

THE CLAIRVOYANT

**THE
CLAIRVOYANT**

A NOVEL

Paul A. Trinetti

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This is an original print edition of *The Clairvoyant*.

Prologue

JK Preston US Military Base, Four and a Half Years Ago

“Talk to me, Miguel,” Dr. Oxford Olsen says to the special ops agent who’s sitting atop a boulder several feet above the river. Body trembling, Miguel stares vacantly with saucer eyes. He doesn’t respond.

Olsen turns to the leader of the Gold Hawks unit, standing beside him. “This doesn’t look good, Lieutenant. Do you know what brought him out here?”

“I assume he was taking his usual early morning swim,” the lieutenant replies. He looks to the top of the boulder. “Miguel. It’s me, Lieutenant Stanwell. I need you to say something. Are you injured? Are you feeling sick?”

“Obviously, something has him traumatized...but what?” Dr. Olsen muses.

Appearing oblivious to the two men before him, the agent abruptly rises to his feet and gazes up at the first rays of morning sunlight. “Someone needs to stop it!” he cries out. “Someone needs to stop that damn train!”

Olsen and Stanwell look on, perplexed. “What train, Miguel?” Stanwell asks.

“My wife and kids... The train must be stopped before it’s too late!” Miguel wails.

“What train? Where’s the train coming from? Where’s it going, Miguel?” Olsen asks, rapid-fire.

Miguel sharply exhales. “Thunder Rail. Train 151 C, heading from Philadelphia to Chicago. Seven hundred and sixty-seven people. It needs to be stopped. Now!”

“Why, Miguel?” Stanwell asks. “Why does it need to be stopped?”

“It’s going to blow up!” Miguel shouts.

“And how do you know this?” Stanwell asks.

“I...I saw it...I saw it happen,” Miguel stammers. “My wife...my kids...they’re going to die, along with so many others, if you don’t do what I’m telling you to—listen to me!” he cries.

Olsen waves his hand toward Stanwell, silently suggesting he’ll take things from here. Stanwell veers off into the near distance. “It’s going to be all right, Miguel. Come on, let’s have a nice talk. Like so many of us around here, you’ve been under so much stress, and I think—”

“Listen to me, you son of a bitch!” Miguel shouts. “You need to do what I say!” He lunges from the boulder, knocking the psychiatrist to the ground. Kneeling above Olsen, he grabs a large rock beside his knee and raises it high, preparing to strike Olsen in the head.

Two gunshots ring out. Lieutenant Van Stanwell’s bullets hit the traumatized agent, who pitches backward and tumbles down the rocky bank to the lip of the river. Within seconds, American Special Ops Agent Miguel Perez is dead.

Chapter 1

As Siro Felder makes his way down aisle three of his neighborhood grocery store to pick up a loaf of rye bread, he hears a young boy pestering his mother to buy him a brand of cereal she obviously doesn't want him to consume.

"No. I'm not going to let you eat that garbage, Noah. And that's final. Do you understand?"

Pouting, Noah turns around and sees Siro. "Hey, Mommy. There's that man again," he says.

"What man?" his mother grumbles.

"The man from the hospital," Noah says, loud enough that Siro can hear him. "The pajama man with the painted face who gives out the toys and the snacks," he adds, still focused on Siro.

"That's enough, young man. I have no idea what you're talking about," Noah's mother barks as she takes her son by the hand. "I'm so sorry, sir," she says to Siro as they turn away.

Moments later, when he exits the store, Siro watches Noah being led into a car by his mother. As she's about to enter the vehicle, Siro approaches her. "Good afternoon, ma'am. May I have a quick word with you?"

"Hey, you're the man we met in aisle three," the young woman replies with a friendly smile. "I'm sorry for my son. For a nine-year-old, he sure gets carried away when he sees people he thinks he recognizes."

"Actually, your son was more than likely correct," Siro says.

“Correct about what?” the woman asks with a raised brow.

“Well, over the last several years, I’ve made it a point to frequently visit the children’s unit at Sundale General and give out toys and snacks while dressed in colorful pajamas and a matching painted face. I’ve become known to the kids and the staff as PJ the Clown,” Siro explains. “My real name’s Siro Felder. I’m the founder and chairman of a company called Ovo-Tech. We supply all kinds of medical devices to hospitals across the country.”

“I’m Julie Cowan. And yes, I’ve heard of your company. It’s wonderful to meet you, Mr. Felder,” Julie says, glancing anxiously in on Noah.

“Likewise. Please, call me Siro. So, was Noah a recent patient at the hospital? I suppose that’s how he recognized me.”

“That’s the crazy thing,” Julie says, wide-eyed. “Noah hasn’t seen the inside of a hospital since he was born.”

“Perhaps at one time he may’ve visited,” Siro counters.

“Nah. I know for certain that’s never happened,” Julie says, shaking her head.

“Hmm. That is very strange indeed.”

“Yeah, it sure is,” Julie replies with a chuckle. “Anyway, I think I better get this little guy home. Sorry for the craziness. Have a great day.”

Siro Felder watches Julie Cowan and her son drive off. He frowns.

When he arrives home, still somewhat perplexed, Siro relates the story to his wife, Ruby.

“Hmm. It sounds like either the mother’s hiding something, or the kid’s some kind of clairvoyant,” she says with a chuckle.

“Crazy story to end a crazy day,” Siro quips, plopping wearily onto the sofa. “Did you hear from our son?”

“Sure did.” Ruby beams. “In a couple of weeks, he and his fellow Gold Hawks are being granted two weeks leave for their hard work. And the really good news is, he’s chosen to spend it here in Sundale.”

“That sure is great to hear,” Siro replies. “I’m so proud of that young man. To think how we nearly lost him before his fourth birthday.”

“And if not for the incredible staff at Sundale General...we would’ve.”

“Twenty-three, and already a member of America’s most important special ops group,” Siro says with pride.

“Which continues to scare the heck out of me every single minute of the day,” Ruby groans. “I only wish he would’ve joined you at Ovo-Tech.”

“That was my hope as well,” Siro replies. “Or followed you into psychiatry.” He sighs. “It doesn’t surprise me he chose the military. My time in the Air Force has always seemed to intrigue him far more than my business career. And as difficult as it sometimes may be, I’ve come to accept and appreciate the dedication he’s shown toward serving his country.”

* * *

Three days later, on a bright Saturday morning, Siro Felder enters Sundale General in a pair of black and red heart pajamas, his face painted to match. Carrying a sack of toys in one hand and a large bag of snacks in the other, he begins making his rounds, attempting to bring some delight to the hospitalized children. Stepping out into the second floor hallway, he hears the voice of a child pestering a young woman at the vending machine. The voice sounds familiar.

“One chocolate bar and that’s it, Noah,” the woman firmly says.

Can it be? Siro peers out from behind a pillar and watches Julie and Noah Cowan turn away and make their way into Room 219. Siro heads down the hallway to the nurses’ station. “Dora, how’s life treating you?” he asks the second floor manager.

“No complaints on my end, PJ,” the woman replies with a joyous smile, teeth gleaming white in her dark face. “When you work in this place as long as I have, you come to treasure every day as a gift.”

“Well said,” Siro replies, returning the smile. “So, has my favorite floor in the hospital added any new patients over the last few days?”

“Yes,” Dora says, regarding her computer. “A ten-year-old boy named Tristan in 211. The little guy was in an automobile accident. A seven-year-old cutie in Room 214 named Isabelle is in for tests, and there’s a young lady named Ocean in 219.”

“Ocean... Now there’s an interesting name.”

“Sure is. A real princess. Ocean Cowan. Twelve years old,” Dora says. “Poor thing was injured while horseback riding. Believe you me, I’ve seen way too many of those over the years. Fortunately, Doc Henshaw says she’s going to be fine. Could’ve been a lot worse.”

“When was she admitted?” Siro asks.

“Yesterday morning.”

“As usual, thank you for the info, Dora. You’re always of such great help to me,” Siro says, tapping on the counter.

“Any time, PJ,” Dora replies. “This world needs more people like you, Mr. Felder.”

When Siro turns around, he sees Noah standing ten feet or so away from him. “Mommy. Mommy,” the boy calls out. “There he is.”

Julie briskly walks toward her son and bends down to his eye level. “Noah, like I told you, you’re not to leave your sister’s room without me or Uncle Clay. Do you understand?” she says in a firm voice. “Now, go back to the room and stay with your uncle while I go to the cafeteria and get us something to eat,” she adds. She watches her son return to Room 219.

“Hello, Julie,” Siro says, walking toward her. “I’m sorry to hear about your daughter. But I understand she’s going to be fine.”

“Thank God,” Julie replies, sounding frazzled. “Great seeing you again. But I need to be on my way “

“Please, don’t go,” Siro says quickly. “We need to talk about the fact your son knew who I was and what I do here at the hospital before we’d ever actually met. Do you not find it a little strange, to say the least?”

“Maybe I was wrong,” Julie says with a sigh. “I guess he has seen you before. Now, I’m sorry, Siro, but I need to get to the cafeteria so I can feed some hungry stomachs.”

Chapter 2

When Siro returns home, he's still pondering the mystery that is Noah Cowan. "You're the psychiatrist, Ruby. Can you make any sense of this kid?" he says to his wife. "And then there's the mother, acting as if there's nothing strange going on."

"Perhaps what she told you today was true. Maybe the child has actually seen you before, and she simply couldn't recall when and where."

"Nah, I don't buy that," Siro grumbles. "Besides, I walk around that hospital as PJ the Clown and not Siro Felder. When he recognized me in the grocery store, I was Siro, not PJ."

Ruby's shoulders sag. "Point taken," she says as she pours him a cup of tea. "I don't know what else to say. Seeing as you don't want to let this go, how about attempting to reach out to her again?"

"Yes. I plan to do just that," Siro replies, staring thoughtfully into the cup.

* * *

"I'm so thrilled to know Ocean's going to be as good as knew," Clay says to Julie while they walk through the hospital parking lot. He studies his sister when they stop in front of their respective vehicles. "Is everything okay, Jules? Considering the good news we received today, you don't seem to be yourself."

“That’s because I’m not,” she mumbles. She turns toward her son. “Now, say goodnight to your uncle and get in the car, Noah. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“Good night, Uncle Clay,” Noah calls out.

“Back at you, little buddy,” Clay replies. They watch Noah clamber into Julie’s car, then he turns to Julie, brow puckered in concern. “What’s going on?” he asks her.

“It’s Noah,” Julie replies.

“Now what could possibly be wrong with that little ball of fire?”

Julie purses her lips and exhales. “Okay. I know this is going to sound crazy...”

“Tell me.”

“Well, ever since he came back from that camping trip you took him on, he’s been... he’s been like, seeing things before they happen.”

Lost for words, Clay stares at her.

“I realize how foolish it sounds, but it’s the God’s truth,” Julie says.

“Huh. He’s seeing things before they happen.” Clay studies his shoes, appearing to gather his thoughts. “Like, what things?”

Julie glances at her car. Noah’s all buckled in. “How about I come by your shop around ten tomorrow morning and lay it all out for you then?”

“Sure. This I have to hear,” Clay says, nodding. Confusion fills his eyes.

* * *

The following morning, when Julie enters her brother’s auto body shop, she finds Clay speaking with a couple of his employees. He gives her a quick nod and a wave as she settles into a chair in the waiting area outside his office.

A few minutes later, he approaches her. “Hey Jules. Come on in.” He leads her into his office. “Would you like a coffee, or a water?”

“I’m good, thanks,” Julie replies. “I can see how busy you are this morning, so I promise not to take up too much of your time.”

“When it comes to you and my nephew, you can take all the time you need. I told you the day John died in that damn accident, I’ll be

here for you and the kids whenever you need me,” Clay says. “Now, please enlighten me as to what’s going on with Noah.”

“It all started the day he returned from the camping trip to Sanctuary Park.” Julie blows out air through her lips and begins to explain.

As she’s preparing breakfast, Julie hears frantic knocking on the front door. Peering through the door’s peephole, she recognizes the familiar face of her elderly neighbor, Donna. “What’s wrong, Donna?” Julie asks upon opening the door.

“It’s Gussy,” Donna cries, referring to her Saint Bernard. “He’s gone off somewhere, and Frank and I have no idea where he is. He’s never even been beyond the backyard on his own.”

“Here, step inside, Donna,” Julie says. “Don’t worry. We’ll find him.” She turns toward the living room and calls, “Ocean! Ocean was just out riding her bike a few minutes ago. Maybe she saw him,” she says to Donna.

“What’s going on, Mom?” Ocean says, appearing from the living room.

“Did you happen to see Gussy while you were out riding?” Julie asks her.

“No. The only place I ever see him is in the Millers’ yard,” Ocean replies.

“Oh my,” Donna moans, “this isn’t good.”

“It’s going to be okay. We’ll find him,” Julie assures her. “I’ll take my car and we’ll search the neighborhood.”

Noah comes walking down the stairs, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “Check the school. Behind the portables. That’s where you’ll find him,” he says confidently.

“And sure enough, there was Gussy up the street, at the school, behind the portables,” Julie tells Clay.

“Whoa.” Clay frowns, his expression perplexed. “And did Noah tell you how on God’s green earth he knew this?”

“He just said he knew,” Julie replies. “I figured maybe he had seen him at the school before, and that the Millers were actually unaware the dog had wandered off in the past. But that wasn’t the case.”

“Is there more to this?” Clay asks.

“Oh yeah, there’s much more,” Julie says, nodding. She tells him about Siro Felder.

Clay studies his sister. “Now I can see why this has you so freaked out.”

“And that’s not it. There’s also Ocean’s accident. He somehow foresaw the events leading to it,” Julie says.

“Like what?” Clay asks.

“He asked me why Indiana—that’s the horse Ocean rides at Green Valley Riding—why she was acting so wild, after we dropped off Ocean for her weekly horseback riding lesson. He said, ‘She’s usually so tame.’ But believe me, Clay, that horse was as tranquil as I’d ever seen it when we left Green Valley. If they thought for a second it was in a bad state, they would never have let Ocean or any other student get within a hundred feet of it. It was a freak accident, but somehow my nine-year-old son sensed it was going to happen.”

Clay was slowly shaking his head in astonishment. “Who else besides Siro Felder knows about this craziness?” he asks.

“Nobody, other than you, and of course whoever Felder may have told.”

Clay works his fingers across his desktop keyboard. He studies the screen. “According to Wikipedia, Siro Felder’s a big player in the business world,” he says. “Ovo-Tech’s quite the company, and he appears to be quite the philanthropist, especially when it comes to donating to hospitals. His wife, Dr. Ruby Felder, is a highly regarded Sundale psychiatrist, and they have a twenty-three-year-old son, but there aren’t any details about him.”

“How do you suggest we deal with this, Clay?”

“Since you think it all started happening after the camping trip, the first thing we need to do is ask my sons if they noticed anything strange about Noah during the trip. I know Sue and I sure as heck didn’t.”

“Good idea,” Julie says.

Clay checks the time. “Great. I think we can still catch the boys on Hello Friend before they head out to their tennis camp.”

Julie hesitates. “Are you planning to tell the boys and Sue about this?” she asks.

“No, I don’t think that’d be wise at this stage. I think it’s best to keep things under wraps for now.” Clay is bringing up Hello Friend on the desktop. Seconds later, the images of his twin teenagers appear on the screen. “Hey guys. Glad I caught you.”

“What’s going on, Dad?” Holden asks.

“I’m here with your Aunt Julie and we want to speak to you about Noah,” Clay explains.

“Well, we haven’t seen or spoken to him since the camping trip, but go ahead,” Tully replies.

“Aunt Julie says he’s been a little off since he returned from the trip. I realize it was only a two day outing, but did either of you notice anything strange about him that you can put your finger on?” Clay asks.

They both look troubled.

“Please, tell me whatever it is, boys,” Julie says. “I really need to know.”

Holden exhales. “Something kinda strange did happen on the morning of the second day.”

“What happened, Holden?” Clay says in a firm voice.

“When Tully and I woke up, Noah wasn’t in the tent,” Holden says.

“Didn’t you guys secure the tent like I ordered?” Clay asks. His tone is agitated.

“We sure did,” Tully replies. “I still can’t figure how he got out of there without us noticing.”

“And what happened from there?” Julie interjects.

“We found him sitting on a boulder on the pathway leading to the river,” Holden replies. “He was just sitting there staring into space with an empty look in his eyes.”

“But then in a flash, he seemed to be his normal self again,” Tully adds. “And that’s why we never brought it up. We told him he shouldn’t have left the tent without permission, and he apologized.”

“Okay, boys. Thanks for being open about this,” Clays says with his eyes on Julie.

“Hey, I have an idea,” Clay says to his sister after bidding farewell to his sons. “Since Siro Felder is already caught up in this, why don’t you see if we can get his wife to speak with Noah, and see if she can help figure out what the heck is going on.”

“Good idea,” Julie says, nodding in agreement.

Chapter 3

Ovo-Tech Headquarters, Sundale County

“Thank you for seeing us on such short notice,” Julie says as she and Clay enter Siro’s office.

“Well, frankly, you beat me to it,” Siro replies, directing them to the chairs across from his desk. “I take it this has to do with Noah.”

Julie exhales. “I owe you an apology,” she says. “What I told you at the hospital is not true. There’s not even the slightest chance my son had ever met you prior to yesterday...and there’s so much more to his story,” Julie says before explaining in detail.

Siro listens intently. “Extraordinary,” he says. “This is beyond puzzling.”

“We’ve learned that your wife’s a very highly regarded psychiatrist, and we came here to request her assistance in attempting to find out what could be going on with my nephew,” Clay says.

Siro nods and offers a warm smile. “We’d both be glad to assist you however we can.”

* * *

“Welcome to my home, Dr. Felder,” Julie says as she leads Ruby into the living room.

“Thank you for having me, and Ruby will do just fine,” she replies as Julie directs her to an easy chair.

“I told your husband I would pay you for your time, but he insisted—”

“Not to worry,” Ruby interjects. “From the background info Siro gave me, this appears to be an extremely perplexing case. And it’s my

understanding you believe it all started after Noah arrived home from a recent camping trip to Sanctuary Park.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Julie replies as she sits stiffly on the edge of the sofa. “Should I call him? He’s upstairs in his room, working on his latest puzzle.”

“Before you do that, I’d like to ask you a few questions about your son, if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly. I’ll tell you whatever I can.”

“Great.” Ruby retrieves a tablet from her handbag. She taps the screen a few times and looks up at Julie with a smile. “Okay... How long ago did Noah’s father die?”

“A little more than three years ago. He died in a work accident. Noah was six at the time,” Julie replies.

“How would you say Noah has handled his father’s death?” Ruby asks, typing notes into her tablet.

“I’d say for a child his age, he’s handled it quite well. The first year was rather difficult, but he’s come a long way.”

“And how are you coping?” Ruby gently asks, looking up from the tablet.

“As much as I miss him, I have to continue on for my children,” Julie replies. “My brother Clay and his wife Sue have been great support to me. In fact, I manage Sue’s department store, and thankfully she’s been very flexible when it comes to my hours.”

“And do you have a sitter for the children when you’re working?”

“Yes. A lovely young woman named Hannah. She’s a true sweetheart, and the kids adore her.”

“Tell me a little bit about Noah,” Ruby says, returning her eyes to the tablet. “His likes and dislikes. How he is in school and how he relates to other kids.”

“I’d describe him as lively. Unlike most kids his age, he doesn’t care for video games. He’d much rather work on solving puzzles, creating drawings, and building things,” Julie replies. “Oh yeah, and he definitely has a sweet tooth. We fight about that all the time,” she adds with a chuckle.

“So I’ve heard,” Ruby quips. “How about school and the other kids?”

“His grades are above average, and according to his teachers, he gets on well with the other students.”

“Glad to hear,” Ruby says, continuing to enter the info into her tablet. “What about past illnesses or injuries?”

“Thankfully, he’s had no major illnesses or injuries. A few colds and the flu on a couple of occasions,” Julie replies.

“Any anxiety issues?”

“None I’m aware of.”

“Very well,” Ruby says. “Have you noticed Noah predicting the weather or any other things around the house?”

“Not that I can recall,” Julie replies, shaking her head.

“All right. Would you please ask him to join us?”

Julie goes to the bottom of the stairs and calls, “Noah, there’s a lady here to see you.”

Seconds later, a skinny child with wispy, copper-brown hair and hazel eyes comes dashing down the stairs. “Here I am,” he proudly announces.

“Noah, this is Ruby. She’s going to play a couple of games with you and have a little chat,” Julie says.

“Hello Noah,” Ruby says cheerfully. “How’s your puzzle coming?”

“I already finished it. It’s a large spaceship,” he replies, shyly looking at Ruby.

“That’s wonderful to hear. As your mother said, I’m here to play a couple of games with you and get to know you,” Ruby says. She lifts herself out of the easy chair and sits down on the living room floor. “Come and join me,” she says with a wave of a hand, directing Noah to the space next to her. “And, let’s play our first game.”

“Sure. That’d be great.” Noah eagerly drops down on the floor beside her.

“Okay. I wrote down a number on this piece of paper before I came here,” Ruby says, removing a folded piece of paper from her handbag. “The number’s between one and one thousand.” She places the paper in front of the child. “Can you take a wild guess at what the number is?”

“That’s easy. Three hundred and seventy-three,” Noah calls out without hesitation.

Ruby reaches for the paper and opens it, revealing the very number Noah called out.

“I knew it!” Noah crows.

Ruby and Julie exchange a glance.

“You did. That’s incredible, Noah,” Ruby says, studying the boy. “Now we’re going to play one more game. I’m going to hand your mother a card that has a picture on it.” Ruby reaches over and discreetly hands Julie the card. “Let’s see if you can tell us what it is.”

“It’s a picture of an elephant in a jungle,” Noah blurts with an impish grin.

“Wow. You did it again,” Ruby exclaims when Julie reveals what’s on the card.

“Way to go, Noah,” Julie adds, feigning joy.

“Now I’d like you to tell me all about your recent camping trip to Sanctuary Park,” Ruby says, smiling.

Noah spends the next several minutes excitedly detailing highlights from the outing. “...and then when we went fishing, Uncle Clay caught four giant fish, and I helped my cousins, Holden and Tully, catch a couple, but they weren’t as big.”

“And I heard you slept in a tent,” Ruby says.

“Yeah. I even helped Holden and Tully set it up,” Noah answers.

“Do you recall waking up early the next morning before Holden and Tully, and taking a walk all by yourself near the river?” Ruby gently asks.

“I don’t remember,” Noah says, frowning. “But that’s where they found me in the morning. So I guess I did.”

“Thank you for telling me about your trip,” Ruby says, rising to her feet. She gives Julie a slight nod.

Julie rises as well. “Okay, Noah. Say goodbye to Ruby and go upstairs and get ready. We’re going to be bringing Ocean home from the hospital later today.”

With Noah out of sight, the two women regard each other, bug-eyed. “Argh,” Julie grunts, wiping her hands down her face. “This is insane. Do you have any idea what’s happening?”

“I wish I did. This is the strangest thing I’ve ever encountered. And believe you me, I’ve come across some strange things over the years,” Ruby replies.

“None of it makes any sense,” Julie says. “Especially now that he’s claiming not to know how he ended up at the riverside.” She starts pacing. “I don’t know where to go from here. Do I need to accept the fact that my son’s turned into a modern-day Nostradamus?”

“It’s not my place to tell you what to do,” Ruby says, “but I suggest we bring the matter to an associate and former teacher of mine, a psychiatrist named Dr. Oxford Olsen. I’d be happy to speak with him on your behalf, if you wish.”

Chapter 4

“Noah calling out that number and knowing about the picture is extraordinary,” Julie tells her brother over the phone. “Ruby Felder’s bringing in a highly renowned psychiatrist named Dr. Oxford Olsen.”

“Sounds like a good idea. By the way, I think it’s time we let the boys and Sue in on what’s going on,” Clay suggests.

“Yes. I agree...looks like we’re all in this together,” Julie replies with a sigh.

“And what about Noah—do you get the sense he’s aware of what’s happening?”

“No, and that’s what makes this all the crazier. It just seems all so normal to him.”

“And how do you plan to proceed if this Dr. Olsen doesn’t have any answers?” Clay gently asks. “Are we just going to accept and expose the fact Noah’s some sort of new age seer?”

“I can’t even imagine what that would do to his life,” Julie replies. “I’m...I’m terrified, Clay.”

“Well, we’ll cross that bridge if and when we need to,” Clay calmly replies.

* * *

“It’s wonderful to see you, Ruby,” Dr. Olsen says when Ruby arrives at his opulent home just north of Sundale County. “Let’s take this out to the patio. It’s such a glorious day,” he adds, breathing in the summer air.

“That’s fine by me, Doctor,” Ruby replies, grinning.

“How about I reward you with a tall glass of my homemade lemonade? After sitting through that boring lecture of mine, I’d say you deserve it,” he says with a laugh that sounds more like a series of hiccups.

“Boring?” Ruby quips. “Every person in that entire hall was captivated for the entire lecture. And believe me, I was one of them.”

“I suppose it’s only natural for the creator to often question his own offering,” Olsen counters with a toothy grin as he retrieves a pitcher of lemonade from the fridge and fills two glasses. “Shall we?” he says, leading Ruby outside.

“Do you miss teaching at the university?” she asks as they settle down on the patio. Widowed and white-haired now, her former instructor had formally retired ten years previously.

“Argh, at my age, doing these seminars even once every two weeks can be quite a chore in itself.” Olsen grunts as he settles back in his chair and takes a swig of lemonade. “So, please tell me all about this little friend of yours.”

Ruby leans forward in her chair and relates Noah’s story in detail. When she concludes, Dr. Olsen appears to be gathering his thoughts before offering a reply. “That’s all very interesting,” he says, grinning as he tugs at his beard. “But unfortunately, my experience with these so-called clairvoyants is that I haven’t met one that wasn’t a fake. And without wanting to insult your intelligence, I need to ask you: has it ever crossed your mind that you and your husband are somehow being played? Getting something like this into the public eye can lead to one heck of a payday for pranksters.”

“I can assure you that’s not happening here, Doctor,” Ruby replies. “As I told you, I tested the child myself. I saw and heard it with my own eyes and ears.” She pauses. “Wait a second. I hope you’re not thinking I’m part of some scam and I’m trying to pull one over on you?”

Dr. Olsen smiles and playfully raises his hands in defense. “Not at all, Ruby,” he says. “You’ll have to forgive the skeptic in me when it comes to the notion of child soothsayers.”

“But I just gave you all the proof you, or anyone, would need. Something’s going on with this child,” Ruby firmly counters. She rises to her feet. “So, would you be willing to visit Sanctuary Park with us? Siro and I, along with the Cowan family, are planning to fly down there on my husband’s private plane. We need to check the place out. We’re hoping maybe it’ll trigger something in the child’s mind.”

A stone-faced Olsen shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Ruby, but I don’t see how I can be of any assistance to you on this one,” he says politely.

“Very well,” Ruby replies. Her tone is edged with distress. “Thank you for your time, Doctor. I’ll see myself back to my car.”

“Best of luck, Ruby.”

Olsen watches his former student exit the patio area. He exhales sharply before reaching for his phone.

Chapter 5

Red Ridge Bay

Lieutenant Van Stanwell approaches an intense game of volleyball between members of his special ops group and watches nervously for a break in the action. “Atlas, I need you to come with me,” he calls out, then leads the soldier into a small office building and directs him to be seated across from his desk.

“Is something wrong, sir?” Atlas asks, brows pinched in concern.

Stanwell sighs heavily. “I’m so sorry to have to tell you this, Atlas. I just received word your father’s plane crashed. Your father, mother, and the seven other people aboard all died.”

“Noooo!” Atlas wails, grabbing at his face. “How can that have happened? My father’s such an accomplished pilot.”

“So far, there’s no information about what happened, other than the fact the plane went down in a completely isolated and wooded area,” Stanwell says. “All we know at this point is that its destination was Sanctuary Park. The plane was supposed to land on the strip just outside the campground.”

“Sanctuary Park?” Atlas ponders aloud. “What kind of business would Ovo-Tech be doing at a campground?” he adds, swiping at his teary eyes with his index finger.

“The report I’m looking at indicates there were also four youngsters aboard the plane. I highly doubt this was a business trip,” Stanwell says. “Here’s the report.”

Atlas shakes his head as he reads the account. “This can’t be... this can’t be...” His voice trails off into a sob. He’s trembling.

Lieutenant Stanwell rises and steps out from behind his desk. He walks toward Atlas and places a hand on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Atlas. My heart aches for you. I'm going to make all the arrangements for your return home. And if there's anything you require, please inform my office."

* * *

Days later, after a touching memorial celebrating the extraordinary lives of his parents, Atlas meets with his father's longtime personal attorney, and then with Ovo-Tech CEO Willow Farlow at the company's Sundale County headquarters. "Do you have any questions regarding the company and where things stand?" Willow asks from behind her desk.

"No, it's all pretty clear," Atlas replies. "I'm elated Dad made me the major shareholder in the company, but I'm even more thrilled you've agreed to stay on and guide the ship. I know it was his wish to have the company continue on no matter what happened to him. And as you're well aware, the day-to-day business stuff is something I have absolutely no interest in."

"I'm honored to know your father had such faith in me, and I promise not to let either of you down. And anytime you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me," Willow says, closing her briefcase.

"I still can't figure out Dad's connection to this Cowan family, and their next of kin are at a loss as well," Atlas says, staring into space. "And on top of that, I still have no idea why they were going to Sanctuary Park."

"Those are the million dollar questions nobody seems to have the answers to," Willow replies.

Atlas deeply exhales. "And then there's the crash itself...still such a mystery."

A knock on the door introduces Miranda, Willow's secretary. "I'm sorry to interrupt," she says.

"By all means. How can I help you, Miranda?" Willow asks.

“There’s a lady named Dora Dyson on the phone, calling from the children’s unit at Sundale General,” the secretary says. “She’s requesting to meet with Atlas.”

* * *

When Atlas enters the hospital cafeteria, Dora’s waiting for him. “Please accept my deepest sympathy. Your father meant so much to this hospital. His generosity was so appreciated,” she says after introducing herself as the second floor manager, followed by a brief exchange of pleasantries.

“And I’m going to do my part to ensure that that generosity continues through Ovo-Tech,” Atlas replies with a smile. “That was clearly stated in Dad’s will. Besides, this place saved my life when I almost died as a child. I’ll always remain extremely grateful.”

“Now let me tell you why I reached out to you,” Dora says, stirring her coffee.

Atlas studies her with raised brows, waiting.

“I’ve come to learn, through the news, that you have no idea how your parents were linked to the Cowan family,” Dora says.

“That’s correct.”

Dora then explains Ocean Cowan and her horseback riding injury. “I witnessed your father speaking to both Julie and her nine-year-old son Noah, here at the hospital. I can’t tell you for certain that this is how they first came to know one another, but I hope it at least provides you with some sort of lead.”

“Hmm. Maybe that explains it. Thank you for reaching out,” Atlas replies. “Would you happen to have any idea why Sanctuary Park was important?” he adds, rubbing his chin.

“I don’t have that answer, but what I can tell you is that Noah had been on a camping trip with his uncle’s family to that campground just prior to his sister’s accident,” Dora says.

“How do you know this?”

“The boy told me so.” Tears fill her eyes. “He was such a darling.”

“Do you recall him telling you anything in particular about the trip?”

Dora thinks for a moment. “Just that his uncle and cousins took him fishing, and how much he loved helping them build a campfire. The usual stuff that’d bring joy to a child. I could see it in his eyes.”

The following morning, Lieutenant Stanwell calls Atlas’s cell. “What’s going on, sir?” Atlas asks.

“We’ve just learned some very shocking news relating to the plane crash,” Stanwell replies. “I figured I’d reach out to you before the FBI does. In fact, I know for certain that Director Gregson will be paying you a visit this afternoon.”

“Whoa. What’s this all about?”

“It’s been discovered the plane’s avionics were somehow hacked into. This means whoever did so would have taken complete control of the plane, causing it to crash. Your father wouldn’t have stood a chance, regardless of how skilled a pilot he was.”

“Oh my God!” Atlas gasps, feeling a frisson of horror. “How can that be? And why?”

“As of now, nobody has those answers, Atlas,” Stanwell replies.

“Why my father’s plane, and with a nine-year-old child aboard?”

“I’m so sorry, young man,” Stanwell replies in a breathy voice. “I pray those answers are found. Now, as I’ve already advised you. Take all the time you need away from the Gold Hawks, and if and when you’re ready to return, we’ll look forward to having you rejoin the team.”

* * *

When FBI Director Elliott Gregson arrives at what was Siro and Ruby Felder’s lavish Sundale County home, he provides Atlas with an update. “I wish I had more info, but all we’ve been able to determine so far is that somehow, someone somewhere, for some reason, hacked into the plane’s avionics and caused it to crash into the forest.”

“Is this your way of telling me it’s more than likely we’ll never find out who did this?” Atlas demands.

The FBI director sighs heavily. “It’s very possible the attack was random. As I’m sure I don’t have to tell you. In this high-tech world

we're living in, we could be looking at a very tech-savvy deranged punk in a basement, a terror organization hacking into the plane as some sort of insane trial run, or perhaps it was an act of vengeance for whatever reason," he concludes.

Sadness and anger converge in Atlas. "I want to be part of this investigation...I need to be part of it, Director Gregson."

"I'm sorry, but I can't allow that," Gregson replies.

"You can't allow that?" Atlas snaps back in a rough voice. "I'm a Gold Hawk. Do you think this is beyond me? We're talking about the murder of my parents!"

Director Gregson runs a hand through his perfectly combed hair. "I understand, Atlas. Let me relay your request to Attorney General Salazar, and if she approves, I'll gladly bring you on board. As of now, I've assigned someone you know, Special Agent Kim Waldron, to head up the investigation."

Atlas finds calm. "Solid decision," he replies, fondly recalling his former fellow Gold Hawk.

The following morning, over the phone, Director Gregson welcomes Atlas to the FBI's investigative team. "I'm pleased to give you the news, but I must tell you, both AG Salazar and I are concerned this may all be a little too close to home for you. I suppose knowing we're talking about a Gold Hawk makes the decision a little less worrisome, but I need you to understand the decision could be reversed, depending on what we learn about the case."

"I understand, and I sincerely appreciate this, sir," Atlas replies. "I promise you and AG Salazar will not regret it."

"We're currently in the process of setting up an agency command post at Sundale's police headquarters. I'll send you all the details along with an electronic case file."

"Is news of the hacking of the plane going to be made public?" Atlas asks.

Director Gregson sighs. “As we speak, that’s still undecided. It’ll be a White House decision. It’s a case of being damned if we do and damned if we don’t. It could destroy aviation as we know it if people learn a plane can be hacked into in such a manner, even if it was a one-off. But at the same time, not disclosing it to the public would simply be wrong.”

Chapter 6

“Atlas. My goodness. It’s been way too long,” FBI Agent Kim Waldron says when they meet in the foyer of the Sundale police headquarters.

“That it has,” Atlas replies as she escorts him down a hallway leading to a conference room.

“Well, this is it,” Kim says as they enter the room, which is set up with a long table and four desktop computers. “There are two other agents who’ll be working alongside us,” she adds, taking a seat.

Atlas drops down in the chair beside her and regards her with a warm smile. “So, how’s life at the Bureau?”

“Hectic, but you’ll get no complaints from me. I enjoy it much more than being a Gold Hawk. I much prefer the more structured environment. The sheer freedom the government has given the Gold Hawks unit to go about its business makes it what it is, but in all honesty, the outright mayhem that comes with it never sat well with me,” Kim replies with a sheepish grin before her expression turns serious. “I’m so sorry for your loss, Atlas. To lose both your parents in such a tragic manner...how can life be so cruel?”

Atlas nods, suddenly blinking back tears. He admits to himself that the wounds are still too fresh, but resolves to aim for objective conduct. He doesn’t want to be removed from the team for being a weak link. “I need to know who did this, Kim.”

“Have you had the opportunity to review the case file?” she asks.

“I certainly have. And there’s something I can add to it.”

“Oh?”

Atlas relates Dora Dyson's revelation, along with how he believes his parents came to know Julie and her family.

"Perhaps your father was attempting to do something nice by flying them out to the campground," Kim opines.

"I suppose," Atlas replies, unconvinced.

Kim sighs. "It's going to be a real challenge unless we can prove someone on that plane was being targeted, and without wanting to offend you, I'd say if that's the case, it more than likely comes down to your parents."

Atlas rises and begins pacing. "Oh, I fully concur. Julie Cowan's brother, Clay, owned a Sundale County auto body shop, his wife owned a small department store, and Julie was the store's manager. Surely not the profiles of people an airplane hacker would target," he says. "And then we have two teenage boys and two children."

"Are you aware of anyone from the business world who may've been holding some grudge against your father?" Kim asks.

"Considering how large Ovo-Tech has become, I suppose that's very possible," Atlas replies with a grimace. "I've asked the company's CEO, Willow Farlow, to send us everything she can when it comes to the company's business over the last five years."

"Great," Kim replies. "I'm going to have my fellow agents begin interviewing the company's key executives ASAP."

"And with my mother having treated so many unstable people over the years, I'm going to dive into her digital footprint to see if that leads us anywhere," Atlas says.

Kim studies him. "Are you sure you're okay with being part of this? I'm certain it can't be easy for you."

Atlas turns to her. "I'll be the first to admit that none of this is easy, but I owe it to the memory of the people who brought me into this world and gave me all the love they could possibly give." He sighs, then changes the subject. "By the way, how's General Waldron these days? From all accounts, it looks like he's going to be our country's next president."

"Dad's doing well, thanks. Since becoming an international hero four years ago, so many people encouraged him to run for president, and I'm thrilled he's done so," Kim says.

“I’ll second that,” Atlas adds.

Four years ago, CIA Director General Russell Waldron had provided key information leading to the thwarting of a series of simultaneous bombings planned throughout Europe by the European Freedom Alliance.

“It’s crazy to think that after that whole insane investigation he headed up years ago, he came so close to leaving the military and the government permanently,” Kim says.

“That’s right. The glowing orbs over the Atlantic,” Atlas replies with a grin.

“Dad said he almost lost all faith in humanity, knowing how many people actually believed the story was real.”

“I’ve come to learn Julie Cowan’s brother, Clay, was one of the so-called witnesses,” Atlas says.

“And America’s self-proclaimed UFO expert, Howard Gill, drove my father crazy for months after the fact. That guy hasn’t met an alien he doesn’t like.”

They laugh before Atlas turns serious. “Sanctuary Park. The old JK Preston base... I know it was before I became a Gold Hawk, but didn’t your father and Lieutenant Stanwell pretty much oversee everything to do with that base?”

“They certainly did. It helped create a strong bond between the two of them,” Kim replies.

Atlas thinks about Stanwell’s compassionate handling of this nightmare. He’ll be forever grateful.

Varley Casino and Resort, Miami, Florida, six weeks ago

“Hey, Dax. I’m here to see Mr. Varley,” Lieutenant Stanwell says when he enters the lobby.

Though casually dressed, the man’s broad shoulders suggest he’s more than a mere valet. “Yes. It’s wonderful to see you again, Lieutenant. The boss is waiting for you poolside.”

“Lieutenant.” Franklin Varley beams at him. “Have a seat, and let me have Dax fix us a glass of white wine. It’s the latest from my collection.”

“Sounds perfect,” Stanwell replies.

“Now, I want to thank you for accepting my invitation to meet,” Varley says. “I hope you and the family enjoyed your most recent stay in Orlando?”

“We did,” Stanwell says. “And this worked out perfectly, seeing as I was already in town. So, please tell me what I can do for you.”

Varley swirls his glass of wine under his nose and takes a sip. “It has to do with your brother...bright-eyed Eric,” he sneers. “Are you aware he’d been acting as one of my investment bankers?”

“I am,” Stanwell replies.

“Are you also aware his stupidity has recently cost me in the neighborhood of fifteen million dollars?” Varley snarls. “This is not acceptable.”

Stanwell groans. “Actually, he’s the main reason why I’m in town. His wife called me and asked me to intervene. His drinking—”

“Well, placing him in some AA program won’t do a damn thing to get my money back. And I’m sure you understand, this is not something I can just let go.”

Stanwell studies the menacing, tanned man before him. “I wish I could help...but I don’t know how.”

Varley takes another sip of wine and smiles. “Thankfully, most problems in life come with a solution, Lieutenant. And I’m certain this particular solution I have in mind will be beneficial to all of us, including this incredible country we all cherish.”

The lieutenant’s eyes widen and he rubs his chin. “Go ahead. I’m listening.”

* * *

“I hope the Ovo-Tech executives are being cooperative with you,” Atlas says when he and Kim reconvene two days later. “Because it they’re not—”

“No, no, they’ve all been very helpful,” Kim interjects. “We have another series of interviews set for tomorrow. How are you making out with your mother’s digital footprint?”

“Well, I’ve learned that prior to the crash, for whatever reason, she’d become highly interested in the subject of clairvoyance. It seems that all her final internet searches revolve around that topic,” Atlas reveals.

“Clairvoyance. Doesn’t that seem odd to you?”

“If she wasn’t a psychiatrist it would, but much of my mother’s research focused on unusual subjects. I did find it interesting that she requested a meeting with one of her former teachers, a man named Dr. Oxford Olsen, about the subject. The text messages she sent him appeared urgent.”

“Do you know if they ended up meeting?”

“No. I didn’t come across any replies from Olsen.”

“Do you personally know him?” Kim asks.

“I met him once about two years ago. I understand he used to consult for the military and counsel soldiers.”

“He most certainly did. In fact, my father and Lieutenant Stanwell had him set up an office at the JK Preston base, back in the day. He was a great help to the military, especially during the Larson mission and Euro conflict,” Kim replies.

Atlas raises a brow at that. “Hmm. I think it’d be wise to pay him a visit to see if he actually did speak with my mother,” he says, looking at his tablet. “And coincidentally, he’s holding a lecture here in Sundale the day after tomorrow.” He looks up. “But for now, there’s somebody else I’m planning to meet with.”

“Who’s that?” Kim asks.

“A young lady named Hannah Macina. She used to be a sort of nanny for Noah and Ocean Cowan, and was very close with their mother. I don’t know if it’ll do us any good, but I think it’s something worth checking out.”

When Atlas arrives at Hannah Macina's Sundale apartment, she welcomes him with kindness. "I'll help out any way I can. The Cowans meant the world to me," she says. "Have they found out what caused the plane to crash?"

Atlas shakes his head. "It's still under investigation," he lies. "So, I understand you were the children's babysitter."

"Yes. Whenever Julie needed me to care for them, I'd do my best to oblige. I'd often have to work around my school schedule, but we usually found a way to make it work. Obviously, the summers were always a lot easier." Hannah smiles.

"Were you around the house in the days leading up to the tragedy?" Atlas asks.

"Not as much as I usually am," Hannah replies. "After Ocean had her horseback riding accident, Julie took time off work, which meant my services weren't needed as often." Hannah frowns, looking confused. "Is there any reason to believe the plane crash was more than some freak accident? Is this why you're asking me these questions?"

"The investigation of what happened to the plane is in its very early stages, so the answers aren't there for us yet," Atlas replies. "Can you tell me if anyone from the family ever spoke to you about Sanctuary Park?"

Hannah appears to gather her thoughts. "Noah told me how much he loved it, especially the fishing," she answers. "Other than that, there's nothing more I can tell you."

"Did it surprise you they'd take the trip so soon after Ocean came out of the hospital?"

"All I know is that it seemed the trip was very important to them. But I have no idea why."

"Did they ever mention my parents to you?"

"They did. A couple of days before that awful day, I stopped by the house to bring Noah a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle of a tropical island. He seemed to love the challenge of putting together those large puzzles. That's when Julie told me she met your father at the hospital and how they were going to be flying out to the campground on his

private plane.” Hannah smiles. “I’m sorry,” she says, blushing. “I was just thinking of Noah and how quickly he put that particular puzzle together. While I was chatting with Julie in the living room, he sat on the floor and finished the thing in a flash.” She pauses and shakes her head. “And the really amazing thing is that he did it without even using the box as a guide. It was as if some strange force was guiding him...I was astonished, to put it mildly. Even crazier was the fact it didn’t seem to faze Julie one bit, which I truly found shocking,” Hannah adds.

Atlas lifts an eyebrow. “Indeed.”

Chapter 7

“This has to be what led my mother to do all that research on clairvoyance,” Atlas says to Kim at their makeshift command post as he relates what the babysitter told him about Noah.

“Are you thinking Julie Cowan asked your mother for help on the subject, and that’s what led her to Dr. Olsen?” Kim asks.

“Well, hopefully Olsen can give us that answer.”

“Do you really think this has anything to do with someone targeting the plane? I mean, you must admit, it seems pretty out-there.”

“I agree,” Atlas replies. “And that’s why it fits so well with this entire baffling case.”

* * *

“Can I help you, sir?” a young woman says to Atlas when he approaches the backstage area of a downtown Sundale community center. Her sandy brown hair brushes her waist and her name tag reads *Brianna*.

“I’m looking to speak with Dr. Olsen,” Atlas says.

“Is he expecting you?” Brianna asks.

“Yes. My name’s Atlas Felder.”

A couple of minutes later, Atlas is face to face with Olsen. “How much of my lecture did you catch?” Olsen asks after a brief exchange of pleasantries.

“Oh, I’d say about the last fifteen minutes or so.”

“You’re lucky,” Olsen quips. “Those other unfortunate souls had to listen to me ramble on about the human condition for the last ninety.”

“Well, my mother, for one, used to go on and on about how much she enjoyed your lectures.”

“Argh,” Olsen grunts. “Ruby...I still can’t believe she’s gone. I feel terrible that I couldn’t make it to the memorial service. Actually, your mother paid me a visit just a couple of days before the tragedy.” He rubs his bloodshot eyes and exhales.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Atlas says.

“Oh, did she tell you she was planning to meet with me?”

“No, but I noticed several emails she sent you requesting to meet regarding the subject of clairvoyance,” Atlas replies.

“Unfortunately, I wasn’t of any help to her. I felt bad about that.”

“Did she give you any idea why she’d developed such a keen interest in the subject?”

“No. But then again, your mother was a very inquisitive person. Always looking to learn. Maybe she decided to write a paper on the topic out of sheer interest, or perhaps one of her patients made some crazy claim they could forecast future events and she was hoping to attain some insight into the subject. Honestly, when it comes to that particular subject, my well of knowledge and interest is nonexistent. It’s something I just don’t believe in.” The psychiatrist tugs at his abundant beard and furrows his bushy brows before stating, “I hope you’re not thinking this is somehow related to the plane crash. That would be beyond ludicrous.”

“I can’t quite put my finger on why, but I do,” Atlas replies.

“Well, more often than not, when the why can’t be answered, it’s usually because the answer doesn’t exist,” Olsen replies, grinning.

“Maybe so, but there’s something I’ve come to learn about the nine-year-old boy who died—his name was Noah Cowan. As crazy as I have to admit it sounds, I have a feeling his family believed the child had attained a prescient power and my mother became aware of it,” Atlas says, and relates what the babysitter told him.

“Hmm. Your mother never mentioned any of this to me,” Olsen lies. “And as interesting as it all sounds, I’m sorry, Atlas, but I don’t see how I can help you. Like I said, I’m not a believer in such things,” he adds dismissively. “Now, if there’s anything else I can help you with, please reach out to me anytime.”

“If need be, I’ll definitely take you up on that offer, Doctor.”

* * *

Oxford Olsen watches with narrow eyes as Atlas leaves before reaching for his cell phone and making a call.

“What is it, Doc?” the man on the other end grumbles.

“There’s something important I need to tell you,” Olsen replies. “Atlas Felder just paid me a visit. He knows all about the child.”

“Very well,” the man replies. “You need not worry, Oxford. All will be dealt with accordingly.”

* * *

“So, how did things go with Olsen?” Kim asks Atlas upon his return.

“He claimed to have no idea why my mother had become so engrossed in the subject,” Atlas replies, plopping down in a chair at the long table. “All he could offer were the same ideas that have already crossed my own mind.”

“Such as?” Kim says.

“She was doing research for a paper, or maybe she was treating a patient who had delusional thoughts of being clairvoyant.”

“And what about Noah Cowan and what the babysitter told you about the boy and how he so easily put that puzzle together?”

“He just shrugged it off,” Atlas replies. “And frankly, he wasn’t very interested in the subject at all, which, coming from someone like him, felt strange. I got the impression he wasn’t being totally forthright.”

“Good day, folks.”

Surprised, Kim and Atlas look up as the FBI director enters.

“Director Gregson,” Kim says.

“Sorry to rain on your little mystical parade, but I think we may finally have something tangible to work with,” Gregson says. “Which is why I took the first flight I could down here. It’s important we tackle this in person.”

“What’s going on, sir?” Atlas asks, feeling hopeful.

“Are you aware of your father donating twelve million dollars in support of the European Union during the Euro conflict?” Gregson says to Atlas.

“No, but it doesn’t surprise me. I know how concerned he was about the anarchy being created by the Euro Freedom Alliance, and the idea such a thing would spill over to America. How did you become aware of the donation?” Atlas asks.

Director Gregson opens up his briefcase. “Here’s a report based on recent info gathered by US Intelligence. The info was discovered on the dark web. It emanates from a Euro Freedom Alliance cell believed to be operating here in America.” He hands copies of the document to Atlas and Kim. “This lists donors along with how much money each donated to the European Union. Like your father, these are all very prominent American businesspeople. Many of whom have already become EFA victims through ransomware attacks totaling in the area of sixty million dollars.”

Atlas scans the report. “So, I take it this means you think the EFA is also guilty of hacking into my father’s plane and causing it to crash. Wouldn’t you agree that’s a whole lot more vengeful and severe than a ransomware attack?”

“It is,” Gregson says. “But it’s a lead we can’t ignore. This group has been able to use technology to an extent we’ve never seen before. Intelligence fears they could be on the verge of hijacking our power grids. We have no choice. We’ll be going public later today.”

Atlas and Kim glance at each other with worried eyes. “And what are the president’s thoughts?” Kim asks.

“He’s very troubled by all of it. Actually, the White House had Lieutenant Stanwell studying the situation just prior to the ransomware

attacks happening, and it's now been decided the Gold Hawks will be leading a full-out mission to take down this group." Gregson turns to Atlas. "And as far as you're concerned, I spoke with Stanwell and he informed me he'd love nothing more than for you to rejoin the team for the mission. Of course, that's if you're feeling up to it."

Atlas sharply exhales. "Oh, I'm ready as can be."

The next day, upon returning to Washington, Atlas visits his mother's brother, Dave Eisen, a former Washington, DC, police detective. His uncle gladly welcomes him into his home. "How are you, Atlas?" he asks as they settle into the living room.

"Trying my best to move forward, stay positive, and live life," Atlas replies, fidgeting in his chair. "But I'm afraid that until the lowlifes who killed my parents are brought to justice, I'll never find complete peace of mind."

"That was quite a bombshell the FBI dropped yesterday," Dave says. "That the EFA targeted your father's plane and is responsible for committing all these big money ransomware attacks on powerful American businesses..." He shakes his head in disgust.

Atlas grimaces and runs a hand through his wavy locks. "When it comes to my father's plane being attacked, there's something you should know," he says, and explains the events leading to the tragedy, and in particular Noah Cowan. "When I tie what I've learned about the child to Mom's apparent sudden fascination with the subject of clairvoyance, I can't help but think there's something to it."

"Whoa. This is all rather bizarre," Dave says, falling into thought. "First of all, do you really think it's possible the boy had such a power? And second, are you seriously thinking this could have something to do with why the plane's avionics were hacked?"

"I have no idea what the child was about, but I believe my mother did... And yes, I do think it could be the reason why they were murdered."

"Because the boy foresaw something in particular. Or, he was targeted because someone came to learn he may have possessed such an extraordinary power," Dave surmises, bringing out the inner detective.

Atlas nods. "If I'm correct, then it has to be one or the other."

"What do you know about this Olsen character?"

"Mom thought the world of him. She used to tell me he was her favorite teacher of all time. He's a highly regarded psychiatrist who used to work for the military. Though, in recent years, he's been more focused on studying paranormal phenomena, which is why I suppose my mother reached out to him."

"Do you think he was holding out on you when he claimed to not know anything about why Ruby approached him?" Dave asks.

"I don't know, but he did seem a little off when we met... The more I think about it, perhaps Mom had purposely been vague with him, not wanting to cause problems for the Cowan family," Atlas replies, half attempting to convince himself.

"And Sanctuary Park? What do you know about the place?"

"It once functioned as the JK Preston military base. That's all I know."

"Well, at least there's one thing we know Olsen and the campground have in common: the US military," Dave muses.

Atlas rises and begins pacing. "I realize there might be nothing to this, but I just can't let it go."

"Are you contemplating stepping away from the Gold Hawks and pursuing this theory on your own?" Dave asks with raised brows.

"No. I've been called upon to help take down the EFA, and that's what I plan to do," Atlas replies. "Besides, despite my hunch, we can't rule them out as being the guilty party, as the authorities are suggesting."

"Are you planning to let your superiors know what you think could be behind this madness?"

"I'm afraid that ship's already sailed, and it quickly faded out of sight," Atlas replies.

"Then how do you plan to...ah, I get it, and I'll gladly do it," Dave says, studying his nephew. "While you do your part helping to take down the EFA, I'll look into Olsen and see where it leads."

"Are you sure you want to do this, Uncle Dave? You being so early into your retirement, the last thing I want to do is—"

“No, no, I want...need...to help. Ruby was my sister, and I loved her with all my heart. One way or another, we need to know who killed her and why they did,” Dave states.

“Great. I’ll do my best to keep you posted from my end,” Atlas says.

Chapter 8

At a secret location in Washington, DC, Lieutenant Van Stanwell surveys his group of Gold Hawks. “Welcome to Project Catching Freedom. You’re here because you’re the best this country has to offer,” he boasts. “As explained in the electronic file you’ve received, we are going up against a European Freedom Alliance cell whose purpose we now know is to seek revenge against America for our country’s involvement in the Euro conflict. As explained in the file, American Intelligence has learned corporations and individuals who provided financial support to the European Union during the conflict appear to be the group’s primary targets for the time being. Also, it’s feared the group may be planning an attempt to hijack our power grids. As proven by the numerous crimes they’ve already committed, including what is believed to be the hacking of a plane resulting in the deaths of nine people, it’s quite clear how advanced this group is from a technological perspective. Thwarting any future attacks is paramount, but will be an enormously difficult challenge.

“Now, I’m certain you’re all wondering if it’s been determined who exactly makes up the group, where they’re operating from, and how they’re being financed,” Lieutenant Stanwell continues. “Information is being gathered on an hourly basis. There’s no doubt the group has been meticulously creating its game plan over the last few years while operating as everyday citizens and businesses simultaneously functioning in the dark worlds of drug trafficking and the distribution of illegal armaments.”

Stanwell takes a drink of water and turns his eyes back on his charges. "We should be honored the White House has entrusted us with this mission. Failure is not an option."

When Lieutenant Stanwell dismisses the group, he asks Atlas to remain. "How are you feeling, Atlas? Am I to trust you're up to the challenge?"

"Most definitely, Lieutenant. It's an honor I can't put in words, sir."

"Well, this country should be grateful somebody such as yourself chose the military over the corporate world."

"Much to the chagrin of both my parents, it was never in doubt for me."

"May God be with you and your folks, Atlas," Stanwell says. "I just wanted to be certain of your objectivity. The desire for justice and revenge must be accompanied by a clear mind when entering into a mission such as this."

"I believe my record speaks for itself, Lieutenant. Always being objective and professional is paramount to me," Atlas states with self-assurance.

"Excellent. That's what I want and need to hear from you," Stanwell replies. "Now, let's nail these bastards and get us some of that justice and revenge."

"Whatever it takes."

* * *

After dismissing Atlas, Lieutenant Stanwell reaches for his phone, dials a number, and replies to a question: "Like I told you, you need not worry. The matter will be taken care of."

Olsen sharply exhales. "I have complete faith in you, Lieutenant."

"Yes, and it's vital that you go on with your life and leave this matter in my hands. Is that clear?" Stanwell warns.

"Very clear, and believe me. I'm more than glad to do so."

Four years ago

“What’s going on, gentlemen? Why is it so urgent we meet?” General Waldron asks when Lieutenant Stanwell and Dr. Olsen enter his office at the JK Preston base. Their faces are flushed, their expressions grim.

“I don’t know where to begin,” Stanwell says. “A Gold Hawk is dead, and I’m responsible—I killed him. His name’s Miguel Perez.”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Shocked, Waldron rises. “Why would you kill one of your own men?”

“In order to save my life,” Olsen interjects.

Wide-eyed, Waldron looks back and forth between them. “Tell me what exactly happened,” he says, glaring at Stanwell.

Stanwell exhales and proceeds to explain.

“After the fact,” he concludes, “I was able to confirm his wife and kids were on that train, just like he said. But at the time, I had no choice, General. If I didn’t pull the trigger, Doctor Olsen wouldn’t be here right now.”

Waldron has called up the news report on the train. “This is...I mean, this is totally insane,” he gasps. “How in the world could he have known what was to come? Is it possible he was somehow involved in the plan to bomb the train and then regretted it afterward?”

Stanwell shakes his head. “I believe this was the work of the EFA. And believe me, Miguel had absolutely nothing to do with those clowns.”

“So, with that being the case, are we to believe he had acquired some kind of prescient power, leading him to know his wife and kids were in serious peril? I can’t even believe I’m saying such a thing,” Waldron huffs. He turns toward Olsen. “Doctor?”

“I have no idea what to make of any of this, General,” Olsen replies, obviously flustered, still trembling with the aftershock of the experience.

Waldron casts his eyes back on the lieutenant. “He was part of your unit. Did you ever see or sense anything out of the ordinary?”

Stanwell runs a hand across his chin. “Miguel was a dedicated soldier who loved this country and would do anything to defend it.

But the Larson mission and the separation from his wife and children had taken a real toll on him. I'd become so concerned about his well-being that I had him meeting with Dr. Olsen on a regular basis."

"And things seemed to be picking up for him. He informed me the other day he'd patched things up with his wife and was looking forward to his time off to be with her and their kids back in Chicago," Olsen adds.

Waldron is again looking at the news report. "My Lord, 767 lives, and they all could've been saved," he wheezes.

* * *

Kim Waldron and Lieutenant Stanwell meet in the lobby of FBI Headquarters in Washington, DC. "Atlas and Ovo-Tech's CEO, Willow Farlow, will be arriving shortly," she informs him.

"Very well. Let's have a seat while we wait," Stanwell says, indicating the leather sofa before them. The lieutenant focuses on Agent Waldron as they sit down. "We need to do whatever it takes to stop these guys," he says.

"Yes. This current version of the EFA appears to be posing quite a threat," Kim says. "That they may have found a way to take control of that plane and crash it is a dangerous threat."

"It even has the FAA reeling at the moment," Stanwell says. "The major airlines have already noted they're taking a real hit."

The arrival of Atlas and Willow Farlow bring Kim and Stanwell to their feet. After initial greetings, Kim leads the group down a hallway to a conference room.

"Thank you for your continued cooperation," Kim says to Willow as they settle down.

"Of course. Anything I can do to help," Willow replies.

"I hope we didn't put you out too much and that your flight was comfortable," Kim offers politely.

"It worked well; I had some urgent business to attend to here in DC anyway," Willow replies.

"Very well. Now, what can you tell us about Ovo-Tech's Chief Information Officer, Jozef Sokol?" Kim asks.

“He was hired as the company’s CIO almost two years ago,” Willow replies. “He’s an extremely hard worker. Very intelligent. He implemented and oversees the company’s computer network systems. Siro Felder thought the world of him, and so do I.”

“Are you aware he has a younger brother named Lubor?” Kim asks. Atlas and Lieutenant Stanwell look on intently.

“No, I’m not,” Willow replies. “Should I be?”

“Lubor’s a founding member of the Euro Freedom Alliance and appears to be leading the cell here in the US. He’s considered a ruthless individual who’s referred to by his peers as the Antichrist Anarchist. He hasn’t been heard from or seen since the Euro bombings were thwarted four years ago. He’s become our key person of interest and we desperately need to track him down,” Kim says.

“He’s also known to be the person who came up with the group’s now notorious rallying call: Death to tyranny, life to liberty,” Stanwell adds.

Brows pinched, Willow gazes at Stanwell and then at Kim. “Do you have reason to believe Jozef also has ties to the EFA?”

“That’s something that’s being investigated as we speak. We are maintaining twenty-four-hour surveillance on him for the time being,” Kim explains. “We’ve come to learn the EFA has been placing members inside the companies of those on their hit list. It appears to be their MO since the conflict’s conclusion.”

“Wasn’t Jozef already included in your interview process?” Atlas asks Kim.

“Yes. A fellow agent did speak with him, and with Willow’s assistance, it’ll be my turn next,” Kim says.

Willow nods. “Like I said. However I can help.”

* * *

“So, what do you know about this Jozef Sokol?” Uncle Dave asks Atlas on Hello Friend.

“Not a heck of a lot. I remember my dad bringing his name up a few times,” Atlas says. “I recall him telling me that the guy had one of the most brilliant tech minds he’d ever come across.”

“And that’s quite impressive, considering the circles your father traveled in,” Dave says.

“Yeah,” Atlas agrees. “I recall Dad telling me how Jozef once came to him with a well-crafted figurine of an angel he’d created. It was a prototype for a project he’d been developing for the company on his own time.”

Dave raises a brow. “How could something like that possibly have been a benefit to Ovo-Tech?”

“The angel’s eyes were tiny cameras that could be used to monitor a patient in whatever applicable setting. Dad was impressed with the product itself, but he became concerned about privacy issues and abandoned the concept.”

“What do you know about his brother, Lubor?”

“From the reports I’ve read, it’s easy to see why he’s referred to as the Antichrist Anarchist,” Atlas says, wincing. “I’ve come to learn Lubor once set a fellow EFA member on fire because the guy refused to bomb his father’s government office while his father was inside the building.”

“Is there actual proof Jozef’s guilty of a single thing, past or present?” Dave asks.

“If there is, you can bet it’ll only be a matter of time before it’s brought to light,” Atlas replies. “We’re on this like green on grass.”

“With all this now happening, would you prefer I bring a halt to looking into Doctor Olsen and the whole clairvoyance thing?”

Atlas purses his lips. “No. Until someone’s actually brought to justice and proven guilty, I believe it’s wise to stay on it,” he says firmly. “Have you found anything of interest on Olsen so far?”

“Besides being renowned in his field, not a heck of a lot,” Dave replies. “However, I have learned he became entangled in an accusation against the US military. I came across a local newspaper article in Arlington, Virginia, where a lady named Libby Rowe blamed the US military for her son having some kind of mental breakdown and going AWOL four years ago. She hasn’t seen or heard from him in all that time. His name’s Sterling Rowe. And what’s interesting is that he’s a former Gold Hawk who’d been based out of the JK Preston base.”

“Which we now of course know as Sanctuary Park. Actually, I’m a tad familiar with Sterling’s story,” Atlas adds. “Did the article explain how she believed Olsen was involved?”

“No, but he more than likely counseled Sterling at some point. That’s something we’ll have to confirm,” Dave replies. “And hopefully my new gig will enable us to do just that.”

“You have a new job?”

The former detective smiles. “Early retirement was already becoming quite boring, so I landed some part time work with the National Record.”

“Interesting. The country’s leading news source.”

“I’m going to be writing monthly investigative pieces under the moniker of The Fact Seeker. The stories will be of my choosing—with the Record’s approval, of course.”

“Sounds fascinating, but I do see a major problem with taking on this particular story,” Atlas says, brows pinched in concern. “If the story gets published, something tells me the military will find out you were behind it, and that surely won’t be a good thing for either of us.”

“That won’t happen. If there’s meat on the bone like I think there is, I’ll make sure it develops into our own private investigation as opposed to a published story,” Dave assures him.

Atlas exhales. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Chapter 9

When Kim Waldron arrives at the Sundale County airport for her interview with Jozef Sokol, she's met by Willow Farlow. "I appreciate you setting this up," Kim says after entering Willow's car. "Has Mr. Sokol chosen to go this alone, or will he have an attorney at his side?" she asks.

"From my understanding, he's willing to speak freely to you without one," Willow says as she maneuvers the car out of the airport parking lot. "Honestly, I'd be shocked to learn Jozef was ever involved with the EFA, Agent Waldron."

"Well, last evening, we learned he was," Kim says.

Willow gapes at her before returning her eyes to the road. "Is this for certain?"

"Yes. It appears Jozef was a key player in the EFA's hacking of the European Union's Central Bank."

"Geez," Willow groans. "That is quite upsetting to hear. Do you know if he's still involved with the group?"

"Well, that's what we need to find out," Kim replies, then asks, "Do you know if he was fully vetted when he was hired? For the position of CIO of such a large company, I would suspect he was."

"His hiring was sort of an anomaly within the company when it came to executives. Mr. Felder handled it completely on his own," Willow answers. "So no, he wasn't vetted in the usual manner."

"Did Mr. Felder ever tell you why?"

"Not that I can recall. But then again, I didn't bother to ask. After all, it was his company."

When they arrive at Ovo-Tech headquarters, Willow escorts Kim to the door of Jozef's office. "My secretary informed me he's waiting for you inside. Good luck," she says before leaving.

Kim knocks, then opens the door and enters. "Good afternoon, Mr. Sokol. I'm FBI Agent Kim Waldron," she says. She sits across from the Ovo-Tech CIO. "Now, I understand you're willing to speak to me without an attorney. Is this correct?"

Jozef studies her. "Yes, it is. I have absolutely nothing to hide."

"Great," Kim says, retrieving a notepad from her handbag. "Do you have any idea why you're being questioned for a second time?"

"I take it you must've learned about my past involvement with the EFA during the conflict," the neatly groomed, dark-haired man calmly replies. "It's not what you think," he adds. Tiny beads of sweat begin forming on his brow.

"How about you tell me about it, then?" Kim calmly says, looking directly into Jozef's dark brown eyes. "Let's begin by having you tell me about your role within the group."

"I led a team that successfully hacked into the ECB. The European Union's Central Bank was extremely corrupt. If our efforts weren't shut down, we would've been able to expose the ECB for all its malfeasance and change things for the better. And to this day, that is the extent of my involvement with the EFA."

"So, it sounds to me like you took part in a very serious, high-level crime."

Jozef exhales and shakes his head. "I don't believe attempting to expose criminals is a crime, especially when nobody else is willing to do so. Our effort was highly justified."

"And would you say setting buildings and people on fire is a justifiable act?" Kim asks in a disdainful tone.

"No, and I was never involved in such terrible acts, nor would I ever be," Jozef replies, without blinking an eye.

"But yet this sort of thing happened often, courtesy of the EFA," Kim says, scowling. "In fact, we have information indicating your very own brother, Lubor, played a major role in carrying out such heinous acts."

Jozef sighs. “My family had a tech company back in the Ukraine. Like so many others, we lost everything because of the ECB and its corrupt policies,” he explains with a grimace. “When something like that happens, everyone responds differently. My brother became fueled with rage. I won’t deny it all got the better of him. Turned him into a complete monster. But there was no excuse for his actions, or any of the others who did such things.”

“While you decided to use your computer skills to expose the ECB in an illegal, but nonviolent manner. Am I on the correct path regarding how you see things?”

“That’d be a fair way of looking at it.”

“Do you know the current whereabouts of your brother?”

Jozef shakes his head. “No.”

“When was the last time you spoke to him?”

“It’s been about four years,” Jozef replies. He pauses and thinks. “Just prior to the attempted Euro bombings.”

“Were you aware of the plan to bomb all those buildings and kill all those people? Were you aware Lubor was one of the main orchestrators?” Kim asks, her voice rising with each syllable.

“Of course not,” Jozef snaps back. “Like I said, I would never have been involved in such a thing.”

“But yet you were part of the group that made it happen.”

“I told you what my role was. What is it you want from me, Agent Waldron?” Jozef retorts.

“The same thing I want from everybody I question: the truth,” Kim states.

“What makes you think I’m not telling you the truth?”

“Did Siro Felder know about your past involvement with the EFA when he hired you to be his CIO?”

“He sure did,” Jozef says, nodding. “There were things about the ECB that we helped uncover that proved how corrupt it was, and when I explained those things to Siro, he fully understood why I did what I did. I believe being someone who built his own business from the ground up helped him understand. And honestly, he appreciated my being transparent.”

“Were you aware he had donated twelve million dollars to the EU, back in the day, to help fight against your plight?”

“Not until I heard about it the other day,” Jozef replies. “I’m certain he never would’ve donated that money if he’d known the truth beforehand.”

“The photo sitting on the ledge behind your desk—who is that?”

“That’s my deceased sister, Maria. She was killed in Slovakia by American forces during the raid of a business that was deeply tied to the EFA. It happened several months after the conflict was considered to be over,” Jozef says softly. “She was a tremendous person who had such a big heart. Sadly, like Lubor, she let her anger get the best of her. But in the end, like me and my brother, all she wanted was fairness...and a better life.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Kim replies. “But fairness is a rather subjective thing, isn’t it?”

Jozef glares at the woman before him. “You think I’m the person who hacked the plane as some sort of revenge against Siro Felder, don’t you?”

“Frankly, after what we’ve recently learned, the thought has entered my mind. I’m sure even you would have to admit there are several factors currently weighing against you.”

“Are you planning to arrest me?” a stone-faced Jozef asks.

“Not at this time,” Kim says, then rises and exits the room.

“Should Ovo-Tech be looking for a new CIO?” Willow asks Kim during the ride back to the airport.

“That’s totally your decision. Seeing as this investigation is as fluid as it is, I can’t tell you what tomorrow will bring,” Kim replies. “As for now, we have no proof Jozef hacked the plane, or is guilty of anything outside of his past deeds with the EFA.”

“Isn’t that already enough to place him behind bars?” Willow asks.

“No, it isn’t. At least not here in America. After the conflict, once the EU confirmed the ECB was indeed highly corrupt, an international resolution treaty was created protecting Jozef and others from being arrested for hacking into those groups. His brother,

Lubor, though—he’s an entirely different story. His heinous crimes make him a wanted man right across the globe, along with many of his EFA associates,” Kim informs her.

“But still, the prospect of you and your fellow agents bursting in and escorting Jozef out of our building doesn’t sit very well with me. And more importantly, neither does the notion he may’ve been the person who hacked into the plane, killing a man who was like a brother to me,” Willow says. Anxiety edges her voice.

“The crazy thing is, according to Jozef, Siro knew all about his involvement with the EFA,” Kim says, and then relates what Jozef told her.

“My Lord,” Willow gasps. “I can’t imagine Siro accepting such a thing.”

Kim exhales. “God only knows if it’s true,” she says, retrieving her tablet from her handbag.

“Did you get the impression he was lying?”

“It’s difficult to say...I found him very difficult to read,” Kim replies.

“Oh my!” Willow suddenly cries, slamming her foot on the brake. “Did you see that?”

“No. What happened?” Kim asks, looking up from her tablet.

“That guy,” Willow gasps. “He just walked across the middle of traffic right in front of the car and went off that way, into the woods.” She points to her left. “He looked like a zombie.”

“Did he appear injured?”

“No, but he seemed totally disoriented.”

“Did you get a good look at him?”

Willow frowns, thinking. “From what I could tell, he looked a little over six feet tall. Brown, shaggy hair. A beard.”

Kim makes a note and then asks, “Are you okay, Willow? Do you want to stop at the diner up ahead? I have plenty of time before my flight,” she says, nodding toward an illuminated sign identifying the diner as the Super Sizzle.

Willow lets out a heavy sigh. “That’s probably a good idea. Hopefully, it’ll help me clear my head.”

When they enter the Super Sizzle, they immediately notice a distraught young woman sitting at one of the tables being consoled by a middle-aged, casually dressed man. Kim approaches the table. “Is everything okay here?” she asks.

“We just had a little incident, but everything is fine. I’m the owner of the diner. Please have a seat. I’ll be with you in a minute,” the man says, not looking at Kim. The young woman is obviously his waitress. She sits sobbing, her face flushed.

“I can’t believe it. He had a gun—a gun,” she stammers.

This immediately draws Kim’s attention. “Who had a gun?” she asks.

“That’s not for you to worry about, Miss,” the man tells her bluntly.

“Oh, I beg to differ,” Kim replies, displaying her badge.

* * *

“What’s going on, Sterling? You look awful,” a burly man smoking a cigar says to the man sitting on a fence rail beside him. Sterling is just staring ahead, looking, frankly, traumatized.

“I just witnessed a waitress have a gun put to her head at the Super Sizzle, Roy,” Sterling replies, still staring ahead.

“A gun? What the hell happened?” Roy exclaims.

“Some jerks were giving her a hard time, so I told them to lay off, and obviously they didn’t appreciate it. The next thing you know, one of them is pointing a gun at her head. He told me he’d shoot her if I didn’t leave the damn diner and get out of sight, so I had no choice,” Sterling explains, blinking his glazed eyes. “I regret not taking that SOB out.”

“Don’t fret, Sterling,” Roy says. “Sounds to me like you made the correct decision. Have you ever seen these guys before?”

“No, I haven’t. But the look in their eyes—I’ve seen that messed-up look before.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Roy says before taking a puff of his cigar.

“What used to be my own personal drug of choice: devil-glass,” Sterling replies. “I can still recall that disturbing angry look every time I’d look in the mirror.”

“How about we go see if we can track the bastards down and deal with this properly,” Roy says, reaching for a rifle leaning up against the shed. His giant hands make it look like he’s holding a toy. “We’ll see how tough they are when they get a load of Big Charlie here.”

“Please. Put the gun down, Roy” Sterling says.

“No way. You’re the heart and soul of this farm. The best damn manager I’ve ever had, and I’m not going to let some damn idiots go around messing with you like that,” Roy replies, looking into Sterling’s eyes.

“As much as I’d love to do what you’re suggesting, you know as well as I do how important it is I stay out of trouble,” Sterling says.

Roy exhales with a grunt and leans the rifle back up against the shed.

Chapter 10

The Super Sizzle's owner, Vance Ryan, leads Kim and Megan the shaken waitress into his back office. "With all respect, Agent Waldron, isn't this more of a local police matter?" he asks.

"It most definitely is," Kim says. "And that's why I just put in a call to Sundale PD. But in the meantime, please tell me what happened." Her eyes are on Megan.

Megan slowly exhales and begins relating the details. "The three men were sitting in the booth in the far corner away from the main door. The moment I approached the table, they began making some very rude comments to me. Things I'm too embarrassed to repeat," she adds, looking down at the space between her feet.

"So, I take it they spoke English," Kim says.

"Yes, but with very thick accents," Megan replies.

"Do you know if they've ever been in here before?" Kim asks.

"We've only been open a little over a week. So no, I can't say I recall ever seeing them before," Megan says.

"What happened next?" Kim asks.

"I kept trying to take their order, but they became even more belligerent. I think they were on drugs, or they were drunk," Megan mumbles.

Vance grimaces and interjects, "Unfortunately I was back here in my office, tending to some office work while all this was going on."

"Did they eventually settle down and allow you to take their orders?" Kim asks.

Megan shakes her head. “No. They became even more aggressive. One of them tried to grab me, which was when the only other customer in the diner at the time turned around from his counter seat and politely tried to settle them down. The guy who appeared to be their leader pulled out a gun and pointed it at my head.” Megan starts sobbing at the memory. “He ordered the man to leave, saying he’d kill me if he didn’t. And after making a few more crude remarks, they left.”

Kim thinks for a moment. “Was the patron who attempted to assist you a little over six feet tall, with shaggy brown hair and a beard?”

“Yes, I’d say that’s very accurate,” Megan replies without hesitation.

“That explains the man we saw walking out into traffic,” Kim surmises aloud. “Did you happen to pick up on any names of the guys harassing you?”

“I don’t know...I was so terrified. Everything was just a blur,” Megan replies.

“I heard a name amidst the chaos,” the restaurant owner interjects. “One of them addressed the guy with the gun as Lubor.”

“Lubor,” Kim repeats, blinking rapidly.

“Yep. I’m certain that was it,” Vance confirms.

Kim taps her tablet a few times and presents it to Megan. “Could this be the man?” she asks, displaying images of Lubor Sokol.

“Yeah, that looks like a younger version of him,” Megan replies.

“That’s definitely him,” Vance says. “Is this guy some sort of wanted criminal?”

“He most certainly is,” Kim answers, nodding. “Are there any cameras inside the diner, or in the parking lot?”

“Not yet. I’m still working on it,” Vance replies. “The camera from the gas station next door might be of some help to you.”

“That’s good to know,” Kim says, then contacts Sundale PD to cancel her original request. “This is now an FBI matter,” she informs the operator, then turns back to Vance and Megan. “In the meantime, if these men return, please immediately and discreetly call 911.”

FBI Headquarters, Washington, DC

“The video footage from the gas station next door shows three men, including Lubor Sokol, entering a white van and heading off in an easterly direction from the restaurant,” Kim informs Director Gregson.

“But let me guess,” Gregson sighs. “The van had no plates.”

“Of course,” Kim replies.

“And what about the patron who tried to help out. Was he a regular customer?” Gregson asks.

“The restaurant’s only been open for a week or so. They know nothing about him, or the perps,” Kim replies.

The arrival of Lieutenant Stanwell brings a pause to the conversation. “Hey, Kim. I understand you had quite an adventure out in Sundale,” he says.

“Yeah, it was pretty crazy,” Kim replies.

“I read in your report that the waitress believed Lubor was high,” Stanwell replies. “This is all very interesting, since we’ve come to learn the EFA’s current main place of operation is in Sundale County, just miles from the Ovo-Tech headquarters and that very diner. They’ve been operating a company called Am-Dro, which is a wholesaler of recreational drones, but their main business is the illegal trafficking of drugs and armaments. And Lubor Sokol is definitely the main man in charge of the entire operation.” The lieutenant grins. “I’m also thrilled to let you both know my team has been able to successfully get into their computer network and has been able to attain corroborating evidence linking the group to the reported ransomware attacks. But, unfortunately, so far, we’ve been unable to track down the stolen funds.”

“And what about the hacking of the Ovo-Tech plane?” Kim asks.

“Jozef Sokol will be charged with the crime. There’s too much evidence pointing to him,” Gregson replies.

“We’ve learned the Sokol brothers most definitely have been communicating as we suspected,” Stanwell adds, “which is why our plan will be to simultaneously take Jozef into custody while raiding the Am-Dro building and hauling in Lubor. However, we must make certain Lubor is in the building before the raid takes place.”

“Willow Farlow informed me Jozef has resigned from Ovo-Tech,” Kim adds.

“He’ll remain under twenty-hour surveillance,” Stanwell says.

Twenty minutes after the incident at the Super Sizzle diner

“Lubor. This is Jozef. Where are you?”

“What do you want, Jozef?”

“The walls are closing in on you and your friends, man,” Jozef replies. “The FBI’s been all over me. I know for certain they think I’m responsible for hacking the plane.”

“Which means they must have ears and eyes on you at all times.”

“Don’t worry. I’m on a burner.”

“Did you tell them you know where I’m at?”

“No...but I probably should’ve,” Jozef scoffs.

“Listen to me, Jozef. Just go about your business as usual,” Lubor says. His tone is matter-of-fact. “We’re folding up shop in the coming days and getting the fuck out of Sundale, and America, for that matter. We raked in thirty million fucking dollars from those ransomware attacks. Once we get the funds all sorted out, I’m going to send you a little something.”

“Don’t send me a damn penny. Like I’ve told you from the day we ended up in America, I don’t want a thing to do with your bullshit,” Jozef barks. “And by the way, how come the media’s been reporting you and your friends stole sixty million dollars in those attacks?”

“We did, but we had help. A very valuable partner. We agreed to split the money,” Lubor replies. “But you need not worry about any of that. We’ll all soon be out of your way.”

“I need to ask you another question,” Jozef says.

“Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“Was it you who hacked into that plane and caused it to crash?” Jozef asks his brother.

“No. And I have no idea who did,” Lubor vehemently replies. “I honored your request and didn’t go after Siro Felder, or his company. But honestly, I’m sure not losing any sleep knowing that bastard has met his end.”

Lubor Sokol is filling plastic bags with tablets resembling clear ice pellets when his cell phone rings again. “Dax, my friend. Speak of the devil. I’m preparing a little something for you right this very moment,” Lubor says to Franklin Varley’s henchman, placing the bags in a cardboard box.

“That’s music to my ears, Lubor,” Dax replies. “I’ll be there in five.”

“Good stuff. As usual, park in the back lot and enter through the back doors,” Lubor says.

Minutes later, Dax calls Lubor again. “I’m here, and I need your help with something,” he says. “Can you meet me outside?”

Lubor approaches the van in the back lot. “Whoa. You came bearing gifts,” he says as Dax shows him a large crate in the back of his van. “Let me give you a hand.” Lubor reenters the warehouse and returns with a trolley.

“This comes directly from Mr. Varley himself. The best and most expensive red wine in his entire collection. It even comes with a special note from the man himself,” Dax informs Lubor as they ease the container to the ground. “He’s very pleased with the things we’ve been able to accomplish together.”

“Yeah, I suppose. Sometimes cooperation works better than competition,” Lubor says with a cackle.

“Let’s crack this sucker open and get the day started the proper way,” Lubor says when they’ve moved it inside.

“No need to open that big boy up yet,” Dax says, his eyes on the crate. “I have a few extra bottles ready to go in the van. Let me go back outside and grab them.”

When Dax returns, Lubor pops open a bottle and pours two glasses. With a sinister grin, he swirls the glass under his nose and inhales before taking a sip. “Mmm...perfection,” he exclaims, smacking his lips together. “I kind of feel guilty when I compare what I’m offering in return,” he adds, pointing to the cardboard box filled with devil-glass. They share a laugh.

“I’m glad to see you’re so relaxed, even with the authorities seemingly on your trail,” Dax says.

Lubor waves his right hand as if swatting away a fly. “I’m not the least bit concerned,” he scoffs. “They have no idea where we’re at. And thanks to our association, I realize they’ll never track down the ransomware money.”

“This is very true,” Dax replies with an impish grin. “When it comes to hiding money, our people are the best. And by the way, we’re on schedule to have the funds transferred to your account in the coming days, as promised.”

“Fantastic. If my math’s correct, half the take is thirty million big boys,” Lubor gloats. “That calls for a refill,” he adds, reaching for the bottle.

“And that’s not all.”

“I’m all ears.”

“We have a very important customer who’ll be sending one of his guys by here tomorrow in search of the world’s finest devil-glass,” Dax informs him.

“Send him over,” Lubor replies, eyes gleaming. “Just make sure he knows the proper code sentence, or he isn’t getting past the front desk.”

“Here’s how much he’s looking for and the price you’re going to sell it to him for,” Dax says, handing Lubor a note. “I’ll be taking the usual 20 percent finder fee.”

“It’s all good, bro,” Lubor replies, studying the paper.

When Dax exits the building and enters his van, he retrieves his cell from atop the dashboard and makes a call.

“How did it go, Dax?” the voice on the other end asks.

“As smooth as silk, Mr. V.”

“Excellent. I’ll inform Stanwell.”

* * *

“I was able to line up an interview with Sterling Rowe’s mother, Libby. As I expected, she was very receptive to the idea,” Uncle Dave informs Atlas during a follow-up video call.

“That’s good to hear,” Atlas replies from his Sundale condo. “In the meantime, I came across the name Sterling Rowe on my mother’s patient database. It appears she treated him a few times. It was four years ago.”

“My God,” Dave says. “PTSD?”

“Yep,” Atlas replies. “His file indicates he was treated with an audio-video relaxation program called The Mind’s Eye.”

“Well, at least that tells us he originally headed to Sundale when he escaped from the base,” Dave says.

Atlas updates his uncle on the latest news regarding the EFA, and law enforcement’s notion of who hacked the plane. “I’m glad we’re planning to take these guys down, but something deep inside still tells me it wasn’t Jozef Sokol or anybody related to the EFA that committed that act.”

* * *

Led by FBI Special Agent Kim Waldron, the Gold Hawks convene at an abandoned Sundale County warehouse not far from the Am-Dro building. Lieutenant Stanwell joins in through a video call. He addresses the group. “We have to be certain Lubor Sokol is present,” he says in a forceful voice. “Now, normally we’d scope out the location for verification, but we’ve learned this would be far too risky due to the high level of surveillance surrounding the property. Instead we’ll be executing a sting operation in which Agent Felder will be looking to purchase a large quantity of devil-glass directly from Lubor, and Agent Newport will be posing as a buyer for a retail chain hunting for the latest in recreational drones. If and when Agent Newport is able to confirm the presence of Lubor, we’ll move in and take over the building, as planned. Please, strictly follow Agent Waldron’s command. In the meantime, I’ll be personally moving in on Lubor’s brother, Jozef, if and when we have confirmation.”

* * *

Wearing a ball cap, blue jeans, and a t-shirt, Atlas parks his vehicle in the Am-Dro parking lot and enters the building carrying a duffle bag.

“How can I help you?” a young woman with shoulder-length auburn hair asks as he approaches the front desk.

“I need to see the big boss regarding something extremely important,” Atlas replies, speaking in code picked up in the investigation.

The woman studies him and nods. “Very well. Please give me a moment,” she replies and taps her phone.

Meanwhile, a casually dressed Agent Charmaine Newport enters behind Atlas and approaches the same woman while he waits off to the side. “Is there a chance I can receive some information regarding your line of recreational drones?” she asks.

“Of course,” the woman replies, forcing a smile. She reaches across her desk for a booklet. “This will tell you everything you need to know.”

As she hands Charmaine the booklet, a tall man with a buzzed haircut and a neatly trimmed goatee approaches Atlas. A quick glance from Charmaine confirms the presence of Lubor Sokol.

“Thank you for your assistance,” Charmaine says to the woman before exiting the building.

Seconds later, she alerts Kim Waldron, who is stationed at the warehouse command post. “We’re good to go on Lubor and his buddies. Are you ready to move in on Jozef?” Kim asks Lieutenant Stanwell, who is positioned outside Jozef Sokol’s Sundale home.

“Affirmative,” he replies. “Let’s get it done. Start the five minute countdown.”

“Five minutes, folks. And remember, it’s vital to take these guys alive, if possible,” Kim calls out over the radio to the team of Gold Hawks who are in the guise of a construction crew stationed fifty yards or so from the Am-Dro building.

Meanwhile, back inside the building, Atlas is escorted into a back room. “I came to you because I was informed your devil-glass is next to none. I just hope my customers will agree,” he says, meeting Lubor Sokol’s gaze. He places the duffle bag on the floor, noting the underling waiting casually against the wall.

Lubor snickers. "Satisfaction guaranteed, my friend. The best there is." He drops down into a chair in front of a table. "Just like this wine. Would you care for a glass?"

"No thanks. It's much too early in the day for me," Atlas says.

"Well, it's never too early for me," Lubor says before taking a swig. "And thankfully, there's a lot more where this came from," he adds, shifting his eyes to a crate sitting on the floor beside him.

Atlas regards the crate with narrow eyes. "Enjoy, my friend," he says.

"Oh, I intend to." Lubor takes another swig before abruptly rising. "Okay. Let's take care of business so we can get your people dancing with the devil." A sinister grin spreads across his face. "Excuse us for a minute," he adds, and nods to his underling. They exit the room together.

A few minutes later, as the Gold Hawks are about to descend upon the building, thunderous blasts roar out into the ether. The ground shakes as the entire Am-Dro building explodes into a giant fireball.

"Oh my God!" Charmaine wails. "Are you seeing this, Agent Waldron?" she cries to Kim over the radio.

"Yes...we still have the feed...what the hell just happened?" Kim shouts as she watches massive clouds of black smoke filling the screen.

"Atlas! This can't be happening," Kim sobs in disbelief.

"Who could've done this?" Charmaine asks.

"I can assure you, the suspect list would be endless," Kim says wryly.

"But the timing," Charmaine replies. "Do you think maybe they realized they'd been made and turned this into some sort of mass suicide?"

Kim purses her lips. "I suppose that's a possibility," she says. "From what you're seeing on the ground, do you think it's possible anyone could've got out of there alive?"

"No, not a chance," Charmaine answers bluntly as the wail of sirens fills the afternoon air. "I'll update you," she adds before ending the call.

Stanwell contacts Kim. His image reappears on the monitor. "What on God's earth has happened?" he says, wide-eyed.

"It's bad...really bad," Kim says, then elaborates.

"And Agent Felder?" he asks.

"From what we witnessed and from what's being reported on the ground, there isn't a prayer he or anybody else could've made it out of there alive," Kim says.

"Whoa...I never expected this," Stanwell says, frowning.

"And what about Jozef Sokol?" Kim asks.

"He's dead. When I entered his residence I found his lifeless body lying on the living room floor. A self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head."

Chapter 11

Harmon Farms, Sundale County

As Roy Harmon and Sterling Rowe watch the evening news in the main house, Sterling's taken aback by an image that appears on the television. "Hey, that's the guy from the diner. The SOB who pulled the gun on that waitress," he says, glowering at the photo of Lubor Sokol being shown on-screen.

"From what they're saying, the people who died in that building were part of some EFA cell operating here in America. It serves the bastards right," Roy growls, lighting a cigar.

A male news reporter appears on the screen. "I'm here in Sundale County, and let me tell you, I feel like I've just stepped into a war zone," he says as the camera pans over the piles of rubble and debris that used to be the Am-Dro building. "Let me specify. US Government law enforcement officials are verifying they did not bomb the building, confirming that doing so was never their intention. However, they are stating they were on the verge of executing a raid just prior to the explosion."

Roy gazes over at Sterling, whose face is flushed. "Are you okay, or is this bringing back some kind of unpleasant memories for you?" he asks his farm manager.

"Unpleasant?" Sterling scoffs with a scowl. "What the US Government did was turn my life into a nightmare. And no matter how hard I try, I'll never be able to completely erase it from my mind."

“But you’ve come so far,” Roy insists, puffing on his cigar. “Remember, those ghosts can’t haunt you if you don’t bring them to life,” he adds through a cloud of smoke.

Sterling nods and purses his lips before sighing heavily. “Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m starving,” he says. “I think I’ll head out to the diner.”

“Would you like some company?” Roy asks.

“If you don’t mind, I’d prefer some time alone.”

“I understand, Sterling. Just be sure to bring me back one of those cheeseburger combos with a chocolate shake,” Roy says with a gruff chuckle.

“Consider it done.”

When Sterling enters the Super Sizzle, he takes a seat at the counter. “Is your order for here, or to go?” the waitress asks.

“Both,” he replies. “I’ll have two cheeseburger combos with chocolate shakes. One for now, and one on the way out.”

The waitress studies him. “Wait a second,” she says. “You’re the guy who came to my aid when those jerks were harassing me the other day. I owe you a huge thank you. My name’s Megan.”

“Nice to meet you, Megan. And as far as the other day is concerned, I just did what any decent person should do. There’s no need for a thank you,” Sterling replies.

“Well, your order’s on the house, my friend,” the diner’s owner, Vance Ryan, calls out from behind Megan.

“That’s not necessary,” Sterling says.

“Please. It’s the least we can do,” Vance says. “After what happened, I’m surprised you’d ever want to step foot in here again. By the way, we won’t have to worry about those creeps anymore. Have you seen the news?” he adds, directing Sterling’s attention to the television on the wall above the counter.

“Yeah, that’s quite a story,” Sterling says.

“Actually, an FBI agent happened to arrive here right after that scumbag pulled his gun on Megan,” Vance says. “The agent was hoping to speak with you. I suppose it’s probably not that important anymore, since it appears the guy’s now been turned to ash. But here’s her card anyway.” He fishes around in his shirt pocket and produces a business card. “Now, let me get the cook working on your order,” he adds, turning up the sound on the television before heading back to the kitchen.

Sterling studies the card as he listens to a government official on the television speak about the EFA and the Am-Dro explosion.

Four years ago

When he looks outside the window of his second storey room at the JK Preston military base, Sterling Rowe sees a green van pulling into the parking area. Two imposing men wearing what he recognizes as Military Police windbreakers emerge from the van. Knowing very well they’ve come to arrest him for possession of the devil-glass that someone planted under his bathroom sink, he puts his escape plan into motion.

After pulling on custodian’s overalls he spirited from the maintenance locker, he ties a bandana over his brush cut and tops it off with a ball cap. Pulling a full backpack from under the bed, he makes his way down the hall, activates the fire alarm on the way by, and scrambles down the stairs. As the siren begins to wail and commotion fills the building, Sterling walks outside. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the two men who’ve come to take him away, directing others. He calmly walks past them. They’re none the wiser. He keeps walking, right through the gate as fire trucks rumble through in the opposite direction.

After walking about a mile down the road, he ducks behind some roadside brush, ditches the overalls, ties the bandana around his neck, and pulls the ball cap low over his eyes. Then he returns to the road and sticks out his thumb, hoping to hitch a ride.

Within a few minutes, a red pickup truck stops on the roadside. “Hey, bud. Where you looking at going?” a ruddy-faced, middle-aged man calls around the cigar in his mouth.

“Just a few miles away, to Sundale County,” Sterling replies.

“Get in,” the man says.

“My name’s Roy. Roy Harmon. Were you stationed at the base?” he asks Sterling after he’s climbed in.

“I was...but my time’s up,” Sterling says, aimlessly gazing out the truck’s front window.

“So, why Sundale?”

“It reminds me of where I’m from,” Sterling says.

“And where’s that?”

“Arlington, Virginia.”

* * *

“Here you are. One double cheeseburger combo, and I’ll have the other for you when you’re done... Is everything okay?” Megan asks, taking Sterling away from the memory.

“Huh? Yeah, I’m fine, thank you,” he mutters, regarding his plate of food through haunted eyes.

Eisen residence, Washington, DC

While Dave Eisen is diligently preparing notes for his upcoming interview with Sterling Rowe’s mother, Libby, the sound of the doorbell brings him to his feet. “I’ll get it, honey,” he calls out to his wife, Shayna.

“Good morning, sir. Are you Mr. David Eisen?” a neatly-attired man in an olive green suit asks.

“Yes, that’s me,” Dave replies with a raised brow. “How can I help you?”

“I’m Lieutenant Van Stanwell.”

“My Lord,” Dave gasps, falling into thought. “Is this about my nephew? Did something happen to Atlas?”

“May I come inside?” Stanwell asks.

“By all means,” Dave anxiously replies, leading the lieutenant into the living room. “Would you like to have a seat?”

“No, thank you,” Stanwell answers. “I’m not planning to take up much of your time.”

Dave begins to blink rapidly. He can’t hold back any longer. “Is...is my nephew dead?”

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Eisen," Stanwell gently replies, nodding.

"Oh my God!" Dave cries, prompting Shayna to run into the living room.

"What is it? What's going on?" she asks. Panic edges her voice.

"Atlas is dead, Shayna," Dave gasps as he plops onto the sofa behind him. He buries his face in his hands.

"Oh no," Shayna groans. "How did this happen?" she asks, turning to Stanwell.

The lieutenant sighs. "Due to the nature of Atlas's work, I hope you understand that I can't—"

"It was that EFA...that blown-up building, wasn't it?" Dave interrupts, rising to his feet. "You need not worry, Lieutenant, I'm a former DC detective, and my wife's a DC attorney. We understand discretion. We were the only family Atlas had left."

The frown on Stanwell's face provides the answer. "Your assumption is correct, and please understand, Atlas did not die in vain," he says, looking at Dave.

"Does anybody have any idea who caused the explosion?" Shayna asks.

"Not at this time. But the one thing I can tell you is that we didn't. Considering the activities the EFA was involved in, the pool of potential suspects is vast, to say the least," Stanwell replies. "It's even possible they may have set off the explosion themselves as some sort of act of martyrdom for their cause, knowing we had them cornered."

"Was his body recovered?" Shayna asks, dabbing her tears with a tissue.

Stanwell shakes his head and frowns. "No, it hasn't been, and it won't be... It was a very powerful explosion. But we are certain, without a doubt, Atlas was in the building at the time."

"And what about the plane crash that killed my sister and her husband, and those other poor souls, can you now confirm the EFA was the guilty party?" Dave asks through pursed lips.

"Yes, I can," Stanwell replies. He pauses and looks back and forth between Dave and Shayna before continuing. "Once again, I'm so sorry I had to bring you this awful news. My office will be in touch

with you in the coming days,” he concludes, handing Dave his card. With that, he bids farewell and exits the home.

“This is unbelievable,” Dave huffs as he enters the kitchen to retrieve a bottle of water from the fridge. He then takes a seat at the table.

“Is it really, though?” Shayna says, sitting beside him. “He was special ops. Sadly, that comes with enormous risk on a daily basis.”

“I know, but—” The buzzing from Dave’s cell interrupts. It’s a private number. “Hello. Who is this?” he says.

“It’s me...it’s me, Atlas,” the voice on the other end says.

“Atlas?” Dave exclaims, jumping to his feet. “What the hell is going on? Lieutenant Stanwell was just here and—”

“I know, I know,” Atlas replies. “I saw him. I’m in the park behind your house. I’m heading over as we speak.”

When Atlas steps through their door, his uncle immediately wraps him in a bear hug as a bug-eyed Shayna looks on. “I’m so glad to see you. Only minutes ago, you were dead to us,” Dave says. “I still don’t understand what in the world Stanwell was doing here, telling us you’re dead. Is this all part of some covert plan?”

“No...he thinks I’m dead,” Atlas replies. “And he has good reason to.”

Noticing that Atlas is anxious, Dave studies him. “Talk to us, Atlas.”

“They wanted me dead,” he replies, staring into space.

“Who? The EFA?” Shayna asks.

“No. The very people who sent me in after them,” Atlas answers, anger clouding his eyes.

“Whoa...are you saying US law enforcement bombed that building in order to kill you?” Dave says, frowning.

“It’s not that simple,” Atlas replies with a sigh as he drops down into an easy chair and throws his head back against the headrest.

“Well, either they wanted you dead, or they didn’t,” Dave counters.

“I strongly believe that what they wanted was to kill two birds with one bomb: me and the EFA,” Atlas says.

Perplexed, Dave and Shayna exchange glances. “Well, I’m just glad you’re okay, Atlas. Let me give the two of you some time alone,” Shayna says before excusing herself from the room.

“Are you thinking this is about your father’s plane and Dr. Olsen?” Dave asks his nephew.

“One hundred percent,” Atlas answers. “And now I have every reason to believe Stanwell’s somehow involved in this as well.”

“But have you found actual proof there’s some kind of link?”

“When Lubor Sokol brought me into the back room of the building, he offered me a glass of wine, which I refused,” Atlas explains. “The wine he was drinking was from FV Wines; Franklin Varley’s wine collection. He had an entire crate of the stuff, which I discovered had a bomb inside it. Over the years, I came to learn Stanwell had often vacationed at Varley’s resorts. So, I put two and two together.”

“But Varley’s wines are a big seller. God only knows how many crates of that wine he sells each day,” Dave says with a shrug.

“Yeah, but how many of those crates come with a personal message from Varley himself?”

“What kind of message?”

“Right on the crate, it was written: ‘Lubor, There’s always more where this came from. Drink up and enjoy, my friend—Franklin Varley.’ When Lubor and his minion left me alone in the room, I pried open the crate, dug down into the bottom, and found the concealed timer and explosive device. I grabbed my phone, snapped a few photos, then made a mad dash out of the building into an area I hoped was out of danger and out of view of surveillance. I saw that entire building obliterated. There’s no doubt in my mind it was Stanwell who planted that bomb.”

“But can you prove it?” Dave counters.

Before Atlas can frame a reply, Shayna comes dashing back into the living room. “Director Gregson just announced Jozef Sokol’s dead,” she says. “Turn the TV on. He’s saying Jozef was being charged with hacking into the plane and when they came to haul him in, he was dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.”

Dave quickly turns on the television and changes the channel until the FBI director's image appears on the screen. "Here we are," he says, turning up the volume.

"... We are confident this current form of the European Freedom Alliance no longer poses a threat to America or the rest of the world," Gregson boasts. "I'll now take questions... Yes, the young woman in the blue dress."

"Do you have any idea who caused the explosion at the Am-Dro building, killing the EFA operatives?"

"No. And at this time, I must reiterate: American law enforcement did not blow up the building," Gregson asserts.

"It's now been established Jozef Sokol took his own life as he was on the verge of being arrested. Do you think it's possible his brother did the same thing by blowing up the Am-Dro building, as some sort of martyrdom for the EFA's cause?" the same reporter asks.

"Like I said, at this time we don't know who or what caused the explosion," Gregson replies. "Okay, let's have Natalie from the National Record."

"I don't know if you're aware of this, Director Gregson, but there's been videos circulating from the Euro conflict wherein members of the EFA claimed they would gladly take their own lives before ever stepping into a prison cell."

"Yes, we're well aware of those videos, but I refuse to speculate," Gregson replies. "All right, how about Patrick from DC Daily?"

"Thank you, sir," says a tall, middle-aged man with a receding hairline and a fair complexion. "Since their MO appears to focus on drug dealing, the selling of illegal arms, and ransomware attacks, can you enlighten us on what prompted them to hack into the Ovo-Tech plane and kill nine people? Would you not agree this seems outside the box? Or did they see Siro Felder in a different light from their other targets?"

"We have evidence that indicates Siro Felder was targeted for more than just the fact that he donated twelve million dollars to the European Union during the conflict," Gregson replies. "For various reasons, I'm unable to provide specifics at this time."

"Is the plane crash now a closed case?" Patrick follows up.

“Yes,” Gregson answers without hesitation. “I’ll take one final question before we wrap up... Okay. Gloria from WCR.”

“Were any members of law enforcement killed during the explosion?”

Gregson exhales. “Sadly, one law enforcement official is presumed dead.”

“Do you have an identity for us?” Gloria asks.

“Unfortunately, due to the covert nature of their work, it’s not something that can be made public at this time, but their next of kin has been notified.”

Atlas glowers at the screen. “Yeah, his name’s Atlas Felder.”

Dave shuts the TV off and turns to his nephew. “So, besides me paying a visit to Libby Rowe, where do we go from here?”

“Well, you heard the man,” Atlas replies. “According to the US Government, I’m dead, so until we find out what the hell is going on, I think it’s wise we keep it that way.”

An hour before Gregson’s press conference

“I want to commend you on an incredible job,” FBI Director Gregson says to Lieutenant Stanwell.

“All for justice and the betterment of this incredible country, Elliott,” Stanwell states, straightening proudly.

“However, both AG Salazar and I have a major concern.”

“And what would that be?”

Gregson sighs. “The building exploding as the Gold Hawks were about to move in sure doesn’t make for great optics. It leaves many questions still to be answered.”

“We may now have some of those answers,” Stanwell replies.

“Please. Enlighten me, Lieutenant,” Gregson says.

“We’ve been able to confirm the EFA knew we were coming for them. They knew their time was up,” Stanwell answers.

“So are you suggesting that, instead of fighting back, they blew the building up to avoid being apprehended?”

“While giving attention to their plight.”

“But can we present actual proof of this?”

“Not yet, but according to the bomb squad’s analysis, there’s no doubt the explosion occurred within the building, which gives strong credence to the theory,” Stanwell explains, handing Gregson a report.

The FBI director glances at the document. “But since they knew your people were coming, why do you think they didn’t wait for the Gold Hawks to enter before setting off the bomb?” he counters.

“Perhaps it was all about perception, making it appear as if the ‘evil’ US struck again,” Stanwell suggests. “However, I can tell you they most definitely got the one man we knew they were after—Atlas Felder.”

“Are you thinking they wanted him dead because of his father and the money he pledged to the EU?” Gregson asks.

Stanwell shakes his head. “There’s much more to it than that,” he says.

“Go ahead. I’m listening,” Gregson prompts.

Stanwell blows out air. “I’m breaking special ops protocol by divulging this info, but I’m well aware the White House and the attorney general have demanded complete transparency.”

“Yes. We’re all in this together, Van.”

“Lubor and Jozef Sokol had a sister named Maria,” Stanwell explains. “Maria was killed during a raid that took place in Slovakia months after the Euro conflict was deemed to be over. The Gold Hawks performed the mission and it was Atlas Felder who was responsible for shooting her to death. We believe the Sokol brothers were aware of this and acted out against his father.”

“My Lord, Van...and you let Atlas into that building, knowing that?” Gregson snaps, scowling.

“He entered the building incognito, and seeing as he was the best person for the job, I have no regrets.”

The FB director sighs. “How in the world would the brothers have known about this?” he asks. “We all know how covert your missions are.”

Stanwell nods. “Yes, they’re extremely covert. At least until a current or former agent goes rogue and breaks the chain of secrecy for whatever reason,” he says. “In this instance, I believe the brothers had been on a mission to find out who killed their sister, and paid a handsome fee for the answer.”

Chapter 12

An hour after his meeting with Director Gregson, Lieutenant Stanwell contacts Franklin Varley via Hello Friend. Forgoing pleasantries, Varley's all business. "Good, or bad?" he asks. There is a nervous tic under his left eye.

"As good as good can get," Stanwell exclaims, grinning. "Our beloved FBI director bought it all, Franklin."

"So are you telling me there's no hint of a formal inquiry into the explosion?"

"After learning the bomb squad determined the explosion happened from inside the building, Gregson appeared completely satisfied with the idea it was a mass suicide."

"That is simply fantastic." Varley beams, and the tic fades. "I must say, this has worked out rather well for the both of us. We made some good money, enabling you to pay off your brother's debt. And America has once again taken down the EFA, thanks to me and my corrupt ways," he adds with an ominous laugh.

Stanwell nods and grins. "Yes, your proposed beneficial solution was indeed very beneficial."

"I'm only sorry you had to lose one of your men in the process," Varley says.

"It all comes with being a Gold Hawk...such a tragedy," Stanwell replies, feigning grief.

"Well, Lieutenant, if you ever decide to choose a more subtle and safer line of work, I could really use someone with your capabilities and status on my team."

“With all respect, Franklin, somehow I don’t equate subtle and safe with anything relating to what you do,” Stanwell replies, prompting laughter from both men.

The Sea Garden Restaurant, Washington, DC

“Van. Have a seat. I hope you brought your appetite, my friend,” General Waldron says to Lieutenant Stanwell as they meet in the private dining room of the lavish restaurant. Waldron’s security detail surveys the area before exiting.

“Well, when you told me you were treating, I made sure to clear my busy schedule for my favorite lobster dish,” Stanwell quips.

Waldron studies the man he mentored. “I must commend you on a job well done.”

“I only wish there was another option,” Stanwell sighs. “Atlas Felder was a fine young man.”

“Yes. My daughter also spoke highly of him. But we did what had to be done,” Waldron states. “Now, I hope I don’t need to remind you how important it is that Varley remains in the dark about what we’ve done, including my involvement.”

“Fully understood. I still can’t believe how he led us straight to those EFA bastards.” Stanwell beams. “And when it came to the plane, Jozef Sokol proved to be the perfect scapegoat.”

“I can’t help but wonder what actually happened to that bird,” Waldron muses, studying a menu. He looks up. “I need to ask you. What were you planning to do if the plane didn’t go down?”

Stanwell draws a breath and sharply exhales. “Find an alternative plan. It’s very likely everything about the JK Preston base would’ve come under scrutiny, including probes on both the death of Miguel Perez and the case of Sterling Rowe, which means the lives of you, me, and Olsen would’ve become a living inquiry.”

“Speaking of Olsen; is there a need for concern his conscience will eventually be getting the best of him?” Waldron asks. “I recall you telling me he seemed rather paranoid after Ruby then Atlas Felder paid him a visit.”

“Fortunately, the last thing he’d want to do is tarnish his son George’s future and image as one of the country’s leading heart surgeons,” Stanwell replies with a grin. “In all honesty, General, I’d be more concerned about Sterling Rowe. As your presidential campaign intensifies, it wouldn’t surprise me if he came out of the woodwork and told his story to someone looking for a big payday.”

“That doesn’t concern me in the least,” Waldron says with a shrug. “It’d be my word against his and I really like my chances against a devil-glass addict with a highly unbelievable story to tell.” He chuckles.

Eisen residence, Washington, DC

“I should let you know, Willow Farlow and your attorney reached out to me about an hour ago, and informed me I’m the heir to your Ovo-Tech holdings,” Dave tells Atlas. “I’m very touched to learn you did such a thing. What is it you’d like me to do about this?”

“Go through with the process,” Atlas says without hesitation. “I feel terrible deceiving Willow and my attorney, but until we get this mess resolved, I see no other viable option.”

“We’ll get there, Atlas,” Dave assures his nephew. He looks at him through narrowed eyes. “Do you still have no doubt you were sent into that building to die?”

Atlas purses his lips. “No doubt whatsoever,” He pauses in thought. “I only wish I knew what Gregson meant in his press conference when he stated my father was specifically targeted for a reason other than the twelve million dollars he’d donated to the EU.” He pauses and rubs his chin. “Hey, if I recall correctly, didn’t you assist the FBI during the Larson mission?”

“I sure did. In fact, my department provided Gregson with the main lead that helped end that chaos. He’s always told me how he owes me for that,” Dave replies.

“Hmm. I think it might help our cause if you cashed in on that sooner than later.”

Arlington, Virginia

When Dave Eisen's cab pulls up the drive, a middle-aged woman with shoulder-length white hair and bright green eyes is sitting on the veranda. "Libby Rowe?" he calls out as he exits the vehicle and walks toward her.

"That's me," the woman replies cheerfully, rising to her feet. "And you must be from the National Record," she adds.

"I am," Dave answers with a smile as she approaches. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," Libby replies. "I'm glad to know someone from a reputable news source like the National Record is interested in my story." She pauses and gazes around. "Since it's such a wonderful day, I thought we would conduct the interview out on my patio."

"Sounds good to me," Dave replies.

She leads him around the side of the house. When they reach the patio area, he stops and looks around. "Wow. What a beautiful garden. Those are the most splendid marigolds I've ever seen—so very vibrant."

"Thank you. Gardening has always been my favorite hobby. You could say I have a true passion for the outdoors," Libby says as they settle down at a patio table. "My husband and I used to own a farm about eighty miles or so from here."

"I understand you're a rather successful real estate agent here in Arlington, and your husband died in battle, serving his country," Dave says gently.

"Yes. Defending his country meant everything to Kevin," Libby replies, blinking back tears. "Sterling decided to follow in his father's footsteps, but it was a long and difficult path for him."

"Please, enlighten me."

"As a youngster, Sterling really took to farm life. Not once did his father or I have to remind him to do his chores. He shined in everything he did. Not only was he always a top student, he also excelled in athletics—there's no doubt he could've been a professional athlete if he'd chosen to be." Libby sighs and stares into space. "And then when his father died, his entire life fell apart. He went and joined

Adam and Eve Cardon and the Friends of the Future—that damn cult. Claiming to be on a mission for world peace by showing hatred toward all people associated with defending one’s country. What a joke... Are you aware of the group?”

Dave nods. “I certainly am.”

“Well, those criminals led Sterling and continue to lead so many others into a world of debauchery fueled by devil-glass. That drug became my son’s one friend in the world—or I should say, enemy. If not for General Russell Waldron, Sterling would be dead.”

“Is that so?” Dave says, typing notes into his phone. “And just how did General Waldron free your son from his addiction?”

“He found a way to profoundly reach Sterling,” Libby explains. “It wasn’t easy, but deep down Sterling knew he needed to climb out from the hell he was living in. And thankfully, with the help of General Waldron and his psychiatrist associate, Dr. Oxford Olsen, he eventually saw the light.”

Confused, Dave looks up from his phone. “I thought Olsen’s actions led to Sterling’s undoing. It sounds like he was more of a life-saver.”

“At the time he was. Both he and Waldron were instrumental in Sterling not only getting his life together, but eventually becoming part of a special ops group called the Gold Hawks. Things were looking very positive for Sterling. He was even able to patch things up with his brother, Travis.”

“Had they had a falling out?” Dave asks.

“While he was with the Friends of the Future, Sterling begrudged Travis being an assistant to a US diplomat who was stationed in France. The building in France that Travis worked in was one of the buildings the EFA had been planning to bomb,” Libby explains with a heavy sigh. “And if not for General Waldron...”

“Yes, his effort toward thwarting those bombings has made him quite a hero,” Dave replies.

“Deservedly so.”

“And then what happened to Sterling from there?” Dave asks.

“Just before he and the other members of his team were about to head to Europe during the Euro conflict, he called me and told me he

wouldn't be joining the others," Libby explains. "He said he'd been betrayed by Waldron and Olsen, but wouldn't say more. 'Just know I was set up,' he told me, and that it might take some time, but he'd get things worked out, and when he did, he'd contact me. And that's the last time I've spoken with my son in the last four years."

Libby stares out into her garden. "When I reached out to General Waldron, he said he had no idea why Sterling took off like he did. He was concerned he'd relapsed or was suffering from some sort of PTSD due to the Larson mission, but I don't believe either scenario to be true."

As Dave studies her, he feels her heartache. "I've come to learn Sterling spent time seeing a psychiatrist in Sundale County. Actually, it was my sister, Dr. Ruby Felder," he says.

"Were you able to find out why and whether or not the treatment was a success?"

"Unfortunately, no. My sister's dead," Dave replies, and explains.

"I'm so sorry." Libby sighs. "Well, like I said, it'll sure help to have someone from the National Record look into the matter. I need to know what's happened to my son."

Sensing her anguish, Dave exhales and rubs his hands together. "And I need to be honest with you, Libby," he says. "I contacted you out of more than just sheer interest."

Libby blinks. "What's that supposed mean? Are you not who you claim to be?"

"No, no. I am doing stories for the National Record, but I'm also a former Washington, DC, police detective with reason to believe the US military, along with Dr. Olsen, are currently involved in something very sinister and unsettling. I'm attempting to figure out exactly what it is."

Libby appears to gather her thoughts, then nods. "I'll do anything to find my son, and if you can assist me, I'll help you any way I can."

Dave peers into her eyes. "I don't mean to be insensitive, but how do you even know Sterling's still alive?"

"I don't. Every day, I pray to God he is—but no, I have no idea," Libby admits, her lips quivering. "I've had two separate private

investigators attempt to track him down over the last four years, and they came up empty. I would've gone to the authorities, but I didn't think it'd be wise to do such a thing, considering what Sterling told me."

Dave sighs. "My experience has taught me that finding someone who doesn't want to be found is usually a very difficult task. We definitely have our work cut out for us, but I promise you, if your son's still alive, I'll find him."

Chapter 13

FBI Headquarters, Washington, DC

“Come on in and have a seat, David,” FBI Director Elliott Gregson says to Dave Eisen after Gregson’s secretary escorts him into his office.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice,” Dave replies, sitting across from Gregson.

“Of course,” Gregson says. Easing back in his chair, he laces his hands behind his head. “I’m so sorry for what you’ve recently endured, my friend.”

“And Shayna and I thank you for the flowers you sent in memory of Ruby,” Dave says.

“Such a tragic story... And your nephew,” Gregson adds with a sigh. “I didn’t know him very well, but he appeared to be a fine young man. I know Lieutenant Stanwell regarded him with high esteem, as did Special Agent Kim Waldron. I realize it won’t bring back lives, but I’m glad to know those behind these crimes are no longer a threat.”

“There’s something I need to know, Elliott.”

The FBI director raises a brow. “Sure. How can I help you?”

“During your recent public address, you noted that Siro Felder was targeted for more than just donating twelve million dollars to the EU during the conflict. I need to know what that means.”

Gregson’s eyes flicker, and he leans forward in his chair. “You’re asking me something I’m not at liberty to divulge. There’s a reason I was being so vague about it during the presser.”

“We’re talking about my sister, my brother-in-law, and now my nephew. I have a right to know what the hell is going on,” Dave counters.

Gregson sighs. “Jozef and Lubor Sokol had a sister, Maria,” Gregson says, and elaborates. “Lieutenant Stanwell informed me that Atlas was the Gold Hawk who shot and killed her during the raid. It was purely self-defense. There was no way he would’ve known who she was. Somehow Lubor and Jozef must’ve found out, which of course is why Siro Felder was on their radar.”

“Yet Stanwell still sent Atlas into that building, knowing that?” Dave says, wide-eyed.

“He did. And he completely stands by his decision.”

Dave purses his lips, fighting anger.

When he arrives home, Dave asks Atlas to join him in the living room.

“Judging by the glum expression on your face, I’m afraid to ask how things went with Gregson,” Atlas says.

Dave exhales and relates what Gregson told him about Maria Sokol’s death.

Atlas frowns. “It’s not true,” he says.

“Are you telling me there was no raid?”

“No. That raid happened. And though it’s correct I had no idea who she was, I vividly recall a young woman being shot to death, but I didn’t do it. Van Stanwell’s the person who did. He’s lying.”

“Are you certain of this?”

“Absolutely,” Atlas says. “He shot her in self-defense as she was reaching for a semi-automatic lying on the table in front of her.”

“Did anyone else witness this?”

“Yes. During the raid, I was paired with a Gold Hawk named Charmaine Newport. She saw exactly what I did as we entered the back of the building. There’s no way Stanwell would’ve known we saw what we did.”

“Isn’t Charmaine the specialist who entered the Am-Dro building with you?”

“Yes, that’s her.”

“I met her at the memorial service held in your honor. She seemed like a wonderful person and was deeply grieving your loss.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. We worked well together and became good friends. She helped mentor me when I joined the Hawks. I would say she’s the most dedicated member of the group I’ve ever known.”

“Was,” Dave says. “She told me she opted out of the unit two days after the bombing—out of the military completely.”

“Did she tell you why?”

“No, but then again, I didn’t ask. Didn’t feel it was my place to.”

Atlas runs a hand across his face. “Come to think of it, she would’ve been a Gold Hawk at the same time Sterling Rowe was.”

“Interesting. Do you think we can trust her to bring her in on this and maybe help shed some light?” Dave asks.

“Yes. If there’s anyone I trust, it’s Charmaine,” Atlas answers.

Harmon Farms, Sundale County

“Are you certain you need to do this?” Roy asks Sterling as he watches him pack his belongings, preparing to leave the farm. “After all, why would the feds wish to speak with you, now that this Lubor Sokol idiot is dead?”

“I love it here, and I appreciate what you’ve done for me, Roy, but I just can’t risk it. I need to move on,” Sterling replies.

“And just where the hell are you planning to go? Or, is it better I don’t know?”

“Yeah, I’m afraid it is,” Sterling says.

With a sigh, Roy plops down on the living room sofa. “Are you at least now finally going to tell me what it is you’ve been running from for the last few years?”

“No...that wouldn’t be wise,” Sterling replies, turning to the man whose farm he so proudly managed for the last four years. “I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me, Roy. And the last thing I’d ever want to do is put you in danger...I’ve already risked that enough since I’ve been here.”

Roy rises and regards Sterling eye to eye. "When my son died, it took a huge chunk out of my heart," he says. "And though no one will ever truly replace Cole, you came much closer than I thought anyone ever could. Just remember, you're always welcome here, young man." He offers his hand. Sterling grips it and they shake.

"Believe me, I'm going to miss this place...and the man who makes it all work," Sterling replies, blinking rapidly.

* * *

"Hello, Charmaine. It's wonderful to see you again," Dave says to the former Gold Hawk when she enters the lobby of her building.

"Ah...Mr. Eisen," Charmaine replies slowly, eyes narrowed in query. "Are you acquainted with someone who lives in the building?"

"Actually, I'm here to see you. It's very urgent. And please, call me Dave."

"How did you know where I live?"

"Atlas," Dave bluntly replies.

"What would have made Atlas tell you where I live? And furthermore, why's it so urgent for you to see me?"

Dave exhales. "Atlas is alive and well, Charmaine."

She gapes at him a moment. "Whoa...did you just say what I thought you said?"

"He's been staying at my house, about ten minutes from here."

"But I...I saw that explosion. There's no way anybody could've possibly survived."

"There's loads more to this story than meets the eye," Dave says. "Please, come back to my house. I'll gladly explain everything to you on the way there. I know how much it'd mean to Atlas to be able to confide in you. And besides, there's something we need your help with."

Charmaine thinks for a beat, then nods. "Okay...I'll do it."

When they arrive at the Eisen residence, Charmaine meets Atlas in the living room and greets him with a heartfelt embrace. "I still can't believe this," she exclaims.

“Let me give the two of you a chance to talk,” Dave says, exiting the room.

“Your uncle told me everything on the way here,” she says.

“So, what are your thoughts?”

“Frankly, I’m still trying to piece it all together. This is some pretty heavy stuff with some serious accusations on top of it.”

“You were there at that raid, Charmaine,” Atlas says. “You know as well as I do that I didn’t kill who we now know is Maria Sokol, and that Stanwell did. As long as I’m supposedly dead, I guess he thinks he can get away with such a lie for his own benefit.”

“Oh, I know he was the person who fired that gun... It’s still ingrained in my mind to this day,” Charmaine says. “It appears Stanwell’s up to no good for whatever reason, but who else do you think is involved?”

“Besides Stanwell, it’s become clear Dr. Olsen is, and God only knows who else.”

“Yeah, your uncle told to me about this whole clairvoyance thing with your mother, and how Olsen fits in.”

“Did he ever counsel you, back in the day?” Atlas asks.

“He sure did, and did I ever need it,” she exclaims. “The Larson mission and the Euro conflict were complete horror shows. Olsen really helped me and many other Gold Hawks face the reality of all that madness.”

“What can you tell us about Sterling? My uncle and I are confident his story plays a key role in this puzzle,” Atlas says as Dave rejoins them.

“Sterling. He was quite a Gold Hawk,” Charmaine replies. “Though we were in the group together, I didn’t get to know him very well. It seemed very interesting, how he found his way so quickly into the military after being part of the Friends of the Future and kicking a devil-glass habit. And it’s definitely true about General Waldron being the person who guided him out of his problems.” Charmaine pauses and slips into thought. “Amber...Major Amber Sutton. She was Olsen’s assistant at the JK Preston base. I remember her and Sterling being a couple. Amber’s brother, Brad, was a fellow Gold

Hawk. Like Sterling, he was brilliant, but didn't stick around too long."

"Can you recall anything about your last days with Sterling?" Dave asks.

"The whole thing with him not being permitted to accompany the team to Europe was a total shock," Charmaine says. "Then in a flash, he was gone."

"Do you know why he left?"

"I have no idea," she replies. "If anyone would know the truth behind that, it'd be Amber."

Atlas blows out air through his lips. "Will you help us find out what the hell is going on, Charmaine?"

"I will. I surely will. If your theory's correct, then I'd say we're going up against corruption in its worst form, practiced by those we trust to protect and serve us. I'd be a complete hypocrite to not answer the call."

"I'm thrilled to hear that," Atlas says with a sigh of relief. "So, I can't help but wonder what made you quit the Gold Hawks. Was it the aftereffects of the EFA incident?"

"Events like that really put our job in perspective, don't they?" Charmaine says, gazing into space. "But honestly, it was going to be my last mission, regardless—at least until now."

Seconds later, Uncle Dave receives a call from Libby Rowe and puts it on speaker. "Libby. This is a surprise. What can I do for you?"

"There's a man at my home named Roy Harmon who claims Sterling has been managing his farm in Sundale County for the last four years. I'll let you speak with him. I've already told him how you've been helping me try to find my son," Libby replies.

"Great. I'd love to chat with him."

"Here, I'll connect him."

Roy's image appears on Dave's phone. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Roy begins relating how he came to know Sterling. "At the time I gave him a ride from the military base, I was looking to hire a manager for my farm, so it all worked out perfectly."

"Did he use his legal name?" Dave asks.

“If Sterling Rowe’s his legal name, then he sure did,” Roy replies. “He provided me with proof he’d been serving his country. He was also very honest with me about his past addiction to devil-glass and his prior association with the Friends of the Future so-called peace movement. But he wouldn’t tell me why he left the military. He told me he’d had a falling out with his superiors, but I could tell there was much more to his story. I could feel his anguish.” Roy draws a breath. “He was far more interested in discussing his time before entering the military—growing up on the farm here in Arlington.”

“So, did you ever learn why he appeared to be fearing for his life? Did this not concern you?”

Roy sighs and shakes his head. “No on both fronts. All I cared about was hiring the best damn person to manage my farm, and by hiring Sterling, I did just that. From the moment I met him, I could see the kind of man he was just by looking into his eyes. He so badly wanted to prove himself to me, he even requested to work on the farm for an entire month without getting paid, which of course I didn’t accept. Let me tell you, that young man is pure gold.”

“And when you did pay him, how did you go about doing so?” Dave asks with pinched brows.

“Cash, along with free board and food. That enabled him to remain hidden from the outside world, as was his wish,” Roy explains. “It was really no different than if I’d paid him in the normal manner, unless one considers all that government tax malarkey to be of importance.”

“What made him leave your farm?”

“There was an incident that took place at our local diner,” Roy replies, and elaborates.

“Are you aware if those at the diner, or the feds, knew who Sterling was?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Did Sterling tell you where he was going?”

“No, he didn’t. But I’m pretty sure I know where he went, which is why I took it upon myself to track down his mother and reach out to her. I thought it was best to address this in person.”

“That was very wise and kind of you. Where do you think he headed?”

“When I learned he was planning to leave, I also found out he’d been revisiting the Friends of the Future online. To my reckoning, they’re nothing but a group of deranged idiots,” Roy huffs.

“That they are,” Dave replies.

Chapter 14

“The Friends of the Future peace movement,” Charmaine gasps after Dave ends his conversation with Roy Harmon. “I know I don’t have to tell either of you, but this is not good news.”

“And if anyone knows about those clowns, it’s Charmaine,” Atlas adds.

“Yep, that’s correct. Just prior to heading out to Europe during the conflict, the Gold Hawks were on the verge of raiding the group’s New York City mansion, compound, or whatever the hell you want to call it. Many politicians across the country had grown tired of the group promoting the idea that our military was filled with evil people from top to bottom. There was and still is concern that the group is not what it claims to be,” she explains. “But since its inception nine years ago, the government’s handled them with kid gloves.”

“That’s always puzzled me,” Dave says.

“I put it down to freedom of speech,” Charmaine replies.

“Did Sterling ever imply devil-glass was being distributed within the group?” Dave asks.

“Not directly by the Friends of the Future,” she replies. “But, he did reveal there was always plenty of it going around at their rallies.”

“My Lord. With Sterling heading back their way, who knows what it’ll do to him? He could relapse, or already has,” Dave says grimly.

Atlas scowls. “Let’s hope not. We need him—and we need him with a clear mind.”

Friends of the Future mansion, New York City

Sterling Rowe pulls his pickup truck up to the front gate, reaches out the driver's window, and enters a code into a keypad. Seconds later, the gate opens and a young woman with jet black, shoulder-length hair appears and directs him to a reserved parking space.

"Thank you, Miss," Sterling says to the young woman when he exits the vehicle.

"Of course," the young woman replies, pushing strands of hair away from her dark brown eyes. "Please follow me. Adam's waiting for you in the theater."

When Sterling enters the lavish home's theater room, he hears a disembodied male voice booming out across the room's surround sound system: "So when your country needs you, you must answer the call." The warning is accompanied by images of American soldiers in training, filling the screen at the front of the darkened room. Abruptly, the video comes to an end and the room lights up.

"Come and have a seat, Sterling," a voice calls out from the back row.

As he approaches, Sterling instantly recognizes the craggy face and pitiless eyes of Adam Cardon. "Hello, Adam," he says.

"What you just heard and saw is nothing but pure propaganda baked in a big batch of bullshit," Adam hisses, turning toward Sterling. "How are you, my friend?"

"I've seen better days," Sterling says.

"Haven't we all," Adam replies with a grin. "Let's take this into the living area," he adds, springing up from his comfy leather seat.

Sterling follows Adam into a very plush living room. Adam signals to the young woman. "Violet. Please grab us a couple of cold ones," he says. She nods and goes into the kitchen.

"Wow... It's like nothing has changed around here," Sterling says, blinking.

"I can't forget how you came to us such a confused young man, and I must tell you, I feel we failed you, knowing you left us and chose to enter the world we loathe."

Sterling frowns. "Nah, I failed myself," he says. Violet hands him a beer and takes a seat across from the two men. Sterling regards the

bottle with brooding eyes. “Entering the military was the worst decision I’ve ever made. It completely ruined my life.”

“Don’t fret, my friend. We all make choices we regret,” Adam says before taking a swig of his beer. “It’s all about moving forward into the new day. And as we did in the past, we gladly welcome you as one of our seven guests for the next seven months.”

“Ah, right. The Lucky Seven program,” Sterling says, grinning. “Are you one of us?” he asks, looking toward the young woman. Violet smiles and nods.

“Yes. Violet is actually joining us for a second term,” Adam explains. “Her contribution to our group as an IT expert has been enormous. She’s helped increase our reach immensely.”

“Were you a former IT specialist for the military?” Sterling asks the young woman.

“No, I’ve never been part of the military. I’m here because of what happened to my mother, who dedicated her life to being a human rights attorney,” she replies with a deep sigh. “She was killed while performing work in Poland during the Euro conflict. Allied forces mistakenly bombed the building she was in. As usual, they were much too eager to display their firepower and it was proven that they ignored their own intelligence. That building was filled with single mothers and their children.”

Sterling frowns. “I’m very sorry. That is so tragic.” He takes a hefty gulp of his beer.

“So, that’s why I’m here in support of this very important cause,” Violet says.

The entrance of a tall, slender woman with shoulder-length, golden hair, wearing a brightly colored floral gown brings a halt to the conversation.

“And there she is,” Adam crows. “The heart and soul of the movement.”

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Eve,” Sterling says.

“Sterling Rowe... When Adam informed me of your submission request, I was pleasantly surprised,” Eve replies, smiling.

“Yes, and I’m very thankful the request was granted,” Sterling says.

“Sterling just finished saying how joining the military was the worst decision he’d ever made,” Adam informs his wife with a chuckle.

“Now, how come that doesn’t surprise me?” Eve quips. “Are we going to get to learn the details?”

Sterling shakes his head and gazes at the floor between his feet. “No, that’s not going to happen. Believe me, it wouldn’t be in anyone’s best interest,” he says. “It’s a story of utter betrayal.” Rage and grief meld in his eyes.

Two days later, at a Friends of the Future rally in Central Park, Sterling encounters an old acquaintance. “Sterling fuckin’ Rowe...I don’t believe it,” says a tall, scrawny man with shoulder-length white hair.

“My Lord. Is that you, Snowy?” Sterling replies.

“In the flesh,” the man replies. “Hey, back in the day, didn’t you go off and do some military shit?”

“I did...but now I’m back.”

“Ah, and back for the good stuff, I hope,” Snowy replies, removing a small vial of pills from his black leather jacket, which is about two sizes too large for his skeletal frame. With a mischievous grin, he raises the vial and rattles it.

Sterling nods and smiles. “Damn right. Makes me feel like a kid at Christmas.”

“Here, this one’s on the house, bro. Consider me a much thinner and taller version of Santa Claus,” Snowy says with a cackle, handing Sterling the vial.

Sterling regards the container with wide eyes. “Whoa. Are you sure, man? This stuff’s sure worth a pretty penny.”

“Take it, and enjoy, my friend. It’s great to have you back.”

Chapter 15

Nine Years Ago

“Please, come on in and have a seat,” Varley says to a beautiful twenty-four-year-old woman named Eve Cardon. He welcomes her into his office.

She smiles and sits across from the mogul. “I must admit, I’m surprised to be meeting with you, Mr. Varley. Do you always interview your wannabe casino hostesses?”

Varley answers that with a chuckle. “As important as my casino hostesses are to me, I must admit this is a first. However, I’m going to make you a far more lucrative proposal than a job handing out drinks and forcing smiles.”

Eve raises a brow. “I don’t understand, but I’m listening.”

“Your back story is rather fascinating,” Varley says with his eyes on his desktop. “Raised by a single mom. Becoming the face of Redding Beauty made you lots of money. Lots of money you lost. Winning a battle with anorexia while being a staunch advocate for the legalization of devil-glass. And then falling in love with a photographer, who just happens to be named Adam... Adam and Eve. All so cute and glorious.”

Eve chuckles. “Yeah, I’ve often thought about writing my life story.”

“Well, seeing as most people nowadays are much too lazy to read, I think that’d be a waste of your precious time,” Varley says. “Now, I have a plan for you that, like I said, will be far more financially

rewarding and fulfilling than working at one of my gambling holes,” he adds and then explains his concept for Friends of the Future.

“Hmm. I wasn’t aware you were such an advocate for peace.”

“I’m not. This movement will serve as a great vehicle for me to move product, that product being...devil-glass,” Varley replies with a sinister grin.

Eve thinks for a moment. “So, it sounds to me like you want me and my husband to bring to life some sort of scam. A fake anti-war movement as a way for you to sell the drug... We’d be nothing more than cons. Am I correct?”

“Extremely wealthy cons. You’ll be set for life.”

“That’s if we avoid going to jail,” Eve replies.

“That won’t happen. You have my solemn word,” Varley counters.

“But how can you promise such a thing? If you have dealers doing their thing at these so-called peace rallies, how can you guarantee my husband and I won’t be caught in the crossfire?”

“I said, I give you my word,” Varley growls.

“I’m sorry, but this all sounds—”

“Here,” Varley says, abruptly interrupting her as he places an envelope in front of her.

“What is this?” Eve nervously asks.

“Some of your husband’s more interesting work before he became a hotshot, high-end, fashion photographer,” Varley says.

Eve removes a series of photographs from the envelope, and after a quick glance, she grimaces and quickly places the photos back inside. She looks up at Varley with stunned eyes. “Where...where did you get these?”

“Let’s just say I’m very well connected to the unsavory world,” Varley replies matter-of-factly.

“This is blackmail,” Eve says.

“Argh, I see it more as a form of bargaining. You should be thanking me for being so generous,” Varley replies. “Now, do we have a deal?”

Eve sighs and nods.

Neon Paradise (nightclub), Miami, Florida

As Franklin Varley and his underling, Dax Anderson, enjoy a nightcap at Varley's private club, Dax receives a call on his cell. "It's Adam," Dax informs his boss.

"Great. Let's take this in the back," Varley says before Dax answers the call.

"I'll put him on Hello Friend," Dax says to Varley when they're in his office.

"Gentlemen. It's wonderful to speak with you both," Adam says. "I wanted to let you know our friend Sterling has returned to the FoF just as you hoped he would."

"Did Snowy do what he was supposed to do?" Dax asks.

"He certainly did. Devil-glass with a little extra something special," Adam replies. "According to Snowy, our friend Sterling lit up like the Fourth of July at the mere sight of those babies. It shouldn't be long now."

Franklin Varley retrieves a black ski mask from his desk drawer, sets it on the desktop, and glares at it. "I've waited so long for this!" he growls, and that night comes rushing back.

* * *

"Zach just contacted me," Dax informs Franklin, referring to Varley's twenty-seven-year-old son. "He just made the deal a few minutes ago and is on his way back to the casino with the cash."

"Is Snowy following behind, as you ordered?" Varley asks.

"No. Against my orders, your son told the Snowman to go pick up some food for the three of us," Dax replies.

"Damn," Varley grunts. "Will that kid ever learn?"

It's 2:25 a.m. Zach Varley is a few miles away from the casino when his car is forced off the dark, deserted road by a charcoal gray van.

Zach's car strikes a light post and he's immediately dazed, nearly unconscious.

A man wearing a black ski mask exits the van, wielding a revolver. He approaches Zach's car. Seeing Zach's condition and realizing it's safe to do as he pleases, the man retrieves a duffle bag from the back of the car and takes it back to his van. The van drives off.

Still stunned, Zach reaches into his coat pocket, retrieves his cell, and manages to contact Dax on speed dial.

"Zach—what's going on?" Dax asks.

"That fucker...the guy we made the deal with...he got me, Dax," Zach stammers, struggling with every breath.

"What are you talking about?" Dax shoots back.

"Forced me off the...off the fucking road into a pole. He's got the money."

"Do you know for certain it's the same guy we made the deal with?"

"Yes... I screwed up, man. I'm not going to—"

"Zach! Zach! Zach! Can you hear me?"

A few miles away from the wreck, on the side of the road, Dax finds the deserted van belonging to Sterling Rowe. A black ski mask lies on the front seat.

Friends of the Future rally, Central Park, New York City

"My name's Violet. My mother was savagely killed by US forces during the Euro conflict," the woman with the jet black hair exclaims through a microphone to a crowd of several hundred people.

In response to her description, the crowd feverishly chants, "No more killing! No more war!"

"The Friends of the Future requires your full and unwavering support," Violet urges. "We must do everything we can to obliterate the concept of war itself. As individuals, it's you and I who shape the world we live in. Therefore the blame lies with every person who decides to serve their country and its military and become an agent of war—a purveyor of evil. It doesn't matter if you're a clerk, a cook, a medic, or a soldier in the field, you are feeding the monster of war!" Anger radiates from her eyes as she gazes out at the crowd. "We must

strike out against this kind of injustice against the human spirit. This movement must span the globe and with the strength of numbers we will reach our goal of world peace! No more killing! No more war!” The crowd resumes the chant along with her.

An incognito Charmaine Newport blends in with the boisterous crowd. Atlas and his uncle Dave hadn’t been entirely comfortable with her attending the rally, but they all agreed it was a risk they’d have to take. They needed to know if Sterling Rowe had indeed returned to the FoF fold, and what state he was in. How would he react to meeting up with a former fellow Gold Hawk? Atlas had been confident Charmaine could convince Sterling she was on his side, in the hope that he’d give them whatever he could on Olsen and his friends.

She’d located Sterling, who is obviously disoriented, standing several feet to the left of the podium. Her eyes follow him as he staggers toward a dirt path. Trailing him at a distance for twenty yards or so down the path, she waits as Sterling plops down onto a park bench, then approaches. “Sterling? My goodness...Sterling Rowe...is that you?”

“Who the hell...who the hell wants to know?” he mumbles.

“It’s me, Charmaine Newport,” she says without removing her ball cap and dark sunglasses.

“Do I...do I know you?”

Charmaine looks into his eyes. They’re glassy and distant. Oh no. Devil-glass. “Don’t you remember me? I’m Charmaine. We were in the military together—Gold Hawks. Four years ago. I badly need to speak with you. I’m here to help you.”

Sterling shakes his head. “Help me? How the hell are you going to help me?” He groans as his body begins to tremble uncontrollably. He slides off the bench onto the grass and curls into a fetal position before passing out.

Charmaine checks his vital signs. Phew. He’s still alive. She calls 911 on her cell.

In the near distance, in a wooded area, Snowy looks on, cell phone pressed to his ear. "It's me, Snowy," he reports to Dax Anderson.

"What's going on?" Dax asks, stepping away from monitoring a high stakes game of roulette at one of Varley's Jersey casinos. He finds an isolated area inside the building.

"It's Sterling Rowe. It looks like it's a done deal," Snowy replies.

"Done deal? As in he's dead?"

"If he isn't already, there's no doubt he will be soon," Snowy says, and describes what he just witnessed.

"But from what you're telling me, the son of a bitch is still alive. That's not the fucking plan! The boss wants him dead!" Dax yells. "And this woman in the park he was speaking with, who the hell is she?"

"Like everybody else around here today, she's probably just another malcontent bleeding heart who wouldn't know reality if it hit her on the head," Snowy replies.

"I don't care. Find out who she is and what she knows," Dax orders.

"It's too late," Dax says, watching the ambulance pull away from the scene. "She just left in the ambulance with Sterling."

"Damn," Dax grunts. "Get yourself down to the hospital and find out what the fuck is going on!" he orders. "For both our sakes, he better be dead by the time you get down there."

En route to the hospital, Dax's wish is granted. Sterling Rowe is pronounced dead.

Minutes later, Charmaine contacts Dave Eisen and gives him the news. "An overdose, just like we feared could happen."

Dave sighs. "I'll contact his mother."

"No! It can't be!" Libby wails when Dave gives her the tragic news.

"Obviously, whatever he's been dealing with over the last few years became too much for him," Dave says.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not buying it," Libby cries. "Sterling gave me his word he'd never touch that stuff again."

“I’m so sorry, Libby. Addiction is a horrific thing,” Dave gently says. “If there’s anything Atlas or I can do for you, just name it.”

“There is,” Libby snaps. “Find out what those bastards did to destroy my son’s life.”

“We will. You have my word.”

Chapter 16

At the Friends of the Future mansion, NYPD Officer Candice Turcott gives the news of Sterling's death to Adam Cardon.

"My Lord. I was afraid something bad had happened to him," Adam says.

"Were you aware he was using, Mr. Cardon?" Turcott asks.

Adam sighs. "My wife and I knew of his past problem with devil-glass, but if we thought even for a second he was currently using, we would've never welcomed him as a guest in our home."

"It's my understanding that devil-glass is quite popular at your rallies. Why is that?"

"If you're asking me if Friends of the Future promotes or distributes such a drug, we don't. However, we've never made a point of denouncing devil-glass, or any other drug, for that matter. It's simply not our place to do so."

Turcott looks Adam in the eyes. "It's also my understanding you often record your rallies for promotional purposes. Was that the case this time around?"

"As it happens, that's something we haven't done over the last little while," Adam answers. "There's way too many privacy laws in place nowadays to do such a thing. We've even gone so far as to erase past recordings, to be on the safe side."

"Okay," Turcott replies. "I'll leave you my card. If you, your wife, or any other members of your group have anything to offer regarding Mr. Rowe, it'd be in everyone's best interest to contact me."

“Will do,” Adam says. “Believe me, Officer, the last thing any of us want is something so tragic to happen at one of our rallies.”

Eisen residence, Washington, DC

“Damn. This was the worst case scenario,” Atlas grumbles. “We need to contact someone who was with Sterling during those final days. We need to know what, if anything, he had to say about his past.”

“Are you suggesting we attempt to get inside the Friends of the Future?” Dave asks as he taps a few buttons on his desktop.

“Yes. Perhaps he opened up to someone within the group,” Atlas says.

Dave gapes at his computer screen. “Geez...looks like they’ve shut it down.”

“Huh?”

“The Friends of the Future. Their site’s gone completely black.”

“Are you certain?”

“Here, take a look for yourself,” Dave says, directing Atlas’s attention to the monitor.

“Hmm...very interesting,” Atlas says, looking over his uncle’s shoulder. “Sterling rejoins the group, dies of an overdose, and now the entire movement has gone dark. Damn bastards.”

Friends of the Future mansion, New York City

“That the boss set you guys up in such a place still amazes me,” Dax says, settling down with Adam and Eve out on the estate’s lavish patio.

“I think it’s all worked out rather well for everybody involved,” Adam replies, grinning.

“Yes, getting those drugs into the hands of Sterling Rowe was vital for all of us,” Dax replies.

“I still say the guy was so messed up it was only a matter of time before he overdosed, with or without us,” Eve says.

“Once an addict, always an addict,” Dax scoffs. “But I am concerned about the devil-glass having been spiked. A detailed autopsy will more than likely pick that up.”

“So what if it does?” Adam says with a shrug. “It wouldn’t be the first time an enhanced form of devil-glass found its way onto the street.”

“Are you sure shutting things down so soon after Sterling’s death is a wise idea?” Eve asks Dax with a raised brow.

“That’s Mr. V’s decision. He thinks the kitchen’s becoming way too hot. But don’t fret, you’ll be receiving proper compensation, per our original agreement,” Dax replies. “And I’m thrilled to tell you that your new accommodation in the Bahamas is awaiting your arrival. You’ve both done some outstanding work over the last nine years.”

A couple of days later, after tending to further business in New York City, Dax makes his way to Judy’s Diner, a few blocks from the Friends of the Future mansion.

A text message informs him the person he’s scheduled to meet with is seated at the third booth from the front door. He enters the restaurant and walks toward the booth.

“I’m sorry for being late, Violet,” he says to his daughter.

“I wouldn’t have expected otherwise, Dad,” the young woman quips.

“Well, at least I’m consistent.” Dax guffaws as he slides into the booth across from her. “My Lord. How long has it been?”

“Since my graduation, which will soon be a year,” Violet says, frowning.

“I’m so sorry, honey. Work has been driving me crazy lately,” Dax replies. “So, how’s the job search been going? As I’ve informed you in the past, there’s an office with your name on it waiting for you at Varley’s, if you wish.”

Violet shakes her head. “No. My focus is on something far more important than casino resorts, amusement parks, and whatever the heck else you guys do.”

“Is that so?”

“I hooked up with Friends of the Future about eight months ago, and I’d become a key player in the movement. They knew me as Violet Childress.”

“The Friends of the Future?” Dax mumbles, shocked. He’d been unaware...but then, Adam and Eve Cardon don’t know a single thing

about Dax's personal life, including who his daughter is. "What made you join those lunatic dreamers?"

"Are you forgetting how Mom was killed?" Violet counters. "Do you not think it's time someone does something about it?"

Dax sighs. "I'm all for bringing peace and goodness to the world, Violet, but something like the Friends of the Future is surely not the answer. It's nothing but a brainwashing machine feeding off young people's insecurities."

Violet frowns. "So, tell me, Dad. Do you have the answer?"

"No, I don't," Dax replies with a shrug. "Because there isn't one. Some things are just a fact of life. And unfortunately, war and conflict are right at the top of that list."

"That's a cop-out, and you know it," Violet retorts, then sighs. "Well, much to my chagrin, and without warning, Adam and Eve Cardon have now shut down the entire operation anyway. All of us who were currently living with them as their guests found our bags lying outside the mansion gate. It's like they just vanished into thin air."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Violet," Dax replies, feigning remorse and surprise.

"Well, it's certainly not going to stop me from furthering the cause. I'm planning to begin my own movement," she announces.

Dax studies his daughter with uneasy eyes. "From what I've always understood, the Cardons put quite a load of money behind that movement over the years. How could you possibly finance such an endeavor on your own?"

Violet gives her father a hard look. "I was hoping maybe you could help get old moneybags Varley to finally put his resources to good use and support a worthy cause."

Dax swallows hard at the irony of the suggestion before he replies. "I honestly don't see that happening...ah, now I know why you invited me to lunch," he adds with a chuckle.

"Would you at least ask him, and maybe try to convince him?"

"I can try, but I must warn you, the only person who convinces Franklin Varley to do something is Franklin himself."

Neon Paradise (nightclub), Miami, Florida

“Follow me. He’s in the back office,” Dax says to Stanwell when the casually dressed lieutenant arrives at the private club.

“Van the man.” Varley beams. “Have a seat, my friend.”

“So, according to my brother, the funds are as secure as can be,” Stanwell says, dropping into the chair across from Varley’s desk.

“Yes. I’m very impressed with Eric’s handling of the sixty million big ones,” Varley replies.

“We’re both grateful that you trusted him to look after things,” Stanwell says.

“I’m usually very open to giving people second chances. Third chances, not so much.”

“Understood,” Stanwell replies.

“Now, have you reconsidered my suggestion that you retire from the military and join my army?” Varley asks, grinning.

The lieutenant smiles at that. “Actually, I am retiring from military life. In the meantime, I’ll be heading up security for General Waldron’s election campaign.”

“Well, for America’s sake, let’s hope the good general’s successful,” Varley says. “If those left wing loons get hold of this country, we’ll all be sorry. To think such a huge part of their agenda is legalizing devil-glass...imagine doing such an awful thing.”

Sinister laughter fills the room.

Chapter 17

Eisen Residence, Washington, DC

“It sure wasn’t easy, but through her contacts at the IRS, your Aunt Shayna discreetly found another link between Varley and Stanwell besides the fact that Stanwell often vacations at Varley’s resorts,” Dave tells Atlas.

“What did she learn?”

“Stanwell’s brother, Eric, is a big-time investment banker in Miami and has done extensive business with Varley.”

“Yeah, I remember once meeting Eric at a function,” Atlas says. “Somehow, I don’t think he’d remember me; he was pretty wasted by the end of the night.” He pauses and takes the final bite of a roast beef sandwich. “I think it’s time, Uncle Dave.”

“Time for what?” Dave asks with a raised eyebrow.

“Time for me to come forward and be open about what I saw inside that building,” Atlas replies. “Those photos speak volumes in linking Varley to the EFA and Stanwell to the bomb.”

“It still won’t fully give us what we need,” Dave exclaims. “It might help incriminate Varley, but I’m afraid there’s not enough there to nail Stanwell, Olsen, and whoever else might be involved. Though we’re convinced Stanwell planted that bomb, proving it is another thing.”

“With Sterling now out of the picture, I think we need to take whatever we can get,” Atlas counters. “And who knows where else nailing Varley could lead?”

Dave sighs. “I gave Libby Rowe my word, and then there’s your mother and father—we owe it to their memory to leave no stone unturned in solving this damn thing. And you know as well as I do that Stanwell and crew have surely insulated themselves from Varley.”

Atlas slips into thought. “You raise some very valid points... I suppose having to remain isolated from the world at large is getting the best of me.”

“As difficult as it is, we must remain patient, Atlas.”

Atlas chuckles at that. “Yeah, that’s exactly what Stanwell would always say during our missions.”

The doorbell’s chime brings a halt to the conversation. “That’s Charmaine,” Dave says. He walks to the front door and lets her in.

“I’ve come up with something regarding the Friends of the Future that hopefully might get us something on Sterling,” Charmaine announces as she enters.

“Let’s hear it,” Dave says, directing her into the living room with Atlas trailing close behind.

“I came across a woman online named Violet Childress,” Charmaine explains. “She’s claiming to have been a vital part of the Friends of the Future for the last eight months.”

“Did you reach out to her?” Atlas asks.

“No, not yet,” Charmaine replies. “But I do have a game plan.”

“Let’s hear it,” Dave says.

“Violet’s looking for financial backing for her newly formed peace movement, People for Peace, and I was thinking we should pretend to show interest. Doing so could give us the opportunity to pick her brain regarding Sterling,” Charmaine says.

“I’ll do it,” Atlas quickly interjects.

“Are you forgetting you’re dead?” Dave counters with a raised brow.

Atlas grins. “Are you forgetting I’m a Gold Hawk, and that I’ve been preparing for life after death since I became one?”

Dave falls into thought, then nods once. “Okay. The job’s yours.”

“I’ll reach out to her once we’re done here,” Atlas replies.

As Dave begins detailing the newly discovered link between Eric Stanwell and Varley to Charmaine, music from her cell phone breaks up the conversation. She regards the screen. "Oh my. It's Stanwell calling," she says. She swipes at her screen and places the phone on speaker mode. "Lieutenant Stanwell. What a pleasant surprise," she says, feigning delight.

"Did I catch you at an okay time, Charmaine?" he asks.

"Yes. How are things, Lieutenant?"

"Things are well, and if you accept the offer I'm about to make, they'll be that much better," Stanwell says.

"Well now, you sure have my curiosity," Charmaine replies with a hint of caution.

"General Waldron has asked me to come on board and head up security for his campaign as things heat up, and I've agreed," Stanwell says.

"Congratulations. But what does that have to do with me?"

"I want you to help guide my team."

"Whoa. I'm both honored and surprised."

"Yours was the first name that came to mind," Stanwell replies. "How about we meet at the Sea Garden for lunch tomorrow and discuss the details?"

Before framing a reply, Charmaine gazes at Atlas and his uncle, who are both fervently nodding their heads. "Okay. Yes, let's do that."

"Fantastic. How's tomorrow at one?" Stanwell asks.

"I'll be there," Charmaine replies, then ends the call.

"This could be the break we're looking for," Dave says.

"Getting inside Stanwell's world is exactly what we need to do. But knowing what we know, are you sure you're okay with this?" Atlas asks Charmaine.

"I sure am," she firmly replies. "If Stanwell's what we think he is, then I wanna do whatever I can to help take him down."

Atlas rubs a hand across his chin and sighs. "Through this entire ordeal I've been wondering about General Waldron. After all, when it came to the JK Preston base, he was the lead man in charge."

"And then there's Gregson and the FBI, not to mention President O'Rourke and his people. If they're all caught up in this madness, we'd

be looking at an unthinkable and impenetrable pyramid of corruption,” Dave adds, his tone ominous.

* * *

Under the alias of an altruistic venture capitalist named Slater Hoyt, Atlas connects with former Friends of the Future supporter Violet Anderson, aka Violet Childress, on Hello Friend.

“I’d be more than glad to email you my plan,” Violet says, explaining why she had joined Friends of the Future along with her strategy for People for Peace. “I’m planning to do things quite a bit differently than the Friends of the Future. I’m actually looking at running it like a business and making a profit, with a portion of the money going to war veterans across the globe and the rest of it going back into the movement to keep it afloat.”

“Hmm. The business of peace...sounds very interesting,” Atlas replies. His brown eyes now appear hazel via the magic of contacts, and his wavy locks have been cut short.

Encouraged, Violet continues. “I’m planning to focus on a global approach. Bring the world together as one. My plan is to utilize a series of advanced social media platforms to help me do so, including advertising from around the globe. And when we do hold in-person rallies, I’ll make certain things are kept professional. For whatever reason, Adam and Eve would always turn a blind eye to all the debauchery that came with their gatherings.”

“Yeah, from what I understand, there was quite a bit of odd behavior going on at the FoF rallies,” Atlas says. “In fact, didn’t someone recently die from an overdose?” he asks, playing dumb.

“Sterling Rowe...he was a former special ops guy with the US military,” Violet answers.

“So you knew him?”

“I’d only just recently met him. He was with us for a few days prior to his death.”

“Were you surprised to learn he overdosed?”

“Like many who supported the movement, he was a very troubled soul. Something happened to him, back in the day...I only wish he’d opened up and told someone exactly what it was. Maybe he could’ve received the help he needed.” Violet pauses and sighs. “When I saw him meeting with that lowlife, white-haired freak, I probably should’ve intervened, but I didn’t.”

“What lowlife, white-haired freak?”

“He goes by Snowy. He’s one of the drug dealers who used to hang around the FoF rallies,” Violet says, her voice tight with disapproval. “He’s approached me on several occasions with his untoward devil-glass offers, even back before I became a part of the movement.”

“Sounds like the guy gets around.”

“He sure does. You see, my father works with the Varley Corporation, and I also remember this Snowy idiot hanging around, doing his thing at the New York casinos.”

This instantly draws Atlas’s attention. “Varley, huh? Does your father work at one of the casinos?”

“He’s actually Varley’s director of operations and security. My real name’s Violet Anderson and my father is Dax Anderson.”

“Interesting,” Atlas says. His adrenaline is pumping. “Are the two of you close?”

“Not anymore. Actually, the other day is the first time we’d spoken to each other in over a year,” Violet admits.

“Was he a supporter of the FoF? Was he aware of your involvement with the group?”

Violet chuckles at that. “No, on both fronts. In fact, I went to him to see if he could get Franklin Varley to assist me with the financing,” she says, grimacing. “It appears that’s not going to happen. So—I’m curious why you would want to put your hard-earned money behind such a cause. Were you once in the military?”

“No,” Atlas lies. “But I did have a couple of close friends who lost their lives to the senseless concept of war, and it’s always been my wish to see the world peacefully live as one.”

“Wouldn’t that be amazing?” Violet beams. “Well, I hope the plan I’ve laid out impresses you enough to bring you on board. Without

the proper initial funding, I'll never be able to bring People for Peace to life the way I envision it."

Atlas forces a smile. "I understand. I'll be giving you my answer in the coming days, as promised."

The Sea Garden restaurant, Washington, DC

"So, how's life been treating you, Charmaine?" Stanwell asks as they settle down at their table.

"I can't complain," she replies.

"I must tell you, your exit from the Gold Hawks came as quite a surprise. Am I correct to suppose the EFA explosion and Atlas's tragic death played a major role in your decision?"

"I won't deny the impact that event has had on me, but if anything, it was simply time to move on," Charmaine replies. She studies him with sharp eyes. "I can only imagine how thrilled and excited for General Waldron you must be."

Stanwell grins and nods. "He deserves this, Charmaine. Especially when one considers what he's done for this country—and the rest of the world, for that matter." He retrieves a document from his briefcase and passes it across the table. "Now, here's the job proposal. It's very succinct and without legal jargon, and if you have any questions, please feel free to ask. But, I will need an answer by the end of the week."

"I won't need till the end of the week," Charmaine says as she pretends to peruse the offer.

Stanwell rubs his chin. "Do you mean that in a good way, or—"

"I'm in, and I'm honored."

"Wonderful," Stanwell crows. "And on that note, I say it's time we order."

"Sounds good to me," Charmaine replies, feigning joy. She uneasily observes the man before her—a man she once highly admired.

Chapter 18

Sundale County, Nine Weeks Ago

When Siro and Ruby Felder arrive at the hangar housing the Ovo-Tech jet and exit their limo, they notice a black SUV on scene with a fair-haired man and an auburn-haired woman standing in front of the vehicle.

The man approaches Siro. He's tall, broad-shouldered, and casually dressed. He wears a serious expression. "Mr. Felder," he says.

"Yes. I'm Siro Felder."

"I need to speak with you, sir," the man replies, his tone urgent.

"About what?" Siro asks. "Who are you?"

"My name's Brad Sutton."

"Am I supposed to know who you are?" Siro asks.

"I'm a former member of the US special ops group known as the Gold Hawks. The same group your son currently serves with," Brad says.

"Go ahead. I'm listening," Siro replies. Ruby looks on, curious.

"I'm here to warn you and the rest of your group that it's very likely your lives are in jeopardy," Brad tells him.

"How so?" Siro inquires, frowning.

"Dr. Oxford Olsen," Brad replies. "My sister, over there" —he points to the woman— "was his admin assistant while he worked at the JK Preston military base, which has now become Sanctuary Park. We, along with a couple of other former Gold Hawks, have been monitoring Olsen for the last few months. We have every reason to believe he's been concealing a very serious secret for the last four and

a half years.” He then relates suspicions surrounding Miguel Perez’s death and Sterling Rowe’s sudden exit from the JK Preston base.

Siro studies the man before him. “Why not contact the authorities?” he asks.

“Because we also believe Olsen’s a small pawn in a very large game. A very dangerous game,” Brad replies. “It’s highly likely he has overseers who are also involved.”

“And how were you able to link us to him?” Ruby asks.

“We’ve been secretly monitoring him and listening in on his phone conversations,” Brad explains. “We heard him speak with an unidentified source after your recent visit. Both parties agreed your entire group poses a serious threat to their well-being.”

“Do you have any specifics?” Ruby asks.

“There’s no doubt it has to do with what you told Olsen about the child. Why and how it all blends together is what we desperately need to find out,” Brad replies. “Our plan is to eliminate your entire group from their troubled minds by having them believe you’ve all been killed in a plane crash. Meanwhile, you’ll be securely tucked away at a safe house just outside Sundale.”

“Whoa...this is insane,” Siro protests, holding up his hands. “Why should we believe any of this? How do we know there’s even a speck of truth to what you’re saying?”

“What reason would I have to lie? And why would we take such extreme measures?” Brad shoots back.

Siro sighs before turning toward his wife. “What do you think, Ruby?”

Ruby takes a moment to gather her thoughts. “I believe what he’s telling us, after my meeting with Olsen left me feeling so troubled.”

Siro stares at her for a moment, then turns to Brad. “Very well. We’ll take you for your word,” he says, and looks past Brad. “Now that the others have arrived, I’d better fill them in.”

Twenty minutes later, with Brad and Amber Sutton leading the way, Siro, Ruby, and the others arrive at the large property where the safe house is located.

“Who owns this place?” Siro asks Brad.

“Amber and I,” Brad replies. “It was one of our farms, back in the day. Our father operated a very successful farming business up until his death three years ago.”

“There’s plenty of room for everybody,” Amber says, guiding the group through the large home. “And please know, all your amenities will be taken care of for as long as you’re here.”

“Hey boys, why don’t you take Ocean and Noah and help them get settled into their room,” Clay says to his sons, surreptitiously looking around in confusion.

Holden and Tully nod in unison. “Sure thing,” Holden says as the children dash off.

“Now, will somebody please tell me, my wife, and my sister what the hell is going on here, exactly? We’d appreciate some details,” Clay says, looking back and forth between Brad and his sister.

Brad explains in detail.

“I don’t understand...what makes you think this Sterling Rowe character just didn’t run off of his own free will?” Clay asks.

“A few months ago, he wrote to me,” Amber interjects. “He explained how much he regretted leaving me behind like he did, and that he’d been thinking of me a lot. He also told me that his superiors, including Dr. Olsen, were concealing the truth about something very troubling. He claimed they went as far as planting devil-glass in his room back at the base.” She pauses and clears her throat. “He said he couldn’t provide me with more details because it would be much too dangerous...too dangerous for everyone who learned the truth.”

“And this prompted us to begin investigating the matter on our own,” Brad adds.

“Wait a second,” Clay says. “How can you be certain the guy’s being truthful, considering his past?”

“I loved Sterling, and I have no reason to doubt him,” Amber insists.

“And being a member of the same close-knit special ops team as Sterling, I fully concur with my sister,” Brad adds.

“And this staged plane crash. What about our bodies, or lack thereof?” Clay asks. “How do you plan to deal with that?”

“You need not worry,” Amber once again interjects, her tone matter-of-fact. “My brother and his associates know how to make things happen that never actually did.”

“My goodness,” Ruby says, eyes wide with concern. “What about our loved ones? Doing such a thing would be cruel to them.”

“We realize that,” Brad replies. “But in the end, this is about saving your lives and solving this perplexing puzzle of deception. Your son’s life could very well be at stake as well. This is in everyone’s best interest, except for Olsen and whoever else wants you all out of the picture.”

Clays scowls at that. “Why pretend we’re dead? Why can’t we just remain here in hiding until you and your associates find a way to deal with Olsen and whoever the hell he’s involved with?”

“Because, like I said, we have no idea how deep this madness runs,” Brad counters. “Olsen is only a bit player. This is what needs to be done to uncover the entire truth and ensure your personal safety.”

* * *

When Julie returns to her suite, she finds Noah half asleep on the sofa.

“Hey, Noah. Why aren’t you with the others in the game room?”

“I didn’t feel like it,” he mutters.

“You’re disappointed we couldn’t go to Sanctuary Park, aren’t you?”

“Nah,” Noah replies, sitting up. “I knew we wouldn’t be able to go anyway.”

“You knew?”

“Yeah, I know the man with the big beard wants us out of the picture.”

“What man?” Julie says. “And why does he want us out of the picture?”

Noah’s eyes blink rapidly. “I think I’ll go join the others now.”

“Of course, but I need you to tell me, Noah. Why does the man with the beard want us out of the picture?”

“I don’t know,” Noah says matter-of-factly. “I just know he wants it.”

Julie watches Noah leave, then decides to pay a visit to the Felders. A short walk down the hall brings her to the door of their suite, and she knocks gently.

“Come on in,” Ruby calls out.

“I’m sorry for intruding,” Julie says as she enters, unable to keep the anxiety out of her voice.

“Are you okay, Julie?” Ruby asks. “I was just about to meet up with Siro in the dining room for a bite to eat. Why don’t you join us?”

“No, thank you. But I would like to ask you a question.”

“Sure.”

“Does Olsen have a hefty beard?”

“He most certainly does. Why do you ask?”

Julie describes her conversation with Noah. “And when I asked him why Olsen wanted us out of the picture, he couldn’t, or wouldn’t, elaborate.”

Chapter 19

Waldron Campaign Headquarters, Washington, DC

“And it’s the incredible people I’ve had the honor and pleasure to work with over the years that have made my time in the military and serving as both the director of the CIA and National Intelligence Agency such an incredible experience,” Waldron concludes. Supporters at the rally cheer his every word.

After the crowd has dispersed, the general meets with his campaign security team inside a conference room. “I want to thank you all, and let you know how much I appreciate your commitment to ensuring we enjoy a safe and prosperous campaign.” Minutes later, his personal security detail escorts him away.

With that, Lieutenant Stanwell takes Waldron’s place in front of the group, which includes former DC police officers and those who specialize in cyber security. “I want to echo the general’s words. I also want to welcome former US Special Ops Agent Charmaine Newport to the team. Charmaine will be serving as our team’s director. You will report to her, and she will report to me. We must be highly vigilant. General Waldron’s past takedown of the Euro Freedom Alliance has made him several enemies over the years, and you can guarantee those enemies will attempt to do whatever it takes to interfere and cause trouble for him throughout the election campaign. Meanwhile his opponent continues to claim the EFA’s just a figment of our collective imaginations.”

Once Stanwell dismisses the team, he asks Charmaine to join in him in his office.

“There are a few more aspects of the operation I’d like to go over in detail,” he says. “Have a seat, and I’ll have Kayla brew us up some coffee.”

“That’d be great,” Charmaine replies as he leaves the room. *This is my chance*, she thinks, eyeing Stanwell’s cell, lying atop his desk.

With one eye on the office doorway, she exhales and reaches into her handbag for her own cell. Within seconds, she’s put her advanced high-tech Gold Hawk training into play. She swipes and taps the screen of both cell phones.

Stanwell reappears in the office doorway. “Do you still take your coffee with one cream and one sugar?” he asks.

“Always have, and probably always will,” Charmaine quips.

Stanwell turns away and calls out instructions to his secretary before entering the office and returning to his desk. “Man, oh man. Do I ever need that coffee.” He rubs tired eyes.

The sound of free form jazz shoots out of Charmaine’s cell, signaling an incoming text. She looks at the phone and then Stanwell. “I can get that later,” she says.

“No. Please. Go ahead. You never know. It could be important.”

Charmaine removes the phone from the edge of the desk and reads the text. “My lord... this is awful,” she gasps, assuming an expression of grief.

“What’s wrong, Charmaine?”

“This text...it’s telling me Sterling Rowe is dead. It says he died of an overdose.” Charmaine looks up.

“Sterling Rowe,” Stanwell says, widening his eyes. “I haven’t heard that name in a few years.”

“An acquaintance of mine is a support worker at the hospital where he passed away in New York City. She contacted me because she learned Sterling was a fellow Gold Hawk.”

“That’s too bad,” Stanwell mumbles.

“If I recall correctly, didn’t he mysteriously disappear from the JK Preston base a few years ago?” Charmaine asks.

“Sterling was a very troubled young man,” Stanwell replies.

Charmaine sighs. “Unlike Atlas, who had it all so together.”

Stanwell nods and smiles. It seems forced. “Atlas...such a fine young man...such a tragedy. Fate can be such a wretched monster.”

“It just goes to show, one person’s monster can sometimes transform into another’s angel. If that bomb went off only a few minutes earlier, I would’ve been...” Charmaine lets her voice fade.

“Well, let’s count our lucky stars it didn’t.”

Charmaine sighs and taps on the desk. “There’s something very important I need to tell you.”

“Sure. What is it?”

“Atlas’s uncle, a man named Dave Eisen, reached out to me the other day.”

“Yes. I’m aware of who he is. I personally paid a visit to his home to give him the awful news about Atlas. What made him reach out to you?” Stanwell asks.

“He invited me to participate in an interview he’s doing with the National Record. It’s about the Am-Dro building explosion,” Charmaine says.

“In regard to what in particular?”

“He believes Atlas was unnecessarily put into harm’s way by being sent into the building before the planned raid.”

“Is that so?” Stanwell says, scowling. “Did you agree to the interview?”

“I told him I needed to speak with you before even thinking about it.”

The lieutenant exhales. “That was very wise of you. I guess this shouldn’t surprise me. He’s a former DC detective and his wife’s a big-time attorney. Obviously, they’re fishing for something that isn’t there.”

“He said something about the FBI telling him the Sokols wanted personal revenge against Atlas and his father for something more than the twelve million dollars his father pledged to the EU. Do you know if that’s the real reason Jozef Sokol targeted the Ovo-Tech plane?”

Stanwell's face is flushed. He runs a hand across it. "More than likely... Did Eisen tell you what that something is?"

Charmaine shakes her head. "No, he didn't. And when I asked, he said it was something he wasn't at liberty to discuss," she says.

"Well, this is America. There's always bullshit stories to be told as long as there's people willing to accept them. It would be unethical and compromising for us to participate in any such interviews," Stanwell says firmly, rising to his feet. "And now that we've become so sidetracked, how about we pick things up again tomorrow morning?" Despite his light tone, he looks concerned.

When Charmaine exits the building and enters the parking lot, a silver sedan pulls up beside her. Atlas and his uncle Dave are in the front seat. She opens the passenger side back door and climbs in. "It's done. His phone is ours and I fed him the info as planned," she announces.

"And therefore, he should be calling you anytime now," Atlas says wryly, looking across at his uncle.

"Did he react as expected?" Dave asks, looking back at Charmaine from the driver's seat.

"He sure did. By the time we were done, his face was an entirely different shade of white," Charmaine replies, then elaborates.

"Here we go. Right on cue," Atlas says, as a dial tone comes across their respective phones. Dave answers as Atlas and Charmaine listen in.

"Hello," Dave says.

"Mr. Eisen. This is Lieutenant Van Stanwell."

"Lieutenant. What can I do for you?" Dave asks.

"I just had a very interesting conversation with one of my former Gold Hawks, Charmaine Newport."

"Ah, yes, a fine young woman. Did she tell you I've asked her to participate in a National Record interview I'm taking part in? It's about the Am-Dro building explosion and how it appears my nephew was led into his death."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Stanwell rages. "And why would you want to tarnish the memory of your nephew's bravery?"

“I know about Maria Sokol,” Dave shoots back. “And I know you sent Atlas into that hellhole knowing very well Lubor Sokol would kill him if he had the opportunity. And that’s exactly what he did!”

“I sent your nephew into that building because he was the best damn agent for the job. It’s that plain and simple,” Stanwell retorts. “Besides, you have no proof Lubor, or anyone in that building, knew Atlas’s true identity.”

“Well, I suppose your superiors and the American public can decide that for themselves,” Dave says. “And if you’re so steadfast in believing what you did was the correct thing, why don’t you join in on the interview and tell your side of the story?”

“Do you realize what you’re doing?” Stanwell growls. “Your nephew was a member of the most prestigious special ops unit in the country. He wanted this fight more than you could possibly know—and yes, regrettably, he died in the process. But he died a hero. And now you’re about to take that from him.”

“Well, if you or Charmaine have a change of heart, you both know how to reach me.” With that, Dave ends the call.

Within seconds, the group picks up Stanwell’s next call. “He’s contacting, Olsen,” Atlas says, and they listen in.

“What’s going on, Lieutenant?” Olsen asks.

“I’m calling to give you a heads-up, Doctor,” Stanwell replies.

“A heads-up? About what?” Worry edges Olsen’s voice.

Stanwell tells him about Dave’s upcoming interview with the National Record.

“How on earth did this Eisen fellow learn about Maria Sokol?”

“It had to have been Gregson. Eisen assisted the FBI with the Larson mission back when Eisen was with DCPD,” Stanwell says.

“And what if he connects the dots to Miguel Perez and Sterling Rowe?” Olsen’s worry quickly morphs into panic.

“That’s why it’s vital you keep your mouth shut if anybody comes sniffing around about anything to do with that military base,” Stanwell orders.

When Olsen replies, his tone is contemplative, his voice breaking. “So often, for the last four years, I’ve thought about Sterling. That

young man came so far and we crushed him.” A pause. “I just hope somewhere, somehow, he was able to regroup and find some peace of mind.”

“Knowing how capable and resourceful he is, I’d say it’s a rather safe bet he’s living a very comfortable and happy life.”

“My Lord,” Atlas gasps. “Stanwell’s concealing Sterling’s death. For what reason?”

“And who the heck’s Miguel Perez?” Dave asks, looking across at Atlas.

“Wasn’t he the former Gold Hawk who died in a tragic accident at the base?” Atlas asks, looking at Charmaine.

“Sure is,” Charmaine replies. “God only knows how his story fits into all this.”

Chapter 20

National Record Broadcasting Center, Washington, DC

“Good evening. This is Natalie Lawrence. You’re watching the Evening Record,” the veteran journalist says. “Tonight’s show will feature an exclusive interview with former DCPD detective David Eisen.”

“I’m elated to be here,” Dave says. “And I want to thank the National Record for granting me this opportunity to speak on a matter that is so important and close to my heart.”

“We’re thrilled to have you, Mr. Eisen,” Natalie replies. “Let’s begin by having you tell us why you’re here.”

“My nephew, Atlas Felder, was the special ops agent who was killed in the Am-Dro building explosion. Though I’m certain the US military will not appreciate my making this public, I’ve been left with no choice.”

“And why’s that?”

“It needs to be made clear. Atlas’s superiors sent him into that building and to his death knowing very well he was a specific target of the Euro Freedom Alliance.” Dave explains in detail.

“I can’t imagine how difficult losing both your sister and nephew in such a short period must be for you,” Natalie says.

“There are simply no words to express my anguish,” Dave says, swallowing hard.

“Are you contemplating legal action against the US military?”

“At this point in time, I simply want answers,” Dave states. “I realize nothing I do can change what’s already been done, but this

needs to be addressed in honor of those who, like my nephew, take such pride and display such bravery in serving their country. They deserve far better.”

“Understood. Now, I need to make it clear that we here at the National Record have reached out to the US military and have been provided with a joint statement from the military and the White House in response to this matter,” Natalie explains. “The statement reads: Our deepest condolences continue to go out to all parties negatively impacted by this tragic event. The matter remains under full investigation.”

* * *

As the interview continues, Lieutenant Stanwell and General Waldron watch with grave concern from Waldron’s campaign headquarters. “I can’t believe this is happening. The entire thing is backfiring on us,” Stanwell barks, pounding the table in front of him. “The whole Maria Sokol thing was supposed to be kept under wraps and Gregson went and opened up his big fucking mouth.”

“We knew this could happen, and now it’s vital you steer things in the right direction, Van,” Waldron insists, glowering at the screen. “You have to appear remorseful, but vehemently stand by your decision and defend it on all fronts.”

An incoming text message on Stanwell’s phone interrupts the conversation. He regards the message. “Well, it looks like I’ll have my chance to do just that. The attorney general is calling on me to meet with her tomorrow morning.”

Safe House

Ruby gapes at the National Record broadcast on the TV screen. “This can’t be happening,” she gasps. “My son,” she whimpers.

“Be proud of him, Ruby,” Siro says, holding her tightly in his arms.

“I am, more than anybody can imagine—but this can’t go on,” she declares. “I need to speak with my brother.”

Seconds later, Brad joins them in the common room. “I’m so sorry, folks,” he says in a sympathetic tone.

“My brother needs to know we’re alive,” Ruby says, swiping at her tears with the back of her hand. “This has gone on way too long.”

Siro nods. “I agree. I know for certain we can trust in David’s full discretion. In fact, he could be of great help.”

Brad thinks for a beat and sharply exhales. “Okay. I’ll reach out to him and arrange to fly him out here under the premise that I have some valuable info for him. But I don’t think it’s wise to reveal you’re alive until he arrives and sees it for himself.”

“Very well,” Siro says.

Ruby nods.

“By the way, what can you tell me about Jozef Sokol?” Brad asks.

“It’s so difficult to believe he’d be involved in any of this. He did a wonderful job at Ovo-Tech,” Siro says. “I fully trusted him. There’s no doubt in my mind, they used him, Brad—used him as a scapegoat.”

“Which means they more than likely killed him as well,” Brad replies with a sigh.

The following day, Dave Eisen arrives at the safe house escorted by Amber. “Mr. Eisen. Thank you so much for agreeing to do this,” Brad says, studying the former detective. “I hope the flight on my colleague’s plane was comfortable.”

“Yes, happily, there were no issues,” Dave replies. “Now, will somebody please tell me why I’m here? I only agreed to do this knowing you’re a former Gold Hawk,” he adds, looking Brad in the eyes.

“There’s a couple of people inside I’m certain you’ll be very happy to see,” Brad says, pointing toward the large house.

“I-I don’t understand,” Dave stammers. “I thought you brought me here because you had info on my sister and the others who died in the plane crash.”

“We do,” Amber replies.

Dave regards her with a furrowed brow.

“Shall we?” Brad guides him into the house. As they enter the hallway leading to the common room, Brad and Amber hang back.

Dave enters and looks around. As he looks to his left, Dave’s eyes open wide and his body begins to tremble. “Oh my—how can this be?” he cries out in joy.

“David!” Ruby huffs and runs over to fall into his arms.

“My Lord, this is incredible.” Dave is crying. “How? What—?”

“The plane crash was staged, David,” Siro informs him as he walks up.

“Brad and Amber approached us and told us our lives could be in danger. Brad and his associates have been secretly investigating one of my former teachers,” Ruby adds.

“Dr. Oxford Olsen,” Dave blurts.

Siro’s eyes widen. “Whoa. How do you know?” He looks over at Brad, still standing in the doorway. “I thought you weren’t going to tell him what happened until he got here.”

“I haven’t told him anything,” Brad says, entering the room with Amber behind him.

“He didn’t have to,” Dave interjects. “Atlas figured it out shortly after you were both pronounced dead.”

“Atlas,” Ruby says softly. “I’m so proud of what you’re doing in his memory. Someone needs to be—”

“He’s alive,” Dave says.

“Whoa. Did I just hear you correctly?” Siro gasps.

“You sure did,” Dave replies, grinning.

“But how?” Ruby says. “That building was burned to ash. And we all heard you on the National Record.”

“I think you all better have a seat,” Dave says. “What I’m about to tell you is going to shock you.”

Dave explains in detail, concluding with the death of Sterling Rowe.

“Oh no, not Sterling,” Amber moans, then explains her past relationship with the former Gold Hawk and how his story fit in with their decision to monitor Olsen.

“It appears he began using again only a couple days before he died. He found his way back to the Friends of the Future, and that was

it,” Dave tells her. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have a few questions of my own,” he says, taking them all in with his eyes. “Like for starters, this fake plane crash. How did you pull that off?”

Brad answers wryly, “Through the extensive training provided by the very people who, it now appears, created this madness.” He explains the operation in detail.

“Remarkable,” Dave says when he’s done. “I think it’s time we bring our two factions together to get this entire mess figured out.”

Brad nods. “I agree.”

“Tell me about Miguel Perez,” Dave says.

Brad explains the circumstances surrounding the reported fatal accident and his own doubts the Gold Hawk died in such a manner. “One of my associates was able to hack into the JK Preston records in hopes of retrieving a report on Miguel’s death, including the autopsy report. What we found was very interesting. Neither report existed.”

* * *

When Dave contacts Atlas from the safe house and informs him his parents are alive, Atlas is by turns overcome with joy and anger. “How could they have done such a thing to me?” he eventually groans.

Dave relates all he’s learned.

“Brad Sutton...he’d left the Gold Hawks before I joined, but from what I always heard, he was as good as there’s ever been,” Atlas says. “So, where do we take this from here?”

“Brad’s arranging to have you brought down here to the safe house. He’ll be sending you the details,” Dave replies. “We’ve agreed to join forces and make this place a command post.”

“Sounds like a solid plan.”

Department of Justice Headquarters, Washington, DC

“Come on in and have a seat, Lieutenant,” US Attorney General Lea Salazar says to Stanwell after he’s escorted into her office. He drops

into the chair across from her desk. "As I'm certain I don't have to tell you, we have a major problem on our hands."

"Oh, I'm well aware, ma'am, and though I'm heartbroken over what happened to Agent Felder, I still don't regret the decision I made," Stanwell ardently replies.

Salazar purses her lips. "How could you have let him enter that building, knowing what you knew?"

"With all respect, ma'am, he was the best person for the job. Even you and Director Gregson enabled him to be part of the FBI investigation."

"Whoa, whoa," Salazar exclaims. "At that time, we had no idea he'd shot and killed Lubor Sokol's sister, making him a prime target for the EFA."

"There's no proof they knew who he was. He entered that building completely incognito, posing as someone looking to purchase devil-glass."

The attorney general sighs. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant Stanwell, but this matter will need to be thoroughly reviewed, and I sincerely hope you'll cooperate."

Stanwell sighs and shakes his head. "I don't see what there is to investigate."

"I suppose that'll be determined," Salazar replies.

Chapter 21

Morton Lecture Hall, Norfolk, Virginia

“In the end, our life’s destiny is a product of a series of decisions mixed with a little bit of fate,” Dr. Oxford Olsen says with a chuckle as he concludes his seminar on the human condition. The audience claps enthusiastically as Olsen exits the stage.

A young woman takes his place. “Wow. Let’s hear it for, Dr. Oxford Olsen,” she crows to the audience. “Now, for those of you who are wishing to purchase and have the doctor sign a copy of his most recent book, *We’re All right—The World’s Crazy*, please line up on the left side of the auditorium.”

Amber Sutton rises and joins what appears to be half the audience in the lineup. Olsen sits at a table beside the stage, pen in hand. Several minutes later, Amber’s face to face with her former boss. “My goodness. Major Sutton—what a pleasant surprise,” he exclaims, proceeding to sign her book. “How’s life treating you?”

“Very well, thanks,” Amber replies, forcing a smile. “When you’re done with all these folks, is there a chance I can speak with you?”

“By all means,” Olsen replies. “Go see my assistant, Brianna,” he adds, pointing to the young woman leaving the stage.

“Thank you for your patience, Amber,” Olsen says when he later greets her backstage.

“Well now, it’s impressive to see how many adoring fans you have.”

“Argh,” Olsen groans with a shrug. “To this day it surprises me how people still want to listen to an old, highly pretentious curmudgeon like me.”

“Well, obviously they do.” Amber chuckles.

“So, what have you been up to since the days you served as my assistant at the base?”

“I’m proud to tell you I’ve become involved in social work, here in the heart of Norfolk.”

“That’s outstanding, young lady,” Olsen replies.

“Yeah, I’ve enjoyed it, but I’ve decided to move forward and study psychology. I was hoping you would guide me down the right path with regards to schools and courses.”

“Sure. I’ll help as best I can.” Olsen beams.

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“How about I put some suggestions together and send them off to you? Just leave your contact info with Brianna on the way out.”

“Excellent,” Amber replies. “I must tell you, working alongside you back at the base was such an inspiring experience, especially the way you assisted Sterling Rowe in finding his way out of his problems.”

Olsen’s eyes widen. “Yes, but sadly, darkness found its way back into his soul. If I recall correctly, weren’t the two of you a couple, back in the day?”

“We were,” Amber says with a sigh.

“I sincerely hope the young man has found his way again. Have you seen him since he went AWOL all those years ago?” Olsen asks with a raised brow.

“No, but he did reach out to me,” Amber replies. “He sent me a letter a short while back.”

Fear flashes across Olsen’s face. He quickly recovers. “So, what did he have to say?”

“Not a heck of a lot. He just wanted to let me know he’d been thinking about me and hoped I was doing well,” Amber lies.

“Denial. Such a shame.” Olsen frowns and shakes his head. “It’s what makes an addict what they are.”

“Is...is that what happened four years ago? Did he relapse? If so, he sure did a wonderful job of hiding it from me,” Amber says.

“Deception is another one of the addict’s most important tools,” Olsen says, shaking his head.

“Well, I guess you should know, Sterling’s dead. He overdosed on devil-glass.”

Olsen’s face flushes and his breathing grows heavy. “Oh no. That is so tragic. Underneath all his troubles was a fine young man.” He tugs at his beard.

“I’m sorry to be the messenger, Doctor,” Amber says solemnly. “It was wonderful seeing you again, and I look forward to hearing back from you,” she says by way of farewell, and leaves.

* * *

Olsen blinks rapidly as he watches Amber leave. Then he quickly reaches for his cell.

“It’s urgent we speak, Van,” he says when Stanwell answers. His voice is edged with panic.

“What is it, Oxford?” Stanwell says.

“It has to do with Sterling Rowe,” Olsen replies and relates what he’s just learned. “Were you aware he died?” Olsen barks.

“Yes,” Stanwell replies without hesitation. “I found out through Charmaine Newport not long before we last spoke,” he adds matter-of-factly.

“The former Gold Hawk?”

“That’s her.”

“And how the hell did she know?”

Stanwell relates what Charmaine had told him.

“And for the love of Jesus, why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“Because you need not worry about such things, Oxford.”

“Did you have anything to do with his death?”

“I sure as hell didn’t force him to overdose on devil-glass, if that’s what you’re asking. For God’s sake, I didn’t even have any idea where he’d been for the last four years, nor did I care.”

“Well, forgive me for having a conscience,” Olsen counters in a broken voice. “Sterling was an outstanding young man. He fought his demons so valiantly, and then we hung him out to dry, all for our own self-serving reasons.”

“You need to pull yourself together!” Stanwell growls.

“Damn this entire thing!” Olsen retorts, ending the call.

When Dr. Olsen takes the stage for his evening lecture, his eyes look sunken and he seems jittery, his delivery rambling. “I’m supposed to be the man with all the answers,” he quips to his audience in a self-deprecating tone. “After all, I’ve earned several degrees from all the best schools, written several books on the human condition, consulted for some of the largest corporations in America, including the United States military, for a number of years.” He pauses and drops his head, taking a couple of sluggish strides toward the right side of the stage. Again he looks at his audience. “Yeah, I’m supposed to have all the answers for what makes people do the things they do. This is why you all came here, correct? Well, the truth is, I don’t even have the slightest idea why *I* do the things I do.” Laughter ripples from the audience, but the doctor scowls into space. “Oh, you can laugh all you want, but it’s so very true. You’ve paid your hard-earned money to listen to a fool. A man who will go down in infamy.” The laughter suddenly dies to an eerie silence. Olsen sighs and shakes his head. Faces in the crowd display shock and concern. “What makes us do what we do? Is it money, love, power, fear? Or is it an attempt to escape reality? A reality we create through decisions we make on a collision course with fate.” He shrugs his shoulders in defeat. “Well, it all began for me here in Norfolk, so I’d say it’s very fitting for it all to end here.”

Dr. Oxford Olsen reaches behind his back and retrieves a gun from the waistband of his pants. The audience looks on in horror as he places the gun to his temple and pulls the trigger.

Safe House

Euphoria fills the air in the main living room as Atlas reunites with his parents. “Wow, there’s simply no words to describe this!” he crows, but their eyes are all bright with tears of joy.

“Isn’t it crazy that all three of us died and found a way to come back to life,” Siro quips.

“And what’s even crazier is that we have to still keep it from the world,” Ruby adds.

“When I decided to become a Gold Hawk, I knew very well this kind of thing could happen to me, but for the both of you and the others caught up in this mess, this is completely insane and so unfair,” Atlas says. “Brad and Uncle Dave filled me in on all the details, and I’m still having difficulty understanding how this all happened.”

“That young boy,” Ruby says. “This power he acquired is amazing.”

“Then why can’t he use it to tell us how to get the hell out of this confusion, and what the future holds for all of us?” Atlas asks with a raised brow.

Ruby smiles. “Every day since we’ve been here I’ve spoken with him, attempting to have him do just that, but to no avail. It’s like his mind has been completely put on pause. Maybe it has.”

“Too bad. We could all use his insight right now,” Atlas says with a mild chuckle.

“When we first met Brad and Amber we asked them if they were aware of any strange otherworldly happenings taking place at that base back in the day, and they weren’t,” Siro says. “Are you aware of anything?”

“No, but you can bet if there were, it would’ve been swept under the carpet,” Atlas replies.

Without warning, Brad appears at the room’s entrance. “I’m sorry for interrupting, folks,” he says in a grave voice, “but I’ve just received some stunning news from Amber.”

“What is it?” Siro asks.

“Olsen took his own life in the middle of one of his lectures. Shot himself in the head.”

“Right on stage?” Ruby gasps.

“Yes. In front of the entire audience,” Brad replies, wincing.

“The guilt of learning about Sterling’s death must’ve been the final straw,” Siro surmises, reminding them all of the cell phone call Olsen had made to Stanwell that they’d eavesdropped on earlier, thanks to Charmaine’s hack.

“This is all getting so out of hand,” Ruby says, frowning.

“Looks to me like they’re beginning to break,” Atlas says.

“Did you send the Am-Dro building photos to Kim Waldron?”
Dave asks.

“Done,” Atlas replies.

Chapter 22

FBI Headquarters, Washington, DC

“Good morning, Director Gregson,” Kim Waldron says to her boss upon entering his office. She places an envelope on his desk. “I think it’s urgent you see these, sir. They appear to be photos taken inside the Am-Dro building just prior to the explosion.”

Gregson removes the photos and studies them. He looks up at her, wide-eyed. “Where did you get these?”

“They came to me anonymously.”

“Have you had our people check them out?”

“I didn’t think it’d be a good idea to show them to anybody until I spoke with you,” Kim says.

“Good move.” Gregson’s eyes have returned to the photos. “Hmm...a personalized crate of wine from Franklin Varley to the EFA with a camouflaged bombing device inside,” he ponders aloud.

“For such a success story, so little seems to be known about Varley,” Kim notes.

“Yes, he is quite the man of mystery,” Gregson says. “Being a former Gold Hawk, what do you make of the bomb?” he asks.

“Explosive devices were never my specialty as a Gold Hawk,” Kim replies. “However, there’s no doubt this device was made by someone who knew what they were doing. The proof’s in the outcome. By the way,” she adds, “I’ve been meaning to ask you your thoughts about what’s happening regarding Lieutenant Stanwell.”

Gregson appears to gather his thoughts. “In hindsight, Atlas should never have been part of any of these investigations, and I’m to blame for getting the ball rolling,” he replies.

“If I recall correctly, you went through the proper channels by going to AG Salazar, and she agreed it’d be okay.”

Gregson frowns. “Damn...why would Stanwell do such a thing, knowing Atlas was the person who’d killed Maria Sokol?”

“What do you make of the theory going around this building?” Kim asks.

“You’ll need to enlighten me,” Gregson replies with raised brows.

“The theory that Atlas is alive. That he somehow knew about the bomb and exited the building before it went off.”

“I thought there were eyes on the entire site.”

“There were, with the exception of one blind spot. An area Atlas and the other Gold Hawks would’ve been well aware of.”

“But why? I mean, if he’s alive, why would he be in hiding?”

“Fear for his life, among other reasons.”

Gregson thinks for a beat. “What if? What if he not only knew about the bomb, but was the person who brought it into the building?”

“Personal revenge against the EFA?”

“Exactly. Revenge against those who killed his parents,” Gregson replies. Appearing flustered, the FBI director rubs his face and sighs. “Let’s get the photos analyzed and proceed from there.”

Safe House

Wearing a glum expression, Clay pours himself a coffee and joins Brad at the kitchen table.

“Is everything okay, Clay?” Brad asks.

Clay sighs. “I need to know how long this is going to continue. Although we’ve all been very comfortable here so far, I honestly don’t know how much more my family can take,” he replies. “My wife and I are everyday people who operate everyday businesses. And our teenage boys, they need to get their lives back. Not to mention my sister and her kids... Especially Noah—what’s going to become of him? Then there’s our next of kin, who to this day believe we’re dead.”

Brad nods. "I fully understand your frustration, but if we're going to get to the bottom of this lunacy while keeping you safe, we're all going to need to stick with the plan. I believe we're close, I really do, Clay."

"And when this mess is finally solved are we all expected to just come back from the dead and go about our lives like nothing happened? We're not in the same favorable position as the Felders. Frankly, the mental and financial ramifications of all this are scaring the daylight out of me, my wife, and Julie."

"You'll have nothing to worry about. I give you my solemn word on that," a voice says from the kitchen entrance. Brad and Clay turn to see Siro Felder. "I'm sorry for overhearing your conversation," Siro says, pouring himself a cup of coffee. He turns to Clay. "We're all in this together, and Ruby and I will do what it takes to best ensure you're all looked after both mentally and financially. But I'm afraid I agree with Brad; we're going have to fully solve this puzzle before we can properly and comfortably move forward with our lives."

Clay exhales and nods. "Thank you, Siro. Knowing that you're in our corner brings much needed relief, but I still can't help but be concerned about my nephew. He just seems so despondent lately. From the day his father died, I've done my best to help nurture him, but how are my sister and I supposed to deal with this living nightmare?"

"As you're well aware, Ruby's been closely observing Noah and counseling him since we arrived. We care about him," Siro replies.

"But he's been completely out of it," Clay replies.

"Ruby senses Noah's come to realize he's at the root of this entire craziness," Siro says. "She believes he's been overcome by a sense of guilt. I realize it's not easy, but we simply need to give him more time. And then there's the question of whether or not he even still possesses that sixth sense."

Varley Casino, New York City

"Hey, good looking. I'm Crystal. Can I get you a little something from the bar? Maybe, just maybe, it'll change your luck, hon," a scantily clad hostess says to Brad as he sits pretending to be flustered in front of one of the casino's slot machines.

“Sure. If you say so, I’m more than willing to give it a shot,” he replies with a grin and a wink.

“How does vodka and ginger ale sound?” the hostess asks.

“Heavenly,” Brad replies.

When Crystal returns with the beverage, Brad slips a twenty dollar bill into her tip jar.

“Thank you, sweetie.” She beams.

“You’re very welcome. Oh, by the way, I’m looking for Snowy. Is he around this evening?”

“He sure is. You can’t miss him, unless you’re in the middle of a blizzard,” Crystal quips. “In fact, I just saw him heading out back for a smoke. I’d be glad to go fetch him in for you.”

“No, no. I’ll catch up with him once I’m done downing this drink and winning the jackpot,” Brad says with a chuckle.

“Well, don’t forget me when you do. Now, you just give me a holler if I can be of any further assistance.”

“Will do.”

Twenty minutes later, Brad enters the bar area and notices a man with white hair sitting in an isolated back corner booth. He’s nursing a glass of whiskey and smoking a cigarette. Slipping a tiny listening bug into his clenched fist as he approaches the table, Brad asks, “Are you Snowy?”

“Depends on who wants to know,” the drug dealer scoffs, blowing smoke.

“I’m Jay. A buddy of mine named Sterling told me you have the best glass this side of the planet, and I’m here for a score, bro,” Brad replies. He slips the bug under the table.

“Sterling? Doesn’t ring a bell, partner. No idea who or what the hell you’re talking about,” Snowy replies, staring into his glass.

“The Friends of the Future,” Brad replies.

“Like I said. I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Sterling Rowe sent me. Please, man. I need you to fix me up.”

“Get the fuck out of my face, bud,” Snowy barks, his voice rising.

“Whoa, okay.” Brad backs up in retreat. “Have yourself a great evening.”

“Get lost, and don’t let me see you around here again, or I’ll have my large friend at the door break you in two. Do you understand?”

Shaking his head and waving a dismissive hand in feigned frustration, Brad walks away from the table. He exits the building, enters his vehicle, and turns on the receiver to the bug. *Come on, come on. Give us what we need*, he says to himself.

Within seconds, Brad is listening in as Snowy calls Crystal to his table.

“Hey, Snowman,” she says.

“Have a seat, honey,” he says with a heavy sigh.

“What’s going on?” she asks, sounding anxious.

Snowy takes a drink and slams the glass back down on the table. He rubs his bloodshot eyes. “We need to get out of here.”

“Why? Did something happen with that guy you were just speaking with?”

Snowy purses his lips and nods. “There’s no doubt in my mind he’s a cop. He mentioned that Sterling Rowe guy who recently overdosed at the Friends of the Future rally.”

“Right. The guy Varley and Dax ordered you to give the free vial of devil-glass to,” Crystal replies.

“Spiked devil-glass. They wanted him dead, Crystal,” Snowy says.

“Do you know why?”

“Varley’s son, Zach, died in a drug deal gone bad. A drug deal that involved Sterling. Varley’s been seeking revenge for the last four years. I think Varley also feared Sterling learned he was the person behind the Friends of the Future,” Snowy explains.

“What?” Crystal exclaims. “All this time, you never told me that Varley was an anti-war activist.”

“Nah, it’s all been a load of crap. The FoF was a complete sham. It had nothing to do with war and peace. It was simply a vehicle to deal devil-glass. Dax and I have been sworn to secrecy, but now I don’t give a rat’s ass—I can’t go on serving these bastards like I have been.”

“But do you really think it’s wise to just leave?” Crystal asks. “Where will you go?”

“Where will *we* go?” Snowy counters. “Do you actually think I’d run off without you and leave you in this shithole, working for these creeps? I was serious the other evening when I told you how much you mean to me.”

Crystal exhales and smiles. “Okay, where will we go?”

“Buffalo,” Snowy replies. “I’ll go back to working in my uncle’s warehouse. But this time, I’ll be a manager. And one of his best friends owns a classy, legitimate restaurant. I’m sure he could get you in there, if you like.”

As Brad is about to relay the information back to the safe house, he receives a call on his cell from Dave. “Libby Rowe received Sterling’s autopsy report and it shows the overdose was a result of devil-glass mixed with fentanyl.”

Brad sighs. “I know.” He reveals what he’s just learned from eavesdropping on Snowy.

“The bastards led him directly to his death,” Dave growls. “And what you’re telling me about the Friends of the Future opens up a whole other can of worms. Are you planning to maintain surveillance on this guy?”

“Nah, I don’t see the point. There’s much bigger fish to fry,” Brad replies. “Besides, seems to me Snowy’s seen the light and is at least on some sort of road to redemption. Good riddance and good luck to him.”

“Well, at least your recording will serve as another piece of evidence, and one less drug dealer off the street is a victory in itself,” Dave says.

“So where do you suggest we take this next?” Brad asks.

“I think it’s time Atlas reconnects with Violet Anderson.”

* * *

As Atlas prepares to speak with Violet Anderson via Hello Friend, he thoroughly reviews his notes, then assumes his Slater Hoyt persona.

“Thank you for getting back to me, Slater,” Violet says by way of greeting. “Did you have a chance to review my plan?”

“People for Peace. I sure did,” Atlas replies. “It’s impressive.”

“Does that mean you’ll invest?”

“No,” Atlas replies bluntly. “Did you actually think I wouldn’t find out?”

“Find out what?” Violet asks.

“Come on, let’s cut the crap,” Atlas snarls. “You neglected to tell me your very own father and Franklin Varley were the people behind the Friends of the Future, and that it was all a sham, just a way to sell devil-glass for the last nine years.”

“Huh? I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Violet sounds genuinely stunned. “Who told you this?”

“Before investing my time and money into something, I make it a point to do my homework,” Atlas replies. “And I’ve learned Franklin Varley operates a devil-glass distribution network in America, and your father is the key man behind the operation. That drug dealer, Snowy—the guy you referred to as a lowlife, white-haired freak—he’s Varley’s lead devil-glass sales rep, working under your father. It’s no coincidence you’ve seen him outside of the FoF rallies and at the casinos. In fact, he and your father gave Sterling Rowe spiked devil-glass hoping he’d die, which of course he did.”

Violet begins breathing heavily and her face flushes. “Why would they do such a thing?”

Atlas explains Sterling’s supposed involvement in Zach Varley’s death.

“How did you actually find out about all of this? What do you mean when you say you did your homework?” she asks.

“I’m sorry, I can’t reveal my source, but believe me, they’re very well informed and highly reliable. You see, Violet, my source also informed me it’s only a matter of time before the FBI completely shuts down the entire Varley Corporation, and your father will be going down with the ship. I’m sorry, but I just can’t be associated with such a thing,” Atlas says.

“I don’t believe any of this... You can keep your damn money!” Violet shouts, ending the call.

Chapter 23

From her New York City apartment, a confused and angry Violet Anderson reaches out to her father on Hello Friend.

“Hey, Violet. How are you, honey?” Dax says. “Is everything okay? You look like the world has just fallen on your shoulders,” he adds with a chuckle.

“And you’re the person who dropped it on me,” Violet grumbles.

“Whoa. Is this about Varley not wishing to support your venture?” Dax replies. “I’m sure there are other investors out there who’d love to put their money behind such a worthy cause.”

“I know. I found someone.”

“Then why so miserable? You should be beaming with delight.”

“My potential investor did his homework and told me something very interesting and disturbing about both you and the Friends of the Future,” Violet says. She explains in detail.

“Whoa, whoa. As far as this Sterling Rowe is concerned, he was an addict, Violet. Whatever Varley had against him and what Snowy gave him, I know nothing about,” Dax says.

“And are you going to tell me he was wrong about the Friends of the Future?”

“Yes. Perhaps this guy’s just some bitter son of a bitch who lost a load of money at one of our casinos and he’s attempting to cause trouble. Believe me, there are lots of those idiots out there.”

“Well, I guess we’ll know sooner than later,” Violet declares.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I shouldn’t even tell you,” Violet retorts, “but you’re my father.”
 “Is there something I need to know?”

“According to this so-called ‘bitter son of a bitch,’ it’s only a matter of time before the FBI rains hell on Varley’s entire sad operation,” Violet says, and ends the call.

* * *

Dax stares into space and exhales. Heart thumping, he reaches for his cell and contacts Franklin Varley.

“What’s going on, Dax?” Varley says when they’re virtually face to face.

Dax relates the conversation with his daughter.

“Who the hell is this guy?” Varley barks.

“He’s probably a cop.”

Varley exhales. “Well, thankfully we’ve covered all our tracks and no one can prove a damn thing,” he says with forced calm. “But it still makes me wonder how this came to be.”

Dax sighs sharply. “I think I just may have the answer.”

“Being what?”

“Snowy. It has to be.”

“What’s making you think that?”

“I haven’t been able to reach him, and he’s not returning my calls. Knowing what we do now, I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“Do you really think he’d do something like this, knowing very well I wouldn’t hesitate to remove his limbs if he did?”

“Sterling Rowe,” Dax says. “That’s what this has to be about.”

“Did you ever find out about that woman who approached Sterling in the park the day he overdosed, the one who followed him into the ambulance?”

“No. But she was probably another cop.”

Varley’s breathing grows heavy. “Find Snowy and get the truth out of him no matter what it takes,” he orders. “And don’t forget about our meeting with Eric Stanwell this evening at the Paradise.”

Neon Paradise (nightclub), Miami, Florida

“Bright-eyed Eric. Have a seat, my friend,” Varley says to Eric Stanwell when he enters the back office of the club. “You know my main man, Dax,” he adds.

“Of course. Thank you for doing this on such short notice,” Eric replies.

“Normally I’d have Dax run out and get you one of our tasty beverages, but knowing your recent battle with the demon alcohol, I’d hate to tempt you with such a proposition,” Varley says sardonically.

“That’s okay. I’m not planning to take much of your time anyway,” Eric counters.

“So, what can I do for you?” Varley asks.

“I’m here about the sixty million dollars,” Eric replies. “My brother believes it’s in everyone’s best interest if we relinquish the money and return it to its rightful owners.”

“Now why would he make such an absurd suggestion?” Varley snaps.

“He’s under investigation in relation to the EFA bombing,” Eric replies.

“So I’ve heard,” Varley mutters.

“Since he knew the exact time that bomb was going to go off, it appears to me he sent this Atlas Felder guy straight to his death,” Dax interjects. “Why would he have done such a thing?”

Eric blinks rapidly. “I’ve been thinking the same thing all along, and honestly, I have no idea. And when I asked him, he told me it was none of my business.” He sits forward and adds earnestly, “The last thing I need to do is fall deeper into this chaos.”

“I’m glad to see you’ve turned a corner in life, Eric, but I’ve now come to learn your brother’s a backstabbing liar!” Varley growls. “He obviously had an agenda other than taking out those EFA bastards and paying your debt in the process. You can tell him he can do whatever he pleases with his share of the dough, but there’s no way in hell I’m giving up even a crumb of my piece of the pie,” Varley concludes, scowling.

“I’ll give him the message,” Eric sneers. He rises and leaves.

Alerted to a call on Lieutenant Stanwell's phone, Brad and Charmaine listen in and record the conversation.

"What's the scoop?" the lieutenant asks.

"As you've ordered, thirty million will be going back into the hands of its rightful owners by tomorrow," Eric Stanwell's voice replies. "The other half...well, it doesn't appear Varley's going to budge even one bit."

"How come that doesn't surprise me in the least?" the lieutenant growls.

"Hmm. Sixty million dollars," Charmaine quips when the call ends.

"My Lord. The ransomware money," Brad says.

National Record Broadcasting Center, Washington, DC

The following evening, the National Record presents a special report. "We have breaking news pertaining to the Am-Dro building explosion and the ransomware crimes committed by the Euro Freedom Alliance operating here in the US," Natalie Lawrence reports. "In a highly unexpected development, the FBI is reporting that thirty million of the sixty million stolen dollars have been recovered via the dark web. The money will go toward all the victims of the attacks. I'm now being joined by FBI Director Elliott Gregson. Good evening, Director Gregson. Thank you for joining me."

"It's my pleasure, Natalie," Gregson says, appearing side screen.

"How surprised are you that this money was returned?" Natalie asks.

"Very surprised," Gregson replies.

"Does the Bureau have any insight into who did this?"

"All I can tell you is, we're elated that half the money has been returned."

"Do you think it's likely the remaining thirty million dollars will also be repaid?" Natalie asks.

"Well, we have to remember the EFA was operating a large drug trafficking and illegal armaments operation, so I'd be betting most of that money is already in the hands of other groups," Gregson answers.

“What’s your opinion on the controversy surrounding Lieutenant Van Stanwell?”

Gregson exhales. “Since the matter is still under review, it’s not something I’m currently at liberty to comment on. However, I will say that Atlas Felder’s death remains an awful tragedy.”

Varley Corporation Headquarters, Miami, Florida

While Franklin Varley and Dax Anderson are discussing business in Franklin’s lavish office, Varley’s secretary announces that the company’s chief counsel, Seth Kleinberg, is here to see him.

“Send him in,” Varley tells her.

“Gentlemen,” Seth says upon entering. He looks concerned.

“So, to what do we owe this pleasure, Seth?” Varley asks.

“The FBI wants to speak with you, Franklin,” Seth replies. “They’ve requested a meeting at their Miami field office.”

“Do you know what this is about?” Varley asks.

“I don’t...do you?”

“Argh. Someone’s probably falsely accused us of rigging our slot machines again,” Varley quips.

“Well, just in case it’s something a little more serious, I’ve retained an associate of mine, Cheryl Erickson, to come along with us. She’s as solid a criminal lawyer as you’ll find in the state,” Seth says, studying the two men before him.

“Okay. I suppose we’d better not turn down an invitation from the good old feds,” Varley says with a wry grin.

“I’ll give you a few minutes,” Seth says. “Cheryl and I will see you downstairs.”

“What could this be about?” Dax asks after Seth leaves.

“Maybe Snowy’s been chirping like a bird. Or perhaps your daughter has,” Varley replies.

“And maybe it’s neither,” Dax counters. “What if our dear friend Stanwell has decided to stick it to you for not returning the remaining ransomware money as he requested?”

Varley sighs. “Well, that wouldn’t be a very wise move.” He abruptly rises his feet.

“I’ve often wondered what Seth really knows about operations around here,” Dax muses.

“Hopefully, not a damn thing. I’ve done my best to make him believe we’re as pure as a newborn’s precious little heart,” Varley replies, his expression smug. “Now, while I tend to this meeting, I need you to contact Stanwell and find out if he knows what the hell’s going on.”

Chapter 24

FBI Field Office, Miami, Florida

“Good afternoon, folks. Thank you for agreeing to meet,” Kim Waldron says, and introduces herself to Franklin Varley and his attorneys.

“Ah, the daughter of America’s next president,” Varley says in return.

Kim ignores the comment and places an envelope on the table in front of the business mogul. “I’ll give the three of you a few minutes to review the contents of this envelope,” she says before exiting.

Varley grabs the envelope and reaches inside. “What in the world?” he exclaims as he removes a series of photographs with notes attached. “It says these are from inside the Am-Dro building prior to the explosion, and the Bureau has authenticated them.”

Seth Kleinberg and Cheryl Erickson begin examining the material. “Do you know anything about these?” Seth asks Varley, not looking up from the photos.

“I have no idea where they came from, but I did send Lubor Sokol the crate of wine with the thank you note,” Varley replies. “As far as what’s noted as an explosive device in Exhibit Three, I have no clue what that is or where it came from.”

Seth’s eyes narrow. “How were you involved with these guys?” he asks.

“I did business with Am-Dro well before the truth came out about them,” Varley replies.

“What kind of business?” Cheryl asks.

“I purchased recreational drones for our amusement parks.”

“Is this something you can prove?” Cheryl asks.

“Absolutely. I just need to have our purchasing department retrieve the related material,” Varley states.

Cheryl looks thoughtful. “Do you often send your most expensive crates of wine to your vendors with a personal thank you note?”

Varley smirks at that. “I sent it as a thank you for their efforts in expediting the transaction. Nothing more.”

“Do you have any idea how a bomb ended up in that crate?” Cheryl asks.

Varley glares at the attorney. “Of course not.”

“Okay,” Seth interjects. “When the agent returns, let Cheryl do most of the talking.”

“So, Mr. Varley, is there anything you’d like to tell me about the photos?” Kim asks when she reenters the conference room.

“First of all, where did these come from?” Cheryl asks.

“That’s irrelevant at this stage,” Kim answers, continuing to stare in Varley’s direction.

“My client acknowledges the crate of wine and the thank you note accompanying it as a token of thanks sent to Lubor Sokol as part of a business transaction with Am-Dro. At the time of doing business, he had no prior knowledge the company was involved in illegal activities,” Cheryl says.

“What kind of business?” Kim asks with a raised brow. Her eyes shift around the room.

“The purchase of recreational drones for his amusement parks,” Cheryl replies. “Proof of which, he’ll be more than glad to provide to you.”

“Great. I’ll expect to see all the company’s material relating to those purchases by four o’clock today,” Kim shoots back. “Now, shall we talk about the explosive device pictured inside the crate?”

“Mr. Varley has informed me and Mr. Kleinberg that he’s never seen it before and was completely unaware of its existence,” Cheryl replies. “And unless you have proof otherwise, or plan to arrest my client, I’d say it’s time we wrap this up.”

“Well, like I said, I appreciate your cooperation, Mr. Varley,” Kim replies, peering into Varley’s stony eyes. “I hope you all have a wonderful day, and I’ll be expecting that information later this afternoon. Please forward it to this email address.” She hands Cheryl her card.

Upon returning to his office, Varley meets with Dax. “Something really fucked up is going on, Dax,” he says, pacing the floor. Doubt has replaced his usual self-assurance.

“What happened? Why did the feds want to speak with you?” Dax asks.

Varley explains in detail, wiping beads of sweat from his brow.

“Did they tell you where the photos came from?”

“No.” Varley finally sits behind his desk. “That’s the part that’s driving me crazy. Did you get ahold of Stanwell?”

“For whatever reason, like Snowy, the bastard’s avoiding me.”

“It’s a damn good thing I purchased those drones as a security blanket.”

“Do you think Stanwell’s behind this? Do you think he’s setting us up? I know for certain both Snowy and Violet didn’t know a thing about our link to the EFA, so if anybody’s throwing us to the wolves, it has to be him,” Dax says.

“No, I don’t see what good that’d do him when he’s already in this as deep as he is,” Varley replies. “I’d be betting this all relates to the agent who supposedly died in the explosion. The guy Stanwell’s being investigated about.”

“So I take it you believe the agent’s still alive and in hiding.”

“Alive and on the verge of taking down the good lieutenant for trying to get him killed,” Varley replies.

“And in the process, what are we supposed to do?”

Varley slaps his knees and rises to his feet. “We carry on as normal.”

When Dax exits the office, Varley pours himself a drink and thinks back in time.

* * *

“What would you say if I told you I’m aware of an EFA cell operating in Sundale County?” Varley says to Stanwell during their meeting at Varley’s Miami resort.

“My Lord,” Stanwell gasps. “Is this for real?”

“I’ve come to learn they’re operating two separate companies here in America. One is called Am-Dro. They sell recreational drones.” Varley pauses and smirks before continuing. “But Am-Dro’s bread and butter is illegal arms and devil-glass.”

“And I suppose you’re none too pleased about the devil-glass side of things,” Stanwell replies, returning the smirk.

“That is very true,” Varley replies. “However, I’m even more concerned about what these bastards could do on American soil if they’re not properly dealt with. A source of mine has told me they could be planning to hack into America’s power grids.”

“Hmm. I think it’d be wise to deal with that. Don’t you agree?” Stanwell says. “And what about the second business they’re operating?”

“Unfortunately, I have no idea what it is.”

The Pentagon. Washington, DC

“Good morning, Lieutenant Stanwell,” US Special Ops Commander Colonel Warner Herrington says as Stanwell sits down in front of him and two of his underlings.

“Good morning, everyone,” Stanwell replies.

“I want to begin by letting you know this is merely a review of Project Catching Freedom. My team and I are here to learn about the inner workings of the mission for the betterment of future missions,” Herrington explains.

“So, does this mean you’re expecting me to reveal my outside sources who assisted with the operation? With all respect, Colonel, I refuse to do that,” Stanwell states. “I’ve never done such a thing, nor do I plan to now. I will not compromise the sanctity of the unit I’ve led for more than ten years.”

Colonel Herrington thinks for a beat. “Understood, Lieutenant. Let’s focus on why you’re here today—your decision to send Agent Felder into the Am-Dro building, knowing what you knew.”

“As I’ve already told AG Salazar, I simply chose the best person for the task, Colonel,” Stanwell replies.

“Was Agent Felder aware that he was the person who shot Maria Sokol to death?” Herrington asks. “Did he know this before entering the building?”

“No. I didn’t tell him because I didn’t view it as being relevant to the mission at hand,” Stanwell says. “And like I said, I stand by my decision. I only wish the outcome had not cost the young man his life.”

Herrington sighs and briefly confers with his two underlings before turning back to Stanwell. “Do you know if Agent Felder was capable of creating an explosive device that could blow up that building?”

“Most definitely,” Stanwell says. *Where the hell is this going?* he wonders, nervously shifting in his seat.

“So, it was your plan to send him into a building filled with those both you and he knew were responsible for killing his parents, setting aside the Maria Sokol situation,” Herrington says. “Were you not the least bit concerned about the effect this would have on him?”

Stanwell sighs. “As I know you’re well aware, Colonel, I personally spoke with Agent Felder and addressed the matter. If I sensed he was off, even a little, I would’ve immediately pulled him from the mission.”

“But he was a Gold Hawk,” Herrington shoots back. “Highly adept at being deceptive. Perhaps he fooled even you, Lieutenant.”

“I don’t believe he was deceiving me in any way whatsoever.”

Herrington shakes his head. Chin thrust out, he counters, “Do you think it’s possible Agent Felder blew up the building, perhaps escaping before igniting the device, or even taking his own life in the process?”

Stanwell pauses to gather his thoughts. “I suppose it’s possible, but I find it hard to believe. Atlas prided himself on being a

professional regardless of the circumstances. I still believe the EFA set off that bomb as an act of mass suicide.”

“That said, I take it you do understand the optics of what happened leave us with many questions,” Herrington replies.

“All I can tell you are the facts, Colonel,” Stanwell states. “As the FBI can attest, the plan was to raid the building and take down this EFA cell. Agent Felder entered that building under the guise of someone looking to purchase devil-glass. This was done to ensure the presence of Lubor Sokol and enhance our case against the group.” Before continuing, the lieutenant pauses and rubs his hands over his face, feigning sorrow. “If I had known...if I had known we were about to witness a mass suicide bombing, there’s no way I would’ve sent a single soul within a hundred feet of that building.”

Chapter 25

Waldron Campaign Headquarters, Washington, DC

“So, how did things go at the Pentagon?” General Waldron asks Stanwell when he arrives.

“I spun it the best I could, Russell,” Stanwell says, plopping into a chair across from the presidential candidate. “This whole thing is getting out of hand. Herrington even posed the idea that Atlas was responsible for blowing up the building out of revenge against the EFA.”

Waldron purses his lips. “Well, it might start getting even crazier in the next few minutes.”

“How so?”

“Kim’s coming by to speak with us. She claims to have some important info regarding the bombing,” Waldron answers.

Stanwell feels anxiety pushing his pulse rate up. “Did she give you any idea what it is?”

“Unfortunately not.”

* * *

“Wow, your team has done an incredible job with this place,” Kim crows to her father as she gazes around the former tool and die factory turned campaign headquarters.

“How about a grand tour?” Waldron suggests.

“Maybe when I’m not so busy,” Kim replies, holding up her attaché case.

“Of course,” her father says. “The lieutenant’s in his office with Charmaine. I’ll let him know you’re here, and then we’ll find a private space for the three of us.”

“Charmaine? As in former Gold Hawk Charmaine Newport?”

“Exactly. She’s heading up Lieutenant Stanwell’s security team.”

“Have her join us,” Kim says. “After all, she did enter the building with Atlas.”

Moments later, the group convenes in a conference room. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Kim presents Atlas’s Am-Dro building photos. “These came to me anonymously,” she explains.

Stanwell studies the photos. “This is insane,” he exclaims. “Where in the world did they come from?”

“We wish we knew,” Kim says.

“Maybe there was something shady going on between Varley and the EFA,” Charmaine chimes in.

“I’ve already interviewed Varley and he informed me he had purchased a host of recreational drones from Am-Dro and the crate of wine was merely a thank-you, as reflected by the personal note he wrote on it,” Kim says.

“Was he able to back up the claim?” Waldron asks.

“Yep. Everything he told us appears legit,” Kim replies.

“Did he tell you what a bomb was doing in the crate?” Stanwell asks with raised brows.

“He claimed to have no idea,” Kim says.

“That looks like quite the high-tech device. Especially the way it’s been camouflaged,” Charmaine says, studying the photos as if it’s the first time she’s seen them. “Looks like something we’d use as Gold Hawks,” she adds, turning to Stanwell.

The lieutenant sighs. “At this morning’s review at the Pentagon, Colonel Herrington proposed the idea that Atlas may’ve been the person responsible for setting off the bomb.”

“That’s crazy,” Charmaine says. “He’d never do such a thing.”

“I told Herrington the same thing, but the more thought I’ve given it, the more I can’t help but wonder,” Stanwell replies. “Did you actually see what was in the duffle bag when he entered the building?” he asks Charmaine.

“No, I didn’t,” she replies with a scowl. “But I can’t believe you’d give the theory even a second of thought. I was with him before and when he entered that building. He was nothing but his usual professional self,” she says firmly.

“With all respect, Charmaine, he knew the people in that building were responsible for the death of his parents. Something like that could push anyone over the edge,” General Waldron says.

“And right before coming out here we learned something that’s now made both me and Director Gregson have even more questions,” Kim adds.

“What’s that?” Stanwell asks.

“We’ve come to learn Lubor Sokol and his friends had been planning to fly off to Europe the following day,” Kim says. “That sure doesn’t sound like a group preparing to take their own lives.”

“Unless maybe they had a change of heart once they knew we were onto them,” Stanwell interjects.

“That said, this news changes the entire course of the investigation,” Kim replies.

“Well, is there anything else you need to tell us, Kim?” General Waldron asks.

“Nope. That’s all for now,” Kim replies. “But I would appreciate a private word with Lieutenant Stanwell.”

“By all means,” Stanwell says with a nod, prompting the general and Charmaine to exit the room.

“This won’t take long, Lieutenant,” Kim says.

“I’m all yours. However I can help.”

“It has to do with your brother, Eric.”

“What about him?”

“Are you aware he’s performed investment banking services for Franklin Varley?”

“No, but it doesn’t surprise me,” Stanwell replies. “Over the years, Eric has helped some of the richest people in the country become even richer, and sometimes even much poorer,” he adds with a chuckle as his eyes blink concern.

N&J Heating & Air, Buffalo, New York

After Paul Clancy, commonly known to his friends as Snowy, watches the final minutes of his evening shift fade away, he exits the warehouse into the parking lot, where he’s approached by someone with a very familiar face. “Dax! You scared the crap out of me, man,” he exclaims, raising his hands in a defensive posture. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“We need to talk, Snowy. And as I’m sure you can guess, I’m not too thrilled about having to come all the way down here to do so,” Dax says, scowling.

“How about we grab a bite?” Snowy says, pointing at the diner two doors down.

Dax nods.

In the diner, they slide into an isolated booth in the back. “I owe you an apology, Dax,” Snowy anxiously says. “I should’ve contacted you as soon as that son of a bitch approached me in the casino. And I know not returning your calls was totally inexcusable, but I was freaked out, man.”

“Whoa, whoa, back up,” Dax replies. “Who approached you in the casino, and what made you so freaked out that you packed up shop and headed down here?”

Snowy explains Brad’s visit to the New York casino. “Just the fact he brought up Sterling’s name made me panic.”

“Do you think he was a cop?”

“At first I did, but in the end, I think he was actually trying to score glass.”

“Have you noticed anybody tailing you since you came down here?”

“No, and that’s why I’m convinced he was who he said he was.”

Dax taps on the table. “If Varley knew I was able to track you down, he’d be expecting me to put a bullet in your head. But you need not worry; that’s not in my plans.”

Snowy sharply exhales and takes a drink of water. “How did you track me down?”

“You tend to really open up about your future plans when you’re wasted,” Dax wryly replies. “I don’t blame you for wanting out. With all that’s been happening, I have a feeling the Varley ship is going down, and like you, I’m not planning on being part of it. Things have gone way too far.”

“The Friends of the Future,” Snowy says. “There’s something I think you should know.”

“If it’s about my daughter, I’m already well aware,” Dax says, studying a menu. “How long have you known?”

“I only learned who she was at the last rally. I put two and two together when I heard her speaking about your wife,” Snowy replies.

“Patricia was a damn good person,” Dax says, gazing into space. “Ten times the person I could ever dream of being... When Varley first hired me, it was all about keeping the crooks out of the playhouse. I quickly realized he was the biggest crook of them all, and I went right along for the ride.”

“My Lord, Dax. Are you feeling okay, bro? Sounds like you’ve had some sort of come to Jesus moment.”

“It took Violet to finally make me see the light,” Dax admits. “I’m supposed to be the one teaching my daughter about life, not the other way around.”

“So...what’s your game plan, moving forward?”

“I’m going to do to Varley what he thought you were doing to us,” Dax says with feeling.

“Come on, man. You can’t be serious. If you squeal on the big man, you’ll be sinking with the ship just like you said—and I’ll be joining the both of you.”

“No, you won’t. No matter what, I won’t get you involved. You have my solemn word.”

Snowy sighs and nods.

Memorial service for Oxford Olsen

Dr. George Olsen stands before those who've come to pay their respects to his father, Oxford. Tears fill the lanky, dark-haired surgeon's eyes. "Dad dedicated most of his life to studying the human condition. He took great pride in assisting others with life's trials and tribulations," he says. "The final, horrific moments of his life were in no way indicative of the man he was."

After the eulogy, as George greets those in attendance, Amber and Brad Sutton approach. "Do you remember me?" Amber asks.

He studies her. "Of course I do...Amber," he replies with a toothy smile. "Thank you so much for coming. Dad always thought the world of you."

"Likewise," Amber replies. "I don't know if you remember my brother, Brad."

"I sure do," the doctor says, holding out a hand. The two men shake. "If I recall correctly, weren't you a Gold Hawk?"

"That I was," Brad replies. "I'll never forget what a great help your father was to me, especially after the Larson mission. I'll always be grateful."

George sighs. "I only wish I knew why it ended for him like it did. In hindsight, he hadn't been himself for the last few years. And of course, I'd become so wrapped up in my practice... I should've made a point of spending more time with him."

"Brad and I have some important information regarding your father that we'd like to share with you," Amber says. "Is it possible to have a few minutes of your time in private?"

"Definitely," George says, and leads them into a small, empty sitting room across the hall. When they enter, he studies them. "So, what is this information you have?" he asks, regarding Amber with narrowed eyes.

"We believe we know what was troubling your father so deeply," Amber replies.

George swallows hard. "Please. Enlighten me."

"We're certain it all goes back to his time at the JK Preston base. But we can't tell you how vital it is that this info remains confidential," Brad says.

“Most certainly,” George asserts. “Hmm. The JK Preston base. That’s where you served as his assistant,” he says, turning to Amber.

“Yes.”

“What happened at the base?” George asks as he drops down onto a sofa.

“Do the names Miguel Perez and Sterling Rowe ring a bell?” Brad asks.

“Should they?” George counters with a raised brow.

Brad explains in detail what has so far been uncovered about the former Gold Hawks. “When it came to Miguel’s death, there were no reports or death certificate on file,” he concludes.

“What about his family?” George asks.

“His wife and kids were all he had. Otherwise, the Gold Hawks were his family,” Brad says with a heavy sigh. “But those reports should’ve still been on file. Believe me, the way the military works, it’s highly unusual they wouldn’t be—unless, of course, someone, or several people, were hiding something.”

“And are you suggesting my father was one of those people?” George asks.

“Yes. When you consider his association with both Miguel and Sterling. We believe he was part of a larger cover-up on behalf of the military,” Brad replies.

George winces. “But it sounds to me like Sterling Rowe was in trouble before my father ever counseled him. Perhaps he never really did overcome his drug addiction.”

“We were a couple,” Amber interjects. “I know for certain he wasn’t using while serving as a Gold Hawk. There’s no doubt he was set up, for whatever reason.”

“So, exactly what actual proof do you have of my father being involved in this craziness?” George asks, frowning.

Brad relates the phone call Dr. Olsen made after Ruby Felder’s visit, along with details surrounding the staged Ovo-Tech plane crash.

“My Lord... Do you know who was on the other end of that call?” George asks.

“We have every reason to believe it was Lieutenant Van Stanwell, and that more than likely he’d been pressuring your father to keep covering up whatever they’ve been hiding over the last four and a half years,” Brad replies. “I’m sure you’re familiar with Stanwell.”

“I am. Frankly, I thought he’d be here today,” George says. “Hmm. It’s shocking to me that Dad would just shrug off the idea of this Noah Cowan child having some sort of prescient power... In recent years, he’d really began taking an interest in subjects of that kind.”

“Ruby Felder found that very difficult to believe as well,” Brad says.

George’s face flushes red, and he stares into space. “Is there any way I can assist you in getting to the bottom of all this?”

“If we could get access to your father’s digital footprint, I have a feeling we might be able to get some of the answers we need,” Brad replies.

“Consider it done. Whatever it takes to find out what prompted such an honorable man to lose his way,” George says.

Chapter 26

Safe House

“Will we ever get to go home?” Ocean Cowan moans to her mother.

“I know how difficult this has been, honey,” Julie replies with a sigh. “None of us wanted this, but it’s all for our own good and safety.”

“I still don’t understand why anybody would threaten us because Noah’s messed-up little mind was seeing things before they happened.”

“Whoa. Don’t speak of your brother in such a manner.”

“Okay, I’m sorry. But what’s with him, anyway? I don’t think he’s said more than ten words since we arrived here,” Ocean replies.

“I don’t have the answer for you, Ocean...I can only tell you that Ruby’s been doing her best to get him to open up. We just have to keep taking things one day at a time.”

Down the hall, Ruby and Noah are engaging in their daily session. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me, Noah?”

Eyes vacant, Noah shakes his head. “Not really,” he murmurs.

“Well, I have something for you,” Ruby says, reaching out to the table behind her. “It’s a brand new puzzle Amber bought for you. It’s a fifteen hundred-piece map of the world. How about you and I put it together and show it to the others?”

“No!” he cries, abruptly turning away. “I want everybody to just leave me alone.”

When Ruby reports back to Julie and Clay, they're both taken aback by Noah's behavior. "What do you make of it?" Julie asks the psychiatrist.

"I say we grant him his wish," Ruby says.

"Do you think perhaps his soothsaying days are all behind him?" Clay asks.

"I wish I had the answer for you, Clay."

"I'm terrified for my little boy's future," Julie says. Dread fills her voice and her eyes are distant.

Ruby places a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Like Siro has said so many times, we're all in this together. In the end, it'll all work out."

Dax Anderson residence, Miami, Florida

Dax nurses his morning coffee, lost in thought. Today he plans to visit the FBI's Miami field office and betray the man he's served loyally all these years.

As he reaches for his keys, the African drum ringtone on his phone makes him freeze. Within seconds, he's face to face with Franklin Varley on Hello Friend. "Don't do it, Dax," Varley hisses. "If you love your daughter as much as I think you do, then you'll heed my warning."

"If you or anyone else lays a finger on Violet—"

"That's the last thing anybody wants," Varley says matter-of-factly.

Dax purses his lips. "Snowy ratted me out, didn't he?"

"Come on, Dax. Smarten up, man. This bullshit epiphany of yours won't do anybody any good, most of all yourself. You know as well I do that you and Snowy are every bit the criminals I am. For God's sake, you're both responsible for the murder of Sterling Rowe. That won't ever go away," Varley exclaims. "Tell me what it is, Dax. Do you feel I've treated you unfairly? Or is this all because I wouldn't help finance you daughter's peace plan?"

"Keep going," Dax growls.

"Ha, ha." Varley's laugh is menacing. "Well, I should let you know, your timing is on point. The very wealthy Richter family has

made an offer to purchase my company, and seeing as I've been looking forward to my retirement, I've accepted their very generous offer."

"And just how's that going to benefit me?"

"You'll be receiving a very handsome final payout. You deserve it." Varley beams. "How does twelve million dollars sound? That should be enough to help Violet in her quest to save the world from meeting its untimely end, and leave enough for you to live comfortably ever after." He pauses and exhales. "Whaddaya say? Do we have a deal?"

Feeling cornered, Dax pauses for a beat before agreeing.

"It's funny how a large sum of money can just obliterate all the sins of the world," Varley quips with a cackle.

Safe House

For the last several minutes, Brad and Atlas have been dissecting Dr. Olsen's digital footprint. "Here we go: Clairvoyance," Brad excitedly calls out. "There's search after search."

"From when?" Atlas asks.

"Hmm...looks like it all started just over four and a half years ago. Right around the time Miguel Perez died," Brad replies.

Atlas gathers his thoughts. "Is it possible we're looking at a scenario where, like Noah, Miguel Perez was able to see into the future, and Olsen and Stanwell became involved, leading to things taking a turn for the worse?"

"Future events, such as the bombing of the train carrying his wife and kids," Brad surmises.

"Leading to his murder," Atlas suggests. "If Stanwell was willing to kill me because I was asking questions about Noah, then God only knows what other cover-ups could be at play here, not to mention the measures they've taken to protect those secrets."

"Let me check the date Sterling's mother claims to have last spoken with him. Luckily she made note of the day," Brad says, once again altering the screen on his laptop and checking his notes. He gazes at the screen with wide eyes.

“What is it?” Atlas prompts.

“It looks like Olsen had sent an email to Howard Gill the day before,” Brad replies, rubbing his chin.

“Howard Gill. As in the world’s foremost expert on UFOs and other mysteries of the universe?” Atlas says.

Brad nods and sighs. “That’s right. He’s the guy who’s been going on and on for the last decade about the US Government’s penchant for covering things up.”

“What was in the email?”

“Olsen sent him a request for a meeting.”

“And did he accept?”

“Not directly,” Brad says, then reads aloud the reply. “‘Dr. Olsen, on account of your strong ties to the United States military, if it’s your wish to meet, you must submit a formal request to my attorney in writing.’ And then he goes on to provide the attorney’s contact info. From then on, I don’t see any further contact between the two men. But judging from his internet searches, that didn’t stop Olsen from trying to learn everything he could about clairvoyance.”

When Dave Eisen enters the room to receive an update from Atlas and Brad, they immediately share that info. The former police detective listens intently. “My Lord. This gets more insane by the second,” he says with a furrowed brow, but it’s more frustration than perplexity.

“Is there something troubling you, Uncle Dave?” Atlas asks.

“The more we uncover, the more I can’t help wondering where Waldron fits in,” Dave says, plopping down into the recliner behind him. He runs his hands over his face. “After all, we’re talking about the man in charge of that base all along.”

“Knowing how close he and Stanwell are, he has to somehow be involved,” Atlas interjects.

“And the way things look, we’re talking about our soon-to-be president,” Brad adds in an ominous voice.

“By the way, did Aunt Shayna come up with anything on Varley’s son, Zach?” Atlas asks his uncle.

“The reported cause of death was a car accident,” Dave replies.

Chapter 27

“Thank you for allowing me to visit,” Dax says to Violet upon entering her New York City condo.

“What can I do for you, Father?” she says, leading him into the living room, where they sit across from one another.

Dax purses his lips and exhales. “Saying I owe you an apology would be the understatement of the century,” he nervously says. “I only hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

“Oh, I can forgive you for being Franklin Varley’s lackey and selling devil-glass. I can even forgive you for being part of the Friends of the Future scam, but I can’t forgive you for murder,” Violet says. “For God’s sake, you helped take another man’s life. God only knows how many others there were.” Her voice is filled with disdain.

“Several years ago, Sterling’s actions led to Zach Varley’s death. It was Varley’s revenge,” Dax explains.

“Does that make it right?”

Dax bows his head. “Being Franklin Varley’s puppet is an extremely dangerous game, Violet. If I didn’t arrange to have Snowy give Sterling that spiked devil-glass, or go along with all his other nefarious deeds, I’d be a goner myself. But more importantly, he’d get to me by getting to you—which is why I couldn’t do what I was planning to do just the other day.” His voice is edged with remorse.

Violet shakes her head. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“I was planning to go to the authorities and own up to all I’ve done, but through Snowy, Varley found out and threatened to kill you if I ever did such a thing.” Tears fill the corners of his eyes.

“My Lord,” Violet gasps. “And I take it this means you’re also now out of a job.”

“He’s selling the corporation, and in the process I’ll be receiving a twelve million dollar payout,” Dax says. “I want you to have half of it. I realize this doesn’t make up for the terrible things I’ve done, but it’s the least I can do as an act of contrition, and to prove to you how sorry I am.”

“I don’t want a cent of that damn blood money!” Violet snaps. “I don’t know what brought about this sudden change of attitude, but too much damage has already been done, and I can’t simply let it go.” Her rage succumbs to sadness. “Like you said, you let yourself become Varley’s puppet, and now you’ll have to live with it. I want nothing more to do with any of this. You live your life, and I’ll live mine. Maybe someday, I’ll have a change of heart.”

His expression anguished, Dax rises and makes his way to the door. “I realize I can’t tell you how to feel, Violet, but if you ever do have that change of heart, you know how to reach me.”

Eisen residence, Washington, DC

“She’s going to be here any moment now,” Dave Eisen’s wife, Shayna says over the phone to her husband.

“Did she tell you why she wants to meet?” Dave asks from the safe house.

“No, but I think it’s safe to say it all has to do with your National Record interview.”

“Whatever you do, don’t reveal our hand yet.”

“Don’t worry, I’m only planning to hear her out, whatever it is,” Shayna replies. “Lea and I go back to university. If there’s one thing I know about her, it’s that she tends to deal with matters in a more unconventional manner than most other high-level legal minds.”

The sound of the doorbell halts the conversation.

“It’s been much too long, Shayna,” Salazar says as Shayna welcomes her into her home.

“Yeah, at least back in the day, we’d occasionally run into each other in court. That was before you became the most powerful attorney in the country.”

Salazar chuckles. “With the current craziness at the Justice Department, I often question if I made the correct decision.”

“So, what brings you to me?” Shayna asks as they settle down in the living room.

“I wish your husband would’ve reached out to me before running to the National Record,” the attorney general replies. “You’re well aware of my open door policy, Shayna.”

“David did what he felt was best under the circumstances, and I concurred.”

Salazar sighs. “I realize what a difficult time it’s been for the both of you. And before this information is made public, I think it’s only fair for you and your husband to hear it from me.”

“I’ll be sure to enlighten him. What is it?”

Salazar reveals the Am-Dro building photos and the news that Lubor Sokol and his associates had been planning to leave the country. Already wise to both developments, Shayna plays coy. “Does this change what you think happened inside the building?” she asks.

“We now believe someone outside of the EFA had to have set off that bomb, and based on the facts, Atlas is currently our number one suspect,” Salazar explains.

“As some sort of act of vengeance?”

“Yes. And it’s totally understandable why he would’ve done such a thing.”

“Is there actual proof?”

“No, not yet, but like I said, the facts point in his direction,” Salazar replies.

“Does this mean it’s also believed he’s still alive and in hiding?”

The attorney general sighs and shakes her head. “Could be. But then again, there’s also the possibility he decided to take his own life in the process.”

“And what about the photos of the crate? Doesn’t that raise suspicions about Franklin Varley?”

“It’s been proven Varley did legitimate business with Am-Dro,” Salazar replies. “We have no proof of any nefarious activity happening between the two parties.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Shayna huffs. “The belief is, Atlas entered that building with a bomb in a duffle bag and found a way to plant it inside the crate of wine, and either took off, or waited inside knowing he would soon meet his own demise along with those he planned to kill.”

“I’m sorry, Shayna, but that’s precisely how we’re viewing the matter,” Salazar replies. She slaps her knees and rises to her feet. “Now, if there’s something your husband or anyone else can offer, with actual proof countering that theory, I’d be more than willing to hear it. And in the meantime, unless something else is uncovered, we’ll be going public with the theory, and putting out an APB on Atlas the day after tomorrow. If you or David know the whereabouts of your nephew, I suggest you have him come forward.”

Safe House

After Shayna relates her conversation with the attorney general to her husband, Dave confers with Atlas and Brad.

“This is insane,” Atlas scoffs, pacing. “Stanwell sends me into that building to be blown to pieces and now I’m the mass murderer. If this goes public, my reputation will forever be tarnished regardless of the truth.”

“Don’t worry, Atlas. As we stand here today, we’ve got enough on that bastard to dispel anything he claims,” Brad replies.

“Do we, though?” Atlas shoots back, looking back and forth between Brad and his uncle. “Can we actually prove he had anything to do with Miguel Perez’s death? And those calls he made with Olsen about Sterling sure won’t help. We still don’t know enough about Sterling’s story to prove anything.” He pauses and blows out air. “I know Stanwell was out to kill me, but unless we can prove he orchestrated that bombing, then I’m up against a wall.”

“The money—the ransomware money,” Dave blurts. “Once we prove Stanwell was working with Varley, that wall is sure to come tumbling down.”

“If only Stanwell mentioned Varley’s name during the phone call with his brother, we’d have a slam dunk,” Brad laments.

“But he did mention the sixty million dollars,” Dave adds. “And it’s public record, Eric Stanwell was once one of Varley’s moneymen, so I’d say there’s definitely enough there.”

Varley Casino, New York City

“Is there anything about all this you’re going to miss?” Dax asks Varley in the back office.

The business mogul smirks. “The people. All the wonderful people,” he says with a cackle. “What are your plans, Dax, now that you have all that money can buy?”

“Right now my entire focus is trying to make things right with Violet—and believe me, that’s going to be one uphill battle.”

“Does that mean she refused to accept your handout?”

“Refused would be a polite way of putting it.”

Varley rubs his chin and sighs. “Tell me, Dax, other than our operating the Friends of the Future and dealing devil-glass in the process, what else does she know of what we did? Does she know the truth behind the ransomware attacks?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“And what about the fact we presented Sterling Rowe with the spiked devil-glass?”

“If she knows, she didn’t tell me,” Dax lies with a sigh.

The arrival of a large man in the doorway brings an end to the dialogue.

“What is it, Rocco?” Varley asks.

“There’s a man in the main gaming room who’s claiming it’s vital he speaks with the boss,” Rocco replies.

“Did he tell you his name, or what his problem is?” Dax says.

“When I questioned him, he simply told me he was here to speak to the big boss,” Rocco answers. “I’ve no idea what it’s all about. All I

can tell you is, he has a heavy accent, a thick mustache, and he's wearing a suit that probably costs more than my house."

Dax and Varley exchange ominous glances. "Well, let's go see what this is about," Varley says.

Rocco leads them out of the office and directs them to the man before drifting out of sight.

"Good evening, sir," Varley says. "I'm Franklin Varley and this is my director of operations and security, Dax Anderson. I understand you wanted to speak with me. Is there some sort of problem?"

"Actually, there's thirty million of them," the man replies in a thick accent.

Once again, Varley and Dax exchange worried looks. "Follow us," Varley says, and leads the man back toward the office. When they enter the room, Varley nods to his underling. Dax closes the door. "Have a seat," Varley says to the man. "Who the hell are you?"

"You can call me Ivan," the man calmly replies.

"Well, that surely doesn't tell us who the hell you are," Varley barks as Dax takes his place beside his boss's desk, standing at attention.

"Now is that any way to speak to a business partner?" Ivan answers.

"Go on. Cut the crap and tell me why you're here," Varley says.

"I told you. You have thirty million dollars of my money," Ivan replies.

"Ha. That's a good one," Varley huffs.

"Did you actually think the EFA came to an end after you and your friend, Lieutenant Stanwell, killed my sociopath cousin Lubor and his idiotic friends?" Ivan replies.

"We may've been in on the ransomware attacks together, but I don't know a damn thing about how that bomb got there, or who put it there," Varley lies.

"With all respect, lying to a liar very rarely works," Ivan says, scowling. "Now, I must admit it was quite brilliant, the way you pulled the entire thing off. And honestly, Lubor and Jozef deserved what they got for being so damn stupid. I always warned Lubor to never

accept gifts from those you can't trust. It's also interesting to see how thirty million dollars found its way back into the hands of justice right around the time Lieutenant Van Stanwell fell into disfavor with his superiors."

"Why should we believe a single word of this?" Dax asks.

"That's totally up to you," Ivan scoffs. "If you don't hand over our money, I'll be more than glad to validate what I'm saying and we can have ourselves a little gang war." He shakes his head and grunts. "It'd be just awful to see this very favorable deal you've made with the upstanding Richter family fall to pieces because of your sinister ways."

"Fifteen million," Varley says.

Ivan sighs and rises to his feet. "Let's see. Sixty million dollars was stolen under the basis of a 50 percent split. Now, math has never been my strong suit, but I believe 50 percent of sixty million is thirty million, is it not, Mr. Varley?"

Varley's face becomes flushed and his breathing grows heavy.

Ivan smirks. "But since I came to really appreciate and enjoy that amazing devil-glass of yours, I'm willing to give you a discount...let's make it an even twenty million, and we'll never have to see each other again. Twenty million in cash. Do we have a deal?"

Varley falls into thought. "Deal," he says with a menacing glare.

"Excellent." Ivan beams.

"Come by tomorrow morning at seven and we'll get it done. You can enter through the back parking lot. We'll be in the warehouse adjacent to the casino," Varley tells him.

When Ivan has left, Dax turns to his boss and throws up his arms. "Just like that, you're accepting this?"

"He's legit, Dax," Varley says. "Lubor made me well aware of this clown. But after we turned Lubor and his friends to ash, I thought for sure he'd keep his distance." He pauses, then growls, "And the last thing I need right now is more trouble with these psychopaths, especially on the verge of selling this entire damn operation."

Chapter 28

The following morning, Varley, Dax, and Varley strongman Rocco Angelino wait tensely inside the warehouse with twenty million dollars. “They’re here,” Rocco calls out as he watches a black SUV pull into the lot. A blue van follows behind.

Ivan Sokol and two other men exit the SUV and enter the warehouse. “Good morning, gentlemen,” Ivan says. He’s wearing a pale blue designer silk suit and a navy blue bowler hat. “It’s a wonderful morning, isn’t it?”

“And it’ll be that much more wonderful once we get this done,” Varley replies. “Feel free to count the goods.”

Ivan nods to one of his men—a hulking, fair-haired man wearing a pair of dark sunglasses—and he starts counting the money. Eventually he looks back at Ivan and nods.

“Well, I want to thank you for your cooperation. I wish I could say it was a pleasure doing business, but I can’t,” Ivan sneers as his associates move the money into the blue van.

Varley’s scowl intensifies. “Take your damn money and make sure I never see your fucking face ever again,” he fumes.

Ivan counters with a smirk before turning away. He and his associates enter the SUV.

“Ivan” immediately swipes a hand across his face and removes his mustache, instantly turning into Brad Sutton. “It should be a matter of seconds, gentlemen,” Brad says to his associates—former fellow Gold Hawks.

Sure enough, wailing sirens shatter the early morning calm as several vehicles arrive on scene. Men and women in FBI windbreakers exit the vehicles. Some enter the building with weapons drawn, while others surround the perimeter.

Minutes later, Franklin Varley, Dax Anderson, and Rocco Angelino are escorted from the building in handcuffs.

12 hours earlier

“Shayna. David. Come in and have a seat,” Attorney General Lea Salazar says to the Eisens as she welcomes them into her office. She studies them. “I’m glad you caught me when you did. I was in the midst of closing shop for the day when you called. And I’m truly glad you came to me this time instead of running to the media,” she adds, glaring at Dave.

“I simply did what had to be done,” he replies firmly.

“No. What you did was tarnish the image of a fine man,” Salazar retorts. “Van Stanwell serves this country with honor and pride.”

“Van Stanwell’s a criminal,” Dave shoots back. “A criminal of the worst kind.”

“Enough!” Salazar shouts. “I realize how difficult things have been for you of late, but you can’t keep doing this. The only reason the lieutenant sent Atlas into that building was because he believed in his abilities as a soldier. Yes, in hindsight it may’ve been a questionable decision, but it doesn’t make the man guilty of any crime whatsoever.”

Dave shakes his head and sighs. “The only reason Van Stanwell sent my nephew into that building was to have him killed.” His tone is matter-of-fact.

Flabbergasted, Salazar fixes her gaze on Shayna. “The three of us have been friends since you and I first attended university. Would somebody please tell me what the hell is going on?”

Shayna turns to her husband. "Tell her, David."

"Atlas is alive. And so is my sister Ruby and her husband, and the others who were reported to be dead from the plane crash," Dave says, then explains.

"Whoa... Frankly, the Atlas part of this doesn't surprise me, but are you telling me that plane crash never happened?" Salazar exclaims.

"Exactly. It was staged," Shayna replies.

Dave reaches into his coat pocket and retrieves a flash drive and gently places it on Salazar's desk. "Everything you need to know is on this."

Salazar regards the device with bewildered eyes.

"How about David and I go grab a coffee across the street and give you some time to review the material?" Shayna suggests.

"I'm... I'm totally at a loss," Salazar mumbles.

"Once you review the material, there's no doubt the complete picture will come into focus," Dave replies.

Salazar draws a breath and exhales. "I'll grant your request, and let you know when I'm done," she says.

"Great. In the end, I'm certain you'll agree it's in everyone's best interest," Dave replies.

After Dave and Shayna exit the office, Salazar inserts the flash drive into her desktop. She looks on in disbelief as a series of reports, charts, and audio files appear on her screen.

Within seconds, it's quite clear that Dave, Atlas, Brad, and Charmaine have utilized their experience in law enforcement to impressively catalog the details and character links relating to the JK Preston military base, the staged plane crash, the Friends of the Future, the murder of Sterling Rowe, and the Am-Dro building explosion.

"This is incredible," Salazar mutters after spending half an hour or so reviewing the material and making notes.

When the Eisens return to the office, they're instantly greeted by Lea Salazar's scowl. "What in the name of God is going on here?" she groans as they settle back down before her.

“We realize how much there is to take in, but as the saying goes, the devil’s in the details,” Dave says.

The attorney general responds with an icy glare. “The only problem is, pretty much all of this evidence has been attained through illegal means, and is full of conjecture,” she states.

“That’s understood,” Shayna replies. “But what’s transpired is what’s transpired regardless of how it was discovered. And that can’t be denied.”

“So, are we just to evade the legal course of justice whenever it suits us? No! It doesn’t work that way. And you both damn well know that,” Salazar counters.

“Are you going to deny the truth that shoots out from the video Brad Sutton made of last night’s meeting with Franklin Varley?” Dave says.

The attorney general exhales. “That’s actually the only thing I’m going to take to heart from this web of madness you’ve placed in front of me. Have this Brad Sutton and his associates plan to go through with the Varley meeting tomorrow morning,” she adds. “Once I’ve had a chance to brief Director Gregson and Agent Waldron, we’ll assist you in setting up a sting operation to take down Varley tomorrow morning. He needs to account for that money and a host of other things, if what you’ve put in front of me is accurate.”

“Very well,” Dave replies. “Although I don’t think involving Kim Waldron in any of this would be wise, due to her father’s possible involvement. We can’t forget he was the main man in charge of the base.”

“If and when you show me proof, I’ll fall in line with that, but for now, I’ll proceed accordingly. Kim Waldron has been a part of the EFA case since day one, and she will remain so,” Salazar firmly replies.

“And Lieutenant Stanwell’s lie about Atlas shooting Maria Sokol during that raid...are you just going to let that hang in the air?” Dave fumes. “Can’t you see he used Jozef Sokol as a scapegoat for the plane crash? A crime that never happened. For God’s sake, it’s obvious Jozef Sokol didn’t take his own life. Van Stanwell killed him. And how do you explain Miguel Perez’s supposedly tragic accident and the fact

there were no reports of any kind? If that doesn't scream 'massive cover-up,' I don't know what does."

"Are you finished?" Salazar huffs.

Dave exhales. "We've done all we can, Lea. If you're not going to address these issues accordingly, then I'll have no choice but to pay another visit to the National Record."

Salazar scoffs at that. "I'll call Natalie Lawrence right this moment for you if you wish, and at the same time I'll arrange for you and your entire rogue team to be charged for numerous offenses. Now, if you can somehow provide actual proof beyond a reasonable doubt to back these theories of yours, then I'll be more than pleased to hear you out, as long as your nephew turns himself in."

Minutes after the Eisens exit Salazar's office, the attorney general reaches out to FBI Director Elliott Gregson at his home.

"Lea...this is quite a surprise. Please don't tell me we have some sort of major crisis on our hands," Gregson says, answering through Hello Friend.

"I'm glad to see you're sitting down, Elliott."

"Hmm. Somehow I don't think I'm going to like what you're about to tell me."

Salazar rubs her eyes. "Argh. Where to begin?" She details what she's just learned.

"My God," Gregson gasps, wide-eyed. "Dave Eisen and his wife actually believe Dr. Olsen and Stanwell were going to bring harm to all these people because of some child they believe became clairvoyant?" He begins pacing the floor of his den. "Could any of this be true, Lea?"

"Surprisingly, most of it appears to be solid, Elliott. Consider Olsen's suicide. When I send you the file and you see all the links laid out before your eyes, I'm sure you'll concur."

FBI Headquarters, Washington, DC

"How many times do I have to tell you people, Mr. Varley knows nothing about how that bomb got inside that crate?" Cheryl Erickson says to Director Gregson.

Gregson smiles and shakes his head. “And why, Miss Erickson, would I, or should I, believe the words of a liar? When my agent questioned Mr. Varley at our Miami field office, with you present, he refused to disclose his true involvement with the Euro Freedom Alliance. As I’m sure you’ll agree, it’s now obvious he did much more than just purchase drones and send off a crate of wine as a thank you gift.”

“Have you spoken with Lieutenant Van Stanwell, Director Gregson? Are you aware that my client was assisting him and his team in a highly clandestine mission with the end goal of taking down the EFA?” Erickson says, scowling. “Becoming involved in those ransomware attacks was part of the Lieutenant’s plan for infiltrating the group. His plan was to win their trust, which was accomplished. The idea always was to return the money, but for whatever reason, Lieutenant Stanwell failed to remain in contact with my client.”

“And when that impostor showed up pretending to be the EFA, I was left with no choice but to acquiesce to his demands, while saving ten million dollars in the process,” Varley lies.

A flabbergasted Gregson rubs his eyes. “And what prompted the lieutenant to come to you in the first place and ask for your help?”

“I informed him the EFA had come to me looking for devil-glass,” Varley shoots back. “These damn rumors about me being some big-time devil-glass dealer have haunted me for years, ever since a few of my so-called trusted employees got into dealing the stuff at my resorts behind my back.”

“Well now, that leads us perfectly into the next topic. Tell me all about the Friends of the Future,” Gregson says.

“By all means. What would you like to know?” Varley replies.

“It came as quite a surprise to find out it was you who was behind the movement. Why the mystery for nine years?” Gregson says, staring Varley in the eyes.

“I suppose I’m full of surprises, Director Gregson,” Varley shoots back. “It keeps life interesting. Would you not agree? Actually, my associate in the next room lost his lovely, innocent wife during the very early days of what eventually became the Euro conflict, and that

served as the impetus to create the movement. Besides, it's not uncommon for a mogul like myself to want to do things anonymously."

Gregson shakes his head at that. "Does the name Paul Clancy, aka Snowy, mean anything to you?"

"Sure does. He was part of my company's security team for over a decade. But I recently discovered he too had been dealing—from what I understand, a very dangerous and impure form of devil-glass. I learned he was dealing at FoF rallies and I had no choice but to let him go. And yes, I should've contacted the authorities, but I actually felt for the guy, and didn't want to see him go to prison," Varley explains.

"Hmm. This is all so interesting," Gregson replies. "I'm going to play a recording for you. A conversation between Snowy and his girlfriend Crystal, which took place at one of your New York City casinos."

Varley shakes his head and grimaces as he listens to Snowy tell Crystal how and why Varley orchestrated the murder of Sterling Rowe, along with the idea that the Friends of the Future was nothing more than a sham to deal devil-glass.

When the recording concludes, Varley cackles, while his attorney regards him through narrowed eyes. "What a load of garbage!" he calls out. "That son of a bitch would cheat his own mother if it served him. He'll also say and do whatever it takes to win over that lovely young woman. And sadly, it always seems to work."

"So, are you telling me it's all lies?" Gregson asks.

"Exactly," Varley grunts.

"Tell me what you know about Sterling Rowe," Gregson says.

"He was a guest of the FoF in its infancy before going on to join the military, and then just recently he came back to the group before overdosing on whatever it was Snowy gave him," Varley explains.

"No drug deal gone bad involving your son Zach, which cost your son his life?" Gregson counters.

Varley purses his lips and sighs. "My son died in a car accident, Director Gregson. I don't know anything about him ever being

involved in any drug deal, let alone whatever the hell Snowy was referring to.”

“Are you aware Snowy is dead?” Gregson shoots back.

“That’s news to me,” Varley replies.

“His body was found in a dumpster outside his workplace in Buffalo only days after the recording was made.”

Varley exhales. “Frankly, it doesn’t surprise me one bit. Those who play with fire eventually get burned.”

“That, I’ll definitely agree with,” Gregson scornfully replies. He turns to Cheryl Erickson. “Well, how about you and I pay a visit to Dax Anderson and Rocco Angelino over in the next room, and hear what they have to say?”

“Lead the way,” the attorney says, rising to her feet.

“Sit tight, Mr. Varley. We’ll be back when we’re done,” Gregson says with an icy glare.

Once Gregson finishes interviewing Dax and Rocco, he contacts the attorney general via a video call.

“Lay it on me, Elliott,” Salazar says.

“Varley had a damn answer for everything, and so did his underlings. And they were completely in sync,” Gregson replies. “If they were lying, they were all reciting from the same book of deception.” He gives details.

“Can this be?” Salazar replies in reference to the revelation Varley and Stanwell were working in tandem to take down the EFA.

“We’re talking about the Gold Hawks, ma’am,” Gregson replies. “From the day the unit was created it’s been given free rein to do whatever it takes to complete its missions, even if it sometimes means breaking laws in the process.”

“Well, in order to get to the bottom of this, Stanwell will have no choice but to lay out and prove every detail relating to Project Catching Freedom,” Salazar says. “In the meantime, Varley and his friends must remain in FBI custody.”

Flustered, Gregson runs a hand across his face. “Are you certain the White House will sign off on forcing Stanwell to reveal the details? It goes against current protocol.”

“Once the folks at the White House learn what was actually going on, I’m more than certain they’ll demand to know what the hell Stanwell was thinking,” Salazar says.

When Gregson ends the call with the attorney general, he meets one on one with Cheryl Erickson. “Are my clients free to leave?” she asks the FBI director.

Gregson chuckles. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am,” Cheryl bluntly replies. “On what grounds could you possibly hold them? You have no proof my clients were at all involved in the deaths of Sterling Rowe or this Snowy fellow, and on top of that they assisted the government in infiltrating the EFA. With all respect, Director Gregson, you should be thanking them.”

“Well, if and when Lieutenant Stanwell corroborates what I’ve been told, maybe I will, but until then, all three of your clients will be kept in FBI custody,” Gregson says. “And that order comes directly from the attorney general.”

The attorney raises her arms in disgust. “And when this is all said and done, I’ll be more than glad to file harassment suits against both the Bureau and the Department of Justice.”

“That’s what makes this country so wonderful, Miss Erickson—you’re free to do as you please and sue whoever you wish,” Gregson mockingly replies.

Chapter 29

Department of Justice Headquarters, Washington, DC

Trepidation guides his every footstep as Lieutenant Stanwell enters the conference room. He exhales and takes his place across from the attorney general and the FBI director.

“Good day, Lieutenant,” Salazar says.

Stanwell studies them uneasily. “So, here we are again.”

“You’ve taken great pride in leading the Gold Hawks over the years, haven’t you?” Salazar says.

Stanwell nods. “So much so that deciding to give it up was the most difficult decision of my life.”

“You’ve accomplished a great deal, leading that group,” Gregson interjects.

“Do you mind if we cut to the chase, and someone please tell me why I’m here?” Stanwell says.

“Project Catching Freedom,” Salazar replies. “We’ve received information leading us to believe the ransomware attacks were part of your plan to take down the EFA. Is this correct, Lieutenant?”

Stanwell tries unsuccessfully to hide his bemusement. “How do you...how do you know about that?”

“That’s irrelevant,” Salazar replies. “We need to know if it’s true.”

Stanwell doesn’t reply. He stares into space. *Hmm. This has to do with why Varley has been so fervently attempting to reach me.*

“Look, we fully understand the clandestine nature of the Gold Hawk missions, but this matter extends far beyond the norm,” Gregson adds.

Stanwell shifts nervously in his seat. “I don’t see this as being any different than the Larson mission. And to this day, not a single government official has ever questioned how we uncovered that human trafficking ring.”

“Please, Lieutenant...if you refuse to cooperate, I’ll have no choice but to pass the matter over to Criminal Investigations,” Salazar warns.

Stanwell thinks for a moment, then sighs heavily. “It’s true. The ransomware attacks were utilized to help infiltrate the EFA to the fullest extent. Now, as far as Jozef Sokol and the hacking of that plane is concerned, you both know as well as I do that we had every reason to go after him,” he lies.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Salazar says. “Please tell us how it all came to be.”

“The EFA Sundale cell was brought to my attention through Franklin Varley of the Varley Corporation,” Stanwell answers. “My brother Eric has done some investment banking work for Varley, and that is how Varley and I became connected. According to Franklin, there’d always been these rumors about him being involved in dealing devil-glass and this is what led to Lubor Sokol’s people reaching out to him.” He pauses and draws a breath before continuing his attempt to spin the story to his benefit. “So, being a concerned citizen, he played along with Sokol and eventually found out his group had been planning to hijack our power grids. The ransomware attacks were our way in. A way to ensure they didn’t follow through with their plan while we fully infiltrated the cell.”

“I see,” Salazar says, taking notes.

“And the money?” Gregson asks. “Am I correct in assuming the idea was to return the entire sixty million dollars?”

“Of course,” Stanwell lies. “On top of that, I personally made certain no company files ever got into the scummy hands of the EFA. At no time were any of them ever accessed by anyone.”

“But how come only half the money had been returned? And through the dark web?” Gregson asks.

“I’m certain I don’t have to tell either of you, in order for the mission to maintain its clandestine nature, there was no other

choice,” Stanwell explains. “And as far as returning the remaining thirty million dollars is concerned, the wheels are in motion and you have my guarantee it’ll get done ASAP.”

Salazar and Gregson exchange sidelong glances. “There’s something you need to know, Lieutenant,” Salazar says, and describes the sting operation against Varley.

“Wow,” Stanwell says, frowning. *Just as I figured*, he says to himself. “How did such a thing come about?”

“None of that matters,” Salazar says with a sigh. “The important thing is, the air’s now been cleared and we can all move on.”

“For everyone’s sake, please tell me this is all going to be kept behind closed doors, where it belongs,” Stanwell says.

Salazar and Gregson nod in unison.

“So, what are your thoughts?” Gregson asks Salazar after Stanwell has left.

“It’s difficult to know what to make of any of this,” Salazar replies, deep in thought. “Their stories all completely mesh, but I still have to wonder.”

“I know what you mean. I can’t see how we can just push aside what the Eisens have presented to us.”

“Especially when we consider the credibility and the backgrounds of the group that’s compiled the material.”

The FBI director runs a hand across his temple. “Jozef Sokol,” he muses. “Others at the Bureau felt we should’ve fully investigated his suicide, but it was my call, and I figured with the walls closing in on him for hacking that plane, he felt cornered and gave up the fight by giving up his life. If Stanwell killed him, I’m afraid it’s on me, ma’am.”

“If that’s the case, you surely weren’t the only one caught off guard,” Salazar replies. “And now, how are we going to explain a plane crash that never happened? We need to reach out to President O’Rourke and tell him everything we know.”

Sundale County

After two failed requests, Dave Eisen is elated when Jozef Sokol’s girlfriend, Anna, agrees to meet. “Thank you for doing this,” Dave

says when Anna welcomes him into her condo—the home she once shared with Jozef.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to meet with you earlier, but as I’m sure you can understand, my life’s been turned completely upside down,” Anna replies. Sadness fills her eyes. “First I find out the love of my life hacked into a plane and killed nine people, and then not long after, he takes his own life. I still don’t believe any of this has happened,” she adds in a broken voice.

“And with good reason,” Dave replies. “Jozef didn’t hack into any plane, and I have every reason to believe he didn’t take his own life.”

Anna blinks the tears away. “What...what are you talking about?” she stammers.

“Unfortunately I can’t provide you with all the details at this time, but what I’m telling you is the absolute truth.”

“My boyfriend’s dead, Mr. Eisen. And if he didn’t kill himself, then that means he was murdered.”

“I believe he was.”

“But, who, and why?” Anna shoots back. “You said Jozef didn’t hack the plane, so why would anyone go after him, and why was he being charged if he was innocent of the crime?”

“It’s very complicated. But I promise you, I’m doing everything in my power to uncover the entire truth.”

A puzzled expression consumes Anna’s face. “You told me you’re a former police detective. How do you know all this? And how will you be able to uncover the truth?”

“You have to trust me,” Dave says with a sigh. “Now, please tell me about Jozef’s final days. Did he tell you he’d been questioned by the FBI about the plane?”

“No,” Anna says, shaking her head. “But I did get the sense something was troubling him. He actually seemed paranoid in the days just prior to his death.”

“Did you address this with him?”

“Of course. As soon as I heard there was an EFA cell here in America, I immediately asked him if he was involved.”

“And?”

“He told me he wasn’t involved, and that he was very happy at Ovo-Tech. We were planning to get married later this year, and hoping to start a family, Mr. Eisen.” The tears reappear. “That’s why I was so shocked when I found out what he was being accused of, especially knowing how he thought the world of Siro Felder. But like I said, I sensed this whole thing had made him fearful about what was going to happen to him.”

“What about Lubor? Do you know if Jozef had been in touch with his brother?”

Anna sighs. “Yes, he had. And when I found out, I was furious. But Jozef assured me he no longer had anything to do with the EFA, and never would. I believed him. At least up until his death. And now...I don’t know what to believe. In fact, I’ve decided to go back home to Ukraine. Just being in this condo makes me sick, knowing his dead body was found right over there.” She shifts her eyes across the room.

Dave follows her gaze, and out of the corner of his eye, he notices a figurine of an angel with bright silver eyes sitting atop an end table. Hmm. Could this be the prototype Atlas had told him about? The video recorder idea he proposed to Siro Felder for Ovo-Tech? Dave rises to his feet and walks toward the figurine. “Wow. This is quite a piece of art,” he says, drawing Anna’s attention to the object.

“Jozef crafted that,” Anna replies. “From what he told me, his late sister, Maria, used to collect all kinds of figurines, so he made it in her honor. It’s somewhat strange you mentioned it, because in the days just prior to his death, Jozef, for whatever reason, seemed to have become really preoccupied with the thing.”

“My niece’s sweet little daughter, Tina, just loves anything to do with angels,” Dave says. “She’d go absolutely crazy for something like this.”

“Well then, it’s all yours.”

“Fantastic,” Dave crows, eyes fixed on the figurine. “Are you sure?”

“Most definitely.”

“That’s very kind of you. Thank you.” Dave gives her a friendly smile.

“You’re very welcome,” Anna says, returning the smile. “All I ask in return is that you keep me informed about what you discover...good or bad.”

“You have my word.”

Safe House

Upon his return, Dave meets with Siro, Atlas, and Brad in the main living room.

“How did things go with Sokol’s girlfriend?” Atlas asks his uncle.

“Well, I think I’ll have an answer for you once we’re able look into this angel’s eyes,” he replies as he retrieves the figurine from his travel bag.

“My goodness,” Siro gasps. “That’s the exact figurine Jozef presented to me.”

“Am I correct in supposing this was in his apartment?” Brad asks.

“Right in the heart of the living room, where his body was found,” Dave replies. “And the interesting thing is, his girlfriend told me he’d become paranoid about what was going to happen to him, while at the same time being preoccupied with the figurine for reasons unknown to her.”

“Please tell us you know how the thing works,” Atlas says to his father.

“It’s very simple,” Siro confidently replies, walking toward the figurine. “The eyes are cameras. One slight push of this little button at the back of the head turns them on, and two pushes releases the tiny computer chip from its mouth.” He backs his words with action. “Here it is. And now we simply scan it and let it play out before us.”

“Brilliant,” Brad exclaims.

“Well, let’s see what we get,” Atlas says.

The four men watch intently.

Van Stanwell is seated on a sofa across from Jozef Sokol.

“I told Agent Waldron everything I could,” Jozef says. Frustration edges his voice. “Why can’t you people get it through your heads that I didn’t hack into any plane?”

“Oh, I believe you, Jozef. In fact, I know you didn’t,” Stanwell says matter-of-factly. “And just to let you know, I’m not here to arrest you.”

“Then why are you here? Like I said, I’ve already told the FBI everything I can.”

“Do you ever count your lucky stars, Jozef?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The lieutenant laughs. “Come on, my friend. You came here from a broken Europe and became the CIO of a very successful company, enabled by some stupid international treaty that protects terrorists like yourself.”

“What we did to expose those banking criminals was completely justified, which is why that treaty exists,” Jozef says. “I am not a terrorist. I’m a seeker of justice,” he adds with a scowl.

Stanwell’s eyes narrow. “You lying son of a bitch. You and your good ol’ cousin Ivan are responsible for the murder of 767 innocent lives, people who simply took a train ride. Unlike you, Ivan obviously isn’t very tech savvy. His emails speak volumes. All this back and forth about the train company’s chairman being linked to the European Central Bank made it all very clear.” Stanwell is scowling now. “It took me until just a few days ago to fully figure things out—almost five damn years.”

“To abolish tyranny from the human race, sometimes innocent people must pay the price and die,” Jozef says without flinching.

* * *

With a raised brow, Siro pauses the video. “Did you know anything about this?” he asks Atlas. “Or, anything about this train company chairman?”

Atlas shakes his head. “No. Not a thing.”

“He must be referring to Tobias Kuhn,” Brad interjects. “He was the chairman of Thunder Rail, and a major force at the European Central Bank. One of the few higher-ups who avoided being charged.”

“From what I can recall, after the bombing, Thunder Rail changed its name and became a shadow of its former self. Kuhn retired shortly after,” Dave adds.

Siro exhales and resumes the video.

* * *

Jozef’s breathing grows heavy. “I thought you weren’t here to arrest me.”

“I’m not,” Stanwell says, rising to his feet, prompting Jozef to do the same.

“Sit the fuck down!” Stanwell orders as he puts on a pair of black leather gloves and retrieves a revolver from under his jacket.

With his arms raised in a defensive posture, Jozef follows the order. “What is it you want from me?”

Stanwell scoffs at that. “Perhaps part of the reason I came here was to vent.” He glares at the man before him while pacing the floor, gun clasped in his right hand. “Do you believe in clairvoyance, Jozef?”

“Why...? Why would you ask me such a crazy thing?”

“A psychiatrist associate and I had the opportunity to save those people on that train,” Stanwell says. “You see, one of our soldiers had a vision... Somehow, he foresaw the tragedy—the tragedy you created. But we didn’t believe him. His wife and kids were aboard that train. He warned us, but we refused to believe him—we thought he’d completely lost it. After all, how could somebody have acquired such a power?” The lieutenant pauses and takes a deep breath. “Eventually, in a rage, he lunged at my associate and was about to kill him, and I was left with no choice but to fire my gun. I killed that innocent young man because of you and your twisted ways.”

“If you’re going to kill me, go ahead and just do it,” Jozef mumbles through quivering lips.

“I did some research into your family background,” Stanwell says matter-of-factly, keeping his gun pointed at Jozef. “I must tell you, it was a rather horrid expedition.” He shakes his head and snickers. “Both your parents were killed during a heist they participated in. Your sister, Maria...I still vividly remember her reaching for that semi-automatic. Thank God I beat her to the draw.”

“It was you who killed my sister? Murderer!” Jozef cries out.

“That was purely self-preservation,” Stanwell says with a smirk. “Now, what’s about to happen to you and Lubor and his friends any minute now—well, that’s murder.” Drawing several breaths, the lieutenant retrieves a silencer from his jacket and places it on the gun.

“Death to tyranny. Life to liberty!” Jozef shouts. “Go ahead and do it. You bastard!”

“Okay,” Stanwell says. He moves in closer and shoots Jozef Sokol in the side of the head. “I told you I wasn’t going to arrest you,” he adds, standing over the man’s body. Kneeling, he carefully places the gun in Jozef’s right hand.

* * *

Those watching murmur in shocked disbelief. “That’s it,” Atlas blurts as his father stops the video. “We need to get Charmaine up to speed and get her away from Stanwell ASAP. I’ll give her a call.”

“It’s as if Jozef knew this was going to happen,” Siro muses. “My Lord. To think he helped orchestrate that train bombing...I would never have guessed, from my dealings with him. Either he truly was on a path of redemption, or he was the greatest actor this world’s ever known.”

“Stanwell,” Dave growls. “If this doesn’t do him in, nothing will.”

“That all depends,” Brad counters, appearing deep in thought. “It sounds like Stanwell killed Miguel Perez to save Dr. Olsen’s life, and as far as Jozef Sokol’s concerned, there’s a possibility Stanwell may’ve received an executive order to make the hit, once it was discovered Jozef orchestrated the bombing.”

“And I’d say the only way to determine that is by taking the next logical step, and once again bring our evidence to Salazar and Gregson. Would you not both agree?” Siro looks back and forth between Brad and Dave.

“Yes,” Brad replies.

“It needs to be done,” Dave concurs. He stands. “Though this definitely helps confirm our suspicions about Stanwell, we still don’t know what actually went down with Sterling, back at the base.”

“And it also still leaves us empty when it comes to General Waldron and his involvement,” Brad adds.

“Perhaps he wasn’t involved in any of this,” Siro says. “And when it comes to Sterling, maybe there isn’t anything more to his story than meets the eye. It could be you and Amber were misled, Brad. Sadly, he may’ve been one of the many unfortunate souls in this world who once again lost his direction in life and never truly found his way back.”

“I suppose it’s possible,” Brad replies with a shrug. “However, until it’s been proven, we need to stay on it.”

Chapter 30

Department of Justice Headquarters, Washington, DC

“Your Aunt Shayna should be here any minute now,” Dave informs Atlas as they sit in the reception area, waiting to meet with the attorney general and the FBI director.

Atlas grunts and shakes his head. “I pray to God we can all get our lives back, once we show them this video.”

Before he can frame a reply, Dave’s cell phone rings. “This must be your aunt,” he says, retrieving the phone from his jacket. “Hmm. It’s Brad. I wonder what this is about... Hey, Brad. What’s going on?”

“Looks like Kim Waldron and a couple of her FBI friends are paying us a visit here at the safe house,” Brad replies tersely. “They’re checking out the property as we speak.”

“Well, I suppose it was only a matter of time,” Dave says. “How are you planning to handle it?”

“I have no idea,” Brad replies. “Mostly because I have no idea why they’re here in the first place. Did you inform Salazar that Atlas was accompanying you today? I’m betting the main reason they’re here is to haul him in.”

“I didn’t inform her,” Dave replies. “Looks like she’s in for quite the surprise on more than one front.”

“Well, you take care of things on your end, and we’ll do the same here,” Brad says, ending the call.

Safe House

“Hello, Brad. It’s been ages, hasn’t it?” Agent Waldron says to her former Gold Hawk associate as she greets him at the front door. She’s flanked by two men wearing FBI windbreakers.

“That it has. How are you, Kim—or should I say, Agent Waldron?” Brad replies.

“Well, since I’m here on FBI business, Agent Waldron will do fine,” Kim says with a soft smile. “May we come in? Oh, and before you ask, yes, I do have a warrant.” She holds up a piece of paper

Brad studies her and grins. “Efficient as ever, I see. Come on in,” he says, and leads them into the main living room. “So, what can I do for you?”

“First of all, where is he? Where’s Atlas?” Kim asks, eyes taking in the living room entrances.

“He’s in Washington, about to meet with Attorney General Salazar and your boss,” Brad replies.

“Good,” Kim says. “It’s about time he turned himself in.”

Brad scoffs at that. “He’s not turning himself in.”

Kim raises a brow. “Huh? Then what’s he doing?”

“You’ll find out sooner than later,” Brad replies.

She glares at him. “When Director Gregson filled me in on this craziness, I thought my ears were playing tricks on me. I was aware of Atlas’s fascination with this supposedly clairvoyant child, but all the things surrounding this story are beyond ludicrous, especially the staged plane crash. What were you and your friends thinking?”

“Everything was done for a reason, Agent Waldron. Like I said, soon you’ll find out why,” Brad replies.

“Maybe so,” Kim says. “In the meantime, I’ve been ordered to check this place from top to bottom. Let’s begin by you telling me the names of everybody currently residing here and how they’re all connected.”

“Will do,” Brad replies, and begins providing the information.

Department of Justice Headquarters, Washington, DC

“I’m glad to see you’ve finally decided to come forward and turn yourself in,” Attorney General Salazar says to Atlas when he enters the conference room accompanied by his aunt and uncle.

“I’ll second that,” Director Gregson adds.

A stoic Atlas turns to Shayna.

“My client isn’t here to turn himself in,” she says.

“Okay. If we have to arrest him, then so be it,” Salazar calmly replies.

Dave retrieves a flash drive from his jacket and places it on the table in front of Salazar.

“What’s this, more crazy conjecture?” Salazar asks, her tone cynical.

“You could say it’s my client’s get out of jail flash drive,” Shayna replies, grinning.

Gregson snickers. “I don’t know about you, Lea, but I’ve had enough of everybody in this group trying to play superhero,” he says, glaring at Dave. “After I provided you with the information about Maria Sokol’s death, you stabbed me in the back and ran off to the National Record. And you,” the FBI director adds, turning his glare on Atlas. “How in the world did you let yourself become a part of this?”

“I did it to save my life,” Atlas shoots back. “You see, I didn’t kill Maria Sokol in that raid, nor did I set off any damn bomb in any damn building.”

“Please, ma’am. Play the video,” Dave says, nodding at the flash drive. “It’s all there.”

With her eyes still fixed on Atlas, the attorney general slowly inserts the device into her laptop.

Salazar and Gregson witness Lieutenant Stanwell speaking with Jozef Sokol and then eventually killing him in cold blood.

“Where did you...where did you get this?” Salazar asks Dave when the video concludes.

He explains the angel figurine. “Seeing as he turned on the device when Stanwell arrived, Jozef must’ve figured something was up and he wanted the world to see.”

Gregson turns to Atlas. “You were a Gold Hawk. Were you not aware of what now appears to be Stanwell’s plan to simultaneously eliminate Jozef and Lubor Sokol?”

“No,” Atlas bluntly replies. “I was told I was being sent into that building to help provide proof Lubor and his friends were dealing devil-glass, and then from there the idea presented to our group was that a full-out raid would ensue, followed by arrests.”

“And from what you just witnessed, it’s obvious my client and the other Gold Hawks were lied to as Stanwell embarked on his own personal killing mission, which included Atlas as a target,” Shayna interjects. “Now, unless the mission was some sort of insane black-ops thing ordered by the US Government, I’d say the lieutenant’s guilty as sin.”

A brief silence fills the room before the attorney general replies. “There’s no way the US Government would conduct business in this manner. Not in this day and age.” She turns to Gregson. “There’s far more than enough here. We need to bring Stanwell in.”

“And what about Franklin Varley?” Shayna says. “Are you still buying his innocence in all this?”

“Until we can prove otherwise, or Stanwell sells him out, we have no choice,” Salazar replies. She draws a deep breath and exhales. “Now, the rest of your group back at the safe house. That’s something we need to talk about.”

“We sure do,” Dave says, glaring at Gregson. “The last we heard, Agent Waldron and a couple of her men were paying the place a visit.”

Salazar gives Gregson a nod. The FBI director sighs and retrieves his phone and moves to one side of the room. Within seconds, Kim Waldron’s image appears on his phone. “What’s going on, Director Gregson?” she asks.

Gregson relates what he’s just learned.

“Everything seems exactly as we’ve been told, and Brad Sutton has been very cooperative,” Kim replies.

“That’s good to hear,” Gregson says. “Whatever you do, make certain no one leaves the property for the time being.”

“I’ve already ordered all the occupants not to do so and informed them the place will be under surveillance. I’m certain we’ll be fine,” Kim replies.

When Gregson rejoins the others, he enters what has become a heated conversation.

“Regardless, what you’ve all done is unacceptable and highly illegal,” the attorney general barks at Dave and Shayna.

“Yes, and in the process it potentially saved lives while uncovering something you and Gregson couldn’t. And now the entire truth needs to be told,” Dave steadfastly counters, looking back and forth between Salazar and Gregson.

“Oh, Van Stanwell will get what he deserves. I guarantee you that,” Salazar says. “But if you think the US Government is going to support the concept of some mysterious prescient powers being transmitted into the minds of human beings, well, you’re gravely mistaken.”

“So, are you just going to ignore what’s transpired at that forsaken place, along with what we’ve learned about Miguel Perez and Noah Cowan?” Dave asks.

“First of all, there’s no proof Miguel Perez was prescient. He was a Gold Hawk. Maybe he’d attained inside information into the bombing, or was somehow involved,” Salazar retorts. “And second, how can we rely on the lieutenant’s narrative when it’s now become evident he’s a master of deception?”

“And Noah Cowan?” Shayna counters.

“Perhaps he’s a very gifted child who’s bound to become an internet sensation,” Salazar says with a shrug. “That’s of course if his mother wishes to put him through such a thing.”

“It sounds like you’re planning to just sweep this all under the carpet,” Atlas shoots back.

“What I’m planning is to deal in reality,” Salazar replies. “And if anyone can show me indisputable proof something otherworldly went on at the JK Preston base, or the current Sanctuary Park, I’ll deal with it then, and only then.”

“Hmm. Seeing as General Waldron was the base’s overseer, maybe he can enlighten us,” Dave says.

Salazar nods. “Yes. With the information you’ve now brought to us, he too will need to answer many serious questions.”

Chapter 31

The Sea Garden restaurant, Washington, DC

“Well, I just couldn’t let you gentlemen return to Miami without trying the best lobster this side of the universe,” Lieutenant Stanwell tells Varley and Dax, beaming. “You’ll feel like you’ve died and gone to heaven, or wherever it is you boys deem to be paradise,” he adds with a laugh. He waves a tall, olive-skinned waitress over to the table. “Please bring us a bottle of Varley champagne, Fiona. My friends and I have quite a bit of celebrating to do.”

“Ah, you choose very wisely,” Varley quips.

“And expensively,” Dax adds, prompting laughter.

Moments later, Stanwell raises his glass of champagne and crows, “Here’s to my final and most successful mission of all time.”

As the three men salute their success, a gunman carrying a semi-automatic rifle, his identity concealed by a black and green ski mask, bursts into the restaurant. He stalks silently to their table and before the three men can react, unleashes a hail of bullets at them. “Death to tyranny! Life to liberty!” he roars in a thick accent before dashing out of the building, passing other patrons cowering under tables.

“Oh my God!” Fiona shrieks as she reappears from the kitchen. Recovering from her shock, she pulls out her cell phone and dials 911 with shaking hands. Horrified sobs and cries fill the restaurant.

“All appears clear,” the restaurant’s manager eventually calls out. He and Fiona drape tablecloths over the three bullet-riddled bodies.

A maroon SUV speeds away from the restaurant. Leaving town via a series of backroads, it eventually slows, then stops behind a motorcycle waiting in a wooded area. The assassin exits the SUV, leaving the gun, the ski mask, and a notebook inside.

* * *

When Director Gregson, Kim Waldron, and two other agents arrive at the Sea Garden, Gregson begins interviewing the restaurant's manager and staff while his underlings speak with the few patrons who were willing to remain on scene.

Kim takes aside a heavyset man with a large round head, dressed in a tan double-breasted suit. "It was crazy...really crazy. A client and I were enjoying our shrimp cocktails," the man tells her, "and this guy just came in like a madman and fired away at the three men. There's no doubt he knew who he was after."

"Did you hear him say anything?" Kim asks.

"Oh yeah. Death to tyranny. Life to liberty," the man replies. "He shouted it in a heavy accent. My client informed me what he shouted was some kind of mantra those Euro Freedom Alliance bastards use."

Kim nods thoughtfully. "Yes. That's very true."

Minutes later, she meets with Gregson to compare notes. "Considering what he shouted and the signature black and green ski mask, this definitely looks like it's EFA-related," the FBI director declares with a sigh. "The White House will need to get in front of this ASAP."

"Hmm. Dax Anderson," Kim mumbles, standing over Dax's body. "Just before this all went down, his daughter, Violet, reached out to NYPD, who in turn contacted my office. Apparently she has info related to Sterling Rowe's overdose."

* * *

Upon returning to her office, Kim had her secretary set up a video call with Violet the next day.

“Good day, Violet,” she says now. “I want to begin by telling you how sorry I am for your loss.”

“My father brought about his own demise, Agent Waldron,” Violet replies in a broken voice. Her sunken eyes and frown accentuate her grief.

“So, I understand you have information regarding Sterling Rowe.”

“They murdered him.”

“Who? Who murdered him?”

“Varley, my father, and a white-haired, drug-dealing freak they call Snowy.”

“Are you certain of this? The autopsy report on Sterling indicated he died of an overdose,” Kim says.

“Yes. Spiked devil-glass. Supplied by Varley through my father with the intention of killing him. It all goes back to Varley blaming Sterling for his son’s death. A drug deal gone bad. I’ve come to learn Varley was dealing more drugs than he was cards. Take the Friends of the Future for example—the entire setup was all about dealing devil-glass.”

Kim’s eyes widen with every word. “How do you know all this?”

“Dad told me. He’d been planning to confess everything, but Varley found out and threatened to kill me if he did, so in order to protect me, Dad figured he’d just let things go. But I couldn’t.”

“That’s very courageous of you,” Kim softly says. “Did your father happen to mention anything to you regarding a connection to the other man he and his boss were killed with today—Lieutenant Van Stanwell?”

Violet shakes her head. “No, I can’t say I recall ever hearing that name.”

The White House, Washington, DC

After a lengthy meeting with the president and his staff, Attorney General Salazar and Director Gregson prepare to face the White House press corps to discuss the murder of Lieutenant Van Stanwell.

Salazar solemnly addresses the group with Gregson by her side. “Good evening, everyone.” She then relates the facts surrounding the

shooting. "With that, I'll now hand things over to Director Gregson." She steps aside, surrendering the podium to the FBI director.

"Thank you, Attorney General. I'll now take questions," Gregson says. "Let's have Carly first," he adds, nodding at a young woman positioned toward the back of the room.

"Can you confirm this was the work of the Euro Freedom Alliance?" the reporter asks.

"No. However, the facts are leading us to believe it was EFA-related," Gregson replies. "Okay, let's have Raheem."

"Should Americans be concerned the EFA is still alive and well and here in our country?"

"If, and I say *if*, this is connected to the EFA, it is our belief we're dealing with a lone wolf scenario, which, as you're well aware, is out of our control," Gregson replies. "Through strong intelligence, we believe there are no current EFA cells here in America. But that could change at any time if we don't remain vigilant."

"Was Lieutenant Stanwell directly involved in the planned EFA raid which never took place due to the bombing?" Raheem follows up.

Gregson scoffs at that. "You know better than to ask such a question, Raheem. I'll take two more...Gloria from WCR, followed by Natalie with the National Record."

"Knowing the EFA cell here in America was dealing drugs and guns, and knowing Franklin Varley ran a gambling empire and has been rumored to be involved in various illegal activities, is it possible he and his associate were the targets and Lieutenant Stanwell was in the wrong place at the wrong time?" Gloria asks.

Gregson furrows his brow, appearing to slip into thought. "Yes, that is very possible, but so are several other scenarios."

"Are you aware of any direct link between Varley and the lieutenant?" Gloria asks.

"We're aware the lieutenant often vacationed at Varley resorts, and that his brother has performed investment banking services for the Varley Corporation in the past," Gregson says, refraining from expanding on the matter. "Okay, let's wrap things up with Natalie."

“Thank you, Director Gregson,” the National Record’s lead journalist says. “Considering Lieutenant Stanwell was heading up security for General Waldron’s election campaign, is there concern for the leading presidential candidate?”

Gregson clears his throat. “Though it’s important and wise to consider all possibilities, it’s also vital we don’t over-speculate and become paranoid. You have my assurance the Bureau will fully investigate this crime until answers are found.”

“Do you know if General Waldron is planning to speak on the matter?” Natalie asks.

“No, I don’t,” Gregson replies. “Thanks everybody,” he adds, before exiting the podium.

Safe House

“Is that it?” Clay exclaims. He throws his arms in the air, glaring at the television screen. “What about all the other crap Stanwell’s done?”

“I wouldn’t expect any of that to be exposed until they’ve at least had a chance to look into what Waldron knows,” Brad replies with a sigh. “And even then, who knows if the complete truth will ever come out.”

“Sadly, that’s simply the way these things work, Clay,” Atlas interjects.

Clay rises up from the sofa and walks toward the window. “This is unbelievable,” he huffs as he looks out at the FBI vehicles surrounding the property. “Somebody please tell me, are we ever going to get our lives back?”

“We will,” Atlas replies. “But I need to warn you, the truth...it’ll be twisted and compromised in whatever way the powers-that-be see fit.”

“Does that mean it’ll never come out that Stanwell was the person who bombed that building, targeting both you and the EFA?” a flustered Clay asks, plopping back down on the sofa.

“According to the attorney general and Director Gregson, the bombing being seen as a mass suicide is in everyone’s best interest—and frankly, I have to agree,” Atlas says.

“And why’s that?” Clay counters with a raised brow.

“If the truth’s brought to light, there’s no doubt it would inspire an EFA uprising, which would bring about a whole other set of problems,” Atlas explains. “You see, the idea of a mass suicide led by Lubor Sokol sends out a message of weakness to the remaining EFA fragments, which is favored by our government and others around the world.”

“And what about the fact Stanwell killed Miguel Perez and Jozef Sokol and covered it up? Is that going to all be swept away as well?” Clay asks.

Atlas rubs his weary eyes. “Bearing in mind what revealing that info would lead to, I’d say that’s a rather safe bet.”

“Are we going to let that happen?” Clay asks, looking back and forth between Atlas and Brad.

Brad purses his lips. “Well, if we want our lives back and not face any issues ourselves, we have no choice.”

Atlas’s ringing cell interrupts the conversation. “It’s Charmaine,” he announces. “What’s going on, Charmaine? I’ll put you on speaker. I’m here with Brad and Clay.”

“Waldron just fired me and the rest of the security team,” Charmaine says.

“Did he say why?” Atlas asks.

“No. However, I did learn he’s hired a DC security firm to take over,” Charmaine replies. “Are you certain Waldron didn’t know about my involvement in all of this?”

“Unless he somehow figured things out for himself, all he would know is what Salazar and Gregson were told. And the only time your name ever came up was the witness statement you provided, stating that I didn’t kill Maria Sokol and Stanwell did,” Atlas answers.

“Well, if he is involved in this insanity, I imagine that’d be enough to make him leery of me,” Charmaine says.

“If you don’t mind me adding my two cents, I’d say this is all for the best,” Brad interjects. “After what happened to Stanwell, it’s clear you’d be risking your well-being.”

Charmaine sighs. “Which is what I’ve been doing my entire adult life.”

“Brad’s spot on, Charmaine. You need to get yourself out of there,” Atlas says. “No matter what’s uncovered about Waldron, or anybody else. You know as well as I do the government’s going to continue to move forward according to how it best serves its own needs.”

“As usual,” Clay interjects. “All we need to do is look at the way they discredited those mysterious lights over the Atlantic, that night years ago.” He shakes his head in disgust. “I saw them with my very own eyes. Let me tell you, that was no space junk casting those lights over the water.”

“That certainly was Waldron at his best,” Atlas wryly states. “UFO enthusiasts around the world didn’t stand a chance against his bombastic denial.”

Chapter 32

Department of Justice Headquarters, Washington, DC

General Waldron and US Special Ops Commander Colonel Warner Herrington enter the main conference room together. They are greeted by Attorney General Salazar and two members of her staff. “Please have a seat, gentlemen,” Salazar says. Her tone is serious. “Now, am I correct to assume you’ve had a chance to review both the report and the video my office sent to you?”

Both men nod sullenly.

Salazar exhales. “So, can either of you tell me how this happened? I realize the lieutenant and the Gold Hawks had been given extra privileges when it came to autonomy, but would you not agree this went just a tad too far, Colonel?”

Herrington rubs his temple. “Both the report and the video were disturbing. And please let it be clear, ma’am, I had no knowledge of any of this. It appears the lieutenant found out about Jozef Sokol through his own investigative work and decided to go rogue for his own personal reasons,” he solemnly says. He pauses before adding, “However, because this all happened under my watch as the lieutenant’s overseer, I’m willing to accept full responsibility.”

Salazar turns to General Waldron. “Russell?” she says.

“I’m...I’m still at a loss, trying to understand all that’s transpired,” Waldron replies. “Disturbing is exactly how I’d describe it as well. Shocking.”

“Why no reports relating to Miguel Perez’s death?” Salazar asks, looking Waldron in the eyes.

“I presume now we know why. A cover-up on Lieutenant Stanwell and Dr. Olsen’s part,” Waldron replies without flinching. “And since the doctor who performed the autopsy died a few weeks later, it’s obvious they took advantage of the fact.”

“I’ve come to learn Miguel had nobody else in his life besides his wife and children. So that meant it was quite easy for the lieutenant and Dr. Olsen to hide the truth, with no one asking questions,” Herrington says. “Again, that’s where my office needed to be far more diligent.”

“Dr. Olsen...this whole ordeal must’ve been weighing on him for the last four and a half years,” Waldron interjects. “How in the world could he and Stanwell have believed in such an outlandish thing as clairvoyance to the point where the lieutenant would attempt to kill Atlas Felder because of the craziness surrounding some child? But like Colonel Herrington, I too take responsibility and should’ve been much more attentive to what was happening on the base.” He pauses and draws a breath. “However, with all respect, I think it’d be the wrong decision to go public with this, regardless of what the lieutenant told Jozef Sokol about Miguel, and regardless of the fact those caring for Noah Cowan claim the child exhibits some sort of prescient power after attending the campground.”

Salazar blinks rapidly. “Did you read section four of the report? The child was perfectly normal until he visited that property. And considering what we’ve now learned about Miguel Perez during his time on the base, how can we not be left with questions?” She pauses, clasps her hands on the table, and leans forward. “All that said, I agree. There’s absolutely no way the United States government can afford to even touch this.”

“And what about the folks back at the safe house, especially the child’s mother, Julie Cowan; are they in agreement?” Waldron anxiously asks.

“Thankfully, she wants nothing more than to get her and her child’s life back,” Salazar says.

“And Atlas? What’s his position on all this? Not to mention the staged plane crash. How in the world is that going to be explained?” Herrington asks with a furrowed brow.

“Atlas and Siro Felder will be joining me at tomorrow’s presser. I’m certain you’ll receive all the answers you need, Colonel,” Salazar replies, ending the meeting.

The White House, Washington, DC

“I hope we can soon break the habit of these things,” Director Gregson says to Salazar while preparing to once again meet the press corps.

“This one’s going to be the toughest of all,” Salazar replies, looking at Atlas and Siro Felder, who are standing in the wings. Turning back to Gregson, she says, “Thankfully, everyone’s on board with the plan.”

“And there’s a reason why operations such as Catching Freedom are classified as highly covert. Sometimes even our very own laws must be bent and the public must be deceived for these missions to be successful,” Salazar says in conclusion to the stunned group of reporters who’ve just listened to her and the FBI director provide details about a staged plane crash and the survival of a special ops agent who’d been reported dead.

“I’d now like to bring out Siro and Atlas Felder, who will join Director Gregson and me in answering any questions you may have,” Salazar says, and points to a petite woman in the second row. “How about we begin with Deirdra?”

“When it came to the staged plane crash, was the government not concerned about the panic it would generate across the country, with people fearing an airplane’s avionics could be hacked into?” Deirdra asks.

“Unfortunately, it was the best way we could protect the lives of those nine people,” Salazar lies.

“Can Director Gregson tell us why the lives of Julie Cowan and her family were also being threatened?” Deirdra follows up.

“They weren’t,” Gregson says. “They happened to be innocent bystanders who unfortunately became caught up in this mess.” He points to a young man in the back corner of the room. “The gentleman in the beige jacket.”

“I’d like to ask Siro Felder how he came to know Julie Cowan and her family,” the man says.

Siro steps up to the podium. “While performing charity work at Sundale General, I had the pleasure of meeting Julie when her daughter, Ocean, was a patient. From there, I offered to fly her and the others to Sanctuary Park as guests of me and my wife. And as you now know, that didn’t quite work out,” he says, deftly maintaining the cover-up.

Salazar then points to Carly Perkins from WCR.

“I’d like to ask Atlas about his escape from the Am-Dro building.”

“Plain and simple. I got lucky,” Atlas replies. “I’m sorry, but that’s all I can share.”

“Are you planning to continue on in special ops?” Carly asks.

Atlas sighs. “No. I wish I could, but now that my cover’s been blown, that would be impossible.”

“All right,” Salazar says. “Let’s have Raheem and then Natalie with the National Record for the finale.”

“Is the Am-Dro building bombing still being deemed a mass suicide?” Raheem asks.

“Yes,” Salazar replies, and abruptly turns away from the journalist and toward Natalie Lawrence.

“This is for AG Salazar, or Director Gregson,” the veteran journalist says. “Do you have any update on the murders of Lieutenant Stanwell, Franklin Varley, and his associate, Dax Anderson?”

Director Gregson steps to the podium. “Though we’ve yet to make an arrest, we now more than ever believe this was the work of an EFA lone wolf.” He pauses and thinks for a moment. “The assassin’s vehicle was discovered and contained solid evidence, including an EFA manifesto.”

Natalie grins mischievously. “I need to ask you, Director Gregson. Why is it the Bureau has not yet brought to light the fact that Franklin Varley was behind the Friends of the Future? A movement we’ve come to learn he established for the sole purpose of dealing devil-glass, with his associate, Dax Anderson, acting as his

lead salesman. And on top of that, why was Lieutenant Stanwell having lunch with these two men?"

"Regarding your remarks about the Friends of the Future, nothing yet has been proven, but it is under investigation. And as to why Lieutenant Stanwell was meeting with Franklin Varley and his associate, I don't have that answer," Gregson says. "Thanks, everyone," he adds, ending the session.

Julie Cowan's residence, Sundale County

Julie beams, passing through the front door. "Home sweet home. Miracles do happen. Thanks, big brother," she says to Clay as he lugs a number of suitcases and bags into the house.

"If there's anybody we both should be thanking, it's Siro and Ruby Felder," Clay replies. "They were certainly true to their word when they promised to support us in getting back on our feet. Anyhow, I should get back to my gang," Clay says by way of farewell as he leaves.

"So, Mom, tell me what I'm to say to my friends when they ask me how I came back to life?" Ocean quips.

"If they're truly your friends they wouldn't dare ask such a thing," Julie replies, grinning.

"Hey, look at sleepyhead over there." Ocean nods toward Noah, napping on the living room sofa. "Do you have any idea whether he can still see into the future? If he can, I want him to tell me if mean Mr. Egan is going to be my new teacher in September. Because if so, I'm quitting school."

Julie laughs and shakes her head. "Go get yourself ready. Hannah will be by anytime now," she says, referring to the children's nanny.

"I can't wait to see her. It's been way too long," Ocean replies.

"Just don't forget to bring back a container of your brother's favorite ice cream," Julie says with a smile.

"I know. Chocolate peanut butter."

Moments after Ocean leaves, Noah cries out, "Go away! Go away!"

"Noah!" Julie dashes into the living room and finds the boy lying in a fetal position on the floor a couple of feet from the sofa. Heart

pounding, she drops down beside him. “What’s wrong, Noah? Are you having a nightmare?” she gently asks.

There’s no response. Though he’s breathing, his ghostly pale face and wide eyes conjure dread in his mother. “Talk to me, Noah. Who were you telling to go away? Please tell me what happened. Please—no one can help you if you keep it to yourself.”

Again, there’s no reply. Petrified, Julie heads to the kitchen to retrieve her tablet. Seconds later, she’s face to face with Ruby Felder on Hello Friend. “Hey, Julie. How does it feel to be back home?” Ruby asks, then sobers. “You don’t look well.”

“It’s Noah,” Julie replies in a broken voice. “Something very strange has happened.”

“Did you notice anything peculiar in the moments leading up to his nap?” Ruby asked after Julie describes what happened.

“No,” Julie says, then gasps when she turns around and sees Noah heading for the stairs. “What in the world? He’s going upstairs. I guess I should follow him and see what the heck is going on,” she says to Ruby.

“All right. Keep me posted.”

Julie ends the call and goes to Noah’s room. Fear leads her every footstep. “Hey, Noah. Is it okay if I come in?” she says from the doorway.

“Sure,” he answers, sitting on the floor with a multitude of jigsaw puzzle pieces scattered in front of him.

“Hey, isn’t that the puzzle Ruby gave you back at the safe house?”

“Yes. It’s the world,” Noah replies.

Julie studies her child as she carefully searches for words. “Were you having a nightmare during your nap?”

“No. It wasn’t a nightmare. It was real. But it’s over,” Noah says matter-of-factly as he begins shifting the puzzle pieces around.

Deciding not to force the matter, Julie sits on the edge of Noah’s bed and looks on.

“This is going to be a real challenge,” Noah says as he reaches for the box and examines the photo of the puzzle in its completed form.

Julie’s worry suddenly gives way to relief as she watches him concentrating fiercely on the puzzle. “Hey, Noah. I’m thinking of a number from one to ten. Can you guess what it is?”

“Four,” Noah shoots out.

“Close. It was six. Well, I’ll leave you to the puzzle, little man,” she says, and leaves.

Seconds later, Julie reconnects with Ruby on Hello Friend and relates what just happened. “I never thought I’d see the day where I’d be so pleased to see Noah so frustrated by a puzzle. Do you think this craziness could finally be over?”

“Sounds like it very well could be,” Ruby replies. “That said, it’s probably best if I come on by in the morning.”

The following morning, after Ruby spends time with Noah, she and Julie sit down for coffee in the living room.

“Whatever prescient power it was that came over your son definitely appears to have vanished. Either that, or he’s tricking us into believing so, which I highly doubt,” Ruby says.

“Do you think the program you were using on him worked after all?” Julie asks.

“Though it’s in its infancy, The Mind’s Eye has proven to be a very effective relaxation program,” Ruby replies.

Julie exhales. “I don’t know how to thank you and Siro for all you’ve done,” she says, blinking back tears.

“It’s our pleasure,” Ruby replies. “I only wish I could tell you how and why this all came to be. So many questions, still with so few answers.”

Judy’s Diner, New York City

“Hello, Violet, It’s great to finally meet in person,” Atlas says, joining her at her table.

“Now, am I still to refer to you as Slater, or do I go with Atlas?” Violet asks with a chuckle.

“Atlas will do just fine. I suppose I owe you a full explanation.”

“That won’t be necessary. You actually did me a favor.”

“So, how’s People for Peace coming along?”

“My plan’s fully in place, but my funding...that’s an entirely different story.” Violet frowns.

“Well, hopefully this’ll help,” Atlas says with a smile as he passes a check across the table.

“My Lord. This is for three million dollars,” an astonished Violet gasps. “How? I mean...why?”

“In all honesty, your plan impressed the heck out of me,” Atlas replies.

“But you’re a soldier. Where in the world did you get this kind of money?”

“I *was* a soldier.”

“A former soldier who won a lottery?”

“No, a former soldier fortunate enough to have an incredibly compassionate father, who also happens to be an extremely successful businessman,” Atlas replies, and reveals that Siro owns Ovo-Tech. “And from the moment I told him your plan, he was delighted to help out. It’s all yours, with no payback of any sort expected.”

“Thank you so much. And thank your father,” Violet says, blinking back tears. “I only hope I can do half the good in this life as my mother did.”

Chapter 33

FBI Headquarters, Washington, DC

“So, I understand you have an actual lead on the Sea Garden shooter,” Director Gregson says to Kim upon entering her office.

“It’s about time,” Kim huffs. “I just hope it’s solid. Seeing as this guy was brazen enough to target Lieutenant Stanwell in a popular restaurant, I’ve been fearing for my father’s safety ever since it happened.”

“Well, let’s hear what you have.”

“It’s a lead on the getaway vehicle where the evidence was found,” Kim informs him. “It appears the perp brought the vehicle in for repairs two days before the incident at a place called Vic’s Auto which is only a few blocks from the restaurant.”

When Kim arrives at the auto shop, she’s immediately met by a tall, slender man with dark, shoulder-length, wavy hair. “Hello. I’m the owner, Victor Nagy,” he says. “Please, follow me into my office.”

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Kim cuts to the chase. “Did you provide him with an invoice, or was it some sort of cash transaction without one?”

“The latter,” Victor replies. “I offered. But all he left here with was the general receipt from my cash register.”

“Did he give you a name?”

“Nope,” Victor replies.

“Do you have him on video?”

Victor shakes his head. “Unfortunately, I erase the tapes after forty-eight hours,” he explains. “The only reason I caught on to the story was

because of my wife. She has family spread across parts of eastern Europe, so whenever news about the EFA pops up, she's on it."

"How about a description?" Kim asks.

"Well, he was about six feet tall with a medium build. But he was wearing a ball cap and dark glasses, so I couldn't get a good look at him," Victor replies.

"How would you describe his voice?" Kim asks.

"Deep, with a thick accent."

Kim runs a hand across her face and blows air out through her lips. "I appreciate you reaching out to me, Mr. Nagy, but this doesn't give me much."

"There's more," Victor replies.

"Please, tell me," Kim urges.

"That night, my wife and I and another couple went to Olly's Lounge up the street. Our mystery man was there playing pool with the owner of the place."

"Are you certain it was him?" asks Kim.

"Yep. He was wearing the same clothing and ball cap. It had a very distinctive insignia on it. A silver bird flying into the sun."

"Did you end up speaking with him?" Kim asks with a raised brow.

"No," Victor replies. "But, since he was playing pool within earshot of our table, I definitely heard him speak."

"Do you recall him saying anything of interest?"

"It's not what he said. It's how he said it," Victor replies.

"I don't understand."

"His accent. That thick accent he spoke to me with earlier in the day had been replaced by a good old heavy New York accent," Victor says.

"Hmm. That's rather interesting... Which one was the real one?" Kim ponders aloud.

"That I can't tell you," Victor replies. "They certainly both sounded authentic."

After departing from the auto shop, Kim makes her way to Olly's Lounge, where she identifies herself to a petite young woman with

braided black hair. "I'm looking to speak with the owner," Kim says politely.

"That'd be my father. I'll get him for you," the woman says.

A minute or so later, a muscular man with sunken eyes approaches Kim. "I'm the owner, Lionel Avery. How can I help you?"

Once again, Kim identifies herself. "I'd appreciate a moment of your time in private, please," she says.

"By all means, Agent Waldron." Lionel leads her to his back office. "Sorry for the mess. Not enough hours in the day," he says when they enter.

"Oh, I know the feeling," Kim replies with a chuckle, then provides details about the suspect.

"I definitely remember him. He introduced himself as TJ," Lionel says. "He was quite a pool player. Told me he'd only be in town a couple of days and that he was staying at the Rest Easy Hotel across the street." He pauses and looks at Kim with narrowed eyes. "Is this guy a wanted criminal or something?"

"That's what we're attempting to figure out, Mr. Avery," Kim replies. "Was there anything distinctive about his voice?"

"Judging by his accent, he had to be a New Yorker," Lionel says. "I wish I could tell you more, but that's all I have."

Kim nods. "You've been of great help. Thank you, Mr. Avery."

Next she goes to the Rest Easy, where she's met by the hotel manager.

"I'm Angie. How can I assist you?" a middle-aged blonde woman says from behind the counter.

Kim does her best to describe the suspect.

"Yes, I think I know exactly who you're talking about—TJ," Angie says. "But I can't recall anything about any accent...in fact, I don't think he spoke a single word to me during his two night stay. Just the odd uneasy smile and a few nods."

"Did you get a full name, or see any ID?" Kim asks.

Angie shakes her head. "Nope. He paid cash in advance, and that was it."

"Are you able to let me see the room he was staying in?" Kim asks.

“I certainly can, but quite a few guests have already been in that room since he checked out,” Angie explains. “However, today just might be your lucky day.”

“How so?”

Angie reaches under the counter and retrieves a black duffle bag. “This,” she says. “It was heading for the charity depot across the street today, since it’s now past my claim expiry date. It belonged to the man you’re looking for. For whatever reason, he left it behind and never came back for it. And the crazy thing is, I discovered these inside,” she adds, retrieving two one hundred dollar bills from behind the counter and placing them before Kim. “I called the local police, but they advised me to just donate the money to the depot along with the bag, if the owner didn’t return.”

“I’ll need to take those,” Kim says. She looks at the bag and frowns. She studies the bag. *My Lord. This is the very bag I gave my father on Father’s Day when I was thirteen. Did he orchestrate the shooting?* “Thank you,” she manages, and gathers up the bag and bills and leaves.

Heart racing and her senses reeling, Kim places the evidence in the back of her vehicle and heads to her father’s campaign headquarters.

“Wow, what a wonderful surprise,” the general says when Kim is escorted into his office. She doesn’t respond. Her solemn face prompts the general to ask, “What’s going on, Kim? You look like you’ve just lost your best friend. Has something happened I should know about?”

She glares daggers back at him as she retrieves a tablet from her handbag. After running her fingers across the screen, she hands him the device. “Does this bag look familiar to you?” she asks in a broken voice.

“Should it?” he shoots back with a furrowed brow.

Kim sharply exhales. “Take a good look at the photo. Does it look familiar?”

“To me, it just looks like another duffle bag.”

“I gave you that bag when I was thirteen years old, for Father’s Day. I guess you don’t remember.”

“I...I don’t understand.”

“I know damn well you filled it with cash and paid off some hitman to take out Van Stanwell, Franklin Varley, and Dax Anderson. The actual bag’s in the trunk of my car as we speak!” Kim rages. “Funnily enough, it came with two one hundred dollar bills when I retrieved it from a seedy hotel not very far from the Sea Garden restaurant. I also came to learn the guy you hired could pull off a really good accent.”

General Waldron begins breathing rapidly and his shoulders sag in defeat. “I got Van before he got me, Kim. And as far as those two other miscreants are concerned, I know for certain they killed Sterling Rowe. As far as I’m concerned, all three of those bastards got what they deserved.”

Lost for words, Kim shakes her head. “You’re telling me the same man who always claimed he looked up to you like an older brother was planning to kill you.”

“All we need to do is consider recent events.”

“Do you have proof he wanted you dead?”

“In fact, I do,” Waldron replies as he reaches for his own tablet. “This video will show you all you need to know.” He places the device in front of his daughter.

“What am I looking at?” Kim asks.

“Van Stanwell planting an explosive device at the bottom of my personal limo,” Waldron explains with a sigh. “He left me no choice.”

“Oh no, you had a choice,” Kim firmly counters. “You could’ve come to me and Director Gregson with this damn video. Besides, he was on the verge of being arrested the day you had him killed.”

“Argh. You know as well as I do, even his being arrested wouldn’t stop him from eventually killing me,” the general shoots back. “For the love of God, just look at what that maniac had already done.”

“But why? Tell me why, Dad. Why would Stanwell have wanted you dead? Did you know all along he was the person who bombed the Am-Dro building?”

“No,” Waldron lies. “But he learned I knew he’d killed Jozef Sokol in cold blood before that video of him doing so had surfaced. And I

let him know I thought it was the wrong thing to do, regardless of what Sokol had done. He became enraged at me, lost trust in me, and obviously wanted me out of the picture.”

Kim falls into deep thought as a knock on the door interrupts their conversation.

“Come on in, Rita,” Waldron calls out to one of his assistants.

“I’m sorry for interrupting, sir, but I didn’t want this espresso to become cold on you,” Rita says, handing him a cup. “One of the men from the security company told me to tell you it’s courtesy of your nephew. He also wants you to know Andrew’s planning to come by and personally inspect the work once it’s been completed.”

“Excellent,” Waldron replies. “And I could sure use this right now,” he adds, inhaling before taking a sip.

Rita turns to Kim. “Wonderful seeing you again, Agent Waldron.”

“Likewise,” Kim replies, forcing a smile in return.

“I’m so proud of your cousin. How he’s built his company is very impressive. My brother would be so proud of him.” Waldron beams before taking another sip from the cup. “Now, are you planning to arrest me?” he adds, grinning.

“That depends,” Kim says with a scowl.

“On what?”

“On the other secrets you’ve been hiding.”

Waldron sighs. “What in the world does that mean?”

“Sterling Rowe. I need you to look me in the eye and tell me exactly what happened with him back at the base.”

The general’s cell buzzes before he’s able to frame a reply. “Give me a minute, Kim. It’s Andrew.”

“Take all the time you need. I’m not going anywhere until I get a straight answer,” Kim firmly says.

Waldron answers the call and puts it on speaker. “Andrew. How are you, nephew?”

“Uncle Russ. You need to leave the building immediately,” Andrew blurts.

“Why?” Waldron exclaims.

“Seconds ago, I learned the two guys I sent to perform your repair work have been playing me. They’re both EFA guys. The only reason they took the job with my company was to find a way to get to you,” Andrew replies. Panic edges his voice. “I’m contacting the authorities as we speak.”

Suddenly the general begins panting and his body starts to tremble.

“Dad!” Kim cries as her eyes shift to the espresso cup.

“Kim...Kim...I’m so sorry...sorry for all I’ve done,” Waldron groans. His face is losing color by the second.

“Dad! Noooo!”

“I need you to...I need you to tell Libby Rowe—Sterling didn’t relapse back at the base. The devil-glass was planted. Also, I need you to tell your mother how much I—”Waldron collapses face down on the table in front of him.

Kim leaps forward to check his vitals. Nothing. He’s dead. Shocked, she stands before her father, her mind swirling with grief and confusion.

Chapter 34

FBI Headquarters, Washington, DC

“Are you certain you don’t want to speak with a professional about this?” Director Gregson asks Kim when they meet in his office. “What you’ve gone through is traumatizing.”

Kim exhales. “Thanks for your concern, but I’ll be fine, sir. I just wish I knew what my father was talking about regarding Sterling Rowe being set up.”

“Knowing what we now know about Lieutenant Stanwell, nothing should surprise us. Perhaps Sterling knew something he shouldn’t have known, like the truth behind what happened to Miguel Perez,” Gregson replies. “Speaking of Stanwell, how did you make out on the Sea Garden lead?”

Kim sighs. “Unfortunately, it was a dead end,” she lies, concealing the truth about the duffle bag and that her father had orchestrated the shooting.

Gregson sighs. “After what went down with Atlas, I think it’s best we let another agent take over the investigation. You don’t need to put yourself through more of this, Kim.”

“I’m confident I can handle it, sir.”

The FBI director studies her. “If anybody can, I know it’s you. But there’s one caveat.”

“What’s that?”

“Your boss is going to be riding shotgun all the way with you on this one,” Gregson replies with a subtle smile.

National Record Broadcast Center, Washington, DC

“Good evening, America,” Natalie Lawrence says into the NR camera. “It would be an understatement to refer to the recent murder of General Russell Waldron as a tragic event. This was a man who served his country to the fullest. A true hero who led the way in thwarting what would’ve been the worst crime in history. And a man who was destined to be America’s next president. I’m privileged to have US Attorney General Lea Salazar joining me, via Hello Friend, for an exclusive interview.”

After a brief exchange of pleasantries and some reminiscing about General Waldron, Natalie gets to the heart of the matter. “Seeing as both Lieutenant Van Stanwell and General Waldron were both targeted in relation to the Euro Freedom Alliance in such a short period of time, should Americans be concerned the EFA is alive and well here in our country?”

“No,” Salazar answers without hesitation. “Although that’s not to say there aren’t small fragments of a shattered EFA looking to bring harm to our country.”

“Do you believe the same person or persons who killed General Waldron are also behind the Sea Garden shooting?”

“That is something we are attempting to determine, but I’d say it’s very likely,” Salazar replies.

“Do you have any idea of the motive behind the killing of General Waldron?”

Salazar appears to gather her thoughts. “Revenge—after all, the general led the way in bringing a halt to the EFA’s planned bombings across Europe, and helped somewhat in dismantling the group in the process.”

“Are you and the rest of our government’s high ranking officials in fear for your personal safety?” Natalie asks.

“We always need to be vigilant.”

“It was clear General Waldron was well on his way to becoming this country’s next commander-in-chief. Are you able to tell us what happens now?”

The attorney general smiles. “What I can tell you, Natalie, is that there is a vast group of very intelligent people addressing the matter as we speak.”

“One last thing,” the reporter says. “What are we to make of the fact that General Waldron, Lieutenant Stanwell, Professor Olsen, and a former US special ops soldier, Sterling Rowe, have all died within such a short span of time? All were connected to the former JK Preston military base, which happens to be the same area where the government recently staged the Ovo-Tech plane crash.”

Salazar’s smile widens. “Are you going all conspiracy theory on me, Natalie?” she says with a chuckle.

“Well, you have to admit, it does all seem rather strange, does it not?” the reporter counters.

“I suppose there’s always a fine line between coincidence and strangeness,” Natalie replies. “I wish I had a more tantalizing answer for you, but I don’t.”

Memorial service for General Russell Waldron, Washington, DC

“I’m so very sorry for your loss, Kim,” Libby Rowe says to her.

Kim offers a small smile. “Thank you, Libby. And thank you for coming all the way from Arlington.”

“As you’re well aware, your father and my husband meant a lot to one another,” Libby says. “And I’ll never forget what Russell did for Sterling. He was his life-saver.” She sighs. “But sadly, Sterling was an addict.”

Kim gently places a hand on Libby’s shoulder. “There’s something important I need to tell you,” she says, leading her away from the large group into an empty room across the hall.

“What is it, Kim?” Libby asks with a raised brow.

“It has to do with Sterling and his time at the JK Preston base,” Kim replies. She tells Libby what her father told her with his final breaths.

Shocked, Libby stares wide-eyed at Kim. “But why?”

“Director Gregson and I think it had to do with Sterling finding out what happened to Miguel Perez, and it was part of the military’s cover-up,” Kim explains. “I’m so sorry.”

Libby sighs. “After learning what we’ve learned about Lieutenant Stanwell and Professor Olsen, I’m not the least bit surprised they’d do such a thing. But your father... that sure doesn’t sound like the Russell Waldron I knew.”

“Unfortunately my father was far from the perfect man so many people believed he was,” Kim says sadly.

“Is this something that’s going to be investigated?” Libby asks.

“No,” Kim replies, shaking her head. “With all the major players now dead, it’d be futile. But that said, I can guarantee you the military records will be adjusted to reflect Sterling’s innocence.”

“I suppose I’ll have to take what I can get, especially now that he’s gone,” Libby replies with a shrug.

Super Sizzle Diner, Sundale County

“Hey Roy, come on in and take a seat wherever you like,” Megan says as the farmer enters the diner.

“Ah, I see my usual table is free,” he replies, ambling toward the table nearest the window.

“Phew. It’s been a crazy day, but thankfully I’m done in five minutes. Can I get you something before I join you?”

“One of those delicious chocolate shakes will do just fine,” Roy replies. A grin expands his fleshy, ruddy cheeks.

Minutes later, Megan returns to the table with the shake. “Yes! My evening energy boost,” Roy crows, eyes on the tall glass.

Megan sits across from him. “So, have you had a chance to look at my brother’s resume?” she sheepishly asks.

“Yes. Very impressive. He might be the right person to fill Sterling’s very efficient work boots. I’m looking forward to inviting him to my farm for an interview next week,” Roy says before taking a drink of his shake.

“Thank you,” Megan replies with a warm smile. “Actually, I was thinking of Sterling the other day, when news broke about General Waldron’s murder.”

“Oh? Why’s that?” Roy asks.

“The night before Sterling left town, I treated him for dinner at the Blazing Flame steakhouse. It was my way of formally thanking him for coming to my aid when those EFA goons were harassing me,” Megan explains. “During dinner, he told me the craziest story I’ve ever heard.” She laughs. “For such a big, strong guy, he sure didn’t seem to handle his alcohol very well.”

“Tell me what he told you,” Roy urges with a wave of his arm.

“Nah, nah. Trust me. This is so out-there—it’s not even worth the breath.”

“Come on. I could use a good laugh.”

“Okay. Since you insist,” Megan says, and relates the story.

* * *

“So, Sterling, tell me what brought you here to Sundale and Roy Harmon’s farm. It seems like such a drastic shift in life from being a special ops agent,” Megan says.

Sterling takes another swig of wine before replying. “Frankly, my departure from the military was unexpected. The same men who rescued me from my living hell and helped me find new life as a Gold Hawk are the same men who left me with no choice but to exit that base. One was a psychiatrist, and the other I’m sure you’ve heard of—General Russell Waldron.”

“The man poised to be America’s next president?”

Sterling grins and takes another drink. “Yep, that’s him.”

“The man’s an international hero,” Megan replies. “Are you telling me he did you wrong?”

Sterling sighs and purses his lips. “It happened during one of my early morning jogs along the riverside. I have no idea how it happened, but all of a sudden the strangest feeling came over me, and I had this very vivid and disturbing premonition.”

“You saw some future event?” Megan says, doubt edging her voice.

“I envisioned a series of bombings across Europe, my very own brother and thousands of others being killed by the Euro Freedom Alliance.”

“The Euro bombings that Waldron was praised for helping to prevent?”

“Yes,” Sterling replies, refilling his glass.

Megan studies the man across from her. “That’s a good one,” she says with a chuckle.

“It’s not a joke,” Sterling shoots back.

“Wait a second...you expect me to believe this?” Megan says, frowning.

“It’s the absolute truth,” Sterling replies. “You can believe me or not. Waldron made himself into a hero after I went to him and told him about the premonition. He buried the truth by using the fact I was a former devil-glass addict against me. He went so far as to have the drug planted in my room at the base. And that’s why I left the military. It was that, be arrested, or perhaps even killed.”

* * *

“Like I told you. Now you can see how the wine must’ve got to him,” Megan says to Roy. “He concluded the story by telling me he’d begun seeing some lady psychiatrist in Sundale, because he continued to see future events, which was really freaking him out. He didn’t tell her about his prescient power, instead claiming he was suffering from PTSD. She used some relaxation program called The Mind’s Eye, and it solved the problem. In the process, he used the fact he’d been in special ops to avoid divulging his identity. This was some real crazy stuff,” she adds with a laugh.

Silent, Roy stares into space.

“Roy... Do you believe any of this?”

Again, no answer.

“Are you okay?”

“Huh? I’m sorry, I was just thinking about Sterling...such a fine young man.”

“Phew. For a second there, I almost thought you believed in his fairy tale.”

“Of course not,” Roy wryly replies, though his chuckle doesn’t sound sincere. “Like you said. The wine must’ve got the better of him.”

Startled by the revelation, minutes later, Roy exits the diner and heads to his pickup truck. When he enters the vehicle, he reaches into his coat pocket and retrieves his cell. Within seconds, he’s face to face with Dave Eisen via Hello Friend.

“Roy...the stars must be aligned this evening. I was just about to call you,” Dave says.

“Oh?”

“Libby Rowe learned something very interesting at General Waldron’s memorial service,” Dave says.

“I’m all ears.”

“In his final moments, the general told his daughter, Kim, that Sterling didn’t relapse and devil-glass was planted in his room—which has to be why he bolted from the base.”

“My Lord. That explains it,” Roy muses.

“Explains what?”

Roy relates what he’s just learned from Megan.

Dave blows out air. “Geez...this keeps getting crazier by the second. Am I safe to assume she didn’t believe him?”

“Not knowing what we know, who in their right mind would?” Roy counters.

“Very true,” Dave replies. “None of this surprises me, Roy. In fairness to Waldron and the US Government, I can see how this craziness backed them into a corner, but there’s no excusing what they did to Sterling—and their other elements of deception,” he adds.

“So, do you agree something needs to be done about it?” Roy asks.

Dave sighs. “I wouldn’t hold your breath, my friend. This goes way beyond you, me, and the others who’ve been involved in this lunacy.”

“Does that mean you’re thinking what I’ve just told you would be deemed irrelevant?”

“Certainly not by me,” Dave replies. “But then again, I’m not the United States government.”

Chapter 35

Department of Justice, Washington, DC

After her invited guests are thoroughly searched, AG Salazar, along with Agent Kim Waldron welcome Dave Eisen, Atlas Felder, and Brad Sutton into the main conference room.

“Before we begin, it’s my wish to address everyone,” Dave Eisen says to Salazar.

“The room is yours,” Salazar says.

Looking directly at Kim, Dave relates what Sterling had told Megan about her father.

Kim gasps and shakes her head. Her face flushes.

“Did you know anything about this?” Salazar asks, gazing at Kim.

“It’s news to me,” she replies. “This is all becoming more and more unbelievable by the second.”

“Can this waitress—or anyone else, for that matter—prove this to be true?” Salazar asks. “Or are we looking at more hearsay?”

“With all due respect, General, I think the facts surrounding the events that have taken place around the property give credence to what we’ve now learned,” Dave states.

“Oh, I can no longer deny that some very strange things have happened on that property, which is why Colonel Herrington will be undertaking a full investigation of the land,” Salazar says. “Sanctuary Park will be formally shut down as of noon tomorrow as the military retakes possession of the property. The investigation will trace back as far as we can go, and right up until the current day, along with complete twenty-four-hour surveillance of the property.”

“Will all the past happenings on the property be kept under wraps?” Atlas asks.

“Yes. This will be a covert operation until the White House deems otherwise,” Salazar replies, rising to her feet. “Some truths in life are meant to stay hidden, especially when revealing them will create more damage than the truth itself.” She pauses and gazes around the room. “That said, I realize everyone here, along with many of your acquaintances, are familiar with the chain of events. And though I can’t legally prevent any of you from going public, I strongly—and I must emphasize *strongly*—advise against it.”

Julie Cowan’s residence, Sundale County

“Where’s the home run king?” a beaming Clay asks upon bursting into his sister’s home.

“He’s upstairs getting ready. He should be down in a few minutes,” Julie replies.

“Well, we’re going up against the number one team today, so I hope he’s got his A game ready to go.”

Julie meets that with a sigh and sagging shoulders as a frown spreads across her face.

Her brother studies her. “Is something wrong with the little man? Has he been seeing into the future again?” Clay gently asks.

“No. Fortunately, that isn’t the case, and he doesn’t appear to have any recollection of any of that stuff.”

“Then why so glum?”

“I just finished speaking with Ruby Felder. Through Atlas, she’s learned some more disturbing info regarding the JK Preston base,” Julie replies, and explains the revelation pertaining to Sterling Rowe.

“Whoa...if this is true, then that son of a bitch, Waldron, was lying to the world, and destroyed Sterling’s life in the process,” Clay says, his jaw clenched. “And what’s going to be done about this?”

“The government’s going to be conducting a thorough investigation of the property,” Julie replies.

“While keeping the truth hidden from the masses, I suppose,” Clay mutters, scowling.

“Thankfully, that appears to be the case.”

“Thankfully? No. That’d be a huge mistake. It’s the wrong thing to do, Julie.”

“Are you forgetting that your nine-year-old nephew is at the center of this insanity?”

“Of course not,” Clay huffs. “But if you or anyone else thinks for a moment a story of this magnitude can remain buried forever, well, you’re fooling yourself. And for Noah’s sake, I believe it’s best if this is dealt with now, as opposed to later on.”

“How can you say that when you know his life would be turned into a circus if that happens?” Julie retorts, her voice rising.

Frustrated, Clay removes his baseball cap and plops down on the living room sofa. He looks up at his sister with sorrowful eyes. “Ten years ago, as you know, I was one of the seven people on that cruise ship who saw those strange sunburst orbs over the Atlantic,” he says. “The other 133 people were inside either gambling, eating, drinking, or dancing. When the seven of us decided to go public with what we witnessed, because we’d all had a few drinks, we were deemed to be hallucinating drunks looking for cheap publicity. And believe me, that wasn’t some sort of atmospheric event we witnessed. Do you know how many people here in Sundale were afraid to let my shop repair their vehicles because they thought I was some sort of lunatic, because the US Government declared I was? To this day, my reputation remains tarnished. By not forcing the government to admit the entire truth, we’re setting Noah up for problems down the road.”

“So, is this about vindicating yourself all these years later?” Julie huffs.

“Oh, no. I’ve come to terms with what happened to me,” Clay replies, frowning. “This is about Noah. We can’t hide from the truth, Jules. Like I said, at some point, all this lunacy is going to be exposed, and it needs to be now, rather than later.”

Julie stares into space as she gathers her thoughts. “And even if I agree, what makes you think we can force the government to admit anything to the public, especially when all the major players involved are dead, except Noah?”

“We need to bring this to light as one. All of us. I mean, we’ve got a well-respected psychiatrist and her powerful mogul of a husband on our side, not to mention a group of former US special ops agents,” Clay says.

Julie shakes her head. “I can’t speak for the others, but I know for certain that Ruby and Siro both believe it’s in everyone’s best interest to leave well enough alone. And the more I think about it, the more I agree,” she says. “Think of the chaos that would ensue if the government brought this to light. Sheer madness would rule the day. We can’t have that, Clay. I beg you not to go public.”

Clay sighs and stands. “It’s a real shame you feel this way.”

The arrival of Noah ends the conversation. “Why are you arguing?” he asks, making his way down the stairs.

“We’re not arguing, Noah,” Julie says, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Uncle Clay was telling me you’re playing the top team today. How about you hit a couple of home runs for me?”

“I wish you could come see the game. How come Ocean has to have her stupid dance recital today?” Noah moans.

“I’ll be at the next game, guaranteed,” Julie tells him, beaming. Then she aims a frown toward her brother.

“Come on, slugger. We need to get a move on,” Clay says. As they’re about to exit, Clay glares back at his sister and sighs.

National Record Headquarters, Washington, DC

In the middle of her busy morning, while preparing an updated story on the murder of General Russell Waldron, Natalie Lawrence checks her emails. *Hmm...what in the world is this?* Her heart skips a beat as she gazes at the Subject Line of the most recent message: *The Truth Must Be Told*. The email, with an attached file, is from Maryland Senator Jill Johnson on behalf of the Democratic Party.

Natalie opens the message. It reads: *Miss Lawrence, We have extensive, vital information regarding the JK Preston military base, currently known as Sanctuary Park. This information will reveal the greatest government cover-up in American history.*

Natalie gasps in disbelief as the mounds of information flow through her brain. *This is incredible*, she repeatedly says to herself.

With her senses reeling, she meets with her boss, National Record CEO Katherine Hodges. “We need to run with this,” she says eagerly. “Every aspect appears to be perfectly backed up.”

“Where did the Democrats get this info?” Hodges wonders while reviewing the material. “My Lord... Whoa... This exceeds earth-shattering.”

* * *

“Hello, am I speaking to Julie Cowan?” a woman asks when Julie answers her cell.

“Yes,” Julie replies.

“Good day, Ms. Cowan. My name’s Natalie Lawrence. I’m a senior reporter with the National Record.”

“I’m well aware of who you are,” Julie says, her eyes on Ocean as her daughter mounts her first horse since her accident.

“Would you be open to an interview regarding the staged plane crash you took part in, and also discussing your son, Noah?” Natalie asks.

“Noah? Why do you want to speak with me about my son?”

“The National Record has come to learn something very strange happened to your son after visiting Sanctuary Park, and I’d like to speak with you about the event before we run our story.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Natalie sighs. “Believe me, Julie. No one’s out to bring harm to you or your son, but we’re now well aware of a massive government cover-up that involves Noah, and I just want to present you with the opportunity to tell your story.”

“How dare you? Write whatever damn story you want, but leave my son the hell out of it!” Julie fumes, and ends the call.

Leaving Ocean in the capable hands of Green Valley Riding, Julie makes her way to her brother’s shop. “Hey Vince, is Clay in his office?” she asks one of the mechanics.

“He sure is,” Vince replies.

“Thanks.”

“Hey, what’s going on, Jules?” Clays says, looking up from a stack of papers as she bursts into his office.

“How could you? How could you do it?” Julie shouts.

“Whoa, whoa. Hold on. How could I do what?” Clay shoots back.

“I begged you not to.”

“Will you tell me what in the world you’re talking about?”

“Noah. Natalie Lawrence from the National Record just asked to interview me about the staged plane crash and my son.”

Clay frowns and sighs. “I get it. You think I went and blabbed to the NR behind your back.”

Julie studies him. “Are you telling me you didn’t? I mean, just the other day you tried to convince me we should go public.”

“That’s right. But I would never do such a thing without your approval.”

Julie draws a breath and plops down into the chair across from her brother. “I’m sorry for jumping the gun, Clay. I don’t know what got into me,” she says sheepishly.

“Obviously, the love you feel for your son,” Clay gently says. “And as difficult as this is for you, I still believe it’s in everybody’s best interest if the full story comes out.”

Julie nods, frowning. “Yeah...it was only a matter of time—and now it appears that time has come.”

Chapter 36

FBI Headquarters, Washington, DC

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me,” Kim Waldron says to her cousin, Andrew, welcoming him into her office. She offers the chair in front of her desk.

“Of course,” he replies, settling into the chair. “I still can’t tell you how sorry I am, Kim... To know it was my employees who killed your father sickens me.”

“Please, don’t do that to yourself, Andrew,” Kim replies. “It’s obvious these guys were on a mission and nothing was going to stop them.”

“Well, as you requested, I’ve been doing some digging and I’ve come to learn something that may be of interest to you.”

“Great. Let’s hear it.”

“I found out where they purchased the espresso they poisoned Uncle Russell with. It’s a place called Krissy’s. A fellow employee happened to pull into the parking lot and witnessed them exiting. He’s certain they didn’t see him,” Andrew says.

“I know the place.”

Twenty minutes later, Kim is able to obtain video footage from both the café and its parking lot. She and Director Gregson review it intently.

“Hmm. What do we have here?” Gregson says as they witness the two men meeting with a tall man with slicked-back dark hair and a mustache outside their truck. The man hands them what appears to be a tiny, test tube-like vial.

“Let’s get a close up of these clowns and that vial,” Kim says, tapping a few buttons on her keyboard. “That has to be the poison that killed my father. And now let’s see if we can get a match on our EFA database.”

Gregson gives his keyboard a few taps. “Bingo,” he crows a few seconds later. “There’s no doubt that’s the real Ivan Sokol who handed them the vial.”

Kim sighs. “Damn. This is not good.”

“That bastard must be working another EFA cell here in DC,” Gregson says.

“Wait a second,” Kim replies. The video shows Ivan entering a gray SUV.

“I’ll bet anything those plates are fake,” Gregson says, shaking his head.

Kim enters the DMV database and says a moment later, “You win your bet, sir.”

“Damn!” Gregson rises and paces the floor. “He’s up to something big. I can feel it in my bones. We need to somehow track that son of a bitch down.”

Department of Justice, Washington, DC

“Come on in and have a seat,” AG Salazar says to Natalie Lawrence when she enters her office. “I’ve been seeing so much of you lately, I think you’ve now officially become my new best friend. And if you can get your people at the NR to stop writing about my ugly divorce and my rumored love affair with Colonel Herrington, then you may just become the best friend I’ve ever had,” she adds with a chuckle.

The reporter meets that with a sour expression.

Salazar studies her. “Well, obviously you’re not here for a laugh, so how can I help you, Natalie?”

Natalie reaches into her attaché case and retrieves a printed document and a flash drive. “You can help me and the entire country you serve by telling us the truth,” she says, placing the material on the attorney general’s desk.

Salazar begins to read. Her breathing becomes heavy and her eyes widen by the second. “Where did this come from? Who’s your source?”

“The Democrats. The material was sent to me by Senator Jill Johnson.”

“Hmm...somebody in the know sold us out,” Salazar murmurs as she continues to examine the material.

“So, does that mean you’re not contesting the information?”

The attorney general’s shoulders sag as she sighs. “No...unfortunately, it’s all very true,” she says quietly. “But in truth, every decision to suppress these facts was made by my boss, President Johnathan W. O’Rourke. When it comes down to it, I’m merely a civil servant with an important title.”

“Will you go on record admitting all this insanity is real if the president remains in denial?”

“It’s not my job to do so,” Salazar replies. “I take it the National Record intends to go public?”

“We certainly do,” Natalie exclaims.

White House, Washington, DC

“How the hell did this happen? Top secret info like this does not belong in the public domain!” President O’Rourke rages to AG Salazar.

“So, what’s next?” Salazar demands.

“I’ve pleaded with Katherine Hodges and the National Record not to run the story, but it’s to no avail. This is the kind of thing those self-serving vultures have been craving,” O’Rourke says, running a hand through his thick mane of salt and pepper hair. “They’re planning to break the story tomorrow evening, but they’ve at least

granted me an in-person one-on-one with Natalie Lawrence immediately following.”

“My Lord,” Salazar gasps. “The reaction to this...it’s going to be beyond frightening, sir.”

“Which is why I’ve placed police and military units on high alert across the country,” O’Rourke replies with a heavy sigh.

National Record Broadcast Center, Washington, DC

Natalie Lawrence begins the broadcast with “Good evening, America,” but her usual upbeat greeting sounds subdued. “Tonight, we have a breaking story presented to us by the United States Democratic Party that’s guaranteed to send shockwaves across the country. We at the National Record have given great consideration to the pros and cons of revealing such ground-breaking news, and have concluded it is our duty to you, the American people, to do so. Though you have every right to be informed and let your voices be heard, that right comes with the obligation to respond in a lawful manner. Please note; once the information has been presented, President O’Rourke will be my guest here inside the NR studio.”

The presentation reveals the true in-depth details pertaining to the crimes and mysteries surrounding the JK Preston base and Sanctuary Park, the criminal deeds of Lieutenant Stanwell, and the staged Ovo-Tech plane crash.

“Thank you for joining me, Mr. President,” Natalie says coolly after the broadcast.

“I’m privileged to be here,” O’Rourke solemnly replies.

“In light of the startling information presented this evening, are you planning to resign?”

The president meets that with a sneer. “Of course not. With the recent death of General Waldron, I’ve been reinstated for the next two years and I plan to see that through.”

“Do you at least understand why I’m posing the question?”

“I certainly do,” O’Rourke replies, appearing to be gathering his thoughts. “However, every decision I’ve made, and will make as commander-in-chief of this incredible country is done so with the

best interests of America in mind and at heart. Though I didn't play an actual part in the events in your presentation, I admit to having fully navigated the course that followed, and I completely stand by all my decisions."

"How about we talk about some of those events and decisions you made?"

"By all means."

Natalie smiles and nods. "Okay. Were you ever planning to tell the American people about these mysterious prescient powers that appear to be at play here?"

O'Rourke takes a drink of water and clears his throat. "After learning what we've learned about special ops agents Miguel Perez and Sterling Rowe, I've ordered the shutdown of Sanctuary Park, and also had the US military retake possession of the property while initiating a full investigation into the matter. I've also ordered twenty-four-hour surveillance of the property." He pauses and sighs. "This is an ever-changing situation. Hopefully we'll have some answers once the investigation has concluded."

Natalie scowls and shakes her head. "How is it Sanctuary Park was allowed to continue functioning as a public campground when your administration knew this craziness was going on?"

"Nothing had been proven, and the last thing we wanted to do was initiate some sort of mass panic among our citizens based on conjecture."

The reporter snickers at that. "Are you worried you'll be impeached, Mr. President?"

"Honestly, I don't worry about things I can't control."

Chapter 37

Following the National Record broadcast, a tidal wave of anger pours over America. The outcry against the O'Rourke Administration's deception becomes palpable.

"This is outrageous and completely unacceptable!" the Democratic Senator of Maryland, Jill Johnson, fumes during a public statement. "This president either must resign or be impeached!"

As the public uproar continues to build, the Democrats, assisted by Violet Anderson and People for Peace, begin coordinating a massive demonstration set for New York City's Central Park.

* * *

"How can this garbage about your father be true?" a tearful Denise Waldron groans to her daughter, Kim, after two large men in dark suits secretly lead them into a lavish DC hotel room.

"I've been repeating the same question to myself from the second I learned it was," Kim replies.

"It's the craziest thing I've ever heard," Denise huffs. "Some special ops guy envisioned those bombings in his mind?"

Kim blows air between pursed lips. "I know. It's so difficult to believe, Mother."

Denise shakes her head, plopping down on a plush sofa. "All the great and honorable things he did for his country have now become tarnished because of this lunacy. Do you really think he hid the truth, solely so he could take the credit?"

“I’m sure he was at a loss about what to do at the time. However, doing what he did to Sterling is inexcusable, and so difficult to fathom,” Kim replies, aimlessly staring out the hotel window.

“Especially knowing how much he once cared for Sterling,” Denise adds.

“There’s... There’s something else you need to know. I...can’t keep it from you,” Kim says, turning back to make eye contact with her mother.

“What is it?” Denise asks anxiously.

“Dad was behind the Sea Garden shooting.”

Denise frowns. “No...that can’t be,” she gasps. “Why would he want to kill Van? They were like brothers.”

Kim sighs. “It came down to getting Van before Van got him.” Kim explains.

“My goodness,” her mother says. “And the other two men?”

“That was revenge for what they did to Sterling,” Kim replies, and once again explains.

“Does anybody else know about this?”

“No. After Dad explained to me why he did what he did, I made a decision to keep it a secret. Doing otherwise would create even more of a mess for everybody, including the country as a whole,” Kim replies.

Her mother grunts, burying her face in her hands. “One minute my husband, an international hero, is on the verge of becoming the next US president, and then in a flash he’s dead, and his entire legacy has been completely tarnished.”

Kim moves in and begins gently rubbing her mother’s back. “He also did many honorable things, Mother. How about we remember him for those?” She pauses and draws a breath. “Right now we have to focus on ourselves. I hope you understand why it’s so important you remain sequestered for the time being. All this craziness has really placed the country in deep peril. Between the reaction to these recent revelations and the fact the EFA appears to still be alive and well here in America, God only knows what else we’re about to face.”

“Please tell me Gregson doesn’t expect you to be front and center in all this,” Denise says, dabbing her tears with a tissue. “You’ve

already become enough of a target, being the daughter of Russell Waldron.”

Kim meets that with shifting eyes. “I have a job to do, Mother. Gregson, along with Homeland Security, believes an EFA terror attack is imminent, and I plan to do my part to help prevent it.”

Ovo-Tech Headquarters, Sundale County

“Your father and I are thrilled you’ve agreed to accept the position,” CEO Willow Farlow says to Atlas after he officially agrees to become the company’s new director of security.

“Well, I’m elated to come on board,” he replies.

“Are you sure you’ll be good to start in two weeks? Your father’s concerned it might be too soon, with all you’ve recently gone through.”

“Oh, I’ll be good to go. And I’m just as thrilled you’ve agreed to hire Charmaine to head up the cyber end of things. You won’t find anyone more capable,” Atlas boasts.

“Yes. I’ve come to realize her qualifications are impeccable.” Willow beams.

At the conclusion of the meeting, Atlas receives a call from Violet Anderson. “Hey, Violet. It’s wonderful to hear from you. What I can do for you?” he asks.

“The upcoming protest at Central Park,” she replies.

“Yes, I saw how the Democrats have asked the People for Peace to be the lead organizer.”

“And we are,” Violet replies, but her tone is edged with worry.

“That’s incredible news for your movement. Why are you sounding so glum?”

“This rally is going to be so massive, it’s scaring the hell out of me.”

“Ah, I see. You’re afraid things are going to get out of hand.”

“That’s an understatement,” Violet groans. “My movement’s supposed to be about making the world a better place through transparency and peace, and from all indications this gathering is going to be filled with anger, which could lead to people acting like a

bunch of mad dogs. And even though there's going to be police and military personnel on site, we need someone to be in charge. I was wondering if you'd be interested in the job. I've conferred with Senator Johnson and she views it as a wise idea."

Atlas falls into thought. "I would be honored to."

"Great. I'll send you the details."

As he's about to exit the Ovo-Tech building, Atlas receives a call from Kim Waldron. "Kim. What brings about this pleasant surprise?"

"I need to meet with you in person here in New York, Atlas," Kim informs him. Her tone is edged with urgency.

"Well, since I've been asked by Violet Anderson to oversee security for the upcoming Central Park rally, I'll be making plans to fly there tomorrow morning."

"Excellent. And actually, I've been tasked with overseeing the Bureau's side of things for the event. So, it looks like we're a team again."

"Great. I'll let you know when I arrive, and we'll set something up."

Central Park, New York City

"Good day, America. This is Natalie Lawrence of the National Record reporting from Central Park in New York City. In two days, Central Park will be hosting what is being regarded as the largest organized protest in American history. As you can see, law enforcement units from the FBI and the NYPD along with the US military have already implemented immense security measures for the event being staged by the United States Democratic Party and organized by the recently formed People for Peace." The camera pans across the site, displaying areas sectioned off by barricades and fences, along with a vast array of law enforcement vehicles.

"I'm now being joined by Violet Anderson, the founder of People for Peace," Natalie says, standing beside the dark-haired, petite woman. "I need to ask you, Violet, do you believe these rallies will go off peacefully, considering the anger that's currently pouring over the country?"

“I’m certain it’ll be a challenge, which is why such extreme measures are being taken,” Violet replies. “The aim of these rallies is to enable Americans to be heard in a unified, but peaceful voice. Any forms of aggressive behavior will not be tolerated.”

“And what do you say to those who are being critical that the US military is involved? To many people, it seems odd, especially that it’s now come to light that you were involved with the Friends of the Future, a movement that referred to all military personnel around the world as parasites.”

“Yes, up until recently, I did feel that way,” Violet sheepishly replies. “But I’ve come to realize that the problem lies with those at the very top who guide and shape our military, and not the people who choose to represent their country.”

“Thank you, Violet,” Natalie says, and moves toward people congregating outside a barricaded-off area.

“Miss, may I have a moment of your time?” she says to a bleached-blonde, twenty-something woman.

“Definitely,” the woman replies. Her t-shirt reads *Put a Fork in O’Rourke*.

“Were you shocked to learn the House of Representatives voted not to impeach President O’Rourke, or that he hasn’t resigned?” Natalie asks.

“Not at all,” the woman replies. “I expected it. That’s why I’m out here, and that’s why, as Americans, we need to be heard, to bring about change through transparency.”

“Thank you,” Natalie says with a nod and a smile. “I now want to welcome Maryland Senator Jill Johnson, who will be one of the keynote speakers here at Central Park. Thank you for doing this, Senator.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Johnson says, smiling.

“How shocked were you to learn of the strange course of events leading to this protest?” Natalie asks.

“Not as shocked as I should’ve been,” Johnson replies. “For politicians, there’s a fine balance between serving the people and serving yourself, and as these revelations proved, more often than not, the scale becomes tilted the wrong way.”

“So what is it that you believe needs to be done? Do you think this rally is going to bring about some sort of sudden change?”

“No, unfortunately not,” the senator bluntly replies. “However, I do believe a strong message will be sent, and that’s very important for change to eventually happen.”

“You’ve made it very clear you believe the president should resign. How do you respond to his reasoning that some truths within the government are meant not to be told in order to avoid panic and chaos?” Natalie asks.

“Yes, there are some truths meant not to be told, but those are matters of national security, which don’t apply here,” Johnson replies. “These cover-ups were self-serving, and the American people deserve much better than that.”

Judy’s Diner, New York City

“Breakfast is on me,” Kim says to Atlas as they slide into a private booth in the back corner.

“Good, because this place serves up a mean breakfast,” Atlas replies with a chuckle.

Kim forces a smile from a frown.

“So, are you going to tell me what’s going on? You sounded so serious over the phone, and you look even more serious right now.”

“We know who was behind the killing of my father. It wasn’t some lone wolf EFA sympathizer,” Kim says.

“Whoa—have you been cleared to share this with me?”

“No, but if anyone deserves to know what’s going on, it’s you.”

“Go ahead. The suspense is killing me.”

“Ivan Sokol,” Kim says with a sigh. “We’ve strong reason to believe he’s currently operating a cell here in America, and killing my father was his first step in a much larger plan.”

“Do you have any idea what he’s been doing and what he might be planning?”

Kim shakes her head. “I wish we did.”

“What about the country’s power grids, as was part of the EFA’s original plan?”

“Since word got out about that, Homeland Security’s been doing everything in its power to prevent that from happening, so we don’t believe that’s in the cards.”

Atlas exhales. “First Stanwell, and now your father.”

Kim appears to fall into thought. “I...again, I need to be honest with you, Atlas. Nobody other than me and my mother know what I’m about to tell you.”

“What is it?”

“The EFA had nothing to do with Stanwell’s murder. My father hired a hitman. He discovered Stanwell had been planning to kill him, so he beat him to it,” Kim says, and tells him about the video in which Stanwell attempted to bomb the general’s limo. “And as far as Franklin Varley and Dax Anderson were concerned, that was all about revenge for what they did to Sterling.”

“God help us,” Atlas gasps. He thinks a moment. “After what Stanwell did to me, and the other things we’ve learned about him, the fact he was planning to kill your father shouldn’t surprise anyone.”

“Still, my father shouldn’t have done it,” Kim says. “Just like he shouldn’t have done what he did to Sterling.” She draws a breath. “Gregson and I are so sorry we doubted you when you first came to us about Olsen. We should’ve been more considerate of the facts you presented.”

Atlas scoffs at that. “Nah, I was skeptical of that myself. Who’d ever think something so crazy could be so real?”

“This entire country’s a mess right now. And with Ivan Sokol and his friends out there somewhere, we’ll need to be more vigilant than ever.”

“The protest,” Atlas says. “Talk about a potential target.”

“I hear you,” Kim says. “Since this morning, Gregson’s been conferring with the White House and Homeland Security about how we should proceed.”

“The mere thought of trying to stop it from happening is even more frightening than anything the EFA could pull off,” Atlas surmises. “There’s one thing I’m curious about.”

“What’s that?”

“Why the fact Ivan Sokol was behind your father’s death hasn’t yet been made public.”

“It will be. This evening,” Kim replies.

Chapter 38

National Record Broadcast Center, Washington, DC

After announcing, Ivan Sokol has become the prime suspect for the murder of General Waldron, Director Gregson adds the following: “We’ve come to learn that every major decision the Euro Freedom Alliance has made since its inception has come from the diabolical mind of Ivan Sokol. Like his cousin Lubor, this man is evil. However, where Lubor was more often impulsive and reckless in his decision making, Ivan is extremely patient and calculating.”

The screen shifts away from Gregson’s image. “This video shows Ivan Sokol meeting with the men who, shortly after this encounter, carried out the murder of General Waldron. The FBI is offering ten million dollars to anyone who can provide information leading us to Ivan Sokol. We must all be extremely vigilant at this time,” Gregson concludes.

“Was this revenge for General Waldron thwarting the EFA’s planned bombing attack across Europe more than four years ago?” Natalie Lawrence asks.

“We’re certain it’s a factor,” Gregson replies.

“Are you concerned about the upcoming protest at Central Park? Do you think it should still go on as planned?” Natalie asks.

“Sure I’m concerned, but I also believe it must go on,” Gregson replies. “We can’t let a terrorist group such as the EFA prevent us from living our lives and prohibiting our freedom of speech.”

“After visiting Central Park in preparation for the protest, I was impressed by the level of security that’s already been put in place.”

“Law enforcement is doing everything we can to ensure the public’s safety. And I’m confident it’ll be a very safe environment on that day,” Gregson says.

Sanctuary Park

The buzzing from Colonel Herrington’s walkie-talkie wakes him from a deep slumber at 3:17 in the bloody morning. He rubs the sleep from his tired eyes. “Yeah, what’s going on, Private Kershaw?” he asks the man managing the monitoring station.

“It appears we have a possible tornado coming our way within the hour,” Kershaw explains. “I think the helicopter should pick up Major Hill from the riverside while it still can.”

“That’s a very wise idea,” Herrington replies. “Safety is our priority. In the meantime, I want the entire team alerted and ordered to take shelter at the station ASAP. I’m on my way.”

“Roger, Colonel.”

Forty-three minutes later, Herrington and his team watch in awe as a series of rumbles disturb the morning calm, roaring through the ether accompanied by a chain of lightning bolts slashing through a torrential downpour.

“My God, check this out!” Major Hill blurts, pointing toward the center monitor.

“What the hell?” Kershaw gasps.

“Wow...what in the world is that?” Herrington says as a trail of orbs like sunbursts flash across the screen, engulfing the stormy sky. “My Lord,” he whispers, eyes affixed to the monitor.

“And there they go,” Kershaw adds. In a flash, the trail of light melds into the ether.

* * *

At Julie Cowan's residence, the sound of crashing thunder wakes her and her daughter from their sleep. Frightened, they meet in the upstairs hallway. "Did you hear that, Mom?" Ocean asks. "I thought the house exploded."

"Oh, I heard it," Julie assures her.

"I guess Noah can sleep through anything," Ocean quips, looking down the hall toward her brother's room.

"Hold on. Wait a second," Julie says, making her way down the hall. "His door's open."

"He never leaves it open at night," Ocean says.

"Oh my. He's not in his bed," Julie gasps, looking inside the room. "Noah...Noah," she frantically calls.

Mother and daughter begin searching the home.

"Look outside—there he is," Ocean calls out, looking out the living room window toward the front lawn.

"What in the world?" Julie gasps at the sight of Noah sitting cross-legged on the grass. "You wait here," she says to Ocean. Pulling a coat over her pajamas, she exits the home with her cell phone and a flashlight in hand.

"What's he doing out there at five in the morning during a storm?" Ocean calls out to her mother.

Julie makes her way onto the lawn and slowly approaches her son. Thankfully, the storm has subsided. A calmness fills the air and a glorious arching rainbow lights the murky morning sky. "Noah," Julie gently says, standing over him.

The drenched child doesn't reply. His empty eyes conjure dread.

"Noah, speak to me. What are you doing out here?"

"It came to me...it came to me again," he replies through trembling lips.

"What came to you?"

The boy falls silent.

As Julie studies his glazed eyes, she hears the serene harp ringtone from her cell. "Clay," she says to her brother.

"Is everything okay there? The storm hit us pretty hard over here. Three trees came down out back," he says.

"I...I don't know, Clay," Julie says.

"Are you okay? Are the kids okay?"

"Ocean and I are fine, but there's a problem with Noah. He's out here on the lawn, completely out of it," Julie replies.

"Hold tight. I'll be by in a bit."

"Thanks, Clay. In the meantime, I'm going to reach out to Ruby Felder and see if she'll come by," Julie says.

"Good idea, but since the roads are a complete mess, tell her I'll come pick her up in my truck."

With her eyes on what appears to be a comatose Noah, Julie calls Ruby. "I'm so sorry if I'm waking you at this time, but—"

"Waking me? That damn storm literally knocked Siro and I right out of our bed," Ruby replies. "Are you and the children okay?"

With a heavy sigh, Julie tells her about Noah. "All he said was that it came to him again, whatever that means. I don't know what to do. He's still sitting out here on the soaked grass, just staring into space."

"I think I might know what he's referring to," Ruby replies.

"I know what you're thinking. I was thinking the same thing, but it can't be...I mean, he's been nothing but his usual self lately," Julie says.

Ruby sighs. "Atlas just informed me and Siro that he's learned the satellite cameras at Sanctuary Park picked up a series of sunburst orbs streaking over the river when the storm hit."

"Is the government suggesting these orbs are the source of the lunacy that's been going on over at that park?"

"I can only tell you that it's being taken very seriously."

Fifteen minutes later, Clay and Ruby arrive. "This is what he's been like since he uttered those words. I thought it best not to force the issue," Julie says. Her face is flushed and anguish fills her eyes.

"Hey, Noah," Ruby says, crouching down to the boy's eye level. "This is Ruby. Is there anything you'd like to tell me?" she gently asks. "You can tell me whatever it is."

“It came to me...it came to me again,” Noah replies without flinching.

“Are you talking about the same lights you saw at Sanctuary Park?” Ruby asks.

He doesn’t answer.

Ruby tries again. “Did something happen after you saw the lights?”

Nothing. This time, the boy tilts his head back and his glassy eyes gaze into the ether.

Clay and Ruby exchange nods. “Come on, little man. Let’s get you inside,” Clay says, wrapping a large blanket around Noah and lifting his listless body off the ground.

“My Lord. I can’t believe this is happening,” Julie groans.

“It’ll be okay,” Ruby gently replies, placing an arm around Julie’s shoulder as they follow Clay and Noah into the house.

With a still disoriented Noah now wearing dry clothes and sitting on the living room sofa, Ruby reaches into her handbag and retrieves The Mind’s Eye. “This helped him the first time around, so I’d say it’s worth a shot,” she says, holding up the device.

“Please. However you can help him,” Julie anxiously replies.

As Ruby’s about to place the headphones over Noah’s ears, the child begins trembling and his eyes blink rapidly. “People are going to die!” he cries out. “Lots of people are going to die!” With that, he falls back into his prior state.

“Oh my God!” Julie gasps.

“Noah, Noah—you need to wake up,” Clay says, shaking his nephew. “You need to tell us what you saw and what you know.”

“Talk to us, Noah. Tell us how people are going to die,” Julie adds.

“Let’s give it time,” Ruby says, attempting to bring calm to the moment. “Hopefully, soon he’ll come out of it and tell us what he envisioned,” she adds.

Tension fills the room.

“We need to find out what the hell he’s talking about,” Clay says.

Ruby nods. “I’m prepared to contact Atlas right this moment, so he can—”

Without warning, Noah springs up from the sofa, interrupting Ruby. “Is my baseball game going to be canceled tomorrow because of all this stupid rain?” he asks matter-of-factly, moving over to the window. He gazes outside.

“Whoa... It’s as if he’s continuing the conversation we had before I sent him off to bed last night—like nothing strange has happened since,” Julie says with raised brows.

“I suppose that’s both a good thing and a bad thing,” Clay says.

“And how’s it a bad thing?” Julie asks.

“We need to know about his premonition,” Clay replies, his tone urgent. “Based on the past, we need to know.”

“Maybe I can gently ease it out of him,” Ruby says.

“It’s worth a try, Jules. After all, he just finished telling us lots of people are going to die,” Clay gently adds.

Julie’s shoulders sag in defeat. “Okay, but please be easy on him,” she says to Ruby.

For the next few minutes, Ruby sits alone with Noah in hopes he’ll reveal something pertaining to his premonition of doom. The attempt is futile. “It’s like it’s all been erased from his mind,” she tells Julie and Clay afterward.

“So what do we do now?” a frustrated Clay asks. “We can’t just let this pass.”

Ruby nods. “Clay’s correct,” she says to Julie.

“Maybe this time it’s not for real,” Julie suggests. “Maybe it was just some sort of crazy nightmare he had.”

“Possibly,” Ruby replies. “But, I’m sorry, Julie—I agree with Clay. We can’t chance it.” She reaches for her phone and calls Atlas.

Minutes later, she concludes after sharing with Atlas what happened, “Unfortunately, we couldn’t get any details out of him.”

“There’s no doubt this needs to be taken seriously, especially with Ivan Sokol on the loose and the Central Park protest looming,” Atlas replies.

Somewhere in New York City

A well-dressed man with dark, slicked-back hair and a mustache to match rises and moves to the front of a conference room filled with a dozen other men. “First and foremost, I want to commend Stefan and Radko on a job well done. You did this world a huge favor by ridding it of that miscreant, Russell Waldron,” Ivan Sokol announces. “And now it’s time to complete our mission here in America. Where my incompetent cousin Lubor failed, we will succeed. Let’s raise a toast!”

After fervent applause, the others raise their glasses.

Chapter 39

FBI Field Office, New York City

“Follow me, Atlas,” Kim says, leading the former Gold Hawk down the hall and into a room.

“Thanks for doing this on such short notice,” Atlas says.

Noticing his uneasiness, Kim studies him intently “What is it, Atlas?”

“Noah Cowan,” Atlas replies. “Once again, something very strange has happened regarding the boy.” He explains in detail.

“Hmm. Now I understand why you look so pale.”

“I don’t know how you feel, but I believe we need to be concerned.”

“Well, I’m sure not about to discount the matter this time,” Kim says. “I only wish the boy could’ve provided some details about what he envisioned.”

“Gregson and Salazar need to know about this.”

“I agree, and I’ll ensure that happens, but in the end, it’s all up to our beloved president, how the White House will deal with the situation,” Kim says sardonically.

“What about Ivan Sokol? Any leads so far?” Atlas asks.

“Oh, the calls have been coming in, which is expected when such a high reward is on the table,” Kim replies. “Unfortunately, most were baseless. However, I’ll be meeting with a gentleman who I’m hoping has something concrete to offer.”

* * *

“Now, my assistant filled me in, but why don’t you start from the beginning, Mr. Tillman?” Kim suggests to the rangy middle-aged man seated in her office. He appears nervous.

“Please, call me Phil,” the man replies, then clears his throat. “I got called to the location because the building was having some issues with its drainage system. It was my second job since I opened my own plumbing company a month ago.”

“Yes, I see the address here in my notes. It includes fifteen units?” Phil nods. “Carry on, please,” Kim says.

“So, within a couple of hours I completed the job and was paid cash.”

“By Ivan Sokol?”

The plumber nods. “From the photos I’ve seen, there’s no doubt in my mind it was him. He briefly checked over the work and paid me the money without issue.”

“Do you recall him having an accent?”

“I sure do.”

“Is there anything else you noticed that could be of interest to us?”

“Yeah, the one other guy I saw in the building that day,” Phil replies. “You see, prior to opening my own business, I used to work for a large plumbing company called Easy Flow. I distinctly remember having met this other chap in the past.”

“Do you know his name?”

“No, but I certainly remembered the scar on his forehead and the slight limp when he walked.”

“Do you recall the name of the business you met him at?”

Phil shakes his head. “I’ve been pounding my brain over that one. The problem is, I visited so many businesses during my time with Easy Flow.”

“What about a time frame?” Kim asks.

“It was definitely within the last six months I worked for the company.”

At the conclusion of the interview, Kim sends Phil down the hall to meet with an FBI sketch artist. She then contacts her boss via video call.

“What do you make of the guy and his story?” Gregson asks her.

“It all seems legit to me, especially seeing as that building doesn’t have a registered owner. But that said, I’m planning to take all precautions before sending anyone near the place.”

“Yeah, the last thing we need is another Am-Dro situation.”

“If it was serving as some sort of hideout, I’m betting they’re long gone by now and the place is as barren as a desert.”

“Well, hopefully they didn’t leave us something to remember them by,” Gregson says with a sigh.

Within the hour, the perimeter of the suspected EFA hideout is secured by a large team of FBI agents, including the Bureau’s premiere bomb unit. “Though there’s a very strong chance there won’t be anyone inside, it’s vital we approach this expecting the worst case scenario,” Kim Waldron tells them over the radio before they enter the property.

Ten minutes later, the team leader reports back to Kim. “We’ve discovered eleven bodies in some sort of conference room. It appears they’ve all been poisoned.”

Thinking of her father’s untimely end, Kim sharply exhales. “We need to find out who the hell they are and if Ivan Sokol’s among the group.”

Over the next several hours, Kim and Director Gregson, with the assistance of US Intelligence and Homeland Security, begin placing the pieces of the EFA puzzle together. Gregson then takes the info to AG Salazar in her office.

“We were able to match the identities of all eleven dead men to EFA operatives,” he says. “But we still have nothing on Ivan Sokol.”

“And what about this fellow the plumber identified?” Salazar asks.

“We believe his name is Marco Martinek. And no, he doesn’t appear to be among the dead,” Gregson says.

“Well, it looks like Ivan Sokol may have killed his own men,” the attorney general surmises.

“Probably out of fear the temptation of ten million dollars would bring about a rat,” Gregson agrees.

“And Marco Martinek?”

“Agent Waldron and her team are continuing their efforts to track down both him and Sokol.”

Salazar pauses in thought. “Maybe Ivan Sokol’s sole purpose for being here in America was to kill General Waldron,” she suggests.

Gregson runs a hand across his forehead and sighs. “There’s something else you need to know, Lea.”

“And what’s that?”

“There’s more to the sighting Colonel Herrington and his team witnessed at Sanctuary Park.”

“Oh?”

“Noah Cowan,” the FBI director says, and explains.

“Lots of people are going to die,” Salazar repeats, frowning. “If we’ve learned anything recently, we need to take this seriously.”

“Do you actually believe for a second that President O’Rourke will do so?”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” Salazar replies, reaching for her phone.

Within minutes, AG Salazar, Director Gregson, and the president are on a video call.

“Lea, Elliott. To what do I owe this pleasure?” O’Rourke asks.

Salazar explains.

“Whoa, whoa. Are you expecting me to create nationwide panic because some child had a nightmare? And as far as those lights in the sky are concerned, Colonel Herrington sent me the video, and I see nothing that disproves it being anything but space junk, or some strange atmospheric event,” the president barks.

“All we’re asking you to do, Mr. President, is to fully inform the people of this country, so they can act according to how they personally see fit,” Salazar replies.

O’Rourke sighs and loosens his tie. “Until our investigation’s complete and proves this craziness has even a single iota of merit, I refuse to give this any credence whatsoever,” he snaps. He looks thoughtful. “I only wish I knew who the hell the traitor was who leaked this garbage to the damn Democrats.”

Salazar sharply exhales. “You’re looking at her,” she bluntly shoots back.

“It was you!” O’Rourke shouts.

The attorney general nods.

* * *

The clandestine meeting is taking place in a park a few miles from Senator Jill Johnson’s office.

She looks on as a black sedan stops on a side road thirty yards or so away. Moments later, she’s face to face with US Attorney General Lea Salazar.

“I must admit. I was both curious and shocked by your request to meet, especially in a place like this,” Johnson says to Salazar, gazing at the wooded area in the near distance. They move to a nearby bench.

“When I tell you what I’m about to, you’ll understand why.”

“My curiosity’s just reached an all-time high.”

Salazar retrieves a flash drive from her bag and hands it to the senator. “Open it.”

“What is this?” Johnson asks as she inserts it into her tablet and opens a file.

“I’d say it’s the greatest cover-up in US Government history,” Salazar replies.

“What’s going on, Sterling?” Waldron asks. “You look like you’ve just witnessed the end of the world.”

“I-I-I don’t know what...what just happened to me,” Sterling stammers. “I...I had the most horrific vision...”

“That’s General Waldron and special ops agent Sterling Rowe,” Salazar elaborates.

“My Lord... This is incredible...insane.” The senator looks up at Salazar. “Why? What made you bring this to me?”

“I just can’t take it anymore. I can’t keep being part of this,” Salazar says. “This needs to be exposed, but for the well-being of my family, I can’t be the person to do it.”

“Where did this recorded conversation between them come from?” Johnson asks.

“From Sterling Rowe himself. Though he was highly traumatized at the time, he still had the presence of mind to record the conversation,” Salazar replies. “Colonel Herrington received it the day before Sterling died. Apparently he was somebody Sterling trusted.

“I presented the video to President O’Rourke and he ordered me to make sure it stayed buried, just like he did when I presented him with all this other information,” Salazar explains. “Over the last little while, Colonel Herrington and I have been working behind the scenes, compiling all the facts in preparation for exposing the truth, and now the time has come.”

“Making this public will more than likely destroy O’Rourke and cause a nationwide uproar like we’ve never seen,” Johnson says. Concern edges her voice.

“And hopefully out of that chaos will come a future where politics and personal gain no longer override the truth,” the attorney general replies, gazing aimlessly into the trees.

“But aren’t you concerned you’ll be going down with the ship?”

“The way I see it, Senator, it’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make for the future of this country, which has given me so much more than I deserve,” Salazar replies, blinking back tears.

* * *

“Were you a part of this, Elliott?” O’Rourke rages at Gregson.

“No, I wasn’t, sir. I had no idea,” the stunned FBI director replies. He turns and gazes at Salazar with narrowed eyes.

The president glares at the attorney general. “You placed this administration and the entire Republican Party in severe peril!” he shouts. “Now, if you’re planning to go running off to the National Record about this latest fairy tale, you might as well hand in your resignation at the same time.”

Salazar grins. “And that’s exactly what I plan to do.”

* * *

“Welcome to the Evening Record. I’m Natalie Lawrence,” the renowned journalist says. “My two guests this evening are former United States Attorney General Lea Salazar and, joining us from her Sundale County home, Julie Cowan.”

After a brief exchange of pleasantries, Julie describes Noah’s recent experience. “... And in his traumatized state, he repeatedly told us ‘lots of people are going to die.’”

“What do you say to those people who believe all of this is nothing but some sort of hoax?”

Julie sharply exhales. “They’re very mistaken. It’s taken me quite some time to accept what has happened to my son, but I have no choice...why this, whatever it is, has chosen him to be some sort of conduit to future occurrences is beyond comprehension, and very scary and disturbing.”

“Does Noah understand what is happening?” Natalie gently asks.

“No, fortunately he doesn’t.”

Natalie turns to Lea Salazar, who begins by revealing news of her resignation and that she was the whistleblower. “It’s something I had to do. I owe it to my country.”

Wide-eyed, Natalie asks, “And why do you think President O’Rourke is not taking these strange events seriously at this time? I mean, you, on the other hand, just gave up one of the most powerful positions in his administration because of his avoidance of the issue.”

Salazar pauses to gather her thoughts. “That’s a question you’ll need to ask him.”

“We have,” Natalie replies. “And it’s always the same thing: the matter’s under investigation.”

Salazar snickers at that. “I don’t know what more proof he needs. But that said, even with all the facts that have emerged, unfortunately, most folks across this country still seem to be in denial.”

“Well, hopefully your coming forward will change that,” Natalie replies, concluding the interview.

Chapter 40

FBI Field Office, New York City

“As you can see by the list I sent you, our plumber friend, Mr. Tillman, visited many clients over his last six months with Easy Flow,” Kim explains to Director Gregson on a video call.

Gregson sighs. “We’ll have to contact every one of them. We need to track down Marco Martinek. I only hope the place of work where Tillman saw him wasn’t some EFA front.”

“And on top of that, unfortunately, the only photos Intelligence could come up with are five years old.”

“Well, let’s hope Tillman nailed the description with our sketch artist,” the FBI director says. “Frankly, Kim, knowing Sokol’s on the loose during today’s protest frightens the hell out of me.”

A half hour later, Kim is face to face with Cynthia Fletcher, the CEO of Five Star Beverages. “There’s no doubt in my mind he’s the same Marco Martinek who heads up our bottled water division,” Cynthia states.

“Is he on the job today?”

“No, he began a two week vacation starting yesterday.”

Kim sighs. “And it’s safe to say that’ll be a permanent vacation.”

“I don’t understand. Why’s Marco a person of interest to the FBI?”

“He’s a member of the Euro Freedom Alliance, also referred to as the EFA. We have reason to believe he’s involved with the cell that murdered my father, General Russell Waldron.”

“My goodness,” the CEO gasps. “I mean, Marco’s work’s been nothing but stellar, and I personally checked into his background as a former VP of one of the largest snack and beverage companies in Germany.”

Kim nods. “Some of the most evil folks who’ve gone on to join the EFA were very successful individuals in day-to-day life.”

Cynthia blinks rapidly and her breathing grows heavy. “Oh no!” she cries. “Today’s protest rally in Central Park!”

“What about it?” Kim asks.

“We’re supplying over one hundred thousand bottles of water to the protest, free of charge. Actually, it was Marco who came to me with the idea and because I believed so strongly in the cause, I agreed to it,” Cynthia explains. “And I’d say that delivery has already arrived, or will be there anytime now. I can easily confirm that for you.”

“There’s no time for that,” Kim replies, taking out her cell. She taps the screen and within a flash, Atlas is on the other end.

“Hey, Kim. What’s going on?” he asks.

“Has a large truck full of bottled water from a company called Five Star arrived on scene yet?” she frantically asks.

“Yeah. Actually, I just received word it’s approaching the gate,” Atlas replies. “What’s going on?”

“You need to stop that truck from entering the rally and immediately clear the area around it as far and as fast as you can. We could be looking at a bomb on wheels, courtesy of the EFA,” Kim blurts. *Lots of people are going to die.* Noah Cowan’s words pound in her brain.

“My Lord,” Atlas gasps as he reaches for his walkie-talkie and relays the order to the team of military personnel guarding the entry gate.

* * *

As the truck roars toward the gate, several uniformed men, weapons drawn, frantically wave for the truck to stop. Thankfully, the driver heeds the order.

“Sir, you need to get out of the truck and run as fast as you can,” one of the men orders over a bullhorn. A tall, slender man exits the vehicle and makes a mad dash toward the soldiers.

“I figured you guys might come in handy,” Atlas says, approaching the leader of the FBI bomb squad stationed nearby.

“Well, it’s a good thing we brought this guy with us,” the man replies, pointing toward the unit’s robot.

While the robot examines the truck, Atlas reconnects with Kim Waldron, now en route to Central Park. “We could be looking at two possible scenarios here,” she says. “One, a bomb. Two, that water’s been poisoned.”

“Would this Marco Martinek have had the opportunity to do such things?”

“Yes. According to the company’s CEO, he had complete autonomy over their entire bottled water division.”

“What about the company itself? How do you know we’re not dealing with another EFA front?” Atlas asks.

“Seeing as the CEO reached out to *us*, I’d say that’s highly unlikely. However, we’ve ordered the company to cease all operations until further notice,” Kim says.

By the time Kim arrives on the scene, the bomb squad has completed their analysis. The leader of the unit approaches Kim and Atlas. “We have no indications of any incendiary devices whatsoever,” he happily reports.

“Phew. That was a close one,” Atlas says, swiping at his brow.

“The water...I’m betting that’s some pretty deadly stuff in there,” Kim says, gazing toward the truck. She lifts her phone to contact the US agency that oversees toxic substances.

Off to the side, Atlas is joined by Senator Jill Johnson and Violet Anderson. “Are we still a go?” Johnson anxiously asks Atlas.

“Thankfully, we are,” Atlas replies, looking out at the massive crowd of protesters. “They may end up being a tad thirsty as the day goes on, but we’re certain we’ve eliminated the threat.”

“I had no idea,” Violet says, lips trembling. “The company reached out to *us*.”

An hour later, 120,000 bottles of deadly poisonous water are shipped away to be destroyed.

FBI Headquarters, Washington, DC

Director Gregson stands before a throng of reporters. “Earlier today, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, led by Special Agent Kim Waldron, thwarted what would’ve been the worst terror attack ever perpetrated on American soil,” he announces, and elaborates. “We have every reason to believe this attempt at mass murder was orchestrated by the Euro Freedom Alliance, directed by Ivan Sokol with the assistance of this man, Marco Martinek.” Gregson displays past photos and the current FBI sketch of Martinek. “With that, I’ll now do my best to answer your questions.”

“This poison that was in the water. Can you tell us what it was, and if people would’ve instantly died upon taking a drink?” a woman with burgundy braids asks from the side of the room.

Gregson pauses a moment. “For various reasons, we will not be revealing what type of substance was used. However, what I can tell you is that death would’ve resulted approximately ten to twelve hours after a single sip. And with over fifty thousand people attending the rally, we need to be thankful the attack was thwarted.”

While the press conference at FBI headquarters continues, Kim Waldron arrives at the NYPD Central Park Precinct. “There’s a guy here who’s demanding to speak with somebody from the FBI regarding today’s craziness. He was unwilling to tell us anything until someone from the FBI showed up,” the desk sergeant informs her. “He’s with one of our officers in a room down the hall to the left. Let me take you there.”

“Thank you,” Kim says, and follows him.

She enters the room, acknowledging the officer with a nod, and he exits with the sergeant. Kim studies the man before her, immediately noticing the scar on his forehead. His eyes are glazed.

“My name’s Marco Martinek,” he says, placing three pieces of ID on the table in front of him.

Kim immediately draws her gun and calls out, “Put your hands up and don’t move an inch!”

The man obliges. “You have nothing to worry about. I came here to turn myself in, all by my lonesome—no lawyer. Don’t need one. Don’t want one,” he says in a thick accent.

With her gun still drawn, Kim signals for assistance, and two officers enter the room. An unresisting Marco is handcuffed to the table. Kim settles down in the chair across from him and examines his ID. “So, I’ve noted your intention to speak to me without legal representation. Are you still in agreement with this?” Kim begins.

“Yes. But there’s no time for that,” Marco replies.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kim shoots back. “Is there some other planned attack I should know about?”

Marco frowns and shakes his head. “My family back home... Now that I failed to carry out his plan, there’s no doubt he’s going to have them killed.”

“Ivan Sokol?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know his current whereabouts?”

“Not at this moment,” Marco replies. “But I know where’s he’s planning to be two hours from now.”

“And where’s that?”

“At JFK. On a plane bound for Rome.”

“That may not be so easy, considering he’s currently the most wanted man in the country.”

“Clear Travel Euro—that airline has had deep ties to the EFA since its inception. It’s how our operatives have been traveling in and out of America. Ivan always boards the plane at least half an hour before anyone else, including the crew. He always sits in the back left corner.”

Kim reaches for her tablet and contacts Director Gregson, who has just concluded his press conference. The FBI boss’s image appears on the device. Kim directs his attention to the man sitting across from her.

“Can you hear and see me, Mr. Martinek?” Gregson calls out.

“Yes,” Marco replies.

“Are you certain Ivan Sokol, or any other member of the EFA, isn’t planning a further attack on America?” Gregson asks.

“All the other cell operatives are dead. Ivan poisoned them,” Marco replies. “And my failure in carrying out his plan means my family and I are going to be next, which is why I’m here. Please, you need to bring that bastard in before he gets to my wife and kids.”

“So, you’re here out of fear rather than contrition,” Gregson surmises.

“You can call it what you like, but my family’s lives are in jeopardy. It’s the only reason I agreed to go through with the attack in the first place,” Marco explains. “It’s how the Sokols worked. I joined the cause during its inception. It was supposed to be a powerful but peaceful movement until they turned it into terrorism.”

JFK International Airport, New York City

“The camera’s been planted. Sokol just made his way on board,” an FBI agent in the guise of a maintenance worker reports to Kim.

“Excellent. I see he’s by himself, as Martinek told us he’d be,” Kim says, bringing up the image from inside the plane on her phone. She contacts Gregson on her two-way radio.

“Has the surrounding area been evacuated?” the FBI director asks.

“Yes, sir,” Kim replies.

“This is huge, Kim,” Gregson says. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, I’m more than okay. I can’t wait to see this dog get what’s coming to him,” Kim firmly replies. She’s joined by a team of six agents in tactical gear.

“Remember. He’s more than likely armed, so be careful,” Gregson warns.

“Roger,” Kim replies, then turns to her team. Again she checks the scene inside the plane on her phone, confirming that Ivan Sokol is still sitting there alone. He’s focused on his cell phone. “Let’s get this done, folks,” she calls out to the agents.

As the team storms onto the plane with their weapons drawn, Kim follows behind.

Suddenly Gregson calls out, rapid-fire, over her two-way radio, “Kim! Get off that plane. Martinek was playing us. It all must be part of some sick backup plan. He just offed himself. He has no loving wife or children. He has an ex-wife who hates his guts and two teenage sons he hasn’t seen in years. This looks like a suicide mission. Do you read me?”

Now ten feet or so away from him, Kim looks Ivan Sokol in the eyes.

“Death to tyranny! Life to liberty!” Sokol shouts, rising to his feet. He holds his cell phone in his outstretched right hand.

Without blinking an eye, Special Agent Kim Waldron reaches for her revolver and blasts Ivan Sokol in the temple. The cell phone falls out of the terrorist’s hand as his lifeless body falls to the floor.

One of the agents retrieves the phone and examines it. “All is safe,” he eventually calls out. Murmurs of relief fill the plane.

Kim’s heart races and tears fill the corners of her eyes as she looks down at the man who killed her father. “You rotten bastard,” she sneers.

Then out of nowhere, one of the agents wails, “Whoa—what the hell?” as he looks out a window.

“What is it?” Kim anxiously asks

“It...it looks like...it looks like it’s happening,” the agent stammers. “The end of this bloody world!”

“Oh my God!” Kim cries out, looking on as sunbursts fill the evening sky. One by one, the orbs explode, the fiery blasts setting the ether aglow.

Epilogue

As Dr. Ruby Felder prepares for her next patient, she receives a call on her cell. The caller ID shows *Sheriff Thomas Vernon*. “Sheriff Vernon. What can I do for you?” Ruby asks her longtime friend.

“I’m sorry for bothering you, Ruby, but this has to do with Siro.”

“Is he in some sort of trouble?”

“I don’t know what to make of it.”

“Make of what?”

“He was found in a catatonic state inside his car at Sanctuary Park,” the Sundale County sheriff explains. “He’s currently at Sundale General.”

“My husband’s in the hospital?”

“Unfortunately, he’s still completely out of it.”

“Is he ill?”

“The doctor’s at a loss. There doesn’t appear to be any ailment, nor signs of alcohol or drugs—which, knowing Siro as I do, doesn’t surprise me.”

“Who found him?”

“A small group of campers. Do you know what he would’ve been doing at the park?”

“He’d been out of town on business and was driving home. He often goes out of his way to visit that park and take a walk along the riverside. He always tells me how it helps him relax.”

When Ruby arrives at the hospital, she’s met by the attending physician in the waiting room. “This is all so very perplexing,” the

doctor says with a sigh. “On a positive note, I can’t find a single thing wrong with him. It’s like he’s become frozen in a state of shock. Maybe your presence will somehow get him out of it.”

“Can I see him now?”

“In a few minutes, I’ll have my nurse come and get you.”

Seconds after the doctor exits, Ovo-Tech CEO Willow Farlow appears. “My Lord. What the heck is going on, Ruby?” she asks.

Ruby draws a breath and explains. “The doctor’s hoping my presence will help him snap out of it.”

“What in the world could’ve caused this?” Willow poses.

“I’m thinking he’s over-stressed,” Ruby replies. “I think building Ovo-Tech into the giant it’s become is finally getting the better of him.”

Willow nods. “Lately I’ve been trying unsuccessfully to get him to slow down.”

Ruby answers that with a sigh. “Well, hopefully I can somehow help snap him out of it.”

“The Mind’s Eye relaxation program,” Willow suggests.

“Excellent idea,” Ruby replies.

“If your attempt to—”

Before Willow’s able to complete her sentence, the doctor reappears, beaming. “I have good news. Your husband has found his way back to life. Out of nowhere, he somehow snapped out of his malaise.”

The doctor leads Ruby into her husband’s room. “What in the world is going on with you?” she jokes.

“I wish I knew,” Siro says, shaking his head. “All I remember is exiting my car to take a walk. It’s nothing but a blank canvas from there.”

Ruby draws a breath and plops down into the chair beside Siro’s bed. “You need to slow down,” she gently says. “What you’ve done with Ovo-Tech is incredible, but now it’s time to ease up and start to actually reap the benefits of all your hard work. I need you to promise me you’ll take things easy and stay completely away from the company for at least a couple of weeks.”

Siro meets that with a sigh and a smile. “Okay. Your wish will be my command,” he says.

A knock on the half-open door draws their attention to Willow Farlow. Siro waves her into the room. “I’m sorry, but I couldn’t help but overhear Ruby’s order, and I need to second it,” she says.

“Well, seeing as I’m outnumbered, it looks like I’ll be nothing but a vegetable for the next little while,” Siro quips, prompting laughter.

The following afternoon, while at home reviewing a series of Ovo-Tech financial reports, Siro receives a call from his wife. “Things are crazy at the office today. I most likely won’t be home until the early evening,” Ruby tells him. “Would you mind running out to the grocery store to pick up a few things?”

“Consider it done,” Siro replies.

“Great. I’ll text you the list.”

As wealthy businessman and philanthropist Siro Felder makes his way down aisle three of his neighborhood grocery store to pick up a loaf of rye bread, he hears a young boy pestering his mother to buy him a brand of cereal she obviously doesn’t want him to have.

“No. I’m not going to let you eat that garbage, Noah. And that’s final. Do you understand?”

Pouting, Noah turns around and looks at Siro, “Hey, Mommy. There’s that man again,” he says.

“What man?” his mother grumbles.

“The man from the hospital,” Noah says, loud enough that Siro can hear him. “The pajama man with the painted face who gives out the toys and the snacks,” he adds, his eyes still focused on Siro.

“That’s enough, young man. I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Noah’s mother snaps as she takes her son by the hand.

With that, Siro abruptly veers out of sight toward aisle four. *My Lord*, he inwardly gasps. *That child...that woman... Can it be?*

Guided by a rush of adrenaline, Siro abandons his shopping cart and rushes out of the store. When he enters his car, a series of strange events—the past, the present, and the future—come to vivid life in his mind.

With a trembling hand, he reaches for his cell phone.

“Hey, Dad. This is a pleasant surprise,” Atlas says on the other end of the line. “You got me just as we finished a wild game of volleyball here at the base. Lieutenant Stanwell gave us one of our fun days today,” he sardonically adds.

Stanwell, Siro mumbles under his breath.

“So, how are you feeling?” Atlas asks.

“As good as can be,” Siro replies, feigning calm. “I want to ask you about two former Gold Hawks.”

“Since when did you develop an interest in former Gold Hawks? Are you working on some investigative piece with Uncle Dave?” Atlas asks with a chuckle.

“I need you to tell me what you can about Miguel Perez and Sterling Rowe,” Siro says.

“Hmm...this sounds serious.”

“It definitely is. I’ll fill you in later. Please tell me all you can.”

“Well, since they both preceded me as Gold Hawks, I’ve never actually met either of them,” Atlas explains. “From what I know, Miguel died in a tragic accident at the JK Preston military base, which is now the very same park you so often love to visit. And as far as Sterling’s story goes, there’s a big-time mystery surrounding his departure from the unit.”

My Lord. “Thanks for the info, Atlas. Enjoy the rest of your day and I look forward to seeing you soon.”

“Okay. And good luck to you and Uncle Dave on whatever the heck you’re embarking on,” Atlas quips, concluding the call.

With his senses reeling, Siro makes his way to Harmon Farms. When he arrives, he sees a brawny young man tending a herd of cattle. Siro parks his car at the side of the dirt road, exits the vehicle, and

approaches the gate at the entrance. "Hello," he calls out, waving his hands in the air.

Seconds later, the man approaches the gate. Siro recognizes him as Sterling Rowe "How can I help you, sir?" Sterling says with a furrowed brow. Anxiety edges his voice.

"May I have a moment of your time?"

"The owner's not here," Sterling informs him. "The man you need to see is Roy Harmon."

"I know Roy. I'm not here to see him. I'm here to see you, Sterling."

"Who the hell are you?" Sterling nervously shoots back.

"There's no need to fret, young man. I'm not here to bring you trouble," Siro calmly replies. "Now, will you please open the gate and let me in?"

"Not until you tell me who you are and what you're doing here—and how you know who I am," Sterling firmly counters.

"Okay. My name's Siro Felder. I'm the founder and chairman of a company called Ovo-Tech."

"I'm very familiar with your company...and your wife the psychiatrist," Sterling says matter-of-factly. "But what does any of it have to do with me?"

"Absolutely nothing. You see, my son Atlas is currently a Gold Hawk like I know you once were. I also know you were badly mistreated by the very man who mentored you. I've come here to help you, Sterling."

The former Gold Hawk stands speechless. Confusion fills his hardened face.

"You need to come forward with the truth, including the recording you have of yourself and General Waldron," Siro says.

"How...how do you know about that?" Sterling asks.

"That doesn't matter. All that matters is you coming forward. I'll be glad to fly you to Washington on my private plane. I'll get you in front of the people who need to know the truth," Siro explains.

Sterling studies the man before him with uneasy eyes. His shoulders sag. "Okay. Come on in. Let's talk," he says as he opens the

gate. After walking twenty yards or so, Sterling directs him toward a hay bale beside an outbuilding. “Have a seat,” he says.

As Siro sits atop the bale, Sterling ducks around the corner of the building and returns with a shotgun. “This is Big Charlie,” he says, aiming the gun at Siro.

“Whoa, whoa,” Siro gasps with his arms raised in a defensive posture. “There’s no need for that.”

“Who the hell sent you here?” Sterling barks.

“Nobody. I’m being completely honest with you—I’m here of my own volition.”

“I know the power Waldron wields. Are you some sort of government fixer?”

“The only thing I’m here to fix is the fact you were so wronged four years ago. Please, Sterling, put the gun down,” Siro calmly replies.

Sterling studies the man before him and sharply exhales before tossing the gun to the ground. He leans against the building and gazes skyward. “My coming forward will crush Waldron. The man’s considered a hero to the world. If I do it, I, my mother, and the rest of our family will be living the rest of our lives in fear.”

“Waldron lied to the world, Sterling. He went against everything this country stands for. The truth needs to be exposed,” Siro firmly counters. “People won’t come after you for exposing him as a fraud. They’ll thank you.”

After a beat, Sterling purses his lips and nods. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

“Great. You won’t regret this.” Siro beams.

“Let me go inside and put a bag together, and call Roy at the same time. I owe my life to that man.”

While waiting for Sterling, Siro returns to his car and calls his brother-in-law, Dave Eisen.

“Siro. How are you, my friend?” the former DC detective asks. “Ruby told me how you had a little setback the other day. I hope all is well.”

“Well as can be,” Siro replies, once again feigning calm.

“So, is this a social call, or is there something I can help you with?”

“I need you and Shayna to help get me in front of Lea Salazar ASAP.”

“As in United States Attorney General Lea Salazar?”

“Exactly.”

“Hmm... May I ask why?”

“To change the course of time,” Siro explains.

“Change the course of time,” Dave repeats. There’s a pause before he asks, “Are you sure you’re feeling okay? What’s this all about?”

“It’s about, hopefully, saving the world,” Siro replies.

THE END