the *Hail Nucleus* wasn't a military ship. It wasn't really a corporate vessel either; therefore, his crew could be dressed in just about any type of clothing that could be purchased from the ship's mall.

"Where do you want to eat?" Kara asked, rising from the couch.

"I don't know," Hail said, finding his sandals next to the coffee table and stabbing his feet into them.

"How about something breakfasty?" Hail suggested.

Having successfully attached footwear to his feet, Hail looked up at Kara, who was now standing next to the door.

She was wearing tight jeans and a white scoop neck blouse. Her red hair was done up in a neat ponytail, but she had left her bangs loose. She was wearing just a hint of makeup, but Hail felt that she really didn't need it. It was like touching up the famous painting by Marcel Dyf called *Claudine a l'Estampe*. Kara Ramey looked remarkably similar to the woman in the French painting, ponytail and all.

"They serve a good breakfast in the American restaurant," Kara said.

Hail walked toward the door, and Kara opened it and walked into the hallway, holding it open for Hail.

Neither of them spoke as they made their way toward the restaurant.

The breakfast bar was still open, and a half-dozen tables were occupied. Marshall and Kara helped themselves to an assortment of breakfast items and then found a table with a degree of separation from the others.

Before Kara began eating, she said, "I wanted to apologize if I—if I—agitated you yesterday." She chose the word *agitated* carefully, as it didn't imply that she was either wrong, responsible or out of line in any manner. It was up to Hail how he chose to perceive her words, which could be negatively or possibly constructively.

Hail looked away and stuck a forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth.

Kara took a sip of her apple juice and waited for Hail to respond. When he didn't, she told him, "I think the main bone of contention we have right now is Kornev. If you can tell me any other issues we have, and I'm assuming you can't, then we just need to come to an understanding about Kornev and we should be good, right?"

Hail said nothing. He took a bite of bacon and looked at her passively.

"So, this is my suggestion," she said. "For now, you shelve your thoughts of whacking Kornev during this mission and give me time to see if I can get the information I need out of him. If you do that, then I promise I will deliver Kornev to you, all tied up in a pretty ribbon, and then you can do whatever you want to do with him."

Kara looked expectantly at Hail. "Deal?" she asked, offering out her hand.

Hail reached out his hand, but instead of grasping Kara's hand, at the last second, he moved it to the right and picked up his glass of orange juice.

He took a sip and smiled at her. It was the first expression, other than somnolence, she had seen on his face all morning.

"Now you're smiling?" Kara said, reeling back in her hand. She wanted to call him an asshole but held her tongue.

She said, "I don't think you get it, Marshall. This means a lot to me. Believe it or not, I'm not colored red, white and blue. I do not work for the CIA because I love my country or I want to make a difference or any of that crap. I'm doing what I do in order to find out who killed my parents, and Kornev is the only link I have to that information. Do you understand?"

Hail spoke, "I understand, but do you realize how crazy that sounds?"

"Oh," Kara huffed, "and kazillionaire making it his life mission to exterminate everyone on the FBI's terrorist list isn't crazy?"

Hail considered her counter and said "Well, maybe you have a point."

"Marshall, let's face it. We're both screwed up individuals. I've got a demented program in my brain that just keeps running and so do you. There are plenty of other assholes in the world you can kill, so all I'm asking is that you refrain from killing my special asshole, and I promise I will help you kill more of yours."

Kara held out her hand again, and this time Hail shook it.

"Great, now that we have that out of the way, we have about ten minutes to finish eating before Gage's mission planning meeting starts," Kara said.

Hail responded by sticking a piece of toast into his mouth.

THE WHITE HOUSE OVAL OFFICE—WASHINGTON, D.C.

President Joanna Weston was sitting in one of two chairs at the end of the coffee table. The FBI Director Trevor Rodgers and General Quentin Ford were sitting on the couch to her right. On the couch to her left sat the director of the CIA, Jarret Pepper, and the Director of National Intelligence, Eric Spearman.

Since Pepper had called for the meeting, he was the first to speak. “I wanted to provide everyone an update on *Hail Storm*,”

“*Hail Storm*,” the president repeated, as if she were trying the words on for size. “I like that. Did you come up with that name, Jarret?”

“Yes, I did,” Pepper lied.

Pepper smiled at the group and continued, “My operative, Kara Ramey, was successful in tracking the shipment to a warehouse in Wonsan, North Korea.”

Pepper looked the group over, and they looked impressed.

Continuing, Pepper said, “She called in and reported that ninety-nine percent of the missile parts had arrived at the warehouse. She also sent me the exact coordinates of the warehouse itself.”

The president interrupted and asked, “Just a little clarification. Ms. Ramey is working with Marshall Hail on this operation. So what part of this is Ms. Ramey, and what part of this is Marshall Hail?”

Pepper considered the question and responded, “She is currently aboard one of Hail’s cargo ships, the *Hail Nucleus*. Hail has had every opportunity to keep her out of the operation’s specifics, but Kara has used her CIA training to obtain direct access to their mission center. She is providing us timely updates as to the progress of the mission as well as Hail’s internal capabilities.”

“And what’s the latest update?” General Ford asked.

“It’s Ramey’s understanding that Hail is preparing to make a strike on the warehouse.”

“How and when?” the general asked.

Pepper answered, “Kara reported that those mission elements have not been decided at this time.”

“Not been decided?” the general repeated for effect. “There is no telling how long those parts will be in that warehouse. They could move them again at any time, and we may never find them again until—” The general hesitated and then finished, “Until it’s too late.”

The president looked concerned. “Is this something we should prepare for?” President Weston asked her staff.

“I vote yes,” General Ford said.

“I agree,” Eric Spearman said. “I mean; we don’t know if Hail can pull this off. And if he can’t, and we have actionable intelligence, and we just can’t ignore it.”

“What do you think?” the president asked the FBI director.

Trevor Rodgers made a concerted effort to remove his personal feelings and friendship from the situation. “I think having a reasonable drop-dead date and time would be prudent,” he suggested.

Joanna Weston thought about the consequences of launching an attack on the North Korean warehouse. If it was quick and surgical, and they could get in-and-out without detection, then it was something to consider. And even if they were caught red-handed, how in the world could North Korea spin it so anyone gave a damn. Would North Korea complain to the international community that the bad Americans destroyed all the new ICBMs that North Korea intended to launch at them? It was best if Hail succeeded in the task, but her advisors were right. They had to have a Plan B in case Hail failed.

Weston asked, “What do we feel is an appropriate amount of time to wait for Hail to complete this mission?”

Pepper spoke up, “I would be surprised if he doesn’t take action tonight, Pyongyang Time.”

“I agree,” General Ford said. “Hail has to understand, the same as we do, that all the parts can be moved at any time. If I were in his shoes, I would hit the warehouse tonight as well.”

“So, we’ve decided that our cutoff time is tonight?” the president confirmed.

Everyone in the room nodded in agreement, except for Trevor Rodgers, but no one noticed.

“So, our Plan B is sometime before sunrise?” the president confirmed.

“I think around four in the morning, North Korean time, would be the latest we would want to strike,” the general suggested. “It would give us time to get out of theater before the sun comes up and paints our jet in the sky.”

“What assets do we have in that area?” the president asked.

“Off the top of my head, I know that the new Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier is approaching our Fleet Activities Chinhae Navy Base in Busan, South Korea.”

“Is the Gerald R. Ford equipped with Predator drones?” Spearman asked.

“No,” the general responded, the sound of disappointment in his tone. He understood that sending a drone in to do the dirty work would be much better than sending in a manned aircraft. Less downside all the way across the board.

“But I’m confident that our new F-35 Lightning II can do the job just fine,” the general said.

The general was referring to the new Lockheed Martin F-35, an all-weather stealth multirole fighter. It was a fifth-generation combat aircraft and was designed to perform ground attacks. The 337-million-dollar fighter was the best of the best, and the general had complete confidence in its abilities.

“What’s the flight time to the target?” Spearman asked.

“Well, I’m sure we don’t want to fly directly over the DMZ border for this sortie. It would be much better to make a big looping flight path over the Sea of Japan and then come in low, avoiding ground radar,” the general explained.

No one in the room could fault the general’s logic.

Continuing, the general said, “But hell, at 1300 miles per hour, it’s like taking a stroll around the block to an F-35. Time is not a real issue. From takeoff to target, we’re talking maybe fifteen minutes.”

The general paused to see if anyone had anything to add.

After another moment the president asked, “Does anyone else have anything to add?”

The man from the FBI spoke up. “What if Hail is successful in blowing up the warehouse. How will we know?” Rodgers asked.

Pepper fielded the question, “We’re watching the warehouse closely with one of our satellites. Of course, it can’t see the building in the dark, but it will detect a flash if the building blows up. Also, I’m sure that my agent Ramey will notify me of the strike.”

“Unless anyone has anything else, then that sounds like the plan,” the president said. “I would like us all to be in the Situation Room tonight to observe the operation.”

The general said, “Excuse me, Madam President, but there is a thirteen-and-a-half-hour difference between Washington and North Korea. Four o’clock in the morning would be 2:30 p.m. tomorrow.”

“I will see you then,” President Joanna Weston told the men. “But right now, I have a lunch meeting with the President of Nauru.”

There was silence for a moment, and then Trevor Rodgers asked, “Where is Nauru?”

“It is more like what is Nauru?” Eric Spearman asked. And then answering his own question he added, “It happens to be the smallest country in the world.”

“Third smallest,” the president corrected, already getting up from her chair and heading for the door.

“And they get a lunch with the President of the United States?” Rodgers asked to no one in particular.

The president had exited the room so the general answered, “You never know when you’ll need a military base on a tiny island in Micronesia, and if all it cost you was a lunch with the POTUS, then that sounds like a good deal to me.”

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

During the entire time Kara had spent in high school and then college, every time she had sat in front of a complicated math problem of any type, she had always thought to herself, “When in my life will I ever need this stuff?” And up to this point, she had never run into a situation that required complicated math. Her phone had a calculator, and her CIA job didn’t require trigonometry or calculus or any of those *geek-type* mathematics. And technically, right at this moment, she still didn’t need those skills either, because everyone around her appeared to be a math genius. She was good at languages, but when it came to paying attention in algebra or calculus, it was always easier to find a smart guy to help her out.

From the moment she had pulled up a chair at the big conference table and began to look at the warehouse aerial photos, the meeting had turned into math. The topic of math initially reared its ugly head when there was a need to know how far the mother drone would be away from her baby drones, and then how far the baby drones would have to fly to get to the warehouse. Kara thought that was complicated enough, but the math that followed those issues was dizzying.

Renner, Hail and Mercier were crunching numbers based on power consumption versus flight time versus battery weight versus total payload. The lab coats, Garber and Rugmon, were working on weight distribution and oxy-fuel cutting calculations, using acetylene or methylacetylene or propylene. Their math tinkered around with the oxy/fuel ratios for maximum tip temperatures versus weight factors. Garber and Rugmon looked absolutely electrified as their calculators spit out numbers related to pre-heat flame temperatures which affected the oxygen stream throughput, which was related to the torch and cutting nozzle diameter, which also varied the numbers involving cutting speed versus the material being cut.

Each group was jotting on pads, writing on tablets, entering data into spreadsheets and then changing numbers when the ones they tried didn’t work.

Kara couldn’t feel more out of place if she had walked into an insurance seminar.

Then the graphs started. These were shown on the big screens in the conference room so everyone could look them over and comment on how they were too flat or dipped too quickly or spiked where it shouldn’t be spikey. Then the math would start in again, making the dips less dippy and the spikes less spikey.

By the time the meeting had concluded, Kara didn’t have a clue what had transpired.

“If everyone is happy with all of this, then I think we’re a go,” Hail said, smiling a tired, yet accomplished smile.

Kara felt foolish simply being in the meeting and decided that anything she had to add would be met with either disdain or indifference. So, she said nothing.

Hail's phone went off. He took it out of his pocket and noted it was his old friend Trevor Rodgers from the FBI giving him a call.

"I'll be back in a second," Hail told the group. He stepped out of the room, into the hallway and answered his phone.

"Hey, Trev, what's up?"

"Nothing good," was the answer.

"How so?" Hail asked.

"I just wanted to give you a heads-up that I just got out of a meeting with all the people that were in the meeting when you came out here."

It was apparent that Trevor was being careful not to use names.

"OK," Hail said to let Trevor know he understood.

"They are planning an entire back-up mission, just in case you can't get the job done."

"What?" Hail asked.

"That's right. At 4 a.m., your time, they are going to swat the fly if it hasn't already flashed on the satellite."

Trevor was being cryptic in his verbiage, but Hail understood exactly what he was saying.

"You've got to be kidding me?" Hail said.

Trevor said nothing.

"Are they going to use a drone?" Hail asked.

"Nope. They don't have any in the area. They are using the real deal. One butt in one seat."

"Jesus," Hail said. "Do they have any idea how hot the air space will be once we take out the target? Every North Korean asleep at his radar station is going to wake up and start scanning the air like their life depended on it. Anything larger than a bird is going to get a Chinese-made Flying Crossbow missile enema."

"I know," Trevor said. "But you know how it is. I'm just the FBI to these people. What does the FBI know about bombing sorties and such?"

Hail was mad. "You know, Trev, that's why I didn't want to get involved with the government. It would be one thing if we coordinated the strike, but doing two separate missions where one of them is secret; that's got cluster written all over it."

"I agree, but I'm just the messenger."

“Do they know you called me?” Hail asked. “Was this supposed to be a secret back-up plan?”

Rodgers said, “I made a point of not asking during the meeting. Therefore, if in the future they ask me if I told you about it, I can say, ‘*oh, my bad,*’ I didn’t know we were keeping this a secret.”

Hail calmed down a bit and said, “Well, you know I appreciate the call.”

“It was the most I could do,” Trevor said. “You take care of yourself, and I’ll talk to you on the other side.”

“You do the same, and thanks again.”

Hail clicked off his phone and stood in the hallway for a moment, considering this new information.

The first thing he needed to decide was should he share this information with his team. If his guys completed the mission before four in the morning, then they could be clear of the country, and it wouldn’t even be an issue. But if his team was running late, then why even bother with the mission? Hail would lose a lot of gear if they had everything in place, only to have a jet turn it all into rubble before they could hit the switch.

And if Hail decided to tell his crew about the back-up plan, would it be in his best interest to tell the CIA woman as well? But then, maybe she already knew. Maybe it was even her idea. There was no way to know unless he asked her, and asking her would be telling her. And what would happen if she knew that Hail knew this back-up plan was in place? Would the White House advance their timeline?

Hail tried to remember if Kara had been in the room when they had been discussing timelines. Off the top of his head, he didn’t recall her being there during that time. She had been late to the meeting that day, and that’s when they had decided on the time. Hadn’t she?

Then he started to get mad again, and on the surface, he didn’t know why. After all, his high-level partners in the USA were just backing him up. Just being good allies. But there was more than just that. To Hail, this was his deal. His mission. He had planned it. He had designed new drones for the task and had everything ready to go.

Then he realized the ugly fact that his anger was based on pride. And the strange thing was, Hail was good with that. He had immense pride in his crew, as well as his ship and his company and everything that he had built. If he hadn’t been wired that way, then none of this would have ever happened. He would have simply done his 9 to 5 job and then gone home to sit on the couch and watch *Baywatch* reruns while eating Cheetos.

He thought about it some more and tried to run through some scenarios in his mind. Hail stood there in the hall for about five minutes tossing it around. In the

end, he decided that he would tell his crew about the back-up mission, but he would not tell Kara. There was no point to it. Kara would be nothing more than a spectator in the mission room when the operation went down, and her knowledge would have no impact on the outcome. It was important to inform his crew to know that there may be friendly aircraft in the operational theater. If planes came too close to the *Hail Nucleus* for comfort, his team had to be selective about which ones they shot down.

Hail pressed a contact on his phone and listened for Renner to answer.

“Yeah,” Renner said.

“I need you to leave the meeting and walk with me over to ship security. We have some new developments we need to discuss.”

“Now?” Renner asked.

“Now,” Hail emphasized.

WONSAN, NORTH KOREA—WAREHOUSE

The official name of the vehicle was the UAZ-469, but it was essentially an open-air jeep with a canvas top. Manufactured in Ulyanovsk, Russia, the North Koreans used it as an off-road, military light utility vehicle, but Victor Kornev was trying to use it as a bed. He was exhausted and needed some sleep. The cramped office in the warehouse didn't have any place to lie down, but that didn't seem to bother Trang Won Dong. His highness had fallen asleep easily in his hard wood chair; his head flopped over on his shoulder, massive snores escaping from his gaping drooling mouth.

Kornev had watched the ugly little man for a while, until he knew he couldn't spend another minute in the same room or he would have to take out his well-oiled Glock and first put a hole through Trang's head and then his own. But instead of that detrimental action, he had decided to leave the office that smelled of stale snakehead fish stew and fermented cabbage to see if the vehicle he had arrived in could offer a place to recline in comfort.

Now that he was in the UAZ, he discovered that the front seats didn't recline and the back seats were actually three poorly padded seats that were welded together to make one. As he lay there, he could feel each of the bars between the seats pushing up into his back. He sat up and glanced forward at the vehicle's dashboard. The key was right there sticking out of the ignition. One turn of that key and only a twenty-minute drive and he could be lying in a hot and smelly bed at the Dongmyong Hotel. If he was lucky, it could be a good electricity day and he could take a hot shower.

Victor grunted as he tried to work his phone out of his shorts pocket. He put it up to his face, checked for a signal, saw three bars and tried to call the truck driver again. The call went to voicemail. Kornev cursed and checked the time. One in the morning. The truck carrying the missile part was more than eighteen hours overdue. Victor wanted to reach through the phone, grab the truck driver and choke the hell out of him. He was up for choking the hell out of anyone right now.

Sweat dripped from the tip of Kornev's nose and onto his phone, as he sat there in the back of the UAZ, miserable and with no place to go. No place to sleep. No place to eat. Even the water was highly questionable. The unreasonable part of his brain told him that it wasn't worth it. It told him that he already had enough money, and that the bag of diamonds he would get for this gig was just a bag of rocks. But the other part of his mind—the part that had taken him from a common Russian thug and had moved him up the ladder to wealth and respect—that part of his brain told him that he would sit there no matter how long it took. That sensible part of his brain knew he would sit there in the heat, in the car, in the office—hell, he would sit in a pigpen of poop, if it meant getting paid. Each contract for arms could be his

last. He just hoped this one wasn't. He would prefer to go out on a high note, if possible.

So, with that decision made, he put his phone back in his pocket, laid down in the back seat, felt the bars dig into his ribs, cursed again and drifted off into a painful and unrewarding slumber.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

Gage Renner made his final inspection of the large drone called *Queen*. The sky-blue drone sat perched on a long steel beam that angled up from inside deck number two of the *Hail Nucleus*. The solid beam rose at forty-five degrees and terminated at a large opening in the main deck above.

Gage asked Rugmon, “Can you think of anything we haven’t thought of?”

The bald man in the white lab coat shook his head.

“We’ve been over the check list three times. It’s good to fly.”

Renner knew that this step was critical, because once they had launched the drone there was no turning back. The only way to retrieve the machine would be to splash it down next to the ship and use the crane to pick it up out of the water and set it back on deck. That would kill their schedule.

Rugmon looked at his watch. He pointed the face of his watch toward Renner and tapped on it with his finger.

“Tick-tock,” Rugmon reminded Renner.

Renner made one more loop, walking the entire way around the big drone.

Connected to the top of the large drone was a smaller drone with the given name of *Blondie*. The top of the smaller drone was flat, making it easier for Rugmon to fabricate doors that could open and close remotely. *Blondie* was referred to as a parasitic drone—meaning that it clung to its host until it was time for action, similar to a parasite. *Blondie* was the heaviest parasitic drone that the Hail Team had ever launched. And since *Blondie* was so heavy, it would be released and then flown to its landing zone as a glider. Flight was nothing more than math. Making sure *Blondie* could complete the task was a relatively simple equation of weight, lift, drag and distance. If all those variables were constants, and weather wasn’t a factor, then an unmanned computer could glide *Blondie* to its target. But they would use Alex Knox instead. He was almost a computer when it came to flying.

Renner touched *Queen* and ran his hand up her smooth frame until he felt the connection between the aircrafts, two thick metal hooks that would be retracted when *Blondie* was released.

Rugmon thought Renner’s actions were foolish. Touching the machine did nothing except make him feel as if he was in control of the situation. But the real trick wasn’t the release or even the flight to the landing zone. The real trick was the launch. In order to prepare *Queen* for launch, the drone had been placed upside down on the launch rail. The launch system was not designed to accommodate a parasitic drone attached to a mother drone. Therefore, *Blondie* was actually attached to *Queen*’s belly, and *Queen* was lying on her back on the rail. Trying to fly *Queen* with

that much weight on its back would have been impractical. Physics would dictate that the aircraft would want to roll until the weight found its gravitational center. Hence, Rugmon turned *Queen* upside down for launch and had placed *Blondie* on top of *Queen*. Once both aircrafts were shot from the rail, Knox would have to execute a half roll to put the bundle into its proper flight orientation.

Rugmon waited patiently for Renner to make his final round. When Renner appeared from behind the tail of the drone, Rugmon asked him again, “Are we good to go?”

“I guess so,” Renner said. “Go ahead and charge the field.”

Rugmon walked over to the wall and opened a panel. Inside the panel he pushed a big button that simply read CHARGE. He watched a red light start blinking. A hum began to vibrate the room as if a large microwave oven had been switched on.

Renner took a few steps back from the drone. There was no need to retreat any further. He just had to get out of the way of the wings and tail apparatus. When *Queen* left the rail, those protrusions would cut him in half if he was standing in their path. There would be no jet or rocket emissions that would burn him or cause alarm. The launch system was similar to the way they got new roller coasters moving. The long steel beam had a series of stators and rotors mounted in a line, which produced a linear force with no moving parts. Once the charge was released, the launch of the drone was nothing more than powerful magnets opposing and attracting one another in perfect synchronization. The action culminated in the launch of the drone from zero to flight speed in less than three seconds. The angle of the launch beam sent the aircraft upwards at forty-five degrees, straight out the hole in the deck and up into the night sky.

Rugmon watched the blinking red light turn to a solid green.

“We’re charged,” he told Renner.

Renner ran through the checklist in his head one last time. He then walked over to the wall and picked up a phone. He dialed a six-digit number that connected him to the ship’s mission center.

“Are you ready, Knox?” he asked the pilot.

Renner set the phone back on its cradle and then told Rugmon, “Launch the drone.”

Rugmon lifted a red protective switch cover labeled LAUNCH and flipped the switch underneath.

The hum of the microwave oven cracked violently as if its electrical cord had been cut with metal scissors. A 100-decibel shriek of electromagnetism ripped the drone off the steel beam and out the hole in the deck so quickly that when Renner blinked, it was gone.

Renner looked at Rugmon, and Rugmon shrugged nonchalantly.

“Close the deck,” he told Rugmon.

The bald man pressed another button and the sound of metal, gears and electric motors rumbled to life.

Both men looked up and watched a thick metal hatch slide into place and block out the view of the bright moon on the cloudless night.

*_*_*

Hail knocked lightly on the steel door.

A moment later, Kara Ramey answered her stateroom door.

Hail made the same **T** using his fingers as Kara had made when she had knocked on his door.

“Truce?” Kara questioned, looking at his symbol.

“Time to work out,” Hail corrected her.

Kara looked him over for a second.

“I see you’re wearing underwear,” she commented.

“You said you were used to guys wearing underwear, so I thought this would make you feel more comfortable.”

Kara huffed.

“Hey, I’m wearing my underwear on the outside of my gym shorts in case you felt weird about it.”

Kara couldn’t help but laugh.

“Do you really want to work out?” she asked Hail.

“Yeah, I have a bunch of nervous energy, and I need to run it off.”

Kara paused for a moment.

“Isn’t it kind of close to mission time?” she asked.

“Yes, it is,” Hail said. “As a matter of fact, we already launched *Queen*.”

“*Queen*?” Kara asked.

“The delivery drone,” Hail said.

“Of course,” Kara said, making no effort to let Hail into her room.

“Why are all the drones named after rock bands?” she asked.

Hail thought about it for a moment, and then responded, “Because the other suggestion was to name them after candy bars, and I thought rock bands sounded cooler. I mean, which do you think is cooler? *Blondie* or Snickers?”

Kara considered the question.

“Come on, let’s go,” Hail said.

“I already worked out, but I’ll do something light, maybe,” Kara informed Hail.

“Aerosmith or KitKat?” Hail asked when they were in the hallway.

“Aerosmith,” Kara answered.

“Whitesnake or Butterfinger?” Hail asked.

“Whitesnake,” Kara responded.

“Rush or Milky Way?” Hail continued.

“I don’t know about that. I kind of like Milky Way.”

“OK,” Hail agreed. “Just for you, our next drone will be called Milky Way.”

“You are so good to me,” Kara said.

When they reached the gym, Hail climbed up onto a treadmill and started off at a slow run.

Kara, who wasn’t really dressed for a workout, wearing jeans and a classic plaid flannel shirt rolled up at the sleeves, selected a slower speed and walked on her treadmill next to Hail at a normal pace.

Hail thought Kara looked a little depressed. Her face, which was always beautiful, wasn’t as beautiful tonight.

“What’s the matter?” Hail asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said, somewhat surprised that Hail had zeroed in on her mood. “Maybe it’s being on the ship.”

“You don’t like the ship?” Hail asked.

“Sure. What’s not to like?” Kara responded respectfully.

Hail was quiet.

A moment later Kara said, “I don’t think this is really for me.”

“What, you mean the ship?” Hail asked.

“No, I think it’s all the push button stuff. You know? Death from afar. All the drone stuff you guys do.”

Hail responded immediately, “How could that be bad? Even on the worst day, none of the good guys get hurt. Sure, we might lose some equipment, which equates to money, but we don’t lose lives.”

Kara hesitated and then said, “I don’t think you could understand unless you’ve been out in the field. You know, where you have something at risk other than equipment and money.”

“I’m not sure what you are talking about.” Hail said.

“Do you ever hear people talk about their kids?” Kara asked. “You know, they tell kid stories and the only people that truly understand how they feel are other parents who have kids?”

“I guess so,” Hail said, “But I’ve had kids, so I guess I don’t understand.”

“Well I do,” Kara said. “Some of my colleagues back at the CIA talk about their kids and the problems they have with them, and to me it doesn’t compute because I don’t have any. The closest I can come to that situation is that once I had a cat. After my house staff left, I think the cat got hungry and ran away.”

“OK,” Hail agreed with her for the sake of argument.

“It’s the same with me and you. The revenge kick you’re on—”

“Retribution,” Hail corrected.

“Whatever. It’s not the same as being out there and having something at risk, like your life.”

“I don’t know about that,” Hail responded confidently. “It felt pretty good to me when we took out Kim Yong Chang remotely.”

“I think that’s because it was your first,” Kara said. “But you need to trust me on this. It’s nothing like having some skin in the game. It’s nothing like being there. It’s not nearly as rewarding.”

“If you say so,” Hail said. “I wouldn’t know.”

Kara added, “And I think that’s what I’m feeling. I don’t think I miss being in the field. I just think I can be more effective out there instead of lounging around on this ship. After all, we both have our own agendas, and we both feel we’re under a time constraint for whatever weird reason.”

“So, after this mission, do you want to leave?” Hail asked.

“I don’t know. Let’s see how things go and if I can be of any help.”

Kara looked at the time on her phone and thought she should check in with Pepper back at CIA headquarters. She calculated the time in Washington and guesstimated it should be early afternoon back in that part of the world.

“I should make a call and update my boss,” she told Hail.

Hail didn’t respond. Two thick lines of perspiration were meandering down each side of his face. He was breathing hard. At least harder than he should for the amount of effort he was putting out.

“I’m really out of shape,” he finally responded, not looking very happy with himself.

“Is there anything you don’t want me to discuss with Pepper?” Kara asked.

Hail scrutinized her question and did his best to determine why she would ask such a thing. On one hand, she was showing him a measure of respect by asking if

there was a subject that he felt was off-limits and shouldn't be shared with her intelligence agency. But on the other hand, any subject that Hail told her was off-limits would immediately be something that the CIA would be very interested in investigating, only because Hail had told her it was off limits. Either Kara was very crafty, Hail was very paranoid, or maybe a little of both.

"I can't think of anything," Hail told her. But he was thinking of something. He was thinking about the dangerous back-up plan that the Washington officials had developed. He wondered if Kara knew about it as well. Once she had conversed with her boss, and Hail had a chance to listen to the recording, he might discover that answer.

Kara switched off her treadmill and told Hail, "I'm going up top to make a Sat call."

"OK," Hail said, dabbing one side of his face into the sleeve of his shirt. "Why don't you meet me in the mission center in about thirty minutes?"

"Will do," Kara said.

THE WHITE HOUSE SITUATION ROOM—WASHINGTON, D.C.

It's no secret that the White House has a special high-tech room called the Situation Room. During many critical operations that had been conducted over the years, several presidents had been photographed looking very tense as they watched the military operation play out over live video feeds. The Wiki on the White House Situation Room reads, *The White House Situation Room is a 5,525-square-foot (513.3 m²)[1] conference room and intelligence management center in the basement of the West Wing of the White House. It is run by the National Security Council staff for the use of the President of the United States and his advisors (including the National Security Advisor, the Homeland Security Advisor and the White House Chief of Staff) to monitor and deal with crises at home and abroad and to conduct secure communications with outside (often overseas) persons. The Situation Room is equipped with secure, advanced communications equipment for the president to maintain command and control of U.S. forces around the world.* And everyone knows the Wiki never lies.

Jarret Pepper's phone played a tune, and he looked to see who was calling.

"This is Pepper," he said.

"Hi, Jarret. This is Kara."

Of course, Pepper knew this because of the caller ID. But it was protocol for each caller to announce themselves.

"Are we on a speaker?" Pepper asked.

"No, I'm up on the deck, and it's just me. What's going on there?" Kara asked.

"I'm in the Situation Room with a dozen others watching and waiting," Pepper said.

Kara thought that was strange since it was pitch-black in North Korea; therefore, there was nothing to watch.

"What are you watching, and why are you in the Situation Room?" Kara asked.

"Not much right now," Pepper responded. He almost sounded a little sad.

"We're waiting to see a dark spot in your area get much brighter."

"Well, it won't be much longer," Kara said. "Hail has already launched a drone that is flying toward the warehouse right now."

"That's good. Do you know the approximate time the strike will happen?" Pepper asked.

Kara thought about all the planning sessions she had attended in Hail's conference room. There were so many moving parts to this mission that she doubted if she fully understood all the elements. She certainly didn't want to open a

door with Pepper unless she felt fully qualified to walk through it. At that moment she didn't feel like getting into the nuts and bolts of the operation.

So instead of a long answer, she decided to say, "Mission time is planned around 3:00 a.m., but it's more complicated than a simple drone strike. Hail wants to get in and get out without leaving any sign of ever being there."

"And how the hell does he plan to do that?" Pepper asked.

He asked as if he didn't believe it was possible. But maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe Pepper thought that she was lying to him.

Kara answered with a constricted response, "It's too complicated, and without being an expert in all the wizardry that is going on down here, I can tell you that they are using only drones, and it appears there is a lot that can go wrong."

The line was silent for a moment.

Kara said nothing.

Pepper wasn't talking which meant he was thinking.

Kara surmised that he was preparing to share some important information with her. Something was going on at the White House. The president's entire cabinet was staring at a dark spot on a video monitor. She sensed that Hail's mission wouldn't garner that sort of attention unless there was another element she was missing.

"I don't see how this will affect Hail's mission, but we have developed a back-up plan in case he fails," Pepper confessed.

And, to Kara, it sounded like a confession. It sounded like Pepper was telling her a dirty little secret that, given the choice, he would be just as happy to keep to himself. But since others knew, Pepper had decided that he would confess his sin to her as well.

Kara said nothing at first. She was wondering if she even wanted to know the specifics about the back-up plan. If Pepper was right and it wouldn't affect Hail's primary mission, then why did she even need to know about it? And, if she knew, then she would have to decide if she would share it with Hail. That was a lot of drama she didn't need on her plate right now.

Instead of starting with the *how*, Kara decided to test the waters with the *why*.

"Why do you need a back-up plan?" she asked.

Pepper appeared to be expecting the *how* question and took a moment to change gears.

"If we have intelligence on the exact location of all the missile parts and Hail's mission fails, then we might not get another opportunity to destroy them."

Kara thought that logic was pretty sound, so she decided to ask the *how* question.

"How do you plan to do it, a Predator strike?"

Pepper responded almost giddily, “No, none in the area. We’re using a single jet fighter. One sortie with one load. It should be more than enough to do the job.”

“I thought we were trying to avoid a U.S. strike on the North Korean target?”

“Not really,” Pepper corrected her. “We’re trying to avoid a number of jets hitting a number of warehouses. That’s messy. One jet hitting a single warehouse full of ICBM parts—that might be something that the North Koreans may not even want to talk about once it’s over. Regardless of the political fallout or the cost, those missiles have to be destroyed.”

Kara had to ask one more question, “When is this supposed to happen? What time?”

“At 4 a.m., your time and, of course, that’s only if Hail doesn’t get the job done before that time.”

If Kara remembered correctly Hail’s strike was scheduled for 3:00 a.m. Certainly not much wiggle room if Hail’s operation was running late. It didn’t matter one way or another to Kara if Hail blew up the missiles or Washington’s airstrike did the job, but she didn’t know if Hail would feel the same way.

“Is this confidential information, or can I share it with Hail?” Kara asked.

Pepper thought for a moment and responded, “If you think Hail needs to know, then you can tell him. Otherwise, what’s the purpose? It’s not like he has people on the ground. Either he gets the job done or *we* will.”

“Understood,” Kara said.

Pepper added, “We’re watching the warehouse on the video, but give me a call if it goes *BOOM* so we have verbal confirmation.”

“Will do,” Kara said.

A pause and then Pepper asked, “How are you doing, Kara?”

His question sounded distant and expressionless, like Pepper figured it was his job to ask such questions, even though he really didn’t care.

“I’m fine. I will give you a call one way or the other,” Kara said flatly.

“Sounds good. Keep up the good work. Goodbye,” Pepper said.

Kara said nothing. In the dark, she watched the icons on her phone change as the transmission was terminated. She left the shelter of the massive radioactive containment vessels, walked out onto the running track and rested her arms on the ship’s railing. The night was bright. A full moon was out shining so brightly that Kara thought it resembled a mini sun. Somewhere in the bright night, *Queen* was on its way to do bad things. At least bad things to the North Koreans. Good things if you were on the other side of the explosions that would soon follow.

The sea was still, and except for the air flowing past her from the four-knot forward speed of the ship, there was no wind at all.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

The mission control room was full tonight. All sixteen stations had pilots occupying the seats. Three-fourths were young men or boys, depending on who was making the determination, and the other stations were occupied by girls or women, with the same caveat.

“What’s *Queen*’s altitude?” Hail asked Knox.

“Two thousand feet,” Knox reported.

“Has the glide path been plotted?” Hail asked.

“Yes, sir,” Knox said. “We’re within gliding range and we are good to release.”

Hail pressed an icon on his screen and patched in Dallas Stone who was working in the ship’s security center. “Hi, Dallas. Is there any unusual air activity around Wonsan that we need to know about?”

The voice over the speakers said, “No, nothing on the radar. I’ve also been monitoring the video feeds from our drones stationed at the North Korean airfields, and no combat aircraft has taken off.”

“Very good,” Hail said. “Please let us know if anything changes.”

“Will do, Skipper,” Stone said.

“Bring up the video from *Blondie*’s main camera,” Hail told Knox.

The large screen above the controller’s station blinked on but nothing appeared.

“What’s up with the camera?” Hail asked.

“The camera is on and streaming, but there is nothing down there to see,” Renner said. “No lights, no nothing. Maybe when we get closer to Wonsan we’ll see something.”

Hail asked Knox, “Are you ready?”

“Sure am,” Knox said with a measure of excitement in his voice.

“Then deploy the wings, recalculate the glide path and release *Blondie* from *Queen*.”

“Deploying the wings,” Alex Knox reported as he pressed the appropriate icon.

The nineteen-year-old pilot then pressed another icon labeled RELEASE and said, “*Blondie*’s in free fall.”

Hail’s next order went to the mission pilot, Tanner Grant, sitting two stations away from Knox.

“Tanner, get *Queen* home. Keep it slow and just above the tree line. We don’t want any blips on North Korean radar stations.”

“Understood,” Tanner Grant replied.

Hail knew each of his pilots to one degree or another. He had observed each of them in the flight simulator, and he and Renner had both certified these particular pilots for this mission. This was the very first mission for most of his pilots. Hail hoped it would be the first of many missions they would share together.

Instead of gliding *Blondie* to its landing zone, Knox had become more of a spectator, relying heavily on *Blondie's* computers to make critical flight adjustments. The night was windless, so keeping the drone pointed toward its landing zone was easy. And the rate of descent was a simple mathematical formula; $ROD = GRAD \times GS$, which meant for a three percent glide slope, you multiply your groundspeed in knots by approximately five and you get the rate of descent in feet and minutes. The computers onboard *Blondie* were recalculating this formula fifteen times per second and making adjustments to *Blondie's* flight surfaces and continually correcting for any anomalies. Essentially, the drone was flying itself. *Blondie* knew its landing coordinates—it knew its height and its rate of descent. Therefore, short of snagging a power cable (of which there were very few in North Korea), this part of the mission was simple. The decision to fly in as a glider meant that the approach and landing would be completely silent. A guard could be a hundred yards away and hear nothing when the drone touched down on the other side of the chain link fence.

Hail glanced at the monitor connected to the armrest of his chair. A yellow line on a black background sloped from the top of the screen in the left corner to the bottom of the screen in the right corner. At the top of the yellow line was a kite-looking graphic that represented *Blondie*. At the bottom of the yellow line was a green horizontal line that represented the landing zone. *Blondie* was slowly sliding down the yellow line while white digital numbers indicated the drone's speed, altitude, distance and time to its LZ.

The room was quiet. Each of the pilots had pulled up the same plot that Hail was watching on their own screens. *Blondie's* nose camera was turned on and sending back live video, and each of the pilots was watching that as well. But there was still not much to see. The warehouse was on the outskirts of Wonsan, and with only a limited amount of electricity, North Korea wasn't a cityscape of dazzling lights.

Knox would typically be announcing distance and altitude, but since everyone was watching the glide slope on their own monitors, he remained silent and kept his eyes on his instruments.

"Communications status?" Hail asked Shana Tran.

"Five by five. We have a really good night out there for flying. No clouds. Great signal," she said.

The glider was now halfway down the yellow line. The distance showed five miles. The time until landing showed sixteen minutes and five seconds.

Hail heard the thick door to the mission center hinge open and saw Kara enter the room. She was holding her cellphone in one hand leaving her other hand free.

She walked up and stood next to Hail. This time, Hail couldn't offer her a chair if he wanted to because they were all taken. She had told him before that she liked standing, so he thought nothing of it.

"I see you removed your underwear," she said softly.

"Yeah, I didn't want to give these young people the wrong idea," Hail replied.

"That was some solid thinking," Kara said. "So, what's going on with *Hail Storm*?" she asked.

Hail chuckled. For some reason, every time she said *Hail Storm* he thought it was amusing. It wasn't that the name was funny. It was the fact that the CIA had to name everything they did. He assumed this was the case because they had so many operations going on at one time that they had to name them in order to refer to them. But he also assumed that each operation had a budget line associated with it, and all the financials were bundled under that name. It also had a little more flair when discussing the mission with Congress after it had become declassified. He was certain that they would rather discuss *Hail Storm* with Congress instead of Operation 19,304.

"We're about to land *Blondie* next to the warehouse in the LZ we selected on the photographs," Hail told Kara.

Hail pointed down toward his monitor so Kara could see the progress of the descent.

The legend was pretty easy to follow. Kara saw that the kite-looking graphic was three-fourths down the yellow sloping line and nearing the green bar at the bottom.

Hail then pointed up at the big screen above the controllers' stations.

"That's the live feed from *Blondie*'s nose camera."

Kara had to take a second look at the screen to be sure she was looking at the correct monitor. It appeared to be turned off. The entire screen was black. And then, just when she was going to ask Hail about it, she saw a light below. A second later, she saw another light on the ground, far away. It was actually two lights close together. Kara thought it must be a vehicle of some type.

"Not exactly Times Square down there, is it?" she said.

"Nope," Hail said. "Good thing we're navigating by GPS, or there would be no way to land this thing."

Kara thought about taking this last moment before the drone landed to tell Hail about Washington's back-up plan. If his operation was called *Hail Storm*, then Hail Mary would be a good name for the back-up mission. Kara knew that North Korea had been steadily building up its anti-aircraft missile installations. They had purchased much of their equipment from Victor Kornev. And, in just the past few years, North Korea had also purchased and installed the new Chinese radar that could detect a stealth aircraft, but not clearly enough to give an accurate location to

an interception missile. Still, this meant that the North Koreans could scramble their fighters to intercept such an incursion into their country. Kara felt sorry for the poor sucker that had volunteered to fly that mission. She hoped it would be unnecessary.

“Getting close to touchdown,” Knox reported.

Kara watched the live video being sent from the drone, and she thought it was useless. A flash of light here, a streak of moonlight there, and that was the best the video had to offer. The pilot they called Knox wasn’t even looking at the video feed. He was watching a bank of virtual gauges and holding onto the controls, but he didn’t appear to be actually flying the machine.

“Hundred feet and flaring to fifty knots,” Knox said, but he made no significant action Kara could detect.

Hail saw Kara watching Knox and said, “The drone is flying in autopilot. Remember when we were on my jet and I told you that the plane could take off and land itself?”

Kara nodded.

“Well, that’s what *Blondie* is doing now. The only unknown is how far it will slide when it hits the landing zone. The grass and weeds in the field are wet and slick.”

“Fifty feet,” Knox announced.

“Release the skids,” Hail ordered.

Knox touched the screen and confirmed, “Skids released.”

“What are the skids?” Kara asked.

Hail took a moment before answering.

“They resemble skis and are tucked up inside the drone to prevent drag when it’s flying. When we’re getting ready to land, we deploy the skis, or skids as they are called, instead of landing wheels. The skids weigh less than wheels and don’t require the extra weight of brakes. They stop the aircraft by using friction. The skids have short spikes on the back of them. After the drone touches the ground, if we lift the nose of the drone, the skids roll back onto their spikes which dig into the ground and quickly slow down the aircraft.”

“Neat idea,” Kara said.

“Old Rugmon came up with that one,” Hail told her.

“Good old Rugmon,” Kara said dryly.

Now closer to the earth, shapes and forms began to show up on the video as the bright moon illuminated the ground and the landing zone dead ahead. To the right, the warehouse was clearly visible. A bright sodium vapor lamp was mounted to each corner of the building, casting out a wide cone of light that glittered off the newly installed barbed wire fence.

The video swayed from side-to-side a little, but Kara thought it was surprisingly stable considering that no one was flying the drone. Or maybe the opposite was the case. The reason it was so stable was because a computer was flying *Blondie* and not some nineteen-year-old pilot. In either case, everyone in the room stopped breathing for a moment. The ground, which had looked brown only a second ago, now looked somewhat greenish as the nose of the aircraft skimmed just a foot above it. The video chattered and blinked and jerked as the drone's skids dug into the soft earth.

Knox stepped on his control pedals, instinctively activating brakes that were not in fact brakes at all, but it made him feel better to do something. Once the aircraft had touched down, it took only a matter of four seconds before it came to a complete stop.

Quickly Hail ordered, "Microphone on, please. I want to determine if we can hear anything."

"Like boots running toward *Blondie*?" Kara asked.

"Yeah, just like that," Hail said.

The microphone was opened, and the room was flooded with the sound of a million popcorn kernels being shaken in a metal trash can.

"Turn it down," Hail said. "What the hell is that?"

Pierce Mercier, who had been sitting very quietly at his station, fielded the question.

"Cicadas, or the more common term is summer crickets, known as "Maemi" in Korean. En masse, their call for a mate can reach in the neighborhood of 90 decibels or above."

"Well, we're not going to hear anything with that racket going on. Shut off the microphone and take the camera up and do a three sixty, and let's see what there is to see," Hail told Knox.

Near the front of the drone, a small round hatch on *Blondie's* back popped open. A telescoping monopod slowly grew from the hole. On the tip of the pole was affixed a motorized 360-degree pan head. Mounted on the pan head was a small high-definition camera. The black drone sat on its long belly in the deep weeds and grass with only two feet of its profile exposed. The camera's monopod extended *Blondie's* horizontal elevation another three feet—high enough to clear even the tallest grass in the field.

Knox slowly rotated the camera as Hail had instructed.

The crew watched nothing but blackness for three-fourths of the camera's rotation. In the last quarter turn, Knox stopped the camera when the warehouse centered into frame.

Hail took some time to look over the building.

The warehouse was galvanized grey in color. Hail estimated it was about 40 feet high, and the side they were looking at was about 300 feet long. The aerial photos they had received from the CIA had already provided the team with overall dimensions of the warehouse, everything but its height. Even with all that information they had collected from outer space, there was nothing like looking at the warehouse from ground level to get an idea of the layout.

Hail detected some sort of movement in the right corner of the frame. A dark figure was crossing under one of the bright lights.

“Zoom in on that guy,” Hail told Knox.

Knox adjusted the camera to the right and tightened up the shot.

A soldier in a drab grey North Korean uniform was walking slowly down the side of the warehouse. He had a shiny black AK-47 slung over his shoulder. His strides were short and indifferent. He walked with his head down, looking at the ground.

“Is that guy awake?” Renner asked.

“Let’s hope not,” Hail said.

The camera tracked the soldier as he walked halfway down the side of the building and then stopped. The soldier then stood still, raising his head and looking off into the night. In fact, he was looking right at *Blondie’s* camera.

“Say cheese,” Knox quipped.

Of course, the crew understood that there was no possible way the man could make out the black drone in the dark field a hundred yards away. He was simply killing time, waiting there instead of finishing his rounds. The guard’s body language said, *“I’m tired and need a good night’s sleep.”* Hail could only guess how long the guy had been trudging around or the last time he had slept.

They continued to watch the man stand on the side of the warehouse. Eventually he backed up and began leaning on the building.

“What are you waiting for?” Kara asked Hail.

We need to see what this guy does,” Hail told her. “Either he’s going to walk all the way to the back of the building and check it out, or he is going to kill time on the side before walking back to the front. Either way, we need to know if there is some sort of guard schedule and if so, where do they go.”

“This guy looks like the only thing he is patrolling is the inside of his eyelids,” Kara responded.

“That works for me,” Hail said.

The soldier now looked as if he had literally fallen asleep. He continued to stand, leaning on the side of the warehouse, shoulders sloped, head down pointed toward the ground.

“Knox, wake up *Black Eyed Peas* and *Electric Light Orchestra*. Run a full system check on them. I need to know how much video time and communications time each drone has left.”

Knox began flipping through screens and pressing icons. It took him a few moments to collect the information.

“*ELO* has about two hours of power left to facilitate the communications between *BEP* and the satellite.”

He paused for a second and flipped to another screen.

“And *BEP* has a little over three hours of power left to stream video.”

Hail checked the time; it was 3:15 a.m.

Kara checked the time on her phone as well—3:15 a.m. She knew that Hail would be cutting things close and wrestled with telling him her little secret. Best outcome would be that Hail would quickly complete the mission, and the airstrike would be called off. Worst outcome would be that he would run long and the jet would polish off the warehouse. She decided to wait a little longer and see how things progressed.

Hail’s phone went off and he answered it.

“Hello,” was all he said.

“Hey, Marshall. This is Dallas. We played back the last phone call Ramey made to Pepper. The time set for the airstrike is still set for 4:00 a.m. Pyongyang Time.

Hail wanted to say damn or some other expletive, but with Kara standing next to him, all he said was, “I understand,” and he pressed the END icon on his phone.

He looked at Kara inquisitively for a moment, as if his gaze alone might prompt her to spill the beans.

Kara looked back at him innocently.

If he confronted her with the information, then she would know that they were still monitoring all of her communications. That was an advantage Hail was unwilling to give up at this time. And this would not be the best time to get into a pissing match with the CIA operative. He needed to get the operation moving quickly considering that there was less than forty-five minutes left.

He looked away from Kara.

On screen one was the close up of the guard still leaning on the building, which was being sent from the monopod camera on *Blondie*.

And on large screen number two were fresh images from inside the warehouse. *BEP* was alive and streaming.

“Let’s get the show on the road,” Hail said.

He told Kara, “Excuse me.”

Kara stepped away from his chair. From under the armrests of his chair, Hail slid two flight hand controllers into place. He locked them into an upright position on top of each armrest. He then reached down on the side of his chair and flipped a latch that released a platform that contained foot pedals that protracted under his feet. In less than ten seconds, Hail had converted his big chair into a flight control station.

Kara looked impressed, but she said nothing.

Hail adjusted each of his small monitors as a motorcyclist would adjust rear-view mirrors for a better view. He then skimmed his finger across the small screen to his right, again and again until he found the page he wanted.

“I’m going to take *Guns N’ Roses* out for a little look around,” he told the crew.

Renner started to say something, stopped and decided to let it ride. He knew that Hail was just as qualified to fly the drones as any of his other pilots, but this “*look around*”, as Hail referred to it, had not been planned. One of the other pilots was supposed to fly that combat drone.

Hail set his feet on the pedals and wrapped his large hands around each of the flight controllers. He took in a breath and squeezed the throttle trigger on the right controller.

A large flat pizza sized section of *Blondie’s* backend lifted out of its sealed compartment. The composite plastic lid rose into the air. The round disc had four large propeller cutouts. Four powerful electric motors spun four propellers at 1200 revolutions per minute, two spinning clockwise and the other two spinning counterclockwise to offset the torque or the turning force. Just under the lid, two cameras were mounted one inch apart from one another. One was a day/night vision camera, and the other was a targeting camera specifically calibrated for the gun located directly beneath the cameras.

Renner activated the camera on the drone called *Guns N’ Roses*. An obscured view of tall grass appeared on the night vision camera on big screen number three.

As the drone continued to rise out of *Blondie*, a nasty black 9-millimeter M4 mini-gun was exposed to the North Korean air. Due to its thick sound suppressor that was mounted to its stubby barrel, the gun looked more substantial than it really was. Still, Hail and the designers of the drone knew that the weapon was all business. In full auto mode, the little gun could fire thirty-two rounds in less than three seconds. With a hundred and twenty-eight rounds on board in a condensed drum, the compact drone would be something that none of the North Koreans would want to mess with. Under the machine gun, three thick legs sprang out at 120-degree angles, creating a tripod base for the drone to rest upon when it returned to earth.

Hail gently nudged the drone up into the air and hovered about ten feet above *Blondie* to have a look around. Nothing had changed. There was no additional activity near or around the warehouse. Hail squeezed the throttle and bent the right

controller forward. The drone responded by gaining altitude and moving forward toward the twelve-foot barbed wire fence. Two hundred feet before reaching the wire, Hail veered *Guns N' Roses* sharply to the left and began a long arc around the property. He tilted the angle of the drone backward slightly to bring it to a hover. He was now positioned about a hundred feet from the fence in back of the warehouse. Hail scanned the backside of the property for guards or dogs or any other living thing that could send an alert. Seeing nothing, he slowly nudged the drone forward and over the top of the razor wire. The drone approached the wall of the back of the building, still hovering just under the roof line. From there, Hail rotated the drone left toward the side of the building they had not investigated. Hail allowed the drone to peek around the corner. Nothing. No guards. No dogs. No threats of any type. He then spun the drone 180 degrees and flew it to the other corner of the back of the warehouse. He tilted the control stick to the right and the drone looked down that side of the building. One sleeping guard. No dogs. No real threats of any type.

“We’re clear,” Hail told his crew. Then he added, “I need to set this thing down to save power.”

Hail tilted the aircraft backward, and the drone began drifting back away from the light and back toward the inner perimeter of the fence. He brought it down slowly and directed it toward the corner of the fence. From that vantage point, the drone had a good view of both the backside of the building as well as the entire side of the structure the guard was leaning on. Gently and silently, Hail brought the drone down onto its tripod base and then released the throttle. The video image stabilized and Hail relaxed.

“Good job,” Renner told him.

“Now it’s your turn,” Hail told Renner.

“I’m on it,” Renner said.

Mimicking the motions Hail had performed only moments ago, Renner lifted an identical drone out of the back of *Blondie*. Its name was *Sex Pistols*, and its job was to land on the opposite corner of the warehouse property. With both combat drones situated in those positions, three sides of the warehouse could be covered with only two drones.

With *Gun N' Roses* having already performed the recon and silently standing guard, Renner didn’t have to worry about being spotted. Therefore, he took a more direct approach by gaining altitude and flying directly over the fence and then over the top of the warehouse at two hundred feet in the dark sky. If five fully awake guards were doing nothing but watching the sky, they might have been able to detect something flutter in front of the bright moon, but that wasn’t currently the case down below. Renner flew over the top of the warehouse and quickly brought the drone down in the other back corner, inside the barbed wire fence.

“Good job,” Hail said, returning the compliment.

“Nothing to it,” Renner said.

“So much for the known. Now for the unknown,” Hail announced.

“Knox, let’s get *Men at Work* busy,” Hail ordered.

“Roger that,” Knox said.

The young pilot wasted no time lifting the third full-sized mini-drone out of the back of *Blondie*. Rugmon had taken the same combat drone that Renner and Hail had flown and had replaced the ammunition drum with a small acetylene and oxygen tank. The M4 mini-gun had been replaced by remote operated control valves and a 3-axis arm that held a cutting torch. The weight was approximately the same as the combat drones, but as Knox flew *Men at Work* toward the fence, he realized that the balance was off. The drone wanted to go to the right. Instead of correcting the problem by adjusting the speed of each propeller, Knox opted to let the drone lean in that direction and feathered the propellers so the drone was flying sideways. By flying sideways, he was using less power than if he was overcoming the balance issue with engine power alone. This peculiar flight position meant that *Men at Work*’s camera was leaning at an angle as well. Hail tilted his head slightly to compensate as he looked at the video on big screen number three. The fence appeared in the periphery of the lens and then quickly passed underneath the drone. The roofline of the warehouse appeared next, and Knox slowed the drone into a hover. Only then, when he needed to see precisely where he was going to land, did he adjust each of the propeller speeds for balanced flight. Now positioned a foot from the back wall of the warehouse, Knox scanned the ground below for the best place to touch down.

“Are we still all clear?” Knox asked both Hail and Renner.

“We are clear,” Hail answered for the both of them.

Knox hovered the drone next to the back wall of the building and eased off the trigger, slowing the motors and causing the drone to slowly sink toward the ground.

“Keep it tight against the wall,” Hail instructed.

“No problem,” Knox said making small adjustments as he lined up his landing spot. The crew was watching *Men at Work*’s primary camera, which was now pointing directly into the steel wall of the warehouse. Knox had switched to the drone’s vertical landing camera that was mounted between the aircraft’s tripod legs. The camera pointed straight down and reminded Knox of those old clips he had seen when they had landed on the moon. And sure enough, a foot off the ground he was able to say a few of those words he had seen in the clip.

“Picking up dust,” Knox said as dirt flew in all directions. “Two more feet down. Position looks good.”

The view from the main camera had not changed. The side of the warehouse was no more than nine inches from the lens. If it wasn't for the bright moon reflecting off the tin-like surface, it would be a black wall and invisible.

"*Tranquility base here,*" Knox said. "*Houston, the Eagle has landed.*"

"Nice," Hail told his pilot.

A smattering of applause and "Atta-boys" rose up from the crew waiting for their turn.

Hail checked the time again. Now it was 3:31a.m.

"Man, you have to get this thing cutting fast," he told Knox, who had already begun unhinging the long arm that held the cutting torch.

In order to pack the complicated arm into the drone, Rugmon had designed it to fold over on itself; much like a wrist, elbow and shoulder could move on a human. Unlike a human, all three of these joints could fold up to a very flat five-degree angle. Knox had to unfold each joint, each section of the arm, one section at a time. The crew watched the arm come into view on *Men at Work's* main camera. At first, only the brass looking torch could be seen. Then as the next section unfolded, the arm extended closer to the wall. And when Knox had fully extended the arm, he had to point the camera up at a higher angle in order to see the entire cutting arm in a single shot.

Knox wiggled the arm around and then pointed the torch down at the camera and waved it at the crew.

"Hello, down there," he clowned.

"We see it can wave," Hail commented. "The question is, can it cut?"

"Let's find out," Knox said.

"I'll operate the gas, and you do the cutting," Renner told Knox.

"Wait a second," Hail said. "Let's check the inside of the warehouse before we get started."

Hail took over *BEP's* camera and zoomed in toward the office window. Behind the glass, he saw Trang sleeping and that was all. He assumed that there was probably a guard stationed outside the front door of the warehouse and at least one more at the front gate. But right now, no active guards were in sight. Hail didn't find this level of security unreasonable, considering that the entire country was under guard. It wasn't as if they had a huge immigration problem with unknown people clamoring to get into North Korea. A few guards were more than enough to guard a place that the North Koreans would assume was safe to begin with.

"All is quiet," Hail reported. "Start cutting," he told Knox.

Knox twisted the torch back toward the sheet metal and told Renner, "Light it up."

Renner turned on the gas nozzles and pressed an icon that was labeled IGNITOR.

Mounted under the tip of the torch, a small jagged wheel began to spin under a spring-loaded flint. A flash of sparks caused the video image to grey out momentarily as a long orange flame grabbed on the end of the torch. The video image now turned white as the camera tried to compensate its exposure going from moon dark to sun bright. Renner adjusted the gas mixture until he produced a long blue flame. Renner then messed around with different camera filters, until he found one that allowed enough light into the lens to see the metal, yet it shielded enough light to prevent the video from blooming out.

“OK, you are good to cut,” Renner told Knox.

Using his control sticks to remotely operate the arm, Knox slowly pressed both controllers forward and the torch moved toward the sheet metal. This wasn't a new experience for Alex Knox. Over the last few days, he had used a test control station in the lab, as well as the same exact drone, to cut a two by two-foot hole in a similar piece of galvanized steel. The first hole he cut in the lab looked like a dinosaur had ripped into the metal with its teeth, and he had run out of gas before completing the ragged mess. But as Knox got more time at the controls, his next attempt looked like a lawnmower had gnawed on the steel. On his next attempt, the hole looked like a large rock had been shot through the metal, and the subsequent trial looked like a blob of searing plasma had melted the metal. Finally, on his fifth attempt, Knox had cut out a relatively square and precise opening. At least it was good enough to fly a drone through.

Knox manipulated the robotic arm and pressed the torch up against the metal. The flame flattened and hissed in protest. The torch began to cut. From his practice sessions, Knox knew that he had to move quickly. Rugmon had built the tanks to hold a specific amount of gas; just enough to complete the hole with about one minute of burn time left in reserve. This left just one minute of leeway in case Knox screwed up the cut. If indeed the cut was incomplete the only choice Hail's team would have would be to shoot out the remaining bits of metal. And if it came down to that, they might as well just go through the front door with guns blazing.

Knox began the cut high and to the left, reaching up and out as far as the drone's arm would extend. He then began cutting in a downward direction, slowly, watching the metal separate under the flame.

Through the lens of *Guns N' Roses*, Hail monitored the sleeping guard. So far, so good. The North Korean had made no movements.

Renner watched the other side of the warehouse from the camera on *Sex Pistols*.

Both men also watched the screen above them that showed video from inside the warehouse. No activity. Trang was still sleeping soundly in his chair. If there

were any guards in the warehouse or outside of the office door, they could not be seen from *BEP's* current camera angle.

Knox finished his first vertical cut, a gash in the steel about twenty-four inches long. Molten red metal dripped from the cuts and onto the ground in front of the drone.

“Eighty percent gas left,” Renner told Knox.

“Rugmon didn’t leave much to play around with,” Knox complained, concentrating on the new direction of the cut.

“Sorry, I know you wanted to sign your work when you were done, but we don’t have either the gas or the time,” Hail quipped.

“The guard is waking up,” Kara warned Hail.

Hail checked the video feed. Sure enough, the guard had pulled himself off the wall and was standing up groggily, rubbing his eyes.

“Should I stop cutting?” Knox asked.

“No, not yet,” Hail told him. “We’ll keep an eye on the guard to watch what he does.”

The horizontal cut that Knox was making was almost done, and he prepared to start moving the torch upwards.

The guard looked to his right for a moment and then to his left toward the back of the warehouse. Hail watched him closely from *Guns N’ Roses’* camera. For a moment it looked as if the guard had made up his mind to walk toward the front of the building, but then, almost as an afterthought, the soldier made a slow turn toward the back of the property and began a slow plod in that direction.

“No,” Hail said. “*Don’t do it.*”

“Should I stop cutting?” Knox asked.

“Wait one,” Hail told him.

An icon on Hail’s screen read GUN CAM and Hail pressed it, and the video was swapped out with a high-res image that had a gunsight painted in the middle. Hail reacquired the guard who was still walking toward the rear of the warehouse. Hail zoomed in and placed the M4’s virtual crosshairs on the man’s forehead.

“Don’t do it, dude,” Hail said, and he meant it.

It would be bad. Hail really didn’t want to kill this guy if he didn’t have to. The man was nothing more than a cog in the evil North Korean machine. The soldier was doing what he did so he could eat. Shooting the man this early in the mission was a problem as well. The drone’s gun was relatively quiet, but it wasn’t the whisper that movie producers want you to think. A silenced gun made noise, maybe enough noise to be heard by the guard in the front of the warehouse, or the guard positioned at the gate. And even if he had to put this guy down and no one heard the shot, the

other guards might come looking for him. And when they found him, all hell would break loose.

A hundred feet from the rear of the building, Hail told Knox, “Stop cutting and stay silent.”

Renner pressed an icon and extinguished the torch. The metal glowed red in the dark night. It was bright enough Hail thought it might be detectable from the guard glancing around the back of the building, but it was what it was.

The soldier stopped walking for a moment and shook a cigarette out of a pack he pulled from his pants pocket. He lit the cigarette and sucked in some smoke. The tip glowed red and illuminated the man’s face. He was young. Maybe in his early twenties. He looked tired, like he hadn’t slept in days.

Hail kept the gunsight fixed on the red tip of the soldier’s cigarette. A triple tap from the mini-gun and it didn’t matter if it impacted the guard’s forehead or his throat. It would still be instant lights-out for the guy. But the bright red dot in the darkness was a great target.

“Go back,” Hail willed the guard. “Go back and visit your buddies up front.”

But the guard didn’t go back. Instead, he proceeded to walk the remaining distance down the side of the warehouse toward the back corner.

Hail felt his finger tighten on the trigger of his control stick. With his drone positioned in the corner of the property, and the guard just arriving at the corner of the warehouse, this was as close as the soldier would be to Hail and the best time to take a shot. Hail pressed an icon and switched the gun from auto into manual mode. “*Maybe just one quick round would do the trick and minimize the noise,*” Hail thought.

The guard stopped at the corner. Instead of walking around to the backside of the warehouse, the soldier simply poked his head around the corner of the warehouse and took a quick look. By now, the glowing cutting marks had cooled and were no longer a red flag waving in the darkness. The guard must have been satisfied that no trespassers were on the property because he turned back toward the front of the warehouse and began the long walk.

Hail took his finger off the gun trigger and told Knox, “Start cutting again. Our friend is gone.”

Renner turned the gas back on, and Knox pressed the ignitor and lit the torch. Knox repositioned the torch an inch under the third side of his vertical cut, so if any metal had fused back together, the flame would separate it again.

Hail checked the time. Seven minutes had elapsed. It was 3:38 a.m.

Hail told Renner, “Gage, break open *Blondie* and get your pilots ready to fly. We’re running out of time, and as soon as the hole is open, they need to be in the air.”

“Understood,” Renner said.

He accessed *Blondie's* command and control systems and pressed an icon.

Back in the dark field, both of *Blondie's* cargo doors began to open. Tiny electric motors barely made a sound as they lifted the counterbalanced thin sheets of carbon fiber from *Blondie's* back. Once the doors had fully opened, the motors stopped and the drone became perfectly silent again.

Renner got up from his station and walked into the middle of the mission room. He stepped up onto the next tier where the analysts were stationed. The young pilots were looking at him and awaiting their instructions.

“We’re going to do this exactly as we performed it in the simulator,” Renner began. “Each of you has a drone assigned to you as well as a specific location where to land your drone. Our time frame has tightened up, so instead of one drone at a time, we’re going to fly in pairs with less than a minute between launches. Are there any questions?”

Twelve pilots looked at him, and none of them spoke up. Renner felt that was a good omen.

“Starting the last cut,” Knox reported, moving his control stick to the left to complete the box. Sparks, smoke and red-hot goo fled from the cutting torch.

“Less than one minute,” Hail said. “I think you can get them in the air, Gage,” Hail told Renner.

“Roger that,” Renner acknowledged. “Pilots one and two, you are good to liftoff.”

Pilots one and two happened to be the most experienced junior pilots on the ship.

Oliver Fox and Paige Grayson prepped their stations and ran full systems checks on their drones.

Inside the belly of *Blondie*, sixteen drones sat waiting to get airborne. Each of them was stacked on one another, four stacks, four drones per stack. None of the drones was anything special. They were designed with just enough battery power to get them to their LZ and nothing more. They were provisioned with large motors and wide propellers to carry their payload. They had nothing other than a lightweight low-resolution camera.

“Are we ready to fly?” Renner asked Fox and Grayson.

“Yes, sir,” they both reported.

“Oliver, go,” Renner said.

Fox pulled the trigger throttle on the drone called *Thing 1*.

Fox watched his video monitor as his drone cleared *Blondie's* cargo bay doors. Once it had risen four feet, Fox swiveled his controller in the direction of the

warehouse. The video on the drone spiraled into focus. In front of Fox sat a well-lit warehouse.

“Moving toward the wire,” Fox announced.

“Go, Paige,” Renner ordered.

Trying to stay close to her flight partner, Paige pulled the trigger and began swiveling her drone toward the warehouse before it had even cleared the hatch. As soon as she saw the warehouse lights, she tilted her drone forward and began to make up ground on *Thing 2*.

“The cut is almost done,” Knox reported. “Only one more inch.”

Hail didn't know how much noise the metal flap would make when it came loose, so he checked *BEP*'s camera inside the warehouse to confirm that the room was still unoccupied. The two by two-foot piece of metal could fall inward or outward, and they had to be ready for either contingency. If it fell inward and landed on something flammable, they had to have all their drones inside and in place before the warehouse became an inferno. If the flap landed on the outside, then Knox had to make sure that it didn't damage his drone. Either way, Knox understood that once the cut had been made, he had to move *Men at Work* out of the way to make room for the dozen drones headed toward the new opening.

Knox didn't have long to wait. Five seconds later, the torch found its starting point and the metal sheet dropped away and fell inside the warehouse.

Hail brought up *Black Eyed Peas*' control panel. He accessed the camera pan head and rotated it 180 degrees, so the lens was pointing toward the back of the warehouse. The steel beam that *BEP* was resting on blocked some of the floor of the warehouse below, but Hail could clearly see a gaping black hole cut in the wall at the end of one of the wide aisles. He watched the new opening for a moment, waiting to see if there was a flare-up of smoke or fire.

“Looks like we're good,” Hail said. “Good job, Alex,” he told Knox. “Now you need to move your drone out of the way so the *Things* can get in.”

“Will do,” Alex said, discarding the screens that dealt with all the cutting tools and pulling back up the flight control screens. He pressed a few icons and wrapped his hands around the control sticks and lifted *Men at Work* off the ground.

“It's a lot lighter without the gas,” Knox commented.

“Where do you want me to set it down, Marshall?”

“I'd like to get some eyes on the front of the warehouse. Why don't you go over the top of the wire and set it down in the weeds where you can get a good visual of the main gate.”

“OK,” Knox said and pressed the throttle and watched the drone gain altitude. As *Men at Work* cleared the razor fence, Knox saw *Thing 1* and *Thing 2* pass over the fence about five yards away, heading in the opposite direction.

“Wow, it’s getting so busy around here that we’re going to need a flight controller,” Knox joked.

Fox and Grayson flew their drones up to the hole Knox had cut in the warehouse. Very carefully, Fox maneuvered *Thing 1* through the opening, followed immediately by Grayson’s *Thing 2*.

Hail watched closely, understanding that the first nine drones were the most important. Each one of them carried the two-pound shaped charge of RDX, or cyclotrimethylenetrinitramine, as Terry Garber liked to refer to it.

Fox carefully flew his drone down the aisle, staying low in case of a malfunction or a communications problem. If *Thing 1* was going to fall to the floor, then Fox wanted to make sure it was a short distance in order to minimize the noise of impact.

Directly behind him, Paige mimicked his movements and direction.

“Get the next set in the air,” Hail told Renner.

“I’m on it,” Renner confirmed.

Very close to the front office, Fox spotted his designated landing zone. He applied more power to the propellers and climbed five feet in the air before turning to the right at the end of the aisle. Fox flew *Thing 1* directly over the top of one of the large individual sections of the missile. Making very small control stick adjustments, Fox positioned *Thing 1* in a hover over the top of his designated section of an ICBM. He then slowly eased off the throttle. The drone dropped a foot and then gently touched down, resting on top of the massive piece of metal.

Paige’s target was the missile section in front of the stage Oliver had landed on. She climbed at a 45-degree angle and brought *Thing 2* into a hover. She then set her aircraft down on her assigned landing zone without incident.

By the time *Thing 1* and *Thing 2* had touched down, *Thing 3* and *Thing 4* were already inside the warehouse and floating down the aisle.

WONSAN, NORTH KOREA—WAREHOUSE

The sound of a ragged running truck motor woke Victor Kornev. It was a loud diesel engine that sounded as if it was ready to puke out a chunk of iron on the side of the road. But to Kornev, it was the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

Besides sound, the first waking sensory input that Victor noticed was that he was drenched in perspiration. He wiped liquid from his forehead with the sleeve of his already wet shirt. The next sense to wake up was his nose. He breathed in the scent of his own spoiled musk. It was revolting. He could never remember being so dirty. The next item on the waking parade was his stomach. He felt like he wanted to throw up. And he couldn't figure out if he wanted to throw up because of the heat, or his smell, or because of all the disgusting North Korean dishes he had been consuming during his stay. But none of that mattered now because the truck was here.

Kornev unfolded himself from the short back seat of the UAZ in which he had been sleeping. He groaned as his paralyzed extremities came back to life. Once he was seated upright in the back seat, Kornev pushed the front seatback forward and reached for the door handle. He gave it a tug and used the handle to pull himself up and out of the Russian military vehicle.

He took a moment to get his bearings. He glanced toward the closed front gate and saw the diesel rig sitting patiently at a standstill, waiting for someone to let it in.

Kornev walked briskly toward the main gate, only to discover a North Korean guard sleeping soundly against the fence only twenty feet away. He walked over and nudged the soldier with his shoe. The guard awoke and quickly jumped to his feet. Kornev pointed at the gate and told the man in Korean, "Let the truck in."

The soldier nodded many times and bowed many times. Kornev guessed that the man would like to keep his unapproved nap just between the two of them.

The soldier fumbled with his keys for a moment before finding the correct one. He plugged it into the padlock and gave it a turn. The guard unthreaded the chain from the gate and swung it open.

Kornev stepped to the side and motioned for the truck to come in. As the truck passed, he jumped onto the cab's step and pointed the driver toward the entrance of the warehouse. Glancing back, Kornev verified that indeed the driver was hauling the last section of the missile. He could have kissed the driver or shot him. Either way, he was happy because he knew he would be out of the country in a matter of hours.

The truck crossed the dirt yard and came to a stop in front of the closed warehouse doors. Kornev jumped off the step and walked over to the office door. A North Korean soldier was guarding the door. This man wasn't asleep. The soldier bowed to him and opened the door to the office. Kornev stepped in and found Trang Won Dong sleeping in his hard chair. Kornev shook his head at the sight, mystified how the man could sleep so soundly in that position. The Russian walked over and tapped the bottom leg of the chair with his foot. Trang let out a large snore and then a cough and then his eyes snapped open. He looked up at Kornev with reverence, as if he had materialized before him from thin air.

"The truck is here," Kornev said in English. "I have your man opening the warehouse doors."

He nodded sleepily and tried to stand. He wobbled for a moment, unsteady on feet that were still sleeping. The small man picked up his big hat from the desk and placed it on his shaved head. Both men walked out the front office door and turned to the right. The soldier that had been at the front door was now wrestling to open the massive warehouse doors that apparently hadn't been oiled in the last century. One door was open, but the other was stuck. Kornev went over to help the guard get it rolling on its track. The tall sheet metal door squealed and then there was a crack as a rock was pulverized under its wheels. The pushing eased and the door slid open the rest of the way without any other issues. He hoped that this would be the last of his menial tasks before he got paid and left North Korea.

Then Kornev noticed that the truck's crane was located on the back of the trailer, instead of the front, which meant that it was pointing the wrong direction. In order for the crane to reach the area they had reserved for the last missile section; the truck would have to be backed in.

Kornev walked over and climbed back onto the cab's stair and told the driver in Korean, "Sorry, you need to back it in."

The driver nodded and he stepped back down.

To Victor Kornev, it seemed as if he'd been sucked into a time-warped universe where one minute in his old universe took five minutes in this new one. Either everything took longer to accomplish or it simply appeared that way. Sure, Kornev was hot, thirsty, hungry and needed a shower, but from Kornev's perspective it took the truck driver ten minutes to circle the lot and back the big rig into the warehouse. It was at that point that Kornev decided he wasn't going to wait for the unloading process. The way these people moved, that process could take a decade.

Kornev walked over to Trang and said, "All the parts are here. If you don't mind, I would like to get paid and leave your wonderful country."

The minister was pleased that Kornev had a great admiration for his country. He nodded his head, smiled widely and grunted, "Very good," in English.

The two men left the warehouse without ever noticing the strange contraptions that were sitting on top of each of their coveted missile stages. Grey, relatively flat and inconspicuous, the drones were easy to miss.

The office was even hotter than Kornev remembered, and it stank of just about everything that had ever had an odor associated with it.

Trang walked to the corner of the office and removed a section of the wooden floor. Under the square section of flooring was a small safe that was cemented into the slab beneath it. He began to twirl the combination lock this way and that. Again, the weird Pyongyang Time warp played on Kornev's nerves. It shouldn't take as long as it was taking for the dignitary to open a safe.

Kornev was considering actually timing the extraction of the diamonds from the safe to verify he hadn't lost his mind when his phone rang.

It was a call from a number he didn't recognize.

"This is Victor," Kornev answered.

He listened to the voice on the other end.

Kornev's face slackened noticeably as he took in the words from the caller.

Trang Won Dong finished opening the safe and pulled the top off.

Kornev said angrily, "Who is this?"

The minister turned around just in time to see Kornev run from the office and out the front door. Trang ran out the door after him holding up a black bag of diamonds, yelling, "Where are you going?"

He was shocked and confused to see Kornev jump into the UAZ, start the engine, slam the vehicle into gear and then drive out the opened front gate, leaving nothing but dust and millions in diamonds behind.

BUSAN, S. KOREA—ABOARD THE *GERALD R. FORD* AIRCRAFT CARRIER

Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan was crazy. At least that's what the men in his squadron thought of him. Not just because he had volunteered to fly the suicidal mission into North Korea to take out a warehouse, but because he also harbored a vendetta. He was the squadron leader after all and could have certainly guilted one of his men into taking the sortie. But he hadn't. When the mission had come down from the top, Nolan had accepted it even before the men in his squadron knew the mission was available.

In force, the mission was doable. But the lieutenant commander's men knew that a single fighter flying into North Korean airspace had about as much chance as a kite in a hurricane. Five miles out to sea—no problem. Five miles on the friendly side of the DMZ—easy. Five miles into Wonsan—*No Bueno*. Between the radar and anti-aircraft batteries, the North Korean jets just sitting in a ready state on numerous North Korean airfields, and the North Korean pilots drooling at the prospect of getting them some American jet fighter ass, it was not a good mission at all. The probability of surviving the mission was low. The probability of dying or being captured was high. Only a crazy person would voluntarily jump into a cockpit and fly it without backup.

And his men also knew that their brave leader was crazy in another way. He was crazy for some payback. His twin brother had been killed in *The Five*. And ever since that happened, Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan had become withdrawn and morose. It didn't help matters that the American military had very little to offer in response to *The Five*. Two years after *The Five*, the best response the United States could muster was some spot bombings here and there. Nothing of any real consequence. No real enemy to go after, unless their government made all Muslims enemy combatants. If that happened, then there would be plenty of countries to bomb. More than enough to go around. More payback than Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan could handle in a lifetime, no matter how short that was. But that wasn't the case. And the limp-dick response from the US of A frustrated the lieutenant commander to no end.

So, when this mission to go in fast and low, spitting missiles at the North Koreans came about, well, all his men knew why Nolan had taken the gig. He was crazy.

Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan now sat in his Lockheed Martin F-35C, hooked into the catapult of the Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier. The ship had just arrived at the Fleet Activities Chinhae Navy Base in Busan, South Korea.

The lieutenant commander checked his watch—3:44 a.m. One minute until blast off. Surprisingly, he wasn't scared. He wondered if his brother had been scared when his Virgin Atlantic flight 1082 was shot down leaving Orlando International. He

guessed there wasn't enough time to be scared. Low altitude. Maybe only ten seconds until impact. Even so, Nolan was sure that his brother had been pulling on the ejection handle that wasn't under his seat. It would have been a habit. His brother had been a jet pilot as well. The ejection handle—a magic handle that could shoot you far away from danger and then float you down to the ground. Reaching and tugging for salvation. Foster Nolan supposed he could reach his handle if the mission got too heavy in North Korea. Maybe he could blow away a few North Koreans on the ground before they rounded him up. But it really didn't matter. He had been profoundly sad since he had lost his brother. Clinically depressed is what the shrinks would say if he'd let it all out. But he hadn't. He had contained his ailment, his secret. And the little bugger had slowly changed over time from depression, to anger, to revenge, and now it would seem it had mutated into a death wish. That was OK as well. Hell, that's why he was a pilot. If there wasn't any chance of dying, then everybody would want the job.

The lieutenant commander went over a final checklist and waited for the yellow-shirted catapult officer, the shooter as they called him, to give him a thumbs-up. His flight would only last about a half hour. Fifteen minutes to go in, a few minutes to neutralize the target, and then on full afterburners return home. That is, if he came home. If not, then his plane had probably been reduced to ash and tinsel that rained down and decorated the jungles of North Korea. Nolan often thought of dying. He fantasized about crashing his 337-million-dollar aircraft into the warehouse instead of just sending a few missiles into the building. That would make a bigger bang. But then all pilots thought about stuff like that. At least he thought they did.

The lieutenant commander checked his watch again. Time to go. He saw a flurry of activity around him as the guys on the ground did their best to make sure he was safe. SAFE. That was funny. It's like giving a flu shot to a guy being executed in the electric chair. Fifteen minutes from now, he would be a bird in a shooting gallery. Or not. Down on the deck, he saw the shooter in the yellow shirt getting ready to do his thing, so Nolan spun up the Pratt & Whitney F135 turbofan engines to max power.

Foster Nolan put his stick in all four corners and cycled the rudders to demonstrate to the deck crew that his controls were free. He then turned on his lights and held still. Ten seconds later, Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan saluted the man in yellow who was standing next to his plane. The man gave him a thumbs-up, dropped down on one knee and pointed toward the bow of the ship. Nolan pushed the throttle to full afterburner, the ship's catapult cut loose and ripped the F-35 off the deck and threw it out into the darkness.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

Men at Work sat silently in the green wet field only thirty yards from the main gate of the warehouse. Knox was expecting absolutely nothing. Thus, he was very surprised to see the headlights of a large vehicle crawling up the dirt road toward the warehouse. He watched for a moment and then zoomed *Men at Work*'s camera in closer to get a better look at the truck. He looked away from his screen and told Hail, "Marshall, I believe the last piece of the missile is arriving right now."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Hail said.

Knox pressed an icon and the video streaming from *Men at Work* popped up on large screen number four. Hail swiveled his chair a few degrees to center on the monitor. Sure enough, a large diesel rig with a lowboy trailer was stopped at the front gate of the warehouse. The unmistakable huge cylinder was resting in the middle of the trailer. The only difference Hail could tell between this rig and the one before it was the crane mounted on the end of the trailer instead of the back of the truck.

"What's the status of the deployment?" Hail asked.

Renner, who was still manning *Sex Pistols*, responded, "Almost done. *Thing 9* and *Thing 10* are entering the warehouse now."

Hail turned his attention to the video on the big screen that was being streamed by *BEP*. The interior of the warehouse was bright, in stark contrast to all the other videos that were being shot in low light from outside. Each time Hail switched between monitors, it took his eyes a few moments to adjust.

He saw two drones fly in through the hole in the back of the building. The contraptions looked alien, even to Hail. They looked even more out of place in the warehouse, weird shaped flying apparatuses contrasted by common crates and boxes. Both drones stopped and seemed to look around for a moment. Then, still in a hover, they went straight up toward the ceiling. Hail tracked them on the monitor as one *Thing* went left and the other right. A moment later, Hail watched each of the drones touch down on the top of a wide stack of tall wooden crates.

Renner reported, "Two more drones to go."

Hail turned his attention back to the screen that showed the main gate. He saw a large man walking out toward the truck. Hail had to assume he had come from the office. However, all he saw in the office was the sleeping North Korean minister. The big man kicked a body that was lying next to the fence. Then Hail saw the awakened body get to his feet. He bowed over and over to the man who had just kicked him back to life. He opened the gate, and the truck rumbled in.

“Who is that?” Hail asked Kara. The big man had now jumped up on the running rail of the truck.

“I don’t know.” Kara told him. “It’s too dark to tell.”

The main gate wasn’t well lit, and the man was standing on the truck’s step on the opposite side of the camera, so it was hard to make out his features.

“If you don’t need me right now, I have to use the ladies’ room,” Kara said.

“Down the hall and to the right,” Hail told her.

But once Kara had exited the mission center, she did not go down the hall and to the right. Instead, she ran to the nearest set of stairs and began climbing as fast as she could. As she made her way up deck after deck, she fumbled to get her phone ready. The last flight of stairs terminated at a thick bulkhead door that led out onto the top deck. Kara twisted the steering wheel handle until the door’s stubby metal fingers let go of the wall, and she pushed it open. Once on the top deck, she wasted no time entering the digits she had committed to memory and hit the dial button.

“This is Victor,” the voice on the other end of the phone said.

Kara lowered her voice and began talking in a husky Mexican accent.

“This is a courtesy call to let you know that an airstrike will take place at your warehouse in less than 90 seconds.”

“Who is this?” Victor Kornev asked.

“This is a friend. You now have 75 seconds to clear the area. Hellfire missiles are inbound.”

Kara hung up the phone and hoped that Kornev had taken her warning seriously.

*_*_*

Hail took control of *BEP*’s camera and turned it toward the front of the warehouse. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. A sweaty and disheveled Victor Kornev was helping a North Korean soldier open one of the warehouse doors. Hail looked to his right to confirm with Kara that it was indeed Kornev, and he then realized she wasn’t back from the bathroom.

Hail felt a burst of adrenaline. Kornev was still there. If everything went well, the Russian arms dealer, the guy who sold the weapon to the people who had killed his family, would be in the warehouse when it turned into a ball of fire. Hail was very pleased with that thought.

Hail noticed that the stubborn warehouse door had finally been pushed open, and Kornev stepped back to allow the truck to pull in. There was a look of annoyance on Victor’s face as he climbed back onto the truck’s step and said

something to the driver. The driver nodded and began to pull the truck back out and away from the warehouse.

Hail watched Kornev stand by the doors for about thirty seconds. The Russian then made a face, shook his head and said something to the short North Korean general with the big hat. The little man looked as if he had agreed to something and then both men walked over to the office door and went inside.

“What’s the status of the drones?” Hail asked.

“Just waiting on the last two,” Renner told him.

“OK, the warehouse is clear. Now is our only chance,” Hail told him.

Renner instructed the young pilots of *Thing 11* and *Thing 12* to enter the building and find their landing zones.

Hail zoomed *BEP*'s camera in close on the window of the warehouse office. He saw the North Korean officer disappear from view, as if he had dropped something on the floor and gone down on all fours to pick it up. But that wasn't the case. The North Korean never reappeared. Kornev was still looking down at the place where the minister had dropped from sight. Then Kornev looked up, reached into his pocket and placed his phone to his ear. He said something and waited. By his facial expression, Hail could tell Kornev wasn't happy with whatever the caller was telling him. Then he responded angrily to the caller. The Russian waited again. This time, he didn't look angry. Hail thought that he looked scared. And then, out of the blue, Kornev bolted out the front office door.

Hail looked across all the big screens to see where Kornev was heading in such a hurry. *Men at Work*'s video stream showed him running toward a weird looking Jeep-type vehicle parked in the yard. A second later, Kornev had jumped into the Jeep and began driving toward the main gate in a hurry.

“He can't get away,” Hail stated.

“Well there's really nothing we can do to stop him,” Renner said, but Hail had already grabbed his flight controllers, and *Guns N' Roses* was airborne before Renner had finished his sentence.

“What are you doing, Marshall?” Renner yelled.

“If you haven't noticed, *my wife* is in the bathroom so I'm going to kill Kornev,” Hail said, sounding every bit as demented as his statement would indicate.

Renner thought that Hail sounded mad. Mad as in crazy.

“This is a bad idea,” Renner said, but he already knew it was a lost cause. Renner had never seen his friend change his mind once he had committed to something. It could be as big as closing a questionable corporate deal to parachuting. Once Hail had started moving forward, only an act of God could pull him out of the game.

Hail was concentrating on flying. His mouth was tight and his jaw was clinched as he tilted the front of the drone forward to generate more speed. His trigger finger was pressed so hard against the throttle controls that it made a small cracking sound as the plastic began to give way.

“Just get the rest of the *Things* in place and blow up the damn warehouse,” Hail ordered.

Up ahead, Hail could see that Kornev’s Jeep had already driven out the gate and had disappeared down the narrow dirt road. *Guns N’ Roses* was heavy with ammo and not designed for a chase, but so far it appeared to be doing a pretty good job. Hail watched the fence line clear just feet beneath his aircraft. Looking down on the dirt road, the moon was bright and Hail saw Kornev’s Jeep about a hundred yards ahead. Hail switched to the drone’s targeting camera and lined up the crosshairs on the middle of Kornev’s vehicle. Hail toggled the gun into auto mode. He then flipped off the gun’s safety and squeezed the trigger on his left joystick. A short burst of bullets spat from the gun. Hail saw sparks as the steel-jacketed rounds sheared off the latch securing the vehicle’s canvas top. The fabric peeled back and Hail saw a very surprised Victor Kornev glance back in his direction. Hail was certain that he could not see the drone. The drone didn’t have any navigation lights or any visual clues that would give it away. Kornev could not see his drone, but Hail was quite sure that he saw the next round of bullets that punched three big holes into his dashboard.

Kornev looked back at the road and jammed his foot on the accelerator. The Jeep gained speed and Hail compensated by tilting the nose of the drone down and feathering its propellers. Hail let another volley of lead fly from the M4 mini-gun and waited for the result. The bullets hit low and to the right, disappearing into the back seat of the vehicle. It was at that point that Hail realized that shooting a gun from a stationary drone and shooting the same gun from a drone doing 40 miles per hour wasn’t in the least bit comparable. The calibration of the M4’s gunsights was off, and Hail realized that he had to lead the target.

Hail began to gain on the Jeep and then some static began to dance across his screen. Nothing major, just a few lightning bolts of interference and then they were gone.

Tran said, “You are getting too far away, Marshall. We’re starting to lose communications with you.”

Hail gritted his teeth and said, “Just another minute is all I need.”

Hail placed the gun sight six feet in front of the top of Kornev’s blond head. He squeezed the trigger, and the screen became blocky and the video lagged for a second. A moment later the video image had recovered. Hail didn’t have a clue where the bullets had gone, but he knew that they didn’t hit Kornev because he was still driving. Driving and looking back over his shoulder at the invisible death machine that was following him.

“Marshall, you’re almost out of power,” Renner yelled. “And you know the rule. Leave nothing behind. You have to break this off.”

“No way,” Hail sneered, pulling the trigger again. This time he saw Kornev pull his hand off the steering wheel like he’d been bit by a viper. Hail knew that a bullet had struck Kornev’s hand. Hail had finally zeroed in on the range.

A blaring beeping sound went off indicating that *Guns N’ Roses* had less than 5% battery power remaining.

Shana Tran warned Hail, “Comms will fail very soon.”

The video on Hail’s screen was drifting in and out, as if a child was playing with the remote control. Picture, static, pixels, picture, static, big blocks, little colored blocks, fragments of a picture and then the image turned into black and white, but Hail could still see Kornev’s Jeep below.

“Just one more shot,” Hail said to himself. “Just one more.”

Renner walked over to Hail and put his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“It’s over, Marshall.”

Renner entered a four-digit number on Hail’s left control screen and pressed a button labeled SELF DESTRUCT.

Hail actually saw the fireball before the video had disappeared.

“No, damn it, no,” Hail cried. “I almost had him,” he told Renner. “Just another few seconds is all I needed.”

Renner looked at him and said, “In just a few more seconds *Guns N’ Roses* would be lying in the middle of the road just waiting to be discovered. You know the rule. Leave nothing behind.”

“I almost had him,” Hail repeated.

Renner just shook his head. He pat Hail on the back.

“We’ll get him another time. Now, don’t we have a warehouse to blow up?”

WONSAN, NORTH KOREA—WAREHOUSE

Victor Kornev had three good reasons for running. Number one: Only a handful of people knew his phone number. Whoever had called him wasn't a prank caller or had accidentally performed a butt dial. Number two: Less than a handful of people knew where he was at that exact moment. Number three: Only two people that he knew of, other than the truck driver and the guards, knew what was in the warehouse.

The union of those three facts meant that the caller was on the level. And as far as Victor was concerned, there was no downside to getting the hell out of there. He would put about a mile distance between himself and the warehouse, then turn around and watch and wait. After a few hours, if nothing went boom, then he would drive back, get paid and get the hell out of North Korea.

As Kornev ran out of the office, he first considered just running out the front gate. And then he recalled seeing the keys in that UAZ, or the GOAT as the Russians called it, out front. He was glad that the engine turned over and he didn't have to go through some starting ritual to get the goat moving. He found what he thought was first gear, let out the clutch and pointed the car toward the main gate.

Kornev wasn't aware as he drove that he kept periodically looking out his window and up into the sky to see if some sort of aircraft was bearing down on his position. But he was fully aware that he needed to put some distance between himself and the warehouse.

After he had blasted past the guard at the main gate and centered the car on the little dirt road ahead, he was starting to feel good about the situation. Someone somewhere, a friend he didn't even know he had, was looking out for him. Good friends in his business were hard to find.

Kornev was thinking happy thoughts about his new friend when sparks fell into his lap and the canvas top on the goat cut loose and went sailing back over his head.

At first, Kornev thought an electronic component in the dashboard was shorting out and throwing sparks. Then he looked down and saw that the latch that had secured the fabric top to the goat was lying in his lap. That was weird. The goat wasn't the best vehicle in the world, but a short circuit under the dashboard shouldn't cause the ragtop's handle to fall off.

He looked up into the sky for an inbound aircraft and three bullets ripped three holes into the goat's dashboard. The attack was so sudden and so unexpected, that Kornev didn't react at all. One second, there were no holes in the goat's dashboard, and then a second later, three perfect holes stitched through the top of the dash like they were part of the vehicle's initial design. Maybe cooling holes of some type.

Victor compensated for his delayed reaction by stepping hard into the accelerator. He now understood that he was being targeted, but he didn't know by what or who.

He craned his neck and looked back over his shoulder at the road behind him. Nothing. Then he looked backward and up into the night sky. Nothing, or at least nothing he could see.

Then, over the engine noise, Kornev heard something very familiar. It wasn't a typical sound one heard when being attacked in a vehicle traveling on a North Korean road in the middle of nowhere. He heard the unmistakable sound of a silencer. PLAP-PLAP-PLAP. Three quick rounds. A short burst from an automatic silenced weapon of some type. Kornev recognized the sound because he had sold thousands of silencers of every type for just about every gun he could name. He had test-fired thousands of rounds through silencers to make sure they were indeed silent. Or at least as silent as one could be.

Victor looked behind him in the goat's rear-view mirror. He saw nothing. He looked up again into the sky and saw nothing. And then a bullet went through his right hand. It felt like he had been stung by an extremely venomous creature. He snatched his hand off the steering wheel and tried to shake out the pain. Instead, he shook out blood that went sailing into his face and onto the goat's still intact windshield.

That's when Victor Kornev knew he was going to die. Something was on him and he couldn't shake it. He couldn't even see it. It was a new weapon of some sort and his last regret on this earth was he wouldn't live long enough to sell it to any of his customers.

Victor kept his foot pegged to the accelerator. He fully understood that in the next few seconds his head would catch a volley of lead and he would be dead before he even knew what hit him. But what actually hit him was heat. An enormous fireball erupted just above and behind him. He could feel his neck and the back of his head prick and tingle as the flames tried to catch him. The sound was so loud and the shockwave was so close he nearly drove off the road. But luck was with him on that night. The fireball faded and condensed in Victor's rearview mirror, leaving black smoke that had dissipated into the jungle before Kornev had made his next turn.

What it was, Kornev may never know. But this wasn't the airstrike that his friendly caller had warned him about. This was something entirely different and unique. This was something that Kornev wanted to get his hands on.

THE WHITE HOUSE SITUATION ROOM—WASHINGTON, D.C.

The president was beginning to get antsy. For the last hour, they had all been staring at a black screen that had four white dots arranged in a box pattern. Four dots of light she was told were the four lights that were mounted on the corners of the warehouse in North Korea. But from the satellite image, little else could be seen. If she stared long enough, she supposed she could make out a color difference between the dots, a little lighter shade of black that would have been the roof of the warehouse. But she knew that it really didn't matter what was on the screen as long as it was indeed the warehouse that housed the missile parts. Other than that, they were all waiting for the four white dots to turn into a single massive white and red and blue blob that would indicate that Marshall Hail had done what he said he would do.

"It is 3:50 a.m. Pyongyang Time," General Ford announced to the room. "Our jet fighter is in the air and should be on time, if there are no unexpected complications."

"Like he gets shot out of the air before he gets there?" suggested the director of the FBI, Trevor Rodgers.

"No, like Hail blows the place up in the next ten minutes," the general replied.

"If he is going to blow up the place, then he is certainly cutting it close," the CIA man, Jarret Pepper said.

"Why would he cut it so close?" the president asked.

No one answered.

The president looked at all the men's faces in the room. Some looked away. Some pretended to be looking at the four white dots on the screen, and the few others looked down at the table.

"None of you told him about the back-up plan, did you?" the president asked.

Silence.

"Why not?" the president asked, her tone dry and accusatory.

Both the general and Pepper began to answer at the same time.

The general stopped talking first which left Pepper to answer the question.

Pepper started over.

"I gave permission to Kara to tell Hail if she thought it was necessary. After all, Hail doesn't have any live bodies near the warehouse. Kara reported to me that the entire mission is being executed using drones. Most of them are probably disposable drones. She also told me that Hail's timetable was 3:00 a.m., which means that he is either running late or he has failed."

“I still like the notion of plausible deniability,” the president warned her staff. “I wanted the use of our military as a last resort, not as the first resort if Hail was running a little late.”

She looked at the men with unabashed disdain.

“Don’t you think it would have made more sense to coordinate our back-up plan with Hail?” she asked.

The general answered, “But we just don’t know Hail well enough to know how he would react to that suggestion. Once we told him about it, if he disagreed and we still went forward with the plan, it could get ugly.”

“Ugly how?” the president asked.

“If we wanted to use Hail in the future, then that might tarnish the relationship. And if we really made him mad, then—” the general let his sentence go, deciding that getting into deep waters at this point was counterproductive.

The president composed herself. She smiled. Her smile was just for show and everyone in the room knew it.

“I count on all of you to make the correct decisions in matters such as these. I’m neither a military person nor a warrior, but I do have common sense. And my common sense tells me that we’re making a mistake by not coordinating our efforts with Marshall Hail concerning our back-up plan. But I will defer to all of your years of experience and expertise in the area of warfare.”

Just as the president completed her speech, the dark screen in the dim room turned white and blue and yellow. There was no sound, just the vivid colors as they danced across the clean shiny surface of the conference room table, the burst of light temporarily blinding those who had been staring directly at the dark screen.

*_*_*

Hail saw the door open and Kara walked back into the mission center.

She walked up to Hail and asked, “Did I miss anything?”

Hail considered telling her that he tried to kill Kornev, but since he had failed, he simply told her no.

“But I’m glad you are back in time to see the big boom,” Hail told her.

Hail looked at *BEP*’s video feed and was comforted to see that the missile section had been dropped off and the driver and truck were gone. The warehouse doors had been wheeled shut and the warehouse was quiet once again. The last *Thing* holding one of the nine shaped charges had been flown up onto the new missile section, and now all of the explosive drones were in place.

“Knox,” Hail said, “Turn *Blondie*’s microphone back on.”

Alex Knox reached over and unmuted the mic on *Blondie*, and the cricket noise jumped back into the room.

Hail then looked over in Renner’s direction and gave a nod.

Renner, who had been waiting for Hail to give the signal, called out to his *Thing* pilots, “Fingers over your DESTRUCT icons and wait for my countdown.”

If there was any part of the mission that Hail thought was low-tech, this was it. He would have preferred that all the DESTRUCT salvos to all the drones had been synchronized into one switch, but there were too many drones, too much programming, and too little time to put all that together. Therefore, the last step in the mission would rely on twelve fingers pressing twelve icons that looked like a pack of dynamite on twelve separate screens. A little too soon, and one premature detonation could knock the drones off the top of the missile parts, and the shape charges would have no effect. A little late and the exact same thing could happen.

“We will do this exactly as we trained. On zero, we will all press at the same time,” Renner instructed.

Renner looked at Hail, and Hail gave him another nod and smiled.

Renner began the countdown.

“Five, four, three, two, one, ZERO!”

Hail watched *Black Eyed Peas*’ video signal turn red and then disappear. *BEP*’s mother drone, *Electric Light Orchestra*, was vaporized at the same instant, and by default, all the communications were automatically routed over to *Blondie*. Along with his crew, Hail watched the destruction from both *Blondie*’s and *Men at Work*’s video cameras.

Minutes before the blast, Renner had flown *Sex Pistols* and landed it atop the roof of the warehouse. That drone had been destroyed along with the others. Hundreds of rounds of spare ammunition that had been attached to *Sex Pistols* had been thrown into the air and were falling like metal rain around the ruins.

It was breathtaking. The sound, even over the mission center’s small speakers, was immense. The crew could actually feel the power of the blast as a low rumble distorted the mid tones and the screeching highs fluctuated wildly throughout the room. The view from both surviving cameras was overwhelming. It looked more like a nuclear explosion than a conventional blast. The shaped charges directed their energy straight down. When the shockwave could no longer penetrate the earth, it rebounded and went straight up and out making a mushroom cloud.

Men at Work fell over on its side as the shockwave blew past it and continued on out into the North Korean countryside. *Blondie*’s camera shuttered, went white, went black and then came back online in time to see the aftermath, a roaring fire that was consuming anything that was left to burn. The building was no longer there. All that

was left were dozens of fiery piles of parts and crates, office furniture and mangled pieces no longer recognizable. A moment later, a secondary explosion puffed fire out in all directions and another shockwave shook *Blondie's* camera.

“Oh my God!” Kara said.

“Oh my God, indeed,” Hail agreed.

Renner had a huge smile on his face.

Hail looked around the room and everyone had the exact same smile. Hail realized that he was smiling as well.

“You did it,” Kara told him. “You really did it.”

“I can’t believe you had any doubts,” Hail responded with a degree of cockiness.

As the sound of the blast faded, a voice came over the mission room speakers. Hail recognized it as Dallas Stone, who was in the ship’s security office.

“Marshall, *Prince's* radar has detected a fast-moving aircraft approaching our position.”

“Do we have an ID on it?” Hail asked.

“Checking now, but it is supersonic and flying low. That would constitute an attack profile.”

The crew’s joy dissipated quickly and the room quieted down so Hail could talk to Stone.

There was a moment of silence and then Stone came back on the speaker.

“It’s ICAO designator ping is showing as United States military—”

A beat and then Stone continued, “Designator F35. I’m cross checking that ICAO code now.”

A moment later, “Its ICAO ping says it is a United States F-35 Lightning Two. Range of seventy-five miles and heading straight for us.”

Hail looked at Kara for a moment, and she shrugged.

“Activate the railgun,” Hail told Dallas.

“Wait,” Kara said, placing her hand on Hail’s shoulder. “I need to tell you something.”

“And what would that be?” Hail asked her, even though he already knew her secret, and understood the intentions of the inbound jet.

Kara looked him directly in the eyes and said, “The United States has a back-up plan in case you were not successful in your mission.”

“And what would that be?” Hail asked in a calm and controlled tone.

“That jet is flying a single sortie to blow up the warehouse, if you had failed to do so. It’s not coming for you, so you can put your big gun away.”

Kara thought that Hail looked angry, but not as angry as she would have expected.

He said, “Do you realize how dangerous that is? It’s dangerous for everyone.”

“I understand,” Kara said, but Hail didn’t believe her.

“We could have shot this asshole out of the sky before he ever made a pass on the warehouse.”

“I understand,” Kara said. She averted her eyes away from Hail’s and back to the screen that showed the burning warehouse.

Hail asked her, “If this is a back-up plan, then why hasn’t this guy turned around and gone home?”

Kara looked back up at Hail and looked perplexed, as if she hadn’t thought of that fact. “I don’t know. Maybe he hasn’t gotten the word yet.”

“Then maybe you should get on the horn with your boss and make sure this guy gets called off before he wakes up every radar and anti-aircraft battery in North Korea. I don’t know if you realize it, but we’re pretty exposed right here in the middle of the Sea of Japan.”

Hail handed Kara his phone. “We don’t have time for you to go to the top deck. Use my phone,” Hail told her.

THE WHITE HOUSE SITUATION ROOM—WASHINGTON, D.C.

Pepper's phone went off, and he saw it was a call coming from Hail. He answered it. "This is Pepper," he said.

"This is Kara," said a concerned voice.

"Great job, Kara. We just saw the warehouse blow up. Really great job!"

"If you just saw it blow up, why is your jet still headed toward North Korea?"

Pepper was confused. "There is no jet headed for North Korea. As soon as the general saw the explosion, he called Naval Operations and told them to scrub the mission."

"Well, Hail's radar shows an F-35 inbound and it is not turning back. If I hadn't told Hail what it was, he may have taken it down."

"He has the armaments to do that?" Pepper asked, truly surprised.

"That's not the point," Kara said angrily. "The point is you need to get this guy turned around before he wakes up all of North Korea."

"I'm on it," Pepper said, and he hung up. He turned toward the general, who was also on his cellphone.

The general cupped the bottom half of his phone. He told Pepper, "It looks like we have a rogue pilot on our hands."

"Damn," Pepper said, at a loss for words.

They both looked across the room at the president, who was shaking hands and basking in the glory of the mission. At least, for the moment, she looked very happy.

OVER THE SEA OF JAPAN—ON THE F-35C LIGHTNING II JET AIRCRAFT

Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan was crazy. And, to be honest with himself, he understood his men thought he was crazy. But he also felt that there was nothing crazy about just doing his job.

Even though he had already been notified that the target had been neutralized, there was certainly no reason not to take a look-see. The F-35 was one of the fastest and most advanced jet fighters in the world. A quick in-and-out should not be a problem. Dart in to verify the target was totally destroyed and then run for the ocean. Unless of course, he found other targets of strategic value during his confirmation pass. If that were the case, and he thought it was in America's best interest to cut loose, that action should not slow him down in the least. With the exception of China, the North Koreans had not been a friend or ally to any nation. So, he didn't have an issue getting a little payback for his country and for his brother.

The lieutenant commander's radio squawked to life.

"Lieutenant Commander Nolan, you are directed to immediately turn around and return to the carrier. I repeat you are ordered to turn around and return to the ship, immediately. That is a direct order. Is that understood?"

Foster Nolan reached over and flipped off the radio. In military speak, "that is a direct order" still left some wiggle room. Many pilots had received orders, yet stayed a bit longer, and had still kept their jobs. This would be one of those missions. He might get called onto the carpet, but he had a rock-solid record, and one little indiscretion shouldn't bring down the house. And then there were the practical aspects of the mission. After all, how much could they actually see from outer space? For all they knew, a sewer plant had a gas build-up and had then ignited. A chemical factory had mixed Tank A with the wrong Tank C and Tank B had exploded. Witnessing a blast from outer space was like watching a hockey game on TV. You never saw the puck. Foster would check it out and make sure that the warehouse he was supposed to destroy had indeed been fully neutralized. Or else he would finish the job. Maybe even find a secondary target of value.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

Dallas Stone's voice came over the mission center speakers. "The F-35 is turning west. If it maintains its current course, it will be flying over the North Korean mainland in under five minutes."

"Gage, please patch my phone into the speakers so we can all hear," Hail asked his friend.

Renner did some computer voodoo, and Kara's private conversation with Pepper became public. Hail held out his hand and Kara placed his phone in it.

"This is Hail," he began, talking through the microphones in the room. "What the hell is going on with your F-35? Are you guys crazy? This moron jet pilot is going to bring a load of heat down on us and for absolutely no reason." Hail was mad and his tone did nothing to disguise that fact.

In contrast, Pepper's tone was contrite. "We know. It would appear that we're having a possible communications problem with our Navy pilot, or there may be an issue that's out of our control."

Hail looked at Kara and she looked back at him with a blank expression. "What issue are you talking about?" Hail demanded.

Pepper paused for a moment, and Hail sensed the news was going to be even worse than he had anticipated. "We may have a rogue pilot on our hands," Pepper said shamefully.

"Jesus," Hail groaned.

Kara looked both sickened and ashamed.

"Hold for a second," Hail told Pepper.

Hail pressed the mute button on his phone and turned to Renner. "Get us the hell out of here. Let's head south at best speed."

"Absolutely," Renner agreed.

Hail unmuted his phone and let it fall back into his lap, unsure what was left to be said. As far as he was concerned, Pepper, and for that matter, the entire Washington entourage had screwed him. They could have easily told him about their back-up plan, but they chose not to. And to Marshall Hail, that meant they had purposely put him and his crew in danger. Hail chastised himself for not taking Renner's advice to carry out the mission from Indonesian waters. They could have launched the drones from the *Hail Laser's* catapult and still have run the operation a thousand miles away. So, there was enough blame to go around, but if Pepper and his tribe hadn't put a crazy pilot into the air, then the mission would have played out exactly as planned.

“Are you still there?” Pepper asked.

“Yeah,” Hail said. He said *Yeab* like it was a cuss word. “But I don’t know what we have to talk about. We’re bugging out. This pilot thing is your mess, not mine.”

Pepper didn’t say anything, so Hail pressed the END button on his phone.

“Let’s finish this,” Hail told Renner.

Renner returned to his control station and accessed the drone called *Men at Work*.

The pilots who had flown the *THINGS* had left their stations and were standing around the room watching the video on the big screens being sent by *Men at Work* and *Blondie*.

Gage Renner pulled in the throttle trigger and angled the propellers to the right. Still on its side, the drone was dragged a few feet before righting itself and taking flight. The drone gained altitude quickly, and for the first time, Hail and his crew got a look at the devastation from above. As the drone passed over the missing warehouse roof they saw the floor of the warehouse was now replaced by a large pit. Tons of flammable debris had fallen into the shallow pit and was burning, creating North Korea’s largest campfire.

“Wow,” Kara said. “There is absolutely nothing left.”

The areas inside the warehouse where the large perfect missile sections had once rested, wrapped snugly in protective plastic, now looked like jagged metal teeth that protruded from dirt and broken concrete.

“We did all of that,” Hail reminded Kara. “We didn’t need your help.”

Kara shot back, “It wasn’t me.”

“Could you have stopped it? Could you have warned me?” Hail asked, but it sounded more like condemnation.

Kara said nothing, and Hail added, “I thought so.”

Renner’s drone had finished its pass over the warehouse and had flown back over the fence and was closing in on *Blondie*’s position in the field.

He asked Knox, “Give me a light, please?”

Knox reached down and flipped on an icon that read ID LIGHT.

An infrared light appeared on *Men at Work*’s video feed. Renner turned toward it and continued to fly out into the field and toward *Blondie*’s light.

Dallas Stone’s voice came over the mission room’s speakers, “The North Koreans have eyes on the F-35. *Prince*’s radar just detected two military aircraft taking off from Wonsan Air Base.”

“Damn,” Hail said. “Do we have any idea what type of aircraft they scrambled?”

“Checking now,” Stone said. A moment later, “This doesn’t look good. The ICAO ping indicates they are Chengdu J-20s.”

Renner and Hail looked at each other, confused about the information.

“Are you sure? The Chengdu J-20 is the new Chinese superjet. How in the world could North Korea get their hands on those?”

Dallas came back with, “You got me. I Googled it, and you’re right. They shouldn’t have any.”

Hail looked at Renner and rolled his eyes.

“The Chengdu J-20 is a badass aircraft,” Dallas added. “They were built specifically to go up against the American F-35.”

“I understand. Thanks, Dallas,” Hail said.

Then almost as an afterthought, Hail told Stone, “Bring the ship’s railgun online and load a guided projectile.”

“Roger that, Skipper,” Stone responded.

Hail turned to Kara who was still standing nervously next to him. “Your pilot is in a world of hurt,” he told her.

Kara gave him an angry look and said, “I told you, it wasn’t my call.”

Hail ignored her and looked back to Renner and asked him, “What’s the status of *Men at Work*?”

“I’m already down,” Renner said.

Hail looked at the screen. Both *Blondie*’s and *Men at Work*’s cameras showed the identical image. It was the same long-distance shot of the burning warehouse. Renner had landed *Men at Work* on the back of *Blondie*.

“Do it,” Hail told Renner.

Without hesitation, Renner typed in four digits and pressed the icon on the screen labeled SELF DESTRUCT. *Men at Work* blew another deep hole into the North Korean soil, blowing *Blondie* to tiny pieces along with it.

OVER WONSAN, N. KOREA—ON THE F-35C LIGHTNING II JET AIRCRAFT

As Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan approached the target site, he drastically reduced speed in order to look at the warehouse below. At his previous speed of a thousand miles per hour, the warehouse would have passed under him so fast, it would have looked like a firefly. The blaze from the warehouse was clearly visible.

Nolan made a long slow circle above the target until he was convinced that it had been destroyed in its entirety. Just as he was preparing to throttle up and run for the sea, another explosion erupted on the ground. The lieutenant commander estimated the blast was a good hundred yards away from the warehouse. But it didn't make sense. Any explosive material that had been in the warehouse would have gone up in the initial blast. As he tried to determine what it might be, cockpit alarms began beeping. He checked his heads-up display and was disturbed to see two bogies in the air, headed in his direction.

“Oh, hell no,” he muttered.

But the lieutenant commander was ready for a fight. He had been for years. He was flying one of the world's most sophisticated aircraft and he was armed to the teeth. There was no doubt in his mind that he could certainly take out two crappy North Korean jets. They were probably those outdated Chengdu J-7s or possibly a Russian MiG or two.

But they were not. “*Oh, hell no,*” he said again, vehemently. On his screen, the designator J-20 was clearly marked next to each of the two dots closing rapidly on his position. At first, he thought it was a mistake, but there was no mistaking the fact that they were hauling ass and would intercept him in less than one minute.

Nolan pressed the engine throttle forward to its full extent and the jet screamed, pinning him back into the seat. For a moment he considered turning his radio back on and explaining his precarious situation. And then he thought to himself — *why?* He was a lone pilot flying over North Korea on a clandestine mission with two J-20s on his ass. No one was going to help him.

Foster Nolan checked his display again, and he saw that the J-20s were vectoring to cut him off before he could make it to sea. It was either fight or flight, and he was already in the process of flight. But there was another option that appealed to him as well. Actually, not exactly an option. More like an added bonus.

Up ahead, he saw a target. It appeared to be a fully lit multistoried structure. The reason the target stuck out was because it was the only thing below that had lights blazing. And this was a big target. A big bright target. Obviously, it was something very important to the North Koreans. Most probably a military installation of some type.

Nolan flipped a switch and armed the new Joint Air-to-Ground Missile called LOCO. If the North Koreans thought the old Hellfire missile was nasty, the LOCO would truly rock their world.

Five miles out, Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan pointed a laser beam at the brightly lit military complex. He yelled, “This is for my brother,” as he pulled the trigger.

WONSAN, NORTH KOREA

Victor Kornev was as close to a panic as he had ever been. He had pushed the UAZ, the goat, just as fast as the lightweight vehicle could go. Never in a million years did he think he would be grateful to see the ugly city of Wonsan come into view but he was. The Pyongyang–Wonsan Highway was the frickin’ yellow brick road, and he longed to be in the safety of Oz up ahead.

Kornev turned off the highway onto the road that led to Kaeson-dong. If he remembered correctly, the circle in Kaeson-dong led to the Dongmyong Hotel. Even though he hated the place, he couldn’t think of anywhere else to go. The minister of state security for North Korea, Trang Won Dong, was his connection with his cargo plane to get out of North Korea. From the explosion he had experienced as he was driving away from the warehouse, and then the massive explosion when the warehouse had been vaporized; Kornev had to assume Trang had been fried to a crisp.

Kornev reached the circle in Kaeson-dong. He drove around it twice until he found the road that led to Pongch’un-dong. He yanked the wheel to the right and saw some light ahead on the horizon.

Once he checked into the smelly Dongmyong Hotel, he would then call in a favor from an influential friend to find a safe way out of the country. He sure wished he knew who was trying to kill him. It wouldn’t help him now, but at least he could plan his next move based on a factor other than fear.

There it was up ahead. The wretched Dongmyong Hotel. And it would appear that his luck was changing. For maybe the first time in a month, the hotel had electricity. That meant a working elevator, a shower and a—

The blast was so intense that Kornev felt his face blister and his ears rupture. He slammed on the goat’s brakes, but his eyes were closed. When the car went into the skid, Kornev was helpless to do anything but hang on to the steering wheel and ride it out. The car slid sideways, flipped into a ditch and ejected Kornev fifteen feet into the thick muck.

Kornev lay in the ditch, dazed, face down, and unmoving until his senses returned enough so that he realized he was drowning. Pulling his face from the muddy water, coughing and spitting out black mud, Kornev raised his head from the ooze and looked up. What he saw amazed him. The Dongmyong Hotel had been turned into fiery rubble.

Any man in Victor’s current condition might consider himself ill-fated to be shot in the hand, almost assassinated, ejected from a car, burnt, temporarily deafened and was now lying in a ditch face down in North Korea. But, on the contrary, Victor understood that if he had arrived a few minutes earlier, he would have been checking

into that hotel at the same instant it was being obliterated. Kornev was a very lucky man, and he knew it.

Someone was on his side. Not God, but someone else that he believed in—and they believed in him. But somewhere along the way, he had also had made a formidable enemy—a person or persons so powerful they had the resources to blow up an entire hotel in North Korea in order to kill him.

Now all he had to figure out was *who*.

THE WHITE HOUSE SITUATION ROOM—WASHINGTON, D.C.

“I would like you to precisely define what you mean by ‘a rogue pilot,’” the president asked General Ford.

Just moments ago, she had been happy. The mission had been successful, and Hail had done what he said he could do. No messy loose ends. No political fallout. Everything had been peachy. And then the general had come over and told her something about a rogue pilot. In her line of work, a “rogue” anything was bad news. The word *rogue* could even be used in place of a profanity. So, when the general had said, “rogue pilot” the president connected that with the fact that this person was flying one of the most destructive planes in the American arsenal. The situation didn’t sound positive; therefore, the president’s mood was not optimistic.

“He is a very good pilot. Loyal. Great combat record. He’s been decorated,” the general explained.

“What’s the problem?” the president asked. Her tone was abrasive, and the general suspected it was going to get worse after his next sentence.

“The pilot has not responded to our orders to return to base, and he is continuing to fly into North Korea.”

The president was dumbfounded. She didn’t even know how to respond.

The general filled in the silence. “I’m sure it’s just some sort of communications issue. Maybe the North Koreans are jamming our radio transmissions. I’m sure after the pilot has a look at the blown-up warehouse, he will put on the afterburners and return to the carrier.”

The president’s face looked pale. Moments ago, Joanna Weston had been flushed with pride. Now a wave of abject horror washed over her. She made a quick calculation of how many days she might have left in office if this mission got much worse. But the mission mess was out of her hands. It was now in the hands of a crazy rogue pilot—as was her career.

President Weston turned and watched the big screen as the warehouse continued to burn. Another bright spot flashed on the screen a little way away from the big bright spot. It may have been another explosion. Or possibly another communications issue.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

The entire ship hummed. To Kara, it sounded like a hundred electric shavers being run at the same time. “What’s that sound?” she asked Hail.

“It’s the railgun being charged.” Hail hesitated before adding, “To be more accurate, it’s the capacitors for the railgun that are being charged.”

That meant nothing to Kara. But she did understand that the ship’s big gun was being loaded and brought online. How it worked, she didn’t care.

Hail had brought up a map on his personal screen. A real-time plot of the jets showed they had just passed over Wonsan and were heading out to sea. He moved the image up to the big screen, so the crew could see it as well. The good news was the F-35 had made it to sea without being cut off by the North Korean J-20s. The bad news was they were right on his tail.

Dallas Stone was still conferenced into the mission center speakers.

“Are the J-20s in range?” Hail asked.

Dallas responded “Yes, they are and the railgun is at full capacity and ready to fire.”

“Do we have a smart projectile programmed to the J-20 profile?”

“It’s been programmed and is ready to go.”

Hail thought that the smart projectiles should work. But other than testing the new depleted uranium projectiles on his own drones, they had never fired them at anything as fast as a Chengdu J-20. Unlike their dumb projectile brothers, the smart projectile had a computer that took over the guidance once the shell was within striking range. Fins on the nose and the tail of the heavy piece of metal would be deployed and manipulated by the computer to reach its final target. At these speeds, Hail was concerned that the projectile guidance software might get confused and take out the F-35 by mistake.

Hail held his arms up in the air and crossed his index fingers on both of his hands.

“Fire the railgun,” He told Dallas.

There was a deep concussive bang, followed by an abrupt change in the ship’s attitude as it leaned hard to port.

Kara felt like she was falling and grabbed for the first stationary thing near her, which was Hail’s neck. She half fell and swung around to the backside of Hail’s captain’s chair.

“You’re choking me,” Hail gurgled, as the ship rocked back over to its starboard side.

Kara got her feet back under her and stood, releasing his neck.

Hail placed a hand on his Adam's apple and gave it a soothing rub.

"Sorry," Kara said. "Why didn't you tell me that was going to happen?"

"You're right, I'm sorry," Hail croaked.

On the big screen, the plot of the projectile showed it moving toward the trio of jets that were headed in the direction of the *Hail Nucleus*. But Hail knew that this animation would not provide them any significant information. It would simply show them if their bullet had made it within a mile of the group. The rest would be up to the guidance programming code that had been written by his smart guys in the IT lab.

There was nothing for any of them to do but watch and wait.

Dallas Stone's voice came back over the speakers. "*Prince's* radar has detected a rocket fired from one of the J-20s."

Hoping for the best and planning for the worst, Hail gave Stone the order. "Recharge the railgun and get another guided projectile on the rack."

OVER THE SEA OF JAPAN—ON THE F-35C LIGHTNING II JET AIRCRAFT

Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan was crazy. Crazy with fear. He had successfully blown up the North Korean military complex and had beaten the North Korean jets to the sea, but now they were right on his ass. He had tried to maneuver his jet out of harm's way, but for every turn and dive he made, the J-20s had mimicked his actions. At one point he had placed his F-35 into a sustained six-g turn as he tried to get behind his pursuers. But their planes appeared to be just as nimble as his F-35. Around and around they went until Nolan thought he was going to pass out from the g-forces. He then straightened it out, pointed his jet toward Japan and poured on every ounce of speed he could get out of his aircraft.

The North Korean jets were still on his six, and he was expecting to hear a sound that no pilot wanted to hear. And then there it was.

An alarm went off indicating at least one of the jets behind him had a radar lock on him and was ready to fire something nasty his way. A rocket, a gun, a missile—it really didn't matter. At the current ranges and speeds, any would be fatal.

Crazy Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan had less than a second to decide if he would live or die. On one hand, if he let the North Koreans shoot him down, he was certain he would die a hero. He would have given his life for his country. His brother would have been proud of him. And this would be an end to those lonely endless nights, followed by dismal mornings as he mourned the loss of his beloved brother.

For some odd reason, out of the blue, he decided he wanted to live. There was no conscious thought involved with the action. He simply reached under his seat and pulled the ejection handle. The clear canopy flipped open and disappeared a second before the rocket under his seat lifted him and his chair out of the aircraft. The wind hit him like a brick wall.

Less than thirty yards away from his aircraft, Foster Nolan observed a projectile cut the left wing off of his F-35. His multimillion-dollar aircraft rolled to the left and disintegrated. Nolan's large secondary chute deployed, and everything became very still as pieces of his jet dropped toward the sea below.

With his parachute now fully inflated, Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan was now nothing more than an observer. He looked into the sky at the J-20s.

Out of nowhere, a shell, missile, or projectile of some type, silently passed through one of the J-20s that had shot him down. For a split second, Nolan could make out a clean hole that had punched directly through the jet's thin skin. For a fraction of an instant, he could actually see the bright moon through the opening. Of course, you can't cut a hole through a jet at 1200 miles per hour and not expect problems. And Nolan guessed that the pilot of the jet may not have even known he

had a problem. That was until the hole disrupted the airflow enough to pitch the nose up a tiny bit. But at 1200 miles per hour, a tiny bit is quite a lot. And that's all it took. The air pressure on the jet's compromised frame cracked the J-20 in half like a breadstick. It was quick. *Snap!* The front end of the J-20 fell toward the sea, and the backend broke up and exploded as the trailing jet fuel erupted in all the colors of the rainbow.

Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan didn't have much time to consider his future before he hit the warm water below. His best guess was he would be floating on his tiny raft for a few hours in the Sea of Japan until first light when either the Chinese or the North Koreans would locate him. It didn't even cross his mind there *would* be a rescue mission. As far as his country was concerned, he wasn't there.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE *HAIL NUCLEUS*

Hail Nucleus' crew watched the dot—the railgun projectile—reach the other three dots in less than fifteen seconds. Then they all watched the dot with the notation F-35 disappear from the screen.

Renner commented, “That doesn’t look good.”

Kara looked at Hail, and Hail looked stunned, like the worst-case scenario had taken place. He had killed the American pilot.

She started to say something soothing like, “It’s OK, you did the best you could.”

Renner interrupted, “Look, one of the J-20s just vanished.”

Hail took in a deep calming breath and let it out slowly.

“What do you think happened?” he asked Dallas over the speakers in the ship’s security center.

Stone’s voice came back over the speakers, “My best guess would be an almost simultaneous exchange. One of the J-20s killed the F-35, and a second later our railgun projectile took out one of the J-20s.”

Hail watched the only dot left on the screen make a slow turn and change its course back toward the east coast of North Korea.

Dallas said, “*Prince* is picking up a saltwater emergency beacon. Looks like the American pilot ejected and is now floating in the water about fifty miles off our starboard.”

Hail turned toward Kara and asked, “Do you think there’s any chance that your guys are going to pick this guy up?”

Kara shook her head. “Not in a million years.”

“I thought not,” Hail agreed. He swiveled his chair toward his group of young pilots that were standing close to him on his left still watching the show.

He said to two of his junior pilots, “Oliver and Paige. I need you to jump into a chopper and go get this guy. Make it fast. Just drop him a line, pull him in and get back on board before the sky is crawling with hostiles. By the time the sun comes up, I want us to look like nothing more than an innocent cargo ship. *Get going.*”

The pilots confirmed Hail’s request and ran quickly out of the mission center toward the ship’s hangar deck.

Kara asked, “Is it common for the *Hail Nucleus* to be in these waters?”

Hail nodded his head and then leaned forward to stretch his back. “Sure, China is one of our best customers. They have all the coal in the world, but they won’t be

able to breathe their own air in another ten years unless they find another form of power. And we are it.”

Kara watched the last dot on the screen fly over Wonsan and then blink off the screen. She assumed it had landed somewhere near the city.

“You know, that was pretty amazing,” she said.

Hail made a painful face as he arched his back the other direction.

“Which part?” he asked.

“All of it,” Kara said.

Hail stood up and continued to work out his back muscles. “So, what are you going to do now?” he asked Kara.

“I’m not sure,” Kara said truthfully. “Are you hungry?”

“I’m always hungry,” Hail smiled. He grabbed some belly fat through his shirt and said, “Can’t you tell?”

Kara laughed and said, “Let’s get something to eat, and we can discuss the future.”

“I think we also need to discuss the past,” Hail said.

“Nah, the past is the past.”

But to Marshall Hail, the past was more important than the present or the future. All of his best memories and life experiences were in his past. Kara’s deceit had been in the recent past. They would discuss that matter in the present, but the future would still be an unknown because there were still so many factors out of their control.

THE WHITE HOUSE SITUATION ROOM—WASHINGTON, D.C.

“Please explain to me what’s happening,” the president asked her advisors. Everyone in the Situation Room was staring at a large screen that at one time had three dots on it. Superimposed under the dots was the east coastline of North Korea. In a matter of seconds, two of the dots had disappeared, and General Ford looked very concerned.

The general looked away from the screen and toward the president, avoiding looking her square in the eyes.

“What you are watching is—well, it was the location of our F-35. Two North Korean J-20 jets were in hot pursuit of the F-35. The radar we’re watching is being sent by our Sea-Based X-Band Radar station that is sitting on a semisubmersible oil platform located ten miles off the coast of South Korea in the Sea of Japan.”

“And?” the president prompted, her patience running thin.

“And, my best guess is that our F-35 was shot down, and our pilot was able to take out at least one of the enemy jets.”

“I didn’t know the F-35 could shoot at a jet behind it?” the president said, daring the general to lie to her.

“Sure, it can. The F-35 Gen III Helmet Mounted Display System provides the pilot the ability to—”

“Enough!” the president yelled.

Everyone in the room stopped talking and turned to look at the pair.

A red light on a phone sitting on the big conference table began blinking. The general excused himself and picked up the receiver.

He listened for a moment and then announced to the group, “We have a saltwater emergency beacon that was just activated.”

The general listened for more information. He then turned to the president and asked, “What would you like for us to do?”

“What are you talking about?” President Weston responded.

“Looks like our pilot may have ejected and is floating around in the Sea of Japan. Would you like us to rescue him?”

The president stood up from the table, flipped her bangs out of her eyes, walked to the door and said, “I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

A minute later, she was gone. And with that, the situation taking place in the Situation Room had concluded.

SEA OF JAPAN—ABOARD THE HAIL NUCLEUS

Instead of food, Hail escorted Kara to the Officers' Club. Since there were no officers on the ship, the bar was occupied by the exact number of people that Hail wanted. Zero. He needed to clear the air with Ms. Ramey, and he didn't need anyone gawking at them, especially if things got ugly.

Kara looked around. She had never seen the bar or for that matter even knew it existed.

"I thought you were hungry?" she asked.

"I'm a little too wound up to eat right now."

Kara sat at the bar on a stool that had a thick red cushion and a tall wooden back.

Hail went around to the other side of the bar and began mixing up a concoction of some type.

"What are you making?" she asked.

Without looking up, Hail said, "Something strong. Hopefully strong enough so that you and I will catch a buzz and be able to level with one another."

"That sounds dangerous," Kara said.

"If you haven't noticed, living is dangerous."

Hail squeezed a lemon into two glasses.

"Why didn't you tell me about the back-up plan?" he asked.

"Why are you secretly monitoring and recording all my phone calls?" Kara responded.

Hail looked up at her and still holding a lemon, he shook his fist at her in frustration.

"See, that's what I mean. I try to have an honest talk, and we can't get past the first two sentences."

Lemon juice leaked from his grip on the bar.

"Wow, did we somehow get married when I wasn't looking?" Kara laughed.

Hail made an exasperated face, dropped the lemon in the sink, and went back to pouring different colors of liquor into the two martini glasses.

Kara said, "Marshall, you know I work for the CIA. You also know that much of what we do is done on the down low. It's not like I'm trying to be secretive. I simply can't talk to you about work stuff."

"Well, what about non-work stuff?"

“Why do you want to hear about my poor old childhood and my family and all that mess?”

Hail handed her a blue drink.

She took it.

Hail clinked his drink up against hers and said, “Because it’s a start.”

Kara smiled, but she didn’t start the conversation. Hail did.

By the second drink, Hail had begun to tell her about his family and the pain he had felt when they had all died in The Five. But he found it too difficult to linger on that subject. Hail shed some tears, and Kara had been ready with the bar napkins. She listened and understood and felt his pain.

And then it was Kara’s turn. She talked about her parents, about their deaths, about how she had been left alone and how lonely she felt. She explained that her job was really all she had and how sad was that. It was a solemn and awkward talk, but the more they drank, the easier the words came out.

The third drink was green and a little stronger. Hail asked Kara if she wanted to take it up to the top deck and watch the sun come up.

She said yes.

They stood at the railing on the port side of the ship. The sun sneaked up over the edge of Japan. It was bright and the day was clear and the wind was fresh, yet the conversation was sullen and made the sea appear old and insensitive.

Hail talked about the early days, when he was in high school and his Dad was moving up the military ladder. He told her how difficult it had always been to please him. He told her that when his Dad had died, his father had gone to his grave disappointed in him and his accomplishments.

They sipped strong green liquid, and they realized they were much more similar than they had been a few hours ago.

Kara told Hail about being an only child; an only child who was pampered and then left in this world with no practical living skills. She explained that she felt guilty complaining about being too rich and being given everything, knowing how much poverty there was in the world. And as a CIA agent, she had been on assignments in small countries and had seen firsthand how poor some people really were. It could have been the booze, but for some reason she thought it was important that Marshall understood that rich girls could be sad too.

At some point, Marshall began talking about his wife again, about his kids and his love for them, the heart shattering hurt he felt, the stabs of depression that still hit him like physical blows any time he thought of them. Kara put her arm around his waist and told him that she understood.

Hail’s eyes were wet.

Kara's heart hurt for him. Hurt for herself. Hurt for all of those that had suffered way out there, past the glittering coast of Japan and on and on. There was so much hurt and sadness in the world. It was amazing that anyone was truly happy.

The sun was up and they could feel the heat starting to build.

Hail walked Kara to her stateroom. They stopped at her door. Kara looked up at Marshall and gave him a hug. It felt good. It felt good for both of them. It had been a long time since Kara had felt a man that close that had not been part of an operation.

And Hail hadn't felt anyone that close since he had hugged his wife and his girls' goodbye on that last dreadful day.

"Are you hungry?" Kara asked, her hands still resting on Marshall's hips.

"Yeah," Hail said.

"I think I have some popcorn in my room. If you want to come in, we could watch a movie or something."

"Let me check and see if I'm needed elsewhere," Hail said, taking out his phone and checking his messages.

The only message was from Renner. It read in bold letters, KARA CALLED KORNEV AND WARNED HIM ABOUT THE MISSILE ATTACK.

Hail did his best not to react to the information.

He looked into Kara's beautiful eyes and said, "Do you have anything else you want to tell me? If we want to move forward, I need to know we can trust one another."

Kara thought for a moment. She let her hands fall away from Hail's waist. She took some air into her cheeks and then puffed it out a few times as she wrestled with how much she should share with Marshall Hail.

"I have something to tell you, but I think it will make you mad."

"And what would that be?" Hail responded, already looking a little mad.

"Promise you won't be mad?"

"How can I promise that?" Hail said.

"OK, then I won't tell you," Kara said, crossing her arms over her chest.

Hail sighed and said, "OK."

"No," Kara said, "You have to promise you won't be mad."

"OK, I promise I won't be mad," Hail said with a tinge of irritation.

"Remember you *promised*," Kara hesitated.

She took a moment to consider how to phrase her next sentence, but then realized there was no good way to say it.

“I called and warned Kornev about the hit on the warehouse. That’s why he ran.”

Hail had promised he wouldn’t be mad. However, Kara thought he looked mad, but she thought he would have blown his top by now.

She also added, “Remember, I told you I wanted Kornev alive. I need him. I need his information.”

Hail looked at her as if she had disappointed him.

“Is that how your dad used to look at you?” she asked him.

That comment temporarily stunned Hail, and his face went slack.

“As long as we’re being honest, then I have something to tell you,” Hail said, regaining his composure.

“Yes,” Kara said.

“You first have to do the whole *promise to not be mad* thing,” he told her.

Kara rolled her eyes and said, “I promise.”

“I promise not to be mad,” Hail coaxed her. “You have to say the whole thing.”

“OK, I promise not to be mad,” she said, but instead of annoyance, Kara was amused.

“Well, after you left to make your call to Kornev, I tried to kill him.”

Kara looked shocked. She was no longer smiling.

“And how did that work out for you?” she asked tentatively. “I take it when you said that you tried to kill him, that would indicate that you failed to kill him which means that Kornev is still alive?”

Hail looked dejected.

“As far as I know, he is still alive, but it wasn’t from a lack of trying on my part.”

Kara shook her head slowly from side to side. She had her lips bunched up and was giving him the old schoolmarm look.

“Shame, shame,” she told him.

“And I could say the same to you,” Hail shot back.

They both looked at one another, silent, trying to decide in that brief instant how much different their lives might be if this was their last mission together.

“So, do you think we can trust each other now?” Kara asked.

“I don’t know. We were able to talk to each other for several hours without killing one another,” Hail commented. “That’s got to be a good start.”

“Well I think you can trust me,” Kara said.

Hail brought his phone up and looked at the old message that Renner had sent after Renner had listened to the recording Kara had made.

“My phone is almost out of power,” Hail said.

Kara reached behind her back, turned the handle and pushed open the door to her stateroom.

“No problem. Come on in. You can use my phone charger.” Kara offered graciously.

THE WHITE HOUSE ROSE GARDEN—WASHINGTON, D.C.

President Joanna Weston decided that she would take all her meetings outside in the Rose Garden today including, of course, her luncheon with the newly elected president of the Maldives, Mohamed Yameen. It was a beautiful summer morning in the capital city.

The first order of business was an update on the *Hail Storm* mission. Or more to the point, the potential political fallout from the *Hail Storm* mission.

General Ford, Jarret Pepper, Eric Spearman and Trevor Rodgers sat around the table in the center of the Rose Garden. Coffee had been served. Tea was provided for those who thought 10 a.m. was too late to drink coffee.

Nobody looked happy, and considering how badly the mission had played out, the president expected sincere looks of contrition on the faces looking back at her.

Jarret Pepper began the conversation with the upbeat phrase, “The good news is that the North Korean decision-makers have decided not to make a big stink about our attack on their warehouse.”

The president smiled. She had already heard this information but agreed that it was a good starting point.

The general added, “That’s not surprising. If they went the other direction, they would have to tell the world why their warehouse was so important it compelled a superpower to bomb it. That would have created a very sticky situation.”

“And what was their reaction to having their hotel blown up?” the president asked.

Pepper answered, “They framed it as a natural gas explosion.”

“Interesting,” President Weston remarked.

“And do we know what became of the F-35’s pilot, Lieutenant Commander Foster Nolan?” the president inquired.

Pepper replied, “Kara called me and provided a mission summary. She indicated that the *Hail Nucleus* picked up Nolan off his raft in the Sea of Japan. He had bailed out of his jet. He was unhurt and is currently still on the *Hail Nucleus*.”

“Isn’t that uncommon? Why hasn’t he returned to his unit?” the president asked.

All the men looked to General Ford to field the question.

“The lieutenant commander has indicated that he does not want to return to active duty at this time,” General Ford told the group, sounding apologetic.

“And why not? Did he give a reason?” President Weston asked.

“Not per se,” the general said. “But it does not take a fortune teller to foresee that Lt. Commander Nolan’s career in the Navy is over. He may be a little crazy, but he is not dumb. He knows he would receive a court-martial. So, at least for now, Nolan has decided to remain on the *Hail Nucleus*.”

“And, do we have a problem with that?” the president asked.

“Not really,” the general said. “Officially, he’s on R and R. And as far as we’re concerned, if we never see him again, then that means we won’t be required to take any official action. The United States’ military rug is big enough to sweep at least a dozen rogue pilots under it. So, one of him should not be a problem.”

A male White House server appeared and checked on everyone. Getting assurances that coffees and teas were full and all his guests were happy, the server left the group and they resumed the conversation.

“So where does this leave us with Hail?” President Weston asked.

Pepper said, “Kara indicated that Hail was upset, but to what degree I do not know. Hail mentioned that he wanted to talk to you. He thought that you two should *clear the air*, as he put it.”

“I think that’s a good idea. Did he say when?” the president inquired.

Pepper said, “He simply said as soon as possible. I believe he has other targets he would like to neutralize.”

The president turned and asked a question to her typically quiet Director of National Intelligence, Eric Spearman.

“Do we fully understand the capabilities of Marshall Hail and his organization?”

Spearman sat straighter in his chair, and cleared his throat and then said, “I do not think it would be an exaggeration if I were to say that Hail has the ability to kill anyone, anytime, anywhere and leave little to no trace that he was ever there.”

Spearman looked around the table to see if there were any objections to his statement.

No one said a word.

The president looked very concerned. Her face twitched, and she rubbed her arms as if a sudden chill had descended upon her.

“Are you OK, Madam President?” Trevor Rodgers asked.

“No, not really,” she said.

She appeared to collect her thoughts for a moment, and then she asked, “Do any of you understand why that last statement would concern me?”

The four men looked at her with blank expressions.

She looked at each of them as if they were dense simpletons for not knowing the correct answer.

Frustrated, she told them calmly, “If you gentlemen haven’t noticed—” She paused for effect. Then the president shouted, “I AM ANYONE!”

She composed herself, flipped her bangs from her eyes and looked at her staff. Drones that dropped drones that released drones that silently killed people. Warfare had reinvented itself yet again, and the world had again become much more dangerous.

The president looked down at the thick binder to her left that had a single word printed on the jacket. MALDIVES. She realized she knew nothing of the little country and even less about the current president. She checked her watch.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen, but I have to learn about the country of Maldives in the next half hour, before my lunch with its president.”

“What country?” Trevor Rodgers asked.

“Maldives,” the president repeated. “It’s maybe the eighth smallest country in the world. It’s south of India in the middle of the Laccadive Sea.”

“Oh, *that* Maldives,” Rodgers said sarcastically.

“If we have nothing else then—” the president said and gave the men a big thankless smile and held her hand out toward the Rose Garden’s exit.

The men all stood, pushed in their chairs and left the president studying her thick binder.

A Rose Garden holds a natural attraction to insects and even birds. During this time of year, hearing a hummingbird flutter around the garden is a common occurrence. Every once in a while, two hummingbirds might be seen darting in and out of the colorful blooms. But Joanna Weston had never heard a swarm of hummingbirds that appeared to be closing in from behind her. The sound of wind over wings was so loud that she turned to look at the birds.

Instead of birds, contrasted against the organic shapes of flowers, leaves, stems and bushes, she saw an alien-looking contraption. Before she could move, get up or call out, a flying saucer that had a stick hanging under it, flew onto the table. The president gasped as three appendages that looked like tiny legs popped out from the bottom of the stick. Two glasses got bumped, turned over on their sides, rolled across the table, fell onto the bricks with a crash. The president pushed back in her chair as the craft landed on its thin tripod legs. Then the stick began to separate vertically. One half turned at ninety degrees and made a cross with the other half, like a mast of a ship. The two halves then snapped into place. The president began to stand and was preparing to run when a familiar voice told her to wait. It was a commanding tone coming out of the alien thingamabob, and for some reason the voice calmed her. Instead of running, she paused for a second and watched a thin sheet of paper unroll from the ship’s mast-looking thing. Before it had even reached its full length, she recognized the face of Marshall Hail on the flexible LED screen.

A million thoughts went through her head. Had she pissed off Marshall Hail so badly that he had come to kill her? She thought not, but stranger things had happened.

She recalled the words she had just spoken to the men at the table. “*I am ANYONE.*”

It was very clear to her that Marshall Hail could indeed get to anyone, anytime and anywhere, so why run?

Joanna Weston remained in her chair, tense and unmoving.

She must have looked a sight to Marshall Hail because he smiled a disarming “*no harm, no foul smile*” and spoke.

“I’m sorry, Madam President. I didn’t mean to startle you, but we need to talk.”

THE END

Other Books by Brett Arquette

Deadly Perversions

Seeing Red

Tweaked

The Pandemic Diary

Soundman for a B-Band

Operation Hail Warning (Hail #2)